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Garrison Keillor's Wobegon Heroes

He did not lock literature into an ivory tower; instead he emphasized its centrality to the development of civilized and humane society He knew also that the way in which we understand ourselves is less through theory than through story. In the life of any individual, as in the lives of communities and nations, stories are primary.

Margaret Atwood on Northrop Frye

The name "Garrison Keillor" evokes two images. One is visual-- of a tall, bushy-haired man sitting with a slight slouch under a spotlight. The other, however, is not so much visual as visceral. Somewhere from the subconscious bubbles up warmth, a "down-home" hankering, which is captured not only in Keillor's monologues but in his voice. As Peter Scholl notes during an interview with Keillor, "Keillor's speaking voice . . . [is] soft, and as he frequently says about himself, slow. Slow doesn't capture his delivery, which [is] extremely deliberate and measure His answers [are] punctuated with long pauses, but his sentences once uttered [have] nearly the precision of written text" (50). It is this voice, the modulated voice of the storyteller, which emanates every Saturday night from radios in four million homes. The voice becomes the medium for the famous fifteen-minute segment nestled between a folk song and a fictitious commercial for Standard Sandpaper or Old Folks At Home Cottage Cheese (not made with formaldehyde or arsenic). It is the voice we equate with the mythical small town of Lake Wobegon and its hero, Keillor himself.

In 1985, Keillor published *Lake Wobegon Days*, and in 1987 he published a kind of sequel, *Leaving Home*, a collection of stories direct from radio scripts. In those two books and in recordings of a *Prairie Home Companion*, it becomes apparent that there are two primary elements of Keillor's storytelling which make him irresistibly compelling to the American public. One, he creates a functioning myth system out of his portrayal of Lake Wobegon by

using what Jung defines as "archetypes of the unconscious." Such a myth system enables Keillor's audience to identify with his characters, who become a satisfying representation of "the good life." Two, he makes it difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between Garrison Keillor, a true person, and Garrison Keillor, the persona who grew up in Lake Wobegon. Thus, Keillor places himself in a unique role with his radio audience: he is simultaneously the author and the hero of his stories. Combined, the elements ultimately make us, his audience, trust him and trust ourselves. Through his storytelling, then, Keillor demonstrates that each of us is important and effective in his or her own life.

In *The Power of Myth* Joseph Campbell uses Jungian theory to explain how myths emerge "out of the depths of the [human] unconscious" and how the "energies of life come to us" through these myths. Campbell likens the energies to an inexhaustible cauldron, "the bubbling spring from which all life proceeds" (218-219). He believes images of myth are the reflections of the spiritual capacities of every person, and through contemplation, people summon such powers in their individual lives. Shared myths are present in very diverse cultures, separated by history and demography, and often contain the same imagery. Campbell cites recurring themes in stories such as a virgin birth; a savior who comes, dies, and is resurrected; the initial creation of the human species; and the journey of a hero. These are the stories of the search for human significance, self-knowledge, and meaning in our world and in ourselves. In essence, they give people a sense of identity and security. Campbell believes what humanity seeks is the experience of being alive: the act of translating the purely physical plane into a resonance with our own innermost beings (5).

When a society no longer embraces a myth system, what happens to its sense of itself? The intrinsic need for myth leads the society to create a new one. For instance, if a society lacks the rite of puberty (as rites are physical manifestations of a cultural belief in myth), the society lacks a rite which enables a person to know when it is time to leave childhood for adulthood. In such a society, children will create their own rites to make up for the deficit, as is evident in modern North American culture where children set up their own puberty rites in urban gangs' initiation ceremonies or with first date rituals (Campbell 8). The "new" set of rites usually does not conform

to the adult idea of what the rites should be. Thus, one sees a clash not only of generations, but of myths.

