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For Want of Deeper Coverage



by Zachary Michael Jack

On a balmy late spring weekend in Grand Rapids, Michigan, we Midwestern scholars, advocates, and devotees gather to debate the state of the Midwest in a gathering appropriately titled “Finding the Lost Region.” The Grand Valley State University downtown campus, where we’ve convened, sits on land that disappeared under water in the historic floods of 1904 and 2013,

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the latter reported by one of the week’s featured panelists, *New York Times* Chicago Bureau chief Monica Davey. Davey has been handpicked to respond to our concerns about the lack of coverage given the nation’s midsection. It’s a rare chance for us, a group of diehard Midwestern Regionalists, to talk back to a member of the national media entrusted to describe us to the world, and especially so when floods and other natural disasters threaten to define us.

Catastrophic floods like those that strike Grand Rapids are wholly unlike other disasters. Their theatrics are not as aeronautically awe-inspiring as Oz-styled tornados or headline-grabbing hurricanes. Daredevil storm-chasers do not breathlessly follow swollen rivers. A flood is instead an ingloriously terrestrial affair, an ignominious seeping, lacking the well-defined eye or dramatic funnel cloud ready-made for television. It’s a moving, murky, mucky mess. Little wonder, then, that reporters save their most dynamic verbs for the headline-generating class of atmospheric natural disasters. Awed journalists pump up hurricanes and tornadoes with the particularly punchy verbs, conferring on them the agency to “strike” and “hit.” River floods, by contrast, are rendered in past participle and in passive voice. Low-lying environmentally-disadvantaged rural towns like mine in eastern Iowa are said to be *flood-ravaged*—a term which implies that we have been maligned already, then left behind, vaguely compromised. Where floods are concerned, broadcasters jettison forceful verbs like “strike”—packed with plenty of Germanic oomph for emphasis—in favor of more mellifluously euphemistic Latinates; we are *inundated* or *deluged*, the words themselves suggesting some-

thing that happens to us, but whose ultimate source is not easily divined. The verbiage belies a distinct lack of information about the perpetrator: *what* deluged us? The deluge, of course, and yet the redundancy of the words signify our inability to properly define and capture precisely what a flood does to us—like the prohibition against defining a word by using the word needing definition. Unlike hurricanes, river floods are not assigned villainous names, nor measured on scientific scales with the gravitas of the Richter or Fujita. Indeed, how does one properly quantify the more homely damage a flood does: by number of saturated carpets and waterlogged dry-wall panels piled in the garbage? By raw tonnage of wrecked vehicles? By poundage of spoiled food, fiber, and fodder?

Walking through the downtown campus on a May weekend, one can easily see how the denizens of Grand Rapids might turn pessimistic regarding Mother Nature. The River City is unusually prone to devastating and deadly flooding. In 2013 the flooding here achieved historic levels, as the river rose to nearly twenty-two feet, shattering the previous high-water mark. Grand Rapids Mayor, George Heartwell, declared a state of emergency as the angry Grand topped its banks, turning workers and residents alike into refugees. Professionals with offices along the scenic downtown riverfront posted pictures of fish swimming by their submerged plate-glass windows, as if peering outward from inside a giant aquarium. Kayakers surveying the damage to the city's iconic Blue Bridge were forced to duck to pass underneath its span, so close had the muddy waters come to overtopping the downtown's most iconic east-west artery. In an unprecedented move, Grand Rapids called on citizens to form a sandbag brigade to help protect downtown buildings. At its peak, the river sent 37,000 cubic

feet of water per second through the downtown area, coming within a few inches of breaching the city's floodwall in a deluge that might well have caused fatalities on the order of Hurricane Katrina. Thankfully, the levies held, and the River City narrowly escaped catastrophe.

It rained heavily across the Midwest that April, though nowhere were the scenes more dramatic than in Grand Rapids, where cameras captured rescue workers lifting children and the elderly to safety, and where some 4,000 Good Samaritans answered the mayor's call for volunteers to fill sandbags. Reporting from the *New York Times* Chicago Bureau, Davey began her April 25th story, datelined Chicago: "The nation's midsection, which was for months parched by severe drought, suddenly finds itself contending with the opposite: severe flooding that has forced evacuations, slowed commercial barge traffic down the Mississippi River and left farmers with submerged fields during a crucial planting time." The panoramic coverage she offered proved almost biblical—describing drought, flood, withered crops, and exodus in a single swollen sentence. Between Davey's lines is a long-standing message understood by coastal audiences as gospel: the humbled, long-suffering people living in the midst of, and at the mercy of, mid-continental weather, are almost fatalistically prone to the kinds of extreme calamities only a vengeful God might conjure to test their mettle. Davey's next paragraphs focused on Illinois, the nearest locus of the flooding to *The Times* news bureau: "It seemed a sudden, dizzying reversal for a region that had since last summer been contending with a drought that left water supplies in doubt, farm fields shriveled and water levels along the Mississippi River so low as to threaten, at times, to close down commercial traffic." Meanwhile, mention of the unprecedented flood levels in Grand Rapids is not made un-

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til the sixteenth paragraph of the *Times* coverage, presumably due to the River City's distance from the *Times* Chicago headquarters (at 180 miles, a difficult drive to justify for a single reporter tasked with covering a region of more than 750,000 square miles). At approximately 192,000 residents, Grand Rapids represented a fraction of the population of the communities affected, albeit by lower waters, in the Chicago suburbs.

