The Kindness of Strangers: 
The Fiction of Kent Haruf

Jeffrey Folks

In 1999, when Kent Haruf burst on the scene, so to speak, with his bestselling novel Plainsong, he was already fifty-six years old. At this point, Haruf had been writing fiction for well over thirty years and had published two previous novels, The Tie That Binds in 1984 and Where You Once Belonged in 1990. Although his early novels earned him a degree of critical recognition, neither was a popular success. Following graduation from Nebraska Wesleyan University and the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, where he earned an MFA, most of Haruf’s life had been spent working in agriculture, construction, and teaching. Only after the popular success of Plainsong, which was also filmed as a CBS television movie, was Haruf able to devote himself full time to writing.

It seems fitting that Haruf, the son of a Methodist minister and one who has spent most of his life on the Great Plains, should achieve his first real success with a novel entitled Plainsong. His writing is, after all, both a “song” of the plains and a stylistic approximation of “plainsong,” a variety of monophonic Christian vocal music expressive of the quiet devotion and devout faith of the religious communities in which it is practiced. Haruf’s writing is marked by an attitude of stillness and reflection devoted to the enduring relationship of human beings to a particular place, a stable code of ethics, and an unwavering faith in the goodness of life. This faith in what T. S. Eliot called the “permanent things” affords solace and defense against the chaotic force inherent in both nature and human society—a force of disorder that within our nation’s symbolism has always been connected with the Western frontier. Even today, the West, populated as one imagines by a raggedy band of misfits, cultists, survivalists, and hardened loners, remains the locus of America’s outlaw mythology. Like the “American nomads” of whom Richard Grant writes in a book of the same name, Haruf depicts Westerners who are engaged in a “process of retreat and withdrawal, from the damage within themselves and human relationships in general.” Unlike

JEFFREY FOLKS has taught in Europe, America, and Japan, most recently as Professor of Letters in the Graduate School of Doshisha University in Japan. He has published numerous books and articles on American literature including In a Time of Disorder: Form and Meaning in Southern Fiction from Poe to O’Connor (2003) and Damaged Lives: Southern and Caribbean Narrative from Faulkner to Naipaul (2005).
Grant’s nomads, however, who include lost conquistadors, mountain men, cowboys, Indians, hoboes, and bullriders, among others, and all of whom seem to prefer their proud, uncompromising solitude to the less-than-ideal accommodation of everyday life, Haruf’s rebellious spirits find themselves tamed, even amidst the physical isolation of the great Western plains, by the redemptive force of an enduring civilization. Unlike the many desperado figures in our popular culture (Clint Eastwood, Waylon Jennings, Thelma and Louise, and the rest), Haruf’s drifters and rebels crave the protective shelter of those caring, generous souls, themselves often reclusive by nature, who discover their own redemption in acts of charity. Thus, in Haruf’s fiction the Western myth is humanized and assuaged, and the simplistic image of the outlaw hero prevalent in our popular culture is displaced by a more realistic image and underlying truth: that the goodness of heartland America, and of America as a whole, is grounded in traditional values and virtues that foster acceptance rather than isolation, serenity rather than violence, belief rather than doubt. As Jonathan Miles wrote (in an otherwise dismissive review), *Plainsong* is “a life raft for people who felt they were drowning in the sour froth of pop cynicism.”