Any culture's myth system includes "a number of understood, unwritten rules by which people live. [An ethos is there, a mode,] an understanding that 'we don't do it that way'" (Campbell 9). The invaders of North America brought with them a myth system built upon an "old-time religion," one that "belongs to another age, another people, another set of human values, another universe" (13). Currently, however, our culture's religious precepts have all but faded in the new "sheerly mechanistic world, as interpreted through our physical sciences, Marxist sociology, and behaviouristic psychology" (130-31). We are told we are "nothing but a predictable pattern of wires replying to stimuli." We live in a society without faith, a society Campbell calls "a mess."

Conversely, Keillor has constructed a place almost untouched by modern notions. Lake Wobegon is consciously and stubbornly pragmatic, shunning "new-fangled" computers and breakthroughs in laser surgery. Keillor has also succeeded in making the place real to his audience. Lawrence Sutin notes that "Lake Wobegon, a mythical small town, set in the Minnesota prairie heartlands, [is a town] that millions of otherwise practical-minded Americans believe to be absolutely *real*...Lake Wobegon and its residents have taken on life by the sheer fact of their vivid place in our imaginations" (42).

Lake Wobegon's very nature is both imaginary and part of an oral tradition makes the town and its inhabitants a myth in its own right. Furthermore, the mythical place has in turn a mythology of its own: a set of rituals and rites which harken back to a more "traditional" American lifestyle, one that existed before the advent of graffiti and gangs. In any homogeneous culture, the unwritten rules comprise the culture's "unstated mythology" (Campbell 9). In Lake Wobegon, the unstated mythology sounds something like the following: "This is the way we eat sweet corn; this is what you do with your extra tomatoes; this is how we view television; this is the kind of beer we drink; this is how to drive your car," or, in Keillor's words, "car ownership is a matter of faith. Lutherans drive Fords, bought from Bunsen Motors, the Lutheran car dealer, and Catholics drive Chevie from Main Garage" (*Lake Wobegon Days* 112).

Not only do Wobegonians have faith in such quirky-but-simple "rules" by which to live, they also believe in the mystical rooted in

the mundane. For example, one story tells of a wife who attributes the flight of her husband to the power of a number of intimidating items on a self-improvement list. "Evidently," Keillor writes, "he had decided to sit down and get his life in order, and then when he looked at what needed to be done, he panicked and ran. Thirty-four items on the list, and he was thirty-four years old. When [his wife] noticed that, she knew that it was more than coincidence. It was a sign that he had reached his limit as Fred and would never come back" (*Lake Wobegon Days* 168).

Campbell draws on Carl Jung's similar belief in the inexplicable and Jung's description of irrational convictions as stemming from a person's "number two" personality. As Campbell summarizes in *The Power of Myth*, Jung claims an individual's "number one" personality is the "light" one, the side living in the "outer world." Personality number one is proud, ambitious, systematic and fascinated with facts. Number two, the dark side, simply knows things, is hungry for meaning, and is embarrassed by her or his more conventional side. Jung asserts that most people go forward in the name of number one, "into study, moneymaking, responsibilities, entanglements, confusions, errors, submissions, defeats" (*Memories* 88). Number two is more true to the fundamental elements of humanness, managing the more pedestrian life of number one, keeping it "in check," and making sure that an individual's life is not just a surface existence.

Keillor, by depicting Wobegonians as intuitive "number two believers" instead of rational "number one devotees," allows his community more autonomy and hope than one experiences in the real world of modernity. If one says to a passerby "I have a feeling that you will get a job offer today," and then the passerby indeed gets the offer, the person might write the experience off as coincidence or inside information from someone who was not a true stranger (i.e., instead, a person she or he did not recognize). In Wobegon, however, such an event would seem ordinary, even expected, especially if there were some sort of physical evidence like Fred's list. If we subscribe to Jungian theory, then, we must also realize that Keillor's faith in the inexplicable resounds with the audience's hunger for a spiritual value greater than itself, which Wobegonian mythology feeds.