Since our Finding the Lost Region symposium began, many of us have lamented that, until recently, the nation's newspaper of record had just one reporter based in Chicago to cover eleven Midwestern states. Today, Davey accepts our concerns with grace, coupling them with an earnest confession. "That *is* too much to cover," she admits at our prompting; "however, you should think about where it's come from and where it's gotten to. The truth is when I got started in the Chicago bureau twelve years ago, we had two people in Chicago and no one in Kansas City. We covered those eleven states with two people in Chicago flying around. Now we have a bureau in Kansas City, and three [journalists] in Chicago. We'd love to have more. I feel like we are doing more rigorous coverage and more extensive coverage in the Midwest. I've watched the change." She pauses for a moment, reconsidering what might sound like empty rhetoric to the no-nonsense academics in the room. "Is that too many states to cover ... yes." But, she insists, "The Midwest is getting more, deeper coverage, at least from us. We triage the eleven states as needed. So, in other words, if we needed five people in Nebraska, we could. You guys are covered." By comparison, she tells us, the *Times* typically only has one reporter dedicated to the entire mid-Atlantic region.

One of my colleagues from Indiana rises to tell Davey she disagrees with that assessment. "You guys only come ... when we're doing something stupid, crazy, whatever. When I last talked to my son on the phone, I said 'Indiana made the front page of the *New York Times*.' And he said, 'Oh no.'" My colleague goes on to explain how embarrassed she was at the slanted coverage the state received from a *Times* reporter in the wake of the so-called Religious Freedom bill passed by

Indiana legislature: "It's hard ... when the only times we appear on the national scene ... are the things that are not the prettiest part of our lives."

Davey listens intently, though the journalist in her is compelled to relay to us the bad news: "News often doesn't focus on happy things," she reminds. "The stories that newspapers want to tell are more difficult things ... [Because] we write for a national audience or an international audience, ... we step way back in a way that makes the local reporters laugh sometimes ... People forget about stepping back ... because everyone is so in the weeds on a topic they forget that not everyone remembers." I watch my colleague closely for even the subtlest indication that she accepts the explanation of the sometimes fly-by-night coverage of flyover country, but from the deflated way she slumps back into her chair I sense she's not entirely convinced of the merits of stepping so far back that a record-setting flood on the river flowing just beyond our windows merits a mere sentence or two in the *Times* coverage.

I want to push back, to remind today's featured speaker that Midwesterners are all too good at stepping back; in fact, we're well-schooled in the arts of self-effacement, humility, and circumspection from the time we enter grade school. We understand the lack of cosmic importance our blip-on-the-map lives represent to others who live far from here. So it is that our session with Davey returns to the question of just how complicated we are in the kind of coverage we ultimately earn. In its way it's a chicken-and-egg argument. Does our disposition as a region—nationally stereotyped as the gossip-mongering, party-line, eavesdropping pessimists and fatalists of so many Garrison Keillor skits—mean that we would be unhappy if, conversely, the national press corps reported "just the good news" as Davey implies? Would we accuse them of glib superficiality if, instead of focusing on the gravity of our perennial natural disasters, they focused instead on what today they call our "quirky" side—the way we offer a seemingly endless wellspring of odd-ball stories—from the largest hailstone to fall in South Dakota to the last remaining square-toed high school place-kicker in Ohio?

Not long after my return from the Lost

Region conference, my own hometown river, the Wapsipinicon in eastern Iowa, floods at historic levels. While its sister waterway, the Cedar River, garners the lion's share of the national coverage as it inundates the university town of Cedar Falls and the larger industrial city of Cedar Rapids downriver, the creeping damage along the rural Wapsie is deemed fit only for "local news" coverage, though the crests on both rivers represent records and near-records.

