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## Wendell Berry's Philosophy Of Education: Lessons From Port William

Jane Margaret Schreck

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WENDELL BERRY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION:  
LESSONS FROM PORT WILLIAM

by

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A Dissertation  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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2013

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This dissertation, submitted by Jane Margaret Hedahl Schreck in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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Jane Margaret Hedahl Schreck  
April 10, 2013

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
CITATION NOTE .....	viii
ABSTRACT .....	x
PROLOGUE .....	1
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION TO WENDELL BERRY .....	11
II.   WENDELL BERRY: RADICAL THINKER .....	75
III.  EDUCATION IN WENDELL BERRY’S FICTION .....	149
IV.  WHAT PORT WILLIAM THINKS OF HIGHER EDUCATION .....	170
V.   THE EDUCATION OF <i>HANNAH COULTER</i> .....	198
VI.  THE EDUCATION OF <i>JAYBER CROW</i> .....	239
VII.  INCULCATING PEACEABILITY .....	303
VIII. THE HOMECOMING SOLUTION .....	326
REFERENCES .....	419

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Wendell Berry's Kinds of Ignorance .....	68
2. Wendell Berry's Kinds of Knowledge .....	68

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My friend since second grade, Terry Meisner, read several early pieces, and I thank her for her interest and enthusiasm and mostly for her fierce and terrible scrutiny. She's a tough critic, and that was appreciated.

My mother, my sisters and brother, and my daughter and son each read or listened to draft upon draft of all or part of this work. Their presence with me on this adventure is as it has ever been: constant and loving.

When I decided to focus my study on Wendell Berry, my husband Dan promptly read all of Mr. Berry's essays and now, in making decisions, sometimes will ask, "What would Wendell do?" In Dan's held-breath suspense and confidence during this long process, I have always felt his love.

Finally, I need to acknowledge the obvious—none of this would have been possible if Mr. Berry himself did not share himself with the world through his writings. And for that we should all be grateful.



To my mother, who has been with me “every step of the way.”

## CITATION NOTE

The References list of citations follows APA documentation style, as do the in-text citations for any works not by Wendell Berry. For clarity and the convenience of the reader, frequently cited works by Wendell Berry are noted by the following abbreviations for in-text citation, with the full citation listed in References at the end in APA style. Additionally, video or audio recordings, published interviews, or uncollected works by Mr. Berry are noted by the date of recording or publication for in-text citation, with full citation listed in References in APA style.

- ACET* = *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2006) (novel)  
*ATC* = *Another Turn of the Crank* (1995) (essays)  
*AW* = *A Wheel* (poems)  
*CH* = *A Continuous Harmony* (1970/2003) (essays)  
*CM* = *The Country of Marriage* (1971/1973) (poems)  
*CP* = *Citizenship Papers* (2003) (essays)  
*FHB* = *Farming: A Hand Book* (1967/1970) (poems)  
*Fid* = *Fidelity: Five Stories* (1992) (short stories)  
*Giv* = *Given* (2005) (poems)  
*GGL* = *Gift of Good Land* (1981) (essays)  
*HC* = *Hannah Coulter* (2004) (novel)  
*HE* = *Home Economics* (1987) (essays)  
*IP* = *Imagination in Place* (2010) (essays)  
*JC* = *Jayber Crow* (2000) (essays)  
*Lea* = *Leavings* (2010) (poems)  
*LLH* = *Long-Legged House* (1969/2004) (essays)  
*LM* = *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001) (essays)  
*MF* = *The Mad Farmer Poems* (2008) (poems)  
*NC* = *Nathan Coulter* (1960/2008) (novel)  
*OJ* = *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974/1999) (novel)  
*Ope* = *Openings* (1965/1968) (poems)  
*PE* = *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001) (novel)  
*PT* = *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* (2012) short stories)  
*Rem* = *Remembering* (1988/2008) (novel)  
*SBW* = *Standing by Words* (1983/2005) (essays)  
*SEFC* = *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (1992/1993) (essays)  
*TC* = *A Timbered Choir* (1998) (poems)  
*TDL* = *That Distant Land* (2004) (short stories)

- UA* = *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996) (essays)  
*WB* = *The Wild Birds* (1985/1986) (short stories)  
*WCW* = *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011) (essays)  
*WI* = *The Way of Ignorance* (2005) (essays)  
*WL* = *A World Lost* (1996/1997) (novel)  
*WM* = *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (2010) (essays)  
*WPF* = *What Are People For?* (1990/1998) (essays)  
*Whe* = *The Wheel* (1982) (poems)

## ABSTRACT

In the midst of a proclaimed crisis in higher education, in the clamor and clamber to leverage technology for such innovations as mass open online courses and differentiated learning modules, in the speculative frenzy of preparing students for the careers of a fantasy future, and in the swirl of angst about funding accountability and economic relevance, Wendell Berry's philosophy of education declares that the essential element missing from most current discussions and considerations of education is love. As explained in his essays and revealed in his fiction and poetry, Berry's philosophy centers on love as the best animator of learning: love among those teaching and learning, love for what can be learned, and love of how such learning can be applied in a beloved place on earth. Further, under his basic assumption that all life—including our own—depends on the earth, Berry's philosophy sets the life and health of the world as the ultimate goal and standard of education. This dissertation makes a comprehensive study of Berry's work, unearthing a philosophy of education from his essays and interviews and placing that philosophy in the context of his fictional world of the Port William neighborhood, where at its best, Port William offers meaning to its people through necessary work done well and an awareness of interdependence and belonging. It is Berry's hope that a realignment of educational priorities, based on love and focused on the health of the world and local place, can lead us to better care of each other and the earth we share.

## PROLOGUE

### FINDING WENDELL BERRY

I was raised on Velveeta cheese. It is not even cheese, really. Officially, it is identified on the box as a “pasteurized prepared cheese product.” And my Velveeta was typically served on supermarket bread. For years, only with my paternal grandmother did I encounter real cheese. During Memorial Day weekend, for example, the family ritual was to pile into the station wagon and drive with Grandma the sixty miles to a large but nearly vacant cemetery on the edge of tiny Mercer, North Dakota. Our mission was to clean up the gravesites of my grandfather, his first wife, and their firstborn daughter, the latter born and dead in just two days, as we kids seemed to discover anew each year as we studied the granite dates. And here too was the plot where my grandmother would be buried in her ninety-sixth year.

It was all very matter-of-fact, even lighthearted. Grandma would bring some bedding plants, a spade, and some hand tools, and I would have to endure the unusual spectacle of my father awkwardly wielding a spade in his wingtip shoes. Afterward, with the lunch that Grandma packed, we would have a picnic, sometimes at the city park, but often at the cemetery. The staple of the lunch was cheese sandwiches, made with bread she had baked herself and cut in thick, irregular slices, holding pieces of her exotically real cheddar cheese. Sometimes too we would have applesauce that she had made with apples from her own tree. Of course, the picnic tasted delicious, especially after running

among the gravestones on the windy prairie hill, but the real treat for us kids was if Dad had stopped for bottles of Coke and bags of sunflower seeds at Emil Just's gas station.

Perhaps I make too much of Velveeta. I recognize that the cheese my grandmother served had been purchased at a grocery store, too, but somehow the difference between the cheese in her sandwiches and Velveeta seems to me now emblematic of the difference in a way of life. Velveeta is a food much removed from its source, somehow to me vaguely modern and urban—and I was raised as a modern, urban kid, even in North Dakota. Though I rambled about outdoors in a big backyard or in nearby vacant lots and prairie parks, I grew up more inside than out, more sidewalk than dirt path. My family is generations removed from making a living directly from the land. My people had city jobs even in small towns. One grandfather was a shopkeeper with aspirations of being a businessman, as his sons became, and in the early part of the century, he sold some of the first automobiles in the state. He had arrived in North Dakota on a bicycle, but he would leave Mercer in the mid-1920s in a car. My other grandfather was a postmaster and newspaper editor. He even had a job for a time in the state's tallest building, the state capitol. One grandmother was educated to be a school teacher and in her widowhood worked as a librarian. When I knew her, she walked or took the bus to get around town and lived in an apartment that begged to be in a big city. It even had a Murphy bed, a great iron thing that swung out and then down from a closet in the dining room. When I hear apartments referred to as flats, I still picture my grandmother's apartment. Though I am necessarily aware that I did not come from a big city, still the farmland and ranchland that I would see blurring past the side window of our station wagon seemed not hostile but certainly alien to my people and our history.

Only my paternal grandmother—she of the strange, hard cheese—seemed to identify with the land. She too had been educated to be a teacher, but for a brief time, she had a farm and tried without success to make over her shopkeeper husband into a farmer. When they moved to the capital city for greater business opportunities, she tried without success to turn her town-bred children into gardeners. She maintained a big garden almost to the end of her life, with the motto “Eat what you can and can what you can’t.”

My people are also mobile. Since falling onto this continent from Ireland and Norway in the mid-1800s, my people drifted into North Dakota with the east wind that stirs up rain for the dry prairie. We have no ancestral home or piece of land. I hold in my imagination the names and stories of little towns like Twin Valley, Minnesota, and Starkweather, North Dakota—small places of the world, grown even smaller by the time I ever saw them. I have ancestors scattered in tiny prairie cemeteries from Scott and Stearns and Norman Counties in Minnesota to Ramsey and McLean and Burleigh Counties in North Dakota—mute graves that for the most part will never be awakened by bedding plants or memories brought in the spring. It is possible that I will be the first member of my family in generations—perhaps since the old country—to be born and to die in the same place. I was raised and educated to be rootless and to think of rootlessness as normal, schooled not only by my family tradition but also by a culture that urges its young people to go out into the world and succeed, and that success is unlikely at home. It was never my intention to come home. That I wound up at home has been an ongoing surprise and blessing both, but in my family tradition it is also an anomaly.

Finally, growing up on a prairie with no connection to the soil, the most striking and notable feature of the view is the sky, that overarching, horizon-to-horizon, so-blue-

it-will-hurt-your-eyes, infinite sky. It is a perspective that makes it hard to keep in sight the constraints of appropriate scale. Combine that view with the necessary optimism of the stock of “the next place will be better” pioneers from which I spring, and I was a willing victim for the modern world’s easy talk of limitless opportunities, limitless options, limitless potential.

My point is that, on the face of it, there is little in my background to suggest that I should have any interest at all in Wendell Berry’s agrarian philosophy of community and membership, with his suspicion of technology and insistence on limits and appropriate scale. And yet Berry’s writings grab hold of something fundamental about me and do not let go. Why do his writings and ideas appeal to me so?

What makes Berry’s writing resonate with me is surely not my experience on a farm because I have none, nor even my experience of rural life because, however misguidedly, I think of myself as more urban than rural. Of course, to boil Berry down to rurality alone is a fundamental underestimation of his philosophy, but it is the initial point of connection with his work for many people.

In my case, I believe what makes Berry’s writing resonate with me is instead my experience in a college classroom at the start of the twenty-first century. As we in education have been urged to ceaselessly “innovate” (something that always seems to have more to do with technology than with creativity), I have been unable to articulate my resistance. As we have been encouraged to accept without question that education is better when it is more efficient, more standardized, more compartmentalized, I have not understood my doubts. As tools of technology are touted that would allow scalability and global reach, I am convinced that education is really about human relationships. While



modern education reformers act as though the survival of humanity depends only on science, math, engineering, and technology, I have learned that our survival depends first on sympathy, mercy, and love. Finding words for my unease—finding Wendell Berry—there has been joy in this journey.

This is why I am drawn to his philosophy: Reading Berry helps me answer some of my own misgivings about current trends in education. When I read his poems about farming, I think about education. When I read about the order of Elmer Lapp's milking barn and its integration into the whole workings of the Lapp farm, I think of how education could be improved with better integrity among its parts—improved if we could do a better job of teaching the whole student. When I read about the complex, formal intelligence required to run a farm holistically, I think of lesson plans and curricula development. When I read about the disintegration of rural communities, whether in his essays or fiction, I think about how I have contributed to pulling my students from their connections to home, how I have supported the cultural expectation that success is about competition and ambition and addled clichés about stars and sky and overreach and limitlessness. Or I think of my own children, who grew into—for their father and me—the two most fascinating people in the world and who are now thousands of miles away from me and from each other. I know I contributed to that in ways subtle and not, so there has been grief in this journey, too.

Berry does not think of himself as a philosopher. It might be the biggest point of disagreement I have with him. I believe he offers a philosophy, including a philosophy of education, and that philosophy often strikes me as radically counter to many presuppositions that I was raised and schooled to take for granted, yet have held with a

certain unease. Not recognizing himself as a philosopher, Berry has made no effort to present his thinking in any sort of cohesive system. The work of my research has been to survey Berry's work—his essays, interviews, and recorded talks and presentations—to identify and articulate what I see as his philosophy of education. The task has been vast, because Berry's body of work is vast, but the task has also been difficult because Berry's intent has never been to lay out his thinking on education in a systematic way. My task has been to unearth and excavate Berry's thinking on education, sometimes with the doggedness of the most patient archeologist, using the mental equivalent of a dental pick and camelhair brush, and then to restore the dig site to its original wholeness and dignity.

Yet there was something incomplete in simply having looked at the nonfiction. I became convinced that it is in Berry's fiction where his philosophy of education best comes to life through his characters in a place. It is this analysis that I believe deepened and particularized my understanding of his philosophy. A major focus of this study then is on what the fiction has to teach us as well. Of course, all my work has been informed by the extraordinary opportunity that Mr. Berry graciously granted me for an extended conversation with him about education. It was in talking with him that I sharpened my insights, confirmed some hunches, and gained a direction into his work.

There has also been great affection in this journey—for Berry, his characters, and his writing; for my students and my work as a teacher; for the effort of researching and writing this study; and for my life as a wife and mother, daughter and sister, friend and neighbor. This has been difficult work, but it was not without its pleasures. I have at times reeled between my dismay at the immensity and struggle and my delight in the satisfaction. I have loved doing this work, every step of the way.

Simply stated, I believe Berry wants every place on earth loved and cared for and every person on earth able and pleased to love and care for a place and all the creatures in it, human and not human. He believes this is not only the best path to individual satisfaction, but also the only path to peace. I believe this is a powerful and important message for educators. In a world exhausted by overreach and threatened by overshoot, Berry's thinking is necessary, but radically countercultural.

Perhaps because I am a product of modern American culture, many of Berry's ideas startled me at first, and while his writing is not hyperbolic, he certainly is trying to get the reader's attention. As a result, his language is precise but sometimes can seem deliberately provocative and extreme, so his way of expressing ideas almost invites misunderstanding. More importantly for my study, what Berry has to say about education does not make sense outside the larger context of his thinking on all manner of things. I felt it was necessary to ground the explanation of his thinking on education first in an explanation of his thinking on other topics, including economics, technology, and the definition of progress.

Something else that needs to be noted here is that I made the decision in this study to present Berry's ideas largely without counterargument. I am making the assumption that my reader is as saturated as I am with the presuppositions of our time; therefore, my approach, instead, is to offer Berry's ideas as counterargument to the hegemony of modern industrial culture.

The pedagogical structure of this study is, first, to provide the necessary background on Berry and his ideas about the world. My intent is to create a context for understanding his ideas about education. Next, in Chapter III through VII, I rely on

Berry's use of the ancient pedagogical tool of storytelling to show how his ideas on education play out in the lives of the place and people of his fiction. My hope is that this analysis serves to enlarge the understanding of and sympathy for his educational philosophy. Finally, I lay out directly how I understand Berry's vision for higher education: what he sees as the purpose for education, how he sees higher education failing in this purpose, and what he envisions as a path forward.

Since Berry thinks that what is wrong with higher education today has many of the same causes over time as what is wrong with modern American culture writ large, understanding his thinking on education requires understanding his perspective on history. The best way to gain that understanding is through his fiction. All of Berry's novels and short stories are set in and around the fictional farming community of Port William, Kentucky, over a span of time from before the Civil War to the twenty-first century. As such, Port William mirrors the history of the United States, with the nation's population and attention shifting over time from rural to urban, from small places to large places, from interconnection to individualism. The life of Port William also prefigures the history of other places in the world now confronting industrialization and mechanization of life. Berry's fiction asks his readers to consider the impact of modern culture on the people and the land of a small farming community. He also presents Port William as a detailed portrait of a community of people, some of whom understand themselves as interconnected and interdependent, and he asks readers to consider what we might learn from a community and way of life that knows itself as a "membership," as Berry terms it.

Port William is not some sort of Brigadoon, untouched by the twentieth century except when it chances to peep its head out of the mist. Port William is as subject to the

forces of modern progress as anywhere else. It hazards its young to die in distant wars and on nearby highways, it labors under economic and agricultural policies crafted by people who have never seen Port William, and it constantly measures itself by the subtle and not-so-subtle insinuations of need and dissatisfaction given it by media, advertising, entertainment, and other institutions, including schools. And the membership is frail and flawed and frightened. They make mistakes. They mess up, sometimes endangering the land or each other. But in that we can learn from them, too.

In terms of methods, explicating Berry's ideas on education in light of his fiction necessarily makes this study a hybrid of social science analysis with literary analysis. In an interdisciplinary approach that I believe Berry himself might endorse, I have tried to understand and explain his philosophy of education through a close examination of those themes in his fiction. While I believe this strategy has yielded a richer and more extensive interpretation of Berry's thinking, it requires some tacking back and forth between the conventions of these disciplines for the reader and for me.

Also, if some readers find my presentation of Berry's ideas lacking the critical distance of typical academic research, then they are reading me correctly. Indeed, I probably veer often into the role of ardent booster in my urgency to reveal and promote Berry's philosophy. This is a decision I made, not an oversight. Schooled to respect only objective knowledge, I have learned from Berry to value other ways of knowing and to recognize that objective knowledge is only one way to truth—and a narrow truth at that. I hope by the end that readers find that my enthusiasm is not misplaced. Berry's ideas are worthy of consideration, of this I have no doubt.

All of this brings us back to the two basic lessons of the Mercer cemetery, lessons I learned from my grandmother but came to understand more deeply from my study of Wendell Berry. First, we all need to eat, and second, we are all going to die. It really does all come down to that—life and death. We need the earth in order to live, so we had better treat it well, and whether we live two days or ninety-six years, we are frail, flawed creatures, neither as smart nor as strong as we like to believe, so we had better try to get along.

Wendell Berry's philosophy of education arises directly from his understanding of who we are as human beings and of who we need to be to live peacefully with each other and with the earth. We have to come to believe that if we make the earth unlivable through neglect or abuse or violence, it is not the end of the world. But it is the end of *us*. As does his philosophy generally, Berry's philosophy of education begins in work and ends in love, with a deep sense of the interdependence of all being—past, present, and yet to come. I bring to this study the conviction that our lives—that is, the lives of all humanity—depend on our ability to listen to this Kentucky farmer and learn from him. His is not the voice of the past; it is the voice of the present and the hope of the future. His is not a voice for rural people only; it is a voice for all of humankind.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO WENDELL BERRY

Wendell Berry, in his seminal work *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), illustrates his analysis of the fragmentation and disorder of modern culture with a discussion of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Berry notes that when Odysseus finally returns home, the restoration of order and wholeness in his life comes from his crossing of concentric boundaries toward the center of a circle, from the shore of the island to his home. With this movement inward, Berry writes, "[Odysseus] moves also through a series of recognitions, tests of identity and devotion" (pp. 125-126). The last recognition is to find his father, Laertes, tending a young fruit tree. Laertes is dressed in work clothes, not the raiment of royalty. This king has, according to Berry, "survived his son's absence and the consequent grief and disorder *as a peasant*" (p. 128; italics original), working the land, indistinguishable in attire or task from a peasant. "In a time of disorder," he writes, "[Laertes] has returned to the care of the earth, the foundation of life and hope" (p. 129). There is order here, and necessity and pleasure, and also connections of affection to the future and past—a responsibility to those who come after, a gratitude to those who came before. Berry writes, "Odysseus finds [his father] in an act emblematic of the best and most responsible kind of agriculture: an old man caring for a young tree" (p. 129).

In an interview in 2007, thirty years after the first publication of *The Unsettling of America*, Berry talked about a poem he published in the early 1970s called "Planting

Trees” (*CM*, 1971/1973, p. 23). The poem is about his planting twenty tiny trees on his farm and about his pleasure, as a relatively young man, in dreaming about them growing tall and enduring beyond his lifetime. He told the interviewer in 2007 that in the small community near his farm there are still trees growing that his grandfather planted over forty years before. Then Berry said this:

But our present economy doesn't urge a young man to plant a tree—let alone an old man. What makes an old man plant a tree is a culture in which he works, not as himself, but as the representative of his forebears and his descendants. (2007, Winter)

Taken together, the poem, the passage from *The Unsettling of America*, and the comments from the interview form a necessary context for understanding Berry, and while the image of an old man caring for a young tree may be emblematic of the best farming practices, it is also illustrative of Berry’s ideas on education, including how we learn, what we need to know, and why we learn.

We learn from experience, of course, and the experience of sitting in the shade of a tree or eating its fruit teaches Laertes that a tree is a good thing. Experience too teaches him that trees can be planted and they must be tended and cared for; it can even teach about how to care for a tree. Experience has also taught him the discipline of carrying on with necessary work and doing the work well, even in the face of tragedy and sadness. We also learn from instruction, observation, and reflection. As Laertes instructs and models right behavior for Odysseus, Laertes probably also received such instruction and modeling in his time from his father or from other teachers. It is the duty of the old to teach the young, as Berry well knows. The image of an old man caring for a young tree is



humble and particular, focused on home and responsibility. The image is one of care and affection, good work and good stewardship, echoing Berry's assertion, "It is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth" (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 123). The image is one of hope and imagination of what a tree will be. All these attributes appeal to Berry, and all speak to what he values and where he wants education to lead us.

But the image is even deeper and more revelatory of Berry. He learned of Laertes's act by reading *The Odyssey*, a classic text of culture, and his ability to read and understand that text was probably guided or deepened by a teacher. The image of Laertes resonated with Berry because of his experience, perhaps even his experience of helping his grandfather in the orchard. More than merely understanding the significance of the image, however, Berry was also moved to take action—to plant and tend trees himself—motivated by local culture, his grandfather's example, his own experience, and the image from antiquity preserved in literature and art. In his essay "The Loss of the University" (*HE*, 1987, pp. 76-97), Berry writes, "The inescapable purpose of education must be to preserve and pass on the essential human means—the thoughts and words and works and ways and standards and hopes without which we are not human" (pp. 88-89). Berry believes that young people need to be taught "to function as responsible, affectionate members of that community" (1993/2007a, p. 107), with the full implications of what it means to be responsible and affectionate, as well as what it means to be a member of a community, to know oneself as part of a membership and act accordingly.

In the poem "Planting Trees," Berry is a young man caring for young trees, dreaming of their rising to "be for this place horizon and orison, the voice of its winds" (*CM*, 1971/1973, p. 23). Now, over forty years later, as he continues the work of which

*The Unsettling of America* has been only a part, Berry is an old man caring for young trees. He is an old man who still cares for tomorrow, who still sees a duty to speak just criticism of today, who still defends what is necessary and valuable from yesterday. He is an old man, who farms with horses but who has solar collector panels in his pasture. He is an old man, who lives in hope and who lives in light. Listen. We can learn from him.

This study seeks to unify the strands of Berry's thinking to show a cohesive philosophy of education. The study itself has two overriding questions. What does Wendell Berry think about education? And how could Wendell Berry's wisdom inform higher education in the twenty-first century? Within those two broad questions, of course, are questions of pedagogy and curriculum, institutional mission and organization, funding and faculty development, even issues of who should go to college and what purpose higher education should serve in the community or state or nation.

The second broad question—how Berry's wisdom could inform higher education—might seem strange to ask about Berry, a man so staunchly agrarian that his ideas are often dismissed as tragically outmoded (Letters to the Editor, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991). He has been so frequently regarded in this way that now he anticipates it. In the essay "Simple Solutions, Package Deals, and a 50-Year Farm Bill" (*WM*, 2009), he lays out his criticism of industrial farming and says, "About now I begin to hear the distant rumble of two accusations that experience has taught me to anticipate: namely, that I am trying to 'turn back the clock,' and that I am a Luddite" (p. 58). He denies the first accusation, recognizing that "We have no place to start but where we are" (p. 58), while still insisting we must learn from the past. The second accusation he embraces: "I am indeed a Luddite, if by that I may mean that I would not willingly see my

community—to the extent that I still have one—destroyed by any technological innovation” (p. 58). In our modern world, with modern technology, modern expectations, modern assumptions, modern outlooks, and modern aspirations, what is there possibly to learn from a man who still writes with a pencil and farms with horses?

The answer, it turns out, is that Berry has much to offer the rest of the modern world, principally because of his rejection of the aspects of modernity that are in defiance or opposition to both ecological nature and human nature. This dissertation argues that in an increasingly fragmented society, in an increasingly neglected and abused natural world, Berry’s perspective offers a hopeful alternative, offering the foundations of a life that is both responsible and satisfying.

#### Who Is Wendell Berry?

Wendell Berry is a husband, father, grandfather, son, and grandson. He is a neighbor, a storyteller, a conservationist, and an agrarian. He is a Kentuckian by birth and a stockman and farmer for the same reason. He is by turns a quiet man and an outspoken activist. He is now both a private person and a public figure. He has been an award-winning professor of English, and he has referred to himself as a “school teacher” (Smithsonian Institution, 1989). Senators, justices, and princes have come to hear him speak, but he seems more at ease speaking to his dog. He is an essayist, poet, fiction writer, and thinker. He has been called a prophet and a sage, a philosopher and a visionary, but he is not comfortable with any of these titles.

Berry was born and raised in north-central Kentucky. He was educated at the University of Kentucky and Stanford University where he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in the creative writing program. He also spent time in Italy and France as a Guggenheim

Foundation Fellow in the early 1960s, after which he taught and was the director of freshman composition for two years at New York University's University College in the Bronx. In 1964, he returned to Kentucky to teach composition and creative writing at the University of Kentucky. He taught at the university from 1964 to 1977, then again from 1987 to 1993. He and his wife Tanya Berry purchased their house and a small tract of land along the Kentucky River in 1965, eventually purchasing surrounding land for their farm of over one-hundred acres. They have lived there since.

Berry's publishing history goes back at least to his freshman year in college, 1953, when an essay of his was published in an anthology of freshman writing at the University of Kentucky. A short story and a poem were also published in the University's literary journal. His first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, was published in 1960. Several volumes of poetry and another novel followed during the 1960s, with his first collection of essays, *The Long-Legged House*, published in 1969. More poetry volumes, another novel, and three more volumes of essays followed in short order in the early 1970s, until his groundbreaking volume *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* was published in 1977. This book is perhaps Berry's best known work, even to this day. Berry has continued to publish steadily, while also garnering writing awards and prizes, including the Vachel Lindsay Prize, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, a National Endowment of the Arts grant, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Writing, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Jean Stein Award, the Lannan Foundation Award for Nonfiction, the Orion Society's John Hay Award, the Aiken Taylor Award for Poetry, the O.Henry Prize, the *Writer* award, and several honorary doctorates (Grubbs, 2007, pp. xvii-xx; Peters, 2007, pp. 325-328). He was awarded the

Cleanth Brooks Medal for Lifetime Achievement in 2009 and the 2010 National Humanities Medal, and he was honored as the 2012 Jefferson Lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities. His publications now number over fifty volumes.

Berry is often asked why he writes essays, fiction, and poetry—why he has not specialized. His answer comes in various forms all amounting to his recognition that different tasks require different tools, that an essay serves a different need than a poem, for example. He also said this about his writing, summing up himself and his work:

All my work comes from my loves and hopes. My essays come from a desire to understand what I love and hope for and to defend those things; they pretty much constitute a single long argument in defense. This has sometimes been laborious and dutiful work and I have sometimes grown very tired of it. My work as a fiction writer and poet, in spite of the difficulties always involved, has been increasingly a source of pleasure to me—it is my way of giving thanks, maybe, for having things worthy of defense. (1997/2007, p. 120)

Still, whether essayist, poet, or fiction writer, Berry is the same man, with the same loves, the same hopes, and the same worries, and as the above quote suggests, many of the same themes and topics emerge no matter what he is writing.

Berry has frequently written about education. Whether taken on specifically or addressed as part of his broader social theory, education comes under his scrutiny in many ways, including such issues as school's impact on community, the fecklessly organized departmental structure of universities, and the corrupting influence of corporate-funded research or donations. For Berry, schools have a responsibility to the local community, supporting the lives and disciplines of the local people and landscape

and helping to solve local problems. For example, in his early essay “Discipline and Hope” (*CH*, 1970/2003), he describes a good teacher as “a trustee” of the “life of the mind in his community” (p. 129), a kind of general job description connecting schools to the community. Then in “The News from the Land” (2010-2011), he notes two local phenomena that have failed to get the notice of local university scholars, a failure he sees as all the more egregious from land-grant institutions. He describes two specific, local natural phenomena in his part of Kentucky that he has observed—the disappearance of the tumble bug and the disappearance of the black willows from the waterline of the Kentucky River. He speculates on causes and consequences, and he thinks both mysteries should get the attention of science. He believes such local problems ought to be the subject of study by local university scholars, and he laments that as far as he knows both are either ignored or dismissed as having “no economic significance” (p. 28).

In his book-length essay *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), Berry separates himself from a typical modern academic, in this case Edward O. Wilson, in his view of how universities ought to operate, noting that their “fundamental difference” is that:

[Wilson] is a university man through and through, and I have always been most comfortable out of school. Whereas Mr. Wilson apparently is satisfied with the modern university’s commitment to departmented specialization, professional standards, industry-sponsored research, and a scheme of promotion and tenure based upon publication, I am distrustful of that commitment and think it has done harm, both to learning and to the world. (p. 24)

His objection to the detrimental effects of specialization and corporate funding in higher education and elsewhere is a continuing theme for Berry, noted in his essays and poetry

alike (*CM*, 1971/1975, pp. 16-17; *Giv*, 2005a, pp. 28-33). Indeed, Berry has been an open critic of education, particularly universities and colleges, with indictments common in his essays, his interviews and speeches, his fiction, and his poetry. With his critiques of education, as with those of other subjects, he does not stop with faultfinding, but includes analysis and justification for the criticism, as well as suggestions and recommendations for improvement. In his essays and activism, Berry has been focused mostly on topics of agriculture and ecology. To the extent that these topics are influenced by issues of economics, culture, religion and education, he also takes on these additional topics.

### *Influences on Wendell Berry*

To better understand Berry, it is useful to understand the influences on his thinking and language. The literature frequently cited by Wendell Berry as influential to his thinking includes the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Milton, and some of the nineteenth-century poets—standard fare for an English language humanities scholar educated in the 1950s. Additionally he notes the writings of Thomas Jefferson and *I'll Take My Stand* by the Twelve Southerners (1930/1977), and also Thoreau (1854/2008) and a number of other writers concerned with care of the earth, including Aldo Leopold (1949/1968) and Berry's close friend Wes Jackson (1994/1996 and 2011). Along with these influences, of course, Berry has read widely in the classic texts and also in local and regional writers. He reads local and national newspapers and current news. He also acknowledges the profound influence on his language use and thinking by his early experience hearing stories told by family and friends, especially while doing farm work. Further, he regularly notes the deep influence of his father's work and thinking on his own (2009, April 2; 2009, November 30; 2009, December 3; 1990/2007; 2003/2007).

But the writer who comes up repeatedly and sometimes unexpectedly, the writer Berry deliberately read not for school but for the healing of his own land is Sir Albert Howard (1947/2006), a British botanist and agricultural scientist and the author of *The Soil and Health*, a volume on agricultural practices based on the model of nature and decidedly not on the industrial model. In the introduction to a new edition of Howard's book (p. xiii), Berry reports that he read this book first in the mid-1960s to help him understand how to care for the farmland he had recently purchased and was living on.

Berry has said he was born into two worlds: a biological, sun-powered world and a chemical, fossil fuel-powered world. He sees the dominance of fossil fuel and chemicals in agriculture as heedless of natural limits, and he thinks modern agricultural practices are as violent and destructive of nature as the rest of our industrial economy:

As we now have it, the industrial economy operates as if, like an army in battle, it is in a perpetual state of emergency, requiring violence as the first resort and the sacrifice of precious and irreplaceable things. We can see too that at times war and the economy are exactly the same. Both are entirely directed to short-term gains regardless of the long-term costs. (WI, 2005c, p. 148)

In an interview, he said of the earlier, sun-powered world, "My mind was formed by that other world" (Angyal, 1995, p. 147). These early agrarian influences and leanings readied Berry to be sympathetic to Howard's views, but Berry's interest and application of Howard's ideas go well beyond composting practices and plowing patterns.

In many ways, Howard's writing and Berry's use of those ideas in his own life seem to have unified Berry's worldview. He says as much in the essay "On *The Soil and Health*," which is also the introduction to a new edition of Howard's book (1947/2006):



My reading of Howard, which began at that time [mid-1960s], has never stopped, for I have returned again and again to his work and his thought. I have been aware of his influence in virtually everything I have done, and I don't expect to graduate from it. That is because his way of dealing with the subject of agriculture is also a way of dealing with the subject of life in this world. His thought is systematic, coherent, and inexhaustible. (p. xiii)

Howard's is a way of thinking that Berry admires and, not surprisingly, tries to achieve in his own writing as he works to clarify ideas and concepts for readers.

What is not in evidence in Berry's writings or interviews is direct reference to modern educational theorists. Even in his essays that are specifically about education, he writes without direct reference to educational theory. It is as though his ideas about education arise outside of the realm of scholarly pedagogues. When asked directly about influences from educational theorists, Berry named only Alfred North Whitehead, and only Whitehead's book *The Aims of Education* (1929/1967). Intersections between Berry's thought and Whitehead's are examined in Chapter VIII.

#### *Love and Pleasure*

For some people, Wendell Berry appears about as much fun as an Old Testament prophet. His message often seems austere and judgmental. He has been accused of being cranky and severe in his essays (Canfield, 2004). His demeanor while giving a speech seems detached and almost annoyed. Yet get him away from a podium, and he smiles and laughs readily. He insists time and again in his writing, his interviews, and his very way of life, that the great motivators in his life are love and pleasure. In his love and pleasure, though, there is nothing of the easy modern consumerist notions of these motivators. His

love is not a self-serving indulgence or reflective validation, and his pleasure is far from instant gratification or selfish excess. Both love and pleasure for Berry are contextualized and grounded, patient and considered, dutiful but chosen, acknowledging of natural limits, yet finding boundless satisfactions within those limits, always mindful of the world and all the creatures in it, but resulting in a more complete self.

In “Christianity and the Survival of Creation” (*SEFC*, 1992/1993), Berry writes, “To work without pleasure or affection, to make a product that is not both useful and beautiful, is to dishonor God, nature, the thing that is made, and whomever it is made for” (p. 104). Berry’s avoidance of indulgence and excess makes his experience of love no less exhilarating, nor his experience of pleasure no less exuberant. Look to his poetry for his most unbridled expressions of love and pleasure. His is a love that flows from connected appreciation, a pleasure that flows from complex understanding. And both flow from hard work, manual work, work that our modern culture wants us to consider drudgery. But Berry would have us “speak of such work as good and ennobling, a source of pleasure and joy” (p. 112). In “Economy and Pleasure” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry examines how and why the industrial economy, based on competition, is destructive of the best qualities of human beings as it redefines work as drudgery to be escaped, without any hope of affection or pleasure. A better economy, as he explains in “Discipline and Hope” (*CH*, 1970/2003), “would substitute for the pleasure of frivolity a pleasure in the high quality of essential work, in the use of good tools, in the healthful and productive countryside” (p. 117). And when he asserts, “I never write without some pleasure” (1993/2007c, p. 82), and “I’ve always read for instruction as well as for pleasure” (p. 84), we know that pleasure and affection motivate his work as a writer and a scholar as well.

To say Berry is motivated by pleasure and love is not to say that he thinks work should be done only when the mood strikes us. In fact, in the long essay “Discipline and Hope” (*CH*, 1970/2003), he is explicit about the need for discipline in work:

The youth culture has accepted, for the most part uncritically, the conviction that all recurring and necessary work is drudgery, even adding to it a uniquely gullible acquiescence in the promoters’ myth that the purpose of technology is to free mankind for spiritual and cultural pursuits. But to the older idea of economic redemption from drudgery, the affluent young have added the even more simple-minded idea of redemption by spontaneity. Do what you feel like, they say—as if every day one could “feel like” doing what is necessary. Any farmer or mother knows the absurdity of this. Human nature is such that if we waited to do anything until we felt like it, we would do very little at the start, even of those things that give us pleasure, and would do less and less as time went on. One of the common experiences of people who regularly do hard work that they enjoy is to find that they begin to “feel like it” only after the task is begun. And one of the chief uses of discipline is to assure that the necessary work gets done even when the worker *doesn’t* feel like it. (p. 112)

It is as though when pleasure alone is not enough, love or affection can inspire the needed discipline, circling around again to pleasure, as in the pleasure of work well done or of a responsibility fulfilled. A circle is a more comfortable pattern for Berry than a line. His is a cyclical world, not linear, with cycles of growth and decay, life and death. “The cyclic vision,” he says, “is more accepting of mystery and more humble” (p. 135). But to be aware of the cycles and to appreciate life in that rhythm requires a long-term perspective.

Berry's essay "Looking Ahead" (*GGL*, 1981) examines the folly of futurology, but it also gives a glimpse into his satisfactions and rhythms. The essay considers a model society projected by engineering theorists at Purdue University. Their vision of the future is an automated life, a life of "convenience" and "control" (p. 179), as Berry describes it, but without imaginable satisfaction. He is confident to speak for all when he asserts this and explains where our satisfaction comes from. Since we all share a dependence on the natural world and the human and non-human creatures in it, we share this as the source of our satisfaction: "from contact with the materials and lives of this world, from the mutual dependence of creatures upon one another, from fellow feeling" (pp. 180-181). Then he illustrates with an example, a standard teaching method in his writing.

His example is the misery of a particular hay harvest—hard, hot, dusty, dirty, humid, itchy—a generally miserable physical experience that for him was redeemed in part by the companionship of neighbors as they threw in together to complete each other's harvests, redeemed to such an extent that he could call it "a pleasing day" (p. 181). Beyond that, what made it pleasing was a "matter too complex and too profound for logic" (p. 181). They were pleased to have completed the job; they were pleased at the quality of the hay itself and their ability to harvest it well; they were pleased with each other's company. "And yet," Berry tells us, "you cannot fully explain satisfaction in terms of just one day" (p. 181). It is here where the long view is revealed, again with a specific example. He says that when he was a boy he regarded the hay harvest as "an awful drudgery" (p. 181), and he continued to see it this way until the cold January evening when he completed the circle—in fact and in his own understanding—by feeding the farm animals with the very hay he had suffered to harvest six months before. In this

he recognized and experienced the satisfaction of being able to care for his animals in this way.

He allows that this “leaves a lot unexplained” (p. 182). “A lot is unexplainable,” he says. “But the satisfaction is real. We can only have it from each other and from other creatures. It is not available from any machine” (p. 182). He can assert this for all people because of his recognition of our ancient and inescapable dependence on the natural world. But even a single growing season is not a view that is long-term enough for Wendell Berry. This is the man who says, “Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. / Say that your main crop is the forest / that you did not plant, / that you will not live to harvest” (*CM*, 1971/1975, p. 16). Berry would have us reach our imaginations in all directions, as far as they will go, and then acknowledge the mystery of what lies beyond.

Berry’s is a view of the world and an understanding of life best taught by example, best taught by living, best taught by loved ones to loved ones. Writes Berry of his own knowledge and appreciation of farming:

Anything that I will ever have to say on the subject of agriculture can be little more than a continuation of talk begun in childhood with my father and with my late friend Owen Flood. Their conversation, first listened to and then joined, was my first and longest and finest instruction. From them, before I knew I was being taught, I learned to think of the meanings, the responsibilities, and the pleasures of farming. (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. ix)

Of course, asking how formal education might teach such perspectives is absurd. The more useful question is how can and *should* the schools support this understanding of the world? Or perhaps, how can the schools not undermine such understanding? If, as Berry

believes, love and pleasure are the best motivators, then what would it take in terms of pedagogy to foster such a Berryan understanding of love and pleasure?

### *Agrarianism*

Any understanding of Wendell Berry has to begin with agrarianism, including, as noted above, Thomas Jefferson, Sir Albert Howard, Wes Jackson, and the essays in *I'll Take My Stand*. One of the driving points of good sense for Berry is resistance to the forces of industrialism—forces he sees as dangerously reductive in analysis and exploitively violent in practice, toward people and toward nature. By definition, the ultimate standard of industrialism is profit, usually too short-term in perspective to include long-term concerns such as health. Within the standard of profit are the standards of efficiency, competition, exploitation, and a kind of placelessness or necessary mobility. Within industrialism too is a faith in science and technology that Berry finds misplaced and oddly superstitious for a worldview that often regards religious faith as quaint. Industrialism has such a superstitious faith in science and technology as to believe that they can solve every problem they create. As a result, industrialism gives little regard to issues of limits, appropriate scale, or local adaptation. In the disregard of the demands of local adaptation, Berry sees an absurd disconnection between industrialism and the science upon which it claims to depend. Science should sensibly recognize the demands of local adaptation and usually does, at least for wildlife. But science and industrialism often fail to recognize those same demands upon people and our enterprises, to the extent that we, for example, try to farm in Arizona with the same methods that we use in Ohio, relying on massive inputs of energy, technology, scarce desert water, and chemicals to accommodate the differences in fertility, moisture, and temperature.

By inclination, upbringing, experience, and choice, Berry is an agrarian. That philosophical stance informs everything about him, from his farming to his writing to his economic theory to his educational thought, and whatever its variations and shades, agrarianism stands in direct opposition to industrialism and the hegemonic hold industrialism has on modern thinking. For Berry, much of what is wrong with our culture, including our education, can be traced to industrialism, a worldview driven by efficiency over quality, standardization over individualism, and profit over everything.

In his essay “The Agrarian Standard” (*CP*, 2003), Berry makes clear how seriously he views the difference between industrialism and agrarianism, writing:

I believe that this contest between industrialism and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world. (p. 144)

A great part of his objection to industrialism is its tendency toward oversimplification, toward a destructive reductionism, both in causes and results. When the ultimate standard is profit and the lone strategy is competition, all other considerations are bulldozed and flattened in a way that fails to give an honest accounting of consequences.

Berry finds the industrial paradigm particularly unsuitable for education, which should celebrate our humanity and difference more than our efficiency and sameness. In his essay “Economy and Pleasure” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), he says:

The question that we finally come to is a practical one, though it is not one that is entirely answerable by empirical methods: Can a university, or a nation, *afford* this exclusive rule of competition, this purely economic economy? The great fault

of this approach to things is that it is so drastically reductive; it does not permit us to live and work as human beings, as the best of our inheritance defines us....It is impossible not to notice how little the proponents of the ideal of competition have to say about honesty, which is the fundamental economic virtue, and how *very* little they have to say about community, compassion, and mutual help. (p. 135; italics original)

As a human endeavor, education has to acknowledge our humanity and strive for what is best in that humanity. Elsewhere, Berry is more explicit in saying that industrialism is neither a good model for education, nor an acceptable purpose for education: “We need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by industry-subsidized research” (*CP*, 2003, p. 21). He consistently objects to the wide acceptance of public funds for an educational system in the service of industry, a relationship that makes such funding, in effect, a sort of unacknowledged welfare benefit for industry.

Even if industrialism cannot be overthrown as our model and mindset, Berry would have us at least create a space and the means to question its assumptions, and he would have our educational system help to create that space and those means rather than to continue reinforcing those assumptions as he believes schools do now. In “The Agrarian Standard” (*CP*, 2003), he writes that schools under the influence of the industrial economy help to reinforce a kind of ignorance useful to that economy:

Such an economy is bound to destroy locally adapted agrarian economies everywhere it goes, simply because it is too ignorant not to do so. And it has succeeded precisely to the extent that it has been able to inculcate the same



ignorance in workers and consumers. A part of the function of industrial education is to preserve and protect this ignorance. (p. 144-145)

As far as Berry is concerned, higher education is mostly doing the bidding of the industrial economy. Of course, he is not alone in this. For instance, Giroux has made a similar argument in his book *The University in Chains* (2007), adding the military and right-wing fundamentalism to the industrial economy in what he calls the “assault on higher education and freedom in America” (p. 209), and calling for a renewal of higher education to be “engaged as a public sphere” (p. 201) for discourse and critique.

Likewise, Berry wants us to wake up from this stupor and reexamine the purpose of education. In “The Loss of the University” (*HE*, 1987), he says aspirationally:

The thing being made in a university is humanity.... What universities, at least the public-supported ones, are *mandated* to make or to help to make is human beings in the fullest sense of those words—not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture.... Underlying the idea of a university—the bringing together, the combining into one, of all the disciplines—is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good—that is, a fully developed—human being. (p. 77)

With an urgent certainty that our lives depend on it, Berry wants education to contribute to our survival, not continue to chart the course of our ruin by shirking its purpose.

#### Health as the Standard

Understanding Berry’s thinking on education means first understanding how he makes judgments. For some readers of Berry, part of the appeal of his thinking,

especially his social theory, is the way it arises whole in itself, with little dependence on references to other theorists or scholars. His writing is clear, and he follows logic up from the bedrock of respect for people and the world, a respect for the fundamental processes and patterns of nature, including human nature. In his view, whatever is in violation of nature is unhealthy and unsustainable. So when he evaluates a situation or a subject, health is his ultimate standard. This is something he probably understood before reading Sir Albert Howard, but it was something deeply confirmed for him by his reading of Howard.

It is not an oversimplification to say that the rest of Berry's thinking on any subject springs up from that standard, whether he is discussing water policy, morality, economics, farming, or education. In the title essay of the collection *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (1992/1993), Berry writes, "If people wish to be free, then they must preserve the culture that makes for political freedom, and they must preserve the health of the world" (p. 171). And in *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he writes, "We will instead have to measure our economy by the health of the ecosystems and human communities where we do our work" (p. 54). He goes on later in that same book to advocate for changing our standard for work "from professionalism and profitability to the health and durability of our human and natural communities" (p. 134). In short, if something seems to be contrary to the health of the ecosphere or the creatures in it, then as far as Berry is concerned, that thing needs to be questioned and reconsidered and resisted. As he writes in "Poetry and Place" (*SBW*, 1983/2005): "The order of nature proposes a human order in harmony with it" (p. 158), and a great part of maintaining health is submitting to that order.

In *A Continuous Harmony* (1970/2003), Berry extends this standard of health in farming to health in education by drawing an analogy between the two:

An urban discipline that in good health is closely analogous to healthy agriculture is teaching. Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of the mind in his community. The standard of his discipline is his community's health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. (p. 129)

This observation anticipates a theme Berry develops in his writings—that of a scholar's responsibility to community, and by extension, a school's responsibility to community.

When asked in an interview in 1993 about his “approach to improving education,” Berry answered, “My approach to education would be like my approach to everything else. I'd change the standard. I would make the standard that of community health rather than the career of the student” (1993/2007b, p. 100). Such an answer has an appealing simplicity, but this is not to say that Berry is simplistic in his analysis or understanding. Speaking on an earlier topic in that same interview, he says, “The important thing to me is to define the issue with a due regard for its real complexities” (p. 96). Even in his advocating of agrarianism over industrialism, he is calling for a more complex understanding, a point he makes clearly in his essay “Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems” (*GGL*, 1981): “The industrial vision is perhaps inherently an oversimplifying vision, which proceeds on the assumption that consequence is always singular” (p. 116). Certainly the health of a community should defy oversimplification; it is a complicated, nuanced thing, with consequences and entanglements and exceptions.

Berry has said, “I have spent my life trying to complicate the argument about agriculture” (2003, November 10). Then in “Renewing Husbandry” (*WI*, 2005c), he says:

The task before us, now as always before, is to renew and husband the means, both natural and human, of agriculture. But to talk now about renewing husbandry is to talk about unsimplifying what is in reality an extremely complex subject. This will require us to accept again, and more competently than before, the health of the ecosystem, the farm, and the human community as the ultimate standard of agricultural performance. (p. 103)

In fact, the argument about most things becomes more complicated when it is examined in the appropriate context, a requirement for Berry in any good analysis: “We need not only to put the problems in context but also to learn to put our work in context” (*WI*, 2005c, p. 65). Context for Berry is an inescapable given: “We cannot speak or act or live out of context” (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 13), and part of our work needs always to be expanding our understanding of context and our appreciation of the complexity of that context.

Ignoring context, Berry says, is one of the great failings of the modern university in their impulse toward isolated expert specialties, of modern science in its impulse to oversimplification, of modern arts and humanities in their impulse toward impotence and irrelevance, and of modern government in its impulse toward self-perpetuation:

The badness of all this is manifested first in the loss even of the pretense of intellectual or academic community. This is a loss increasingly ominous because intellectual engagement among the disciplines, across the lines of the specializations—that is to say *real* conversation—would enlarge the context of work; it would press thought toward a just complexity; it would work as a system of checks and balances, introducing criticism that would reach beyond the

professional standards. Without such a vigorous conversation originating in the universities and emanating from them, we get what we've got: sciences that spread their effects upon the world as if the world were no more than an experimental laboratory; arts and "humanities" as unmindful of their influence as if the world did not exist; institutions of learning whose chief purpose is to acquire funds and be administered by administrators; governments whose chief purpose is to provide offices to members of political parties. (*LM*, pp. 93-94)

The effort to resist the simple analysis of any subject and to place all issues into their context can, in one sense, be said to be Berry's life's work.

As a thinker and philosopher, Wendell Berry broadens the context, complicates the analysis, and rethinks the standards. Likewise, as a thinker and philosopher of education, Berry is worthy of study for his ideas and for the process of his thinking. His ideas on education usually rise methodically from basic truths about nature and human nature. When his process and style in analyzing a topic carry him to some of the same conclusions as theorists operating in more conventional educational scholarship, he can provide another dimension for understanding those theorists.

