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Town meetings are much more than politics

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(from the *Arts* section)

By David M. Kaslow

Arts Correspondent

Whatever we experience and know exists on several levels, including the intellectual, psychological, physical, and emotional. Each of these levels is important: Whether or not we are aware of them, they are nevertheless present. The more levels of which we are aware, the richer are our experiences and knowledge.

To his great credit, in "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," University of Vermont Professor Frank Bryan presents the experience of direct democracy on numerous levels, ranging from the broadest of overviews to the nittiest of gritties. To gather this material, from 1970 to '98, Bryan or his students attended and described 1,435 Vermont town meetings, held in a total of 210 towns.

This is a treasure of a book, or, more accurately, this is a treasury of four distinct "books" (with unavoidable overlapping). The professor's first "book" is mainly intellectual in nature, conveying, for example, how the direct democracy in New England town meetings differs from the representative democracy at state and federal levels; and the history of pure town meeting-style democracy, from its beginnings in Athens, Greece, 2500 ago, to its present form (warts and all) as represented by Vermont town meetings.

Bryan's second "book" deals with the psychological factors inherent in pure democracy. His description of a citizen who attended a town meeting only to sleep through it, acknowledges the warm psychological feelings of well-being inherent in being among one's friends and neighbors ... and its possibly soporific effect. Bryan also describes the humorous situations that can surround the solving of the inevitable discords that arise at town meetings. For example, on the subject of New Englanders' economical use of words, in a footnote, Bryan quotes Keith Warren Jennison:

Brevity in matters of the tongue has elevated prepositions to a position of high esteem in Vermont. They serve as indigenous road maps. For instance, a simple trip from



Greensboro to Lyndonville (over Stannard Mountain Road) might be described as follows: I'm going along up over through down around into Lyndonville." Ten words. Seven prepositions. Anyone who knows that trip will tell you that this sentence is equivalent to pages of detailed topographical insights.

The author's heavily footnoted third "book" is rooted predominantly in the physical world, addressing, for instance, the effects of several factors on attendance and participation at meetings. These factors include the geographic, socioeconomic, and educational status of the town; the weather conditions; the time of day of the meeting and possible availability of childcare; the nature and importance of the "warnings" (the meeting's agenda); the possible use of the Australian ballot; and the number of attendees of a particular meeting who returned after the lunch break ... and what was on the menu.

In this third "book," Bryan also admirably confronts the age-old problem in writing non-fiction: an unstoppable force (the desire for seamless narrative) conflicting with an immovable object (the necessity for supportive material). Some readers might choose to read the footnotes almost as a separate text.

Finally, Bryan's fourth book reveals the emotional nature of writing about New England town meetings. As he writes:

Studying these meetings is pure joy. Not because the outcomes are always "correct." Not because the process is always (or even often) "pretty." These meetings are a joy to behold because they suggest that common people can and will engage in the ancient dream of public, face-to-face decision making, especially when the issues are difficult and the process is challenging. Beyond the constraints and opportunities I have discussed throughout this book, people come to town meetings to govern themselves. What could be more joyful to a democrat?

"Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works" will warm the hearts and stimulate the thinking of many Vermonters. Amid this season of cold weather and gathering politics, it is an especially welcome addition to our book shelves.

"Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," by Frank M. Bryan. The University of Chicago Press, 2004. \$19.00.

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