

“Fly-over country” people have always been relevant

We – you and I and the millions of men and women who live in small communities from the Atlantic to the Pacific – live in what is euphemistically called “fly-over country,” those cities and towns which the media and the marketing gurus believe to be irrelevant, populated by people who do not have a place at the table because we are too old, too stupid, too straight, too poor, too uncouth to contribute much.

Fly-over country used to be more geographical than it is today. I recall being on a plane from Indianapolis to someplace in the far west years ago and when we got into either Oklahoma or Kansas air space – and I can’t recall which it was – the flight attendants hovered in the aisles to take our drinks away from us because we were 32,000 feet above a place in which to drink alcohol was to sin. We flew over and they returned our drinks a few minutes later at the next state line. I don’t know that the aggrieved states were prepared to shoot us out of the sky for failure to com-

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A MOMENT

Ed Breen



ply, but we did.

As money, power, influence, people and jobs gravitated to the big cities we increasingly lost not only our livelihoods but our self-respect.

A year ago now, the Community Foundation of Grant County brought a fellow to town, a man named Ben Winchester, a Minnesotan and fellow fly-over victim, who tried to disabuse us of this notion. You are not, he said, in the middle of nowhere, you are in the middle of everywhere. He is right, of course, but it is still a



James Fallows and wife, Debra.

tough sell.

Now he has been joined by a big-time serious journalist who is telling us the same thing. He is James Fallows, a former reporter, editor, boss of the Atlantic magazine and once a speech writer for President Jimmy Carter.

Fallows, who was from small-town America himself, albeit a California small town, has teamed with his wife, Debra, a Buckeye by birth, to give us a fresh look at ourselves in both a book and an HBO TV special called, appropriately, “Our Towns.”

The great irony of the Fallows’ work is that they

compressed the necessary time to visit fly-over country by flying to us rather than over us. Fallows is a pilot and the two of them hopscoched the nation from Lackawanna, N. Y., to Redlands, Calif., and 40 other towns in between in their own small aircraft. That allowed more time in places like Vermillion, Ohio, and Eastport, Maine, and Sioux Falls, S.D., to talk to the rest of us.

And the important thing is what they talked about, what they discussed with the folks on and off Main Street in 42 towns. After they com-

pleted their book a couple of years ago, they made another journey to our part of the country to tell us what they had found. Among the stops on that trek were stops in Muncie and Fort Wayne, not to preach but to inform. But let Mr. Fallows tell you a bit of it:

“We avoided national politics,” he said, “because of the depth and dimensionality of people’s views when you ask them about things they know.”

“If you ask them about their lives, their families, their children, their farms, their towns, they are really interesting and deep.”

It would, perhaps, improve the quality of national reporting and the evening TV news if that small admonition were tattooed to the foreheads of the fresh-faced pups who parachute in nightly to tell us what we think.

The Fallows tried to look at regional and local changes and needs separated from the national bleating of all persuasions:

“National politics in the U.S. has become essentially trench warfare and zero sum,” he writes. “In those settings for national politics, it is all the more important that we recognize local and regional experimentation, not so much as a laboratory of democracy, but sort of as a conservator of democracy in medieval terms, when you had monasteries as a place where the light could continue.”

“Places that recognize that more directly are in better shape because they can use a greater share of their communities’ creativity and resources,” he concludes.

We need to assure the lights aren’t turned off on our watch,



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