The problem is, of course, that as a civilization we have been drowning in a sea of cynicism, and the consequences of this sneering distrust become more apparent, decade by decade. As Leszek Kolakowski has suggested, there exists “a close link between the dissolution of the sacred” and certain “spiritual phenomena” that contribute to the decline and perhaps “suicide” of Western culture. According to Kolakowski, these phenomena include “the love of the amorphous, the desire for homogeneity, the illusion that there are no limits to the perfectibility of which human society is capable, immanentist eschatologies, and the instrumental attitude toward life.” The damaging effects of these phenomena manifest themselves throughout our culture, from the extraordinarily high divorce rates to the reduction of social communities to a humorless, legalistic exercise of correctness, to the cult-like appeal of radical ideologies. At the core of Kent Haruf’s artistic sensibility, there exists just such an awareness of the waning of belief in the sacred. Like Kolakowski, Haruf records the dangerous appeal of the amorphous: the urge to flee from the burdens of responsibility, tradition, and constancy in search of greater personal freedom and choice. In novels that depict the need for commitment, charity, and most of all faith, Haruf points to the destructive implications of a humanistic philosophy that would elevate personal freedom and pleasure above all other values. With his profound reverence for life, Haruf opposes those forces of contemporary culture, from the deadening influence of state bureaucracies to the dulling materialism and standardization of consumer culture, that undermine the value of human life and the essential awareness of the sacred.

Given Haruf’s pervasive sense of cultural damage, it is not surprising that his thematic intentions focus on two central matters: first, a compelling documentation of the decline of the sacred and, second, a register of the damage that this decline has caused. In his understanding of the concept of the sacred, however, Haruf is less interested in the influence of sectarian religious practices than he is in a deep-seated and universal religious sensibility that underlies the most important human affiliations, among them the relationships of parents and children, the response to nature, and the ever-present awareness of human mortality. Though much of contemporary behavior seems to proceed from the cynical
assumption that existence is fundamentally irremediable and anarchic, the centrality of purposeful action grounded in religious faith has always stood at the center of Western identity. Within classical culture focused on the *vita activa*, there resided an unshakable confidence concerning the potentiality for human action. It is this faith, extending to a conviction regarding the existence of an afterlife, which has been generally dismissed with the rise of skepticism in contemporary culture, within which it is not action but various forms of constriction and relinquishment that have preoccupied philosophical speculation. In the view of theorists from Nietzsche to Heidegger and from Sartre to Foucault, existence is best understood in terms of absence and loss, and human action is more apt to be viewed as purposeless and indifferent than as good, and within the culture of suspicion that has arisen in the wake of this destructive theory, all assertions of purposeful action are greeted with distrust. Gradually, throughout the past century, an “age of decline” in which Czeslaw Miłosz detects an ever greater materialism, nihilism, and “collapse of values,” the conception of human life as the *vita activa* has largely disappeared among intellectuals, and a culture of absence and opposition has taken hold.

Kent Haruf’s novels constitute a sophisticated response to this spreading tide of defeatism. At the center of these fictional works is a focus on the classical-Christian faith in human existence as purposeful and good, and at the heart of this mythos is a recognition of the new beginning that enters the world with the birth of every child. A vivid example of this affirmation is the meeting of the elderly McPheron brothers and seventeen-year-old Victoria Roubideaux in the novel *Plainsong*. Harold and Raymond McPheron, lifelong bachelors sunk in a stagnant round of farm chores and a sterile, silent home life, appear to be “doomed” by their loss of opportunity for purposeful action. As Harold says, “Think of us. Crotchety and ignorant. Lonesome. Independent. Set in all our ways. How you going to change now at this age of life?” Reduced to a fruitless and reclusive condition, lacking beauty, joy, or the challenge of the unfamiliar, they are simply living out their lives and waiting for death. Yet *Plainsong* and *Eventide*, Haruf’s two novels that focus on the relationship of the McPheron brothers and Victoria Roubideaux, depict the transformation of isolated, unproductive lives into a more hopeful condition of mutual responsibility. Their meeting with Victoria—indigent, bereft of emotional support, and uncertain where to turn after she becomes pregnant—rekindles hope because it allows them the opportunity to engage in purposeful activity. After their meeting with Victoria, the McPherons are spurred to decisive action. As Raymond informs his brother of his decision to shelter the young woman, he delivers the news more as an ultimatum than a request, “Now, are you going to go in on this thing with me or not? Cause I’m going to do it anyhow, whatever.” To which Harold replies, “I will. I’ll agree. I shouldn’t, but I will. I’ll make up my mind to it.”

