



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

“The Soul of this Place”

Talk by Peter Forbes

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Vermont Land Trust Annual Meeting

Back in 1989, Marshall Squire got a call late on a January afternoon from Francis Merrill. Marshall knew Frances pretty well since she had been the town clerk for many years. He started talking about the news of the day as Marshall wants to do, but Francis interrupted him and nervously said, “Mo, I think there’s a fire in my cellar.”

Marshall could smell the smoke as he raced his way up Merrill Spring road and by the time he and other members of the fire department got there the house was pretty much fully-engaged.

Neighbors had already gotten Frances out of the house, but everybody was so busy fighting the roaring fire that nobody noticed that 89 year old woman had settled into her pick-up across the street to watch everything she owned burn to ashes. It was a devastating day, but the smoke was still in the air when folks in this town started talking about planting some seeds in those ashes. The town decided to build Frances a new house, right there on the foundation of the old and they did it on weekends, large crews of men, women and children building quickly, section by section. There was a newspaper article about how Frances Merrill got a new home and her quote was “I don’t know why they did this. I’m just an ordinary person.”

I want to tell you a story about ordinary people in an ordinary town.

Just a month ago, Alfred Ballou was tending his cows, doing what he does everyday of his life, when a disaster struck and in an instant he found himself trapped underneath his

tractor. The ambulance squad barely had Alfred on the stretcher before folks started talking about how they could help. Ten days later, there were 3,000 bales of hay in Alfred's barn. More than forty people dropped what they were doing that week and cut, baled, and stored that hay.

There's a tradition here in Tinmouth about flowers and getting hitched. No one seems to know how or when it got started, but just that it's taken very seriously. When a woman of this town gets married, and it doesn't matter **where** she's getting married or who's invited to the wedding, most every other woman in town fills a few five gallon buckets with flowers and delivers them to the Bride's house. Flowers, beauty and women.

There's another tradition here that goes back at least twenty years: the summer softball games. Lots of communities play softball in the summer, but here in Tinmouth everyone in town is encouraged to play. The average team might have a twelve year old pitcher and sixty-five year old catcher. The motto of the softball games is "Everybody's welcome, nobody keeps score, everybody smiles."

I'm told that just about everyone in this town goes to the annual Game Supper at the Fire department and, what's more, on that evening there very likely isn't a kitchen in Tinmouth that isn't cooking something for it.

Many communities in Vermont have newsletters published by the town, but the "Tales of Tinmouth" is a bit different. It's been around for more than twenty years, and been edited for the last 17 by Gail Fallar. The newsletter is so good that there are a great many folks still subscribing who have long since moved away.

It has the predictable School board announcements, minutes from the board of selectmen, and pertinent notices like this one: "First half payment of property taxes due the 15th. Interest will be charged."

But it also has simple acts of kindness such as this:

“Need water for drinking and washing? If August is dry and your spring or well is running low, you can bring a sap tank or other large container to our place on Gulf Road and fill it from the overflow of our well.”

And it has poetry, essays, photographs, and thank yous of all sorts.

I’ve been told here in Tinmouth that *community is an attitude* and if that’s true, and I believe it is, then I would add it’s an attitude of abundance. The sense of abundance that’s here doesn’t ever run out because receiving love releases the capacity for love. Love and tolerance just breeds more love and tolerance.

There’s a woman here in town, Ruth Drachman, who loves books so much that she pretty much single-handedly re-invigorated the town library. There’s the couple who made an anonymous contribution to make sure this community center would get built, and then the folks in this town donated their time and skills to build it.

Of course, there’s Bob and Sue Lloyd who bought the place of their dreams in 1963: 1,200 acres of mountains, fields and forests. After 15 years of getting to know that land, they realized that what they owned individually was not nearly as important as what they held in common with the people of Tinmouth. They shared in common a love of that land and a commitment to their neighbors. In 1980, Bob and Sue decided to cement those relationships by making a promise to themselves and to everyone in this town: that land would never change. The good neighborliness that was extended to Bob and Sue when they first arrived in Tinmouth was returned in the form of that promise.

Their faith and belief in Tinmouth built trust, which snowballed into more trust. By 1990, six other landowners in Tinmouth had made similar promises and protected their lands. By 2001, twelve neighbors had protected their land forever.