Those who leave the sacred folds of Lake Wobegon to forge out on their own are called the "exiles." At first the designation seems odd since the exiles have chosen to trade the mystical rituals for modern

manners. But, in fact, these people *feel* exiled once they leave the sacred rites of Wobegon's myth system. When the exiles do return for holidays and funerals, they are changed, polluted, and make the Wobegonians defensive and wary of their presence. As a result, Lake Wobegon's population thinks of itself as an innocent community beyond the reach of an ever-encroaching wave of technology, progress and chaos. The inhabitants often voice their distrust of anything new that comes to them from the outside world: such things are the work of the devil himself. "*Decadence*: we're on the verge of it, one wrong move and *k-shoom!* the fat man sits on your teeter-totter. You get A/C and the next day Mom leaves the house in a skin-tight dress, holding a cigarette and a glass of gin" (*Lake Wobegon Days* 132). Keillor has created a mythic world within the real world of modern North America. His mythic world is grounded in tradition and perpetuated through storytelling, and in it Keillor's audience finds a sense of stability and security lost somewhere on the road to technology and reason. In essence, Keillor is writing as an exile for an audience who feels exiled from "the way things used to be."

Within the city limits of Wobegon's small business district and quaint, old houses, the audience sees the town's people. These characters are the heart of Keillor's tales, and without them, the Lake Wobegon myths would be unable to enchant their audience into believing in their alter, native reality. Wobegonians are born; they get punished by teachers; they drink beer without their parents' knowledge; they propagate; they pray; and they die, just like people in any other community. If the characters' lives are so much like our own, why do we find them so interesting? As Campbell would surely note, Keillor's characters live in his audience because they are representations of Jungian archetypal images of the unconscious: intrinsic ideas which spring from within our corporeal selves and which represent the powers of the body (Campbell 51). As Jung puts it, "Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation . . . what we are to our inward vision, and what [humans] appear to be . . . can only be expressed by way of myth" (*Memories* 3).

Jung called archetypal images such names as the shadow, the anima, the child, the trickster, the Wise Old Man, the Wise Old Woman and the self. Keillor's characters are creations who verify such archetypes. Who better to portray archetypal images than a society of the isolated and inbred, unclouded by the technological

world? If we were to name some of the archetypes of Lake Wobegon, the list might look something like this: the father, the preacher, the mother, the sibling, the fix-it man, the man in love, the bumbler, the bully, the exile, the girlfriend, the old couple. Such images become a way of feeling connected to other human beings, a means of confirming shared experience, of creating legacy.

Each of Keillor's archetypes expresses a disposition the audience finds familiar (or "recalls"). In this respect, it is significant that Keillor rarely describes the physical personas of his characters. Many authors vividly depict their characters so readers actually "see" them in their mind's eye. If Keillor described specific attributes such as hair color or shoe size, however, the Wobegonians would be too particularized in our imaginations, and we would not identify with their experiences. Keillor's narrative device -- deliberately conjuring featureless characters -- is a trademark of oral traditions and one which allows Keillor better to exploit the archetypes lurking in our individual unconsciousnesses. Some examples are "The Father" who is so stingy about allowance he always says "I don't know where you think this stuff comes from, but it sure doesn't grow on trees, I'll tell you that," while peeling off his ten dollar bill "like it's the last one around" (*Leaving Home* 14); "The Mother" who implicitly trusts, and feels guilty about, a magazine article linking faulty can openers to diseases caused by steel filings in food (35); the "Man in Love" desperately trying to make himself presentable in a dilapidated bar bathroom, washing his hands and face, spitting out his tobacco, rinsing his mouth and wetting down his hair as "best he can with his hands" (*Lake Wobegon Days* 203); and "Mr. Death," an entity who creeps up on his bed-ridden victims, grabs them, shakes them, and says "Shhhh. Be quiet. Lie still" (*Leaving Home* 17).

Campbell tells us "What makes [an individual] worthy of [a] role is his [or her] integrity, as a representative of the principles of that role, and not some group of prejudices of his [or her] own. So what you're standing up to is a mythological character" (12). The roles people play, like the roles Keillor's characters represent, make them worthy in the eyes of society. If a person portrays his or her archetypal role well, we will view him or her as a person worth respect, legitimate in our eyes. As these roles manifest themselves

over and over again in our culture it makes sense for Campbell to liken them as mythological figures and for Keillor to evoke their presence.

