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WENDELL BERRY: PEOPLE, LAND AND FIDELITY

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Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Henry County, Kentucky, and is the author of more than thirty books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Among his novels (set in the fictional community of Port William Kentucky) are *Nathan Coulter* (1960), *A Place on Earth* (1967), and *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974); short story collections include *The Wild Birds* (1986), *Remembering* (1988), *Fidelity* (1993), and *Watch With Me* (1994); collections of essays include, among many others, *A Continuous Harmony* (1972), *The Unsettling of America* (1977), *Recollected Essays* (1981), and *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community* (1993); and among his many volumes of poetry are *A Part* (1980), *The Wheel* (1982), *Collected Poems* (1985) and *Entries* (1984).

In a commencement address delivered in June 1989 at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, Berry gave some advice that to most modern graduates would sound old fashioned, indeed backward. But the advice he gave was timeless, and his reminder seems apocalyptic in view of the world's current environmental crisis and, as Berry sees it, America's cultural crisis. In a sense, Berry's deliverance of such a critical message parallels Moses' deliverance of the Ten Commandments, for Berry's advice is also a prescription for cultural healing through the imposition of a set of laws. The laws Berry delivers, however, seem to be Nature's laws. He closed his address (later published in *Harper's* as "The Futility of Global Thinking") with a series of ten commands, which, he said, "is simply my hope for us all" (22). These instructions are at the heart of Berry's personal and literary world, and collectively they express the thesis informing all of his work, a canon now in excess of thirty books of essays, fiction, and poetry:

1. Beware the justice of Nature.
2. Understand that there can be no successful human economy apart from Nature or in defiance of Nature.
3. Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale.
4. In making things always bigger and more centralized, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and more dangerous to everything else. Learn, therefore, to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale greed, crudity, and glamour.
5. Make a home. Help to make a community. Be loyal to what you have made.
6. Put the interest of the community first.
7. Love your neighbors--not the neighbors you pick out, but the ones you have.
8. Love this miraculous world that we did not make, that is a gift to us.
9. As far as you are able make your lives dependent upon your local place, neighborhood, and household--which thrive by care and generosity--and independent of the industrial economy, which thrives by damage.
10. Find work, if you can, that does no damage. Enjoy your work. Work well. (22)

Viewed in the context of Berry's canon, this sequence represents far more than a neo-romantic or agrarian appeal to return to "simplicity." To think of his advice in this way is to misinterpret it, for it is more of an oracular warning; either rethink our attitudes toward each other and the natural world, Berry implores, or continue on a path toward natural-, cultural-, and self-annihilation.

Although Berry's tenets echo those of many of his literary ancestors in American literature, his advice is more critical than that of his predecessors, for we now more than ever threaten our existence with destructive potentials unimaginable only a few decades ago. Berry explains our critical condition in "The Loss of the Future," an essay in *The Long-Legged House*:

> We have reached a point at which we must either consciously desire and choose and determine the future of the earth or submit to such an involvement in our destructiveness that the earth, and ourselves with it, must certainly be destroyed. And we have come to this at a time when it is hard, if not impossible, to foresee a future that is not terrifying. (46)

Berry's work is an ongoing exploration of man's use of and relationship to the land, and his writing constitutes, as Gary Tolliver has said, one man's "continuing search for avenues of reentry into a proper state of harmony with the natural world" (13). To proponents of modern "progress," Berry's ideas must seem regressive, unrealistic, radical. But no advice could be more needed and more practical, if we are to progress.

Berry's life, his farm work, his writing and teaching, his home and family, and all that each involves are extraordinarily integrated. He understands his writing as an attempt to elucidate certain connections, primarily the interrelationships and interdependencies of man and the natural world. One of his premises in *The Unsettling of America* at once evinces his notion of cultural and natural interdependency: "Everything in the Creation is related to everything else and dependent on everything else" (46). *The Unsettling of America* is about connections and thus ramifications.

Arnold Ehrlich has called the book "a cool, reasoned, lucid and at times poetic explanation of what agribusiness and the mechanization of farming are doing to destroy the American fabric, the community, the household, even the sexual love that is at the basis of *communitas*" (10).

The traditional community is one of Berry's central metaphors for cultural and natural harmony. Such a community is a highly intricate alliance in which individuals function as "parts" of a membership, each depending on and affecting all the others. The traditional community, like the traditional farms within it, is a model of interdependency. Berry explains, "A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives" (*LLH* 61).

Such an intertwinement of lives is a way of describing a traditional community dance, which is usually circular and cyclic and involves several couples, each partner relying on the other, each couple relying on other couples. The result of this interdependence among the dancers, if each dancer has learned the motions, is harmony. Gurney Norman, a friend of Berry's, has explained that "something basic to people's welfare is present in this sort of community dancing; it has to do with people knowing how to affirm one another and to cooperate, and how to have a good time." The dancers move to the music through the intricacies of the dance, and as each sequence is completed, the cycle begins again. In "People, Land, and Community," an essay in *Standing by Words*, Berry speaks of the analogy between an interweaving dance and the traditional community. While elucidating this metaphor for cultural and natural harmony, he brings together his cyclic ideas of traditional work, apprenticeship,

and the dead as an intricate part of the living:

> People at work in communities three generations old would know that their bodies renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved, in the same shops, houses, and fields. That, of course, is a kind of community dance. And such a dance is perhaps the best way we have to describe harmony. (79)

Berry uses the dance metaphor throughout his poetry to describe harmony between humans and nature, between the living and the dead of a community, and between members of the living. The music accompanying the dancers is sometimes the music of the spheres (the notes of which are so drawn out they can be heard only over years, decades, even centuries). Other sources of the music are farmers working or whistling a work song in a field, people working together harmoniously in communities, water running in a stream, and rain.

