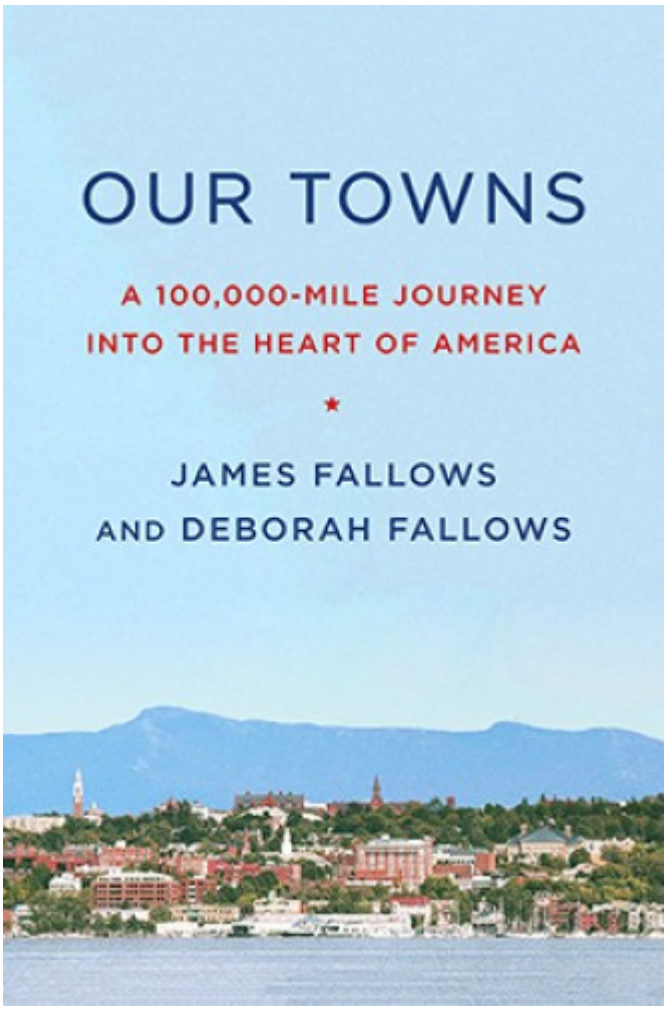
What makes local communities thrive?

James and Deborah Fallows traveled around the U.S. to find out.

by Anthony B. Robinson in the January 30, 2019 issue

In Review



Our Towns

A 100,000- Mile Journey into the Heart of America

By James Fallows and Deborah Fallows
Pantheon
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James and Deborah Fallows wrapped up a conversation with Rusty Bailey, the mayor of Riverside, California, with a question they'd asked of several mayors of robust towns across America. Did Bailey aspire to run for higher office? "Higher?" answered Bailey. "This is the highest office right here."

This exchange reminds me of my own conversations over the years with gifted pastors. Did they aspire to a position of denominational leadership? Most were pretty sure they already had the best church jobs right where they were, in a vital and interesting congregation.

The exchange with Bailey illustrates a larger theme of the Fallowses' encouraging book: in thriving American towns, "people work together on practical local possibilities, rather than allowing the bitter disagreements about national politics to keep them apart." The authors go on to add this sharp observation: "The more often national politics came into local discussions, the worse shape the town was likely to be in."

The Fallowses—particularly James, a longtime writer for the *Atlantic* and former chief speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter—are in many ways Washington insiders. But they went elsewhere to look for hope and vitality. Inside the Beltway, political purists and ideologues outnumber problem solvers. Not so in America's thriving towns.

From 2013 to 2016, the two traveled 100,000 miles in their own single-engine plane to visit 42 towns and cities. Some were large, like Columbus, Ohio, with a population over a million, while others were quite small, like Ajo, Arizona, at 3,500. Most were somewhere in between.

At each stop, the couple located a place to stay, preferably in a downtown area. (Having a "downtown" is one sign of health.) Their first visit was to the town's newspaper, if there was one. Then they split up. Deborah went to the library, the YMCA, and civic clubs. James would stop by the economic development office, tech start-up zones, and community college. Together they would visit public schools, parks, and local brew pubs. Brew pubs invariably turned out to be engines of development and renewal nearly everywhere.

Notably, churches and other religious institutions were not on their list of stops. And churches appear rarely in their narratives of renewal. The authors don't say whether this is because they deliberately bracketed out religious institutions or because those institutions aren't playing much of a role in the vitality of their communities.

Still, the overall tale the Fallowses tell is an inspiring, even spiritual, one. They were particularly interested in towns that had come back from decline, even devastation, when a whole economy had collapsed or a longtime major employer had left or closed. One of the key drivers of an economic comeback are the people they call "local patriots."

The authors would ask, "*Who* makes this town go?" If answers were quick at hand, it was likely to be a thriving place. If people had to think about that question overnight, it didn't augur well. In every lively community there were local patriots, people who came from all walks of life to provide leadership, energy, vision, and just plain hard work. Local patriots believe in their towns. They love their towns.

The title of the book evokes the Thornton Wilder play *Our Town* and its hymn to the beauty of ordinary life. Local communities, the Fallowses argue, are doing the work of innovation and developing the solutions that will eventually fund national renewal when the climate in Washington is not so toxic. The Fallowses are open-eyed about America's current problems, but they give us a reason for civic hope.

While all the studies of individual towns are rich, I found the two concluding chapters to be the most interesting. In the first, the authors take a long historical view, comparing our current time to the Gilded Age after the Civil War. As in the Gilded Age of industrialization and urbanization, the massive social and technological changes of our own era have outrun the capacity of our institutions and politics, at least at the national level. The Fallowses believe that politics at the national level must and will catch up, just as various 20th-century movements and reforms eventually responded to the excesses of the Gilded Age.

The final chapter, "10 1/2 Signs of Civic Success," bears some similarity to books on church renewal. Everyone wants to know what the formula is. But there is none. Each situation is unique.

Yet congregations and their leaders may find useful insights here since civic renewal has many parallels to congregational renewal. In addition to having a problem-solving ethos that supersedes ideology and a cadre of committed leaders, successful

towns are places where “people know their civic story.” People can tell a story about themselves that connects them to a shared past and a hoped-for future, a story that fosters confidence and investment.