Furthermore, his commentary on education comes as both an insider and an outsider. Berry was learning and teaching in colleges and universities from 1952 to 1977, then again from 1987 to 1993. Yet he notes in his essay "The Long-Legged House" (*LLH*, 1969/2004) that he was never comfortable in school. He says:

As I think of it now, school itself was a distraction. Although I have become, among other things, a teacher, I am skeptical of education. It seems to me a most doubtful process, and I think the good of it is taken too much for granted. (p. 127)

With this sort of independent analysis and sense-making, his thinking offers a useful touchstone for understanding and applying other scholarship on education.

*The Path to Health*

With health as the ultimate standard, how would Berry achieve it? He wants every place on earth to be loved and cared for and every person on earth able to and pleased to love and care for a place and the people and other creatures in it. For Berry, this is not simply good stewardship; it is also how people find satisfaction in their work and living, how they become fully human. His essay “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity” (*ATC*, 1995) carries a potent multiple meaning in its title. The humanity being preserved can be taken simply as people, but it can also be taken as the best of our humanness. The pairing of conservation with the “preservation of humanity” gives the issues of conservation the appropriate urgency. Berry’s point in the essay is this:

In order to preserve the health of nature, we must preserve ourselves as human beings—as creatures who possess humanity not just as a collection of physical attributes but also as the cultural imperative to be caretakers, good neighbors to one another and to the other creatures. (p. 74)

For Berry, our ability to know proper caretaking is dependent on our cultural inheritance, part of what makes us fully human.

He offers two absolute laws: “we cannot exempt ourselves from using the world” (pp. 72-73), and “if we want to continue living, we cannot exempt use from care” (p. 73). To this he adds a third, which he says is “perhaps not absolute, but virtually so” (p. 73): “we cannot exempt ourselves from our cultural inheritance, our tradition” (p. 73) because

our cultural tradition—whatever its “errors and mistakes, damages and tragedies” (p. 73)—preserves our understanding of proper caretaking. This recognition of tradition’s importance as teacher and guide does not shield it from correction. Our tradition, says Berry, “is properly subject to critical intelligence and is just as properly subject to helps and influences from other traditions” (p. 73). That we are not exempt from the demands of proper caretaking of the world and each other—that we must avoid damage—means for Berry that we can see moral and religious tradition in a fresh way. “We now can see that what we have traditionally called ‘sins’ are wrong not because they are forbidden but because they divide us from our neighbors, from the world, and ultimately from God. They deny care and are dangerous to creatures” (p. 75). That is, traditionally sinful behavior disrupts or interferes with the health of the world, including our own health. If we love our places and all the creatures in them, then we will treat them with loving care.

But what is required then for every place to be loved and cared for and for every person to know how to love and care for a place and all the creatures in it? Berry would say that three imperatives are required: first, that we each know our place; second, that we protect our place; and third, that we see beyond our own place to graciously extend this courtesy to others. We must learn the skills, knowledge, wisdom, cautions, scale, and limits of these three imperatives if we are to survive. The question for this study is, How can the schools help?

### *Knowing Our Place.*

In Berry’s experience, love of a place begins first with knowledge of that place. By this he means a particular knowledge, not an abstract or general knowledge. Says Berry, “Land that is in human use must be lovingly used; it requires intimate knowledge,

attention, and care” (*HE*, 1987, p. 164). The trouble—in the form of exploitation and abuse—comes when people lack particular knowledge and affection: “The result is that all landscapes, and the people and other creatures in them, are being manipulated for profit by people who can neither see them in their particularity nor care particularly about them” (*CP*, p. 39). Much of the knowledge of a place is gained informally, beyond the reach of the schools, by exploring and working in our homes and natural landscapes.

Such knowledge is gained from our elders and from our culture if the culture is healthy. In “In Distrust of Movements” (*CP*, 2003), Berry writes:

We must know both how to use and how to care for what we use. This knowledge is the basis of human culture. If we do not know how to adapt our desires, our methods, and our technology to the nature of the places in which we are working, so as to make them productive *and to keep them so*, that is a cultural failure of the grossest and most dangerous kind. Poverty and starvation also can be cultural products—if the culture is wrong. (pp. 43-44; italics original)

For Berry, an unhealthy culture often is the result of placelessness or the inability to know a place well. As he writes in “Two Minds” (*CP*, 2003):

To be disconnected from any actual landscape is to be, in the practical or economic sense, without a home. To have no country carefully and practically in mind is to be without a culture. In such a situation, culture becomes purposeless and arbitrary, dividing into “popular culture,” determined by commerce, advertising, and fashion, and “high culture,” which is either social affectation, displaced cultural memory, or the merely aesthetic pursuits of artists and art lovers. (p. 86)



This brings us around in cyclic fashion to Berry's agrarianism and standard of health.

In "The Agrarian Standard" (2003), he writes, "The agrarian standard, inescapably, is local adaptation, which requires bringing local nature, local people, local economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony" (p. 152). But it also brings us neatly around to Berry's insistence on complexity of analysis. In "People, Land, and Community" (*SBW*, 1983/2005), he says, "In a healthy culture, these connections [that join people, land, and community] are complex. The industrial economy breaks them down by oversimplifying them and in the process raises obstacles that make it hard for us to see what the connections are or ought to be" (p. 64). Connecting people, land, and community helps to ensure that people will have the opportunity to love and care for a place and that home places will be loved and cared for. It is a dynamic that is not only best for people, according to Berry, but also best for the natural world.

Again, much of this knowledge, says Berry, is gained informally, but the informal knowledge can be reinforced and validated through lessons and methods of education that are based on the local place. A curriculum that is always focused elsewhere has the effect of telling students that where they live has less value, which only makes young people less pleased with their own homes. So a local focus makes sense to Berry, to help ensure that the people and the places thrive, but he also believes it is the responsibility of higher education to serve local concerns and work on local problems. In "Higher Education and Home Defense" (*HE*, 1987), Berry puts it starkly, with a criticism of higher education and its graduates, whom he terms "professional vandals" (p. 51). He says:

Many of these professionals have been educated, at considerable public expense, in colleges or universities that had originally a clear mandate to serve localities or

regions—to receive the daughters and sons of their regions, educate them, and send them home again to serve and strengthen their communities. The outcome shows, I think, that they have generally betrayed this mandate, having worked instead to uproot the best brains and talents, to direct them away from home into exploitative careers in one or another of the professions, and so to make them predators of communities and homelands, their own as well as other people’s. (pp. 51-52)

In the same essay, he wrote, “Education in the true sense, of course, is an enablement to *serve*—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit” (p. 52). This is a different view of education from the placeless job training that the industrial economy expects. In his essay “Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust” (*UA*, 1977/1996), Berry examines the three legislative acts—the Morrill Act of 1862, the Hatch Act of 1887, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914—that together created the land-grant college complex in the United States, including the state agricultural experiment stations and the cooperative extension service, and he contrasts this legislation with Thomas Jefferson’s vision of education in a free society.

According to Berry, while both Jefferson and Justin Morrill valued education—Jefferson because he had it and Morrill to some extent because he did not—they differed in their understanding of the purpose of education. Jefferson had a “complex sense of the dependence of democratic citizenship upon education....Morrill, on the other hand, looked at education from a strictly practical or utilitarian viewpoint” (p. 146). The intent of the Morrill Act, writes Berry, was “to promote the stabilization of farming populations

and communities” and (quoting directly from the legislation) “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (Association of Public, p. 10), with “industrial classes” in the usage referring to farmers and other laborers, as distinct from the professional classes for whom a college education was more commonly available. A call for both “liberal and practical education” aligns with thinking of the time, including Emerson, who in “The American Scholar” wrote, “Without [action] thought can never ripen into truth” (p. 60). The widely accepted purpose of the Morrill Act of 1862 was to strengthen American agriculture, pairing an understanding of theory with application, and Morrill himself wrote years later that he also wanted to “open college doors to farmers’ sons and others who lacked the means to attend the colleges then existing” (qtd in Duemer, p. 136).

Instead of stabilizing farming populations and communities, however, the effect was, writes Berry, a “lowering of the educational standard from Jefferson’s ideal of public or community responsibility to the utilitarianism of Morrill” (*UA*, p. 147), and “the promotion by the land-grant colleges of an *impermanent* agriculture destructive of land and people” (p. 147). Berry concludes that the land-grant colleges have failed in their stated and assigned mandate. Ten years after *The Unsettling of America*, Berry writes of the land-grant college system in “A Defense of the Family Farm” (*HE*, 1987):

In general, it can no longer be denied that the system as a whole has failed. One hundred and twenty-four years after the Morrill Act, ninety-nine years after the Hatch Act, seventy-two years after the Smith-Lever Act, the “industrial classes” are not liberally educated, agriculture and rural life are not sound or prosperous or permanent, and there is no equitable balance between agriculture and other

segments of the economy. Anybody's statistics on the reduction of the farm populations, on the decay of rural communities, on soil erosion, soil and water pollution, water shortages, and farm bankruptcies tell indisputably a story of failure. (pp. 170-171)

By Berry's standard of the health of the community, higher education—especially the land-grant system—has failed to measure up. It has failed to help its graduates learn to know and love a particular place, and instead often the system has worked against that love of place by the implication or outright statement that other places are better.

At the same time, Berry notes that the failures of our schools to educate are only exacerbated by the failures of the family to educate, and he emphasizes his holistic notion of learning, in informal and formal settings. In the essay "Family Work" (1981), he writes:

If public education is to have any meaning or value at all, then public education *must* be supplemented by home education. I know this from my own experience as a college teacher. What can you teach a student whose entire education has been public, whose daily family life for twenty years has consisted of four or five hours of TV, who has never read a book for pleasure or ever *seen* a book so read; whose only work has been schoolwork, who has never learned to perform any essential task? Not much, so far as I could tell. (p. 157; italics original)

While this may sound as though he is referring only to primary and secondary education, the fact that he bases the judgment on his own experience as a college teacher suggests that he extends the opinion to higher education as well. Appropriate home education,

with a demonstrated curiosity and a respect for useful work, not only prepares students to learn in school, but also teaches them to value home and their responsibility to it.

*Protecting Our Place.*

In addition to a knowledge and love of a particular place and the sense of responsibility for that place that results, what is equally important in Berry's view is for people to know how to recognize when their places are threatened and to know how to defend their places and all the creatures in them. What is required is an independence of thought and the ability to think critically—beyond the rhetoric and the false assumptions that a more dominant culture might be trying to impose. What is required is a belief in human dignity and the value of home communities, but also standards for evaluation and the ability to identify priorities. In other words, an effective defense of one's place and way of life requires Paulo Freire's (1970/2005) concept of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness. By this, Freire means not only the ability to identify oppression and injustice, but also the ability to take action against such oppression and injustice.

Along with recognizing the forces of oppression and injustice, taking action against such forces requires knowledge, communication skills, skills in argument and persuasion, creativity and imagination, and so many more things that cannot be known. The unknowable quality of the future is one reason why Berry scoffs at calls for relevance in the curriculum since we cannot know what will be relevant. In *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), he says, "Without the balance of historic value, practical education gives us the most absurd of standards: 'relevance,' based upon the suppositional needs of a theoretical future" (p. 158). Also in the essay "Discipline and Hope" (*CH*, 1970/2003), he refers to relevance as "the most reactionary and totalitarian

of educational doctrines” (p. 108). In an interview from 1973, Berry addresses relevance in the curriculum, while also giving a rare glimpse into his life on campus:

My own history as a teacher has had a rather dramatic change along those lines. Back when we were making speeches and holding meetings about the environment and against the Vietnam War, I was sort of looked on as a friend of the good causes. Then last year we had a long struggle in the university about academic requirements. I was holding out for the importance of learning a foreign language, for instance, and overnight I got the reputation of being an “academic fascist.” But I would be a lot better off if I knew more languages. And more math and biology, too. That’s the message I got from my own experience. (1973/2007, p. 11)

Interdisciplinary leanings are clear, and his respect for wisdom gained from experience.

Then in another interview in 2006, more than thirty years later, Berry explains the reasoning in his position about relevance in the curriculum:

That idea we had back in the ‘60s and ‘70s that everything had to be “relevant” was a joke on this subject. Nobody knew what was going to be relevant. Nobody ever knows what is going to be relevant. The question is, how do you prepare young people for a world in which *anything* might turn out to be relevant? (2006/2007b, p. 196)

The two quotes together and the bridge of time between provide a clear example of Berry’s consistency and integrity of thought over time. But beyond that, the passage also shows Berry’s own sense of an expanded context, moving from the practical question of what he wishes he had learned to the more theoretical question of what and how to teach.

The same 2006 interview cuts right to the heart of the question, examining both the purpose of education and the issue of relevance in light of an unknowable future:

I don't think the education industry has been asking the essential question: What must we teach? What do we owe the young? It's *not* just a good living, and it's *not* just employability. It's *not* just job training. What do we owe them that can possibly prepare them for the experience of living in an unpredictable world? The education industry doesn't accept the inherent tragedy of that. We don't know enough to teach the young. We don't even know enough to decide what they need to know. But we've got to make a gamble. We're going to be surprised, they're going to be surprised; we know that. (2006/2007b, p. 196)

He would have us be open to the possibility that everything might be relevant, indeed that something becomes relevant not by whether or not it is needed, since everything could be needed. Instead, what makes a subject, fact or skill relevant is that it is known, that it can be applied when needed. It is the old Latin maxim, "Omnia disce: Videbis postea nihil esse superfluum," or "Learn everything: Later you will find that nothing is superfluous."

Both Berry's essays and fiction make clear that he favors giving students opportunities for learning by doing, through apprenticeships, service learning, and problem-based learning. These are even better for Berry if they can be locally based. This belief in experiential learning as a teaching method extends to his writing, where he comes close to duplicating real experience for the reader with his extensive use of examples in his essays, but also in the way his fiction and poetry work to create something near to the emotion of actual experience. Still, Berry is also an advocate for some very traditional kinds of learning and content, including the classic texts of western

culture. Furthermore, he does not want anyone misled into thinking that learning is easy, and he was an early critic of approaches that foist that myth on students:

The fact is that a great deal that's necessary and satisfying to know is not pleasant to learn. So-called educators have allowed the idea to get around among students that education ought to be constantly diverting and entertaining. That's a terrible disservice to reality. And students then feel affronted by the hardship that's native to education and to the mastery of any discipline. (1973/2007, p. 11)

So learning can be hard, and if everything is potentially relevant, it is also long, where the learning is never completed and where everything is interconnected, not separate and departmentalized, and where no realm of knowing is entirely beyond our responsibility. Berry has long been an advocate for an overhaul of higher education to something less dependent on narrow specialties and more affording of interdisciplinary opportunities for students and faculty, providing the possibility for greater context and unity of learning. *Seeing Beyond Our Place*.

A pedagogy focused on place needs one more thing, both to enable students to envision a life for themselves and to help students avoid xenophobia and a predatory exploitation of other people's places. It needs imagination.

Imagination is what allows us to envision solutions for our own lives and places that include "solving for pattern," to use Berry's phrase (*GGL*, 1981, pp. 134-145). Solutions that solve for pattern solve several problems at once without causing more problems. Again, an understanding and appreciation of context is key to solving for pattern, where specific consequences are anticipated and imagined into a workable solution. Imagination, in short, is what enables us to see and feel beyond time and space.



Just as importantly, imagination is the bedrock of empathy; imagination is what enables us to put ourselves in someone else's heart, feel the possibility of other people's love for their children or their home. In a Q&A session after a reading in November 2003, Berry addressed this concept in response to a question about how we can avoid turning people into abstractions. He said we cannot love the human race, but we can understand love of the human race by our own experience of specific love and then by the extension of imagination:

I think you go beyond yourself by imagination, by real imagination....It starts, I think, by saying "I love my children; therefore I have to imagine that other people love theirs." And so you extend that courtesy. I must treat your children as if they are loved as my children are loved. (2003, November 10)

This is an old idea with Berry. As early as 1965, in the darkness of the Cold War, he published a poem called "To a Siberian Woodsman" (*Ope*, 1965/1968). The parenthetical after the title says, "after looking at some pictures in a magazine" (p. 61). It is not difficult to think of Berry studying a photo essay of a man in Siberia, a man whom political forces had declared to be enemies with Berry simply by where they were born. Nor is it difficult to think of Berry being moved to imagine the man's humanity in a way that transcends the role imposed on him as Berry's enemy.

The poem includes vivid and specific imaginings about the woodsman, his children, and his life. The woodsman's daughter "play[s] the accordion," her face "clear in the joy of hearing her own music. Her fingers live on the keys like people familiar with the land they were born in" (p. 61). The woodsman and his son sit, "tying the bright flies that will lead [them] along the forest streams" (p. 61). When Berry says, "I have thought

of you stepping out of your doorway at dawn, your son in your tracks” (p. 61), we know that Berry has stepped out his doorway at dawn, his son in his tracks. He describes the woodsman and his son fishing, “while the east brightens” (p. 61), a reminder that, though they are on the other side of the earth, the sun is the same, the familial relationships are the same. Particularly poignant in this poem are the imaginings of the sounds of the woodsman’s life, which Berry overlays on the photographs from his own experience and through his imagination: the music of the accordion, “birds waking close by you in the trees” (p. 61), “the voice of the stream” (p. 61), “the sound of your own voice” (p. 61), even the lack of sound in “the silence that lies around you now that you have ceased to speak” (p. 61) or “your son who fishes with you in silence beside the forest pool (p. 64).

In these imaginings, Berry finds his commonality with the woodsman, examining the absurdity of either wanting to destroy the other or the other’s children, home, or land. The last stanza is a series of questions wondering at the source of the divide and resisting the imposition of manufactured hostility. He asks, “Who has invented our enmity? Who has prescribed us hatred of each other?” (p. 62). Along with the idea that such hatred can lead to “the burning of your house or the destruction of your children” (p. 62), he notes the destruction of the ecosystem that is a tragic aftershock of industrial warfare: “Who has set loose the thought that we should oppose each other with the ruin of forests and rivers, and the silence of birds?” (p. 62). The questions culminate in a dear statement of the expanded insight the photographs and his imaginings have led to: “And now one of the ideas of my place will be that you would gladly talk and visit and work with me” (p. 63). Talk and work are among the profound pleasures of Berry’s life, and his imagination allows him to make this idea real in his mind, that he and the woodsman could happily

share these pleasures. Indeed the idea is so real that the poem allows readers to imagine it too, embodied and working shoulder to shoulder with Berry on his farm.

In Berry's view, imagination is one way we can be freed from violence against each other and against the world. But it is a complicated dynamic, and if imagining the lives of others can save us from violence, then also, as Berry explains in "American Imagination and the Civil War" (*IP*, 2010a), we need to recognize that "the resort to violence is the death of imagination" (p. 27). When violence is the course, not only have we failed to employ our imaginations to avoid the violence, but also the violence then renders us unable to imagine. In the same essay, he writes, "Once the killing has started, lenity and the hope for order and beauty vanish along with causes and aims....Once opponents become enemies, then the rhetoric of violence prevents them from imagining each other. Or it reduces imagination to powerlessness" (p. 27). Even a cursory familiarity with wartime rhetoric and propaganda demonstrates this phenomenon, where the urgency of war and fear forces public thinking into a polarity of good and evil, demonizing the other side and justifying extremes in the name of good against evil.

Berry understands that this dynamic extends from the violence of war to the violence of exploitation, with the same destructive results to our world and our souls. In the essay "Peaceableness toward Enemies" (*SEFC*, 1992/1993), he writes:

Modern war and modern industry are much alike, not just in their technology and methodology but also in this failure of imagination. It is no accident that they cause similar devastations. There can be little doubt that industrial disfigurements of nature and industrial diminishment of human beings prepare the souls of nations for industrial war in which places become "enemy territory," people

become “targets” or “collateral casualties,” and bombing sorties become “turkey shoots.” (p. 82)

As the scale enlarges, so does the destruction, but so also the abstraction, further numbing our imaginations. In terms of the exploitation of our rural areas, homes become sacrifice zones for the short-term good of urban areas, or we endure an economy that returns so little to farmers that they feel forced to abuse their own soil and exploit its fertility.

Berry does not exclude empathy for the non-human world, referring to “the imperative to imagine the lives of beings who are not ourselves and are not like ourselves: animals, plants, gods, spirits, people of other countries and other races, people of the other sex, places—and enemies” (*SEFC*, pp. 82-83). Again, his vision is simple, even if his understanding and analysis are not: every place on earth loved and cared for, and everyone on earth able to love and care for a place.

#### Why Wendell Berry Is Worth Our Attention

Taken together, the works of Wendell Berry—though not always explicitly about education—create an extended statement of educational philosophy, including how we learn, what we need to know, and what purpose education can serve. Also, his rhetorical approach to writing—his way of expressing himself to readers—models and mirrors his pedagogical strategies, including the value of experience and example, the need for an interdisciplinary outlook, the importance of alert critical analysis, an acknowledgement of sensible limits, and the value of logic tempered with a recognition of mystery.

Much of Berry’s writing—particularly about agriculture—is based on his own experience or the experience of people he has observed, interviewed, or worked with. Throughout his writing, he makes use of specific examples, vividly told, to clarify a

concept for his readers. He is interdisciplinary. When necessary and with appropriate research on his part, he reaches across traditional discipline lines, moving beyond his formal education in literature and language or his informal training and experience in agriculture to incorporate economics or religion or history or philosophy or politics into his writing. His reasoning and conclusions are based on fundamental assumptions about nature and well-being, including health and a recognition of human limits, and he does not hesitate to give a critical analysis of institutions, policies, or practices that he feels violate nature and well-being. Finally, his thinking is supported and complemented by his feelings and his recognition that some realities defy logical explanation, that some realities are mysteries. Along with their aesthetic and instructive value as literature, his fiction and poetry serve in this way to animate and illustrate his ideas through imagination and, indeed, to become nearly tangible examples of his ideas in action.

As an educational thinker, Wendell Berry is worth our attention for a number of reasons. First, his ideas on education integrate with his ideas on other subjects in a way that is holistic and clear. Also, his perspective is often radically countercultural—as questioning of societal assumptions as the best critical theorists—but his ideological background is not alien to American culture. In addition, his work in both his writing and his activism is animated, as noted above, by love and hope and a need to defend what he loves. Finally, he has a way of cutting to the urgently elemental questions of an issue—even questions of survival—and that alone should get our attention.

To examine each reason in more detail, first, Berry's writing has a clarity and approachability that can be lacking in the works of educational theorists. As Madhu Suri Prakash (1994) says, "Berry's craft as a writer makes his educational thought accessible

to ordinary people. It brings philosophy and education down to earth, counteracting ivory tower thinking” (p. 155). Prakash argues that Berry’s thinking on education could have more of an impact on our culture than some theorists because of the clarity of his writing.

Prakash continues:

With his feet firmly planted on his native soil, Berry transforms specialists’ discourses on philosophy and education, as much as on ecology, agriculture, waste management, politics, and sex. He is creating new public commons: where ordinary people can fully engage in philosophical explorations on how to live the good life in times socially troubled and ecologically devastating. (p. 155)

As with agricultural reforms—such as community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, and other local food movements—meaningful education reform may be best led from the bottom. Berry’s thinking has the potential to cause people to critically question current directions in education, see what might be done, and then roll up their sleeves and get busy. His is a philosophy that heals and grows, just as his farming does.

Along with his clarity in expressing himself, Berry distinguishes himself from other educational theorists—notably critical theorists—by the political origins of his thinking. Berry’s background and early experience come from a Jeffersonian and agrarian tradition. He said, “I grew up in an agrarian family. In agrarian politics. My father’s great effort was to keep a viable life for the small farmers” (Berry & Snyder, 1999, November 10). However much the influences of modern industrialism may have suppressed agrarianism in recent times, still Jeffersonian agrarianism is not alien to our culture, history, or tradition of democratic government. Unlike most critical theorists, Berry’s background is non-Marxist. He goes on in the same interview to note of himself as he

was growing up: “I never heard of socialism. Agrarianism, I thought was normal. It turns out, that’s fairly radical.” Yet Berry arrives at many of the same conclusions as do critical theorists in their thinking about the world and society generally, and about education specifically, including a recognition of the oppression of prejudice and colonialism.

From where Berry stands, one of the systematic prejudices of education and American society is against the people and cultures of rural areas. He writes in the essay “Conserving Communities” (*ATC*, 1995):

This economic prejudice against the small has, of course, done immense damage for a long time to small or family-sized businesses in city and country alike. But that prejudice has often overlapped with an industrial prejudice against anything rural and against the land itself, and this prejudice has resulted in damages that are not only extensive but also long-lasting or permanent. (p. 11)

He is clearer and more emphatic in the essay “A Long Job, Too Late to Quit” (*CP*, 2003), raising the prejudice to the level of oppression:

In the United States—and apparently in all “developed” and “developing” countries—farmers are an oppressed social class. They see that they are not only poorly paid for their work, but also ridiculed, caricatured, stereotyped, and sometimes explicitly hated by people in the media and by the public at large. Like other oppressed classes, farm people too often apply the judgment of society to themselves. Too many times I have heard an intelligent, knowledgeable, courageous, and likeable person say, “I’m just a farmer.” (p. 80)

For Berry, this oppression is one of the forces driving young people away from their homes and families in rural areas—the very places and people to which they often are

most deeply and lovingly connected. “The school system,” says Berry, “educates for export” (p. 82). This idea of preparing children for export goes back to Berry’s own experience in school and the pressure he felt to leave home and make something of himself. He has even referred to our current educational system as “a kind of feedlot to prepare young people to go, to be marketable elsewhere on the job market” (2010, May 3), a metaphor that is as vivid as it is distasteful for Berry, given that he compares confinement animal operations to concentration camps or prisons (*CP*, 2003, p. 127).

For Berry, the colonial oppression of rural Americans is as damaging as that of the workers in Third World factories or the people in Brazilian slums for whom Paulo Freire advocated. It is a dynamic that leaves people in rural areas, both young and old, feeling disrupted and dissatisfied, voiceless and powerless, and that allows for an urban mindset of easy exploitation of land and the people who tend it. In addition, by driving young people out of rural areas, the depopulating of these landscapes works to decrease the number of people with the interest and specific knowledge to use these lands well, and it breaks the succession of generational knowledge upon which, Berry believes, good land use depends. As he says in “The Prejudice against Country People” (*CP*, 2003):

Prejudice against rural people is not merely an offense against justice and common decency. It also obscures or distorts perception of issues and problems of the greatest practical urgency. The unacknowledged question beneath the dismissal of the agrarian small farmers is this: What is the best way to farm—not anywhere or everywhere, but in every one of the Earth’s fragile localities? What is the best way to farm *this* farm? In *this* ecosystem? For *this* farmer? For *this* community? For *these* consumers? For the next seven generations? In a time of



terrorism? To answer those questions, we will have to go beyond our preconceptions about farmers and other “provincial” people. (p. 111)

For Berry, this sort of prejudice against and oppression of rural people and landscapes means we are losing the very hearts and minds that can love and know the land well enough to care for it, diminishing our capacity to supply ourselves with food and fiber.

Of course, Berry is interested in resisting this sort of prejudice and oppression, in part, because the people of rural areas are the people who use the land and care for it. But he is interested, too, because of his wish to resist oppression and injustice, particularly when they are imposed upon the place and people he knows, loves, and wants to defend. Says Berry, “My part of rural America is, in short, a colony, like every other part of rural America” (*SEFC*, p. 8). Elsewhere he notes that “colonial economies place no value on stewardship, and do not teach, encourage, reward, or even protect it” (*ATC*, 1995, p. 54).

In a 1990 interview (1990/2007), Berry compared rural America to the Third World:

The situation we have now...is that the larger economy—the national economy—is really being run for the benefit of very few people. It is preying upon and slowly destroying the local communities—everywhere. It’s very clear this is happening all over the rural United States. Rural America is a bona-fide part of the Third World. It’s a colony. Some parts are recognizably Third World—the Appalachian coal fields and the destroyed farm towns in the Middle West. But all of it is at one stage or another of moving toward Third World status. (p. 30)

The colonial mindset is by definition tipping toward exploitation. When the colonized have something that the colonizers want—whether coal or gold or timber or cheap grain or cheap labor—it is too easy for those outside the colony to justify any consequence of

imperialism to obtain it. The trend is toward a devaluing of the place and a dehumanizing of the people. Berry points out that such an attitude of colonialism exists from the urban culture toward rural places, an attitude that normalizes exploitation and makes abuse of such places and their people too easily accepted by urban and rural people alike.

Berry frequently writes about the false economics of the colonial relationship, presented to the colonized as a benefit in terms of jobs and cash, and creating an equally false intimacy of dependence. In “Does Community Have a Value?” (*HE*, 1987), he says:

The way that a national economy preys on its internal colonies is by the destruction of community—that is, by the destruction of the principle of local self-sufficiency not only in the local economy but also in the local culture. Thus, local life becomes the dependent—indeed, the victim—not just of the food industry, the transportation industry, the power industries, the various agribusiness industries, and so on, but also of the entertainment, the education, and the religion industries—all involving change from goods once cheap or free to expensive goods having to be bought. (p. 186)

Dependency leads to powerlessness, and the powerless are easy prey to exploitation.

Berry notes that the economics of colonialism relies on the same accounting of profit and loss that industrialism relies on, but it is the profit and loss of the colonizers, not the colonized. In that same essay about the value of community, he writes:

The fault of a colonial economy is that it is dishonest; it misrepresents reality. In practice, it is simply a way of keeping costs off the books of an exploitive interest. The exploitive interest is absent from the countryside exactly as if the countryside were a foreign colony. The result of this separation is that the true costs of

production are not paid by the exploitive interest but only suffered by the exploited land and people. (*HE*, p. 186)

In the exploitation of a colonial economy, the jobs and cash, for example, are traded for permanent loss of resources, destruction of ecosystems, or damage to local cultures, but the colonized are expected to be grateful for the opportunity to foul their own nest, with the tacit implication that if they succeed under this system of dependence, the ultimate success would be to flee the colony and leave the spoiled land and culture behind.

To trace the dynamic of exploitation in American history, Berry (*UA*, 1977/1996) notes that it is always the established people who become the victims of exploitation from outside: the Native Americans, the colonists, the small farmers, right down to little groups everywhere fighting to protect their lives or places or values. He writes:

The only escape from this destiny of victimization has been to “succeed”—that is, to “make it” into the class of exploiters.... This escape is, of course, illusory, for one man’s producer is another’s consumer, and even the richest and most mobile will soon find it hard to escape the noxious effluents and fumes of their various public services. (p. 5)

Someone determined to stay in a place is less likely to ruin that place, provided he or she has the imagination to envision consequences.

In 2010, Berry spoke at a hearing of the Environmental Protection Agency on coal ash in eastern Kentucky. After making the comparison between the government’s duty to protect its citizens from foreign threats and its duty to protect citizens from internal threats like a poisoned ecosystem, Berry finished his prepared remarks by adding:

I think my side of this issue is at fault in permitting this controversy to be construed as a contest between health and jobs. I believe, and I think my allies understand, that the future of the Kentucky economy is not distinct from the future of ecological health in this state, and we need to be talking about a post-coal economy for eastern Kentucky. And it needs to come from the land and the people's intelligence in eastern Kentucky. (2010, September 28)

The statement neatly sums up many fundamental themes in Berry's philosophy, including health and the land, the need for intelligence and imagination and creativity to work locally to solve problems, an avoidance of oversimplified thinking and either/or reasoning, and a rejection of the colonialism of outside interests telling local people how to live.

Framing a discussion about oppression and colonialism in terms of the divide between urban and rural America gives Berry's argument the potential to resonate with Americans in a way that the arguments of someone like Paulo Freire may not. This is especially true because Berry frequently bridges that divide in his writing with the thing that unites us all, the requirement we all have in common, the necessity that gives us pleasure and strength for survival: food. His clear but complex arguments about how we live and what we need to know almost always come back to the inescapable fact that we depend on our world for food and we have to learn to care for our world if we want to eat. This is our duty and our responsibility, but it is also our joy, according to Berry. Make no mistake. Berry does not want everyone to become a farmer. He does, however, want us all to "eat responsibly" (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 145), and he wants us all to recognize that "eating is an agricultural act" (p. 145). Our need to eat means we all have a

need to support good stewardship of the land. It requires an awareness and critical analysis of the practices, policies, assumptions, expectations, and other cultural forces that lead inexorably to poor stewardship or abuse of the land.

In a world with decreasing resources left to exploit, we have to rethink how we live and how we derive our pleasures. Berry wants us to abandon the violence of exploitation—whether of people or places—as our dominant mode of operation and embrace a care of the world and each other that is sustaining and loving. We need to adopt a culture that conservingly uses the non-renewable resources. Both formally and informally, Berry would have us relearn how we live and use the world. Consider this from *Citizenship Papers* (2003):

The first thing we must begin to teach our children (and learn ourselves) is that we cannot spend and consume endlessly. We have got to learn to save and conserve. We do need a “new economy,” but one that is founded on thrift and care, on saving and conserving, not on excess and waste. An economy based on waste is inherently and hopelessly violent, and war is its inevitable by-product. We need a peaceable economy. (p. 22)

In connecting this “new economy” with peace, Berry clarifies the stakes for us all, the dire consequences of ignoring the urgency to use less and waste less. But he also emphasizes the futility of continuing with our current cultural mindset. This changed outlook will not come about from the assumptions and expectations of industrialism, which “applies its methods and technologies indiscriminately [and] continues the economy of colonialism” (*CP*, p. 144). We need minds educated to engage the world with questions and courage. We need all people able to know that their own life and place

are precious and able to imagine someone else's life and place as precious too. We need the people of rural areas reinvigorated and empowered to use the landscape well, and that includes having the ability to defend themselves and the landscape from exploitation.

If education is to have a role in this change—this alternate way of viewing the world—then we will have to throw off the blinders that force a narrow definition of progress and learn to see the world critically, in as complete a context as possible, with regard for long-term consequences and sustainability. And the lens we need to get this view can be provided by Wendell Berry's philosophy of education.

Berry is not generally thought of as an educational thinker or commentator, yet, as noted above, he is university trained and educated, and for a time his profession was teaching in colleges and universities. The subject of education frequently comes up in his writing, whether as memoirs of his experience, as systems critiques, or as observations on how we learn and how we know or on what we need to know. Little has been done—especially recently—to bring together these pieces of thought into an integrated whole or to articulate what could be considered Berry's philosophy of education.

Paul Theobald and Dale Snauwaert (1993) published an article entitled "The Educational Philosophy of Wendell Berry," and Theobald has continued to cite Berry in his work on place-based education. In their article, Theobald and Snauwaert state their purpose: "This paper is a guide to the educational philosophy of Wendell Berry" (p. 37), and they say they hoped "to provide not the last word on Berry's educational philosophy, but the first" (p. 37). It may have been the first, but it was also nearly the last.

One person who tried to stir some interest in Berry as an educational thinker is Madhu Suri Prakash. Her 1994 article, "What Are People For? Wendell Berry on

Education, Ecology, and Culture,” tried to bring Berry’s ideas into the conversation on education. “This essay,” Prakash says, “stems from the conviction that we should not continue to ignore or banish Berry from our midst simply because he refuses to participate in the business-as-usual promoted by the educational system for over two centuries” (p. 136). Indeed, she says this of Berry:

Berry is a genuinely radical thinker, a master at making whole again our fragmented lives and learning. Berry teaches us how to live and learn on the human scale: as communal beings, virtuous and ecologically literate because of our closeness to the land, without the alienation we suffer because of being “educated” to work for inhuman modern institutions and technologies. (p. 136)

She sees Berry as relevant and necessary: “I want to take Berry’s help,” she says, “in exploding our educational canon” (136). Prakash continues to cite Berry’s work in subsequent articles, some even about education, but her initial or later efforts to legitimize Berry as an educational theorist have not attracted many followers. Whether because of Berry’s criticism of educational institutions, as Prakash seems to think, or for other reasons, Berry remains on the ragged edge of educational thinking today.

In their article, Theobald and Snauwaert (1993) give a straightforward analysis of Berry’s educational philosophy, placing his agrarian thinking into the tradition of Greek antiquity, but noting how Berry sees the necessity for critical assessment of the world and modern institutions: “His educational philosophy seeks to provide a foundation for cultivating a virtuous life, as did the Greeks, while providing the means to penetrate the corruption of modernity” (p. 42). They also note his similarities with the progressivism of John Dewey, including an emphasis on experiential learning and Berry’s “participatory,

social, and active pedagogical approach” (p. 42). Unlike Dewey, say Theobald and Snauwaert, Berry sees education not as student-centered, but as teacher/discipline-centered, a stance more fitting to his advocacy of apprenticeship to a master craftsman.

A draft of the article by Theobald and Snauwaert was available as early as 1990, and between that time and its publication in *Holistic Education Review*, Theobald (1992) published an article in *ERIC Digest* entitled “Rural Philosophy for Education: Wendell Berry’s Tradition.” In it, Theobald implies that Berry’s educational philosophy applies to rural populations only. But Prakash (1994) clearly states that his philosophy should apply to all people. She says Berry “recognizes that communal soil can be created in urban or suburban places as much as in the rural countryside; when and only when we consciously begin to root ourselves in some community and its place in nature” (p. 152). Yes, rural people need to be educated to understand, love, and respect their places and the earth, but that is not enough. There is an even greater urgency about educating urban populations to appreciate the earth precisely because they have so much less access to nature and because the rural populations must rely on the understanding and sympathy of urban and suburban people toward the earth. And, of course, urban and suburban people to a great extent must rely for their survival on the work of rural people on the land.

People trained in ecological studies are trained to see everything as interconnected. This could explain why Berry’s integrated ideas on education—educating the whole person—appeal to educators such as David W. Orr, who quotes Berry in his work, especially on ideas of design, or C.A. Bowers, who quotes Berry in his work as a voice for ecological conservatism as distinct from political conservatism. More to the point for Orr and Bowers probably is Berry’s unwavering defense of the earth and his



interest in how we might “live and work gracefully within our limits” (WI, 2005c, p. 84). That question becomes one of education because it is about skills and knowledge, the handing down of culture, and a criticism and improvement of that culture.

Orr and Bowers are not the only supporters of good causes who acknowledge the influence of Wendell Berry. Included in this list of thinkers and writers would be supporters of action against climate change, such as Bill McKibben and James Hansen; supporters of the Slow Food Movement, such as Alice Waters, Michael Pollan, and Eric Schlosser; supporters of good farming practices, such as Fred Kirschenmann, Wes Jackson, Vandana Shiva, Joel Salatin, and Gene Logsdon; and supporters of an end to mountaintop removal coal mining such as Terri Blandon, Silas House, and Eric Reese.

With so many good causes urgently calling, our present time perhaps is Berry’s time. With increasing concerns about ecology, food sources, energy, and community—the quality of life in general—perhaps higher education is finally ready to hear what Wendell Berry has been saying for five decades. Perhaps his time has finally come.

#### Why We Need Wendell Berry

I admit to having great admiration for the thinking of Wendell Berry. I think the world would be a better, kinder, healthier place if more people embraced Berry’s ideas and disciplines. As a result, this study makes no pretense at being dispassionate about its subject. My interest and partiality, however, do not invalidate the analysis or make its conclusions dishonest or untenable. I would support this claim by pointing to the consistency and internal integrity of Berry’s philosophy as it emerges from my analysis.

This study has been nearly undone—from the beginning and throughout the process—by two countervailing forces: the first, the desire to include everything relevant;

the second, the desire to exclude the obvious. The first has been my wish to live up to Berry's own standard of good work. The poem "Like Snow" (Lea, 2010b) expresses this standard, saying: "Suppose we did our work / like the snow, quietly, quietly, / leaving nothing out" (p. 3). Such a standard appeals to my own instincts, and from that point of view, everything seems relevant and interconnected and worthy of inclusion. With the second force, Berry's clear writing and commonsense reasoning can lull me into thinking his work and ideas are obvious and thus eligible for exclusion. Writing stalled for a time while I vacillated between what seemed indispensable and what seemed self-evident. Three things happened to me in March of 2012, however, to remind me how important—and apparently not widely understood—Berry's thinking is.

The first was a feature in *Time Magazine*, entitled "10 Ideas that Are Changing Your Life." While I suspect that Berry would find several of these ideas questionable if not repellent, it was the ninth one, "Nature is Over" (Walsh, March 12, 2012, pp. 82-85), that was most disturbing. The article on this idea takes an oddly triumphant tone to catalogue the scope and impact of human activities in leaving "a physical mark of our presence" (p. 84) on the earth. An atmospheric chemist is quoted as saying, "It's no longer us against 'Nature.' Instead, it's we who decide what nature is and what it will be" (p. 84), a staggeringly naïve statement to make in the wake of the Japan earthquake and tsunami, for example. The article takes on a quasi-ecological tone toward the end, noting the possibility of extinction, or a "flame out" (p. 85), for human beings, which perhaps is some sort of vague urging of caution in our decisions about nature.

Still, the article urges not caution, not stewardship, not humility, but technology and science and hubris on a planetary scale. It says the future will require "privileging

cities” (p. 85), as though cities are not currently privileged, “because dense urban developments turn out to be the most sustainable and efficient settlements on the planet” (p. 85), although the author fails to explain how the residents of these efficient and sustainable urban developments will eat. The article boasts of “our ability to comprehend the full extent of the human impact on earth” (p. 85), as though the concept of unintended consequences were unknown. Then the article says, “And if we prove unable to quickly reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, we may be required to consciously fiddle with the climate through geoengineering, using artificial clouds or other planetary-scale technology to reduce the earth’s temperature directly” (p. 85). It does not take much imagination to come up with a list of unintended global consequences. The author betrays his superstitious faith in science and technology, and his steadfast confidence in our ability to work error-free on a planetary scale, then dresses up the whole matter as inadvertent but perverse farce with the use of the flippant verb “fiddle with.” This was not a lampoon issue of *Time*. The article reminded me that the world needs Wendell Berry.

The second thing that happened in March 2012 to remind me that Berry’s thinking is not already evident was a lecture by a visiting scientist (Wold, 2012, March 8), on the impact of air pollution on heart health. He was a medical researcher, who explained that particulate matter in the air can affect people’s hearts, and that high smog alert days in Los Angeles, for example, correlate with increased instances of heart attack patients in emergency rooms. No surprise: It makes sense that pollution makes people sick. What surprised me was that in his hour-long talk he did not mention that reducing air pollution might be a solution to this health problem and others. Instead he ended his

talk with an explanation of further research into the use of antioxidants to improve the health of lab animals subjected to unhealthy levels of particulate matter in the air. Again, I was reminded that the world needs Wendell Berry.

The third thing that happened in March 2012 was an appearance by Terry McAuliffe (2012, March 9) on the television program *Morning Joe*. McAuliffe was on the show promoting GreenTech Automotive, an electric car company of which he is chairman. After talk about the car, McAuliffe, presumably a person interested in ecological issues, was asked about the Keystone Pipeline, the tar-sands oil pipeline proposed to run from the Montana-Canada border to the Gulf of Mexico. He answered:

If the map is drawn appropriately, where you don't have to go into these environmentally sensitive areas, we can do this....Put the pipeline where it won't cause any environmental issues...Let's do it where we'll get the oil but at the same time we're not affecting pristine environmental areas. (McAuliffe)

And this was accepted as an adequate answer. No one of the several guests and hosts on that television show asked, "What area is not environmentally sensitive?" or "Where would a pipeline break not cause any environmental issues?" or "Whose backyard do you want a tar-sand oil spill in?" The world needs Wendell Berry.

I mean no disrespect to the author of the article, the visiting scientist, Terry McAuliffe, or the people with *Morning Joe*. They are the products of our time and culture. They have been trained and educated to ignore natural limits, to think globally, to operate within the confines of a professional specialty, to put their faith in science and technology for solutions to problems created by science and technology, to think of rural areas not as fragile and irreplaceable landscapes and watersheds, and certainly not as

someone's home, but rather as resources for urban areas to exploit whenever they need food or water or energy or fiber or a labor force or a consumer market.

Really, the world needs Wendell Berry.

### The Approach of This Study

How to approach a body of work as large and varied as Wendell Berry's has been a challenge for this project from the beginning. A straightforward reporting of Berry's ideas as gleaned from his essays seemed all at once legitimate and inadequate. Such an approach would relay Berry's ideas to a reader with a certain order and allow that reader a kind of knowledge, but it would be a kind of knowledge—a way of knowing—that is incomplete and inconsistent with Berry's own thinking on how we know. In his essay "God, Science, and Imagination" (*IP*, 2010a), Berry criticizes the author of an essay, a scientist, for using "a language that presents belief as knowledge" (p. 179), just as a religious fundamentalist will do. Ironically, in his article, this particular "fundamentalist of science" (p. 179) is, in effect, evangelizing against the existence of God. Berry objects to a number of things about the essay, including the scientist's "abandonment of scientific rigor and methodology" (p. 179) and the scientist's "claim to know what cannot be known" (p. 180), such as, his claim that we know there is nothing after death.

Writes Berry, the scientist is typical of fundamentalists of any kind, who "all seek power—they seek victory, in fact—by abandoning the proprieties that permit us to seek and to honor what is true while acknowledging the limits of our ability to know" (p. 180). This provocative statement is central to any discussion of Berry's views on education, learning, and knowing. It poses two key questions: What are the proprieties that permit us to seek and to honor what is true, and what are the limits of our ability to know?

For Berry, knowledge cannot be understood or appreciated without first understanding and appreciating ignorance. Ignorance is a question both of propriety and limit. In his essay “People, Land, and Community” (*SBW*, 1983), he says, “The acquisition of knowledge always involves the revelation of ignorance—almost *is* the revelation of ignorance” (p. 65; italics original). One aspect of Berry’s idea of propriety in knowing is humility, which is connected to propriety of scale for Berry: “Propriety of scale is invariably associated with propriety of another kind: an understanding and acceptance of the human place in the order of Creation—a proper humility” (p. 71).

In that same essay, Berry asks the questions of propriety and limits differently, saying, “All our problems tend to gather under two questions about knowledge: Having the ability and desire to know, how and what should we learn? And, having learned, how and for what should we use what we know?” (p. 65). The second question suggests limits of time and space, since application has to be placed—it has to occur somewhere at some time. Once we begin using knowledge—applying it somewhere—other limits arise. For example, will what we are doing be good for this place? Do we know enough to judge the impact? Such questions lead to other issues of limits and propriety. Berry goes on:

If we want to know and cannot help knowing, then let us learn as fully and accurately as we decently can. But let us at the same time abandon our superstitious beliefs about knowledge: that it is ever sufficient; that it can of itself solve problems; that it is intrinsically good; that it can be used objectively or disinterestedly. (p. 66)

If our knowledge is always incomplete, then we have to base our decisions on more than just information. Berry asks, “What *can* inform our decisions?” His answer: love and

what he calls “those patterns of value and restraint, principle and expectation, memory, familiarity, and understanding that, inwardly, add up to *character* and, outwardly, to *culture*” (p. 67; italics original). “These patterns,” Berry writes, “constitute...a kind of knowledge that includes information, but is never the same as information” (p. 67). Berry is redefining knowledge and, in so doing, redefining intelligence:

To think better, to think like the best humans, we are probably going to have to learn again to judge a person’s intelligence, not by the ability to recite facts, but by the good order or harmoniousness of his or her surroundings. (p. 77)

In a mountain of facts, some facts will contradict other facts; some facts will obscure other facts. Facts are not enough, and Berry believes we have others ways of knowing, but those ways must also respect the way of ignorance.

#### *Ways of Knowing*

In his essay “The Way of Ignorance” (WI, 2005c), Berry develops a detailed taxonomy of both ignorance and knowledge. He identifies nine kinds of ignorance and ten kinds of knowledge. In so doing, he reveals much about what he sees as our incomplete understanding of both. The point is that Berry’s boundaries of legitimate knowledge are much broader than what has been accommodated by conventional modern education, and his taxonomies reveal both how tolerant conventional education is of different kinds of ignorance and how bereft it is of ways of knowing beyond empirical, provable knowledge. On the next page, Berry’s kinds of ignorance are listed and explained in Table 1, and his kinds of knowledge are listed and explained in Table 2.

When provable, empirical knowledge is valued exclusively, it not only eliminates all other ways of knowing from consideration, but also, oddly, it weakens what might be

Table 1: Wendell Berry's Kinds of Ignorance (*WI*, 2005c, pp. 54-56)

Kinds of Ignorance	Explanation
1. Inherent	We cannot know everything—natural limits on knowing
2. Willful	Deliberately ignoring anything that is known by means other than empirical proof
3. Moral	Deliberately ignoring moral conclusions—faith in objectivity as justification
4. Polymathic	Overestimating one's own knowledge; also called false confidence
5. Self-righteous	Failure to know one's self
6. Fearful	Deliberately ignoring what is strange, unpleasant or frightening
7. Lazy	Deliberately ignoring knowledge that might be difficult to learn
8. For-profit	Deliberately withholding knowledge from others to secure profit
9. For-power	Deliberately withholding knowledge from others to secure power

Table 2: Wendell Berry's Kinds of Knowledge (*WI*, 2005c, pp. 56-58)

Kinds of Knowledge	Explanation
1. Empirical or provable	“dead certainty or dead facts”; a “static, smallish knowledge” (p. 56).
2. Experience	Knowledge gained by experience. It is subject to “uncertainty and risk” (p. 56) because it is not an absolute predictor of what will happen.
3. Traditional	Common knowledge of a culture: “knowledge that has been remembered or recorded, handed down, pondered, corrected, practiced, and refined over a long time” (p. 57). Religious knowledge is related.
4. Inborn	Instinct.
5. Intuition	Recognition: “a way of knowing without proof” (p. 57).
6. Conscience	“the difference between right and wrong” (p. 57).
7. Inspiration	Berry admits this cannot be proven, but he cites Homer, Dante, and Milton as believers in it as a way of knowing. “Imagination, in the highest sense, is inspiration” (p. 57).
8. Sympathy & affection	Gained by imagination, it is “an intimate knowledge of other people and other creatures” (p. 57). Gets little notice, but Berry thinks it is of high value.
9. Bodily	“the difference between knowing how and being able” (p. 57) as revealed through physical activity, such as work, dance, or sports.
10. Counterfeit	Plausible falsehood.



close to objectivity by admitting no contrast or touchstone of equal standing. In his essay “Two Minds” (*CP*, 2003), Berry examines our understanding of knowledge in another way, setting up a contrast between what he calls the Rational Mind and the Sympathetic Mind. In modern culture with our professed reliance on reason, Berry says, “the dominant faith of the world...is in rationality” (p. 87). While Berry agrees that “we need to use our intelligence” (p. 87), he is more doubtful about what that means.