The spare, laconic expression of the McPherons suggests their moral clarity and their determination not merely to reflect but to act on behalf of their beliefs. Unbeknownst to them, Victoria begins to share in this ethical imperative after she learns that she is pregnant. Following her visit to the Holt County Clinic, she stands in the street outside sensing that reality for her has become “hard-edged, definite, as if it were no longer merely a late fall after dusk, but instead as if it were the first moment of noon in the exact meridian of summer.” Her newfound sense of distinctness and lucid-
ity are the result of the revelation that she is now almost solely responsible for the future well-being of a particular human being. As the McPherons realize, this responsibility “ain’t going to be no goddamn Sunday school picnic,” but for Victoria it is in reality the great opportunity of her life. It is most certainly the first time in her unstable, loveless existence that she has entered into a permanent and total attachment to anyone or anything. As her pregnancy proceeds, Victoria’s self-awareness and her appreciation of everything outside herself changes. Even the dry, wind-swept, desolate landscape of Holt County seems transformed.

In terms of this thematic emphasis, the landscape of northeastern Colorado, in fact, plays a significant role in *Plainsong* and in all of Haruf’s novels. The fictional Holt County, a mythic landscape that is at the same time more desolate and more plentiful of spirit and beauty than any actual setting that one could find, is the stuff of moral allegory. Although it may be based on an actual locale, that of northeastern Colorado, the region that Haruf depicts is more akin to that of John Bunyan: it is a desolate landscape with its own City of Destruction, an imaginative locale in which the consequences of moral choice loom larger than any geographical feature. From what Haruf tells us of its early history in *The Tie That Binds*, Holt County is the place where a version of natural selection has taken place among settlers who have had to wrest a meager living from the dry, sandy soil, and those who have remained possess special qualities of determination, durability, and patience coupled with the virtues of humility and kindness. They are in this sense a “chosen people”—chosen not only by God but by the stark, winnowing effects of the American heartland. An Old Testament sensibility attaches easily to this culture and to Haruf’s rendering of it, and especially pertinent is the Biblical account of Exodus. The early settlers on the Western frontier were leading their families out of slavery in the East, the land of Pharaohs in the guise of crippling taxes and governmental tyranny to the homestead lands west of the Mississippi. Like the Promised Land beyond the River Jordan, Western land held out the promise of freedom and new life.

Accordingly, the landscape described in *Plainsong* suggests an existence that is often cruel and unforgiving but that demands moral decisiveness and clarity. The night in early March when Raymond sets out for his ill-fated second “date” with Linda May, Haruf captures a sense of the special moral loveliness of the plains:

> It was a Saturday night, the sky overhead clear of any cloud, the stars as clean and bright as if they were no more distant than the next barbed-wire fence post standing up above the narrow ditch running beside the narrow blacktop highway, everything all around him distinct and unhidden. He loved how it all looked, except that he would never have said it in that way. He might have said that this was just how it was supposed to look, out on the high plains at the end of winter, on a clear fresh night.9

The moral idealism of heartland America that Haruf invokes hearkens back to faith in America as a second Eden—a paradise not only because of its material abundance but also because of its spiritual richness. In this land settlers of modest means, or of none at all, could seek a life of dignity and purpose. In this noble endeavor, they brought with them the transforming knowledge of an inherited faith and ethical culture, and this inheritance
would at least afford solace and hope, if not always success. In the West these settlers preserved and renewed the civilization that they brought with them from the East. From this perspective, America’s role in world history was understood to be that of conservator of the ancient traditions of reverence for life that her earliest European settlers had brought with them. The sheer scale and rough splendor of the West were, after all, intricately connected with a national mythos of providential history that Russell Martin terms “spatial hope.”