The modern agricultural crisis, as Berry sees it, is a consequence of widening the gap between the way nature farms and the way man farms. Many modern agricultural theories and practices assume universal applications. But such attitudes and practices constitute an affront to Nature--that is, the particular Nature of a particular place. Traditional farmers are sensitive to the particular needs of their farms; through the years and generations they have looked to the Nature of their place to judge which practices, plants, and animals work and thrive the best, given the farm's conditions: "A man ought to study the wilderness of a place" (*LLH* 206). He explains *The Unsettling of America* that "the land is too various in its kinds, climates, conditions, declivities, aspects, and histories to conform to any generalized understanding or to prosper under generalized treatment...

To treat every field, or every part of every field, with the same consideration is not farming but industry" (31). Farmers, he says in a later essay, "must tend to farms that they know and love, farms small enough to know and love, using tools and methods that they know and love, in the company of neighbors that they know and love" (*What Are People For?* 210).

Berry believes that a "place" has its own ruling Nature. Thus, Berry stresses that a traditional farmer will always consider and adapt his practices to the needs of the land's primal character. Successful and sustainable agriculture, then, as Berry understands it, is possible only by maintaining a cyclic vision, one attuned with Nature, rather than a linear vision, one seeking conquest of Nature.

The more a person is removed from the substance of his work, Berry argues, the greater is his tendency to neglect or to ignore it. He says that a traditional farmer "will walk his fields out of interest; the industrial farmer or manager only out of necessity" (*UA* 188). Traditional care requires a comprehensive, intimate, often passionate knowledge of the Nature of one's place. Berry writes, for example, in *The Unsettling of America*, "A healthy farm culture can be based only upon familiarity and can grow only among a people soundly established upon the land; it nourishes and safeguards a human intelligence of the earth that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace" (43). Berry is the fifth generation of his father's family and the sixth generation of his mother's to farm in Henry County, Kentucky. Loyal to the cyclic vision, he knows the history of his ancestors on the land, and he understands how each has affected the other.

To Berry, farming the land requires the same discipline as writing a poem. John Ditsky calls farming Berry's "paradigm of art" (13). And Leon Driskell says frankly that Berry "is the same person when writing as when plowing" (63). Traditional farmers, like artists, learn their art through a kind of cultural process, the cyclic view of education, rather than through training or programming, the linear view. Berry explains that the best farming

> grows not only out of factual knowledge but out of cultural tradition; it is learned not only by precept but by example, by apprenticeship; and it requires not merely a competent knowledge of its facts and processes, but also a complex set of attitudes, a certain culturally evolved stance, in the face of the unexpected and the unknown. That is to say, it requires *style* in the highest and richest sense of that term. (*CH* 98)

Like the farmer, the poet must stay in tune with the natural processes of his world, because "the rhythms of the land are an analogue by which we understand ourselves" (Prunty 958).

Berry's artistic vision of agricultural work, then, is diametrically opposed to the industrial vision which maximizes agricultural mechanization in order to minimalize human interaction with and care of the land. Separating humans as far as possible from Nature in practice has created a character-killing and "community-killing agriculture, with its monomania of bigness" (*UA* 41).

The modern linear view of progress not only has destroyed many of America's farmlands; it also has been the driving force behind strip mining, deforestation, pollution, and has widened the gap between culture and nature. The current natural resource crisis, in Berry's view, is a direct consequence of our character, and thus the only real hope lies in the change of attitudes. But for such a change to occur and be effective, Berry contends, it must begin on the local level, not under the guise of national "movements." Berry says in "The Futility of Global Thinking" that "the civil rights movement has not given us better communities. The women's movement has not given us better marriages or better households. The environment movement has not changed our parasitic relationship to nature" (17).

Aside from our suicidal depletion of natural resources, one of Berry's concerns is that our attitude towards the land necessitates our estrangement from it. Berry has said that "my sense of values comes from what I'm rooted in, what I believe in" (Ehrlich 11). To him, Nature, more specifically, the Nature of his particular place, serves as a moral teacher. In "The Nature Consumers," an essay in *The Long-Legged House*, Berry explains one of the dangers inherent in our longing to separate ourselves from the land:

> Man cannot be independent of nature. In one way or another he must live in relation to it, and there are only two alternatives: the way of the frontiersman, whose response to nature was to dominate it, to assert his presence in it by destroying it; or the way of Thoreau, who went to natural places to become quiet in them, to learn from them, to be restored by them. To know these places, because to know them is to need them and respect them and be humble before the, is to preserve them. To fail to know them, because ignorance can only be greedy of them, is to destroy them. (41-42)

Berry's canon constitutes an urgent call to reevaluate both our use of Nature's "gifts" and our view of ourselves. And it is a plea to redirect our environmental concerns from the abstract notion of our "planet" to the more grounded, familiar notion of our "place" - our homes and our communities. In his address, Berry asked the Bar Harbor graduates, "How, after all, can anybody-- any particular body--do anything to heal a planet?" and he answered, "Nobody can do anything to heal a planet. The suggestion that anybody could do so is preposterous. The heroes of abstraction keep galloping in on their white horses to save the planet--and they keep falling off in front of the grandstand" ("Futility" 16).

Berry's premise, implicit, often explicit, in almost all of his work, is that we must have a particular place, must

identify with it, must learn from it, must love it, must care for it. And only by living in this place long enough, and by attending to the knowledge of those who have lived there before us, will we fully realize the consequences of our presence there: "We may deeply affect a place we own for good or ill," Berry has written, "but our lives are nevertheless included in its life; it will survive us, bearing the results" (*LLH* 143).

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