For the sake of analysis, he proposes that “there are two different kinds of human minds” (pp. 87-88), reminding himself and his readers that the terms are allegorical and nowhere operating purely. In brief, the Rational Mind is the mind of the modern age:

Objective, analytical, and empirical; it makes itself up only by considering facts; it pursues truth by experimentation; it is uncorrupted by preconception, received authority, religious belief, or feeling. Its ideal products are the proven fact, the accurate prediction, and the “informed decision.” It is, you might say, the official mind of science, industry, and government. (p. 88)

Berry writes, “Our schools exist mainly to educate and propagate and authorize the Rational Mind” (p. 88).

The Sympathetic Mind, on the other hand, is not unreasonable, but it wants to include “knowledge and reality [beyond] the scope of reason or factuality or experimentation” (p. 88). The Sympathetic Mind works by “making reason the servant of things it considers precedent and higher” (p. 88), such as affection or wholeness. The Rational Mind is “exclusive”; the Sympathetic Mind tries to be “inclusive” (p. 88). The Rational Mind fears “being misled,...being wrong. Its purpose is to exclude everything that cannot empirically or experimentally be proven to be a fact” (p. 88). The

Sympathetic Mind fears “the error of carelessness, of being unloving. Its purpose is to be considerate of whatever is present, to leave nothing out” (p. 88).

In making the contrast, Berry seeks to defend the Sympathetic Mind and its way of working, not deny the need for reason. The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity still matters, but to think that pure objectivity is possible is a delusion, and to value it to the exclusion of subjectivity is an insult to our humanity. Berry is “objecting to the exclusiveness of the Rational Mind” (p. 88), claiming that with such exclusiveness, the Rational Mind “has in effect withdrawn from all of human life that involves feeling, affection, familiarity, reverence, faith, and loyalty” (p. 88). Then he writes, “The separability of the Rational Mind is not only the dominant fiction but also the master superstition of the modern age” (pp. 88-89). What is clear to Berry is that this fiction of separability—this superstition—is propagated by the thinking of industrialism and reinforced by our system of education.

Once again, Berry’s point is that humans have many ways of knowing, and we should use them all. In particular, he sees value in the use of imagination, not as more valuable than other ways of knowing, but as equally valuable. In an interview in 2007, he said:

I take imagination very seriously....Imagination is a force that permits us to perceive in the largest possible terms the reality of a thing. It's the force that permits sympathy to take place. It's the force that permits care to take place. It is the force opposite to reductionism. (2007, Winter)

Imagination is how we get to sympathy and affection, which can change perception. He continued:

[Imagination] perceives that the life of any creature is larger than its life history or its category or classification or its commercial value or its utilitarian value. It permits you to see that the life of anything that lives is a miracle. (2007, Winter)

A changed perception can change action and behavior. Said Berry:

But if you see that the life of any creature has a reality that is perceivable only within limits, and is larger than any possible perception, then you change the way you treat that creature. In that sense, the use of imagination might have almost limitless economic consequences. Imagination permits us to see the immanence of the spirit and breath of God in the creation. That would require economic behavior that would be respectful. (2007, Winter)

Berry is asking that we move from sympathy to changed perception to changed action and behavior, and all by means of imagination.

Given Berry's conceptions of ignorance and knowledge, his skepticism of an exclusively rational view of the world, and the value he places on imagination, sympathy, and affection, the question I faced with this study was, What approach to the analysis of his philosophy of education would explain his ideas clearly and also reflect his complex view of ways of knowing? Further, given that most of what he says about education is woven through essays on other topics, how can those strands be effectively unified?

### *Finding My Toehold*

I had the opportunity to have a conversation with Wendell Berry in July 2011, and among the many things we talked about was his character Jack Beechum. Jack Beechum, especially as a young man, is problematic for me and different from the other main characters of Berry's fiction in the fact that I do not particularly like him though I sense I

am supposed to like him. So I asked Berry how Jack might have been different had he had a decent liberal arts education, how a liberal arts education might have helped Jack in his personal relationships. Berry's answer surprised me and made me examine some of my presuppositions about education in a new light (Berry's answer and its implications are analyzed in Chapter VII). But our exchange about Jack Beechum and my efforts afterward to write about it and make sense of what Berry had said led me to see that Berry's fiction is the approach to his work that would be most effective for me, not only because such an approach is suited to my academic background in literature and language, but also because it is consistent with Berry's understanding of ignorance, knowledge, and human ways of knowing. It allows a more complete telling, even while recognizing that knowledge is never complete. By using his fiction work as the organizing and thematic focus of the presentation of his philosophy, I hope to honor a way of knowing beyond objectivity and empiricism.

Though some of Berry's fiction has roots in real places, real people, and real events, he has said that his fiction writing "has required imagination, not factual memory" (2006/2007b, p. 189). As works of imagination, he is able to shape his stories into something approaching wholeness. As he explained in an interview:

The reason for writing what we call fiction seems to be the desire to tell a *whole* story. And to stick strictly to the truth, what we call nonfictional truth—to tell the story that really happened—is invariably to have an incomplete story. Nobody ever knows all the facts. Time passes, gaps come into memories, and so on. The impulse is an artistic one, the impulse toward wholeness. You may be dealing with your experience, with things that you remember, but they may come

scrambled, they may even come from different times in your experience, and you can put them into a story and give them a coherence that they don't have in factual reality. (2006/2007b, p. 188)

While Berry's essays explain his ideas, his fiction embodies those ideas and walks them around in the fictional Port William neighborhood, providing a fuller and more vivid experience of knowing than what is available through his essays alone.

Berry's fiction works as a dramatic enactment of the ideas he puts forth in his essays and interviews, revealing his philosophy in action. His characters go about their business, trying to take care of the earth and each other. How his characters behave creates a detailed and extensive portrait of Berry's views on the world: some characters are admirable or successful or worthy of imitation; some characters are destructive or exploitive or just damned foolish; some characters are in need of sympathy and understanding; some characters are in need of correction. And they are illustrative of Berry's thinking on issues of the human condition, including education.

Just as importantly but perhaps surprisingly for some, stories of small farmers trying to live in harmony with the land and each other should have resonance for all of us. Farmers of small farms live on a tenuous balance between economy and ecology—in a sense, between a short-term economy and a long-term economy. They need to produce enough to survive, but they also need to do it in a way that ensures survival next year and the next year and on and on. In this way, farmers serve as analogue to the challenges we all face, collectively and individually. Farmers are emblematic of the balance we need to maintain on earth, caught as we always are between economy and ecology.

Not only do readers of Berry's fiction engage their imaginations in the storytelling, they also engage their emotions in situations and issues that are personal for the characters and universal for all of us. As any good teacher knows, learning that engages both imagination and emotion can be very deep learning indeed.

The next chapter lays out the groundwork for understanding Berry's ideas as they relate to education. This will help to establish a context for the analysis of his fiction that follows in Chapters III through VII. Chapter III introduces Berry's fiction and the world of his fictional Port William. Chapter IV analyzes how higher education is viewed by Port William. Chapter V, VI, and VII present detailed analyses of three specific works of fiction. The final chapter examines possible implications and applications of Berry's ideas for higher education.

## CHAPTER II

### WENDELL BERRY: RADICAL THINKER

Fully appreciating Berry's thinking on education requires a background in his thinking on other issues, thinking that is often surprising, if not downright radical. Berry's poetry can serve as both counterpoint and validation for the ideas he presents in his essays and fiction and, as such, is a useful starting point. His poetry is the writing that is most profoundly personal for him. When asked at the Wisconsin Book Festival in 2009 what he was currently working on, he answered that he had "a schedule of dutiful work and much of it is of real interest," but he said that when he could he was "writing short stories because they ended quicker than novels, and now and then a poem for the joy of it" (2009, October 11). He writes poems for joy, but his poems also reveal his thinking—his angers, his delights, his desires, his judgments. The language is often more intense in his poetry, but his concepts and ideas are the same as in the rest of his work.

Several of Berry's poems present a persona known as the Mad Farmer. These poems are republished in a single volume entitled *The Mad Farmer Poems* (2008). Writer Ed McClanahan, Berry's friend and fellow Kentuckian, wrote the Foreword to the book. Among other things, McClanahan explains that the persona of the Mad Farmer is not "a one-for-one autobiographical iteration of the poet himself" (p. ix). Still, it is not hard to imagine that the Mad Farmer and Berry would have much to talk about. As Berry explains in the Author's note, "The joke of the Mad Farmer Poems is that in a society

gone insane with industrial greed & insecurity, a man exuberantly sane will appear to be ‘mad’” (2008, p. v), and “exuberantly sane” seems a fair description of Berry.

Such sanity in a time of madness is not always easily maintained. The poem “The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment” (*CM*, 1971/1973, pp. 21-22) includes these lines: “To be sane in a mad time / is bad for the brain, worse / for the heart” (lines 13-15). Indeed, this gets to the core of the motivation for much of Berry’s writing. As he says more straightforwardly in one of his Sabbath poems from *A Timbered Choir* (1998):

I would not have been a poet  
except that I have been in love  
alive in this mortal world,  
or an essayist except that I  
have been bewildered and afraid,  
or a storyteller had I not heard  
stories passing to me through the air,  
or a writer at all except  
I have been wakeful at night  
and words have come to me  
out of their deep caves  
needing to be remembered. (*TC*, p. 182)

Though published in 1998, the above poem was written in 1994, predating the 1997 interview where he explained his work (quoted in Chapter I above), but his point is the same: He is motivated by love, hope, and pleasure, and by his need to defend what is good. Such motivations in a time of modern rationality makes a person seem a bit mad.



Berry's apparent madness manifests itself often as countercultural thinking, but countercultural does not go far enough. He can be downright radical. Because of that, he is easily misunderstood. He gets accused of thinking some things that he does not think, and he thinks some things that are so surprising they may sound mad without appropriate context. The purpose of this chapter is to set the context necessary for the analysis of his fiction in Chapters III through VII. What follows is some groundwork for understanding Berry's philosophy, presented first as widely held misconceptions about Berry, then as some of his thinking that can be misinterpreted. Because of institutionalized education's influence in reinforcing modern culture and presuppositions, much of Berry's thinking challenges widely held and deeply ingrained ideas embraced by our school system.

#### What Wendell Berry Does Not Think

Part of the difficulty in understanding Berry's thinking on any subject is to avoid getting sidetracked by a misunderstanding of his foundational assumptions, some of which are too easily caricatured and lampooned or too readily dismissed as idealistic. His thinking is better thought of as aspirational rather than idealistic. "I know humans," he is quoted as saying in a 2012 article, "and greatly discomfort myself by expecting a lot from them" (Miller, 2012, July 28). He knows well that people fall short, but perhaps his training in traditional farming keeps a standard of excellence always in view, where quality is valued over quantity and perfection is always in mind as a possibility.

The idea of a standard of perfection for farmers seemed unexpected to me at first, given the many uncontrollable variables in farming, but it is consistent with the tradition of county and state fair competitions and exhibits honoring the quality of produce and livestock, as well as prepared foods and other arts of home economy. In the essay that

introduces the photographs of *Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy* (Hall & Berry, 2004), Berry writes of tobacco, “Nobody, I think, has ever produced a perfect crop. But for many years, for many generations in fact, perfection was the aim” (pp. 11-12). This is true not of tobacco only; Berry could as easily be writing about any farming crop or livestock lovingly raised. He goes on to write:

There is a kind of idealism that seems to be native to farming. Farmers begin every year with a vision of perfection. And every year, in the course of the seasons and the work, this vision is relentlessly whittled down to a real result—by human frailty and fallibility, by the mortality of creatures, by pests and diseases, by the weather. The crop year is a long struggle, ended invariably not by the desired perfection but by the need to accept something less than perfection as the best that could be done. (p. 12)

This is the attitude Berry brings to his life: He sees the ideal and even aspires toward it, yet he understands and accepts something less “as the best that could be done.”

Likewise, Berry’s respect for the past is often dismissed by detractors as sentimental or nostalgic. Familiar with the criticism, Berry said this in a 1997 interview: “One easy (and silly) way to dismiss my argument is to call it nostalgic” (1997/2007, pp. 120-121). He went on from there:

There are indeed things in the past that I look back upon with love. But I know that the past does not return. I have been a steadfast critic of the past and certainly of my own inheritance from the past. History demonstrates certain possibilities, both good and bad, that we had better not forget. But my argument will stand or fall by the validity of its concern for the preservation of necessary things. I’ve

tried to learn from the waste or destruction or ruin of some things that we might have inherited from the past, and that we need now. (1997/2007, p. 121)

In other words, all learning—all progress—is built on the past, so to study the past and offer a critique of the past is not nostalgic or sentimental. It is simply good sense.

When discussing how people might go about setting up a human community in a given place, for example, Berry notes that it is useful to study the efforts of people who have come before. In an interview from 1991, he said:

[Those hoping to establish a community] would have to remember what worked and didn't work in a given place. And then they would have to have an appropriate affection for the dead. By "appropriate" I mean they would have judgments to make and evaluations to make. They would have to be critics. But they would have to care about the people who preceded them. (1991/2007, p. 37)

Such inquiry is both more interesting and more fruitful when it is conducted within a context of knowledge of the past and with an attitude of affection and understanding.

Also, Berry's attitude toward technology is easy to misunderstand. He is a self-described Luddite, but he uses that term in its full meaning and its best sense. In "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community" (*SEFC*, 1992/1993), Berry describes Luddites this way: "These were people who dared to assert that there were needs and values that justly took precedence over industrialization; they were people who rejected the determinism of technological innovation and economic exploitation" (p. 130). The Luddites, according to Berry, "revolt[ed] not only against their own economic oppression but also against the poor quality of the machine work that had replaced them" (p. 130). What is fundamental to understanding Berry on Luddism is that the Luddites "asserted the precedence of

community needs over technological innovation and monetary profit” (p. 131). In other words, the standards of judgment that the Luddites used moved beyond mere efficiency or the wish to be up-to-date and included instead the needs and concerns of the community, within the context of that community. The question was not, “What will bring the greatest profit?” Rather the question was, “What will be best for our community?” with the question of profitability embedded within that question—along with many other questions about people and resources and culture and quality and more—with none having supremacy over the core question of community.

Current understanding of Luddism is shaded by modern thinking on technology and progress. The Luddites get caricatured as backward lunatics, standing in the way of progress, a progress the modern mind often understands as technological determinism. Berry gets caricatured in this way, accused of stubbornly refusing the benefits of technology. A recent blogger calls him a “mossback” (Eisiminger, 2011); another calls him a “technophobe” (Kelley, 2004). This accusation usually has to do with computers, owing to his essay, “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), published first in the *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, and then in *Harper’s*, where it attracted letters to the editor in protest and support, but mostly protest.

His original essay, along with some of the letters and his comments, is reprinted in the collection of essays, *What Are People For?* (1990/1998). So, yes, he invited the criticism of his position—three times. But his counter-criticism, developed fully in his essay “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), is that the criticism of him was not critical enough, in that it was “more feeling than intelligent” (p. 179), and that it was a form of “condemnation by category” (p. 179), without a full consideration of

the specific facts of his position or the broader implications of what he said. Further, according to Berry, the criticism of him as a result of his essay on computers oversimplified the question of computerization and other technology, as well as that of personal economy, in a way that is, as he explains it:

Fairly directly the results of the ongoing revolution of applied science known as “technological progress.” This revolution has provided the means by which both the productive and the consumptive capacities of people could be detached from household and community and made to serve other people’s purely economic ends. (*WPF*, pp. 185-186)

In “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” Berry goes on to consider more deeply humanity’s relationship with technology, as well as his own.

To me, perhaps the least interesting aspect of Wendell Berry is his disinterest in using a computer for his writing, yet it is the issue that seems to capture people’s attention. In an interview for *Seasons, The Magazine of Samford University* (2000a), he was asked if he had plans to upgrade from his practice of writing all his works longhand. His answer contains many of the elements of his argument against adopting unnecessary technology:

What do you mean by “upgrade”? There is no better way to put words in line—no way to make it easy. A computer is no better than a pencil. Or (I guess) vice versa. I use a pencil because it is cheap and quiet and portable. Also, I dislike paying money to computer companies for machines that become obsolete even before they break down. A pencil doesn’t become obsolete or break down; it has the decency simply to wear out. (2000a)

Further, he places his emphasis on quality in his writing, not on quantity. When colleagues tried to tell him that a computer would help him write faster, easier, and more, he had to ask and answer:

Do I, then, want to write faster, easier, and more? No. My standards are not speed, ease, and quantity. I have already left behind too much evidence that, writing with a pencil, I have written too fast, too easily, and too much. I would like to be a *better* writer, and for that I need help from other humans, not a machine. (*WPF*, 1990/1998; italics original)

With farming or writing or education—always with Berry it is about understanding the appropriate standards for the situation and being respectful of what the standards demand.

While Berry does reject technological determinism—or any form of determinism—he does not reject technology out of hand. In the essay, “Health Is Membership” (*ATC*, 1995), Berry writes, “I am not ‘against technology’ so much as I am for community. When the choice is between the health of a community and technological innovation, I choose the health of the community” (p. 90). He tries to be mindful of what he is taking on in his use of technology, rejecting what he does not need and limiting his use of what he does need or cannot free himself of. He says of himself:

I am, however, still in bondage to the automobile industry and the energy companies, which have nothing to recommend them except our dependence on them. I still fly on airplanes, which have nothing to recommend them but speed; they are inconvenient, uncomfortable, undependable, ugly, stinky, and scary. I still cut my wood with a chainsaw, which has nothing to recommend it but speed, and has all the faults of an airplane, except it does not fly. (*WPF*, 1990, p. 196)

As he notes, “I am a person of this century and am implicated in many practices that I regret” (p. 176). Neither does he claim to know how to extricate himself from “involvement in harmful technology” (p. 176). He does not claim to be a purist.

What he is calling for is awareness of the consequences of adopting technology, a modicum of sales resistance to the shiny and new and unnecessary, and restraint in the use of technology based not on what the technology is able to do, but rather on what is good for people, community, and the natural world. Reading from notes for a draft of an unpublished essay, Berry said the following about modern progress:

Criticism of scientific-industrial progress need not be balked by the question of how we would like dentistry without Novocain. Of course, there have been benefits. Of course, there have been advantages, at least to the advantaged. But valid criticism does not deal in wholesale condemnations. Valid criticism attempts a just description of our condition. It weighs advantages against disadvantages, gains against losses. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

Berry wants us to be intelligent about technological development and understand that whatever benefit there is in electricity, for example, it does not give us license to keep the lights on or to stay up all night and ignore our need for sleep. The power of electricity does not justify exploitation and permanent ruin with practices such as mountaintop removal coal mining. And the convenience of electricity in something like a freezer does not safely free us from an obligation to know how to produce and prepare food, nor does it turn gluttony and greed into virtues.

Since our culture tends to conflate technology with science, even yoking them now in the acronym STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), Berry’s views

on technology often earn him criticism as a science denier. This also is not true of Berry. Indeed, he would like to see science follow scientific principles more closely, and his criticism of science does not stop with his relationship with technology. He is wary of the pursuit of research, scientific or otherwise, without regard for the consequences and application of that research in the world. In *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he writes:

One used to hear a great deal about “pure science.” The universities, one was given to understand, were full of scientists who were disinterestedly pursuing truth. “Pure science” did not permit the scientist to ask so crude and pragmatic a question as *why* this or that truth was being pursued; it was just assumed, not only that to know the truth was good, but that, once the truth was discovered, it would somehow be *used* for good. This is a singularly naïve view of science. (p. 16; italics original)

Likewise, Berry is suspicious of the corrupting influence of corporate funding of research, saying, “The present conformity between science and the industrial economy is virtually required by the costliness of the favored kinds of scientific research and the consequent dependence of scientists on patronage” (p. 63). Neither pure science nor the potentially impure science of corporate sponsorship impresses Berry. Both are too apt to be pursued without affection or caution or awareness of consequence.

Berry is also critical of scientific research for what seems to him to be an exclusive focus on large-scale, expensive projects. He thinks this focus should be questioned, but he notes that there are no effective critics of science—not in government, not in academia either from the sciences or from the humanities, not from journalists, and only sometimes from scientists. Those scientists who do present “sound criticism of



science or of scientific abuses of science” (*LM*, p. 21), he believes, are marginalized as “dissidents or heretics” (p. 21), with their criticism ignored or unanswered, and little or no consideration given to losses to balance the gains. He writes:

In short, the scientific criticism of science is demonstrated, for instance, by science’s failure to attend to the possibility of small-scale or cheap or low-energy or ecologically benign technologies. Most applications of science to our problems result in large payments to large corporations and in damages to ecosystems and communities. These eventually will have to be subtracted (but not, if they can help it, by the inventors or manufacturers) from whatever has been gained. (p. 21)

This is a common complaint for Berry: That for most modern enterprises, the books are cooked to look only at the gains and externalize or deny the losses.

But for Berry, the necessary criticism of science should go beyond questioning scale or accounting. He writes, “The science involved has not been comprehensive or humble or self-critical or neighborly or publicly responsible. Mere self-interest obliges us to doubt the scientific faith that facts alone can assure the proper or safe use of facts” (*IP*, 2010, p. 182). This statement takes us back to Berry’s taxonomy of ignorance and knowledge presented in Chapter I, and Berry’s assertion that an exclusive dependence on empirical, provable knowledge is a kind of willful ignorance, excluding several ways of knowing, most notably sympathy and affection.

With this narrow understanding of knowledge, science compounds its own confusion, according to Berry, by often regarding itself as above criticism:

Modern science, as we have known it and as it has represented itself to us, has encouraged a healthy skepticism of everything but itself. But surely it implies no

disrespect for science if we regard it with the skepticism upon which it prides itself. (*IP*, p. 182)

As noted, Berry regards a valid criticism of science as “mere self-interest” (p. 182).

Just to be clear, Berry is not suggesting we eliminate scientific research or research in other disciplines either, as he plainly says in *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001):

I am not of course proposing an end to science and other intellectual disciplines, but rather a change of standards and goals. The standards of our behavior must be derived, not from the capability of technology, but from the nature of places and communities. We must shift the priority from production to local adaptation, from innovation to familiarity, from power to elegance, from costliness to thrift. We must learn to think about propriety in scale and design, as determined by human and ecological health. By such changes we might again make our work an answer to despair. (p. 12)

In other words, researchers—like everyone else—need to be answerable to the standard of health of the world and of local communities.

Berry’s most serious concern about science is the expectation of some people that eventually science will understand everything, that everything will one day be explainable by science. He describes how “legitimate faith in scientific methodology seems to veer off into a kind of religious faith in the power of science to know all things and solve all problems” (p. 19). In explanation, his book *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001) is his response to this presumption of supremacy on the part of science, specifically on the part of Edward O. Wilson in his book *Consilience*, a book that Berry says “reads as though it was written to confirm the popular belief that science is entirely good, that it

leads to unlimited progress and that it has (or will have) all the answers” (p. 24). He has even written elsewhere that part of his purpose in writing *Life Is a Miracle* “was to try to put science in its place” (*CP*, 2003, p. 188). He writes, “It offends and frightens me that some people now evidently believe that the long human conversation about life will sooner or later be conducted exclusively by scientists” (p. 188).

In that vein, Berry is unwilling to cede to science the territory of mystery, something that he thinks is more appropriately explored through religion and art. He claims that Wilson’s materialism drives him to regard mystery as “attributable entirely to human ignorance, and thereby appropriates it for the future of human science” (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 27). According to Berry, with something we do not know, Wilson says scientists “do not know it *yet*” (p. 36; italics original). In so doing, says Berry:

[Wilson] forthrightly appropriates mystery as future knowledge. It takes possession of life and the future of life in the names of its would-be explainers—and, it follows, of its would-be exploiters. As soon as a mystery is scheduled for solution, it is no longer a mystery; it is a problem. The most tyrannic of all reductions has thus been accomplished; a self-aggrandizing science has thus asserted its “proprietary sense of the future.” (p. 36)

If we do not recognize mystery, says Berry, then we do not confront mystery or reverence mystery, and then we will not learn from mystery.

Berry says Wilson goes beyond the “bounds of science” when he denies mystery and religious faith (p. 28). Still Berry is clear on the separation of science and religion:

Religion...should not attempt to dispute what science has actually proved; and science should not claim to know what it does not know, it should not confuse

theory and knowledge, and it should disavow any claim on what is empirically unknowable. (p. 98).

Those who would have science claim all knowledge—known, unknown, and future—as its own are unable to see that some knowledge is beyond the scope of empirical proof. Says Berry, “To define knowledge as merely empirical is to limit one’s ability to know; it enfeebles one’s ability to feel and think” (p. 103). So Berry does not deny science, but neither will he allow himself to be subsumed by it.

The last thing that needs to be addressed in the category of things Berry does not think is Berry’s position on tobacco, not only because the topic is emotionally charged, but also because Berry’s thinking on the topic is misunderstood. He writes with great affection about tobacco in “The Problem of Tobacco” (*SEFC*, 1992/1993):

I was born in tobacco country, into a family preoccupied with the cultivation, the economy, and the politics of tobacco. Many of my closest and dearest friends have been and are tobacco growers. I have worked in the crop from early childhood until now. I have liked and often enjoyed the work. I love the crop in all its stages. I think tobacco is a beautiful plant. I love the lore and the conversation of tobacco growing. I love the smell of tobacco and of tobacco smoke. (pp. 53-54)

But that is not the whole story.

First, while Berry has helped raise and harvest tobacco on the farms of friends and family, he and his wife have never raised tobacco on their farm. Also, Berry himself quit smoking at age thirty, after smoking for sixteen years (p. 57), at a time when smoking was still ubiquitous in this country, when professors smoked in classrooms and patients

smoked in hospitals. Berry explains that he has had many conversations with people who were indignant over any defense of tobacco, conversations that “are always fragmentary because of the great complexity of the subject” (p. 57). In an imagined dialogue with a questioner, Berry details his position.

His position is to defend tobacco farmers, and he cites the tobacco program as a model to use for other crops. Tobacco was a crop central to the culture and economy of north-central Kentucky. It provided in the mid-to-late twentieth century a reliable income for farmers. This was due in large part to the tobacco program, which “limited production in order to control price” (pp. 54-55), helping to ensure a decent return for farmers without requiring them to overplant or otherwise exhaust their land. According to Berry, tobacco is especially suited to hilly country because “it...permitted significant income to be realized from small acreages” (p. 56) and because “it...conformed well to the pattern of livestock farming” (p. 56). Much of the farmland of central Kentucky cannot be safely or responsibly plowed or planted in row crops. Tobacco, at least under the tobacco program, was a crop that encouraged good care of the land in a way that the politics and economics of other crops do not.

In Berry’s youth, most of the farmers in the area grew more than tobacco, in a diversified crop management. Tobacco was their cash crop, along with livestock and easily sold commodities such as butter and eggs. Much of the rest of what was produced on the farm was for the good of the family or the farm itself. Also the way tobacco was grown in those days, it was a labor-intensive crop, requiring lots of handwork at several stages of the process. When work needed to be done, it was an all-hands-on-deck situation, subject to the peril of weather. Also the nature of the work allowed for children

and conversation: Because the machinery used was minimal, children could play a role, giving them an opportunity to learn, and the work was quiet, allowing conversation.

Also, because of the urgencies of time at planting and harvest, people often worked together, “swapping work” (p. 55), helping with the hardest labors. This made tobacco “a very sociable crop” (p. 55). According to Berry, “Harvesting a crop of tobacco is hard, hot, dirty, itchy, exhausting work, using up long days in August and September” (Hall & Berry, 2004, p. 2). And, he goes on, “It is crew work. In a job so demanding, one needs both the help and the company of other people” (p. 2). Hugely valuable, demanding to grow, and “astonishingly delicate” (p. 11), it is not surprising that a whole culture developed around tobacco. Says Berry, “Virtually everybody [in the community] was passionately interested in the quality of [that] local product” (*SEFC*, 1992/1993, p. 54), with a broad acknowledgement of the artistry and high standards involved in the crop. “In those days, to be recognized as a ‘tobacco man’ was to be accorded an honor such as other cultures bestowed on the finest hunters or warriors or poets” (p. 54). Tobacco was king in that part of Kentucky.

Berry’s defense of tobacco farming is really a defense of the land and people he loves, land that lends itself well to tobacco farming in a mix of other crops and people mostly born into a tobacco culture before it became a health issue. His defense, too, asks us to think with nuance and with due attention to complexity, and not with sweeping condemnation. He asks us to think through the consequences of policy that affords no leeway between survival and failure, and accepts the failure of farmers without regard to the impact on land use or farming communities. He asks us to consider tobacco within the context of other poisons and harmful practices accepted as routine or necessary in our

culture. He asks us to consider tobacco within the context of other addictions accepted as routine or necessary in our culture, such as “speed, comfort, violence, usury” (p. 58) and, of course, cheap energy. He asks us also to consider, in the face of moral outrage over tobacco farming, a moral responsibility to help tobacco farmers transition to other crops that would make possible economic stability and careful land use, both of which will help ensure “the establishment of a competent, long-lasting, soil-husbanding community on the land” (pp. 61-62). For those of us interested in eating, that is a good idea.

The point is that Berry continues to defend the concept of the tobacco program not because he is on the wrong side of a simple moral issue but because he understands the complexity and sees the tobacco program as an example of policy that served the farmers, and as a model of what could be done in other farm policy. He continues to write about tobacco farming in his fiction because to do otherwise would be to falsify his storytelling. More importantly, he continues to write about tobacco in both essays and fiction because he wants the story told. He writes out of affection.

#### What Wendell Berry Does Think

In spite of his reputation as a Luddite, Berry can be thought of, in an odd sort of way, as cutting-edge in his thinking, even prescient with some of his concerns. For example, in 1987 when he wrote his essay about not buying a computer, computer ownership in this country probably amounted to 12% of households (data available for 1984=8.2% and for 1989=15.0), according to United State Census data (United States Census Bureau). Viewed in that way, it is not remarkable that he said he would not get one; what is remarkable is that he had thought about it at all. Likewise, while mayors and first ladies have now become concerned about obesity and related health issues, Berry

was writing about the declining state of our physical health in *The Unsettling of America*, first published in 1977 (p. 108). In the middle of tobacco country, thick with personal history of tobacco farming, he quit smoking when he was thirty, about the time the Surgeon General's 1964 report on smoking and health was released (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and certainly in a period where cigarette manufacturers were still trying to market smoking as healthful. Further Berry has been writing about the dangers of economic inequality and corporate size and power for years, cautioning in 1991, "We are increasingly making this a nation of peace, security, and freedom for the rich" (*SEFC*, 1992/1993, pp. 73-74). In the early 1990s, he voiced what seem now like very current concerns about government overreach, including "spy[ing] on its citizens" (p. xvi). Finally, Berry's worries about the quality, safety, and availability of our food supply predate by decades such thinkers and writers about food as Mark Bittman, Michael Pollan, and Eric Schlosser.

While Berry often advocates positions that seem backward, his thinking can be deceptively forward-looking. His thinking is complex and integrated, based on what he sees as basic truths about nature and human nature. It is also often contrary to ideas that modern culture accepts without question. To understand and appreciate Berry's thinking on education, it has to be viewed and understood within a broader context of his thinking on a number of other topics, including our definitions of heroism and modern progress, as detailed in the next two sections.

### *The Heroism of Ordinary Life*

Something that becomes very clear very fast with a study of Wendell Berry is his concern for topsoil. Topsoil to him, of course, is not just dirt. It is life and hope. It is the



past and the future. It is art and science, theology and mystery, worry and comfort, teacher and spouse. It is our joy and our responsibility. As he says in *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), “The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope” (p. 14). This respect for the land and careful use of the land is so fundamental to Berry—like his insistence on health as our standard—that when he writes about land use and farming practices, some of his passages of careful prose seem to carry the soundtrack of triumphant horns. He can sound downright heroic, and our culture loves its heroes. Berry, however, would caution us against our love of heroes. The work of caring for the earth and the care of each other too calls not for the heroes of quests and daring deeds, but for people who will be faithful to right disciplines every day. These are the unheroic, the heroes of ordinary life.

The essay “The Gift of Good Land” (*GGL*, 1981) can help clarify these conflicted ideas about heroism. In the essay, Berry gives a complex and nuanced examination of how Biblical instruction and the Judeo-Christian tradition have influenced our views on our “ecological and agricultural responsibility” (p. 267). In short, he wants “to see if there is not at least implicit in the Judeo-Christian heritage a doctrine such as that the Buddhists call ‘right livelihood’ or ‘right occupation’” (p. 267). This is one of several essays over the years (e.g., “The Burden of the Gospels,” “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” and “God and Country”) in which Berry challenges organized religion—especially Christianity—for its failures to urge better care of the earth. If the earth is God’s gift to humankind, a gift undeserved but necessary for our survival, then what are we to do? He says, “If ‘the earth is the Lord’s’ and we are His stewards, then obviously

some livelihoods are ‘right’ and some are not” (p. 275). Some ways of living are right and some are not. Berry outlines examples—from the Bible and literature—that instruct us, but he says the Judeo-Christian tradition can fail to guide us to right livelihood because it “does not provide us with a precise enough understanding of the commonplace issues of livelihood” (p. 276). We are misled, particularly since the industrial revolution.

According to Berry, there are two reasons from the Judeo-Christian tradition for this imprecise understanding. The first is the tendency of religious traditions that have a belief in an afterlife to venerate that afterlife with an equal disdain for this life. Berry says that this sort of fervor for the next life tends toward a dualistic divide between Heaven and earth, soul and body, spiritual and material, and mind and heart. These become damagingly competitive polarities, where the half of the divide associated with Heaven becomes elevated, and the half associated with earth becomes diminished and debased.

During a question and answer session on October 20, 2007 at a convocation entitled *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, Berry explained it this way:

When you set up a dualism of that kind you inevitably are going to rank one over the other. And in our culture, you’ll put the so-called spiritual over the top of the material. Then that kind of dualism can attract among the unreligious or the irreligious a perfect parallel in the predominance of mind over body, or thought over matter, which gives rise to this idea of conquering the material world. (2007, October 20)

This kind of thinking is an ongoing frustration for Berry, who sees this devaluing of the physical as contributing to our abuse of the earth. In the essay, “Health Is Membership” (ATC, 1995), he writes, “This dualism inevitably reduces physical reality, and it does so

by removing its mystery from it, by dividing it absolutely from what dualistic thinkers have understood as spiritual or mental reality” (p. 93). However comfortingly comprehensible dualistic thinking may be, it is reductive. Berry believes it oversimplifies and exaggerates, and diminishes both sides in its reduction.

According to Berry, the industrial revolution extended these contrasts to include the divide between mechanical and organic. In a contortion of logic of modern thinking, the mechanical takes precedence, further devaluing the organic. Not only does this lead to the metaphor of the body as a machine, says Berry, but it also confuses any discussion that might help to clarify or elevate the tasks, skills, and routines of ordinary life.

The second reason for an imprecise “understanding of the commonplace issues of livelihood” is that the Bible—but also the art and literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition—“is so strongly heroic” (*GGL*, 1981, p. 276). The stories of this tradition focus on “extraordinary actions” (p. 276), actions that, according to Berry, are “unique in grandeur, such as may occur only once in the history of the world” (p. 276). Such stories have their role and can even be “instructive and inspiring to ordinary people in ordinary life” (p. 277), but as examples of ordinary behavior, they fail. “Ordinary behavior belongs to a different dramatic mode,” says Berry, “a different understanding of action, even a different understanding of virtue” (p. 276).

The virtues of heroic drama include physical and moral courage, especially in extreme circumstances. The virtues of ordinary behavior include courage and skill, but, as Berry notes, require something different:

Because ordinary behavior lasts so much longer than heroic action, it raises in a more complex and difficult way the issue of perseverance. It may, in some ways,

be easier to be Samson than to be a good husband or wife day after day for fifty years. (p. 277)

This difference between what is required for heroic deeds and what is required for ordinary life means that the drama of heroism fails to provide useful inspiration or example in two vital areas of daily life: “the issue of life-long devotion and perseverance in unheroic tasks, and the issue of good workmanship or ‘right livelihood’” (p. 277).

Berry argues that until the industrial revolution, the yeoman or peasant or artisan classes “did the work of feeding and clothing and housing ...and were responsible for the necessary skills, disciplines, and restraints” (p. 277). They were numerous enough and necessary enough to exert influence: “As long as those earth-keeping classes and their traditions were strong, there was at least the hope that the world would be well used” (p. 277). The industrial revolution decreased the number of people involved in such work and removed more and more people from a close relationship with the earth, making people more and more susceptible to both a kind of hatred of this world and a longing for life on a heroic scale. Further, according to Berry, the industrial revolution created a contempt for skills that can be completed by machines. Further, when the quality of the machine work is inferior to what can be done by people, that contempt becomes contempt for quality. What becomes prized instead is speed or cheapness or convenience, and quality and workmanship get shoved to the side. In effect, quantity outranks quality.

Interestingly, what this kind of industrial heroism leads to, says Berry, is the modern outside expert, and he says, Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* is our best example:

This is a hero who instigates and influences the actions of others, but does not act himself. His heroism is of the mind only—escaped as far as possible, not only

from divine rule, from its place in the order of creation or the Chain of Being, but also from the influence of material creation. (p. 278)

Berry's complaint about outside experts extends as well to educational consultants who do not teach, agricultural advisors who do not farm, or any outside experts who have no practical experience with what they are advising and nothing at stake in the advice.

For Berry, the two evils of industrial heroism are "hubris and abstraction" (p. 278), an apt description of the typical academic expert, credentialed to the point of hubris and placeless to the point of abstraction. Says Berry, hubris is "the great ecological sin, just as it is the great sin of politics" (p. 270). Hubris performs on an ever-grander scale and leads to "results that one can neither foresee nor control" (p. 278). That is, hubris marches past limits without noticing them. The inherent problem with abstraction is that it does not—it cannot—love particularly; it loves quantities. Berry allows that "without some use of abstraction, thought is incoherent or unintelligible, perhaps unthinkable," but he continues, "abstraction alone is merely dead" (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 136). For him, abstraction ignores questions of application in particular places for particular people: "Application is the most important work, but also the most modest, complex, difficult, and long—and so it goes against the grain of industrial heroism" (*GGL*, 1981, p. 280). This combination of hubris and abstraction is bound to cause damage and do it on a massive scale. This is why Berry is so skeptical of the outside expert.

The essay, "The Gift of Good Land" includes a description of something Berry writes admiringly of in his essays and portrays with affection in his fictional characters:

To use knowledge and tools in a particular place with good long-term results is not heroic. It is not a grand action visible for a long distance or a long time. It is a

small action, but more complex and difficult, more skillful and responsible, more whole and enduring, than most grand actions. (pp. 280-281)

Returning to a more theological tone at the end of the essay, Berry reaffirms the right livelihood of careful, thoughtful stewardship:

That is not to suggest that we can live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want. (p. 281)

In short, Berry says, “We must not use the world as though we created it ourselves” (p. 270). Even without the theological overtones, this is an attitude of responsible sense.

Berry’s advocacy for what could be called unheroism or the heroism of ordinary life certainly puts him at odds with modern culture. Many of our modern attitudes and expectations spring whole or in part from our longing for heroism, individually and collectively. From the definition of progress right through to the attendant attitudes, Berry thinks we should readjust our thinking to something more consonant with nature.

### *Redefining Progress*

Consistent with his unheroism or heroism of ordinary life, Berry’s expectations and definition of progress depart from that of modern culture. Influenced by the thinking of the industrial age and reinforced by our schools, modern America’s notion of progress boils down to more and bigger. Berry’s notion of progress is simply better. It is not a changing of the ways and the time, but rather a *perfecting* of the ways and the time.

Berry examines in some depth what he refers to as modern culture's "doctrine of progress" (*CH*, 1970/2003, p. 133) in "Discipline and Hope." In part seven of that essay, a section entitled "The Road and the Wheel," Berry draws a distinction between "two fundamentally opposed views of the nature of human life and experience in the world" (p. 133). According to Berry, the first view—the road—"holds that though natural processes may be cyclic, there is within nature a human domain the processes of which are linear" (p. 133). The second view—the wheel—is much older, and "holds that human life is subject to the same cyclic patterns as all other life" (p. 133).

The modern world's understanding of progress is linear, like the road. Says Berry, it "represents man as having moved across the oceans and the continents and into space on a course that is ultimately logical and that will finally bring him to a man-made paradise" (p. 133). The cyclic view is more like "a circular dance in which certain basic *and necessary* patterns are repeated endlessly" (p. 133; italics original). This is Berry's understanding of progress: processes in basic and necessary patterns—the wheel with whatever improvements might be managed from what we can learn from past experience.

The contradiction between these two views, according to Berry, is because the linear view is "partial" and the cyclic view is "complete" (p. 133). The cyclic view is reflective of the cycles of nature, "rising and falling, taking and giving back, living and dying" (p. 137). What makes the linear view incomplete is its focus on "the rising phase of the cycle—on production, possession, life. It provides for no returns" (p. 137). The best example for Berry is the fossil fuel industry, which is "not a cycle, but only a short arc between an empty hole and poisoned air" (*GGL*, 1981, p. 117). More generally, he says, "Because industrial cycles are never complete—because there is no return—there

are two characteristic results of industrial enterprise: exhaustion and contamination” (p. 117). The cyclic view sees the cycle as birth-growth-maturity-death-decay and back to birth again, while in the linear view, human endeavor is simply growth-growth-growth, looking “fixedly straight ahead” (*CH*, 1970/2003, p. 136). This is not to say that the linear view is unaware of downturns in the human condition, but Berry explains it this way: “The doctrine of progress suggests that the fluctuations of human fortune are a series of ups and downs in a road tending generally upward toward the earthly paradise” (p. 134). As optimistic as the linear view is, it is not consistent with nature and not respectful of basic natural processes. “The linear vision,” writes Berry, “flourishes in ignorance or contempt of the processes on which it depends. In the face of these processes our concepts and mechanisms are so unrealistic, so *impractical*, as to have the nature of fantasy” (p. 137; italics original). *Fantasy* is an unexpected word choice here because often the disciples of progress and the linear view think of themselves as realists.

The consequences of a linear view of human life are often destructive. First, the view is crassly utilitarian, verging on an ends-justify-the-means mindset. Berry writes, “Characteristic of the linear vision is the idea that anything is justifiable only insofar as it is immediately and obviously good for something else” (p. 134). The requirement that the effect be immediate and obvious oversimplifies the linear view, making it heedless of what is lost. “The linear vision,” writes Berry, “tends to look upon everything as a cause, and to require that it proceed directly and immediately and obviously to its effect” (p. 134). This expectation leads to a reductive shift of value or worth to price, based on metrics that are both obvious and short-term. “Once we accept so specific a notion of utility,” he writes, “all life becomes subservient to its use; its value is drained into its use”



(p. 135). Specifically, the value or worth comes down to money—“for if it can only be good for something else then obviously it can only be *worth* something else” (pp. 134-135). The bottom-line accounting fails to consider losses, and it ignores the value there is in something for its own sake or the less immediate, less obvious value it might hold.

The second consequence of a linear view is that in only looking forward, in only recognizing life and growth but not death or decay, the linear view “provides for no returns” (p. 137). This creates the concept of waste, making it expected and accepted. Of course, the cyclic view produces what the modern mind thinks of as waste, but because everything is part of a cyclical system, it is not thought of or treated as waste, but instead kept in the system or returned. Organic matter that in the cyclic view is returned to the land for decay and fertilization becomes waste and pollution in the linear view.

Once we embrace the possibility of waste, then waste becomes acceptable in other ways too, such as the built-in obsolescence of products or the abandonment of thrift. If waste is acceptable and expected in the name of efficiency, then it is also acceptable and expected to ignore questions of appropriate scale. For example, the linear view of progress sees large confinement animal farms as efficient, where fuel is wasted to bring feed to animals that, in a properly scaled farm, could walk to the pasture, and where huge concentrations of animal waste become pollution to be disposed of instead of fertility to be returned to the soil. A watershed wastes into a sewage system, and chemical fertilizers are required at great expense to rebuild the soil fertility lost into the watershed.

If waste is acceptable and expected, then, writes Berry, “this implies a profound contempt for correct discipline; it proposes, in the giddy faith of prodigals, that there can be production without fertility, abundance without thrift. We take and do not give back

and that causes waste” (pp. 137-138). While the cyclic view presses toward quality and renewal, the linear view presses toward quantity and newness. A corollary is the linear view’s lack of “regard or respect for death” (p. 136) and heroic talk of finding a cure for death. The cyclic view sees “death as an integral and indispensable part of life” (p. 136). Death is defeat in the linear view; death is part of a natural process in the cyclic view.

Additionally, the linear view has changed our vision of history, a consequence that affects modern education, as explained below. If we are always looking forward and always expecting growth, then we see “history as always leading not to renewal but to the new” (p. 141). So the modern view of progress becomes enthralled with technology, change, and innovation, and wonders about what the future will be like. Writes Berry:

[The linear view] assumes a condition of *absolute* change: The future will be *entirely* different from the past and the present, we think, because our vision of history and experience has not taught us to imagine persistence or recurrence or renewal. We disregard the necessary persistence of ancient needs and obligations, patterns and cycles, and assume that the human condition is entirely determined by human *devices*. (p. 141; italics original)

From this comes the “science will save us” excuse for neglect or abuse—thinking that says damage is all right because someone will invent something to fix it later. The cyclic view, writes Berry, is “more accepting of mystery and more humble” (p. 135), knowing some things may never be explained. The cyclic view is more likely to tread softly in the ecosphere, recognizing that if we cannot know “the whole pattern of interdependence” (p. 135), then we need “the greatest possible care in the use of the world” (p. 135). Damage to the earth is permanent, and permanent damage is never acceptable.

The modern mindset's nearly superstitious faith in science and technology—what Berry refers to as “this glib and shallow optimism of gimcrackery” (p. 144)—can make us blind to losses or penalties. Writes Berry, “The ameliorations of technology are largely illusory. They are always accompanied by penalties that are equal and opposite” (pp. 143-144), including loss of necessary, low-tech skills and disciplines and a refusal to acknowledge that even in “the push-button Eden of the future” (p. 143), we will still need food, we will still need to clean up, and we will still need to do the work of “building and maintenance and reclamation” (p. 143)—what Berry calls “fundamental work, much of it handwork, that is necessary to life” (p. 143). He believes that in the future, “the ‘quality of life’ will not depend nearly so much on the distribution of push-buttons as on the manner and the quality of that fundamental and endlessly necessary work” (p. 143). And an increased reliance on technology contributes to a loss of the skills of necessary work.

From an educational perspective, the linear view's utilitarian notion that the worth of something has to tie directly to an obvious and immediate effect creates a stultifying identity relationship, equating tuition costs with the earning potential of a degree or major. Says Berry, “Education becomes training as soon as we demand, in this spirit, that it serve some immediate purpose and that it be worth a predetermined amount” (p. 135). Overturning this simplified cost-benefit analysis for education, of course, is not a license to charge more for tuition under the premise that education is invaluable. Berry's views on the cost of higher education are examined in Chapter VIII.

Worse as it pertains to education is that the linear view, according to Berry, sees humanity “as moving through time . . . , discarding old experience as [it] encounters new” (p. 133). The cyclic view understands that knowledge and wisdom build on the past and

that the past must be remembered, in part because it is bound to come around again. What Berry calls “the failure to see any pattern in experience, the failure to transform experience into useful memory” (p. 142) makes the concept of education impossible to consider. According to Berry, all discipline fails in such a circumstance, and the disciplines of either education or training become useless. Says Berry:

When the new is assumed to be a constant, discipline fails, for discipline is preparation, and the new cannot be prepared for; it cannot, in any very meaningful way, be expected. Here again we come upon one of the reasons for the generational disconnections that afflict us [the so-called “generation gap” of the 1960s and early 1970s]: all times, we assume, are different; we therefore have nothing to learn from our elders, nothing to teach our children. Civilization is thus reduced to a sequence of last-minute improvisations, desperately building today out of the wreckage of yesterday. (p. 141)

Such a view of history and civilization is antithetical to Berry’s philosophy of education.

By contrast, education in the cyclic view *depends* on the knowledge of the past, it depends on the disciplines or skills, honed and perfected over time, and the need to pass those disciplines along to the young. Writes Berry, “Learning the correct and complete disciplines—the disciplines that take account of death as well as life, decay as well as growth, return as well as production—is an indispensable form of cultural generosity” (p. 140). More than cultural generosity, it is an indispensable form of cultural survival.