Equally a part of this myth is the recognition of the paradox that the attractiveness of the frontier West as a last bastion of hope has necessarily contributed to that region’s diminishment as those who flee the East in search of opportunity bring with them civilization’s ills. Inevitably, hope must be qualified by evidence of the inherent corruption of human nature, an unregenerate feature of existence that trumps even frontier optimism. It was this same evidence of corruption in the Old World that impelled the Founders to establish an intricate system of checks and balances, a governmental system grounded on hope but also on the recognition of the inherent fallibility of human nature. Hannah Arendt credited the wisdom of American democracy when she noted that, following the gradual loss of conviction in religion and tradition throughout the post-medieval period, “the revolutions of the modern age appear like gigantic attempts to repair these foundations.” In Arendt’s view, only the American Revolution was successful in attending to the lapse of political order and reinstating a system that was both stable and compelling of belief. While Arendt outlined many challenges to the survival of American civilization, she never lost faith in the value of the Founders’ vision of a liberal democracy governed within a constitutional framework of law. It is not Haruf’s intention, of course, to engage in a discussion of political theory within the context of his fiction, but, based on the manner in which he addresses similar concerns, it is clear that he shares Arendt’s faith. One of the qualities that the McPherson brothers share with Tom Guthrie is an adamant refusal to surrender their rights as free citizens. In their refusal to do so—as when Tom stands up to the attempts of Russell Beckman and his family to usurp his proper authority as a teacher—Haruf’s protagonists defend their rights within a democracy to move about and to congregate freely, to be recognized as equals under the law, and to “speak their piece.” Clearly, however, Haruf fears that these rights are at risk within a society in which, as Kolakowski noted, the claims of homogeneity and the radical demands of free will appear to override traditional restraints of custom and belief.

As a result of the determination of at least some of its citizens to preserve their freedoms, Holt County might well be seen as a promised land of the sort upon which the Founders premised their efforts. In contrast with the pointless frenzy of postmodernist culture, Haruf’s fictionalized world is a place of coherence and purposefulness, a place where roads are platted on a grid running straight north-south or east-west, and a place where an innate respect for order still resides in the human heart. The fictionalized Holt County possesses a deep simplicity—a quality that, as Mark McCloskey points out, “is equated with virtue” in the novel—that acts as a counterbalance to the dominant culture

SPRING 2009
of alienation embodied in the closest large city, Denver. This urban enchantress is the place to which many of the younger residents of Holt County flee from the seeming boredom of life on the plains and where they seek pleasure in activities that, like the coarse party to which Dwayne takes Victoria during her pregnancy, tend toward the destruction of new life. In doing so, they are deserting a better place of clear values and active goodness for a dark underworld of moral confusion and self-contempt. In Haruf’s imaginative world, those who flee from rural America to the city soon find themselves in dreary, isolating circumstances, surviving in characterless apartment buildings in which human beings are severed from nature and walled off from each other.

The contrast with life on the McPheron ranch could not be any greater. Here the brothers are immersed in the rich life of nature; here the weather plays a critical role in their efforts; and here birth and the nurturing of new life are the central activities. In his intricate descriptions of the McPheron cattle operation, Haruf details the processes of birthing, weaning, milking, and separating out cattle for slaughter, a labor that is bounded by the elemental forces of nature. There is, for example, the powerful but disturbing scene in which Haruf recounts the autopsy of a beloved horse, Elko, as witnessed by her owners, two young boys. Yet in the way that Haruf describes the cattle and farming operations, there is the inescapable implication that the same order of necessity enfolds human affairs, and it is largely in these terms that the McPhersons initially interpret Victoria’s pregnancy. Though she is not a cow giving birth to a calf, Harold at first finds it difficult to separate her condition from that of the larger order of nature within which he as a rancher has been immersed for seventy years. Clearly, he and Raymond do come to distinguish her condition from that of the farm animals with which they are more familiar, yet on the elemental level, at least, the pattern of human life, with the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, and death, is no different from what the brothers observe in their ranching operation, and it is this fact that human existence is bounded by necessity that gives rise to their discovery of life’s precious opportunities for charity. Just as the brothers sometimes have to step in to assist in the birth of calves, they willingly assist Victoria in the months before and after the birth of her daughter. From their perspective, it is assumed that they will volunteer this assistance as a matter of course.

