

The tyranny of 'countryside is best'

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1. I was at a celebration in the country, surrounded by refugees from the city. They regarded me with the kind of undisguised pity you'd show a beagle held against its will in a smoking experiment. My task was clear: to diss the city and hymn the countryside as the only place to raise a family and grow old.
2. At first I obliged. How beautiful the area was, how clean the air - bet they didn't regret their decision to move. But as they extolled their surroundings and rubbished mine I felt increasingly uncomfortable. The sentiments I was so politely expressing were bogus - I love the city, and so does at least one of my children (the other is equally happy in town and country). What's more, I wouldn't acquiesce so readily with any other kind of comparison so blatantly in my disfavour, nor would this bunch of liberals - I imagine - have been so happy maligning any other choice I'd made. Why was this one hors de combat? Why should the tyranny of "countryside is best" be so hard to challenge? In the beating heart of every English person is there a haystack, beside a thatched cottage, overlooking a stream? Or is it just that, once people have made a decision, they want everyone else to endorse it too, so that they don't have to tolerate mixed feelings?
3. In the end I fought dirty. My innocent-sounding question about cultural diversity forced them to admit that the area was almost wholly white: their children mixed daily with precisely one non-Caucasian. Indeed, there couldn't have been more than 2.5 kids in that whole neighbourhood whose parents didn't possess identical stripped pine dressers.
4. I felt a little ashamed at using multiculturalism in this way, for of course there are ghettos everywhere, and not just in the countryside. Was I treating their decision as a slight, an implied rebuke, because somewhere I too believe that I should be raising my kids among unpolluted hills and vales, and not the Big Smoke?
5. This last, I doubt. I was raised urban. On my first serious walk, climbing Snowdon, I took along a handbag. For years in the countryside I felt that, like Woody Allen at Diane Keaton's family meal in Annie Hall, I might pupate into a rabbi. But I came to love a long hike: with each step, each minute of silence (children permitting - and often they don't), and the descant of the birds, petty preoccupations recede, humans are reduced in scale, a sense of proportion restored.
6. But there's birdsong in the city, too, and what I object to most of all is the mutual stereotyping of city-dwellers and country people. We haven't progressed much beyond the fables of the town mouse and country mouse. Those who move to the country for a more "natural" life end up polluting more than the townies because with crap public transport they need at least two cars and must ferry their kids everywhere. Those citizens who couldn't live without the stimulation of all that culture - the museums, the theatre - rarely use them more than once a year (rural visitors go more often), and only ever have time for the local multiplex.
7. The country mouse sees the city as a place of alienation and anomie and yet, like most in my area, I'm on first-name terms with the local shopkeepers (my kids used to complain that popping out for a bottle of milk took an hour because we'd stop for so many chats). The town mouse sees the country mouse as full of Nimby Tories, Barboured racists regaling the village pub with apocryphal tales about asylum seekers, and yet I know countless rural people who've welcomed newcomers of every background, taught them and their kids English, and are gay (even in the country!)
8. Life outside the city can be brilliant for small kids, not so great for teenagers. My own shook her head with incomprehension as we drove through the countryside last week - what is it for? Was human life so far from a club sustainable?
9. In the end the whole polarisation between town and country is false. I couldn't move far from my 94-year-old mother even if I wanted to (I don't). Seeing the city or the country as homogenous is absurd: rural and urban poverty have a lot in common, while the lives of the wealthy (whether they live in the town or the country - and the rich usually live in both) are similar. And, no matter how powerful your rural fantasies, wherever you move to, you take yourself with you. That's why nirvana is elusive.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/country/article/0,,1685777,00.html>

Tasks:

1. What does "refugee" mean in the context of the first line?
2. How did the journalist feel when she visited friends for a celebration in the country?
3. What do the thatched cottage, haystack and stream stand for? (2)
4. Which details of her private life does the author reveal?
5. How do "townies" respond to the abundance of cultural events, according to the author? (6)
6. How does she describe life in her neighbourhood?
7. Why, do you think, do town people regard country people as racists? (7)
8. How does the author deal with prejudices and clichés in this article?
9. Why does the author refer to the relevance of class boundaries?
10. Where can the perfect lifestyle be found, in the author's opinion? (and, for that matter, in yours)