*Not a Scold*

Berry wraps up “The Road and the Wheel” with this paragraph, calling for the patience and vision of the cyclic view over the linear view if we are to survive and thrive:

We cannot look for happiness to any technological paradise or to any New Earth of outer space, but only to the world as it is, and as we have made it. The only life we may hope to live is here. It seems likely that if we are to reach the earthly paradise at all, we will reach it only when we have ceased to strive and hurry so to get there. There is no “there.” We can only wait here, where we are, in the world, obedient to its processes, patient in its taking away, faithful to its returns. And as much as we may know, and all that we deserve, of earthly paradise will come to us. (pp. 144-145)

This last paragraph may sound like the puritanical scoldings of a killjoy—as though Berry believes that we do not deserve paradise and must toil in a sad, earthly imitation of paradise until, after years of suffering, we finally die. But that is a tragic misreading of Berry. Instead he is suggesting that embracing the cyclic view and acknowledging and abiding by the natural processes of the world is how we find satisfaction and paradise.

Far from being a scold, Berry is a man who savors his earthly pleasures, who delights in the world, who loves his life. Indeed, his poetry reveals a man so in love with this world that he draws but small distinction between earth and heaven, often pairing them. For example, his poem “The Farm” contains this passage from a description of the first sight of a good farm: “...The possibility / Of human life whose terms / Are Heaven’s and this earth’s...” (*TC*, 1998, p. 136). Or this, from the same volume: “Hate has no world. / The people of hate must try / to possess the world of love, / for it is the only world; / it is Heaven and Earth...” (p. 170). In the poem “The River Bridged and Forgotten,” he presents heaven and earth as one, joined as music: “It takes for pattern the heavenly / and earthly song of which / it is a part...” (*Whe*, 1982, p. 40). Likewise, in a Sabbath

poem from 2007, he advises, "... Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground / underfoot" (*Lea*, 2010b, p. 92), as though heaven comes out of the earth. Berry states this idea in prose in his essay, "The Eternal Moment and the Ground Underfoot" (2011), from his collection of essays on the poetry of William Carlos Williams: "What we know of Paradise we learn here, by looking, by vision, by imagination" (p. 148).

Sometimes too earth and heaven blur in his poetry, as in a poem about watching a rainstorm and remembering loved ones who have died. The poem ends with this:

...And you think then  
(for thought will come) of the strangeness  
of the thought of Heaven, for now  
you have imagined yourself there,  
remembering with longing this  
happiness, this rain. Sometimes here  
we are there, and there is no death. (*TC*, 1998, p. 201)

Also in the poem "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer," Berry writes:

What I know of spirit is astir  
in the world. The god I have always expected  
to appear at the woods' edge, beckoning,  
I have always expected to be  
a great relisher of the world, its good  
grown immortal in his mind" (*FHB*, 1967/1970, p. 63)

This image suggests that in his imagination, the deity is in this world, and is "a great relisher" of its goodness.

In his poem, "Testament," Berry suggests that even were he to make it to heaven, he will be angling to come back to this world:

...Why settle  
For some know-it-all's despair  
When the dead may dance to the fiddle  
Hereafter, for all anybody knows?  
And remember that the Heavenly soil  
Need not be too rich to please  
One who was happy in Port Royal.  
I may be already heading back,  
A new and better man, toward  
That town. The thought's unreasonable,  
But so is life, thank the Lord!" (*CM*, p. 41).

This is not the language or the attitude of someone resigned to struggle and suffering in this life. But neither is it the addled optimism of someone who expects that technology will set us free of the natural processes of this world or that we can safely ignore those processes or forget the past. This is the language of someone deeply in love with the world as it is, or it could be if it were conserved with proper care.

#### *Attitudes of Modern Progress*

Perhaps most damaging about the modern definition of progress are the attitudes that attend it, because attitudes turn into actions. These attitudes of modern progress include competition, ambition, and defiance of limits, and our educational system reinforces, rewards, and celebrates these attitudes. It is understandable: Good teachers

want their students to do well, to achieve, to dream big. These natural good wishes for students, however, get corrupted by the expectations of the modern definition of progress.

Also there is something vaguely un-American about asserting that competition could be a bad thing. Capitalism, free markets, democracy, and freedom—doubtfully understood and oversimplified as they all are—have become conflated with competition in the modern American mind so that we seem to accept competition as an absolute good without much thought or analysis, and somehow it becomes our patriotic duty to support the idea of competition. Berry takes a different view, preferring cooperation to competition. In his essay, “The Total Economy” (*CP*, 2003), he explains competition, especially in the realm of economics, this way:

The “law of competition” does *not* imply that many competitors will compete indefinitely. The law of competition is a simple paradox: Competition destroys competition. The law of competition implies that many competitors, competing on the “free market” without restraint, will ultimately and inevitably reduce the number of competitors to one. The law of competition, in short, is the law of war.  
(p. 68; italics original)

Whatever good is supposed to come from competition is undone by the destructiveness of the logic of competition. A community is better served by cooperation, by neighborliness, by the law of membership, where the fondest hope is excellence from everyone.

Likewise, as it is reduced and simplified within the modern definition of progress, ambition can be a destructive force. When ambition is not about excellence, it becomes too closely related to the worst of competition. One way to measure aspirational success is by comparison to others and by the judgments made about relative winners and losers



in such comparisons. Ambition is also measured by “more,” which gets it tangled up with greed, and “better than,” which gets it tangled up with pride and envy.

Related to competition and ambition, modern culture’s denial of limits seems a direct outcome of a linear, industrial view of the world. Berry’s thinking about limits, on the other hand, springs from his experience farming, an experience that he understands but also feels, in the strain of his own muscles, in the pull of his team of horses, and in the touch and life of his soil. “Agrarian farmers see, accept, and live within their limits,” he writes in “The Agrarian Standard” (*CP*, 2003), drawing a distinction between agrarian and industrial farmers. Agrarian farmers “understand and agree to the proposition that there is ‘this much and no more’” (p. 149). Industrial thinking holds “that abundance comes from the violation of limits by personal mobility, extractive machinery, long-distance transport, and scientific or technological breakthroughs” (p. 149). As discussed in Chapter I and earlier in this chapter, many of Berry’s misgivings about technology and his criticisms of science are related to what he considers a dangerous disregard of limits. Maintaining an agrarian standard, then, is about more than how to farm; it is about how to live, and whether the world is viewed as a gift to be used conservingly or as a resource to be exploited. It is also about work that is scaled to our abilities and intelligence.

Berry asserts that modern industrial culture’s disregard of limits makes people careless of scale. But we are all subject to nature’s processes and limits, and he writes, “Nature is necessarily party to all our enterprises and ...she imposes conditions of her own” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 202). This is from, “Word and Flesh,” which began as a 1989 commencement address for the College of the Atlantic, months after the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill. In the essay, Berry reminds us that nature has the last word when it says:

If you put the fates of whole communities or cities or regions or ecosystems at risk in single ships or factories or power plants, then I will furnish the drunk or the fool or the imbecile who will make the necessary small mistake. (p. 203)

In other words, we have to be careful, and we have to be aware of what is at risk. In 2010, in response to a question about the Gulf of Mexico oil spill that spring, Berry told an audience in Arlington, Virginia, “We’re getting the scale wrong. We’re putting too much at stake” (2010, May 4). In the twenty-one years between Exxon Valdez and the BP oil disaster, we learned little about limits.

The stakes are too high and the risks too great in part because we do not know enough—our knowledge is too limited—to manage the work well. In the preface to his collection of essays entitled *The Way of Ignorance* (2005c), Berry explains the provocative title, saying he does not “intend to recommend ignorance or praise it” (p. ix). Neither is a recognition of human ignorance an excuse not to learn. He says:

We have no excuse for not learning all we can. Within limits, we can learn and think; we can read, hear, and see; we can remember. We don’t have to live in a world defined by professional and political gibberish. (p. ix)

But some ignorance will always remain—“we are never going to be free of mortality, partiality, fallibility, and error” (p. ix), says Berry. We work always from several kinds of ignorance—“a part of our creaturely definition” (p. ix)—so we need to be mindful of what we do not know, we need to be humble, and we need to be careful.

Berry writes, “The way of ignorance, therefore, is to be careful, to know the limits and the efficacy of our knowledge. It is to be humble and to work on an appropriate scale” (pp. ix-x). Then as he says toward the end of *The Unsettling of America*

(1977/1996), “The world has room for many people who are content to live as humans, but only for a relative few intent upon living as giants or as gods” (p. 222). This idea is echoed years later in his essay, “Faustian Economics” (WM, 2010c), where Berry reminds us that “limitlessness is a godly trait” (p. 42). He does not mean that it is something that people should aspire to, but rather that it is something reserved for a god, not a human. People have limits and one of those limits deals with propriety of scale.

As far as Berry is concerned, the bigger-is-better view of modern industrialism urges us in the wrong direction. In *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), he writes:

Much as we long for infinities of power and duration, we have no evidence that these lie within our reach, much less within our responsibility. It is more likely that we will have either to live within our limits, within the human definition, or not live at all. And certainly the knowledge of these limits and of how to live within them is the most comely and graceful knowledge that we have, the most healing and the most whole. (p. 94).

Further, he reminds us, “We can make ourselves whole only by accepting our partiality, by living within our limits, by being human—not by trying to be gods” (p. 95). For Berry, the question of limits is also an aesthetic concern. In *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he urges us to “reduce our tolerance for ugliness” (p. 136) and to think about “the limits—of scale, speed, and probably expense as well—beyond which human work is bound to be ugly” (p. 136). Efficiency does not always lead to beauty, nor does standardization or expanding scale. For Berry, this is the paradox the modern mind struggles with: The more we seek limitlessness, the more limited our thinking has to be, while the more we accept our limits, the more we are free to explore the limitless possibilities within those limits.

Berry examines the idea of limits in “Two Minds” (*CP*, 2003), within the context of a comparison of different ways of thinking. What Berry refers to as the Rational Mind tends toward “defin[ing] the problem as a big problem calling for a big solution” (p. 90). It is “scornful of limits and proud of its usurpations” (p. 90), while the Sympathetic Mind “is occupied precisely with the study of limits, both natural and human” (p. 90). The Rational Mind works toward “bigness and centralization” (p. 99), but the Sympathetic Mind “understands itself as limited” (p. 100). The Rational Mind wants buildings ever taller; the Sympathetic Mind “knows from experience—not with the brain only, but with the body—that danger increases with height, temperature, speed, and power” (p. 100). The Rational Mind is about justice, which too readily turns into revenge; the Sympathetic Mind is about mercy, knowing “even justice is intolerable without mercy, forgiveness, and love” (p. 103). Here is the paradox of the Rational Mind and the Sympathetic Mind:

The human mind must accept the limits of sympathy, which paradoxically will enlarge it beyond the limits of rationality, but nevertheless will limit it. It must find its freedom and its satisfaction by working within its limits, on a scale much smaller than the Rational Mind will easily accept, for the Rational Mind continually longs to extend its limits by technology. But the safe competence of human work extends no further, ever, than our ability to think and love at the same time. (p. 104)

Good human work—work done well—requires a scale that allows sympathy.

The parable of the Lost Sheep is instructive here. Berry says that in that parable, the Rational Mind would stay with the ninety-nine because, to it, all sheep are the same and accounting is on the side of the ninety-nine. The Sympathetic Mind as embodied in

the good shepherd would go after the lost one because “he knows or imagines what it is to be lost” (p. 93), because “he loves the sheep” (p. 93), and because “he understands his work as the fulfillment of his whole trust” (p. 93)—“he has committed himself to the care of the whole hundred” (p. 93). The Rational Mind gets in a trap: If each time a sheep goes missing, the Rational Mind stays with the flock, the lost one merely the cost of doing business, then in time, there will be only one sheep left. The Sympathetic Mind fails if the flock expands beyond the good shepherd’s ability to think and love at the same time. The Rational Mind fails because it thinks its way out of valuing love on the job.

The point is that modern culture—and by extension and reflection our educational system—revels in talk of limitless potential, limitless possibilities, heroic undertakings, bootstrap pulling, and rugged individualism—all concepts that can be inspiring and motivating in their way, but also all concepts that push us toward work that can be beyond our competence and toward ideas that press toward delusion, the sort of muddled thinking that makes students believe they can be whatever they want to be without doing the necessary preparation. In this way, such thinking can undermine and disrupt the disciplines and patience required for good work, for the heroism of ordinary life.

#### *The So-Called Economy*

Combine heroism, competition, ambition, and a defiance of limits and what is created is the modern industrial economy. Berry writes frequently about economic issues, and often he uses the modifier “so-called” to signal, not so subtly, his disapproval of the economy: for example, “so-called free enterprise” (*HE*, 1987, 186), “the so-called free market” (*HE*, 1987, p. 165), and “so-called economic development” (*WI*, 2005c, p. 72). His objections to the so-called economy are numerous and nuanced, but in a way those

objections come down to the fact that the modern industrial economy refuses to acknowledge that a healthy economy is based on nature, with a recognition of the limits and demands of nature. “Our economy,” he says, “has become an anti-economy, a financial system without a sound economic basis and without economic virtues” (WM, 2010c, p. 5). In short, Berry thinks our economic priorities are upside down.

#### *Authentic Economy vs. Anti-Economy*

In “Money Versus Goods” (WM, 2010c), Berry says the ordering of the economy should be “nature first, the economies of land use second, the manufacturing economy third, and the consumer economy fourth” (p. 3). Whether he calls them land-use, land-based, or land economies, he thinks of these as “the fundamental economies” (Berry & Jackson, 2012), second in priority to nature, but ahead of either the manufacturing or consumer economy. Following what agricultural scientist Sir Albert Howard called “the law of return” (1947/2006, p. 31), Berry thinks such an ordering would ensure that “what is taken from nature must be given back” (WM, 2010c, p. 3), maintaining the fertility cycle in rotation, not with artificial chemicals but through natural processes.

Says Berry, “The primary value in this economy would be the capacity of the natural and cultural systems to renew themselves” (p. 3). Such an economy based on renewable resources—what he calls “an authentic economy” (p. 3)—requires “resources of culture that also must be kept renewable: accurate local memory, truthful accounting, continuous maintenance, un-wastefulness, and a democratic distribution of now-rare practical arts and skills” (p. 4). Virtues in an authentic economy for Berry are “honesty, thrift, care, good work, generosity, and (since this is a creaturely and human, not a mechanical, economy) imagination, from which we have compassion” (p. 4). An

authentic economy starts “with the subsistence or household economy” (p. 4). It would enable people to “provide to themselves and to others the things necessary to support life: goods coming from nature and human work. It would distinguish between needs and mere wants, and it would grant a firm precedence to needs” (p. 4). It “would designate certain things as priceless” (p. 4), not “extremely rare and expensive things” (p. 4), as we do now, but things of “absolute value[, such as] fertile land, clean water and air, ecological health, and the capacity of nature to renew herself in the economic landscapes” (p. 4). Furthermore, what cannot be renewed must be conserved and reused or recycled.

By contrast, our “anti-economy” is a consumer economy, inverting the order of the authentic economy, making vices into virtues. “Spending is not an economic virtue,” writes Berry. “Miserliness is not an economic virtue either. Saving is. Not-wasting is” (p. 5). The anti-economy is in thrall to industrialism and the modern definition of progress. The authentic economy is cooperative and strives to allow power to stay with individuals, but the anti-economy is competitive, with power tending to consolidate in fewer and fewer big corporations. The authentic economy is placed and conserving of local nature, wealth, and talent; the anti-economy is colonial and extractive of the nature, wealth, and talent of wherever it considers a colony. The authentic economy is pleased to be local, personal, and long-term; the anti-economy, as Berry characterizes it, wants to be global, anonymous, and short-term, on the make for a quick killing. The authentic economy seeks to fill local needs locally; the anti-economy searches the world for the lowest costs for production and the highest prices for selling, with huge expenditures in transportation costs. The authentic economy is land-based and economic in a way that concerns itself with real needs of households and communities; the anti-economy is money-based and

financial in a way that wonders “what the economy needs” (WM, 2010c, p. 6). The authentic economy is specific and real, and the anti-economy is abstract and theoretical.

The consequences, as Berry sees them, of our anti-economy or industrial economy are clear and predictable:

If we pursue limitless “growth” now, we impose ever-narrower limits on the future. If we put spending first, we put solvency last. If we put wants first, we put needs last. If we put consumption first, we put health last. If we put money first, we put food last. If for some spurious reason such as “economic growth” or “economic recovery,” we put people and their comfort first, before nature and the land-based economies, then nature sooner or later will put people last. (p. 9)

The ecological effect of the anti-economy on agriculture is stated by Berry this way:

“Under the rule of industrialism the land is forced to produce but is not maintained; the fertility cycle is broken; soil nutrients become water pollutants; toxic chemicals and fossil energy replace human work” (p. 15). This same dynamic applies to forestry.

The economic effect on farmers is just as devastating. “Since the middle of the last century,” says Berry, “we have deliberately depressed farm income while allowing production costs to rise, for the sake of ‘cheap food’ and to favor agribusiness” (p. 17).

The effect is that the non-farming population has become so separated from nature that some seem to believe money can produce food. By making it socially unattractive and economically unfeasible for farm-raised youth to return to farming, we are disrupting the orderly handing down of the specific wisdom and art by which food is produced.

Berry has an answer too to those who will insist that we are now in an information-based economy:



All human economy is still land-based. To the extent that we must eat and drink and be clothed, sheltered, and warmed, we live from the land. The idea that we have now progressed from a land-based economy to an economy based on information is a fantasy. (*WI*, 2005, p. 114)

Also, because information needs to be applied specifically and with an intelligence that is placed and locally informed, even our information needs to be land-based.

Issues of the land-based economy seem to be the least understood and the least considered elements of the economy. Again from “Money Versus Goods” (*WM*, 2010c):

As for the land economies, the academic and political economists seem mainly to ignore them. For years, as I have read articles on the economy, I have waited in vain for the author to ‘factor in’ farming or ranching or forestry. (p. 7)

Instead the industrial economy asserts itself as not only the only economy, but also the ultimate standard. In his essay, “A Defense of the Family Farm” (*HE*, 1987), Berry says:

That this so-called economy can be used as a universal standard can only mean that it is itself without standards. Industrial economists cannot measure the economy by the health of nature, for they regard nature as simply a source of “raw materials.” They cannot measure it by the health of people, for they regard people as “labor” (that is, as tools or machine parts) or as “consumers.” They can measure the health of the economy only in sums of money. Here we come to the heart of the matter—the absolute divorce that the industrial economy has achieved between itself and all ideals and standards outside itself. (p.169)

This misses for Berry the real point of economy. “Economy is keeping house,” he said at Duke Divinity School conference in 2007. “Economy is living together. Economy is how

you do or don't justify people in their work. Economy is seeing to it that people can answer their vocation," and "A real economy would be a local economy. And it would be interested in seeing how necessities are met and answered. And one of the needs is for people to answer their calling" (Duke Divinity, "On Membership").

It is important to note that Berry is not suggesting that those in the temperate zone give up coffee or bananas, or that we should be expected to do without rubber, for example. He is saying that producing and purchasing locally strengthens local economies and communities, and he is saying that more diversified crop production is better for the land and more consistent with how nature works. Finally, he is saying that economic forces trending toward globalization are working against local economies.

#### *Local Economy Means Better Care*

This idea of meeting necessities as close to home as possible is central to Berry. This is not to say that everyone needs to live on a farm or that cities have no value or necessity. He says plainly, "we will need towns or cities, places of economic and cultural exchange" (*CP*, 2003, p. 35). But he also knows the waste inherent in transportation costs, and he knows the economic waste when people produce a product and have no chance to add value before turning it over to the modern economy. As discussed in Chapter I, this economic relationship tends to extract the wealth of rural areas in the same way that imperial powers extract the wealth from their colonies.

Berry examines the dynamics of this sort of colonial economy in the essay "Conserving Forest Communities" (*ATC*, 1995):

With few exceptions our country people, generation after generation, have been providers of cheap fuels and raw materials to be used or manufactured in other

places and to the profit of other people. They have added no value to what they have produced, and they have gone onto the markets without protection. (p. 32)

Here, Berry is suggesting that small local production facilities—whether bakeries or slaughterhouses or saw mills or furniture factories—would add value closer to where things are first produced, retaining more of the economic power and strengthening local economies and communities. Further, such production and finishing practices would keep things on a manageable scale, which tends to reduce waste (in an accounting system that does not falsely externalize expenses and losses) and improve quality.

For Berry, the folly of transporting raw materials elsewhere rather than using them locally or take part in the finishing locally is compounded by the oversimplified accounting of the industrial economy and the way power is separated from source in a colonial relationship:

The fault of a colonial economy is that it is dishonest; it misrepresents reality. In practice, it is simply a way of keeping costs off the books of an exploitive interest. The exploitive interest is absent from the countryside exactly as if the countryside were a foreign colony. The result of this separation is that the true costs of production are not paid by the exploitive interest but only suffered by the exploited land and people. (*HE*, 1987, p. 186)

Additionally, Berry reminds us of the questionable practice of economic forces that lead to having our fundamental goods produced in other countries: “‘Outsourcing’ the manufacture of frivolities is at least partly frivolous; outsourcing the manufacture of necessities is entirely foolish” (*WM*, 2010c, p. 7). More than foolish, it is potentially a threat to our security and wellbeing, especially when the necessity is food.

A point needs to be clarified to appreciate fully Berry's thinking on economics: Berry straddles the traditional divide between the conservationists, who conventionally focus on the preservation of wilderness, and the people who make their living from the economic landscape and rural communities. In "Conservationist and Agrarian" (*CP*, 2003), Berry refers to this divide as "the dualism of domestic and wild" (p. 166), and notes that such dualism is "mostly false, and it is misleading" (p. 166). As "a conservationist and a farmer, a wilderness advocate and an agrarian" (p. 165), he says this about himself:

I am in favor of the world's wildness, not only because I like it, but also because I think it is necessary to the world's life and to our own. For the same reason, I want to preserve the natural health and integrity of the world's economic landscapes, which is to say that I want the world's farmers, ranchers, and foresters to live in stable, locally adapted, resource-preserving communities, and I want them to thrive. (p. 165)

With his perspective as a farmer of a small farm, Berry knows the balance that needs to be maintained between economy and ecology. Neither can be ignored.

The problem, as Berry sees it, is that both sides of the divide have assumed "a safe disconnection between economy and ecology, between human domesticity and the wild world" (p. 174) where such disconnection does not and cannot exist. According to Berry, "The question we must deal with is not whether the domestic and the wild are separate or can be separated; it is how, in the human economy, their indissoluble and necessary connection can be properly maintained" (p. 166). And as always for Berry, the standard needs to be health, as he explains in "Money Versus Goods" (*WM*, 2010c):

From now on, if we would like to continue here, our use of our land will have to be ruled by the principles of stewardship and thrift, using as the one indispensable measure, not monetary profit or industrial efficiency or professional success, but ecological health. (p. 27).

It is a damaging error to allow decisions about land to be made according to the standards of the industrial economy only.

But, of course, that is what is happening. According to Berry, while the sides of the domestic and the wild “have been in conflict” (*CP*, 2003, p. 166) with each other, a third side—“that of the land-exploiting corporations” (p. 165)—is, in effect, defeating all three sides, eventually even itself, because its “wealth is illusory” (p. 165), according to Berry, “based, finally, not on the resources of nature, which it is recklessly destroying, but on fantasy” (p. 165). Further, Berry writes this:

The third side is asserting its power as never before: by its control of politics, of public education, and of the news media; by its dominance of science; and by biotechnology, which it is commercializing with unprecedented haste and aggression in order to control totally the world’s land-using economies and its food supply. (p. 165)

Berry’s point is that both conservationists and people working the land have to learn that they have the same goals and that those goals are in opposition to those of the third side.

For example, a good farmer, says Berry, is a conservationist (p. 170). Along with what they produce, good farmers “conserve soil, they conserve water, they conserve wildlife, they conserve open space, they conserve scenery” (p. 170). But a good farmer also knows that wilderness provides a model and standard for the farm. Likewise, if

conservationists want to eat, they will have to support farmers and good farming practices. But also wilderness is best preserved by preserving the domestic landscape because, as Berry writes elsewhere, “if we do not have an economy capable of valuing in particular terms the durable goods of localities and communities, then we are not going to be able to preserve anything” (*HE*, 1987, p. 143)—including wilderness. Finally, nothing of nature is conserved effectively by people who do not care about it. Berry knows this:

To put the bounty and the health of our land, our only commonwealth, into the hands of people who do not live on it and share its fate will always be an error.

For whatever determines the fortune of the land determines also the fortune of the people. (*ATC*, 1995, p. 33)

People living on the land have to pay attention, think, and be aware of the shared fate. And people not living on the land—they need all of that, plus a good imagination, as examined in Chapter I.

Thinking, awareness, analysis, imagination—these are all skills and disciplines of thought commonly associated with education. One would think that schools could help students develop such skills and disciplines. But, as discussed in Chapter I, it seems much more likely that students from rural areas will be taught to be embarrassed by their homes and to yearn for escape and students from urban areas will be taught to think of rural areas as colonial territory made to serve their needs. Loving our place, protecting our place, and seeing beyond our place—these are the lessons that schools need to teach.

### *Sabbath of Time and Place*

As discussed above, one of the more difficult concepts for free-market industrialists to accept is the idea that observing limits might have positive results, that

there might be benefit in limiting production or limiting work. Berry likes to tell about an Amish friend whose father had an “inflexible rule that there would never be a horse harnessed on that place after supper” (Duke Divinity, 2007, “The Land”). Berry went on to explain the significance: “If you don’t have a horse harnessed after supper, you’re not going to work after supper. If you don’t work after you’ve finished your chores, then there’s the whole world to be enjoyed.” The concept of Sabbath is the same—a time for rest and reflection. To observe a Sabbath of time—whether a day or a time of day—is to recognize that there is a limit to the time that should be spent at work.

Similarly, some farmers hold to a practice of keeping a Sabbath of place—reserving places on their farms that are not worked, sometimes because they are unsuited to being plowed, sometimes because they are too beautiful, sometimes simply because the farm needs margins. In describing such places on farms, unproductive and useless by some standards, Berry says, “These places function, I think, whether we intend them to or not, as sacred groves—places we respect and leave alone, not because we understand well what goes on there, but because we do not” (*HE*, 1987, p. 17). Then too in *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), he writes, speaking of farms in land naturally wooded, “The farm must yield a place to the forest, not as a wood lot, or even as a necessary agricultural principle, but as a sacred grove—a place where the Creation is let alone, to serve as instruction, example, refuge” (p. 131). In another landscape, the sacred grove might be a sacred prairie, but the concept is the same.

As foreign as a Sabbath of time might be to industrialism, a sacred grove might be even more difficult to accept. Sacred groves have no place in the fencerow-to-fencerow farming encouraged by agribusiness. They are understandable only by affection.

*The Economics and Politics of Food*

As noted in Chapter I, food is something we all have in common, but while food unifies us, it also divides us. More and more, we are divided now between producers and consumers, between preparers and consumers. Most consumers have little or no personal connection to where food comes from or how it is grown, and with restaurants and prepackaged foods, most consumers have a decreasing connection to food preparation. Indeed, cooking has become not one of the arts and disciplines of daily life, but instead a spectator sport, where we watch celebrity chefs on cable television while eating take-out.

Our culture's disconnection from food production often manifests itself in disregard for farmland and farmers. In 1979, Wendell Berry was arrested. It is the only time he has been arrested, though he has invited it with protests and civil disobedience since. But in 1979, he and eighty-eight other people protested the building of a nuclear power plant on the Ohio River near Madison, Indiana, and they were arrested for the crime of trespassing on the power company's land. Afterward, Berry wrote about the incident in "The Reactor and the Garden" (*GGL*, 1981). Among other things, the essay is a meditation on public protest and group actions, neither of which Berry personally likes. "Public protests are incomplete actions;" he writes, "they speak to the problem, not to the solution" (p. 165). He continues, "Protests are incomplete, I think, because they are by definition negative. You cannot protest *for* anything" (p. 165; italics original). His other misgiving about public protest is the recognition that to some extent the protesters are what they protest. That day, unless they walked to the plant site from a home with no electricity, the protesters—including Berry—were all complicit in the wrong they were protesting. This is part of the moral dilemma that is often unrecognized in ecological



issues. Since we have to use the world, how can we use it well? Self-righteousness does not seem to advance the discussion.

Berry sets up a contrast, then, between a nuclear reactor and a garden. A nuclear plant stands for excessive use and the myth of limitless power and need. A garden stands for sufficiency and satisfaction with enough. He recommends planting a garden as a form of private protest that stands in favor of the ecosphere, and he reminds us, “It is futile to attempt to correct a public wrong without correcting the sources of that wrong in yourself” (p. 170). A garden is a real, complete action in that correcting. Berry explains what he means by a complete action: “an action which one takes on one’s own behalf, which is particular and complex, real not symbolic, which one can both accomplish on one’s own and take full responsibility for” (p. 167). Then he notes of gardening, “The best kind of gardening...is a *complete* action. It is so effective a protest because it is so much more than a protest” (p. 167; italics original). A nuclear power plant is meant as a solution to the problem of energy need, but it is, according to Berry, a solution that causes more problems, including nuclear waste disposal. “A garden...,” says Berry, “is a solution that leads to other solutions. It is a part of the limitless pattern of good health and good sense” (p. 170). And it is humble, which always recommends itself to Berry.

In his essay “Think Little” (*CH*, 1970/2003) some years earlier, Berry explains the many benefits of gardening and the solutions it includes:

A person...growing a garden, if he is growing it organically, is improving a piece of the world. He is producing something to eat, which makes him somewhat independent of the grocery business, but he is also enlarging, for himself, the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating. The food he grows will be fresher,

more nutritious, less contaminated by poisons and preservatives and dyes than what he can buy at a store. He is reducing the trash problem; a garden is not a disposable container, and it will digest and reuse its own wastes. If he enjoys working in his garden, then he is less dependent on an automobile or a merchant for his pleasure. He is involving himself directly in the work of feeding people.

(p. 79)

As if that were not enough, working in a garden provides physical activity. This boost for the body is matched with a boost for the spirit. Says Berry, “A garden gives the body the dignity of working in its own support” (*GGL*, 1981, p. 168). It is this complex dynamic of benefits that supports Berry’s notion of gardening as demonstration for the ecosphere.

Possibly what Berry appreciates most about a garden is what can be learned from it. His poem “A Speech to the Garden Club of America” (*Lea*, 2010b, pp. 22-23) includes these lines: “Let us enlighten, then, our earthly burdens / By going back to school, this time in gardens” (lines 21-22). By reconnecting a gardener to the processes of nature, gardening helps prevent us from becoming industrial eaters. “Eating is an agricultural act” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 145), as Berry likes to remind us. As he says, “The industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land” (p. 146). Writes Berry, this makes an industrial eater “necessarily passive and uncritical—in short, a victim” (p. 146). Even something as simple as growing potted herbs on a windowsill reconnects a person with the food economy, and more importantly, with the mysteries of nature.

In “The Pleasures of Eating” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry explores the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of food. The politics of food is connected to freedom for Berry, who

says in the same way that “we cannot be free if our minds and voices are controlled by someone else[,]...we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else” (p. 147). Aesthetically, industrial eaters have surrendered quality and presentation: “our kitchens and other eating places more and more resemble filling stations” (p. 147). The food industry relies on obliviousness from consumers, according to Berry, for if consumers are paying attention they might object to farming patterned on factories—monocultures requiring use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides, huge confinement animal farms requiring prophylactic use of antibiotics, a practice of specialization that destroys the natural pattern of a farm and violates the law of return, turning what should be recovered fertility into pollution. In addition to the waste and excess of the food industry, disconnecting consumers from the production and preparation of food has the effect of devaluing those arts and skills. Growing or preparing one’s own food can be made to seem backward when compared with the convenience and modern science of steam-in bags and microwaveable packaging or the glamour and ease of going out to eat.

We have to counter our obliviousness with conscious attention and awareness of what the pleasures of eating can be, and says Berry, “A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes” (p. 151). Eating “with understanding and with gratitude” requires knowing where food comes from, what people have done the work, and what artistry and skills have been involved in the production and preparation. Berry sums up this complex involvement:

Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our

gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend. (p. 152)

To recognize mystery, to be aware of “powers we cannot comprehend”—this does not happen in obliviousness. We need to “Eat responsibly” (p. 145), as Berry says.

Modern agriculture has exacerbated this obliviousness. For example, in a farming culture that includes work swapping among family and neighbors, as was the practice for generations in Berry’s part of Kentucky and elsewhere, the companion practice is the communal preparation of noon meals for the work crew. Workers would be fed at the farm where they were working that day, sharing a meal usually prepared by the mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters, with food almost exclusively raised on area farms. The effect of eating food prepared by one’s own work or that of one’s neighbors can be profound, as Berry explains in an interview in 2011: “Living from your own place, eating food from your own place, makes you one flesh, so to speak, with that place. You are made of your place” (2011, January 21). An awareness of this deep connection to the land translates to better care of that land. Modern culture and modern agricultural practices have disrupted this connection by the changing labor force in farming. With smaller families and larger farms, American agriculture has come to rely on temporary workers whose connection to the land is the abstraction of pay. They work under an industrial model, not an agrarian model. They are not particular and familiar to the landowner, but anonymous and alien. Bonds of affections become harder to establish and maintain. It is a change that is demonstrated in the disappearance of these communal meals.

American agriculture’s dependence on temporary workers adds another ethical dimension to food that Berry asks us to consider, noting that some of the worst rural

poverty is among these workers who are also frequently marginalized in many ways. In an interview for *Sojourners* (2004/2007), Berry says this about temporary farm workers:

They have no permanent jobs, so they have no equity in the places where they work. They're not shareholders, let alone entrepreneurs. They're not small farmers, they're not market gardeners, they're just temporary—uprooted, isolated, easily exploitable people. (2004/2007, p. 169)

Harvest meals for these workers are taken at filling stations, not at the table of friends or family. Poor, vulnerable, and disconnected from the land they work—it is a situation that is not good for the workers, and it is not good for the land. That we can take this for granted—that we can tell ourselves that such a situation is necessary and acceptable—is a measure of the hold modern industrial thinking has on our way of viewing the world.

#### *The Mechanization of Creation*

The modern relationship with the physical world is usually through an intercessor. When we work or play outside, mechanism or technology keeps us safely separate from nature, even if the technology is as common as a concrete sidewalk. Since the industrial revolution, machines and technology have modified, standardized, sanitized, tranquilized, trivialized, institutionalized, and commercialized the way we interact with nature.

One result is a lost sense of proper scale, as discussed above. We judge scale by the possibility of the technology, not by the propriety of nature. Additionally, we have reduced to mechanical terms how we think of the world and each other. Writes Berry, “It may turn out that the most powerful and the most destructive change of modern times has been a change in language: the rise of the image, or metaphor, of the machine” (*GGL*, 1981, p. 113). In *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he makes clear the remedy:

We should banish from our speech and writing any use of the word “machine” as an explanation or definition of anything that is not a machine. Our understanding of creatures and our use of them are *not* improved by calling them machines. (p. 135)

In “Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems” (*GGL*, 1981), Berry notes that until the industrial revolution, “the dominant images [in culture] were organic: they had to do with living things; they were biological, pastoral, agricultural, or familial” (p. 113). To compare the mind to a computer or employees to interchangeable parts is to allow our thinking to be guided by “this extremely reductive metaphor” (p. 114). The result is to judge by standards meant for machines: “Work is judged almost exclusively now by its ‘efficiency,’ which, as used, is a mechanical standard, or by its profitability, which is our only trusted index of mechanical efficiency” (p. 114). This is to see the world in a narrow and lifeless way, and Berry thinks it has loosed us from traditional cultural restraints: “By means of the machine metaphor we have eliminated any fear or awe or reverence or humility or delight or joy that might have restrained us in our use of the world” (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 56). It also fools us into thinking that everything can be simplified and analyzed into comprehensibility. That is, mechanical thinking fails to recognize mystery.

To explain his concerns about biotechnology, for example, Berry says, “What we do within living bodies and in the living world is never a simple mechanical procedure such as threading a needle or winding a watch. Mystery exists; unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences are common” (*CP*, 2003, p. 53). A mechanical view of the world also causes us to oversimplify analysis and decision-making. As Berry explains:

We like to believe that all choices are simple, as between an obvious good and an obvious evil, as between two silverware patterns or two automobiles. But in the economies of land use there are no simple choices, and no consequences that do not ramify perhaps endlessly. The results of such choices are not limited, not linear, but are intricately and at last mysteriously formal. (*WM*, 2010c, p. 56)

What is true of land-use decisions is true for decisions we make about anything that is living—living things are not mechanical and they should not be judged by mechanical standards or analyzed by mechanical thinking. This is as true for education as it is for land use. Testing the quality of teaching and learning cannot be reduced to the simple terms or standards of testing the output of an assembly line.

Adding to our confusion is the practice of presenting machines as alive. A recent series of AT&T commercials takes this to a new level of fantasy, with a communications network described as “a living, breathing intelligence” (*Network*, 2012). Among the claims one ad makes: “inventory can be taught to learn” and “machines have a voice” (*Network*). With an unctuous voiceover and happy music, the video switches between images that are appealingly human and images that are vaguely technological, conflating the two ideas. Notably, too, one of the vignettes of this ad includes a crowd of happy children racing up to a soft drink machine in what seems to be a third world country. As the children drain the machine of cans and run off, a truck appears at the entrance to the alleyway to refill the machine. The implication is that even at the ends of the earth, modern commerce can occur. No doubt AT&T and its ad agency hope viewers will be so dazzled by the miracle of a machine with a voice that they will not realize the efficiency with which western culture is exporting its unhealthy diet and consumeristic tendencies.

Berry sees the machine metaphor driving us toward an expectation of inevitability or determinism about the future. Moreover, he says, “this stark determinism is altered in general use to a doctrine that is even more contemptible: every *bad* thing that happens is inevitable” (*UA*, p. 231; italics original). He explains that good things have plenty of people to claim credit, but bad things are thought of as inevitable rather than preventable:

Thus all industrial comforts and labor-saving devices are the result only of human ingenuity and determination (not to mention the charity and altruism that have so conspicuously distinguished the industrial subspecies for the past two centuries), but the consequent pollution, land destruction, and social upheaval have been “inevitable.” (p. 231)

It is a neat sort of mental contortion that results in our feeling powerless to confront problems resulting from technological innovation. Further, to question innovation is to risk being branded a Luddite, with all the negative connotations that term carried today.

As Berry notes, however, “This question of which technology is better is one that our society has almost never thought to ask on behalf of the local community” (*ATC*, 1995, pp. 36-37). Because the question is not asked, the decision is made based on the wrong standard for what might be best for the community:

It is clear nevertheless that the corporate standard of judgment...is radically oversimplified, and that the community standard is sufficiently complex. By using more people to do better work, the economic need is met, but so are other needs that are social and ecological, cultural and religious. (p. 37)

But forces of modernity tend away from what is best for a community and instead toward what consolidates power to the center.



In “Local Knowledge in the Age of Information” (WI, 2005c), Berry examines “the dichotomy between center and periphery” (p. 113), recognizing that his writings on agriculture are as the voice of the periphery. About the center-periphery dichotomy, he notes that these terms apply geographically (city and its surrounding landscapes) or educationally (land-grant university and the rural areas it should serve) or politically (center of government and those it governs) or economically (the market and consumers). He adds, “But above all, now, as a sort of center of centers, is the global ‘free market’ economy of the great corporations, the periphery of which is everywhere, and for its periphery this center expresses no concern and acknowledges no responsibility” (p. 113). Berry sees technology as responsible: “Modern technology, as it has developed from oceanic navigation to the World Wide Web, has been increasingly a centralizing force, enabling ever larger accumulations of wealth, power, and knowledge in an ever smaller number of centers” (p. 114). Recent use of social media to organize anti-government revolutions may prove the Web’s capacity to decentralize power, but these examples are countered by examples, as in China or Iran, of governments restricting Internet access.

In that same essay, Berry goes on to outline the consequences of the centralization of power:

As its power of attraction increases, the center becomes more ignorant of the periphery. And under the pervasive influence of the center, the economic landscapes of the periphery have fewer and fewer inhabitants who know them well and know how to care properly for them. (p. 114)

Centralized wealth, power, and knowledge tend to view the periphery as an imperial nation views its colonies. Writes Berry, “Our rural landscapes and our rural communities

have been in bondage to an economic colonialism that has exploited and misused both land and people. This exploitation has tended to become more severe with the growth of industrial technology” (ATC, 1995, p. 32). Greater power and efficiency tends to increase the scale of both the exploitation and the abuse.

Similarly, Berry writes, “The worst disease of the world now is probably the ideology of technological heroism, according to which more and more people willingly cause large-scale effects that they do not foresee and that they cannot control” (HE, 1987, p. 150). This passage is from “Preserving Wildness,” in which he argues that a polarity has arisen in how people view their relationship with nature. As with most polarities, he notes, there “is bad talk on both sides” (p. 137). The split is between nature preservers, who “tend to stand aloof from the issue of the proper human use of nature” (p. 137), and the nature conquerors, who tend to view problems technologically and solve problems “glamorously, comfortably, and profitably. They believe that the ability to do something is the reason to do it” (p. 138). Berry advocates a third way: the middle, that recognizes the need for humankind to use nature, but sees that “our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use” (p. 139). Still, he believes in “a possibility that we can live more or less in harmony with our native wilderness” (p. 138). He does not see either the “nature romantic or the technocrat” (p. 138) as showing the way: “We are not going back to the Garden of Eden, nor are we going to manufacture an Industrial Paradise” (p. 138). We have to use the land, but we need to use it well, working *with* nature, not against it.

For Berry, the best use of nature is always a local question, intimately tied to a particular place: “There is, thus, no *practical* way that we can intend the good of the world; practice can only be local” (p. 139; italics original). Good use of nature is not

something that Berry thinks “can be achieved simply or easily or that it can ever be perfect” (p. 138). Instead this is “the forever unfinished lifework of our species” (p. 139), and such lifework is for Berry “the human predicament” (p. 139) in two ways:

It is a spiritual predicament, for it requires us to be properly humble and grateful; time and again, it asks us to be still and wait. But it is also a practical problem, for it requires us to *do* things” (p. 139; italics original).

Humility and gratitude, being still and waiting—these are not characteristics of a mind used to the clamor and speed of modern technology.

The modern industrial ideology has nothing so small or humble in mind. It is the ideology of technological heroism described above. Berry goes on in that same essay:

This is the ideology of the professional class of the industrial nations—a class whose allegiance to communities and places has been dissolved by their economic motives and by their educations. These are people who will go anywhere and jeopardize anything in order to assure the success of their careers. (p. 150)

Those who believe in mechanical solutions only, says Berry, “are thus encumbered by dependence on mechanical solutions that can work only by isolating and oversimplifying problems. Industrialists are condemned to proceed by devices” (p. 65). What Berry’s character Art Rowanberry says about big artillery—“When your power is in a big gun, you don’t have any small intentions” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 86)—applies as well to big machines.

Reading from notes for a draft of an unpublished essay, Berry said the following, clarifying what he sees as the scope and purpose of the industrial revolution:

What really excites us so far is some sort of technological revolution: the fossil fuel revolution, the automotive revolution, the assembly line revolution, the

antibiotic revolution, the sexual revolution, the computer revolution, the genomic revolution. But these revolutions, all with something to sell that people or their governments have to buy, are all mere episodes of the one really revolutionary revolution—perhaps in the history of the human race—the industrial revolution, which has proceeded from the beginning with only two purposes: to replace human workers with machines and to market its products, regardless of their usefulness or their effects, at the highest possible profit. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

To deny that any good has come from the industrial revolution is as wrong as to say that it has all been good, and Berry acknowledges that.

He notes, however, that almost “from the beginning of the progress of science-technology-and-industry that we call the Industrial Revolution” (*LM*, 2000/2001), while some people have hailed it as our salvation, others have feared the consequences. While “some have been confidently predicting that science...would solve all problems and answer all questions” (p. 76), others have foreseen and mourned the attendant losses: “Among these mourners have been people of the highest intelligence and education, who were speaking, not from nostalgia or reaction or superstitious dread, but from knowledge, hard thought, and the promptings of culture” (p. 76). Berry examines this grief:

What did they mourn? Without exception, I think, what they feared, what they found repugnant, was the violation of life by an oversimplifying, feelingless utilitarianism; they feared the destruction of the living integrity of creatures, places, communities, cultures, and human souls; they feared the loss of the old prescriptive definition of humankind, according to which we are neither gods nor

beasts, though partaking of the nature of both. What they mourned was the progressive death of the earth. (p. 76)

Traditional agrarian communities were largely protected from these influences, even those communities that made use of machines and technology, because of their otherwise close connection to the land. The culture changed at different times in different places, but for the farming culture of north-central Kentucky, World War II changed the culture, as Berry shows in his fiction and as this study will examine in Chapters III through VII.

Of course, it is not only agriculture that is changed by mechanization. In “Health Is Membership” (ATC, 1995), Berry explores the concept of health, noting that “to be healthy is literally to be whole” (p. 87). But Berry says the modern medical industry prefers to see the body “as a defective or potentially defective machine, singular, solitary, and displaced, without love, solace, or pleasure” (p. 89). In a mechanized view, writes Berry, “One may presumably be healthy in a disintegrated family or community or in a destroyed or poisoned ecosystem” (p. 89), as though outside factors have no more effect on health. Further, writes Berry, “I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms” (p. 90). We cannot isolate wellbeing from any of the physical influences in our lives, but neither can we safely isolate what we conventionally call spiritual reality from material reality when it comes to health. “I believe,” writes Berry, “that the Creation is one continuous fabric comprehending simultaneously what we mean by ‘spirit’ and what we mean by ‘matter’ (p. 91). The industrial model of simplification and isolation fails in healthcare. “We are now pretty clearly involved in a crisis of health, one of the wonders of which is its immense

profitability both to those who cause it and to those who propose to cure it” (p. 93).

Contributing to this crisis of health is mechanistic thinking and the machine metaphor.

Berry clarifies what he sees as the difference between body and machine while also illustrating a body’s dependence:

The body alone is not, properly speaking, a body. Divided from its sources of air, food, drink, clothing, shelter, and companionship, a body is, properly speaking, a cadaver, whereas a machine by itself, shut down or out of fuel, is still a machine.

Merely as an organism (leaving aside issues of mind and spirit) the body lives and moves and has its being, minute by minute, by an interinvolvement with other bodies and other creatures, living and unliving, that is too complex to diagram or describe. It is, moreover, under the influence of thought and feeling. It does not live by “fuel” alone. (pp. 94-95)

For Berry, the body’s dependence makes the machine metaphor feeble in real healing:

“Where the art and science of healing are concerned, the machine metaphor works to enforce a division that falsifies the process of healing because it falsifies the nature of the creature needing to be healed” (p. 96). This falsifying is evident in the modern hospital, which he says is difficult to see as a “place of healing—of reconnecting and making whole” (p. 97). Instead he sees the hospital as a “world of efficiency...of specialization, machinery, and abstract procedure” (p. 101), bustling past “the world of love” (p. 101), from which patients enter a hospital. “The world of efficiency,” says Berry, “ignores both loves, earthly and divine, because by definition it must reduce experience to computation, particularity to abstraction, and mystery to a small comprehensibility” (p. 102). In the face of individual complexity, mechanistic thinking generalizes and simplifies.

Mechanization and the world of efficiency are inadequate to healing in another way because, writes Berry, “Any definition of health that is not silly must include death” (p. 105). As he notes, “the world of efficiency is defeated by death; at death, all its instruments and procedures stop” (p. 105). Love is not defeated by death—“the world of love includes death, suffers it, and triumphs over it” (p. 105). Indeed, “love must confront death, and accept it, and learn from it. Only in confronting death can earthly love learn its true extent, its immortality” (p. 105). Even in death, says Berry, “The world of love continues, and of this grief is the proof” (p. 105). Notably, for Berry death is a learning experience, but the lesson learned is even more notable: When love accepts death, it accepts also its limits, but within those limits love finds its infinity, it finds its limitlessness.

To think of life as machine fails us for agriculture and medicine. It fails us in any interaction with the natural world or with each other because it falsifies the nature of the world and its creatures. It fails us in education for the same reasons. Machines elevate automation and standardization. Machines seek efficiency and quantity. Education should celebrate the particular and the individual. It should seek excellence and quality.

### *Life Is a Miracle*

If life is not a machine, then what is it? Berry wrote a book-length essay to answer that question: *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001). The title comes from Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*. When Gloucester, blind and in despair—too much of both even to recognize his son Edgar beside him—seeks to throw himself off the cliffs at Dover to end his life, Edgar will not let his father die in despair, so he makes Gloucester believe that he is on a high height. When Gloucester swoons and falls, Edgar revives him, pretending to be

someone else, at the base of the cliff, describing Gloucester's fall and marveling at his survival. Edgar says to his father, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again" (IV, vi, 55). Berry writes "This is the line that calls Gloucester back—out of hubris, and the damage and despair that invariably follow—into the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible" (*LM*, p. 5). Then he uses the circumstances of the play to consider ways other than suicide to give up on life.

Berry says we also give up on life "by presuming to 'understand' it—that is by reducing it to the *terms* of our understanding and by treating it as predictable or mechanical" (p. 6; italics original). According to Berry, this kind of reduction is "to give up on life, to carry it beyond change and redemption, and to increase the proximity of despair" (p. 7). He argues that in trying to take his own life Gloucester was trying to take back control of it, a paradox not unlike industrial warfare, as Berry points out. What Gloucester discovers is that he never had control: "He has given up his life as an understood possession, and has taken it back as miracle and mystery" (p. 10). This is key for Berry: "To treat life as less than a miracle," he says, "is to give up on it" (p. 10), but to treat life as a miracle is to begin to understand everything we do not understand.

But *Life Is a Miracle* was not enough. Berry writes that he was challenged on the idea by a friend—"Did you really mean it?"—and Berry wrote a follow-up essay entitled "Is Life a Miracle?" (*CP*, 2003). As it turns out, he does mean it, but for him:

The practical point is that *if* I believe life is a miracle, I will grant it a respect and a deference that I would not grant it otherwise. If I believe it is a miracle, then I cannot believe that I am superior to it, or that I understand it, or that I own it. (p. 183; italics original).