If the audience sees mythical Lake Wobegon as a tangible place, then the creator of the place is also tangible. Our observation of Garrison Keillor follows from his willingness to expose his inner self through his representation of Lake Wobegon. Every story is essentially didactic, or why would the author wish to tell it? But since the author reveals something precious and personal, readers are also inspired to try to forge from the revelation an enlightened path through their own lives. Therefore, whether Keillor wants his audience to know about his real life or not, he engages in the unspoken contract, and has to live the consequences of his act.

One reader of *Leaving Home* notes that numerous stories "deal with people moving out, moving on, and our knowledge of Keillor's real-life flight from home gives them added poignancy: Father Emil getting ready to retire from his pulpit at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church; Darlene giving up her job at the Chatterbox Cafe; Dale Uecker leaving home to join the Navy; and finally the narrator himself, sitting in the Chatterbox on a rainy Wednesday in June and contemplating his own departure" (Barol 83). The real-life Keillor would seem to imagine himself on a hero's quest to find his true essence and transcend the dreary lifestyle of his actual hometown, Anoka, Minnesota. He leaves Anoka to strike out on his own, first to St. Paul, Minnesota, then to Denmark, then to New York City. In leaving home, Keillor flees the life of his father (and generations of other Keillors) who are good people, but who never escaped the ordinariness that is Anoka; he must leave the bland stability of his beginnings, eventually to become a reluctant cynic regarding that kind of life.

The one great myth, or "monomyth," found in every culture is that of the epic hero. "The basic motif of the universal hero's journey--[is] leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or more mature condition" (Campbell 124). It is a journey executed physically, such as Jesus's journey into the desert for forty days to thwart the devil, or spiritually, within a person's own psyche, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. The ultimate end is the same: to transcend a mundane and limiting environment, making one's life truly significant. Campbell tells us this happens when "we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-

preservation . . . [and we] undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness" (126). The heroic journey is achieved through the overcoming of trials and/or by having a revelation.

Because of his age and circumstances, Keillor is at the point in life which has been called the age of grief: "we know that love ends, children are stolen, parents die feeling that their lives have been meaningless . . . the barriers between the circumstances of oneself and of the rest of the world have broken down, after all--after all that schooling, all that care" (Smiley 132). Keillor erroneously thinks he has escaped grief because he has escaped Anoka. He believes he has reached the "utopia" of St. Paul only to find that he is still restless and needs another change. He continues to move; he gets a divorce; he moves again; and now is in the process of a second divorce and another upheaval of family and home and, like his narrating counterpart, has to be content with satirizing his own background, in a sense his own journey. Just when he thinks he has reached the green world, he has to sip from "the cup [that] must come around, cannot pass from you, and it is the same cup of pain that every mortal drinks from . . ." (Smiley 132). It comes round to Keillor at last, and he struggles to escape it, turning to the stories of Lake Wobegon. Without the utopia of Lake Wobegon, how can Keillor live with the fact that love ends, children are stolen, or the possibility that life might be meaningless? If Lake Wobegon--or some other myth system--were not there to give Keillor a belief in a stable and enduring world, he would have to accept a chaotic world, one in which happiness comes to no one, and one where we watch ourselves die and cannot understand the reason why we live. It would be a Nietzschean world indeed, a nihilistic, unhappy one. Keillor is in the same position as his audience, searching for a place where life is good and fulfilling this need by perpetuating Wobegon.

As Garrison Keillor the storyteller (or myth-maker), Keillor also imagines that he is on a heroic quest. The Keillor narrator of Lake Wobegon obviously sees himself as a heroic figure, beginning with his childhood attempts at creating his own mythic system of rites and rituals. "Life in a small town offered so little real ceremony . . . why not a prayer, a speech, a few maneuvers, some rifle shots? . . . I was eleven, a bad age for a boy so starved for ceremony, because as I got good at it, other kids were losing interest . . . I was extremely good at these events and couldn't see why other kids weren't" (*Lake Wobegon*

124). Little Garrison thinks he is trapped in a world devoid of a sustaining mythology, and thus makes his own. Garrison's adult narrator is still attempting to create his own myth system, now by evoking Lake Wobegon (or idealized circumstances for playing out needful ceremonies).