The promises that this community has made to one another about the land it shares is at the heart of their story. Taking care of the land is the act of taking care of one another.

The Vermont Land Trust has protected 4,300 acres in Tinmouth. Another 3,500 acres of wetlands have been protected through zoning. Another 4,700 acres have their development potential significantly reduced through large-lot zoning. Add these together and you find that 42% of Tinmouth is pretty well protected, and by that I mean it's cared for with a promise.

And since 1978 Tinmouth has had sophisticated, thoughtful zoning that rivals any community in New England, while not one of its neighboring towns has any zoning at all.

What does all this mean? How do you explain Tinmouth? There are superficial explanations, none of which are correct.

The first account, often made by neighboring towns, is that Tinmouth is an enclave for the rich who are downwardly mobile in their work cloths and farm caps and who are just protecting what they have by zoning out everyone else. The facts tell a very different story. Median household income in Vermont is \$39,000 and in Tinmouth is \$32,600. Of the fifty kids in the school, one-in-four are on free or reduced price lunch. One-third of the households in Tinmouth receive social security. This is not a rich town, at least not in conventional economic terms.

There *is* individual wealth here, but there's an abundant sense of commonwealth as well. In Tinmouth, wealth isn't measured by the size of your bank account but by the quality of your relationships. Wealth is the number of people you can call when something goes wrong. Wealth is the stories you can tell about the people and places in your lives. Fabulous wealth is a thank you in the Tinmouth Tales.

A second common explanation is that all the progressive, civic-minded things that are happening in Tinmouth are part of an elaborate, well conceived plot by dozens of liberals

who moved in here in the 1970s from Massachusetts and now run the place. Well, there *is* Bob and Sue. But again the facts tell a very different story. Ruth Dwyer won the governor's race here in Tinmouth. I need not say more about this being a town run by democrats, or any one party.

If you ask folks in town what makes Tinmouth unique, you get lots of different answers. One enlightened man quickly told me 'It's the women in this town'

Another said "Tinmouth has done a great job of blending new and old Vermonters."

Or this: "'Tales of Tinmouth' has helped us speak honestly and comfortably with one another."

Someone else said, "It's because of the old generation, folks like Jay-jay Squire and Cecil Buffum who figured out that zoning was important way back in the 1970s and helped the community say that we value our farmers and our history."

Everyone with whom I spoke pointed to the hills or the farms and said it was the land, itself, that made Tinmouth what Tinmouth is. And, of course, the land did make Tinmouth, but Tinmouth has also saved the land.

The true answer about what makes Tinmouth so successful a place to live is complex, meaningful and fragile. Nothing has happened by accident or luck. They have created, through hundreds of evening meetings, casual hellos and simple hugs on the street, an alchemy of land and people that has earned for them an enduring, healthy community, a place that people love.

That remarkable story is held in this single comment: "The heart of Tinmouth is the promises we make to one another."

This community believes in what holds it together. And what holds them together is tolerance, strong intention, and the land.

Jay-Jay Squire and his contemporaries set a tone for tolerance that is still upheld today. They were fiercely loyal to this town but it wasn't a narrow loyalty to just their own tribe. Loyalty and citizenship are often confused. Many places are fiercely loyal to their clubs, charities and congregations, fiercely loyal, in other words, to their own kind- the narrowly defined membership that includes people like them. That's not true here in Tinmouth. Here, citizenship means being open to new people, new ideas, new traditions. The promise is the agreement to disagree, and to respect each others opinions, and it actually works here. One warm-hearted person put it to me succinctly, "I wave to Jim, regardless."

Cecil Buffum, a farmer and former selectmen who's lived in Tinmouth since 1936, told me, "We try to make room for one another. I've hated to see these new houses coming in here. It was hard to take at first. You have to live with it and work with it. Do what's best for everybody. I'm very proud of how we've progressed so far. We keep things open and above board and that helps. People have to have a place to live."

A much more recent resident told me "Being here has opened my eyes to being in a community. It's opened our family."

Another told me, "I didn't know what community was until I moved to Tinmouth."

I can tell that it's helped a great deal that many of the old families are still here, still open to change, still holding dear that which matters most.

Over the years, Tinmouth has intentionally asked itself very difficult questions that are good for us all to bear in mind. How tolerant are our loyalties? How do we best take care of one another? How much is enough?