It is the same if he cannot know that life is not a miracle. “In either case,” says Berry, “I am granting to life, and to each living thing, its own inherent dignity and mystery” (p. 183). With a recognition of life as miracle and mystery come several implications, including that “life is not exclusively the concern of science and commerce” (p. 185) and that “nonmaterial realities” (p. 185) should be included in our discourse.

Among other things, “Is Life a Miracle” tests the idea of the theoretical possibility of “a computer capable of gathering all the data of this great living in one of its moments, plotting the formality of its many motions and relationships, from that construing its indwelling principle of coherence, and so proving at last that life is or is not a miracle” (p. 186). But Berry doubts that such a computer is possible because “we are dealing here with time and the experience of life in time” (p. 186). Experience can be explained, but “it cannot be reproduced” (p. 186). Because “past and future never overlap” (p. 187), a present moment, however fast, is the bridge between past and future. Berry describes it as “the interval in which the future pours itself into the past” (187). Because the present cannot be measured, “we can’t prove its existence” (p. 187). Yet clearly the present does exist: “Here is where empiricism fails and experience forever eludes experimentation” (p. 187), and we are “always, by necessity, a little late” (p. 188) in considering the present.

That very lateness of any consideration of the present limits the possibility of our understanding, and while Berry does not think “an omniscient and extratemporal computer might be possible” (p. 188), he also thinks it would be irrelevant. Berry writes:

What is relevant is that we humans are part of life that is possible only because all living things have it somehow in common, and we do not, we probably cannot, understand how it works. We are not superior to it, we cannot in any final sense

own or control it, we cannot fully appreciate it, we cannot be grateful enough for it. It is *ourselves*, not our machines, who must recognize its beauty, its preciousness, and its mystery. If we don't, we won't take care of it. We will destroy it. (p. 188; italics original)

Life is a miracle, and Berry believes we will take better care of it if we think of it so.

Finally, if we do not abandon the machine metaphor for life, if we become incapable of distinguishing what is living from what is machinery, then we have to ask how far this metaphor will take our thinking. Berry knows how to press an issue to an extreme to make his point: "Soon, surely," he says in "Money Versus Goods" (*WM*, 2010c), "we will have robots that can worship and make love faster and cheaper than we mere humans, who have been encumbered in those activities by flesh and blood and our old-fashioned ways" (p. 19). There's a recognizable hideousness to the extremity of the suggestion, but when does surrendering our lives to machines become hideous? And are we retaining the sensitivity to recognize it? These are certainly questions for education. How can we recognize and protect ourselves against hideousness? How can we become fully human? How can we preserve our humanity? An honest assessment should acknowledge that education has been involved both with the surrender of our lives to machines and with the desensitizing of our ability to recognize it, that formal education has reinforced and encouraged an unthinking dependence on technology in the same way that it has reinforced and encouraged an uncritical faith in science and industry.

#### The Great Moral Issue of Our Time

Caught in the throes of the heroic triumvirate of modern progress, the anti-economy, and technological enthrallment, how can the modern world see its way to

Berry's vision of every place on earth loved and cared for, and everyone on earth able to love and care for a place? It is a mad time to be exuberantly sane. Tempting as it is to summon the Mad Farmer, perhaps a quieter voice will better serve, a voice of hope, a voice of peace. Consider this poem, entitled "February 2, 1968" (*FHB*, 1967/1970, p. 17):

In the dark of the moon, in flying snow, in the dead of winter,  
war spreading, families dying, the world in danger,  
I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover.

That is the entire poem, but brief as it is, it captures a great deal of what Wendell Berry stands for. Without recreating the entire historical landscape, it is not too broad to say the year 1968 referred to in that little poem was a time of great violence—the Vietnam War, peaceful calls for civil rights devolving into rioting in our cities, campus demonstrations for peace that would turn violent in an instant, and the United States poised on the brink of two more political assassinations. More specifically, February 2, 1968, was in the middle of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and only one day after the summary execution on a Saigon street of a Viet Cong prisoner of war.

Berry's poem speaks to heartache and fear, in darkness, cold, and death. The image is bleak in the extreme, yet it is not hopeless. Berry is never hopeless. In a time of violence, he is returning to the disciplines of restoration, trying to protect a rocky hillside with a cover of clover. Conscious of the violence, still he is responsible to what he can do. He is quietly doing the work that must be done, keeping peace in the way he can. The poem becomes even richer when it is read in the context of Berry's speech delivered eight days later at the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft at the University of Kentucky. His speech was entitled "A Statement Against the War in Vietnam," and is

included in *The Long-Legged House* (1968/2004). The occasion for the speech is the war, and Berry says, “I wish to be a spokesman of the doubt that the great difficulties of our time can be solved by violence” (p. 66). His analysis is that this violence has reached crisis level in our time not only because of a failure of imagination to envision solutions other than violence, but also because of the power of modern weapons and technology to destroy the world. “Our crisis,” he says, “rises out of an utter confusion about two fundamental questions: How should we behave toward one another? And how should we behave toward the world?” (p. 67), with Berry advocating for nonviolence toward both. In the essay, he makes it clear that the violence he opposes is not confined to war, but includes rioting and peace demonstrations gone wrong and destruction of the ecosphere.

For Berry, efforts for peace need to be complete actions, in the same way that gardening is a complete action. “In seeking to change the world,” he says, “we must see that we also change our lives. In promoting the cause of public peace, we should not neglect the equally difficult task of making ourselves peaceable” (p. 74). Finally, as always he does not let anyone off without homework. As he reminds us of our complicity in any ecological destruction, so too are we all potentially complicit in violence:

We must recognize that a dishonest or a wasteful or a violent life is as great a danger to the world as a weapon of war, and the violence of neighbors is the model for the violence of nations, and the hope for order in the world fails in a disorderly household. (pp. 74-75)

In other words, we can demonstrate for peace, but individually, we must live peaceably.

At the end of the essay, he explains the “two inescapable reasons” he is opposed to the war: He is a teacher and he is a father. About the first he says:

I am unable to teach on the assumption that it is part of my function to prepare young men to fit into the war machine—to invent weapons or manufacture them or use them, to write the oversimplified language of warfare or to believe it. As a teacher, I reject absolutely the notion that a man may best serve his country by serving in the army. As a teacher, I try to suggest to my students the possibility of a life that is full and conscious and responsible, and I am no longer able to believe that such a life can either lead to war or serve the ends of war. (p. 75)

His standard for himself as a father is just as demanding:

As a father, I must look at my son, and I must ask if there is anything I possess—any right, any piece of property, any comfort, any joy—that I would ask *him* to die to permit *me* to keep. I must ask if I believe that it would be meaningful—after his mother and I have loved each other and begotten him and loved him—for him to die in a lump with a number hanging around his neck. I must ask if his life would have come to meaning or nobility or any usefulness if he should sit—with his human hands and head and eyes—in the cockpit of a bomber, dealing out pain and grief and death to people unknown to him. And my answer to all these questions is one that I must attempt to live by: *No*. (p. 75; italics original)

Whether teacher or father, Berry challenges himself to try to enact his peaceability.

Over thirty-five years later, in the midst of two more wars, Berry wrote “Letter to Daniel Kemmis” (WI, 2005c), in which he diagnoses problems in our political system and political parties. He is distressed at the quality and content of the discourse, reduced by the political parties to simplistic, vaguely religious issues while skirting around real moral issues. Berry writes:

The great moral issue of our time, too much ignored by both sides of our present political division, is violence. From the colonialism that began with long-distance navigation to the present state of industrialism, we of the so-called West have lived and gathered wealth increasingly by violence. (pp. 145-146)

Berry goes on from there to point out the violence inherent in our culture. As he notes, our world depends now on the violence of explosions—controlled or uncontrolled—whether to power our vehicles or destroy our enemies. He writes:

Violence, in short, is the norm of our economic life and our national security. The line that connects the bombing of a civilian population to the mountain “removed” by strip mining to the gullied and poisoned field to the clear-cut watershed to the tortured prisoner seems to run pretty straight. (p. 146)

As far as Berry is concerned, the logic of an extractive economy is the same as the logic of war. Both work “against the natural world; against working people, small farmers, and locally-owned small businesses; and against the life, integrity, beauty, and dignity of communities, both rural and urban” (p. 149). They share the same kind of violence.

The confusion over “how to behave toward one another” and “how to behave toward the world” becomes even more baffling then when it is compounded by the question of why people would choose to behave violently or destructively. One of Berry’s Sabbath poems from 2003 confronts this bafflement directly:

But do the Lords of War in fact  
hate the world? That would be easy  
to bear, if so. If they hated  
their children and the flowers

that grow in the warming light,  
that would be easy to bear. For then  
we could hate the haters  
and be right. What is hard  
is to imagine the Lords of War  
may love the things that they destroy. (*Giv*, 2005a, p. 132)

Among the Lords of War, Berry would count any exploiter of people or the earth, anyone willing to justify violence by profit, anyone who believes that going to war can bring peace. The poem raises the question, but it gives no answer. It leaves us baffled. It is not as simple as hating the haters—we are not given that comfort. And we are further baffled to recognize our own complicity.

Even here, Berry offers hope. Some consider it poetry, but it began as prose—his recognition of bafflement as a challenge for us to try to make sense:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings. (*SBW*, 1983/2005, p. 97)

The mind employed at our real work, on our real journey—this is what education should help prepare students to take on.

Berry's fiction asks us to imagine with him a small farming community in north-central Kentucky, both how it fares in the face of the modern industrial economy and culture, and how we all might fare better if we embraced some of its lessons. We can learn from this radical thinker with his farming stories, this teacher who wants everyone

to see “the possibility of a life that is full and conscious and responsible” (*LLH*, 1965/2004, p. 75), this father who wants everyone to imagine how much other people must love their own children, this person who wants every place on earth loved and cared for and everyone on earth able to love and care for a place. He is the Mad Farmer, hoping for better not for more, happy to live within limits, in love with the world and in grief over our failings. We need to put ourselves to school to him and make peace with ourselves and the world.



### CHAPTER III

#### EDUCATION IN WENDELL BERRY'S FICTION

A useful way to understand Wendell Berry's ideas on education is through his fiction, all set in and around the fictional farming community of Port William in north-central Kentucky. Berry's fiction includes characters and events in a period of time from before the Civil War to the present, with many of the same characters appearing in several works over time. His stories focus on the lives of several families—the Coulters, the Catletts, the Feltners, to name a few—and their fortunes and follies through time. As noted in the Prologue of this study, the history of Port William is also the history of the United States, played out not in the broad abstractions of historical texts, but in the details of characters' lives. Because of the shared setting and characters, his novels and short stories create a rich portrait of Berry's view of what works and what does not work for individuals, for families, and for the community. Whether the education is formal or informal, intended or unintended, Berry's characters learn lessons necessary to life, as they strive and thrive and survive to make a home in their shared place, even into the twenty-first century. Because on one level Berry's fiction is about learning how to be at home with a place and all its human and nonhuman neighbors, it is also about education.

One practice of this study needs to be explained. In his fiction, Berry often refers to the Port William neighborhood as an entity of one mind. He encourages his readers to see Port William as unified in its thinking. In the short story, "Fly Away, Breath" (*PT*,

2012), the Port William neighborhood in 1814 is described as “still in its dream of itself as a frontier” (p. 16). In “The Hurt Man” (*TDL*, 2004b), we learn that in its early days as a river boat stop, Port William is visited by “commercial people, medicine showmen, evangelists, and other river travelers” (p. 4), and that Port William “in its way cherished these transients, learned all it could about them, and talked of what it learned” (p. 4). Likewise, in the novel, *Jayber Crow* (2000b), Jayber as narrator says Port William’s reaction to Troy Chatham’s big talk about farming and his mounting debt is to have “listened, nodded, scratched its ears, grunted, and kept its opinions mostly to itself” (p. 184). In watching Troy, Port William “would be (by turns or all at once) skeptical, impressed, envious, dismissive” (p. 233). Also toward the end of that novel, Port William is waking from its dream of itself, surprised to be in the latter half of the twentieth century. The interstate highway is being built nearby, and some of the older men of the community like to observe the construction. When one of the workers cannot restart his chainsaw, he becomes disgusted and throws it “in front of an oncoming bulldozer, which covered it up. Port William had never before thought of such a possibility” (p. 282). So however artificial or broad-stroked it might seem, it is consistent with Berry’s practice to speak of Port William as a being unto itself, and I use that throughout this analysis.

Several factors about Berry’s fiction recommend its use as the focus of a study of his philosophy of education. First, he frequently uses the vocabulary of education in his fiction. Words such as *lesson*, *instruct*, *learn*, *teacher*, *student*, *study*, and *school* are common, whether the subject is formal education or not. But he also uses more technical educational language sometimes for humorous effect, almost mockingly, especially in Andy Catlett’s voice. For example, Andy describes himself as “a fourth-grade Thomas

Paine, striking blows for liberty, which of course earned me in return blows of yardsticks, rulers, and other pedagogical weapons” (*ACET*, 2006, p. 5). Also, Andy describes how his father had him helping local farmer Jake Branch the summer Andy was thirteen so that Andy would learn to work: “But when he put me under the tutelage of Jake Branch, my father in effect abandoned me to a vast and chancy curriculum of which nobody was in charge” (*TDL*, 2004b, p. 238). The use of such words as *pedagogical*, *tutelage*, and *curriculum* is unexpectedly formal and incongruous in the context, and therefore humorous, but the comic effect is enhanced by the use the term *weapons* rather than something more common, such as *tools* or *instruments*. And while *vast* may be a desirable attribute for curriculum, it is harder to spin *chancy* as something positive.

Beyond the vocabulary, learning itself is a leitmotif in Berry’s fiction. Several of his works have children as main characters, and exploring, discovering, and learning are natural topics in fiction about children. The idea of education also extends to his adult characters. For example, at sixty-one years old, after his son is declared missing in World War II, Mat Feltner must learn to live in his son’s absence. A woman in the community is coping with the death of her daughter, swept away in a flood, and the subsequent disappearance of her husband, distraught with grief over the loss of their daughter. Mat and several of the other men in the community help her keep her farm going. But Mat is also helped by her enduring: “He has become dependent on her, as if her survival of her loss is a lesson to him that he will have somehow to learn” (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 197).

Likewise, Wheeler Catlett, in speaking of his relationship with Burley Coulter, says, “He and I had our differences. Sometimes they came to words, and when they did I always learned something from him—a hard lesson sometimes, but good to know—

because he knew himself and he told the truth” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 185). When the adult Andy Catlett is grieving the loss of his right hand in a farm accident, his mother advises him to “learn something from it” (*Rem*, 1988/2008, p. 27). Andy objects, questioning what he could possibly learn, and his mother says, “I don’t know. But you must accept this as given to you to learn from, or it will hurt you worse than it already has” (p. 27). Always there is something to learn in Berry’s fiction and a reason to learn it. His characters learn in order to grow, to cope, to remember, to improve. And sometimes too they fail to learn.

For characters to grow, change, and learn is not uncommon in fiction—indeed, it is often necessary for dramatic tension. Berry’s fiction, however, reflects his ideas about education and the impact of education on community. His fiction becomes especially illustrative when examined in concert with his essays. He views education as both a hope and a threat to rural areas and small communities, so there is a constant question in his fiction of how education can better serve a place like Port William.

Underlying the leitmotif of education and learning in Berry’s fiction is the larger theme of loss—loss of loved ones, loss of top soil and fertility, loss of community, loss of physical capability, loss of knowledge, loss of a way of life. The gravest, most destructive of these losses is the loss of the young, with so many other losses tied directly to this loss.

The young are always a sign of hope and a reason to plan. For the small farmers of Port William, the young are also help and company in hard work. They can provide the relief that allows for more careful stewardship—with help there is time to do the job right. For Berry, the young also should serve as a vital repository for the knowledge and wisdom of a place. For that knowledge and wisdom to be handed down in an orderly way, in a way that might ensure consistent care or even improved care and better results,

there needs to be some continuity from generation to generation in a place. To lose the young—whether from death or moving away—is to lose help, it is to lose knowledge and wisdom, and it is to lose hope—all factors contributing to a decline in land stewardship, community life, and the quality of life generally. In considering the loss of the young, the concerns are not strictly utilitarian: There is also love and the natural desire to be with loved ones, to have them near.

How to educate against loss is the question Berry shows Port William trying to answer for its own survival—not only the loss of the young, but also “the loss of any good thing” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 165), as the character Henry Catlett terms it in the short story “Fidelity” (*Fid*, 1992). This is not a question only for Port William or the small places in the world. In all his writings, Berry asks us all to try to answer this question because, as it turns out, the survival of a place like Port William is fundamental to the survival of the world. In other words, if we have a culture and society and economy that allow for the protection and prosperity of a small place like Port William, then we have a culture and society and economy that can allow for the protection and prosperity of every place.

This is not paternalism; this is long-term practicality. As Berry understands it, we all need the economic landscapes of the world—the farms and ranches, the forests and mines—to be well cared for, especially those that are renewable with good stewardship. Because good stewardship is a matter of practice—practice locally adapted to a place—good stewardship cannot happen theoretically or on a grand scale. It happens in small, local places. But more than that, the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world means that local well-being is contingent on the well-being of everywhere else. As Berry says, “No place on the earth can be completely healthy until all places are” (1989,

September, p. 18). If some of the economic landscapes are abused and sick, then that abuse and sickness is a threat to all economic landscapes. Likewise, Berry believes we need to protect wilderness, as a practice of restraint and an acknowledgement of our limits, but also to preserve nature's wildness as a standard against which to judge our own work in the economic landscapes.

Berry says it variously throughout his works, but his point is clear: "All things are connected; the context of everything is everything else" (WI, 2005c, p. 108). Nearly three decades before writing that line, he told the 1978 graduates of Centre College that when he was a college graduate the truth he wished he had understood more deeply is this: "the inescapability of connections and of dependences" (1978, June 4). He said further:

Wherever we turn, we are up against order—order that we did not make, that we cannot finally comprehend, that includes and sustains our lives, and that we cannot too radically change without destroying ourselves. There is an order of cause that far outreaches memory; there is an order of consequence that far outreaches prediction. (1978, June 4)

The implications of these orders of cause and consequence should direct our actions and make us careful. He went on in that same address, "Order ramifies in order; disorder ramifies in disorder. And so great is the magnitude of the order of Creation that no one ever understands the ultimate cause or foresees the ultimate consequence of any act" (1978, June 4). If everything is connected, if all things are dependent on all other things, then how does a place like Port William educate against "the loss of any good thing"?

Some loss is unavoidable, even natural, such as death and aging. But when loss is avoidable—when it occurs because of a lack of care, attention, imagination, or

understanding—then the loss becomes exploitation and, indeed, a kind of violence.

Balanced against the theme of loss in Berry's fiction are the twin themes of sympathy and affection, both to cope with unavoidable loss and to prevent avoidable loss.

In Berry's fiction, the Port William neighborhood is under threat, and the threat intensifies after World War II with the spread of industrialism that resulted in part from industrialization of the war effort. The assumptions of modern progress became the norm in American culture, to the detriment of local agrarian culture. Standardized, theorized, mechanized, specialized, centralized, aggrandized, and depersonalized—these are attributes of profit and simple efficiency alone, the way the industrial mind reduces all things. They are the attributes of a distant view of the world, not the up-close, loving view that is necessary and natural to know and care for a particular place well.

Berry lived through such threats to his own community, and his fiction is based on his observation and on the memories shared with him by elders. Writes Berry:

We need to think critically of our history. I remember a way of farming here in Kentucky that was comparatively diverse and at best well structured, farm by farm. I remember when Louisville lived, to a significant extent, from its surrounding landscape. I remember excellent sheep flocks and herds of cattle on beautifully maintained Central Kentucky farms that were not horse farms. I remember when most farm families subsisted primarily from their own land and home economies. (*WM*, 2010c, p. 60)

He is remembering an order of cause and an order of consequence that respected the local economy and ecology, and he is asking that we consider carefully what might have been good about that sort of local focus and independence.

So the questions implicit in Berry's portrayal of Port William are, What are the good things, and what good things have we lost? Asking what has been lost is not the same as asking to return to an earlier time. It is neither sentimental nor nostalgic to wonder what was good in the past. Berry answers accusations of nostalgia this way: "One reason I don't long to turn back the clock is that I don't know a time that I would like to turn the clock back to" (*WM*, 2010 c, p. 60), noting that every era has had shortcomings. Still he insists that, in our mad dash toward the future, we have lost and continue to lose some good things in our culture and economy, particularly when we ignore or defy the orders of cause and consequence and try to work against nature instead of with it:

These memories don't tell me that I once lived in an ideal age, above criticism.

They tell me that by now we have become too much determined by outside influence and too little self-determining; too concentrated, too specialized, and too vulnerable; too thoughtless or neglectful of good possibilities in our land and people. (pp. 60-61)

A close study of Berry's fictional world shows the integrity of that earlier way of life.

In his essay "Simple Solutions, Package Deals, and a 50-Year Farm Bill" (*WM*, 2010c), Berry explains the advantages that were possible in having a local focus, advantages, in particular, to the economic and ecological well-being of the place:

The economic advantages of diverse local land-based economies such as I am talking about are clear enough. Their promise is not luxury or extravagance for a few, but a modest, decent, sustainable prosperity for many. In addition, there would be an equally significant ecological advantage. In a complex local economy, in which a lot of people were economically dependent on the products



of the local landscape, there would be the strongest local support for good land use. People knowingly dependent on the land would not willingly see it cropped or grazed or logged or mined to exhaustion. (p. 61)

By land-based economies, Berry refers to more than farming, ranching, forestry, and mining, but also small processing plants, factories, or other value-adding concerns that could be based on what is grown or produced locally. What cannot be used locally should at least be improved or refined locally and not shipped off as raw material.

This idea of local interest based on local focus and need seems like a simple, self-evident point, but modern industrial culture defies it regularly. For example, in the middle of summer in my community, surrounded by farmland, I found in my local grocery store a yellow pepper bearing a sticker that said it was grown in Holland. This pepper had traveled over the ocean and across half a continent to arrive at my grocery store. The point is that we can grow peppers in North Dakota and save the expenditure of transportation costs and energy to get a pepper to my grocery store. More to Berry's point, having more of our food locally produced would be both an economic and an ecological benefit to my community since it would increase local interest in both.

Whatever seems desirable about the integrity and harmony of the world and way of life Berry describes through his fiction, the alert reader will probably agree that turning back the clock is not desirable. For one thing, Berry's fiction is bleak. It is sometimes sad almost beyond saying, though within the context of sympathy and affection and shaped by his telling, it is not unredeemed. In one of the essays from Berry's collection on the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Berry says clearly that "literature of unrelieved pain and horror is wrong" (WCW, 2011, p. 120), that such literature "is neither reality nor

imagination but a strange nihilism of the modern mind that cherishes and dwells upon whatever is worst” (p. 120). There is great sadness in Berry’s fiction, but it is never nihilistic. The worst is acknowledged, but it is the best that he asks us to dwell upon. Indeed, in many ways, that is part of Berry’s purpose: that the reader might consider the best of Port William—the good things—and decide what should be recovered from what has been lost and what should be preserved of what we still have.

Berry uses many voices in his fiction—sometimes an omniscient narrator, sometimes a limited third-person narrator, or sometimes the first-person narration of one of his characters. All of these first-person narrators are voiced as adults looking back on events, offering the perspective and reflection of time and context. His first novel, *Nathan Coulter* (1960/2008), however, was written from the perspective of a young boy who grows from about age six to about fifteen through the book, with the maturing voice and sensitivities appropriate for that age span. Often Berry’s fiction is told through the device of memories shared by an elder with Andy Catlett, who then tells the story, or Berry will have the story told by a narrator with Andy as the point of view. This device emphasizes Berry’s trust in storytelling, especially local and family stories, to pass on lessons and culture, to entertain and inspire, to honor those who have come before, and to make sense of the world generally. These many voices of his fiction add to the richness of the portrait of this one community and reflect the nuance and depth of Berry’s thinking on education. Events are shared through time but also through the eyes and lives of various characters.

Sometimes Berry will even tell pieces of the same event in different works from the perspective of different characters. For example, in the novel *Nathan Coulter* (1960/2008), Tom Coulter is a young man who leaves home after a fight with his father.

They later reconcile, but he does not come home to stay. Tom's death in World War II happens before the action of the novel *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001), but his death serves as a companion subplot to the story of Mat Feltner's coping with his son Virgil's death in the war. In the short story "Stand By Me" (*PT*, 2012), we learn of Tom's death through the voice of Tom's uncle, Burley Coulter, who helped to raise Tom and loved him as if Tom were his son. But we also learn the details of how Tom reconciles with his father. Through this story, we understand in an intimate and personal way the grief Burley feels, and also the grief of Tom's father, Jarrat. We also can imagine the regret Jarrat would have felt if Tom had gone to war and died without their reconciliation.

Then in the short story, "A Desirable Woman" (*PT*, 2012), we learn about Tom's life after leaving home and before going to war. The story takes place before he dies, but ends within the knowledge of his death. His life and death form a subplot to the story of Laura Milby, the young wife of a minister. From that story we know that Tom falls in love with Laura and that she, in her way, loves him too. They acknowledge this love between them, and she thanks him for it, honoring it in a way he had not expected. They agree to say no more about it. The story ends this way:

There was in fact no more to say. Because they said no more, for the rest of his life, which would not be long, she shone in his mind as she had been that day: "I would like to thank you." And to the end of her own long life she was grateful to him because with his young heart, never old, he had loved her. (*PT*, 2012, p. 68)

Tom Coulter has yet to be the main character in a work of Berry's fiction, but from these portrayals, we come to understand Tom and his place in the lives of those who love him. We understand too that the tragedy of his death is redeemed by the love in his life.

This sort of call to empathy is the power of Berry's fiction. He asks of his readers no less than what he hopes for his characters: the imagination needed to have sympathy and affection for the world. By summoning a convergence of emotion and intelligence, Berry helps us understand his characters. It is what good fiction should do. But in the case of Berry's fiction, the extended portrait helps to bring his ideas to life in a way that can make them concrete, offering a useful entry into his philosophy of education.

Some of Berry's later fiction can tend toward the didactic, overtly reinforcing the ideas and lessons of his essays. For example, in his novel *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2009), Berry allows his character Andy Catlett to muse about the difference between travel by a team and wagon and travel by an automobile, with a caution about how speed changes the view of the world and not in a favorable way (*ACET*, pp. 88-89). Likewise, in his story "Nothing Living Lives Alone" (2011, Spring), a story about the tension between freedom and responsibility as young Andy Catlett comes to understand it, Berry notes the connection between freedom and ecological well-being, freedom from a fear that Andy grows into as an adult and that deepens for him over time: "[As a boy, Andy] was free of the fear of the human destruction of the world, a freedom that no child will again enjoy for generations to come, if ever again" (p. 11).

The short story, "Fly Away, Breath" (*PT*, 2012), tells about the life of a Port William matriarch and her death in 1907. In the voice of the narrator in current time, Berry includes a caution about fossil fuel use: "Our descendants may know such a time again when the petroleum all is burnt. How they will fare then will depend on the neighborly wisdom and the skills that they may manage to revive" (pp. 14-15). The story itself becomes a meditation on how the matriarch's life has shaped the lives of her

granddaughters gathered around her as she is dying—how, in a sense, her life continues in their lives—and how, in turn, the granddaughter’s lives continue in the lives of their descendants, including the narrator Andy Catlett. So Berry’s observation about a petroleum-dependent way of life is more thematically connected than it seemed.

“Fly Away, Breath,” including its observation about dependence on oil, also serves as a statement of the importance Berry places on local culture as a repository of necessary wisdom and skills and the fragile urgency of preserving such wisdom and skills in a particular place. This speaks directly to Berry’s understanding of the purpose of education, but the story also demonstrates his understanding that one of the purposes of art is to be instructive. A good work of fiction serves its reader and makes its meaning in many ways. Along with creating artistic meaning, Berry is teaching in these later fiction works, but a closer examination of his fiction makes it clear that he has always been teaching. “I’ve felt like this all my life,” Berry said in July 2011. “You don’t know whether you’re working to bring about willed change or whether you’re talking about how to meet failure when it comes” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). There is a chill to the gravity of those alternatives, but either way, Berry has devoted his writing life—in his fiction, as well as in his poetry and essays—to articulating a way to educate against loss. This is not all he is doing, of course, but studying his fiction and learning what becomes of the Port William neighborhood and children over time offers a clear and powerful explanation and clarification of Berry’s ideas on education.

What does Port William want for its children? The answer is neither startling nor unusual. In fact, the answer is as old as time itself. Port William wants life for its children. It wants good things in their lives: peace, prosperity, love. Perhaps some of the

citizens of Port William are wise enough to realize they would like their children someday as neighbors; perhaps some dare to dream of seeing their children's children. Some, like Burley Coulter's parents, have at times reduced their hope simply to not being embarrassed by their children. Others, like the Mountjoys and Thad and Rachel Coulter, hope to be elevated themselves by their children and their accomplishments.

For those who are content in their own lives, they hope for happy lives for their children; for those who are disappointed with their own lives, they hope for *happier* lives for their children. As is natural, the definition of happy is relative, dependent on the parents' understanding of happiness. Would a happier life be easier than what the parents endured or richer, fuller in some way, or bigger in some way? Would it be more peaceful, more loving, or freer of worry and fear? Or would a happier life simply be different or lived elsewhere. These are the questions that parents everywhere grapple with, no less so in Port William. What does Port William want for its children and how can it teach them what they need to know? Not all of Port William knows it needs to educate against loss, but by the late twentieth century most are suspecting it and some have begun to realize that they have failed. What can Port William do to educate against loss?

Once again, however, this is not a question for Port William alone. Berry poses this question for people everywhere, not just in considering the education of their own children and how they can be educated against loss. But because we all share this world, it is also a question for people everywhere in considering the education of the children in Starkweather, North Dakota, and Ada, Minnesota, and Numansdorp in the Netherlands.

Berry's essay "Farming and the Global Economy" (*ATC*, 1995) expresses the worry in the context of food, as he cautions that "we need to make our farming practices

and our food economy subject to standards set not by the industrial system but by the health of ecosystems and of human communities” (p. 4), adding the urgency “that we are rapidly running out of farmers” (p. 4). Berry notes that “good farmers, like good musicians, must be raised to the trade” (p. 4), and he insists that farmers are not as interchangeable as factory workers (which are not as interchangeable as CEOs like to believe), that a good farmer relies on an education of experience, instruction, and observation gained over time in a particular place.

The current trend toward a global food economy undermines farmers, who typically control neither the market at which they sell what they produce nor the market at which they buy the supplies they need. Farmers are subject then to “overproduction, low prices, and high costs” (p. 4), with costs driven higher as the forces of modern agribusiness urge farmers to buy what they used to produce themselves in fertility and energy or to buy food for their families rather than produce it themselves. When the practice should be, according to Berry, to get as much as possible of what is needed from as near as possible, the trend in global economics is just the opposite: deeper and deeper reliance on imports from farther and farther away. This is bad enough with electronics or shoes, but it is dangerously risky with the food supply.

Beyond the expense of transportation, the concerns about monoculture farming, and the vulnerability of supply lines, there is the detachment and disinterest of distance. If our peppers come from Holland, then we have less reason to be concerned for the farming landscapes near us. And, in the interchangeability of industrial thinking, we like to believe that if the farming landscapes of Holland become incapable of producing our peppers, then surely somewhere else can do it. But pressing this thinking to make his

point, in “Farming and the Global Economy” (*ATC*, 1995), Berry says, “One thing at least should be obvious to us all: the whole human population of the world cannot live on imported food. Some people somewhere are going to have to grow the food” (p. 7). As far as Berry is concerned, the closer that is to the consumer, the better.

His thinking leads to two corollary questions for educating against loss: “How do you preserve the land in use? And how do you preserve the people who use the land?” (p. 7). Preserving the land cannot be accomplished without also preserving the people who use it. These are questions for all our economic landscapes—farms, ranches, forests, fisheries and even mining landscapes. Berry brings it back to food, saying:

The farther the food is transported, the harder it will be to answer those questions correctly. The correct answers will not come as the inevitable by-products of the aims, policies, and procedures of international trade, free or unfree. They cannot be legislated or imposed by international or national or state agencies. They can only be supplied locally, by skilled and highly motivated local farmers meeting as directly as possible the needs of informed local consumers. (p. 7)

Both farmers and consumers must rely on “local affections and allegiances” (p. 6), with the courage and independence required to be faithful to those affections and allegiances.

So here is the further truth: Preserving the land in use and the people who use it is not simply a question of how we educate the people in rural areas. Without also educating urban populations against loss, and without a rejection of the assumptions of industrialism, the patterns of colonial exploitation will continue. The farther urban populations are removed from the realities of land use, the more likely it is for that use to become abuse.



Again, if Berry's goal is for every place on earth to be loved and cared for and for everyone on earth to be able to love and care for a place, then his philosophy of education suggests how schools can help in this goal. A study of how these issues and trends play out in a small place like Port William provides the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective, a new perspective for much of modern culture, but an ancient perspective too, one more consistent with the natural world upon which we all depend.

Port William admires intelligence and does not necessarily connect it to formal education. Some characters with formal education, such as lawyers Wheeler Catlett or Henry Catlett, are acknowledged for their intelligence, but some characters without much education, such as Elton Penn or Jack Beechum, are regarded as intelligent too. Some are described directly as intelligent or as having "a good mind" (*OJ*, 1974/1999, p. 87), for example, but more often intelligence is revealed simply in what the characters do.

In his essay "Seven Amish Farms" (*GGL*, 1981), Berry lists some of the qualities required by good farming: "intelligent planning, sound judgment, and hard work" (p. 256). Intelligent planning and sound judgment are recognizable in Berry's fiction in a sense of order and an ability to strategize. To these, a study of his fiction suggests that we should add sympathetic intelligence, effective use of language, and a sense of humor. What comes from a sense of sympathy is what Burley Coulter refers to as *membership*, an understanding of a connection and responsibility to the world and all the creatures in it, including people. Burley comes to this understanding over time, and as he explains in the short story "Stand By Me," he realizes his heart has become "bigger inside than outside" (*PT*, 2012, p. 104). Burley's heart—and his sense of worry and belonging—finally grows nearly to include the whole world, but certainly all the people he knows.

Burley's sympathetic intelligence culminates in his great statement of membership, when he tells Wheeler Catlett, "The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't" (*WB*, pp. 136-137). It is a statement that recalls, from the Bible, Paul's description of the early church as members of a body (1Cor 12:12-14)—indeed Berry has called Burley's philosophy of membership "a bit of an improvement on St. Paul" (2010, May 4). It is a statement that echoes understandings of ecological interconnectedness and interdependence. It is a statement of belonging and belonging to. And it is a statement that springs from sympathy and affection.

Such intelligences—order, strategy, sympathy, use of language, and humor—are gained through the necessary lessons of Port William, forming a curriculum that educates against loss. Greatest among these necessary lessons is learning how to work hard and work well, maintaining a standard and a discipline of excellence. This is the third quality cited by Berry as required of good farming (*GGL*, 1981, p. 256). Much of the work of Port William is what the modern world would regard as drudgery, but what distinguishes hard physical work from drudgery is to recognize the work as necessary, to connect more closely to the work, and to find its meaning. For Berry, meaningless or unnecessary work is drudgery, whether physical labor or not. As he explains in *The Unsettling of America*:

We are working well when we use ourselves as the fellow creatures of the plants, animals, materials, and other people we are working with. Such work is unifying, healing. It brings us home from pride and from despair, and places us responsibly within the human estate. It defines us as we are: not too good to work with our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone. (p. 140)

This is what Port William learns, embedded in all the narratives: Do the necessary work. Work well, work with joy, work selflessly, and work in membership because membership, too, is the greatest lesson and inextricably bound to the lesson of work.

Membership has two principal lessons. The first is that people are all members, whether they know it or not. People come to a knowledge of themselves as members through imagination, sympathy, and affection. The second lesson, equally important, is that knowing oneself as a member—recognizing oneself as connected to a place and all the people and other creatures in it and connected as well to every other place—such knowledge changes a person in profound ways, opening that person to the possibility of deeper meanings, new interests, expanded consciousness, and affection.

In 2012, the National Endowment for the Humanities named Berry the 2012 Jefferson Lecturer, “the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual and public achievement in the humanities,” according to its website (National Endowment). Berry’s address was entitled “It All Turns on Affection” and was delivered on April 23, 2012, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The address—and the slightly longer essay upon which it is based—is nominally about affection, the title borrowed from a central line in E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*. But for those familiar with Berry’s writing, particularly his fiction, the address is really about membership and the need to know ourselves as members.

Imagine the task: at seventy-seven years old, on the national stage, having to encapsulate over fifty years of thinking and fifty volumes of writing into one address, just over eight-thousand words. He was trying to say again what he has spent a lifetime trying to say, trying to teach, maybe to some people who were unfamiliar with his work, who

did not know the complexity and interconnectedness of his thought. As a teacher, he must have understood the opportunity, but as a teacher too he must have felt the burden. Where to begin? What to include? What to leave out? Where to end? In other words, what would be the curriculum?

Berry began in love, with a story about his grandfather and father, and he ended in membership, without ever using the term. In between, he included all his great themes, all the necessary lessons of Port William: a promoting of a cyclic view over a linear view; a focus on the local, on stable communities and families; a call for economic justice and a full accounting of losses along with gains in any enterprise; a caution about the assumed good of industrialism and technology and competition and mobility and abstraction and hugeness; a plea, on the one hand, for a defense of our humanity and a culture to sustain it, and a reminder, on the other, that we are all implicated in our troubles; a denunciation of the violence inherent in any exploitation, of people or nature, whether social, political, economic, or physical; a warning about ecological health and nature's sense of justice; an exhortation to work well; and an articulation of a crisis: "the realization that we are at once limited and unendingly responsible for what we know and do" (2012, April 23), which alone should humble us and encourage us to be guided by sympathy and affection.

As a catalogue of Berry's major ideas, the address was impressive in its scope. As a coherent articulation of his main arguments, it was careful in its complexity. As a *ferverino* for membership, it was subtle in its appeal. He came to it through imagination, to sympathy, and to affection. After reminding his audience how "the land and people have suffered together...under the rule of industrial economics," he reminded further: "But this has not been inevitable. We do not have to live as if we are alone" (2012, April

23). So his meditation on affection ended in a call to membership, unquestionably and unsurprisingly, even without saying it, and in an implicit call for work well done.

These then are the necessary lessons of Port William: to know itself as a membership, because members work well even when no one is looking, members work with joy even in grief, members work selflessly even on their neighbor's place, and members never work alone, even when they are by themselves. The larger point, though, is that these are the necessary lessons for all people everywhere: human fulfillment through meaningful work and conscious membership within the context of nature, guided and motivated by affection for what one does, where one is, and who one is with.

The question of how best to learn these lessons of membership and work gets to the heart of the mixed feelings Port William—and Berry—has toward education. An admiration of intelligence is balanced against the recognition that intelligence is not gained through school only. A dear fondness for local schools is balanced against a suspicion that distance makes schools less responsive and less mindful of the consequences of here and now, where Port William lives and works. A deference to education is balanced against a resistance to having education wielded against Port William's best interests as a community and membership.

What follows in the next four chapters is an analysis of Berry's fiction, examining first Port William's attitudes toward higher education, then exploring three specific works of fiction in detail to understand how education, especially higher education, is portrayed in Berry's fiction. This entire study concludes with an analysis of Berry's ideas about higher education—its purpose, its problems, and its promise.

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT PORT WILLIAM THINKS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What Port William thinks of higher education is similar to what it thinks about education in general: Higher education often seems to be working against Port William's best interests. Instead of educating against loss, from Port William's point of view, colleges and universities educate *toward* loss. Port William suspects that the colleges and universities dismiss, ignore, or look down on it. Those experts from colleges and universities who do come to Port William, come with lectures not for conversation. They come to speak, but not to listen. They come with answers, but not with questions, and their answers do not always fit Port William's questions. Higher education validates all of Port William's doubts about the modern definition of progress, with its heroic attitudes of competition and ambition and a refusal to acknowledge limits, as the colleges and universities all scramble and claim to be the top of whatever heap they have staked out. From where Port William sits and thinks and does its work, the anti-economy has higher education in a stranglehold, encouraging the false standards of monetary profit, industrial efficiency, and professional success instead of stewardship, thrift, and ecological health. Moreover, as Port William sees it, higher education sees charmed by the glamour of innovation, rendering itself fickle and inconstant by its single-sighted pursuit of new technology, and its enthrallment to corporate wealth and wield. And still none of that is Port William's biggest complaint about higher education.

Not coincidentally, Port William's complaints about higher education mirror Berry's own. He has witnessed the influences, both good and bad, that higher education has had in his own life and in the life of his community. In his fiction, he dramatizes these influences in the lives of his characters. The fiction allows readers to imagine how such influences might affect people—not exactly real people, but people made to seem real by the depth of his portrayals. Like good teaching, his fiction makes use of direct instruction, something close to experience, and observation and reflection, and it all carries the weight and intensity of an array of emotions, mainly sympathy and love.

While Berry is critical of higher education generally, much of his criticism of higher education is leveled at land-grant institutions, with his sharpest criticism leveled at the schools of agriculture within those institutions. The basis of such criticism comes from what he regards as an abandonment of these institutions' legislative mandate to benefit agriculture and mechanical arts. The Morrill Act of 1862 is subtitled "An act donating public lands to the several states and territories which may provide colleges for the benefit of agriculture and mechanic arts" (Association of Public, p. 10). The language of the act makes clear the purpose:

The endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.

(Association of Public, p. 10)

Berry's complaint is that land-grant institutions have followed lockstep with modern industrialism, regardless of the health of rural people and communities or farming itself.

Neither has the Hatch Act of 1887 accomplished its purpose. This act, which created the system of agricultural experiment stations, states clearly that part of its purpose is "to promote a sound and prosperous agriculture and rural life as indispensable to the maintenance of maximum employment and national prosperity and security" (Association of Public, p. 17). Its purpose is to promote "such investigations as have for their purpose the development and improvement of the rural home and rural life" (p. 17). Over one-hundred-twenty-five years later, it is interesting to note that in 1887 agriculture was rightly connected to national security, something in our own time we forget in the modern zeal for a global economy and a faith in long-distance transportation of food. Also worth noting is the language "development and improvement of the rural home and rural life," dear enough in tone to sound more theological than political. It is a language that should take us beyond an extractive colonial relationship with rural areas and people.

If this is the charge of the land-grant system, then what Berry wants to know—and what Port William needs to know—is how can these institutions take a farm kid who loves farming and turn him or her into a farm equipment salesperson or take a farm kid who loves farming for its work outside and turn him or her into a laboratory biologist? Or in Andy Catlett's case, take a kid who loves farming for its beauty and order and turn him into an agricultural journalist? Part of the answer is the insinuation—common in our culture, even more common in higher education—that going home is defeat.

Characteristic of the industrial mindset is to measure in the simplest way possible, so that we have reduced the idea of purpose in education to something as simple as



earning potential. Largely lost is the idea that educational improvement should include qualitative measures: that education can be life-changing without requiring a person to abandon a life or home, or that education might, for example, make someone from a small community a better member of that community instead of a member of a different community or a larger community, or that education might enable people to live more richly and not simply get rich. As Berry told the Northern Kentucky University graduating class of 2009, “Education has increasingly been reduced to job training, preparing young people not for responsible adulthood and citizenship but for expert servitude to the corporations” (*WM*, 2010c, p. 32). The option of returning to one’s home community is rarely if ever offered as a legitimate choice by higher education, and Port William has known this—and suffered its effects—for a long time.

The character Mat Feltner goes to college in the early twentieth century. After two years, he feels the need to announce by a letter to his father that at the end of the term he wants to come home to stay, that he will not be finishing his degree (*Rem*, 1988/2008, p. 52). When Mat returns home, stepping off the riverboat, an old Port William citizen stops him to ask if he is Ben Feltner’s son. The old man looks Mat over and grasps his shoulder, appraising him as he would a young horse, with a stockman’s eye and hand. The man even says to Mat, “You got some good stock in you” (p. 53). Then he says what most of Port William expects of Mat: “Well, you’ll be going away now, I reckon, to make something out of yourself” (p. 53). This is what Port William thinks of higher education. This is its biggest complaint: Higher education takes the children away.

Years later, Mat’s son Virgil goes to college, and one senses that Mat himself holds his breath against the possibility that college will lead Virgil away from home,

away from the farm (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 178). After Virgil is declared missing in action in World War II, Mat recalls to Hannah, Virgil's wife, that when Virgil came home after his last year in college, Mat asked him about his plans. As Mat tells Hannah:

Lord knows, I'd wanted to know a long time before that, and he'd mentioned wanting to farm before, but the time to ask and be told never had come until then. And I was worried a good deal, because I wanted him to come home here and take this up—or wanted him to want to—and was afraid he wouldn't. And was afraid, too, that he'd see what I had on my mind. (p. 178)

A key line in what Mat says is “[I] wanted him to want to.” What Port William suspects—and what bears out to be true often enough—is that college will make children not want to farm and not want to come home. But the blame is not so easily laid on higher education alone. Parents are not good at inviting children home or making home seem inviting. But then it is all so complicated between parents and children.

In the novel *Jayber Crow* (2000b), Mat Feltner shares with Jayber a dream he has had, disturbing to him now that Virgil is dead. In the dream, Virgil is five years old, described as “a pretty little boy who hadn't yet thought of anything he would rather do than follow Mat around at work” (p. 149). This is how Mat remembers Virgil as a small boy. Then in what must have seemed like the blink of an eye, Virgil becomes the fourteen-year-old who will not listen to his father, but only to his uncle (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 171). When Mat remembers to Hannah, “[I] was afraid, too, that he'd see what I had on my mind” (p. 178), he expresses the trap parents are in, caught between the pretty little boy and the surly teen. Mat does not want Virgil to know how dearly he wants him home working with him. Mat is afraid that his hopes will put pressure on Virgil to stay

against his own hopes, and Mat is afraid that his hopes will turn Virgil away—for a parent paying attention, either outcome must seem plausible and neither is desirable.

Andrew Catlett, son of Marce and Dorie Catlett and older brother to Wheeler, goes off to college with much promise but fails, spending more time dancing than studying. Four years later when Wheeler goes to college, he must feel the pressure to succeed where his older brother failed. No doubt Wheeler has known the sacrifices made to afford to send Andrew to college—for example, their father “went without underwear that winter” (*WL*, 1996/1997, p. 95), to save the expense of new underwear, a sacrifice for a son’s education felt in a very real and personal way for a man who works outdoors. Wheeler must also have known the disappointment and shame for their parents of his brother’s failure, only adding to the pressure he must have felt on himself to do well.

Early in the twentieth century, Jack Beechum’s daughter Clara attends the one-room school near their farm. From there she attends high school at “a seminary for young ladies then flourishing” (*OJ*, 1974/1999, p. 131), far enough away that she is gone from home except in the summers. Then after high school, she attends “a small church college in central Kentucky” (p. 131), and in a sense, she is never home again; she is forever after alien to the farm and to Port William even when she is there. The Beechum farm is paid off by then, but eight years of education expenses put Jack and Ruth under new strain. Like Marce and Dorie Catlett, Jack and Ruth make sacrifices for their child’s education:

[Jack is] again forced to skimp and deny himself in order to pay [Clara’s] expenses. In the warm months he often worked without a hat or shoes. When he plowed his corn he frequently went bare-legged to keep the blades from fretting the cloth of his pants. No economy was too petty or too harsh for him, and by

such measures he gave Clara her education. And Ruth was as self-denying and as frugal as he was. She saved and used every crumb and scrap and rag. She made Clara's dresses. She sold cream and eggs so that the girl would have pin money.

(p. 131)

Clara apparently never suspects her parents' sacrifices. Within two years of graduation—a time she and her college friends spend in parties, courtships, and weddings—she too is married, living in Louisville, the wife of a banker. Ruth is pleased; Jack is resigned.

Mary Mountjoy knows “from childhood that she would be sent to college” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 66). She stays less than two months (p. 67), and chooses instead to leave school to marry Elton Penn—a decision that cuts her off from her parents, who are described as having “aristocratic pretensions” (*PT*, 2012, p. 216). The depth of their rejection is made plain in “A Place in Time: Some Chapters of a Telling Story”: “After [the marriage], she was to her parents as if she were dead or never born. They were never her parents nor she their daughter ever again” (p. 216). The rejection is about her marriage more than her leaving college. Mary's parent expected her to “be married to a solid professional man, a doctor perhaps, or (and this her mother particularly favored) perhaps a minister” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 66), so college was less about their professional aspiration for Mary than it was about their professional aspiration for Mary's would-be husband. The tragedy is that it is not college that takes Mary from them, but rather their own denunciation of her life.

The clearest sense of what Port William thinks of higher education comes in the reaction to Andy Catlett's leaving for the university in 1952. All of Port William loves Andy Catlett: they have loved and respected his grandparents and his parents, and they love Andy for his own sake. His grandmother, Margaret Feltner, sums it up for all of

them in her send-off speech to him: “Listen,” she says, “There are some of us here who love you mighty well and respect you and think you’re fine. There may be times when you’ll need to think of that” (*Rem*, 1988/2008, p. 53). As always when she wants Andy to listen, Margaret delivers what she says in a small speech to get his attention.