Out of this elemental condition emerges a culture of humanity and compassion, yet even as Haruf’s novels depict acts of decency and kindness on the part of the McPhersons and others, they suggest a paradoxical truth that the heartland’s harsh and unforgiving environment should foster such nobility while the less demanding urban milieu represented by Denver seems a place of exploitation and degradation. Like William Blake in this respect, Haruf finds the urban scene filled with “marks of weakness, marks of woe.” Those who have known grief, ranchers like the McPhersons who have themselves struggled and have witnessed the efforts and often the failures of others, have learned hard lessons of concern and self-restraint, while others like Vicky’s boyfriend, Dwayne, fail to register the suffering of others, perhaps because they have never had to suffer themselves.

The reality of suffering and the need for responsible behavior are made apparent throughout Haruf’s writing. In his first novel, The Tie That Binds, we are introduced to Edith Goodnough, a woman who practices self-denial and service to others every day of her life. Growing up in a hard-pressed agricultural economy before
the Second World War, Edith finds that she must give up the great love of her life, John Roscoe, in order to care for her widowed father after he loses all but one of his fingers in a reaping machine accident. Unlike her younger brother, Lyman, who as his name suggests is essentially disingenuous and irresponsible, Edith is conscientious, perhaps to a fault. While Lyman spends the first two decades of his adulthood traveling aimlessly around the country, sending Edith a packet of $20 bills every Christmas along with only a tersely worded postcard identifying the city in which he is living, Edith forgoes love and the chance for independence in order to devote herself to the care of a disabled parent. When Lyman finally returns to Holt County, he and Edith live together for six “good years,” “almost as if they were honeymooners.”

For Edith, however, the good years end all too soon, as Lyman drifts into senility.

Edith Goodnough is not the only character in The Tie That Binds who experiences tragedy. Sanders Roscoe, the novel’s first-person narrator, is a young man who must learn the hard lesson that life is ennobled only by facing up to the circumstances that one finds oneself in. In Sandy’s case, this involves facing the consequences of his own indecisiveness toward the role of fatherhood. After he marries Mavis Pickett in 1963, he and Mavis lose their first baby in a car accident in which Lyman Goodnough is the driver. In 1969 Sandy and Mavis have another child, a daughter named Rena Pickett, who then becomes a frequent visitor at the Goodnough farm. There, in a moment of anger and confusion, the crazed Lyman attacks Rena and Edith after beating the family dog, Nancy. In the end Edith is unable to care for her increasingly dependent brother, and she decides to end Lyman’s and her own life by setting fire to the farmhouse, a solution that is only forestalled when Mavis and Sandy hear Nancy barking where Edith has tied her up outside. Having rushed to the burning farmhouse, Sandy realizes that Edith wishes to die, and he attempts to prevent the fire crew from entering the house. The crew is able to restrain him and remove Edith and Lyman, but Lyman dies in the hospital that night. Then, at the age of eighty, Edith is charged with murder. At the end of the novel, it is the beauty of Edith’s character that impresses Sandy, even as she faces prosecution for her brother’s murder. As he says, she has spent her entire life “without her ever understanding how to say anything like a continuous yes to herself.” She is “still in the ways that matter, just as fine and beautiful as she must have been in 1922” when she was dating John Roscoe. Haruf’s handling of syntax in these and other passages seems a perfect reflection of both the narrator’s countrified manner and, more to the point, the countryman’s stubborn resistance to the easy cliché and thoughtless turn of phrase of his urban counterpart. The speaker’s voice, like his nickname “Sandy,” conveys a gritty resistance to the self-serving correctness of liberal culture, in lieu of which he speaks only heartfelt if sometimes awkward truths.