Keillor clearly reveals to the audience that he buys into the inexplicable as much as his neighbors. His recitation of what he calls "his destiny" with what sounds very much like a rehearsed incantation:

So most of Lake Wobegon's children leave, as I did, to realize themselves as finer persons than they were allowed to be at home. When I was a child, I figured out that I was:

1 person, the son of
2 parents and was the
3rd child, born
4 years after my sister and
5 years after my brother, in 1942 (four and two are)
6, on the
7th day of the
8th month, and the year before had been
9 years old and was now
10.
To me, it spelled Destiny. (*Lake Wobegon* 14)

Of course in real life and as narrator, Keillor does not achieve what young Garrison set out to do--he does not fulfill his "destiny"; his heroic revelation is not achieved (or, at least, is not the revelation he expected). We can understand why he fails to become a hero by juxtaposing his current world (that of the late 20th century) with the "backwards" world of Lake Wobegon (and Anoka).

Keillor is trying to be a hero in a hard, arbitrary world that is unresponsive to spiritual needs. It is a world interpreted solely through physical science, political analysis, and behaviorist psychology, all of which see humanity as nothing but a predictable pattern of wires responding to stimuli (Campbell 131). It is a skeptical world in which more value is placed upon the self than upon the sacrifice of the self for the good of humankind, in which we value only what can be proven to us as valuable. Our society is too

eager to believe that all is explainable, that there are scientific absolutes, that we are not interdependent but merely self-sufficient entities, and that there is no cosmic connection among the generations of the human race. We fail to realize that our hard, skeptical, factual world is not, as we expect it to be, grounded in absolutes. Science continues to break into mysterious dimensions. The source of life--what is it? Is the atom a wave or a particle? No one knows (132). The late twentieth century is devoid of mythology.

Defiantly human, then, Lake Wobegon is interdependent (a community), built on a solid mythological background (given by Keillor), and thus its inhabitants believe in the inexplicable. Keillor exiled himself by no longer participating in Anoka's rituals and rites. He went out into the world, but was frustrated because he never found what he sought. Upon returning, he finds the deeper meaning of human existence at home where he left it, or rather in the myth of home that became Lake Wobegon.

At the end of *Leaving Home* the narrator's two worlds begin to separate forever between the mythic land and the modern world. He looks around at the Chatterbox Cafe and doesn't "hear them anymore, they sit like a picture"; he asks his audience, "If you see them before I do, say hello from me and give them my love" (258). Keillor confirms, as he wanders further and further away from Lake Wobegon, that he does love its people. And although he thinks himself a little above them in an academic sort of way, his heart is still with them. Campbell says that if anything is capable of changing a man, it is his hometown love of the human, the living and the ordinary. All warmth derives from this love, all kindness and all humor (4). If the ordinary is the lovable, then one also loves imperfection. One can only describe human beings and make them real to an audience in terms of flaws. No matter how long he is away or how far he travels, Anoka was the first place where Keillor discovered people and their imperfect, everyday lovability: "You live in a small town, you learn about people. You learn that certain people, if they say they'll be there to teach school on Tuesday, they'll be there, and some people won't, and if you call them up Tuesday evening, they'll say, 'Oh, you meant this Tuesday.'" It's always the same ones who are prompt and faithful and dependable, and if they're ten minutes late you should call the police, and always the same others who say, "Are you sure today is Tuesday? But

yesterday was--Oh yeah, it was Monday, wasn't it? Well . . . do you still need me?" (*Leaving Home* 103).