Andy does listen, and he realizes that “[his grandmother’s] words have made an occasion of his departure; that, he will realize later, was her gift to him” (*OJ*, 1974/1999, p. 113). He is feeling the great divide between his life thus far and his life to come, and his grandmother has helped to keep them connected:

She has reached deeply into him, into that luminous landscape of his mind where the past lives, where all of them—some who are now dead—are together, and where they will all still be together long after many of those now living will be dead. She has shaken him out of what might have been the simplicity of his leaving and has made it as complex as it really is, as she would have it be. And so as he leaves the house Andy steps out into a changed and strangely radiant world, for he is walking now not merely in the place but in his knowledge of it, surrounded by the ghosts and presences of the ones who have cared for him and watched over him there all his life, and he is accompanied by earlier versions of himself that he has lived beyond. The ache of an exultant sorrow is in his throat.  
(p. 113)

Margaret’s gift to him is to remind him that he is part of a membership, and that everything he will learn in college needs to be added to the lessons of membership.

But Port William also recognizes that Andy will go to college, that he should go to college. From an early age he is referred to simply as “college” by his Uncle Andrew

(*WL*, 1996/ 1997, pp. 32, 35, and 40). Andy is acknowledged for his intelligence. His grandmother says, “I don’t *want* him to go,...but I know it’s right. The Lord gave him a good mind” (*OJ*, 1974/1999, p. 87; italics original). To Andy she says, “I think you’ve got a good mind and it would be a shame to waste it. Your granddaddy thinks so too” (p. 112). What is less clear in these expectations and instructions is what people hope Andy will gain from attending college, or what they imagine wasting a mind would be.

Still there is a mixture of awe and dread, envy and wonder, from the men in the work crew on Andy’s last day of work with them. They tease him and encourage him as they can, these men with no experience with college. Repeatedly, Andy is admonished in a vague and clichéd way to “Keep your mind on your books” or “Mind your books and amount to something” (p. 85), or “Learn your books” (p. 119). Beyond the work crew, his grandmother tells him “I want you to apply yourself and study hard” (p. 112). An aunt says, “Be good, hon” (p. 113). A young cousin says simply, “Come back smart” (p. 114). Notably, she is the only one saying outright that she expects him to return.

They speculate and worry about him—how he will fair with girls (p. 85) and how he will get along in a city (p. 88). Mostly, Port William wonders if they have prepared him for whatever he will face. Andy’s great-uncle, Jack Beechum, acknowledges to himself that “he loves [Andy] out of kinship and because he is not afraid of work and because of his good, promising mind, but with uneasiness also” (p. 84). Why his unease? As the good stockman he is, Jack worries about Andy “because he has so little meat on his bones and has a lot to go through, a lot to make up his mind about” (p. 84). When Andy comes to say good-bye, Jack tells Andy, “Come here where I can get ahold of you” (p. 114). Andy obeys, and Jack “feels the boy’s arm from the shoulder down to the wrist,

and then he runs his hand down his leg from hip to calf, grasping and pressing, as he once would have handled a horse's leg" (p. 115). Jack ends his inspection in assessment: "Son, you're mighty nar' in the hams" (p. 115), as though considering a colt for purchase. Then Jack "shakes his head. He has been hoping the boy would muscle up some" (p. 115).

It is a characteristically tangible worry for Jack. He understands and can see physical strength and hardiness. He knows these have been required of him in his own life; he has no experience—and little interest—in the book-learning of the university, and does not know what Andy will need: "Old Jack holds to Andy's arm, looking intently up into his face. What lies ahead of this boy? Where will this departure lead him? What will he have to face? What strength is in him for the work he will have to do?" (p. 119). The answers to these questions confound Jack; they are beyond his experience or imagination.

Asking Andy what he wants to "make out of" himself (p. 115) does not help Jack. Andy says, "I don't know....A farmer, I guess" (p. 115), but Andy is doubtful because this next move of his life seems to turn him away from that. Jack too is doubtful, but he tells Andy, "You can be that" (p. 115). More experienced and less confident than Andy's young cousin, Jack still affirms the life of Port William for Andy as a possibility.

At the noon meal, Andy's grandfather, Mat Feltner, asserts that Andy has learned much already, and he tells the crew of men that they have all contributed to Andy's preparation. Mat says, "Well, he's learned some things here with us that he couldn't have learned in a school" (p. 85). Then Mat confirms the skepticism that Andy learned early about school, saying, "A lot of his teachers there won't know [the things he's learned here with us]. And if he's the boy I think he is, he won't forget them" (p. 85). Mat's comment eases his heartache and that of the work crew and grounds Andy.

Andy knows something of what he has learned too, and he appreciates it. His life to this point has taught him to love, love his people and the land, and to care about each and for each in a kind of sympathy born of imagination:

Since the beginning of [Andy's] consciousness he has felt over and around him the regard of that fellowship of kinsmen and friends, watching him, warning him, correcting him, teasing him, instructing him, not so much because of any ambition they have for him as because of where he comes from and because in him they see, come back again, traits and features of dead men and women they loved. (p. 107)

Also Andy has been taught to work, to work hard, to work well, and to get pleasure from that work. In other words, he has the tools he needs: membership and work.

It is Old Jack who admits to himself what most of them must be thinking and fearing about Andy:

[Jack] sees that he has come to an end in this boy. When Andy Catlett turns from his last visit with Uncle Jack on the porch, he will step away into a future that Old Jack does not know and that he cannot imagine. (p. 119)

Elton Penn says, "Andy, you'll get full of book learning and fine ways up there, and you won't have any more time for us here at all" (p. 85). Andy tries to deny it, but "he knows the inadequacy of such an avowal" (p. 85). They know "Andy has not yet chosen among his choices" (p. 85). Burley Coulter expresses their dread, cloaked in a joke. He says of Andy, "We'll be looking around here for the old boy, and he'll done be gone" (p. 84). It is close to what he says to Big Ellis in the story "The Requirement" (*PT*, 2012) as Big is dying: "We'll look for you and we'll miss you" (p. 179). Surely it is one of Burley's



catch phrases, and that he applies it to Andy is a mark of how he fears his relationship with Andy ending—that Andy’s going to college will make him, in effect, dead to them.

Even Andy feels the possibility of this rupture. He feels “a strange sorrow” in his last week of work before college (p. 109). He finally identifies it as fear:

It was fear that in order to be what he might become he would have to cease to be what he had been, he would have to turn away from that place to which his flesh and his thoughts and his devotion belonged. (p. 109)

This is not some notion Andy has made up; this is what he has been schooled to believe:

For it was the assumption of much of his schooling, it was in the attitude of most of his teachers and schoolmates, it was in the bearing of history toward such places as Port William and even Hargrave, that achievement, success, all worthy hope lay elsewhere, in cities, in places of economic growth and power; it was assumed that a man must put away his origin as a childish thing. (109)

This is Andy’s sorrow, and it will be relieved in no way by his experience in college.

At the same time that he fears this next step in his life, Andy wonders too, with everyone else, if he is prepared:

Now [Andy] is getting ready to leave that place and life that have made him what he is. He is going to bring that old life, familiar to him as though he has known it for generations, to the test of what he does not know: a strange city, books and voices that will be a new world to him. (p. 109)

It is a double sorrow for Andy: uncertain of where his path is leading and uncertain if he is up to the unknown journey. It is the great question and tragedy of education, the worry teachers and parents have about the young: “Where are they going and what will they

need to know?" It is what gives Wheeler Catlett's hugs their force and urgency: "as if foreseeing the times when he would be unable to decide for me or protect me" (*ACET*, 2006, p. 79). Will Andy be strong enough to find his way home? Or as all of Port William expects, will higher education take him away?

But Mat Feltner does not go away. He marries his longtime love, Margaret Finley, and settles in to become one of Port William's leading citizens. Neither does Virgil leave until the military calls him away. After Virgil is home from college and Mat finally breaks down and asks his son what his plans are, Virgil tells his father that he wants to stay home and farm. Later, when Mat is telling Hannah about it, he is moved by the memory, needing "to steady and gather himself" (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 178) before he can continue. "I'll never forget it," he tells Hannah. "I'd have liked to just stop everything right there and celebrate" (p. 178). That he does not celebrate might be because he does not dare show Virgil his joy for fear it will change Virgil's mind: Mat has felt the sting of his son's rebellion enough times perhaps not to trust such candor between them yet.

Wheeler nearly goes away. In spite of or because of his older brother's example, Wheeler succeeds in college—he is described as "an apt and ambitious student" (*Rem*, 1988/2008, p. 56)—and goes on to work for a congressman and attend law school in Washington, D.C., his way set for important positions away from home. Congressman Franklin lines up job opportunities for Wheeler once he has graduated from law school:

Mr. Franklin assumed, along with virtually every teacher Wheeler had ever had, that Wheeler's destiny was to be that of thousands of gifted country boys since the dawn of the republic, and before: college and then a profession and then a job in the city. This was the path of victory, already trodden out and plain. (p. 56)

But this is not the path for Wheeler—he rejects that life to come home to practice law and farm. He makes it his business to defend the way of life he loves:

But the complexity of Wheeler’s history has been that in order to serve and defend the way of life that he loves and respects above all others, he has had to leave it to live another kind of life, first in college and law school and then in the courthouse town of Hargrave. (*OJ*, 1974/1999, p. 163)

Still, he is near to home and to those he loves, near to the life his loves—near enough:

He has stayed near enough to home—to the farms and households and sickbeds and then the graves of those men whose worthiness and whose troubles first defined his aims—so that he has always had clearly in mind what it was he served. (p. 163)

His law office in Hargrave provides a springboard to the farm in Port William where his real interest resides. He has stayed near enough to home to farm still, to feel like a farmer.

Andy Catlett’s road home after college is not as direct as his father’s. He has “resigned himself to living in cities” (*Rem*, 1988/2008, p. 59). His lessons in college have told him that is how it must be:

That was what his education was for, as his teachers all advised and he believed.

Its purpose was to get him away from home, out of the country, to someplace where he could live up to his abilities. He needed an education, and the purpose of an education was to take him away. (p. 59)

The thought “grieved” him, “but no one he met at the university offered him reprieve. He could amount to something, maybe; all he needed was an education, and a little polish” (p. 59). One of his freshman professors even says to him, “For Christ’s sake, Catlett, try

to take on a little *polish* while you're at it. You don't have to go through the world *alarmed* because other people don't have cowshit on their shoes" (p. 59; italics original). However much one might sympathize with this professor's attempts to help his student, the layers of messages about Andy, his home, and his heart become clear to Andy.

Andy goes away, first to San Francisco, then Chicago, working as an agricultural journalist. Far from home, he accepts as correct the ways of modern agriculture:

That bigger was better and biggest was best; that people coming into a place to use it need ask only what they wanted, not what was there; that whatever in humanity or nature failed before the advance of this mechanical ambition deserved to fail; and that the answers were in the universities and the corporate and government offices, not in the land or the people. (p. 60)

His time in college and after has made Andy forget the lessons of membership:

He was capable, in those days, of forgetting all that his own people had been. He loved them, he thought, but he had gone beyond them as the world had. He was a long way, then, from his father's ideal of good pasture, and from all that his old friend Elton Penn was and stood for and meant. (p. 60)

Andy has not forgotten so much though that it does not come back to him when he sees it again in the difference between an agribusinessman and an Amish farmer and how they each farm. Andy's recognition of what he knows as good about farming leads to an argument with his editor at *Scientific Farming* about which farmer should be featured in the magazine, and Andy finds the strength to come home (pp. 60-76).

Berry is fond of acknowledging that "you don't have a control plot for your life" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). None of us knows how a chosen life

compares with an alternative. Neither can we know if Andy would have had a better life had he and his family stayed in Chicago. We can know, however, that he could no longer write features on agribusinessmen. We can know that he is pleased to know himself as part of a membership. We can know how his Feltner grandparents were comforted to have him near at the end of their lives, as he too was comforted to be near. We can know too his parents' joy—perhaps a joy so profound that even they are surprised by it—in having their son and his family near.

In a deeply moving scene from the novel *Remembering*, Andy and Flora Catlett are visiting Burley Coulter. Burley's son and daughter-in-law, Danny and Lyda Branch are living with Burley by then, along with their children. As well as being friends, neighbors, and workmates on their farms, Andy and Danny share a lineage that goes back to the earliest days of white settlement in their part of Kentucky. Burley is digging through his shoebox of mementos, showing various keepsakes, remembering and telling the stories of their shared family and past with a reverence for both.

Burley names the names of these ancestors in litany. Finally he comes to an ancient piece of paper, folded and faded, and asks Andy to read it since Burley's eyes are failing. It was written by Letitia McGown Coulter, great-great-great grandmother to Andy and Danny, written down so she would never forget, and it tells of the departure of her daughter Betsy Coulter, newly married to Will Rowanberry. They are leaving, headed someplace unnamed in the remembering, and all at once the immensity of the departure completely overshadows what must have been the excitement and celebration of the recent wedding and preparations for the couple's new life. Letitia writes that it was as though they all realized at once that this was the last time they would see each other:

I seen it come over [Betsy] how far they was a going & she must look at us to remember us forever & it come over her pap and me and the others We stood & looked & knowed it was all the time we had & from now on we must remember We must look now forever. (p. 88).

She recalls watching the wagon lumber away and seeing Betsy waving, her hand the last thing that can be seen as the wagon crests a hill and sinks out of sight. Letitia writes that she regrets not going a ways with them, just for a longer look. She even schemes out how far she might have gone to be able still to have walked home by dark. But in the end she knows that however far she might have accompanied them, it would have ended the same, with the fading glimpse of her daughter's waving hand.

The narrative, written late in Letitia's life, ends with a devastating revelation and the faint, distant comfort of hope in a hereafter: "God bless her I never knowd what become of her I will never see her in this world again" (p. 88). We never learn what became of Betsy and Will. Maybe they had a wonderful life together. Maybe they never gave a thought to the loved ones they left behind in Kentucky. Maybe they, like the first Coulters and first Rowanberrys in Kentucky, begot generations of families in a new territory. Maybe they had the comfort of living and dying surrounded by their children and their children's children. But what if they felt the loss of their separation from their homes and families? What if they had wanted to come home but were prevented or embarrassed or uncertain of their welcome or simply never considered it an option?

Modern transportation and communication fool us into thinking such a departure of a child is less devastating today, but if we are honest, the separation can be every bit as heartbreaking and finally unnatural as Betsy's from her parents. One imagines the well-

meaning way the parents helped plan and prepare for their daughter's new life, how from the first moment of her life, they worked and hoped for a good life—even a better life—for their child. It is what good parents do. They help children prepare, teaching them what they imagine they will need to know, teaching them to work. They send children to school; they send some to college; they send them out into the world because finally, as Berry writes, “children...must be risked to the world” (*GGL*, 1981, p. 159). Then comes the dawning for parents, slow for some, more sudden for others, that they have been complicit in their own undoing—that with the best intentions, they have created their own worst heartbreak by helping to equip their children with the courage, the independence, the skills, and the knowledge to leave home. Berry described the process this way:

The older people want what's best for the children. So generation after generation, they've done their best to get them out. “You can't amount to anything around here,” they've said, and that's what the school system has been saying. And so by doing that, the older generation undoes the family first, and then the community, and finally the whole society. It's really very destructive. With the best intentions. And their best intentions for the young have had the worse consequences sometimes for the young. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

The lesson most parents forget to teach and schools rarely know is that the best life can be at home. An education against loss needs to include a unit on finding one's way home. Especially higher education, which often takes students away from home, needs to include such lessons.

The Coulters have endured into the twenty-first century in that part of fictional Kentucky, under the names of Coulter and Catlett and Branch, but those familiar with the

list of characters who populate the Port William neighborhood will recognize the name Rowanberry and know that when he left with Betsy, Will was not the last Rowanberry in the area, but by the late twentieth century, bachelor brothers Mart and Art are. In the short story “Are You All Right?” (*TDL*, 2004b), Elton Penn and Andy Catlett go to check on Mart and Art during a high spring flood in 1973, when the Rowanberry farm is cut off by overflow from the river and backwater flooding over roads. Elton has thought to wonder about their safety, and his wonder turns to worry and spreads to Andy, until they both feel moved to make the trek in the dark to see for themselves.

The story is told from Andy’s point of view, and he allows that he and Elton are both “a little embarrassed” (*TDL*, 2004b, p. 365) about their worry for two men who have long proven their ability to take care of themselves, and who come from a long line of men who proved themselves able to care for themselves:

The Rowanberry Place had carried that name since the first deeds were recorded in the log cabin that was the first courthouse at Hargrave. Rowanberrys had been taking care of themselves there for the better part of two hundred years. We knew that Arthur and Martin Rowanberry required as little worrying about as anybody alive. But now, in venturing to worry about them, we had put them, so to speak, under the sign of mortality. They were, after all, the last of the Rowanberrys, and they were getting old. (*TDL*, pp. 365-366)

From the short story “At Home” (*PT*, 2012), we know in 1981, when Art is seventy-six and Mart is seventy-one, that “the family had no younger member who wanted such a farm or even a better one. After so many years as the Rowanberry place, it was coming to a time when finally it would have to be sold” (p. 200). It is more than sentimentality to



regret this turning; it is a practical concern for the land itself and the passing on of the knowledge of how to care for it well. When the farm sells in the mid-1980s, it has four owners over the next twenty-five years (p. 189). The farm needs better care. It needs better knowledge. It needs better hope.

But the story of the Rowanberry brothers is a cautionary tale in another way, and it helps to answer the question of why Port William—given the record of loss—continues to risk some of its children to college and all of its children to the world. What we learn from Art and Mart is that maybe it is possible to be too satisfied at home, or satisfied too quickly. In the same way that Mat Feltner wanted Virgil to want to come home without knowing what Mat was hoping for, Port William wants its children to consider some options and then choose home. Whether they admit it or not, parents want it all for their children: they want them to have the strength to leave and the strength to come home.

Toward the beginning of the novel *Nathan Coulter* (2008), Nathan as narrator is a little boy. He has noticed that “the hills on our side of the river were green, and on the other side they were blue. They got bluer farther away” (pp. 6-7). These strange blue hills must seem exotic and attractive to Nathan, and he apparently has commented to his Uncle Burley about them. Burley explains that those faraway hills are still green; they just look blue because of the distance.

Nathan still admires those distant hills: “That was a pretty color for hills; the little houses and barns and fields looked so neat and quiet tucked against them. It made you want to be close to them” (p. 7). Then Burley, who has rambled a bit in his day and seen other parts of the world through his service in World War I, gives Nathan a lesson in loving one’s own place:

[Burley] said that when you got close they were like the hills you'd left, and when you looked back your own hills were blue and you wanted to go back again. He said he reckoned a man could wear himself out going back and forth. (p. 7)

It is a statement against the necessity and expectation of mobility in modern industrial culture. It is a statement about loving one's place and freeing oneself of "the litter of alternatives" (p. 11), as Berry terms it in his short story "Nothing Living Lives Alone" (2011, Spring). It is a statement about a kind of peace that comes from satisfaction with what one has, and the limitlessness within the limit of one's time and space.

Someday Nathan will discover for himself that the distant hills are not blue. Someday he will understand that one of the things he loves about his home in his green hills is the view of blue hills across the river. Until that time, he is fortunate to have Uncle Burley to tell him the fool's errand of searching for blue hills.

The novel *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001) is set in the spring of 1945, near the end of World War II. Many of Port William's young people are away from home for the war effort, so the book is about coping with that absence, whether temporary or permanent. Those left at home—the parents, the grandparents, the rest—must deal with the emotional strain of separation, compounded by the knowledge and fear that the separation may be forever. But the absence of the young causes a physical and economic strain as well, and this must be dealt with too. When the neighborhood's strong, capable young men are away from home, the physical work of farming becomes spread more heavily on those still at home. Even the less capable men who might be hired as farm hands are in short supply. As Berry tells it, this shifting of the rural population away from home is a situation that agriculture never recovers from.

Compounding the loss of able help in the present and knowledgeable help in the future—help that is familiar with a particular farm and field, help that might be capable of particularized stewardship—is the effect of industrialized warfare on the mind of American culture. Berry believes that what he refers to as the doctrine of “maximum force relentlessly applied” (*CP*, 2003, p. 29) takes a firm hold of the collective psyche after World War II, opening our minds not only to industrialized agriculture, but also to possibilities such as mountaintop removal coal mining, off-shore oil drilling, and global transnational corporations—possibilities that for Berry are dangerously beyond the limits of our capabilities. The natural outcome of this thinking in agriculture is the “get big or get out” advice of the United States Department of Agriculture beginning in the 1950s and the practice of fencerow-to-fencerow plowing, monoculture farming, and large confinement industrial animal production.

Along with the young people who lost their lives in World War II, there were others who lose their way home, as Art Rowanberry nearly does while walking the last part of his journey home, when he is so tired that he begins to feel “a sort of aimlessness” (*Fid*, p. 94) that makes him afraid he will walk right past his home. Art fears, in a counterintuitive way, that if he does not rest—if he keeps going now when he is so tired—he will not be able to stop when he reaches his home. He rests for the night, and then he has the strength the next day to stop when he completes his journey and arrives home. How many others, far from home after World War II, were too tired to begin the journey home, or too tired to end their journey at home?

All of these circumstances working together have worsened what Berry call a kind of “emergency” (*CP*, 2003, p. 179) in his essay “Tuscany.” In the essay, he laments

the changes he observed in farming practices from 1962 when he spent a year in Italy and 1992 when he visited again. In 1962, the farming of Tuscany was diversified, integrated, and ancient, working with nature and its processes not against them, and living fully within the limits of those processes and constraints, including gravity. The work was done by people and draft animals, fertility was returned to the soil and not discarded as waste, and field and plowing practices conformed to the contours and characteristics of the land and place. In short, it was farming elaborately and elegantly adapted to its place.

When he returned in 1992, such traditional practices had been replaced by the generalized and reductive practices of industrial agriculture. Berry observes an obvious and distressing consequence of this change: “The shift from the old horizontal cultivation of the slopes, natural to man and beast, to the up-and-down cultivation enabled, and even required, by machines” (p. 176). He notes “the resulting soil erosion may be understood as something that inevitably happens when the attention, memory, and affection of the people have been alienated from the land” (p. 176). In other words, what had happened in Tuscany from 1962 to 1992 was similar to what he witnessed in his part of Kentucky after World War II and what he writes about happening in the fictional world of Port William. The alienation of people’s attention, memory, and affection from the land can be traced in part to the economic and social forces in modern culture that tend to make people assume that the young as not needed or not welcome or not expected at home.

Berry says plainly in that essay too that he does not believe “that the old was all good and the new is all bad” (p. 176). Nor is he claiming “that there is something invariably destructive in the use of industrial machinery in agriculture” (p. 176). Instead he is asking that we accept “that we have not thought as carefully as we must think about

how and on what scale the machines ought to be used” (p. 176), and that “the substitution of industrial standards for agrarian standards in the land economies is a costly mistake” (p. 176). Health is the prime standard for Berry, but local adaptation is contained within that standard, as is an acknowledgement of limits. “Industrialism,” says Berry, “damages agriculture by removing the cultural, economic, and technological constraints that assure propriety of scale” (p. 177), and a disregard of scale leads away from health.

Essential to those agricultural standards is having enough people to farm well in a particular place—knowledgeable farming, locally adapted to the place, farming that ensures the long-term health of the place. To the extent that our culture generally and higher education particularly is working to make returning home generally and farming particularly unappealing or unattractive to young people, we are exacerbating the emergency. We need people with the knowledge, experience, and affection to farm in a way that is locally adapted to preserve the health of the place. As Berry notes:

Our great error has been to learn to think of the world as a collection of nations, when in fact it is a collection of *places*, differing from one another according to climate, soil, daylength, altitude, exposure, drainage, and ecology, as well as cultural demand and economic need. Small places, side by side, can sometimes differ complexly. (p. 177)

So along with attention, memory, and affection, farming well requires intelligence.

Here is where Berry’s argument becomes even broader about higher education and his indictment more complete. The sensitivity required of local adaptation in farming calls for an intelligence that is complex and nuanced. It calls for problem-solving skills that are proven, yet locally applied. It calls for creativity and courage. It calls for broad

and varied knowledge, particularly applied. It calls for critical judgment able to identify exemplary models, then able to modify the lessons of those exemplars for local use. It calls for communication skills effective enough both to listen and to make one's voice heard. As Berry sees it, good farming makes it necessary "to keep our thinking sound enough and complex enough to deal effectively with actual problems and needs" (pp. 179-180). The point is that these are the skills and knowledge, the disciplines and habits of mind, that one could reasonably expect to gain from an education. To the extent that colleges and universities are failing to help their students make such local and personal connections with their learning, higher education is exacerbating the emergency.

As much as *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001) is about coping with absence and loss, it is also a book about waiting. Set in 1945, the novel gives a deeply personal look at that waiting through the Feltner household, as Mat and Margaret, along with Virgil's wife Hannah, wait after learning that Virgil is missing in action. Late in the evening of the day they have received the notice, Margaret is preparing for bed. Mat has gone out for a walk, too restless for sleep, and the house is quiet, quiet enough now that Margaret can hear what she has been expecting since they received word of Virgil, what she has known was there: "the sounds of outcry and of weeping...as if deep in her body" (p. 61). In this silent distress, Margaret waits for her son: "In the quiet of the house she waits, as though, divided from Virgil by half the world, she might hear him breathe" (p. 61). As terrible as this waiting is, it is familiar to Margaret: "She waited, after his birth, to hear him cry. She has waited, even in her sleep, to hear him wake. Here, in this house, she has waited for him to come back from a thousand departures" (p. 62). Now that he has been declared missing in action, she waits for news that he is found, but such news will never come:

“He was born out of her body into this absence. She will hear every footstep, the opening of every door” (p. 62). His absence is familiar, and she lives in it now, but still she waits for his return.

That portrait of a mother’s personal waiting and personal loss has its counterpart in the waiting and loss of the entire community. A striking symbol of this sort of suspension of life is the never-ending, scored-but-never-totaled, card game that develops in the back office of Jasper Lathrop’s store, stripped of all its merchandise, its mission suspended while Jasper is in the service. It is an empty building, serving no purpose during this time except to house the worry and waiting of the older men of the community as they rotate in and out to play or merely watch the serial game of cards.

In December 1943, young Andy Catlett, looking for his Granddaddy Feltner, discovers the card game. Andy’s grandmother has told him where to look. Andy says:

As I watched it came to me that they were waiting: Granddaddy and Frank Lathrop, each with a son in the army; Grover Gibbs, whose son, Billy, was in the air force; Burley Coulter, whose nephews, Tom and Nathan, had gone off to the army, and who now could hope that Nathan only might return; Jayber Crow, whose calling seems to have been to wait with the others. They were suffering and enduring and waiting, waiting together, joined in their unending game, submitted as the countryside around them was submitted. (*ACET*, 2006, p. 139)

In one sense, the scene is emblematic of all home communities during war, the held-breath dread and the guarded anticipation of safe homecoming. In another sense, in Jasper Lathrop’s back office, *A Place on Earth* provides a prescient portrait of what would happen in rural areas after World War II, compressed in time and intensified by

the urgency of war: The older generation waits for the young to come home, endlessly playing a meaningless card game in the back of an empty store.

By the early 1960s, Port William begins to crack under the strain of waiting for their young people to come home. The town doctor dies and no young doctor wants to replace him. Milton Burgess dies with no one inclined to take over the running of the store, and Burgess General Merchandise closes and eventually the building sells for back taxes. The grade school has closed by then too, and the building is eventually repurposed into a nursing home for the sick and aged, a fitting reflection of the decline of the community. This is about the time Andy and Flora Catlett return with their children to purchase the old Harford farm and make their stand in Port William, and the signs of decline are everywhere. Andy remembers of Port William at the time: “The life of the place itself frets and fritters away” (*Rem*, 1988, 2008, p. 96).

Jayber Crow reports an image that stuck with him from that time: “One night some drunken prophet scrawled COME HOME in a big scripture of green paint on one of the windows” of the building that had been Burgess’s store (*JC*, 2000b, p. 275). This might have been a forgettable incidence of vandalism except that the use of the words *prophet* and *scripture* elevate the message to the significance of sacred text. Still, the image itself carries the green anger and pointless despair of graffiti. It is as though Port William itself were crying out in distress: “Enough. We can wait no longer.” But the intended audience of this sacred text does not get the message. They cannot get the message because they are not there to read it.

This is precisely the problem: Port William is too coy or too unaware in its pedagogy of loving one’s home. As Andy said of his work with Jake Branch: It



“abandon[s] [its children] to a vast and chancy curriculum of which nobody was in charge” (*TDL*, 2004b, p. 238), and hopes they will figure things out for themselves. Port William depends on the anonymous groanings of graffiti scrawled in the night to deliver instructions in an empty lecture hall. The failure of the pedagogy has several causes: In part, it is because Port William often does not recognize the importance of the lesson until the children are gone; in part, it is because Port William dares not hint at what it hopes for fear of undue influence either way; in part, it is because the lesson Port William dares not utter is contradicted by schools, especially higher education.

Port William cannot afford to lose all its children. People everywhere—in small places and large places—have a stake in helping children—Port William’s and their own—find their way home. And we could use some help from the schools. In as much as every person everywhere depends on the well-being of our economic landscapes, the well-being of small places like Port William has to be everyone’s concern. In as much as we might all benefit from having our children close by, the most important lesson we learn from Port William is that we can and we should be much more intentional in our teaching on the importance of home. In as much as higher education is contributing to this practical and personal emergency for our young people and our world, higher education has to do better.

The next chapter of this study examines the novel *Hannah Coulter* to understand this emergency from another perspective. In many ways, the story of *Hannah Coulter* is an extended portrait of a failure to educate against loss.

## CHAPTER V

### THE EDUCATION OF *HANNAH COULTER*

In “The Work of Local Culture” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry says that in our current education system “Our children are educated, then, to leave home, not to stay home, and the costs of this education have been far too little acknowledged. One of the costs is psychological, and the other is at once cultural and ecological” (p. 164). An examination of these costs—psychological, cultural, and ecological—is at the heart of the novel *Hannah Coulter* (2004a). The novel presents the life story of Hannah Coulter, told in her voice and from the perspective of old age. Her story begins in the ancient desire of parents to want what is best for their children and ends in the realization that their efforts have led to their children’s departure. The arc of her life is, in many ways, propelled by education. Berry himself acknowledges that *Hannah Coulter* is “probably as good a commentary as I’ve made on education” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011), making the novel a useful focus for detailed analysis.

However, I would argue that *Hannah Coulter* offers only part of Berry’s commentary. While there is much in the novel to help reveal his thinking on teaching and learning, his commentary in the novel is largely on what is wrong with education, chiefly the dangers of placelessness in higher education. For what can be right about education, for a hopeful portrait of education at its best, I recommend *Jayber Crow* (2000b), examined in detail in the next chapter.

## Hannah the Student: Becoming Some Account

Hannah's parents live in the house her father was born in, sharing the work of the farm and household with her father's mother, Arvinia Steadman, whom Hannah calls Grandmam. Hannah is seven at the start of the Great Depression, with a devastating drought the next year. In thinking back on that life, Hannah knows it was hard, "but," she says, "there was understanding among us, we were never hungry, and we had good neighbors" (*HC*, 2004, p. 7). Hannah is twelve when her mother dies. When her father remarries, Grandmam sees that Hannah is in danger of being lost in the circumstances.

Hannah's father is described as "capable and a master of making do" (p. 7), but "not a man of...much sense about anything beyond his day-to-day life of making do and doing without" (p. 11). The brains of the outfit is Hannah's grandmother: "It was because of Grandmam's intelligence and knowledge and thrift that we always had a plenty to eat and enough, though sometimes just barely enough, of everything else" (p. 11). But late in her life, Hannah can see that Grandmam's influence on her life went beyond ensuring she had enough to eat. Hannah says, "Grandmam, as I have seen in looking back, was the decider of my fate. She shaped my life, without of course knowing what my life would be" (p. 11). This shaping of life and deciding of fate connects directly to Hannah's education, both formal and informal. Grandmam is Hannah's protector. She has sized up her son as unable to stand up to his new wife and her interest in her own sons, and so Grandmam takes it upon herself to be Hannah's advocate and guardian. She makes sure Hannah has a space for herself in the house, close to Grandmam and removed from the others. This helps to secure her present. Then Grandmam starts to work on securing her future. As Hannah comes to see, Grandmam "was determined to mold me into something

that could stay alive” (p. 19). She plans how to give Hannah the strength to survive, how to ensure, in effect, that Hannah has some power—practical, financial, and intellectual.

Grandmam starts with what she has needed to know to maintain a home and farm. In contrast to Mary Penn, who has to learn on the job as a young wife from the women in her neighborhood (*Fid*, 1992, pp. 61-81), Hannah learns what she will need when she is still a girl, from her grandmother, who begins a deliberate, methodical campaign to teach Hannah the practical skills and knowledge of living on a farm. Hannah recalls that Grandmam “taught me many things that I was going to need to know, without either of us knowing I would need to know them” (p. 11). Hannah knows work. Like most of the children in Berry’s fiction, she has been contributing to the work of the household since she was little. “We would all be at work together,” she says, “sometimes with neighbors” (p. 6). Hannah says she “helped and had my own jobs to do from the time I was five or six years old” (pp. 6-7). She knows how to work, but her grandmother takes charge to make sure Hannah learns what she will need and that she learns it in the right way.

When Hannah is working with Grandmam, it is not simply as a helper. She is an apprentice; she is a student to Grandmam’s lessons of work and good sense. Hannah probably knew it at the time, but she certainly knows it looking back. She remembers:

I learned all the things she knew, which turned out to be all the things I would need to know after I married Nathan in 1948. Though [Grandmam] could not have known it, and she never knew it, the things she taught me were good seeds that sprouted and grew. (p. 13)

By 1948, Grandmam is dead, and Hannah means that Grandmam did not know Hannah in that life, did not see her putting her knowledge and skills to work with Nathan on their

farm together. She is acknowledging too a fundamental dynamic of education: Teachers teach on hope, rarely knowing with certainty the outcome of their work.

Grandmam also recognizes the value of financial power. She tells Hannah, “You have got to have some money, child” (p. 12), with the urgency implicit in the phrase “have got to.” So Grandmam devises a way to make it a paid apprenticeship, paying Hannah in money from the sale of eggs and cream. With this money, she expects Hannah to buy her own clothes and what personal items she needs, and she also expects Hannah to start saving money. This arrangement not only allows Hannah to gain some financial sense and thrift, but it also empowers her with the options afforded by the money she is able to save. Knowledge and some financial margin help to secure Hannah’s future. But the arrangement also helps to secure her present because it gives Hannah protection from discord at home: “That, as Grandmam foresaw, gave me a certain independence from Ivy [her father’s new wife], who then couldn’t blame me for spending my father’s money” (p. 14). Grandmam’s strategic intelligence may not have been clear to Hannah at the time, but it is abundantly clear to her from the perspective of old age, and Hannah admires it.

Along with practical and financial power, Hannah needs intellectual power, and Grandmam sees that Hannah studies hard and learns in school. Grandmam herself had completed only the eighth grade. Because of that, Hannah understands and explains, “school was a big thing to her” (p. 13). The urge to provide better opportunities for the young than what were possible for the older generation propels much of what parents do. It is an instinct of good intentions.

Grandmam makes her expectations about school known to Hannah and encourages her: “You have got to learn your books. You have got to keep at your studies”

(p. 13). She creates a quiet space and time for Hannah to do her schoolwork. She also offers a physical presence of support and an example of diligence and persistence:

And so at night, after the others had cleared out of the kitchen and we had put away the dishes, we would sit down across the table from each other, the best oil lamp between us, she with her work basket and mending and I with my books. We would sometimes look up from our work and talk a little, taking a rest, but neither of us went to bed until my homework was done. (p. 13)

Grandmam also shows her interest in Hannah's life and education by talking with her and asking about her life at school. Further, she makes sure that Hannah has hope and is aware of it, asking her in their conversations what she hopes for (p. 14). It is a strategy that works. Hannah graduates as valedictorian of her class at the Shagbark School, a distinction that Grandmam appreciates and announces with pride to anyone she meets.

As noted above, Grandmam's preferred teaching method is apprenticeship. She tells Hannah, "Listen. You have got to learn to be some account. From now on, when you're at home and you're not at your studies, I want you to help me" (p. 13), and so the apprenticeship is framed in terms of learning and self-improvement. The apprenticeship is directed, thoughtful, and hands-on. In this way, Hannah learns through experience, trial and error, direct instruction from a master of the discipline, close observation of work well done, and a standard of work that encouraged care and quality. "Grandmam was a demanding woman" (p. 13), says Hannah, "a hard teacher when she needed to be. She made me do my work in the right way" (p. 13). Through her six years of working beside Grandmam, Hannah learns the art and discipline of a home economy based on a farm that provides most of the food a family needs and a small income for whatever else is needed.

These are the practical skills and knowledge that serve Hannah well throughout her life. From her perspective toward the end of her life, Hannah judges that “[Grandmam] gave me knowledge just as worthy as any that I got from books, and of more use” (p. 13).

There is an urgency too in Grandmam’s scheme and the way she presents it (“Listen. You have got to learn to be some account”). She needs Hannah to know everything, and she needs her to know it fast. Her young daughter-in-law has just died, and now she has taken on the instruction of her granddaughter—she has to have felt the press of her own mortality. Indeed within a short four years of Hannah’s leaving home, Grandmam is dead (p. 46). If part of the urgency is time, the other parts are immensity and uncertainty. With all there is to know and without knowing what knowledge and skills will be needed, how can one figure what to teach and what to teach first? Berry describes such an uncertain calculus as “an inherent tragedy” (2006/2007b, p. 196), because, as quoted in Chapter I, “We don’t know enough to teach the young. We don’t even know enough to decide what they need to know. But we’ve got to make a gamble” (p. 196). Elsewhere, he described the situation as “desperate”: “If you’re trying to teach people to maintain the indispensable things of human culture, you know immediately that it’s a desperate business. You’ve got to teach like fury” (1991/2007, p. 45).

In her way, this is the task Grandmam sets for herself. She had identified the indispensable things that Hannah should know as far as Grandmam is able to see what Hannah’s life might be. Now she is teaching like fury—sometimes instructing directly, but more often, putting Hannah where she can learn by experience. And like good teachers throughout time, Grandmam begins the only way she can: with what she knows has been necessary—indispensable—to her, building on the knowledge of the past.

Yet in Hannah's memory of Grandmam's instruction—this teaching “like fury”—there is nothing to suggest anything but a patient, methodical approach to teaching. When asked what teaching like fury looks like, Berry answered, “It means teaching with passion, with the conviction that it's important” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Grandmam's pedagogy may be passionate, it may be enflamed by her love for Hannah, it may even be desperate, but it is not undisciplined or scattered. There is an internal order and intelligence to her curriculum that teaches Hannah to admire both.

The unknowable quality of the future is a common theme with Berry, and for one person to imagine the future of another is for Berry “a form of oppression” (1993/2007b, p. 92). Still, he believes we have a responsibility to prepare the young “for the experience of living in an unpredictable world” (2006/2007b, p. 196), which requires planning and what can seem like guesswork. This is an ancient duty, one that we have learned from the past. In “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry said, “We have the same pressing need that we have always had—to love, care for, and teach our children” (p. 188). That is, we owe the future some form of preparation, but Berry believes we also owe respect to the past and the present, tempered by critical judgment.

Berry objects to a focus on the future that dismisses the worth of what has come before, and he insists that the only way to learn—as an individual, as a community, as a society, as the human race—is to build on the past. In an interview, Berry said:

You can't look to the future for instruction; there's nothing there. The only place we get anything from is the past. We get our language from the past; we get the knowledge of what works and what hasn't worked only from the past.

(1991/2007, p. 37)



Grandmam has a duty to teach Hannah, and there is no place to start but here and now—what has been built from the past.

If we have a duty to teach the young, then some planning is involved. Writes Berry in *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), “It is no doubt impossible to live without thought of the future; hope and vision can live nowhere else. But the only possible guarantee of the future is responsible behavior in the present” (p. 58).

Furthermore, planning is a kind of affirmation of life. As Berry said in an interview:

A plan is really useful for signifying to yourself and other people that you like living, that you’re looking forward to living some more, that you have a certain appetite to continue the enterprise. But one’s real duty to the future is to do as you should do *now*. Make the best choices, do the best work, fulfill your obligations in the best way you can. (1993/2007b, p. 93; italics original)

One of our obligations, according to Berry, is hope:

Hope is one of our duties. A part of our obligation to our own being and to our descendants is to study our life and our condition, searching always for the authentic underpinnings of hope. And if we look, these underpinnings can still be found. (*SEFC*, 1992/1993, p. 11)

In this way, the future is shaped by lessons from the past and hope learned in the present.

For Berry, the other error people make about the future is accepting inevitability. Berry is definite that the future is neither deterministic nor inevitable. He has said that he is “tired of that word *inevitable*” (2010, May 3) because its acknowledgement seems to provide people with an excuse to give up. In that same interview, he described the word as “part of the vocabulary of very lazy people” (2010, May 3). About the ecosphere,

Berry notes, “Our destructiveness has not been, and it is not, inevitable. People who use that excuse are morally incompetent, they are cowardly, and they are lazy” (*WI*, 2005c, p. 26). He elaborates on this idea in *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), saying, “that use of the word ‘inevitable’ obviates the need to consider any alternative, and a person confronting only a single possibility is well beyond any need to think” (p. 53). While the technocrats tend to see the rise of technology as inevitable and in step with science, Berry notes that such thinking “is not scientific objectivity or science or scholarship” (*CP*, p. 108). To claim inevitability about the future is also to surrender a claim on the present.

In the novel *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2006), young Andy Catlett is visiting at his Feltner grandparents’ house where Hannah, his aunt by marriage, is living too. Andy is fond of Hannah and interested in hearing about her childhood near Shagbark. He asks if she ever imagined she would live in Port William. “Not an idea in this world” Hannah answers. “So all this is a surprise?” Andy asks, charmed by the idea. “Yep,” Hannah tells him, “Every bit of it” (p. 126). This is the gamble that parents and teachers make: What to teach when it is all a surprise. In spite of such uncertainty, Hannah is aware in retrospect that Grandmam was thinking about Hannah’s future: “She was looking ahead” (*HC*, 2004a, p. 12). For Berry, this unknowable quality of the future is a call to remain alert and learning. But if life is a surprise, then it has to be recognized that how we meet that surprise is shaped by our past, by what we have learned and what we know.

With all the practical, financial, and intellectual knowledge, Grandmam also empowers Hannah with a sense of self-worth and an understanding of cause and effect. She tells Hannah, “You’re too good and too smart to go to waste. And you’re too pretty for your own good, maybe. It could get you an early start on a miserable life” (p. 15). On

the face of it, this seems like good advice and good parenting, keeping a child mindful of her dignity and the reality of consequences. It is also the sort of specific worry that probably arises from specific knowledge. Certainly an unplanned pregnancy and a hasty, early marriage can contribute to a miserable life, and no doubt Grandmam knew of real examples, as Hannah probably did too. Grandmam's language is direct and forceful—she wants Hannah to get the point. Still, this concern for Hannah's future carries the impact of the word *miserable*, giving a blanket condemnation to any such life. Also the phrase “an early start on a miserable life” is ambiguous. Was Grandmam saying that it is the early start that makes the life miserable or that a miserable life is likely here? We do not know how she meant it or how Hannah heard it, but we know that Grandmam orchestrated Hannah's escape from home. Grandmam has told Hannah directly, but over the years, Grandmam must have reinforced her words in hundreds of small ways, signaling to Hannah that she had to get out, that she had to get away, that there was no imaginable future for her at home.

In this case, away is not far away, but only to Hargrave, the county seat. One morning, Grandmam lets Hannah know it is time: “Child, dear Hannah,” she says with a long, direct look indicating the gravity of the moment, “you're grown up now. You have graduated from school. You're a valedictorian. You're smart, and you can do things. This is not the right place for you. You need to go” (p. 16). The next day, they will go to Hargrave and, as Grandmam says, “We're going to see what we can do” (p. 17). This is the last plank in the platform Grandmam has built to launch Hannah away from home.

They put on their best dresses and go to see Ora Finley, a childhood friend of Grandmam's, widowed now and managing to stay in her big house by renting out rooms.

Grandmam presents Hannah—“the valedictorian of her school” (p. 18)—to Miss Ora, and after some catching up conversation about old times and changing times, Grandmam declares that Hannah needs a job and a place to stay. Grandmam’s advocacy for Hannah expands to promoter when Miss Ora asks what Hannah can do. Grandmam says:

She would like to come down here to Hargrave and get a job. There are lots of things she could do. They taught her to typewrite. She can do it fast. And she can write in shorthand. She could work in an office. She could work in one of the warehouses when the market opens. (p. 19)

Grandmam lists the skills Hannah has learned in school; she does not include that Hannah knows how to garden, cook, sew, clean, milk, preserve food, raise chickens, and any of the many other skills Grandmam herself has taught her. Then she gives Hannah’s most useful qualification, something Hannah has gained both at home and at school: “She would catch on” (p. 19). In other words, Hannah has learned to learn, and Grandmam knows it from first-hand observation. She sums up Hannah’s abilities and promise, based on her observation of Hannah’s work ethic: “She can do anything” (p. 19). Perhaps this is a boast inflated by love and the pride Grandmam feels in her own contributions to Hannah’s abilities, but it is also the assessment of a “demanding” teacher, someone who has observed her student closely and knows what she is capable of.

Important relationships are built in Hannah’s life because of her skills and habits of work. When she moves in with Miss Ora, Hannah feels “discouraged and homesick” (p. 21), particularly when she does not find a job immediately. She is drawn to Ora and comforted by her presence in part because of the way Ora works. Ora is “busy all the time” (p. 21), with “a wisdom that spread order and beauty around her” (p. 21). But Ora

is also kind to Hannah. Out of her old-time friendship for Hannah's grandmother and out of sympathy for a young woman alone, Ora treats Hannah as more than a roomer, sharing time and tea with her, and getting Hannah to talk about herself in a way that ultimately helps Hannah improve her speaking skills and helps her meet people. The orderliness that Hannah admires in Ora is probably also evident to Ora in Hannah, and attractive in the same way. Their familiarity with each other leads Hannah to offer to help with work, especially as her job hunt stalls. Work, as it often is for Berry's characters, is a means of healing for Hannah. In her loneliness and uncertainty, the familiarity of the household tasks, the order work creates, and the real sense of usefulness work affords—all these keep her grounded in herself and allow her best qualities to show forth. Finally, there is companionship, something Ora probably appreciates as much as Hannah does.

While they are working side by side, Ora is getting to know Hannah, and Ora becomes Grandmam's stand-in as her advocate. When Ora's nephew through marriage, attorney Wheeler Catlett, needs temporary secretarial help, Ora can recommend Hannah because she knows the quality of Hannah's work and her intelligence (p. 23). That job develops into other jobs for Hannah, as well as the opportunity to meet people, including Ora's nephew Virgil Feltner. When Virgil announces that he and Hannah are getting married, Ora does not raise the expected objection because she knows the quality of Hannah's character. And just like that, Hannah becomes "one of the Feltners" (p. 41) and "a member of Port William" (p. 41), moving farther from her father, her home, and Grandmam. She and Virgil move in with Mat and Margaret Feltner, until they can build their own house. Again, Hannah's ability for useful work helps forge relationships, as she helps side by side with her mother-in-law on the work of the household.

It is not only Hannah's knowledge and skills in work that help her get to know others and help others get to know her. Grandmam has ensured that Hannah values school and what can be learned there. As a result, Hannah has learned to enjoy reading and to read with intelligence and understanding. She describes books as "a dependable pleasure" (p. 44), but they are also a means of knowing herself and others. Ora gives her books to read when Hannah is living with her, and then they discuss them (p. 22). Their book discussions are another way for Ora to get to know Hannah and a way for Hannah to improve her speaking skills. This is the skill that is most lacking in her job hunt. She is smart and capable, and she knows it, "but as soon as I opened my mouth," she says, "I sounded like I didn't know anything. I was green as a bean and scared, and I sounded like it" (p. 21). Hannah's two-person book club with Ora is also an opportunity for moral instruction. Ora lets Hannah know what she disapproves of in the works of modern writers, and Hannah understands those discussions to be Ora's way of being "helpful to a young lady alone and away from home for the first time in 'this modern world'" (p. 22).

When Hannah is married to Virgil and living with the Feltner, she has access to the library in the house. Virgil's sister Bess is also a reader and loves to talk to Hannah about books. The books and discussions are a comfort to her when Virgil is drafted and later missing and presumed dead. She is comforted, too, late in life when she can spend more time reading because, she says, "I am too old to work much and am mostly alone" (pp. 44-45). But Hannah learns from her reading and reflects on what she reads: "I read *Old Mortality* and thought more than I wanted to of the horrible deeds people have done because they loved God" (p. 45). This is consistent with Berry's understanding of literature's role in culture: that it should be instructive as well as artistically pleasing.

“I’ve always read for instruction,” he has said, “as well as for pleasure” (1993/2007a, p. 84). Books open Hannah to herself and to her life in Port William.

### Why Hannah Must Leave Home

Though they are separated by only a few miles, Grandmam must know how wide the gulf will be between her and Hannah. She knows how rarely she sees her old friend Ora; she must know how rarely she will see Hannah. Instead of working side by side, instead of sharing early morning breakfast and late night study sessions, Grandmam will have to take what comfort she can from occasional letters and visits. Hannah will have a life now that Grandmam will not see and will not hear enough about to imagine clearly. Also, she will no longer have Hannah as a workmate. She will not have Hannah’s hands to lighten the work or her conversation to lighten the mood or her back to lighten the load. No longer will Grandmam have her own preparation and planning for Hannah’s future to lighten the present. To fully appreciate what Grandmam has done for Hannah and with Hannah, we have to recognize it as the personal sacrifice it is. Grandmam’s life gets much harder without Hannah than it has been with her, probably harder than she ever imagined as she was laying out her schemes for Hannah’s escape.