It is hardly coincidental that the prosecutor’s decision to bring charges against Edith is prompted by the unwelcome prying of a smug young investigative reporter from one of the Denver papers. The media of our time, after all, trade in a commerce of glib lies and half-truths, peddled in the rapid-fire flux of distorted and contextless words and images. As James Bowman writes in Honor: A History, “news and entertainment have grown ever more indistinguishable in the last decade,” a fact that Bowman sees as one consequence of the rise of “celebrity culture” in place of the old honor culture. As Bowman sees it, the rise of investigative journalism is a
manifestation of contemporary culture’s willingness to subject the private and in some cases trivial details of honorable public lives to a corrosive cynicism while, at the same time, excusing all manner of indiscretion and even criminal behavior on the part of celebrity entertainers. The public demands continual entertainment from its clownish celebrities, but it also delights in seeing serious and decent individuals brought down. The spectacle of an eighty-year-old matron on trial for murder is just the sort of story that melds news and entertainment. In contrast to this inane and meretricious entertainment, Haruf’s fiction labors through a narration that depicts generations of sacrifice and real consequence to construct an architecture of tales which function as moral fable, patiently placing present-day events in the coherent context of family and fixed inhabitation. The austere, inhospitable environment of the fictionalized Holt County represents a useful corrective to the current appetite for glib journalistic editorializing with its suggestion that, given the material abundance of American life, all things come easily as a matter of entitlement, and no fault attaches to any behavior, however mistaken. By contrast, Haruf’s vision is more weighty and consequential. As is reflected in the slow, resolute quality of his narration, every action must be weighed with care because all actions possess consequences beyond our knowing. Recognizing the consequential nature of our actions, however, is the first step toward salvaging our imperfect lives.

In this respect, Haruf’s fiction proceeds from a profound idealism since it implies the possibility of improving the world through the actions of those who take their responsibilities and limitations seriously. The kindness of strangers that so often intercedes to arrest the ugly normality of abuse or indifference proceeds from the recognition that suffering and impairment are real and that human resources are constrained. The abandonment of a teenaged girl by her boyfriend after she becomes pregnant is, after all, what many have come to accept as the norm in contemporary society, yet in Plainsong Victoria Roubideaux is befriended, first by her high school teacher, Maggie Jones, and then by the McPherson brothers. It is a small miracle that such unlikely saviors would step in to aid the girl, although at the same time such saving is also a confirmation of life’s absence: the fact that such unlikely miracles have to be deployed attests to the prevailing callousness of modern society, which is thus redoubled in Haruf’s telling. Our condition of loss is made to seem all the more inescapable by Haruf’s reliance on quirky acts of charity in which a few noble strangers—several of them elderly persons who do not survive the stories they inhabit—step in to take the place of family structures that are found to be wanting. Within these relationships (for example, the relationship of the dying Ida Stearns to the two Guthrie boys—providing loving attention in the absence of a mother who has deserted them to live with her sister in Denver), such a large reliance on private acts of charity testifies to the collapse of the structures of order and belief that Arndt referred to as the “private realm.”

For eons the private realm was ruled by the authority of the pater familias, a figure that decades of post–Father Knows Best ridicule has rendered laughable but that for millennia afforded private life a clear sense of boundaries and purpose equivalent in its way to the authority of tradition and religion within the public realm. From the perspective of contemporary culture, with its demands of maximum personal freedom and its arrogant rejection of all restraints on free will, paternal authority seems an unwelcome holdover from
the past, yet, as Tennessee Williams understood, those who are dependent on the kindness of strangers rarely end well, and their dependence is a gauge of the collapse of normal institutions and authorities. The category of “normality,” in any case, has long ceased to exist outside the American heartland, and even here it seems much at risk. Haruf’s disturbing accounts reveal a society in which the mutual care of husbands and wives, children and siblings, and teachers and pupils has been supplanted by the assumption that essential human needs can be serviced at will by any person or agency. From this abstract and bureaucratic perspective, all human affiliations are capable of easy replication and substitution, and human expectations, like the serviceable pies that the Holt café dishes up in predictable varieties of apple, cherry, and coconut cream, are reduced to the level of function and routine. But in Haruf’s fiction, in response to an increasingly nihilistic and disaffected national culture, these old-fashioned virtues continue to be asserted.