Such imperfections make a person human and not supernatural and immortal--and thus, lovable (Campbell 5). The characters' "immortality" is grounded in the human values they exhibit, thus perpetuating themselves. Whether on the radio or in print, Keillor cannot hide the sentimental feelings he has for home. "I'll remember them as they are this moment, on a Wednesday in June, sitting with each other and listening to a summer rain that may yet save the crops. And the river may rise so that you and I can push our lovely rafts from shore and be lifted up over the rocks and at last see what is down there around the big bend where the cottonwood trees on shore are slowly falling, bowing to the river, the drops glistening on the dark green leaves" (*Leaving Home* 258).

Keillor tells Wobegon stories to keep the pathway between the world of the mythic and the world of reality open to the hearts of his listeners. If we were to see Anoka now, a suburb of the ever-encroaching Twin Cities, it would no longer resemble Lake Wobegon. As in the myth of Camelot, perhaps only a traveller who knows the secret path, such as Keillor, can gain access to the Holy Isle of Avalon. The way to Lake Wobegon becomes harder and harder to find, ". . . raindrops in the puddles along the curb, rain out on the lake, which is so misty you can't see the other shore, it's like an ocean" (258).

Keillor created his stories to fulfill his own desires, and found that the myth that solaced him solaced an audience of millions as well. "I wouldn't deny that there's elements of nostalgia in it and that there were stories that were told with feeling and [I] sometimes came close to tears," confided Keillor to Peter Scholl (51). Keillor used the radio as his chief medium, making the audience feel connected to his characters, creating an unseen (but not un-imagined) society that is utopian and therefore desirable. Perhaps the most compelling explanation for Keillor's popularity, however, is not the solace of storytelling which constructed a myth system, but instead the ability he possesses gently to touch his listeners, to tell them that they are vulnerable and imperfect, and, to reassure them that, for these reasons, they are "okay."

All art forms have meaning because people read their own lives into them. Yet no story can ever be truly profound if people self-

consciously enact their lives as a story--as anticipation, suspense, meaning, irony, poignancy and epiphany. If human beings really did live as the embodiment of a "story-in-progress," the everyday act of eating a salami sandwich would take on all kinds of self-conscious, before-the-fact significance it otherwise would not have.

Keillor's storytelling makes that insignificant salami sandwich seem important. His depiction of Lake Wobegon is very close to the real life of a small, midwestern community, and yet he is able to negotiate the fine line between mythology and everyday living, which allows the audience to laugh at itself. In fact, Keillor is funny because he uses everyday situations and chips them away to their archetypal realities. If Keillor chose another mode besides comedy, the embarrassment we would feel for his characters (because of their exposed imperfections) would be too much to bear. They "move" the audience because all of a sudden, their story is our life and our life is the story, yet since it is not exactly our life; Keillor remains within the "safe" boundaries between what is funny and what is offensive--his humor is not simply patronizing. As he himself acknowledges, "I've had a dread of standing on a stage and just telling jokes. To be somebody like David Letterman I would consider a sort of performing Hell." Instead, Keillor likens himself to Mark Twain, "a man who . . . commanded quite a wide range and was able to tell funny stories and be witty but also able to express all manner of feelings; to feel grief and rage and bitterness and a great deal more" (Scholl 52).

In Keillor's monologues, our everyday lives become the stuff of great stories which can be used as parables, or myths, to teach humanity about itself. We become significant through Lake Wobegon's community, because like them, we lack the legs and chins of movie stars and the savvy lifestyle depicted as glamorous by the mass media. We begin to appreciate ourselves, even to like ourselves, and to see ourselves as heroic figures. Keillor writes, "Every time I read a book about how to be smarter, how not to be sad, how to raise children and be happy and grow old gracefully, I think, 'Well, I won't make those mistakes, I won't have to go through that,' but we all have to go through that You get it figured out and then one day life happens to you. You prepare yourself for grief and loss, arrange your ballast and then the wave swamps the boat" (*Leaving Home* xxi). He speaks to the universality of human experience and how we must sustain laughter, even if we must seek out an imaginary

world to laugh at, so we can muster the strength to arrange our ballast again and again.

Iowa State University

Jennifer A. Cognard-Black

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