The way Berry tells it—the way Hannah understands it—there is no future for Hannah on that farm. She has been carefully schooled by her grandmother to see this, and it becomes true. What becomes of that farm is a good example of the unintended way land gets passed through the generations. “Wayward” is Burley Coulter’s word for it (p. 135). What is best for the land is that it be inherited by someone who knows it and loves it—someone who grew up on it (p. 135). But that rarely happens to the farms in Berry’s fictional world, as Kimberley Smith (2001) notes in her article, “Wendell Berry’s

Feminist Agrarianism.” Smith says, “Berry’s farmers share the conventional desire for intergenerational continuity. But they consistently fail to achieve it, for reasons that underscore the problematic nature of the traditional, biological notion of the family” (p. 638). Berry’s characters are not so removed from the conventional views of father-to-son land inheritance that they do not expect it and yearn for it, but reality often intervenes.

Jack Beechum, for example, has no son, and he does not imagine his daughter wanting to work his farm (*OJ*, 1974/1999). Mat Feltner’s son is killed in World War II (*PE*, 1967/2001). Jarrat Coulter has two sons. Tom he loses twice—first from Jarrat’s need “for domination and control” (K. Smith, p. 639), which drives Tom away from home (*NC*, 1960/2008, p. 95-97), and then from Tom’s being killed in World War II (*PE*, 1967/2001). Nathan he does not lose so much as he outlasts. Jarrat is still living on his farm and working it when Nathan feels the need to have a place of his own (*HC*, 2004a, p. 68). But in Berry’s view, as Smith points out, “The land should be left to the person who will best take care of it, who can establish a meaningful and productive relationship with it[,] a criterion that, because it is based on ability, is properly gender-neutral” (K. Smith, p. 639). Wheeler Catlett sees the complexity of this, both in his love for the land and in his role as lawyer, and feels the sometimes opposing pulls of duty to the land and duty to his legal obligations. In his hierarchy of claims to land, gender does not seem to enter into it. His concern seems to be first for the land and next for family.

Wheeler shepherds the estate of Mat and Margaret Feltner so their granddaughter ends up with the farm intact (*HC*, 2004a, p. 136). He helps fulfill Jack Beechum’s final wishes for his farm by helping Elton and Mary Penn buy it and farm it (*WB*, 1985/1986, p. 67). Wheeler resists when Burley Coulter wants his will written to leave his farm not to



his nephew Nathan, as Wheeler expected, but to his unacknowledged son Danny Branch. This should be a plan that Wheeler supports, land passing down to the next generation, someone who will work it with respect and care, someone who will live on it and from it gratefully. Years later in the short story “The Inheritors” (*TDL*, 2004b), Danny is described as “one of Wheeler Catlett’s last comforts, for Danny embodied much of the old integrity of country life that Wheeler had loved and stood for” (p. 433). But when first presented with the plan, Wheeler resists while Burley persists, leading Wheeler to accept the differences between himself and Burley. With those acknowledged differences, Wheeler finally comes to see that what Burley is really talking about is love, his never publicly declared love for Danny’s mother, Kate Helen Branch. Wheeler sees that willing his land to Danny is Burley’s way of finally announcing his love to the world. With the comprehension of that love, Wheeler finally relents, even begins in his mind to plan how he can help Danny, befriend the young man in a way he has not yet.

But what of the farm where Hannah grew up, Grandmam’s place? How does it pass through the generations? We do not learn how Arvinia Steadman ended up on this farm, but she has six children. Of those six, only her son Dalton, Hannah’s father, is working the farm. His interest in the farm is every day; his siblings become interested in it when their mother dies. There is no financial estate to divide up—only the farm. So in effect the farm becomes divided six ways, with Dalton working as tenant to his siblings (*HC*, 2004a, p. 52). His one-sixth of the value of the farm will pass to his second wife, Ivy, whose one sixth would have passed in time to her two sons, Elvin and Allen, who long ago have each left the farm to other lives near Lexington (p. 53). Even before Ivy dies, the farm is sold to people from Cincinnati, who want it “as an investment” (p. 102).

By tradition, legality, and the vagaries of time, Hannah is cut out from the future of the land where she grew up. The place—or her father or grandmother—rarely gets a mention in the rest of the book. Hannah takes Virgil to meet her family. It is described as a “scary duty” (p. 32) because she does not know “what he would think of them or what they and he would have to say to one another” (p. 33). The visit goes well, but Hannah sees the “old place” (p. 33) more critically. She says that “being there with Virgil...made the old place look poorer to me than ever” (p. 33), and as they are leaving, she says to Virgil, “Well, it’s not very grand, is it?” (p. 33). Virgil’s thoughts are not revealed—he has been “gracious and respectful to Grandmam, polite to [Hannah’s] father, friendly to Elvin and Allen” (p. 33). He tells Hannah, “Your grandmother makes it lovely” (p. 33). Hannah does not seem to consider that the old place is in worse shape now because she herself is not there helping. Neither Grandmam nor her father is invited to the wedding when she marries Virgil in the fall of 1941, but then no one is invited except the witnesses. After they are married, Hannah says, “I belonged to Grandmam as I always will, but I didn’t any longer belong to her place” (p. 41). It was clear to everyone that she would stay with the Feltner’s even after Virgil is drafted in 1942, even after Virgil is reported missing in action, even after Hannah’s and Virgil’s baby daughter is born in 1945. Indeed Hannah remained with Mat and Margaret until she and Nathan Coulter marry in 1948.

In December 1943, Andy Catlett, with a nine-year-old boy’s love for a beautiful young woman, asks Hannah if she misses anything from her home. Hannah answers, “Some things over there I miss. My grandmother, I miss her. But there are a lot of things over here I like...And some things over there I don’t miss” (*ACET*, 2006, p. 126). Andy

knows from the part that Hannah gives him that he is one of the things she likes about Port William. He knows too from Hannah's stories that she does not miss her stepmother or stepbrothers. This is the crux of why Grandmam has worked so hard to get Hannah away. She has not been able to see a way to coexistence between Hannah and her stepmother and stepbrothers. Since her son's marriage presents them as unchangeable, Hannah must leave. Grandmam sees no other way, at least not under the urgency of her own mortality.

Grandmam spends Christmas with them at the Feltner's home in 1941, sharing the difficult celebration just weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor (*HC*, pp. 36-40). When baby Margaret is born, no special announcement is made to Hannah's father—"When he heard about the baby, my father came" (p. 52)—and by that time Grandmam has died.

From her perspective toward the end of her life, Hannah can see what she learned from her grandmother: "She made the connections that made my life" (p. 11), she says with gratitude for that life. She has learned to use her mind and her body, to think hard and to work well. Grandmam's legacy to Hannah is not her place, but from her, Hannah has learned how to love a place, and this has also served her well. In a world where land inheritance does not pass in the ordered pattern that Wheeler Catlett would like, where the passage of land can be "wayward," perhaps the ability to learn to love a place is the more practical and valuable skill anyway. All places need loving, after all.

That impetus, perhaps almost an instinct, in parents to equip children to leave home—to make something of themselves—is the paradox of *Hannah Coulter* and the paradox of parenting. Most of Hannah's greatest joys are among the people whose lives she shares as a result of her education and break from home. But some of her greatest heartbreaks come from her efforts to ensure her children get a good education and

succeed. In her old age, she comes to accept this paradox. Grateful for the life she has lived, she is nonetheless grieved to be so separated from her children and grandchildren.

As far as Hannah ever knows, Grandmam does what she does for Hannah's sake alone, working from the instinct to want what is best for a child and the obligation "to love, care for, and teach our children" (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 188). But what if, when she takes over the raising of Hannah, Grandmam's motivation is more specific and personal? Perhaps has Arvinia Steadman redeemed for herself her own miserable life—whether started early or not—by trying to ensure a better life for Hannah. This too is a natural desire for parents. If Hannah knows anything about the start of Arvinia's life on this farm, she does not share it. If it is the case, however, that Arvinia got "an early start on a miserable life" (*HC*, p. 15), she shows to Hannah no bitterness or dissatisfaction for herself or the life she has led. This is a good thing; Hannah learns to be grateful for the life she leads, to embrace the surprise of it all with love. But Grandmam's education plan makes leaving home seem natural and expected to Hannah, as though Grandmam does indeed feel dissatisfaction, but it is dissatisfaction on Hannah's behalf. The lesson Hannah has learned from Grandmam, and the lesson Hannah teaches to her own children, is that children should be encouraged to work hard, study hard, and succeed, and implicit in Grandmam's lessons to Hannah is the definition of success as leaving home.

#### Hannah the Teacher: Giving a Better Chance

About her own children, Hannah says, "They were good students and did well in school. Sometimes, now, I allow myself to wish that at least Caleb had not done so well in school" (p. 111). She knows that in the same way that Grandmam wanted high school for Hannah because she had not had gone to high school, Hannah wants college for her

children. Indeed, she says she “was desperate for my children to go to college” (p. 112). Nathan was not desperate, but evidently he agreed: “We both wanted to send them to college,” she says, “because we felt we owed it to them” (p. 112). Each of her children leaves home, first to college, then to careers. She says:

After each one of our children went away to the university, there always came a time when we would feel the distance opening to them, pulling them away. It was like sitting snug in the house, and a door is opened somewhere, and suddenly you feel a draft” (p. 120).

She feels the distance, realizing that because of it “we don’t talk alike anymore” (p. 122).

Hannah blames herself: “I am sorry for my gullibility, my lack of foreknowledge, my foolish surprise at the way it turned out” (p. 112). She says what she and Nathan “learned from [their] children’s education” is that “the way of education leads away from home” (p. 112). The problem with the way of education is not with learning; the problem is with the place of focus. Hannah understands the dynamic this way:

The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are, because you want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on. I didn’t see this at first. And for a while after I knew it, I pretended I didn’t. I didn’t want it to be true. (p. 112)

Hannah cannot help wondering what the impact would be if schools put their focus on students’ home places and not on some theoretical “better place.”

Hannah finds herself caught between hope and expectation, and she struggles not to let expectations overtake her thinking. She says:

Living without expectations is hard but, when you can do it, good. Living without hope is harder, and that is bad. You have got to have hope, and you mustn't shirk it. Love, after all, "hopeth all things." But maybe you must learn, and it is hard learning, not to hope out loud, especially for other people. You must not let your hope turn into expectation. (p. 146)

For someone schooled by Arvinia Steadman, who made her expectations of Hannah clear to her, Hannah has a harder time than most learning to live without expectations.

Margaret, who loved to play school as a child becomes a teacher in Louisville.

Mattie, who could fix anything on the farm, studies electrical engineering and communications technology and becomes a tech-company CEO on the West Coast.

Caleb, who loved farming and never much cared for school, ends up in school for the rest of his life—studying agriculture and becoming a researcher and professor at a university.

Focused on helping her children do well and succeed, Hannah does not see the consequences of that success. "You send your children to college," Hannah says, "you do the best you can for them, and then, because you have to be, you're careful not to make plans for them" (p. 119). But Hannah realizes too that:

You keep a little thought, a little hope, that maybe they'll go away and study and learn and then come back, and you'll have them for neighbors. You'll have the comfort of being with them and having them for companions. You'll have your grandchildren nearby where you can get to know them and help to raise them. (p. 120)

Lamenting the children's absence to Nathan once, Hannah gives voice to what has driven her: "I just wanted them to have a better chance than I had" (p. 112). It is as though we

can hear Grandmam saying the same thing about Hannah, as though Hannah has been taught to think this way without her even realizing it. When Nathan reminds her not to complain about the chance she had, Hannah realizes he is right. She says, “Like several of his one-sentence conversations, this one stuck in my mind and finally changed it. The change came too late, maybe, but it turned my mind inside out like a sock” (p. 112). Hannah reviews the joys of her life and comes to understand “you mustn’t wish for another life. You mustn’t want to be somebody else. What you must do is this: ‘Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks’” (p. 113). Then she adds, “I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions” (p. 113). She knows she would not change anything about her life. Hannah is still capable of learning.

As much as she grieves not having her children around, she grieves too not getting to know her grandchildren. She grieves being a stranger to them and not being able to teach them all that she has loved knowing, especially things about her place.

#### *Mattie*

Mattie has four children with two wives—the children are never referred to by name in the book—and “Once a year, maybe, he will bring his current family for a visit” (p. 123). About Mattie’s children, Hannah says, “they would spend their whole visit in the house or on the porch if I would let them” (p. 125). They are not interested in and they don’t even like the things Hannah thinks up to entertain them, the things she is interested in and loves:

Before they come and while they’re here I think of things to show them: a new calf, a hawk’s nest, the old hollow tree. I take them fishing in the ponds. I take them out to help me in the garden or the henhouse. I send them out to see

whatever [Danny Branch and his family] are doing. It all somehow fails. They don't much like any of it. By no fault of theirs, they don't know enough to like it. They don't know the things that I and even their daddy have known since before we knew anything. (p. 125)

Hannah's grief here is a recognition of the deep connection between knowing and loving, and in one of the most heartbreaking passages in the book, Hannah extends that connection to herself about her grandchildren:

And what ever in their lives will they think of the old woman they will barely remember who yearned toward them and longed to teach them to know her a little and who wanted to give them more hugs and kisses than she ever was able to? (p. 125)

For Berry's characters, love transcends time and extends in both directions, but it is a love tied to place as much as to familial connections.

Hannah's love for Mattie's children begins on instinct because of her love for Mattie. A look in the eye, a tilt of the head, a small gesture—the power of genetics being what it is, Hannah probably can see hints of people she loves in her grandchildren. Her love for Mattie's children is born with her love for her Grandmam, her father, her mother. To the extent that she has heard stories of previous generations, it includes ancestors that she has never known but feels a part of. It grows with her love for their grandfather Nathan and all of Nathan's family, even the ones she knows only by stories. It includes Margaret's father, Virgil, and all his family. Most immediately, her "love for Mattie's children is made in [her] love for Mattie" (p. 125). It is a placed love; it is "made in Port William" (p. 125). Hannah realizes, "It doesn't fit the children, who had their making



elsewhere, and they don't fit it. It is a failed love, hard to bear" (p. 125). She says, "For me, it is hard to bear. The children don't notice, of course, and don't mind" (p. 125).

Whatever comfort she feels in knowing her grandchildren do not know what they don't have, she knows the richness of love multiplied, connected and extended through time, and she knows her grandchildren do not have that. The chapter on Mattie and his children ends with this tragic admission: "When they leave I am sad to see them go, and I am sad that it should seem right that they should be gone" (p. 125). They do not belong to her place, and she does not know enough about their place to imagine that they belong to it.

### *Margaret*

A better hope for having a grandchild near her comes from Virgie, Margaret's only child. Margaret has married Marcus Settlemeier, a teacher and track coach. In the second year of their marriage, Margaret inherits her grandparents' farm, which generates a little income for her, but still they live in an apartment for the first eight years of their marriage before buying a house, and their son is born in the ninth year.

When Wheeler Catlett has seen to the details of the Feltner's estate, ensuring that the farm stays intact and that Margaret is the sole heir, he tells Hannah, "Well, [Margaret's] got her place. If she ever wants to come to it, she'll have it. It's more hers, anyhow, than that apartment she's living in" (p. 137), and Hannah understands him to mean this in more than just the legal sense. Wheeler means that it is fitting that she should have the farm that would have been her father's had he lived. "Wheeler was a man who held himself answerable to the dead. That the place was now Margaret's was a justice owed, and now paid, to Virgil" (p. 137). Hannah sees keeping the farm intact as a hope that Margaret might one day come home. "And it was a comfort to me," she says,

“to know that Margaret would own the old place that she would think of as home whether she owned it or not” (p. 139). Hannah’s sensibility in this is shaped by her own understanding of the importance of place and the impact of knowing and loving a place.

Margaret and Marcus teach at different schools. They “were working in different places, going off every morning in opposite directions” (p. 139), Hannah says, trying to understand. “They worked apart, worked with different people, made friends with different people” (p. 139). From her perspective, all they have in common are their son, their house, and the weekends—plenty to keep some people together, but not enough for them. Hannah assumes some blame as proxy for Port William: “Margaret was still attached to Port William, not attached enough for the good of the Feltner place, and too much attached maybe for the good of Marcus and her marriage” (p. 139). After twenty-one years of marriage, his wife age forty-three, his son age thirteen, Marcus asks for a divorce and moves into an apartment, having “fallen in love with another woman. A younger woman, of course,” Hannah notes, “one of the teachers in his school” (p. 140).

Margaret comes home to tell her mother, but it is Nathan who gives the most comfort. In his quiet, matter-of-fact way, he says, “Margaret, my good Margaret, we’re going to live right on” (p. 141). It is the same thing he says to Hannah one evening when the weight of their children’s absence hits them both (p. 131). It is what he will say when he is diagnosed with cancer and dying (p. 161). It is what he says and only rarely, Hannah tells us, “when he knew that living right on was going to be hard” (p. 141). And as though to affirm the assertion of living right on, Nathan lays out plans for Margaret’s future. He reminds her that she could come home, “back to her own place” (p. 141), the Feltner place, just next door. So she could be with people “who loved her” (p. 141), and

“Virgie would have a place here where he would belong, and where he would always know he belonged” (p. 141). As it turns out, it is enough of a future to get Margaret through the pain of the present, but it is not a future that ever comes to pass.

Before the divorce, Virgie spends time with Hannah and Nathan at the farm; after the divorce he spends more time, often coming to visit without his mother’s knowledge (p. 144). He likes to work with Nathan, but Hannah says after the divorce, “he began needing to come. He was big enough by then to be of some help, and he wanted to help” (p. 142). For a while, Nathan is “a rock for Virgie” (p. 142), and both Nathan and Hannah love having him around, sharing hugs and pats on the back—a stability and affirmation that he probably craves. Hannah says, “Nathan would have to pat him down, like bread dough that was rising too fast, and take him back home” (p. 144). But as Virgie gets older, his visits are less frequent. Eventually, he visits only on occasions with his mother:

His hair in some odd arrangement or color and a ring in his ear and a stud in his nose—I guess to show his father he didn’t give a damn, which of course he did or he wouldn’t have been trying so hard to act like he didn’t. (p. 145)

Hannah wonders to Margaret whether Virgie is taking drugs. Soon Virgie stops coming to the farm at all and goes missing from their lives. It is 1994; Virgie is eighteen, and as Hannah observes, “Virgie was a long way from knowing how people are bound together” (p. 146). In other words, he is a long way from knowing himself as part of a membership.

### *Caleb*

Hannah and Nathan’s son Caleb almost from the start seems like the child who might return to farming: “Our hope that we might give this place a true inheritor and ourselves a successor naturally fell on Caleb” (p. 127). Caleb loves farming—“Farming

was what he played at before he could work at it. When he got big enough to work, he liked the work. Farming was what he thought about and dreamed about. He loved it” (p. 126). Caleb dislikes school because it takes him away from the farm and his father. On the farm, he “would do his work and then look around for something else that needed to be done” (p. 127), but in school, he got by with “C’s and a few B’s as if they were exactly what he wanted” (p. 127), “doing what was required and no more, except for the agriculture courses and the Future Farmers of America” (p. 127). Hannah reports that “the school he was really interested in attending was here. He was his daddy’s student. He never thought of being anything but a farmer” (p. 127). Before college, Hannah worries about him in a way she never worried about her other children: “He had been so uninterested and unworried in his schooling so far that I was afraid he would go into those high-powered classes at the university and fail” (p. 127). She cautions Caleb before he leaves. “Listen,” she tells him. “Don’t go up there and try to get by with a lick and a promise. You’re going up there to study, so study. If you do badly the first semester, don’t expect us to help you with the next one” (p. 128). She comes to regret giving him this advice, as he finds growing success at the university. In fact, he does so well that he earns a scholarship. He begins helping with research projects, which keeps him from home, and he does not come home at all in the summer before his senior year (p. 128).

As it happens then, Caleb does not come back to the farm. He earns a scholarship for graduate school and more research. His plans are set; he just fails to tell his parents. He comes home the day after graduation, eating the noon meal with his parents, and Nathan does “the only really foolish thing I ever saw him do” (p. 129), as Hannah assesses it later. Nathan decides to discuss Caleb’s future on the farm because he assumes

that Caleb has a future on the farm. Nathan has it all laid out in his mind, and he ticks off the various farm holdings that he is currently responsible for as owner or tenant. Nathan even acknowledges that eventually Caleb will want to marry, and Nathan speculates on where he might want to live. It is a life all planned out in Nathan's mind, but it is not in Caleb's mind, and now Caleb has to tell his father. Berry said of it: "The most painful part of that book for me is when their son says, 'But, Dad, I'm not going to be coming home.' And Nathan sits there and eats and doesn't even know he's crying" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). So again, Nathan will have to just live right on.

Indicating the depth of her concern for what college and academic research have done to Caleb, Hannah says:

After not liking school at all, Caleb had got to liking it too much, more anyhow than I would have wanted him to, if I had had any say. He liked knowing the things he was learning. He was beginning to learn the ways of research, and he liked that. He was, maybe you could say, tempted by it. (p. 128)

Hannah's use of the phrase "ways of research" and the word "tempted" reveals her mistrust of academic research and reflects closely Berry's attitude toward it. This language suggests a closer parallel between academic research and the dark arts than it does between academic research and wisdom or truth. The suggestion of devilry or the occult is an image that Berry has used elsewhere with regard to academic research. In his novel *Remembering* (1988/2008), Andy Catlett is invited to speak at an agribusiness conference as the voice of the opposition. Sitting through the scholarly presentations on the Future of the American Food System, he is in turns "aggrieved, endangered, and falling asleep" (p. 14), but mostly he is angry. He describes the conference this way:

A place of eternal hopelessness, where people were condemned to talk forever of what they could not feel or see, old farm boys and old farm girls in the spell of an occult science, speaking in the absence of the living and the dead a language forever unintelligible to anyone but themselves. (p. 18)

It sounds like hell for the presenters and the audience, and no doubt Berry uses *occult* here both in the sense of abstruse and to suggest something supernatural and vaguely evil.

Hannah begins to suspect that Caleb has fallen into this cult of academic research, and she gets “this uneasy feeling that he was doing too well” (p. 128). She can also feel the pull, from modern industrial society and from higher education, luring him. She says:

And I know, I can almost hear, the voices that were speaking to him, voices of people he had learned to respect, and they were saying, “Caleb, you’re too bright to be a farmer.” They were saying, “Caleb, there’s no future for you in farming.” They were saying, “Caleb, why should you be a farmer yourself when you can do so much for farmers? You can be a help to your people.” (p. 128)

Was even Faust himself wooed by sweeter talk?

Eventually, Caleb is well established and well-regarded as an agricultural researcher. Hannah says:

[Caleb] brings me what he calls his “publications,” written in the Unknown Tongue. He wants me to be proud of them. And I am, but with the sadness of wishing I could be prouder. I read all of his publications that he brings me, and I have to say that they don’t make me happy. I can’t hear Caleb talking in them. (p. 132)

She cannot find Caleb in these publications, nor can she find their own farm in them:

They speak of everything according to its general classification. Reading them always makes me think of this farm and how it has emerged, out of “agriculture” and its “soil types” and its collection of “species,” as itself, our place, a place like no other, yielding to Nathan and me a life like no other. (p. 132)

She could as easily say there is no love in what she reads of his research publications.

Caleb becomes Dr. Coulter, professor and scholar. Hannah notes that he is “teaching agriculture to fewer and fewer students who were actually going to farm” (p. 131). His research is respected, but not much by her. He is married to Alice Hamilton, the vice president of a bank, and they have no children. Hannah says, “They live well” (p. 132), but she worries that Caleb is not happy, that at heart he misses farming. She says he has “the same kind of apology in him that you see in some of the sweeter drunks. He is always trying to make up the difference between the life he has and the life he imagines he might have had” (p. 131). He visits often so she sees that sweet apology regularly.

### *The One Regret*

Late in life, Hannah worries that she and Nathan inadvertently contributed to their children’s focus on a better place elsewhere. She remembers how the children loved to hear stories about Hannah’s and Nathan’s childhoods, intrigued by tales of a time “before we had electricity and plumbing and tractors and blacktopped roads and nuclear bombs” (p. 123). Hannah is left to wonder:

But did we tell the stories right? It was lovely, the telling and the listening, usually the last thing before bedtime. But did we tell the stories in such a way as to suggest that we had needed a better chance or a better life or a better place than we had? (p. 123)

She loads herself with a heavy burden in the wondering, saying:

Suppose your stories, instead of mourning and rejoicing over the past, say that everything should have been different. Suppose you encourage or even just allow your children to believe that their parents ought to have been different people, with a better chance, born in a better place. Or suppose the stories you tell them allow them to believe, when they hear it from other people, that farming people are inferior and need to improve themselves by leaving the farm. Doesn't that finally unmake everything that has been made? Isn't that the loose thread that unravels the whole garment? And how are you ever to know where the thread breaks, and when the tug begins? (pp. 113-114)

She allows herself the mercy, at least, of admitting that the responsibility cannot finally be placed on one thing.

Unwilling to have denied her children either their education or their choice, eventually, the whole matter seem to come down to one regret. Hannah says about herself and Nathan:

We wanted them to have all the education they needed or wanted, and yet hovering over that thought always was the possibility that once they were educated they would go away, which, as it turned out, they did. We owed them that choice, and we gave it to them, and it might be hard to argue that we were wrong. But I wonder now, and I wonder it many a time, if the other choice, the choice of coming home, might not have been made clearer. (p. 151)

And so Hannah's one regret may be a useful instruction, especially for higher education: present the choice of coming home as one of the paths of victory and not a path of defeat.



## Love and Gratitude

Hannah proves herself an apt student, a valedictorian to the end. She learned her books, she learned her arts, and she learned the implicit lesson of modern culture: The way of education leads away from home. She learns this last lesson so well that she teaches it to her children. Her learning does not end there though, and it is not the most important lesson she learns. If the action of *Hannah Coulter* is propelled by education and if the novel is largely about loss, Hannah's life is ultimately about love—love of place and love of people—and about gratitude. At her daughter Margaret's wedding, Hannah feels the presence of Virgil and Mat Feltner, Margaret's father and grandfather, both dead. She says, "I saw [Margaret] as Virgil and Mr. Feltner saw her, and I thought I would perish with the knowledge of loss and of having" (p. 119). This one sentence of Hannah's captures her life and the tension of her story—overwhelmed by loss at the same time that she is overwhelmed by all she has been given.

In 1974, Nathan is fifty and Hannah is fifty-two. One night they are sitting at the table, tired from the day's work and dismayed suddenly to be alone in their house. After a long silence, Nathan reminds Hannah that they are "going to live right on. We'll love each other, and take care of things here, and we'll be all right" (p. 131). Hannah agrees, cheered by his words. "Yes," she tells him. "We're going to love each other, and we'll be all right" (p. 131). Then the novel says, "I got up and went to him then" (p. 131). What they do when she gets to him, we are left to imagine, but the tone of happiness and gratitude in each other's love is clear. The chapter ends with Hannah remembering the two of them during those years after they are alone, "playing house" together and enjoying each other. She says, "We got so we would be very free with looks and touches

and kisses and hugs. Anybody young would have laughed at us, but now nobody young was here” (p. 134). Then she says: “The only people here were just this aging couple, getting a little too small for their skin, their hair turning white, standing it might be in the middle of the kitchen or the garden or the barn lot, hugging each other” (p. 134). She recognizes their worries still and their work and responsibilities to their farm, but she is learning to know the moment and be grateful, without expectations of the future.

For a while there I would think that this, this right now, was all the world that I held in my arms. It was like falling in love, only more than that; we knew too much by then for it to be only that. It was knowing that love was what it was, and life would not complete it and death would not stop it. (p. 134)

She is grateful for the love she knows and will know even after Nathan is dead. Hannah understands the difference between the death of a young man and the death of an old man, and she knows the difference in her widowhoods. She wants to be seen as she is: “an old woman whose grief might be supposed but was little to be seen, who was fully capable and in charge, helpful to other grievers, above all useful to herself” (p. 165).

After Nathan’s funeral, after everyone has left, Hannah is alone in the house:

Nathan’s absence came into it and filled it. I suffered my hard joy, I gave my thanks, I cried my cry. And then I turned again to that other world I had taught myself to know, the world that is neither past nor to come, the present world where we are alive together and love keeps us. (p. 166)

She allows herself her grief, then returns to the present, without regrets or expectations.

Her life now contains Nathan’s death and still contains her love for him. Hannah finds that she needs to know something of his experience in World War II, to fill the

blank that Nathan preserved with his silence about that time in his life. All he has ever said about the war was that it was “Ignorant boys, killing each other” (p. 5), and Hannah imagines his longing to be home. She says, “By a long detour through the hell that humans have learned to make, Nathan had come home” (p. 68). She comes to understand too that Nathan’s life with her was like taking a stand in opposition to war:

There can be places in this world, and in human hearts too, that are opposite to war. There is a kind of life that is opposite to war, so far as this world allows it to be. After he came home, I think Nathan tried to make such a place, and in his unspeaking way to live such a life. (p. 68)

She has suspected this about Nathan, but once she learns more about the war, she knows.

Hannah goes to the library to learn more about the war on Okinawa where Nathan was. She cannot know exactly what Nathan experienced, but she says, “I found out the sort of thing you would have known if you were a soldier and were there on Okinawa in the spring of 1945 when Easter and the beginning of battle both came on April Fool’s Day” (p. 169). The details of war and suffering overflow the blank in Nathan’s life:

To read of that battle when you love a man who was in it, that is hard going. I read in wonder, believing and sickened. I read weeping. Because I didn’t know exactly what had happened to Nathan, it *all* seemed to have happened to him. (p. 171; italics original)

From her reading of accounts of the battle, she comes to understand something of the experience and the great effort required to make any sense at all:

What saved it from utter meaninglessness and madness and ruin was the love between you and your friends fighting beside you. For them, you did what you

had to do to try to stay alive, to try to keep them alive. For them, you did heroic acts that you did not know were heroic. (p. 171)

Mostly there is no sense in it for Hannah. There is only “the thought of the hurt and the helpless, the scorned and the cheated, the burnt, the bombed, the shot, the imprisoned, the beaten, the tortured, the maimed, the spit upon, the shit upon” (p. 171).

As someone from a small farming community of neat little farms and homes, Hannah is moved too by the similarity she imagines between Port William and the farming villages of Okinawa, and she feels the loss of innocence and possibility both in the killing of civilians and in the destruction of farmland. She learns that the Battle of Okinawa was worse than a battle between two armies. “It was a battle of both armies making war against a place and its people” (p. 172). She finds photographs from before the battle of the beautiful things that were destroyed—buildings, walls and gates, bridges and gardens, houses and trees—things destroyed or permanently damaged. She finds “a photograph of some tanks driving across little fields, leaving deep tracks” (p. 172). As a farmer, she knows that deep tracks in a field leave another kind of permanent damage.

She is shaken and says, “I knew then what Nathan knew all his life: It can happen anywhere” (p. 172). With that realization she knows it can happen in Port William. She speaks then of the commitment of love and the implications of that commitment:

You can't give yourself over to love for somebody without giving yourself over to suffering....It is this body of our suffering that Christ was born into, to suffer it Himself and to fill it with light, so that beyond the suffering we can imagine Easter morning and the peace of God on little earthly homelands such as Port William and the farming villages of Okinawa. (p. 171)

On one level, of course, she is referring to her love for Nathan. But what she says—how she feels—could as easily apply to Port William, her life, her neighbors, the membership.

Even in widowhood, even disconnected from her children and grandchildren, Hannah is in love with her life and her place, grateful for it, living by the joy of surprise. She sees the wonders of spring and wildflowers “so thick you can’t walk without stepping on them” (p. 147). She sees the brilliance of summer, dimmed by heat, then reawakened by rain. She sees the ripeness and bounty of autumn. She sees the snow-covered quiet of winter. She thinks, “The world is so full and abundant it is like a pregnant woman carrying a child in one arm and leading another by the hand” (pp. 147-148). Perhaps current cultural standards see only work and burden in this image, not joy and abundance. What makes this such a powerful image of Hannah’s joy is that it is a portrait of a time in her life—Margaret at seven, Mattie at two, and Caleb on the way. It is a measure of her gratitude that joy and abundance remind her of herself in that time.

She thinks of her life all throughout the seasons and years and thinks she will never forget any of it. But as vivid as these memories are to her, she says:

You can’t remember it the way it was. To know it, you have to be living in the presence of it right as it is happening. It can return only by surprise. Speaking of these things tells you that there are no words for them that are equal to them or that can restore them to your mind. (p. 148)

This is joy beyond telling, joy that is both fleeting and always present: “So you have a life that you are living only now, now and now and now, gone before you can speak of it, and you must be thankful for living day by day, moment by moment, in this presence” (p. 148). No regrets or expectations, only love and gratitude.

By the end of the novel, Nathan has been dead almost a year. It is March of 2001, and Hannah is still living on the farm, but most of the farming is being done by Danny Branch and his sons. Grieving her separation from loved ones, in a sense Hannah was prepared from young womanhood to have her children leave—after all, it is what she herself did to her home and family—and still she is surprised by the depth of her grief over their leaving. She should take some consolation in this too. Even by surprise, Hannah has lived a life of love and gratitude. Her children learned the lesson of leaving home. She is a good teacher, so perhaps they also learned the lessons of love and gratitude, and perhaps they have learned to create a membership wherever they are. Their being in membership away from Port William would be good for them and good for their new homes. But it does little good for Nathan and Hannah’s farm; it does little good for the possibility of good stewardship of the land; it does little good for the Port William membership.

### The Membership

There’s a story from long ago—familiar to the Port William membership—that tells of Burley Coulter and Big Ellis off on the prowl in their youth, driving Big’s old Model T Ford. The car needed constant work to keep running, and Big’s strategy when it would not run was to try “taking some of it apart and putting it back together. He would quit working on it precisely as soon as it would run again” (p. 87). One Saturday night, Burley arrived at Big’s just as Big finished one of these tear-down and build-up sessions. The last piece to put in place was the steering wheel. They were in a hurry to get going, and Big was driving fast. Burley never drove a car, but he had lots of opinions about it. Poor roads combined with poor car suspension to make it a bumpy ride, and Burley

complained about the speed. “You’re fixing to kill us, Big,” he said. “I ain’t worried about you, but I’d hate to see me go” (p. 88). And Big slowed down enough so that Burley was worried about the time they were losing. So Big sped up again. But an upcoming curve in the road caused Burley to tell Big to slow down again. So Big said, “Well, if you know so much about it, why don’t you drive?” (p. 88), and Big “lifted the steering wheel off and handed it to Burley” (p. 88). Of course, they crashed and that was the end of Big’s Model T, but not the end of Burley and Big or the story.

It is 2001 toward the end of *Hannah Coulter*, and Hannah is surprised that the new century and new millennium have left the world so much the same. She says, “Here in Port William, it seems, we are waiting” (p. 88), but she wonders what they wait for:

For the last of the old rememberers and the old memories to disappear forever?

For the coming of knowledge that will make us a community again? For the catastrophe that will force us to become a community again? For the catastrophe that will end everything? For the Second Coming? (p. 181)

Hannah does not recognize it, but like the men in the unending card game during World War II, she and Port William are really waiting for the children to come home. Then she says, “The only thing at all remarkable that has happened is that Virgie has come back” (p. 181). One night Hannah’s grandson Virgie drives up in a beaten up old car, out of the mystery of his disappearance seven years before; finally, he is no longer missing. Hannah does not recognize him at first: “He looked like death warmed over, and his face was wet with tears. He looked like a man who had been lost at sea and had made it to shore at last, but had barely made it” (p. 182). He is so filled with relief and regret and sorrow that he will only get out of the car and come into the house at Hannah’s insistence.

Hannah has him wash up, then has him call his mother. “And tell her you love her,” she tells him. “I imagine she needs to know” (p. 182). She instructs him as she would a small child, and he seems to welcome it. She is also giving him very little slack. After he has eaten “a lot” (p. 182), Hannah asks what has brought him back. He tries to say, “You,” and cannot. Instead he says, “This” (p. 183). Hannah does not understand. “I want to be here,” Virgie tells her, “I want to live here and farm. It’s the only thing I really want to do. I found that out” (p. 183). Hannah is guarded: Perhaps having waited so long, she does not want to believe too quickly. In the chapter just before, she has surprised herself by telling a realtor that she might donate her farm as a nature preserve when she dies. She has nearly given up the possibility that someone in the family might return to the farm. But she says to Virgie, “Maybe you can do that. You have still got it to do. We can see. There’s nothing to stop you from trying” (p. 183). She is guarded still.

Hannah puts Virgie to work with Danny Branch—“Whatever you need him to do,” she tells Danny. “Anything. I want you to put him to work and keep him at it. All day every day” (p. 183). She makes it clear she wants Virgie tested, “He’ll be your hand. Ask what you need to ask of him. If he quits, he quits. Fire him if you have to” (p. 184). Hannah is falling back on work, the first lesson of Port William, and hoping if Virgie learns that, he will learn also the lessons of membership.

The timeline of the narrative of the book goes only a month beyond Virgie’s return, but in that month Virgie has worked hard every day with Danny. What he learned working with Nathan long ago comes back to him, but he still “has a lot to learn” (p. 184). Hannah does not yet know how this will turn out. She does not want to know where he has been or what he has done in the missing time. She says, “All I want to know is that



he is well and at work. So far, he is well and at work. The look of him has become a delight to me again” (p. 184). Hannah takes it no further than that, saying, “When you have gone too far, as I think he did, the only mending is to come home. Whether he is equal to it or not, this is his chance” (p. 184). She has learned now to make no plans for others, but simply to love and care for them. She calls Virgie “the last care of my life” (p. 185), and says:

I know the ignorance I must cherish him in. I just care for him as I care for a wildflower or a singing bird, no terms, no expectations, as finally I care for Port William and the ones who have been here with me. I want to leave here openhanded, with only the ancient blessing, “Good-bye. My love to you all.” (p. 185)

Still, there are signs of healing, signs of a return to health for Virgie, and signs of hope.

One evening, after working all day with one of Danny Branch’s sons, Virgie tells Hannah “from start to finish the story of Burley and Big Ellis and the disconnected steering wheel” (p. 184). He is too young to remember Burley and has not heard the story before. Hannah is so surprised and delighted at his telling her the story that she pretends she does not know it, and she says, “We laughed” (p. 184). Maybe it is the first mend in the frayed garment of membership for Virgie. Maybe Virgie can know himself someday as a part of the membership. Maybe Virgie will learn to love this place. Hannah will not speculate. She has come to understand that this is a world of love, and the response to that love is gratitude. For now, one of her grandchildren has come back to her love and care, and she is simply grateful. Ending where it does, the novel manages to be both cautionary tale and celebration.

Berry's own assessment of the novel as good commentary on education is evident. Hannah is witness and collaborator in the great unsettling that is, in effect, the outcome of modern education, whether intended or not. Regardless of what they have studied, her children have been educated, both by her and by the schools, for one thing only: to leave home. The novel may be about Hannah's gaining an understanding of love and gratitude, but the action of the novel lives out how modern assumptions about progress and education drive young people away from home rather than preparing them to return to serve their homes and their people. And too often this can happen without anyone involved even stopping to question it.

Jayber Crow, Port William's bachelor barber, comes to an understanding of love and gratitude that is much the same as Hannah's, but his route to this understanding is very different. As examined in the next chapter, Jayber's circumstances and education take him away from Port William, but he manages to return home. And then his education really begins.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE EDUCATION OF *JAYBER CROW*

The novel *Hannah Coulter* (2004a) provides Berry's commentary on what is wrong with education, but whether he recognizes it or not, his novel *Jayber Crow* (2000b) provides his commentary on education at its best. Through the character of Jayber Crow, Berry creates a portrait of what education can be if sympathetically and lovingly applied to a particular place. Jayber is a pure scholar, one who learns to know and understand things, not to be known. His education, both formal and informal, is not to enlarge himself with money or influence. Instead, Jayber uses his education and intelligence to get to a place of love in his life, and with that love, he comes to peace.

*Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* are similar in posture. Both are written in the voice of the title character, both are written from the perspective of an old person looking back at an entire life, and neither, of course, gives the resolution of those lives. In 1986, Jayber is seventy-two at the time of his reflection, and in 2001, Hannah is seventy-eight at the time of her reflection. Both are still in good shape, living on their own with help from friends, mainly Danny and Lyda Branch and their children. Hannah and Jayber have lived in Port William since early adulthood. Their stories have characters in common, but if Jayber and Hannah appear in each other's stories, their interaction is only incidental.

Both Hannah and Jayber live their lives by surprise. Both feel deeply their membership in Port William. Within that life of membership and surprise, each comes to

an understanding of love and gratitude for life and this world that is palpable, Hannah by a young marriage cut short by death and an old marriage fully lived, and Jayber by a secret vow to a woman who never knows he is her faithful husband. If Hannah feels she might “perish with the knowledge of loss and of having” (*HC*, p. 119), then Jayber could well perish with the knowledge of loss and of not having. Or of having something else, something unexpected but gratefully embraced. Formal education in *Hannah Coulter* is aimed at results, whether Hannah’s or her children’s. As she realizes too late, formal education is a force propelling children away from home. Formal education for Jayber is meandering and driven by curiosity, not by career or intention. Whether as a result of his education or in spite of it, Jayber is driven home as a young man, never to leave again. And both Hannah and Jayber are readers and reflectors, continuing to learn all their lives.

Jayber Crow gives the most complex view of education presented in the Port William fiction. Jayber has four experiences of formal education and a lifetime of informal education. Officially his education is fragmented and interrupted. As a student, he is diffident and adequate, but his view of learning may be the purest of anyone in Port William. Jayber does not pursue his learning for power or influence, nor for position or livelihood. His is learning merely for knowing, and even his knowing he usually keeps to himself. As explained in *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001): “[Jayber] is likely to know something, if not a good deal, about anything—and likely to have to be asked before he will tell what he knows” (p. 66). Burley Coulter brags about Jayber in a letter to his nephew: “You’ve got to hand it to Jayber for the way he’s held his learning and not let it go to his head” (p. 108). Amusing as this line is, it also reflects Port William’s desire to be accepted for what it is and its fear of being looked down upon for what it is not.

Jayber's dual identity as both a marginal student and a lifelong scholar and thinker is just one of the contrasts Jayber lives within. When he returns to the Port William neighborhood in 1937, Jayber is both a native and a newcomer. Throughout his life, he is deeply and intimately connected to the community by what he knows and observes both as the town barber and later as the gravedigger and janitor for the church, yet he is separated from much of Port William too by who he is and his role as the town's bachelor barber. Finally, he is both devoutly married in his heart and irredeemably alone in his life.

### Jayber's Life

Jayber is born in 1914 in Goforth, Kentucky, near Port William. His father is a blacksmith, and they live in the house behind the shop. Jayber says, "I don't remember when I did not know Port William, the town and the neighborhood. My relation to that place, my being in it and my absences from it, is the story of my life" (*JC*, 2000b, p. 12). In February 1918, when he is not yet four, his parents both fall ill and die, and he is taken in by an elderly great-aunt and uncle, who run a store at Squires Landing on the river and keep a bit of a farm. Jayber helps with work at the store, farm, and home.

Uncle Othy dies when Jayber is nine, and Aunt Cordie dies about a year later. With no living relatives, Jayber is sent to The Good Shepherd, a school and orphanage under the direction of Brother Whitespade, "one of the crossest of Christians" (p. 30). As Jayber puts it, "I went out of the hands of love, which certainly included charity as we know it, into the hands of charity as we know it, which included love only as it might" (p. 30). He meets Brother Whitespade for the first time, facing him across a wide desk, and Jayber recognizes himself as nearly powerless. His promise as a student stalls when he

realizes he can exert what little power he has: He decides, “I could withhold this single thing that was mine that I knew they wanted” (p. 34). But he learns he loves to read.

Two things happen to Jayber at The Good Shepherd that chart the course of his life. First, he thinks he has been called to preach the Gospel, and second, he serves as the barber’s assistant in the school barbershop. He learns the barber trade as an apprentice. He is less certain of his religious calling, but he decides he “better give [God] the benefit of the doubt” (p. 43), in case the call had come and he missed it. While uncertain of this calling, Jayber does like what he imagines would be included in a life as a preacher:

I would have learned a great deal during my education, and I would spend a lot of my time reading. I liked those thoughts, and also the thought that I would live in a nice town with shady streets and be well-loved and admired by my congregation.

But the thought that I liked most was that I would have a wife. (p. 45)

Except for a wife, all this comes to Jayber in his life—not as a preacher, but as a barber.

Next stop for Jayber is Pigeonville College, where he enrolls as a pre-ministerial student. He waits tables in a women’s dormitory and makes extra money at odd jobs. He is careful with his money and treasures the few things he buys. He does better in his classes in college than before and enjoys the bigger library the college has. He still keeps to himself and has few friends. As at The Good Shepherd, he bristles under the pious atmosphere of Pigeonville. He begins to doubt his calling and gets into what he terms “doctrinal trouble” (p. 49). After talking about his doubts to his professors, he decides he has to resign his scholarship and leave Pigeonville.

He goes to Lexington in 1935, and after some odd jobs, he takes a job as a barber. He lives in Lexington almost two years, even taking literature courses at the university,

but in the fall of 1936, he begins to feel “just awfully lonesome” (p. 71). He says, “I felt sad beyond the thought or memory of happiness” (p. 71). He finishes out the term, but does not register for classes after Christmas. One day in late January 1937, he simply packs what he can fit into a cardboard box and starts out on foot, telling no one. The Ohio River is flooding in Louisville, and he wants to see the water. He makes it to Frankfort as the Kentucky River is flooding, and he finds that the bridges across the river have been closed. Overcome with loneliness, he is surprised to hear himself tell the policeman at the bridge barricade, “I’ve got to get to my people down the river” (p. 78). The policeman takes pity on him and allows him to cross. Wet, hungry, and exhausted, Jayber ends up spending the night in the capitol, which has been set up as a shelter for refugees from the flood. Being with the displaced people of Frankfort, he realizes he is no longer going to Louisville—what he told the policeman was true. “I was on my way home, as surely as if I had a home to be on the way to” (p. 81). This comes as a surprise because “not a one of my teachers had ever suggested such a possibility” (p. 82). He has been living up to the dictates of formal education to go out and make something of himself. He says, “I suppose that in my freedom, when it came, I pointed to Port William as a compass needle points north” (p. 82). Loosed from presumed expectations, his instinct turns him home.

It is only forty miles from Frankfort to Port William, but walking and hitching rides and taking wrong ways and going around flood waters, Jayber spends two days getting close enough to Port William to recognize where he is. It is here, in the backwater of Willow Run, that Jayber encounters Burley Coulter in a boat, quietly fishing. Once Burley finds out who Jayber is and that he is a barber in need of work, Burley makes sure that Jayber is delivered safely to Port William to become the town’s barber.

In 1945, Jayber also takes on the job of gravedigger and janitor for the Port William church. In 1950, he falls suddenly and deeply in love with Mattie Chatham, daughter of Athey and Della Keith, two people Jayber respects a great deal, and wife of Troy Chatham, someone Jayber does not respect at all. In 1954, love and a kind of logic lead him to make a private marriage vow to himself: Given that Mattie deserves a faithful husband and given that the husband she has is not faithful, Jayber would be a faithful husband to Mattie, forsaking all others, till death. It is a pivotal moment in his life, and yet little changes going forward, mostly because no one knows about his vow but him.

The barbershop building where Jayber works and lives never has running water, and he has to haul his water in buckets. The shop has a big metal urn with a spigot at the bottom, sitting on a little coal oil stove. It is water, it runs, and it is hot, but it does not comply with state regulations for hot running water in a barbershop. He judges the building is not worth the expense of running water, and in 1969, he decides to close the shop. Burley offers him the use of his cabin on the river. Jayber is at home again on the river, as he was during his happy years with Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy. He fishes when he likes and keeps a garden. He continues the schedule of church janitor, but since he is out of town without a phone, he gives up gravedigging. He has brought the barber chair with him to the cabin as his most comfortable chair. To his surprise, many of his former customers continue coming to him for haircuts. He is still the only Port William barber, but now he lives in a cabin in the woods, on the edge of the river.

#### The Many Names of Jayber Crow

During his life at Squires Landing, Jayber thinks of himself as Jonah Crow. He explains, “When I thought of myself, I thought, ‘I am Jonah Crow.’ A pretty name. I



imagined that my mother had loved the sound of it. I was Jonah Crow entirely” (p. 24). Aunt Cordie calls him “my boy” (p. 23) and several other pet names that convey love to Jayber and a certain pride. Or she says, “Jonah,” “with an air of preciseness, as if to show respect for my great namesake” (p. 24). Othy calls him “Jony” (p. 24). When Othy calls him “Jonah,” with the emphasis on the second syllable, Jayber knows he is in trouble.

Under all those names, Jayber knows who he is and why he is named so. His identity is connected closely to real people who know him and love him and whom he loves, and to a real place that he knows and loves. He understands the meaning of his names. The Good Shepherd is run by Brother Whitespade, who renames Jonah Crow as “J. Crow,” first initial and last name, as he does with all new arrivals. Jayber remembers:

We were thus not quite nameless, but also not quite named. The effect was curious. For a while anyhow, and for how long a while it would be hard to say, we all acted on the assumption that we were no longer the persons we had been....We became in some way faceless to ourselves and to one another. (p. 31)

Jayber tries repeating his real name to himself, but finally “it seemed that it could never have belonged to me or to anybody else” (p. 32). Whether Brother Whitespade requires such renaming out of efficiency or to signal a new beginning to the students or for some other reason, the effect disorients Jayber, who spends years finding his true self again.