A crucial element in this faith is the presence of caritas, an action of charity that Diana Postlethwaite mistakenly interprets as “fundamentally humanistic, this-worldly.” In fact, Haruf’s novels are replete with miracles, redemptive acts that imply more than the kindness of strangers based on humanistic assumptions, for what is involved therein is an underlying faith in the sacredness of life. Among these saving relationships is that of D. J. Kephart, a forlorn, impoverished waif who lives with his grandfather, and Dena Wells, the daughter of a depressed, alcoholic woman separated from her husband. Their condition makes D. J. and Dena representative figures of contemporary American children. It is a fact, after all, that today three quarters of American children live in households of transient, unwed, separated, or divorced parents who are often unable or unwilling to care for their children. Yet, from their distressing condition of insecurity and neglect, D. J. and Dena flee to an abandoned neighborhood shed which they begin to furnish with discarded furniture, rugs, and other domestic objects of the sort that embody a sense of normality. The shed provides a refuge for them in the context of a harsh, brutal world, but by its very existence, it also serves as evidence of just how disturbed the social realm has become. In the section where Haruf describes the week of Christmas vacation during which D. J. and Dena huddle together under a thick blanket reading library books and drinking from the thermos of coffee that D. J. brings, the sense of the shed as a refuge is made explicit. Here is an oasis of happiness and security, as suggested by Haruf’s comment that “what was happening in the houses they’d come from seemed, for that short time, of little importance.”

The relationship of D. J. and Dena raises several important questions related to the problematic nature of purposeful action within a society that has largely dismissed the claims of authority and tradition. Why should Dena feel such need to preserve a stable family? Why, in the face of all that their culture shows them about the “normality” of dysfunction, should D. J. take responsibility for Dena, just as he does for his ailing grandfather? Even as their culture provides a safety net of welfare checks and “services,” D. J. and Dena sense that it seems incapable of addressing the real source of damage. The neglect and abuse that they suffer is, more than anything, the product of a permissive, no-fault culture in which selfish indifference is excused rather than challenged.

Despite the cases of moral indifference that Haruf narrates, there remains a ray of sunshine in his world, although this ray of hope derives largely from the personal
engagement of a small remnant who stand outside the mainstream of contemporary liberal culture. As the general society grows more and more disaffected, convinced of the futility of any action, it is only the resolve of a few individuals that holds things together. From their remote farm seventeen miles south of the small town of Holt, Colorado, the McPherons are engaged in an effort to preserve a heritage of traditional values: those bedrock values of honesty, loyalty, humility, and hard work that are central to Haruf’s writing. This vision relies on the belief that America is indeed the last best hope of the world—“a shining city on a hill,” to cite Ronald Reagan’s improvement on John Winthrop’s phrase in A Model of Christian Charity. In this vision of our civilization, America is a land in which there still exists the possibility of independence and liberty for all; it is a land in which the innate goodness of mankind has not been corrupted by the necessity of subservience and mendacity imposed by a caste system or by ideological tyranny; above all, it is a land in which an ideal of productive action still governs the lives of at least a saving remnant. Yet the miraculous opportunities that Winthrop and Reagan cited have always been shadowed by an immense burden: in the words of Governor Winthrop, that of remaining steadfast in “this work that we have undertaken” so that God does not “withdraw His present help from us” and we shall not “be made a story and a byword through the world.” To a large extent, whether we succeed or fail in this labor depends on our faith in the possibility of purposeful action, whether of an entrepreneurial or political or philanthropic sort. The lesson of virtue that Haruf’s fiction teaches involves a restoration of faith in ourselves and in our ability to shoulder our responsibilities. Ultimately, Haruf is simply asking whether we, as a society, care enough to nurture new life, and whether we care enough to continue living ourselves.

1 Richard Grant, American Nomads: Travels with Lost Conquistadors, Mountain Men, Cowboys, Indians, Ho-boes, and Bullriders (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 62.
6 Ibid., 113.
7 Ibid., 78.
8 Ibid., 113.
14 Ibid., 245–6.
17 Kent Haruf, Eventide, 180.