Their answers are as much about the land as they are about the people. In searching for their own healthy future, they had the wisdom to seek the health of the land around them.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “If you would find yourself, look to the land you came from and to which you go.”

This relationship between land and people was described by a resident: “For me it’s always been the landscape that told me what people cared about. And that protected land still tells people everyday what Tinmouth cares about.”

Tolerance toward one another is a tolerance toward the land. Saving land makes real for people the respect they feel for themselves. It’s truthful. A kindness toward one another would be false if it were surrounded by a neglect for the land, just as it would be a troubling deceit to find protected land where there is not fairness among people.

The openness and warmth of this community is plainly visible in the protected fields and streams and forests of this land. It’s hard to say which came first. Was it the tolerance in the people that enabled the land to be protected, or was it this beautiful land, itself, that helped people to be tolerant to one another?

It hardly matters. What counts is the fragile balance still exists here in Tinmouth. Every community across America makes choices about their land that reflect and contribute to who they are and who they will become. And we are grateful for Tinmouth, the way we are grateful for all of Vermont, in that we have more examples here where the right choice was made.

Tinmouth *does* have a different relationship with its land.

Vermont still has 5,800 farms, 1,500 of which are dairies. Six of those active dairies are here in Tinmouth. Vermont only has 4% of its population earning their incomes in the fields, farms and woods. But in Tinmouth it's double that or almost 9 percent.

One of Tinmouth's strengths is that it's never been ambivalent about the future.

They were looking for ways to control their lives back in 1978 when they first voted for zoning. It was quite a surprising thing for a farming community to do.

Cecil Buffum was on the select board back then and he told me: "we saw what was happening in the neighboring towns and zoning seemed just common sense to us. Sure, people got to be free to do what they want but you've got to realize too that putting a house in the middle of a field is plain offensive to us. When you do that, you're declaring no one will ever farm this again. It's thumbing your nose at the history of this place. It's saying that the only thing that matters is the almighty dollar. We enacted zoning to keep things from being done to us. Average folks here wouldn't do these things. Having lived here since I was four, I've seen the things that this land has given me for happiness. I hope we can keep it the way it is. We certainly have a bond to it.

Marshal Squire has led many of the recent efforts to protect this land and claim it forever as home. He told me "there are many people here who just care all through their body for this land."

The land is being protected, but to what extent can the social fabric be protected? The bonds here feel so strong but we know too that they are vulnerable. You can't keep people the same. Some folks are gonna die and, thankfully, babies will be born. Will they be able to fill the shoes left for them? Marshal told me "What I fear the most is that Tinmouth people can't live here anymore".

Tinmouth will figure this out because they already know that their community is inseparable from the land and therefore the land trust will have to help people as much as they have helped the land. The land trust, known for land conservation, will one day also ensure that young people can grow up and have families in Tinmouth.

I want to tell you a story about ordinary people in an ordinary town.

They had a clear vision for what they could restore to themselves and how they might imagine their lives differently. They chose to save land as one of the promises they made to one another. That promise said this: we save land to maintain our connections to the things that matter most to us. We conserve land because we do not accept the illusion that our fate is in any way separated from the fate of the osprey, the catamount, the liverwort, or one another. We conserve land because land is where our relationship with the rest of life, our fundamental happiness and security, is proven. We save land because it is in our relationship with the rest of life that we find enduring meaning and joy. We save land because it's far more fun, healthy, sensual, and enriching to live in a whole world.

These expressions of service, patience, respect, and humility are the core values of every successful community, and they are never easy to live by. But these values left in our hearts by land conservation are bigger and more important than we can imagine. They are bigger than we can possibly count in acres. Some walls grow higher each year, it's true. But others crumble. Land conservation helps a great deal to crumble down the walls between us, and between us and the rest of life.

Last April, third and fourth graders here in Tinmouth wrote a poem to their road commissioner. I love my town, but we do not write poems to our road commissioner. This was written by folks who seem to know Hollis pretty well:

Hollis in his favorite place to be
Sitting in his hunting tree
Watching over Tinmouth

Brave in fires
Awake at three and ready to go in snow
Hollis in his favorite spot to be
With his feisty old turkey
And his crazy crow Jake
Watching over Tinmouth

On the old farm
Truthful and huggable
Hollis in his favorite spot to be
Watching over Tinmouth