

2017: The Year of the Local

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At this time of year media fields of all types are blooming with a journalistic genre called “the year in review”. These are mega-retrospectives of Big Stuff 2016 news: celebrities, stars, men and women of the year, big news stories, the biggest bests and worsts, big personalities, the most dramatic events. If Rip Van Winkel were to awake to read a Big Stuff Year in Review piece, he would conclude that the meaningful stuff of 2016 was national or international.

Yet to most American lives the most consequential events of 2016 were immediate, proximate and local. These were the things that happened in their personal lives, families, schools, neighborhoods, churches, towns, cities and counties. These were the events of a city’s streets and the events of the farmer’s field. These were the places of community and love side by side with places of disintegration and fear. These were the gifts of nature in the back yard on a summer day and the terrors of nature in tornados, floods and fires.

In the election of 2016 the term “flyover” gained geographical currency for that vast middle region of the country some of us Midwesterners have always called home. But flyover isn’t just about states or politics. It’s the cultural tendency to see the year in review as all that is big, flashy and famous.

But that’s not the whole picture at all. American history is in part a story of how nationalism relates to localism. That was the fundamental tension between the Hamiltonian vision and the Jeffersonian vision of America which is baked into the structure of constitutional federalism and continues to play out.

In 2017, let’s raise a glass to that which is local: to rolling up our sleeves for the close-at-hand work we need to do. Here’s to finding solutions not just from the top down but from the local up. Here’s to not waiting for some deus ex machina cure by big government. Here’s to families, schools, neighborhoods, non-profit organizations for the common good and local businesses for economic health. Here’s to what Louisville Kentucky native and Supreme Court Justice Lois Brandeis called democracy’s most important public office: the local citizen.