While tornadoes are said to possess sufficient strength to drive pieces of hay into tree trunks and fence posts (alas, even our rural "urban legends" have lately been denied us by science), floods like the one impacting my town possess a force capable of arranging and rearranging the status quo into almost surreal tableaux. After weeks of intermittent rain the unnamed creek that flows through my farm and into the Wapsipinicon now overtops its ten-foot high banks, leaving behind barrels in my back pasture and sweeping my watering troughs a full half mile downstream. By chance I see a truck carrying them on the gravel road running past my house, and, following the driver into town, identify them as my own. It's pick-up stick city, the flood mixing and mingling our items with our neighbors', the whole giant, preternatural swap-meet sloughing downstream toward the low-lying areas nearer to grain towns that once depended on the force of these currents to spin grist mills.

The local news coverage of our flood event leads with a sanguine if not self-evident headline: "Flood Victims... Depend on Themselves for Flood Protection." It's a sort of non-headline, actually—rural people left to care for themselves. Still we are grateful for the attention. The reportage acknowledges that we have dealt with flooding almost every other year for the past eight years. The journalist dispatched to detail our misfortune declares,

The local news coverage of our flood event leads with a sanguine if not self-evident headline: "Flood Victims ... Depend on Themselves for Flood Protection."

"Homeowners say they don't have city resources or volunteers to help protect them from flooding. Unlike in larger cities people [here] say they can only depend on themselves and their neighbors for protection." The TV images show my neighbors in town wading and boating through the knee-high floodwaters in Cooksville, the portion closest to the river and on the wrong side of the tracks, topographically speaking. My neighbors in town, Steve and Angie Feuss, are photographed in front of their home/auto repair business, which has flooded repeatedly in the past eight years. "We don't have the big HESCO barriers or anything down here," Angie tells the reporter from Cedar Rapids. "It's all manual labor. Filling sandbags and helping each other out. You don't have the city doing it for you."

Upriver in Anamosa, HESCO barriers and levees re-built after the last major flood event have this time managed to redirect the worst of the raging waters. The National Weather Service lists flood stage at 14.5 feet and "major flood stage"—the red zone—at 21.5 feet. The Wapsipinicon River in Anamosa had been forecast

to crest at 24.1 feet. And once more the unremarkable language used to describe river flooding—*flood-stage*, *crests*, *flow*—robs the natural disaster we're experiencing of its intrinsic drama. The language of the flood exhibits far more decorum than the verbiage associated with other natural disasters, and yet the statistics evidence the calamitousness of our new normal. Of the top ten historic crests recorded by the National Weather Service on my home river, all have come during the last fifteen years, with the exception of the crest of 22.0 feet in 1968—the year my father graduated high school. Historic floods and record crests have become rule rather than exception.

Ironically, days before the waters rose above flood stage, I had called Steve Feuss to trouble-

shoot the rusted-out brake lines on my old farm truck. At that time he had told me he was wrestling with what has become a perennial decision: to sandbag or not to sandbag. In the classic version of Midwestern Murphy's Law, when he sandbags around the garage where his auto repair business is housed, the river doesn't flood; when he fails to sandbag, he nearly always ends up with water up to his electrical outlets.

Though most of the rest of the country sees us as dry and dish-pan flat, the Upper Midwest is a place marked by countless creeks and wetlands. *Land-locked* cannot begin to convey the depth and power of the currents swirling everywhere around us. While much of the rest of the nation (approximately 40 percent or 123.3 million people) live in counties boasting shoreline, Midwesterners more often live near the less heralded streams, ditches, and canals that drain our watersheds into the mid-sized rivers that, in turn, flow into the muddy Mississippi or Missouri Rivers, and south to the Gulf of Mexico. Our tributarial lives partly explain the wellspring of our fatalistic thinking, the intrinsic understanding we have that all good things end or change: factories, farms, family legacies that seemed as if they'd last forever are all too easily swept away. And when we forget, nature reminds us of our fragility. The news coverage of our natural disasters, when it comes, usually arrives in the form of

parable featuring a hard-pressed agrarian people whose psychological and physical nearness to an abundant land necessarily condemns us to fall occasional victim to its superabundance, in much the same way that the yeoman who in good years surely reaps the bounty of the fertile riverlands he's blessed to farm must be fated, in bad years, to see his livelihood washed away.

Viewed at panoramic distance, our lives offer the kind of ready allegories busy reporters find beguiling. In reality, the severity and drama of our mid-continental weather hits us doubly hard. Not only does it leave many of our already hard-pressed communities hurting, but it also draws the media eye away from the good and worthy things otherwise coming to bloom in this, the forgotten middle of the country: "Brain Gain" in some of our rural counties threatened for generations by rural-to-urban migration, impressive tallies of new "farms" (though far too many of them hobby), the blessing of our uniquely grassroots retail politics, and the boon of our unequaled literacy rates and levels of civic engagement. As the national media show what's left of our lives from on high, offering fly-over views of ruined lives scattered on the lawn like so many pick-up sticks, we can hold close to our particular regional truth: we are more than stock characters fated to people the parable of a deluge. We are more than the sum of our natural disasters.