

Abstract

Studying West River: North Dakota Field Letters, 2000

Even the name of our Alfred P. Sloan Foundation enterprise, the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life, announces our core orientation toward the study of American working families. Our many projects emphasize the ethnographic and the everyday. Less a discrete method than an overall orientation, ethnography nevertheless achieves its validity from close, textured accounts of its subjects. The most successful ethnographic accounts place heavy weight on the vignettes that derive from the kind of immersion in a setting that results from participant observation.

Many non-ethnographers are curious about what such immersion entails. This working paper is intended to give an example in a selection of the raw, unedited (except for an obscuring of identifying information for the specific place and people) field letters written during one extended field period.

I lived in West River for 3 summer months in 1999, a longer period in 2000, and another shorter period in 2001. As a way of keeping in touch with center people working elsewhere, I began sending field letters to my office during that first chunk of time. The character of those letters described the landscape and the people from the newly sensitive eyes of a North Dakotan coming home after 20 years. In 2000, when I began living with a farm family north of West River, my letters began to describe everyday life with a new intimacy.

Ethnography places unusual demands on the researcher. Among those demands is an awareness of his or her changing relationship with place and people. The field letters from 2000 convey some of the texture of that work and, while far from the whole story I went to investigate, begin to sketch the contours of the everyday. I share those letters here as a first installment on the larger story.