
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's 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:

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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 intertwining 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,
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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.

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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:

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WENDELL BERRY: PEOPLE, LAND AND FIDELITY

M. A. Grubbs

University of Kentucky


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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*).

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