When he gets to college, he is resigned to his name change. He corrects people who try to call him Jonah. When he introduces himself, he calls himself J. Crow. As a pre-ministerial student at Pigeonville College, he has another name crisis, wondering if the name Brother Crow fits him. He decides it does not, and he leaves Pigeonville. In Lexington, the barber Skinner Hawes never seems to call him by name, but Jayber

registers himself at the university as J. Crow. It is only when he meets up with Burley Coulter that Jayber says, “My name is Jonah Crow” (p. 91). Then he adds, “They call me J” (p. 91), never identifying who “they” might be. When Burley takes him home with him for something to eat, Burley explains to his mother, “You remember that boy Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy Dagget took to live with them? This is him” (p. 97). Mrs. Coulter calls him Honey and says she cannot remember his name. He tells her Jonah Crow.

Later, Jayber admits that he felt changed to be remembered by Burley and then introduced by Burley:

But when I recognized Burley Coulter on the water that morning and told him who I was, and he remembered me from that lost and gone and given-up old time and then introduced me to people as the boy Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy took to raise—well, that changed me. After all those years of keeping myself aloof and alone, I began to feel tugs from the outside. I felt my life branching and forking out into the known world. (p. 130)

He recognizes too the complication this is for him:

In a way, I was almost sorry. It was as though I knew without exactly knowing, or felt, or smelled in the air, the already accomplished fact that nothing would ever be simple for me again. I never again would be able to put my life in a box and carry it away. (p. 130)

He senses that he will become entangled by love with Port William. He has not yet heard Burley use the word, but Jayber is destined to be part of the Port William membership.

After becoming the town’s barber, Jayber is called Mr. Cray because “Crow was not a familiar name” (p. 11). Eventually, his customers call him J., and he says, “Once

my customers took me to themselves, they called me Jaybird, and then Jayber. Thus I became, and have remained, a possession of Port William” (p. 11). The barbershop is referred to simply as Jayber’s, “as if it had been clearly marked on some map” (p. 3). The name Jayber probably never sounds so right as when he is called it by Mattie Chatham.

#### How Jayber Learns

Jayber is smart from the start and learns much by reflecting on what he observes. Early on he learns to read, and reading is the main avenue to learning throughout his life. As described in the novel *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001), “[Jayber] has continued to be a student of sorts, as far as short funds and few books and erratic habits have permitted” (p. 66). He learns some of his more useful skills and knowledge through work. His ability to work hard and work well, along with thrifty ways and his willingness to take on odd jobs, is part of what sustains him while at Pigeonville College and also in Lexington. His teachers for these useful skills and knowledge are primarily Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy.

#### *On-the-Job Training*

After Jayber’s parents die, he suffers through a period of grief where he never lets Aunt Cordie out of his sight. But he settles into a happy life at Squires Landing, helping with the store and farm chores, helping Othy with fishing, and studying in fascination the river and the comings and goings of the steamboats. Jayber also lives in the beauty and order of nature, evident in the seasons and the cycles of the garden and farm animals. He begins to feel secure in the dependable love and care that he gets from Cordie and Othy, a routine to match their needs in their place, with each other and with their neighbors. Every day, Put Woolfork comes to the store to loaf. Nearly every night they visit with their neighbors the Thripples. Every Sunday, they travel the four miles to Port William

for church. Aunt Cordie welcomes Jayber's help and praises his work. Jayber says, "Aunt Cordie was good company and always kind, but she saw to it that I did my work right. The best part of my education, and surely the most useful part, came from her" (*JC*, p. 23). Like Hannah Coulter, Mary Penn, and Andy Catlett, Jayber expresses the value of learning to work hard and work well. Each also appreciates the value of practical skills.

At *The Good Shepherd*, Jayber works as the barber's assistant, mostly sweeping and keeping things in order. He shows an interest and the barber teaches him how to care for the clippers and razors, and later even how to cut hair and give a shave. Jayber remembers, "I got so I was good at it and liked to do it" (p. 41). Barber Clark even trusts Jayber to practice giving a shave on him. Jayber appreciates his trust and friendliness.

A lesson that is necessary and reinforced by his experience is independence, no doubt contributing to his dread of being powerless. He learns to take care of himself. Jayber is shrewd and careful and does not allow himself to be vulnerable as prey. Indeed, he could be too guarded, but once he lets his guard down, his heart is wide open.

Jayber learns the job of gravedigging by experience and instruction. In the spring of 1945, when Uncle Stanley Gibbs can still dig a grave but not reliably hoist himself out, he picks Jayber as his successor because Jayber has "both time to spare and the necessary intelligence" (p. 157). *A Place on Earth* gives the details of Stanley's selling Jayber on the job one night in the barbershop. When Jayber asks why Stanley is giving up the job, he launches into a story about a disagreement with the preacher about Stanley's refusal to dig two graves in one day. He agrees to dig one grave, and Brother Preston hires two brothers to dig the other. They make a number of rookie mistakes, compounded by a hard rain that fills the grave with water and mud. Stanley does allow that he made the same

mistakes early in his tenure as gravedigger. The entire story is instructive to Jayber as an illustration of the many things that a less intelligent gravedigger can do wrong.

Stanley presses Jayber for a decision. At first Jayber cannot think what he would do with extra money, then he decides it might be good for his old age. He gets a vision of a small cabin on the river and days spent fishing—indeed, a vision of his own future. But Jayber is worried about Stanley's loss of income and status. Finally, he makes up his mind. He tells Stanley: "I'll take the job. And then I want to hire you to stay on as a supervisor. I'll do the work and you can furnish the know-how, and we'll split the money" (p. 78). Jayber makes the decision based on sympathy and pedagogy. He has preserved a small income and a small dignity for Stanley, while helping to ensure that he can avoid rookie mistakes. In effect, Jayber has created an apprenticeship for himself.

Stanley "is delighted: ...a position of authority with half-pay and no work" (p. 78). "He goes into a discourse on the sleights and subtleties of gravedigging, a discourse on method....His erudition and eloquence surprise him. He knows things he did not know he knew. Gravedigging becomes the science and art that explains the world" (p. 78). But Jayber is thinking about fishing. When Big Ellis comes in and asks what Stanley is talking about, Jayber says, "he's giving me a lesson" (p. 80). Months into the job, Jayber admits, "nothing in his experience as scholar and barber could have prepared him for the agony involved in loosening and spading out that much dirt" (p. 274). Jayber says to Stanley, "Six feet is a lot deeper than I thought it was" (p. 274). Stanley gives a lesson in the philosophy of gravedigging: "things look different from down there, don't they, son?" (p. 274). But Jayber need not be told this. He has learned from experience: "Each time, as he digs his way down and grows tireder, he grows bluer..., [feeling] the full misery of

mortality” (p. 275). When Uncle Stanley is dead and Jayber digs alone, his work digging graves gives him the time and the opportunity to meditate on life and death in Port William.

### *Institutions of Learning*

The Willow Run School is Jayber’s first school, where he learns to read and write and do enough arithmetic to keep the books at the store after Uncle Othy dies. We get a fuller portrait of the orphanage as an educational institution. The Good Shepherd, Jayber says, “was turned inward, trying to be a world in itself” (p. 40), afraid of bad influences. As a result, “the students...naturally hungered for the world outside” (p. 41). It fails to inspire Jayber to study, but he reads whatever he can, and he learns that he does not want ever again “to stand in front of the desk of somebody who had more power than [he] had” (p. 47), as he did when he meets Brother Whitespade. He knows he is a disappointment to his teachers, but being disengaged as a student preserves a piece of himself for himself.

The place is as strange to him as he becomes to himself. He admires the beauty of the lawn, trees, and brick buildings. But when he closes his eyes, it disappears, unlike Squires Landing, which for years he can remember in detail. It is also a divided world or sought to divide it—soul from body, the order of the institution from a claimed disorder of nature. All this is alien to Jayber who has lived as an entire person in an entire world. At The Good Shepherd, he goes from being “Jonah Crow entirely” (p. 24) to being partial and faceless, “not quite nameless” (p. 31) but strangely named. He feels powerless: from his first encounter with Brother Whitespade, to his renaming, to the standing in line, to the beautiful farm he can see but not reach. His powerlessness is the reason he becomes a disappointment to his teachers: He must exert what power he has. Jayber can be a good student. He likes learning, “especially the learning that could be got by reading” (p. 33),

but he does not like school. He makes only fair grades, and he feels “physically confined” in class. His teachers tell him he is “wasting [his] God-given talents” (p. 34). His mind wanders and he lets it go, happy for the escape it allows out a window. Jayber says, “If the classroom was not my natural habitat, the library pretty much was” (p. 34). He spends a lot of time in the library, and he begins a list of his favorite words. Eventually, he reads *Walden* by Thoreau, and describes it as:

A book that made me want to live in a cabin in the woods. I drew a picture of the cabin I wanted to live in, and drew the floor plan, and made a list of the furniture and dishes and utensils and other things I would need. (p. 35)

Such plans give an escape for his imagination and a prescient picture of his later years.

Pigeonville College affords Jayber more freedom and a better library. He feels a duty to study since he is on scholarship. But he finds the atmosphere at Pigeonville too pious and cut off from “open countryside and flowing streams” (p. 48). He says:

I wish I could give you the right description of that atmosphere. It was soapy and paperish and shut-in and a little stale. It didn't smell of anything bodily or earthly. A little whiff of tobacco smoke would have done wonders for it. The main thing was that it made me feel excluded from it, even while I was in it. (p. 49)

His feelings of exclusion come from his longing for nature and from his many questions.

The same divide he felt between soul and body at The Good Shepherd he find here, troubling to him because it does not fit his experience. Then he gets into “doctrinal trouble” (p. 49), wondering about Biblical paradoxes. For example, he wonders:

If Jesus meant what He said when He said we should love our enemies, how can Christians go to war?...And what about our bodies that always seemed to come off

so badly in every contest with our soul? Did Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it? (p. 50)

Most crushing of all is when he realizes that when Jesus prayed that he might be spared the crucifixion, the prayer was refused, and Jayber must confront “thy will be done”:

It means that your will and God’s will may not be the same. It means there’s a good possibility that you won’t get what you pray for. It means that in spite of your prayers you are going to suffer. It means you may be crucified. (p. 51)

This crisis comes down to two worries for Jayber:

Now I was unsure *what* it would be proper to pray for, or how to pray for it. After you have said “thy will be done,” what more can be said? And where do you find the strength to pray “thy will be done” after you see what it means? (p. 51; italics original)

And these questions lead to doubts in his mind about his ability to be a preacher.

He goes to his professors, “starting with the easiest questions and the talkiest professors” (p. 52). Having had no doubts themselves, they tell Jayber to pray. He finds no peace in their advice, and finally goes to Dr. Ardmire. Tough and feared, Dr. Ardmire “was known, behind his back, as Old Grit” (p. 53). It is a measure of Jayber’s distress that he risked himself to Old Grit. He unloads his questions in a rush, and Dr. Ardmire looks at him with “a light of kindness and...of amusement” (p. 53). Then Jayber has one more question: “How can I preach if I don’t have any answers?” Dr. Ardmire agrees he probably cannot. Jayber knows then that he has to leave Pigeonville. He is embarrassed and says, “I had this feeling maybe I had been called.” Then Dr. Ardmire very kindly says to Jayber:



You may have been right. But not to what you thought. Not to what you think.

You have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time. (p. 54; italics original)

Jayber asks how long that will take, and Dr. Ardmire says, “I don’t know. As long as you live, perhaps” (p. 54). Then Dr. Ardmire says, “I will tell you a further mystery. It may take longer” (p. 54). Dr. Ardmire listens carefully to Jayber, he honors his questions by giving no pat answers, he elevates to the level of vocation lives others than the ministry, and he legitimizes mystery. No wonder Jayber thinks of him as his kindest teacher.

At the university in Lexington, Jayber takes classes “to hear somebody talk about books who knew more about them than I did” (p. 69). He finds that “the professors were pretty aloof, like the university itself” (p. 69), but the ones he had as teachers “knew what they were talking about and loved to talk about it” (p. 69). He says about class lectures, “It seemed wonderful to me” (p. 69). He compares the university to his other schools:

The university was in some ways the opposite of The Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd looked upon the outside world as a threat to its conventional wisdom.

The university looked upon itself as a threat to the conventional wisdom of the outside world. According to it, it not only knew more than ordinary people but was more advanced and had a better idea of the world of the future. (p. 70)

To a boy who spent the better part of seven years learning from Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy, both of whom no doubt relied heavily on conventional wisdom in the present about the real world, either attitude about conventional wisdom must seem strange and hostile.

As excited as he is to be at the university and as much as he enjoys the classes he takes, he notes a further observation that disturbs him. Again he makes a comparison:

Otherwise, the university and The Good Shepherd were a lot alike. That was another of my discoveries. It was a slow discovery and not one I enjoyed—I was a long time figuring it out. Every one of the educational institutions that I had been in had been hard at work trying to be a world unto itself. (p. 70)

But he notes an important difference:

The Good Shepherd and Pigeonville College were trying to be the world of the past. The university was trying to be the world of the future, and maybe it has had a good deal to do with the world as it has turned out to be, but this has not been as big an improvement as the university expected. The university thought of itself as a place of freedom for thought and study and experimentation, and maybe it was, in a way. But it was an island too, a floating or a flying island. It was preparing people from the world of the past for the world of the future, and what was missing was the world of the present, where every body was living its small, short, surprising, miserable, wonderful, blessed, damaged, only life. (pp. 70-71)

What Jayber finds lacking in all the institutions of learning that he has encountered is the world of the present. This is a world built on the past, yet irretrievably not the past. This is also a world that is not yet the future and will never be the future.

This separation of past and future by the present is a frequent topic for Berry. In “Is Life a Miracle?” (*CP*, 2003), he refers to “the instantaneity of life” (p. 187), noting that “we are alive only in the present, not in the past or in the future. The present, we assume, is ‘the time’ in which we are alive” (p. 187), and that time is indefinably, “immeasurably” short. “Past and future never overlap. And they are, it seems, very close together” (p. 187), separated only by the present. “The present seems to be the interval in

which the future pours itself into the past” (p. 187), and its immeasurability is for Berry an indication of mystery: “where empiricism fails and experience forever eludes experimentation” (p. 187). He writes, “We know that the present exists, because we know that life exists, but we can’t find its measure; we can’t prove its existence” (p. 187). This to Berry is a hopeful claim, staking out a limit to how science can lead to knowing, not to repudiate it as a system of thought, but to admit to its limits and recapture the validity of other ways of knowing—knowing through faith or love or intuition, for example.

Further, Berry thinks of the present as eternal, with physical life being, in effect, “a participation in, or of, God’s life” (p. 188). His character Andy Catlett shares this view. In *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2006), Andy includes this meditation on time:

Time is always halved—for all we know, it is halved—by the eye blink, the synapse, the immeasurable moment of the present. Time is only the past and maybe the future; the present moment, dividing and connecting them, is eternal. The time of the past is there, somewhat, but only somewhat, to be remembered and examined. We believe that the future is there too, for it keeps arriving, though we know nothing about it. But try to stop the present for your patient scrutiny, or to measure its length with your most advanced chronometer. It exists, so far as I can tell, only as a leak in time, through which, if we are quiet enough, eternity falls upon us and makes its claim. (p. 119)

Jayber would recognize this view of time.

A life that is always planning for the future is never in the present and, therefore, never aware enough of the present to be grateful. But also a life that is without planning is without hope. Jayber says, “the future was coming to me, but I had not so much as

lifted a foot to go to it” (*JC*, 2000b, p. 71). In the fall of 1936, Jayber falls into a deep sadness. He says, “about the time I finished figuring out that all the institutions I had known were islands, the whole weight of my unimagined, unlooked-for life came down on me, and I hit the bottom” (p. 71). He is not where he wants to be, but he is further burdened by not knowing where he should be. This weight of his life draws him first to what he imagines will be the real experience of seeing the flood in Louisville. Then after the frighteningly real experience of seeing the flood in Frankfort and his real deliverance that night in the refugee shelter, the weight of his life draws him home to Port William.

### *Learning through Reading*

Jayber’s education does not end because he is out of school. He likes to read, and he is adept at learning through reading. His barbershop always has a newspaper ready for loafers to read, and Jayber reads it too, learning about the world outside Port William. Jayber also has books, some few that he brought safe through the flood of his journey home, and others that he acquires over the years. For example, once he buys a box of books at an auction for a quarter (p. 148) and discovers a Thomas Hardy novel in the lot.

Of course, Jayber is not the only reader in Port William, nor is he the only one in Port William who learns through reading. Of Danny and Lyda Branch’s seven children, only two finish high school, and Hannah Coulter observes, “Every one of them seemed to have a perfect faith in the education they got outside of school, which they didn’t ever call ‘education’” (*HC*, 2004a, p. 152). Hannah also notes about the Branches: “To learn things they didn’t know, they asked somebody or they read books” (p. 152). Port William has a complement of people who rely on books for comfort or entertainment or knowledge, but for others, reading and books are held in a certain awe.

For example, in *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001), Jayber and Burley Coulter spend a day fishing, then go back to Jayber's to fry the fish and eat in his living quarters above the barbershop. Burley is astounded at Jayber's books and writes to his nephew Nathan:

You never seen the like of books he's got up there. I've known Jayber mighty well for a long time, and I never knew he read books. But he tells me he's read some of them books as many as several times. Some of the authors was ones I'd heard of.... When he seen I was interested, Jayber told me that books has meant a lot to him, and there's some of them he puts a great deal of stock in. (p. 108)

Burley has not put a lot of stock in books, but he is impressed by people who read.

Berry provides Jayber's account of the episode in *Jayber Crow*. Jayber says of Burley: "I had lived in Port William several years before I realized that Burley was proud of me for being a reader of books; he was not himself a devoted reader, but he thought it was excellent that I should be" (p. 124). Jayber remembers that Burley asked if Jayber "reads in them" (p. 125). Then Jayber says:

[Burley] gave the shelves a long study, not reading the titles, apparently just assaying in his mind the number and weight of the books, their varying sizes and colors, the printing on their spines. And then he nodded his approval and said, 'Well, that's all right'" (p. 125).

Burley always sees more than it seems: He was doing more than assaying number and weight. If he was not reading the titles, he was at least reading the authors and discovering that some were ones he had heard of. While Burley describes Jayber's library as "you never seen the like of books he's got up there" (*PE*, p. 108), Jayber describes it as "my books in my little bookcase" (*JC*, p. 124), numbers being relative to experience.

### *Learning through Listening*

Being a barber is about cutting hair and shaving beards but about conversation too, both listening and talking. Jayber says of barbering: “I don’t mean for you to believe that even barbers ever know the whole story. But it’s a fact that knowledge comes to barbers, just as stray cats come to milking barns” (p. 94). He explains the process:

If you are a barber and you stay in one place long enough, eventually you will know the outlines of a lot of stories, and you will see how the bits and pieces of knowledge fit in. Anything you know about, there is a fair chance you will sooner or later know more about. You will never get the outlines filled in completely, but as I say, knowledge will come. You don’t have to ask. In fact, I have been pretty scrupulous about not asking. If a matter is none of my business, I ask nothing and tell nothing. And yet I am amazed at what I have come to know. (p. 94)

Jayber is not a gossip, in the usual sense of the word, but he is interested in people and accepts the knowledge he receives about them with gentleness, sympathy, and understanding. It is worth noting here that Berry makes a distinction between what he has called “mean gossip and merely curious gossip and honestly caring and concerned gossip” (2012, October 29), and he recognizes that the benefit of people in a small community knowing other people’s business is that “everybody in the community knows who needs help, and they know the reasons behind some people’s errors” (2012, October 29). It is one of Berry’s standard answers to criticisms of the closeness of small town life, that sympathy is a necessary and welcome lesson of small town life. Jayber knows this well. However the gossip is delivered, Jayber’s reception of it fits best into Berry’s third category of gossip.

The barbershop in Lexington is a “run-down barbershop on a run-down street” (p. 64) near the track. Skinner, the owner, has not been sober much since his partner died. First Jayber cleans the shop, then promotes the business. When customers start dropping by, Jayber gets to learn about city life from the customers: working people from the neighborhood, but also “several second-string touts and gamblers from over at the track, a pimp or two, and maybe worse than that” (p. 67). He says: “I was pleased, for it seemed to me that I was getting a good look at city life and hearing talk and learning things I probably couldn’t have learned anyplace else” (p. 67). Jayber is a listener, and he learns through listening:

For a barber, I never was very talkative. Mainly I listened. At Skinner’s Barbershop I heard people taking things for granted that I had never even imagined before. And I mean several *kinds* of people talking about several kinds of things. (p. 67; italics original)

It was quite an education for a young man fresh from pre-ministerial studies. Having been deliberately isolated from the threats of the world, he now has a ringside seat.

Likewise, in his barbershop in Port William, he is a listener and a studier of his customers, aware of the intimate connection he experiences in his ministrations to them:

I liked them varyingly; some I didn’t like at all. But all of them have been interesting to me; some I have liked and some I have loved. I have raked my comb over scalps that were dirty both above and beneath. I have lowered the ears of good men and bad, smart and stupid, young and old, kind and mean; of men who have killed other men (think of that) and of men who have been killed (think of *that*). I cut the hair of Tom Coulter and Virgil Feltner and Jimmy Chatham and

a good many more who went away to the various wars and never came back, or came back dead. (p. 125; italics original)

He likes best to listen to some of the old men, the “rememberers” (p. 126), as they are called in Port William: “Intelligent men who knew things that were surpassingly interesting to me....I listened to them with all my ears and have tried to remember what they said, though from remembering what I remember I know that much is lost” (p. 127). Athey Keith is one of these rememberers whose stories fascinate and educate Jayber. But Athey has a style of storytelling that requires puzzle-solving: Athey “never told all of any story at the same time” (p. 216). His stories come “in odd little bits and pieces, usually in unacknowledged reference to a larger story that he did not tell because (apparently) he assumed you already knew it, and he told the fragment just to remind you of the rest” (p. 216). Jayber always listens whether Athey expects it or not: “Sometimes you couldn’t even assume that he assumed you were listening; he might have been telling it to himself. With Athey you were always somewhere in the middle of the story” (p. 216). The effect was an aural puzzle, requiring Jayber’s attention during the telling, as well as his intelligence afterward in assembling the pieces.

Such puzzling is good practice for someone who learns about a community in snippets. His work as gravedigger and groundskeeper for the cemetery calls for some of the same puzzling. He says of the cemetery, “I was always learning something” (p. 158):

It was endlessly moving to me to walk among the stones, reading the names of people I had known in my childhood, the names of people I was kin to but had never known, and (pretty soon) the names of people I knew and cared about and had buried myself. (pp. 157-158)



Studying the headstones, especially of those people he had never known, he would have to listen to the past with his imagination. He imagines and wonders and knows:

The people there had lived their little passage of time in this world, had become what they became, and now could be changed only by forgiveness and mercy.

The misled, the disappointed, the sinners of all the sins, the hopeful, the faithful, the loving, the doubtful, the desperate, the grieved and the comforted, the young and the old, the bad and the good—all, sufferers unto death, had lain down there together. Some were there who had served the community better by dying than by living. Why I should have felt tender toward them all was not clear to me, but I did. (p. 158)

The cemetery has graves of children, dead often from illness. He says, “You didn’t have to know the stories; just the dates and the size of the stones told the heartbreak” (p. 158).

Living in a community and interested in its people, Jayber comes to understand that everyone is helpless in the face of death. In seeing the mourners bearing the dead to the graves he has dug, he knows death’s elemental power over life: “And you couldn’t forget that all the people in Port William, if they lived long, would come there burdened and leave empty-handed many times, and would finally come and stay empty-handed” (p. 158). Yet he is moved by a kind of love for the dead, that his heart might be made big enough “to include them all” (p. 158), and he learns then love’s power over death.

Jayber observes about the cemetery that the “place of the democracy of the dead was sometimes a very social place for the living” (p. 158), with people bringing flowers and regrets and love to the graves or searching for “names and dates of ancestors” (p. 158). He sees all this: “Sometimes old friends would meet after a long separation and

would have to make themselves known to one another again” (p. 158), and he learns more. Decoration Day each year is especially instructive for Jayber, with people coming and meeting and remembering both the living and the dead.

For many years, Mat Feltner leads a work crew each fall to clean up the graves of relatives and friends, the dead all in one category or the other in Mat’s mind. Mat works with the men in the mornings, but spends the afternoons among the dead: “He left the work to the younger ones and in the weakened fall sunlight wandered off among the stones, renewing his knowledge of who lay where and of what they had been in their time” (p. 201). When the men finish mowing and grooming graves and straightening headstones, Mat often directs them to work a bit more on “the graves of other dead who had awakened again in his thoughts and made their claims upon him” (p. 202), renewing memories. Jayber says:

I was there because I had learned [Mat’s] ways and loved to hear him when he went back into his memories. When I knew he had gone out to the graveyard with his hands, I would get free if I could and go there myself, to be in his company for a while....I would listen while he talked, and while he talked the mute stones spoke. (p. 202)

Jayber loves to hear the stories, to add Mat’s remembering to his own remembering and imaginings, and with each story, Jayber becomes more deeply connected to Port William.

### Knowing and Loving

Jayber is an observer, a payer of attention, and he does not miss much. In a life of solitude, he holds the community in his heart. In a life of love and beauty, he knows sorrow and loss. In a life shadowed by war, Jayber strives to make peace.

Coming home to Port William in 1937, Jayber finally comes into his life. His formal education complete, his learning really begins, and as he says, “As the year warmed in 1937, I was a young man. I hardly knew what I knew, let alone what I was going to learn” (p. 129). At the time of the telling of his life story, toward the end of that life, Jayber has come to know himself this way:

I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life, when poured out at the end, would say, “Good-good-good-good-good!” like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am a man of losses, regrets, and griefs. I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith. (p. 356)

He has known himself variously over the years. Besides his jobs, he is a gardener, a fisherman, and a fool (pp. 259 and 295). He knows he has been a scholar (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 274) and continues so, in his way. He knows himself too as a man transformed by love:

If you love somebody enough, and long enough, finally you must see yourself. What I saw was a barber and grave digger and church janitor making half a living, a bachelor, a man about town, a friendly fellow. And this was perhaps acceptable, perhaps even creditable in its way, but to my newly chastened sight I was nobody’s husband. (*JC*, 2000b, p. 197)

At the same time, for much of his life, he is a faithful husband to Mattie Chatham, true to his love and his secret vow.

Jayber also knows himself as a man “captured by gratitude” (p. 83), the phrase he uses to describe how he felt after spending the night at the refugee shelter at the capitol in Lexington during the flood. He knows his life was saved that night, and he is grateful to those who set up the shelter and offered him hot soup and a piece of bread. He is also

grateful to the other refugees. He is moved to have passed a night among the other saved souls. As he is leaving early in the morning, he sees “how small and still and tender” (p. 83) they look sleeping, and he wishes he could “tiptoe around and just lay [his] hand on each one” (p. 83). Instead, he leaves silently so as not to disturb any of them. He says he “eased away” (p. 83). “Captured by gratitude” is a fair way to describe Jayber’s life. His actions throughout his life are well characterized as trying not to disturb, as easing away. He wishes at once not to disturb and still to know the love and griefs of those he shares his time and space with in this world, to lay his hand on each in blessing and gratitude.

Jayber knows himself too as a man living by surprise. He is surprised to be an orphan—twice. He is surprised to be a barber, to return to Port William, to fall in love with a married woman. He is surprised by the depth of beauty and joy he finds in life, but of the sorrow too. He is surprised after twenty years of silence to begin to pray again. He admits that “nearly everything that has happened to me has happened by surprise. *All* the important things have happened by surprise” (p. 322; italics original). When he is faced with closing the shop or updating the plumbing, Burley Coulter presses him on what he plans to do.

Jayber speaks aloud for the first time some things he had not yet said even to himself. He speaks of a cabin in the woods on the river, of fishing and gardening. It is an old dream that he has never spoken of and not thought of for years. In the same way that Hannah Coulter surprised herself with the idea of a wildlife preserve (*HC*, 2004a, p. 178), Jayber is surprised by the plans he tells Burley. He says, “I was listening to myself with some interest, for I certainly had not thought it through” (*JC*, 2000b, p. 296). Burley embraces the idea fully, giving Jayber “the use of” Burley’s cabin on the river (p. 297).

Jayber outdoes Thoreau, repairing and rebuilding the cabin and living there not just for two years in an experiment as Thoreau did, but for more than seventeen years as a life.

Jayber is a man of simple joys and complex sorrows. He says, “One of the best things you can do in this world is take a nap in the woods” (p. 347) and “Provided I am not short of water, I like washing....It is pleasant to work a while in the smell of soap, and then to have the smell of the clean wet things drying on the line” (pp. 357-358). He says, “I try not to let good things go by unnoticed” (p. 323). His life on the river turns out to be “one of [Jayber’s] happiest times” (p. 308). He finds so much to see and enjoy—“things of intricate, limitless beauty” (p. 327)—that he cannot take it all in. He says, “Often I fear that I am not paying enough attention” (p. 327). He is reminded of another time of simple happiness: his years at Squires Landing with Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy.

In his years on the river when he works in the heat all day, both he and his clothes dirty and sweated through, he finds a bath in the river to be a nearly unspeakable joy: “When I wade out again, I am cool and clean, delighted as a risen soul” (p. 326). This is a simple image, straightforward and purely joyful, with the suggestion of Heaven. It is of the moment and timeless, unspoiled by past regrets or future worries. Jayber has moments like this in his life, but he is too reflective, too complex to fool himself. In the midst of all the beauty and humor and joy of life, he knows too the sorrows.

Late in life, Jayber describes his life as “almost entirely memory and very little time” (p. 24), and he remembers his years at Squires Landing as “all time and almost no memory” (p. 24). He sits on his porch overlooking the river and thinks:

My memory seems to enclose me entirely; I wander back in my reckoning among all of my own that have lived and died until I no longer remember where I am.

And then I lift my head and look about me at the river and the valley, the great, unearned beauty of this place, and I feel the memoryless joy of a man just risen from the grave. (pp. 24-25)

While similar to the image of the risen soul, this is a truer reflection of Jayber's complex view. A risen soul goes to Heaven; a risen man returns to this world. Together the two images echo Burley Coulter's telling Nathan in a letter that when he dies, even if there is a Heaven, he would "rather go to Port William" (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 105). Jayber has lived in sorrows and beauty, both in nature and in people. Fully aware of both, he is trying, like Hannah Coulter, to learn to live in the eternal beauty of the moment. Grateful for the beauty and joy, he longs to shed the memory of sorrows. While he longs for Heaven, he also longs to return to this world to risk yet more sorrows for the sake of yet more beauty.

Jayber knows that life does not come compartmentalized; he knows that the beauty is often inseparable from the sorrow. As he explains about the story of his life:

Many things have always been happening all at the same time. Some of the funniest things have happened on some of the saddest days. Sometimes I have been happy in the midst of sorrow, or sorrowful in the midst of happiness.

Sometimes too I have been perfectly content, in the amazing state of ignorance, not yet knowing that I was already in the presence of loss. (p. 354)

This is why for a while he is uncertain what sort of book he is writing in telling his story:

For I have wondered sometimes if it would not finally turn out to be a book about Hell—where we fail to love one another, where we hate and destroy one another for reasons abundantly provided or for righteousness' sake or for pleasure, where we destroy the things we need the most, where we see no hope and have no faith,

where we are needy and alone, where things that ought to stay together fall apart, where there is such a groaning travail of selfishness in all its forms, where we love one another and die, where we must lose everything to know what we have had. (p. 354)

Still, upon whatever knife's edge his life balances, Jayber knows it is a balance, saying, "But the earth speaks to us of Heaven, or why would we want to go there? If we knew nothing of Hell, how would we delight in Heaven should we get there?" (pp. 354-355).

Ultimately, Jayber knows: "This is a book about Heaven. I know it now. It floats among us like a cloud and is the realest thing we know and the least to be captured, the least to be possessed by anybody for himself" (p. 351). Berry is ambiguous in his use of the pronoun *it* in this passage. Taking just the first two sentences of the quote, *it* seems to refer to what Jayber knows about the book, that he knows the book is about Heaven. But combined with the third sentence, *it* seems to refer to Heaven. This is not carelessness on the part of Berry or his editors; this must be deliberate. What Berry has Jayber say here is that, by the time he is writing the story of his life, he knows Heaven, and he is saying that Heaven "floats among us like a cloud" (p. 351). Berry is blurring the lines between Heaven and earth, in the same way he does in some of his poetry, noted in Chapter II. Further, if *it* refers to Heaven in this passage, then Jayber is saying that Heaven is "the realest thing we know" (p. 351). Heaven is the realest thing we know—this statement flies in the face of reason and science and things provable and things we think we know solidly. It is a statement of faith, but faith too is a kind of knowledge for Berry.

How does Jayber go from a failed pre-ministerial student, filled with doubts and empty of prayers, to someone with a conviction of Heaven as the realest thing we know?

He learns it by loving, first Port William, then Mattie Chatham, and finally his enemies. Jayber knows love. He knows he has been loved and is still loved. He also knows he has loved and still loves. But as an orphan, he was long in “the hands of charity as we know it, which included love only as it might” (p. 30). He has given himself few opportunities to love since Aunt Cordie died. But once he allows it, he has a heart that is eager to love.

*Love for Port William*

In January 1937, when Jayber sets out on what will be his journey home, he has no intention of going to Port William. He is fully free in the world, carrying everything he owns, off to satisfy his curiosity about flooding in Louisville. It is an adventure, a lark, inspired by a profound lonesomeness, but unlikely to relieve that lonesomeness. No one knows where he is or even who he is. The few people he meets whom he recognizes do not recognize him. He is anonymous, nameless, almost invisible. Even the policeman at the bridge in Lexington says to him, “Son, I didn’t see you come, and I didn’t see you go” (p. 78).

His night among the refugees in Frankfort changes him: It makes him yearn for community. When Burley remembers him and ferries him safe across the water and delivers him warmed and fed to Port William, Jayber has his lost community. He says:

I felt at home. There is more to this than I can explain. I just *felt* at home. After I got to Port William, I didn’t feel any longer that I needed to look around to see if there was someplace I would like better. I quit wondering what I was going to make of myself. (p. 123: italics original)

He is relieved to have a recognized, particular identity: “I was glad at last to be classified. I was not a preacher or a teacher or a student or a traveler. I was Port William’s bachelor



barber” (p. 123). Most importantly, he belongs: He is “a possession of Port William” (p. 11). He is not simply a bachelor barber; he is Port William’s bachelor barber.

Belonging comes with attachments and risks. Jayber says, “As much as you will let it, Port William will trouble your heart” (p. 230). He describes Port William as “a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill” (p. 205). In spite of his troubled heart, he says: “I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth” (p. 205), and he ponders this membership. From his role as church janitor and his vantage point in the back pew, he thinks about this gathering of souls, knowing what they may not know about themselves:

What they came together for was to acknowledge, just by coming, their losses and failures and sorrows, their need for comfort, their faith always needing to be greater, their wish (in spite of all words and acts to the contrary) to love one another and to forgive and be forgiven, their need for one another’s help and company and divine gifts, their hope (and experience) of love surpassing death, their gratitude. (pp. 162-163)

Though he knows some of their worst, he sees their best.

In 1951, Jayber has been the barber of Port William for fourteen years and the gravedigger and church janitor for six years. Mat Feltner and Nathan Coulter have been working in the cemetery with several other men, and typical of Mat, he has been remembering the dead, telling their stories as the graves are cleaned up. When the work crew leaves at the end of the day, Jayber lingers a while, enjoying the quiet.

After all his listening and all his observing and now all his own remembering, Jayber realizes how thoroughly he is connected to Port William. He says:

My mind had begun to sink into the place. This was a feeling. It had grown into me from what I had learned at my work and all I had heard from Mat Feltner and the others who were the community's rememberers, and from what I remembered myself. The feeling was that I could not be extracted from Port William like a pit from a plum, and that it could not be extracted from me; even death could not set it and me apart. (p. 204)

Imperfect as it is, he sees Port William as it might be if all knew themselves as members:

My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. (p. 205)

He knows the role of love in holding Port William, through time and in the present:

What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on. (p. 205)

He knows he too loves them all, with a sort of perfecting love, as they are seen by those who love them. Jayber says, "I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness" (p. 205). He sees the "mystery" (p. 205) of it all, as he recognizes, "we are eternal beings living in time" (p. 205). Time is our frailty.

He wonders how this mystery can ever be understood, though he thinks he glimpsed a knowledge of it once or at least sensed it as a feeling:

What I had come to know (by feeling only) was that the place's true being, its presence you might say, was a sort of current, like an underground flow of water, except that the flowing was in all directions and yet did not flow away. When it rose into your heart and throat, you felt joy and sorrow at the same time, and the joining of times and lives. To come into the presence of the place was to know life and death, and to be near in all your thoughts to laughter and to tears. (pp. 205-206)

He knows even then the tension of Heaven and Hell.

*Love for Mattie Chatham*

In the midst of falling in love with Port William and expanding his heart to include all those living and dead and yet to come, Jayber is surprised to find himself in love with Mattie Chatham. He has known of Mattie, but one day in 1950, watching her playing with the children at Bible School, he is overwhelmed by her loveliness. She is utterly in the moment of play. In spite of the conflicts that he knows she lives with in differences between her father and her husband, she is playing, "as free as a child, but with a generosity and watchfulness that were anything but childish. She was just perfectly there with them in her pleasure" (p. 191). It is love—unexpected, certainly, and difficult too. He says, "There was nothing to do but submit to the trial of it. After a long time, it proved by its own suffering that love itself was what it was, and I am thankful" (p. 192). He says too of his love for Mattie, "The hopelessness of my love became the sign of its permanence" (p. 198). He discovers that love, even hopeless love, has a goodness.

He feels changed by this love, at first mostly in his awareness of it and his preoccupation with love and with Mattie. He fantasizes about the two of them running off together, but the fantasy does not hold. After a period of impossibly romantic notions and schemes, Jayber settles into a quiet knowledge of his love and can go on with his life, even spending time with Clydie Greatlow again, a woman he knows in Hargrave. Mattie takes up a lot of space in his mind, as Port William would say, and as a result of his fascination with Mattie, her husband Troy becomes both more interesting to him and more loathsome.

In 1954, four years into his secret love of Mattie Chatham, Jayber confronts a crisis. He and Clydie decide to go to a Christmas dance at a Hargrave roadhouse. The dance is well attended, with lots of people. He is enjoying Clydie, a little drunk and dancing close, when he happens to look up and see Troy Chatham, dancing with a woman who is not Mattie. Troy gives Jayber a grin and a wink and the OK sign, as though to say that Troy and Jayber are the same, two men out on the prowl. Jayber is stricken, sick at heart on Mattie's behalf. Sick too on his own behalf, Jayber slips away, leaving a note and his car for Clydie. He walks back to Port William in the snow. During his twelve-mile walk, he thinks about how to assert his difference from Troy. But mainly, he needs to know that Mattie has a faithful husband. How much of what follows can be attributed to love and how much to drink is not clear even to Jayber, but while he walks, he begins a dialogue with himself, working through the logic of his dilemma, but arriving at a conclusion that most people would regard as illogical or even beyond logic. Mattie needs a faithful husband. She has an unfaithful husband. Therefore she needs another husband, one who will be faithful to her. Jayber will have to be that faithful husband,

even if it means giving up his relationship with Clydie Greatlow or his long-held dream of a wife. His dialogue with himself leads him to make something like a marriage vow to Mattie, a vow he keeps from that day forward, faithfully but not always easily. It is a strange application to a practical problem of his formal education in logic and argument.

Now he is changed profoundly. Jayber has felt led from the start by love, but his vow of marital fidelity to Mattie causes him to reexamine the world in terms of this love:

Now that I knew what it was that had led me from the start, I had to reckon with it. I had to look over what I had learned so far of life in this world and see what light my heart's love now shed upon it. What did love have to say to its own repeated failure to transform the world that it might yet redeem? What did it say to our failures to love one another and our enemies? What did it say to hate? What did it say to time? Why doesn't love succeed? (pp. 248-249)

Jayber is all at once heart and mind, with steadfast faith in the power of love even as he examines it cerebrally. He decides:

Hate succeeds. This world gives plentiful scope and means to hatred, which always finds its justifications and fulfills itself perfectly in time by destruction of the things of time. That is why war is complete and spares nothing, balks at nothing, justifies itself by all that is sacred, and seeks victory by everything that is profane. Hell itself, the war that is always among us, is the creature of time, unending time, unrelieved by any light or hope. (p. 249)

He will not, however, give up on love.

Jayber resists what he calls "the temptation of simple reason, to know nothing that can't be proved" (p. 251), and accepts the reality of what he cannot see, knowing that

“love, sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit” (p. 249). He knows even failed love, even desperate love, has power and goodness. He thinks:

Maybe love fails here...because it cannot be fulfilled here....We must take love to the limit of time, because time cannot limit it. A life cannot limit it. Maybe to have it in your heart all your life in this world, even while it fails here, is to succeed. (p. 249)

For the modern world, his standard of success may seem puny—it holds no portfolio, leverages no buyouts, does no deals—but for Jayber “maybe that is enough” (p. 249).

All his thinking on love brings him back to the questions he had years ago with Dr. Ardmire. He imagines himself, sitting again in Dr. Ardmire’s office, asking his questions about God, but now he knows his error. He says, “My mistake was ignoring the verses that say God loves the world” (p. 250), and now Jayber knows that God loves the world even flawed and failing. Such an insight sets off more questions. He wonders:

What answer can human intelligence make to God’s love for the world? What answer, for that matter, can it make to our own love for the world? If a person loved the world—really loved it and forgave its wrongs and so might have his own wrongs forgiven—what would be next? (p. 252)

Jayber imagines Dr. Ardmire listening to his report on what he has learned since 1935, patiently, bemusedly, and then asking, “Well. And now what?” (p. 253).

Now what, indeed, Jayber wonders. All his insights on love, all his experience now with love, leave him with the reality of loss and sorrow. Still, he will stand up for love, knowing, “To love anything good, at any cost, is a bargain” (p. 329). In spite of the failings, in spite of the sorrow, in spite of the loss, Jayber says:

To love the world as much even as I could love it would be suffering also, for I would fail. And yet all the good I know is in this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart. (p. 254)

He will put his faith in love and the possibility of love. And the possibility of God.

After all this time, through all his questions and all his doubts, Jayber begins to pray again. He says: “I took it up again exactly where I had left off twenty years before, in doubt and hesitation, bewildered and unknowing what to say” (p. 250). Still he wonders, in the face of love, how should we pray?

I didn't know, and yet I prayed. I prayed the terrible prayer: “Thy will be done.” Having so prayed, I prayed for strength. That seemed reasonable and right enough. As did praying for forgiveness and the grace to forgive. I prayed unreasonably, foolishly, hopelessly, that everybody in Port William might be blessed and happy—the ones I loved and the ones I did not. I prayed my gratitude. (p. 252)

Again he tries to reason out what cannot be reasoned, asking, “Does the world continue by chance (since it can hardly do so by justice) or by the forgiveness and mercy that some people have continued to pray for?” (p. 253). In case it is the latter, Jayber will pray.

Jayber still has doubts: “They had, in fact, got worse” (p. 250). He says, “The more my affections and sympathies had got involved in Port William, the more uneasy I became with certain passages [of Scripture]” (p. 250). Where two are in the field or two at the mill, and one is taken while one is left, he says, “My heart would be with the ones who were left. And when I read of the division of the sheep from the goats, I couldn't consent to give up on the goats” (p. 250). He knows Hell, and he thinks, “I could see that

Hell existed and was daily among us. And yet I didn't want to give up even on the ones in Hell" (p. 250). This thinking makes it difficult to maintain animosity toward enemies.

This love and sympathy manage to turn mercy and forgiveness loose in the world.

*Love for Enemies*

In "Writer and Region" (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry praises the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—at least the first thirty-two chapters—as "a transfiguring regional book" (p. 72), and he recognizes Huck Finn's voice as having "something miraculous about it" (p. 73). Berry agrees with the widely-held opinion that the novel fails at the end, saying there is something stunted about the novel and about Huck. His analysis of this failure is that Mark Twain does not let Huck grow up, that when he has Huck "light out for the Territory" (Clemens, 1962, p. 226), Mark Twain ignores what Huck must have learned in his loyalty to Jim and lets him revert back to a child. Huck slips away from what Berry calls "the community responsibility that would have been a natural and expectable next step after [Huck's] declaration of loyalty to his friend" (*WPF*, p. 77).

Berry thinks ending the novel in this way reveals "a flaw in Mark Twain's character that is also a flaw in our national character, a flaw in our history, and a flaw in much of our literature" (p. 75). Berry thinks this flaw remains with us today:

Our country's culture is still suspended as if at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly "civilization" of piety and violence or an escape into some "Territory" where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. (pp. 75-76)

Berry says of our culture: "We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility" (p. 76). He says our models of



freedom have remained boyhood and bachelorhood—“lives dedicated and solitary in the Territory of individuality” (p. 76), something true, he says, “for women as well as men” (p. 76). These lives we have imagined and celebrated as “our norms of ‘liberation’” (p. 76). But he says: “We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up. We have hardly begun to imagine community life, and the tragedy that is at the heart of community life” (p. 76).

Stuck in boyhood as Huck is, “he cannot experience that fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy” (p. 77), and says Berry, “tragedy is experienceable only in the context of a beloved community” (p. 77). Mark Twain deprives Huck of a beloved community, and Berry believes this reflects “the failure of Mark Twain’s life, and of our life, so far, as a society” (p. 77). It is not that Mark Twain was without grief, but says Berry, Mark Twain did not imagine tragedy as communal:

What is wanting, apparently, is the tragic imagination that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal. What is wanting is the return to the beloved community, or to the possibility of one. That would return us to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another. (p. 78).

In other words, in a culture of rugged individualism, love and hope for others gets elbowed out of the way by self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Berry continues:

Without that return we may know innocence and horror and grief, but not tragedy and joy, not consolation or forgiveness or redemption. There is grief and horror in

Mark Twain's life and work, but not the tragic imagination and the imagined tragedy that finally delivers from grief and horror. (p. 78)

For Mark Twain, undelivered from grief and horror and loss, all that is left is outrage.

The same stuntedness that Berry sees in the novel and in the character of Huck Finn, he sees also in Mark Twain, particularly in his later works. Says Berry:

In old age, Mark Twain had become obsessed with "the damned human race" and the malevolence of God—ideas that were severely isolating and, ultimately, self-indulgent. He was finally incapable of that magnanimity that is the most difficult and the most necessary: forgiveness of human nature and human circumstance.

Given human nature and human circumstance, our only relief is in this forgiveness, which then restores us to community and its ancient cycle of loss and grief, hope and joy. (p. 79)

A condemnation such as "the damned human race" leaves little latitude for mercy or for forgiveness of human circumstance. Further, "the damned human race" is abstract. This contrasts with the beloved community and Berry's definition as "common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs" (p. 85). The beloved community is specific and particular, there every day in the shared experience, efforts, and place, and if one belongs willingly, then the beloved community cannot be dismissed. It must be accommodated day by day. He writes, "Community life...is tragic, and it is so because it involves unremittingly the need to survive mortality, partiality, and evil" (p. 77). The work of maintaining community requires mercy and forgiveness.

What Berry calls the tragedy at the heart of community life is what Jayber Crow comes to know in Port William, and forgiveness is what he learns. When he arrives in

1937, at twenty-two, he is in his boyhood and bachelorhood, but when he commits to Port William, the community will not let him remain so. He has what Berry refers to in “Writer and Region” as the tragic imagination, and the education Jayber receives at Port William allows him to exercise the tragic imagination and to learn sympathy and mercy. Jayber tells of how being a part of a community and “paying attention” because “attention is *owed*” (*JC*, p. 83; italics original) transforms his perception. He says:

One of your customers, one of your neighbors (let us say), is a man known to be more or less a fool, a big talker, and one day he comes into your shop and you have heard and you see that he is dying even as he is standing there looking at you, and you can see in his eyes that (whether or not he admits it) he knows it, and all of a sudden everything is changed. You seem no longer to be standing together in the center of time. Now you are on time’s edge, looking off into eternity. And this man, your foolish neighbor, your friend and brother, has shed somehow the laughter that has followed him through the world, and has assumed the dignity and the strangeness of a traveler departing forever. (p. 129)

Once Jayber sees one foolish neighbor this way, he can see all his neighbors this way, as dear and sad, frail and threatened always with departing forever, but doing the best they can under the circumstances.

Jayber comes to think of Port William as “a little port for the departure and arrival of souls” (p. 301), and that “the mercy of the world is time” (p. 296). He says:

Time does not stop for love, but it does not stop for death and grief, either. After death and grief that (it seems) ought to have stopped the world, the world goes on. More things happen. And some of the things that happen are good. (p. 296)

In other words, “we are eternal beings living in time” (p. 205), as Jayber likes to say, and everything must be understood within that context.

His understanding of people’s relationship to each other and the world aligns with an ecological understanding of the world as interdependent and interconnected. He says:

We are too tightly tangled together to be able to separate ourselves from one another either by good or by evil. We all are involved in all and any good, and in all and any evil. For any sin, we all suffer. That is why our suffering is endless. It is why God grieves and Christ’s wounds still are bleeding. (p. 295)

On the other hand, he says:

It is not a terrible thing to love the world, knowing that the world is always passing and irrecoverable, to be known only in loss. To love anything good, at any cost, is a bargain. It is a terrible thing to love the world, knowing that you are a human and therefore joined by kind to all that hates the world and hurries its passing—the violence and greed and falsehood that overcome the world that is meant to be overcome by love. (p. 329)

Jayber loves in the same way he learns: because he cannot stop himself—without thought of what he gains, sometimes at great sacrifice, but always because he simply cannot stop himself. And he wants the world to be overcome by love.

After returning to Port William, Jayber eventually goes back to Goforth to see his first home. The blacksmith shop has been torn down—it was in the way “when the road was widened” (p. 37). The house is gone too, burned in a fire, “nothing there even to recognize—just a patch of weeds and tree sprouts with a chimney sticking up in the middle” (p. 37). The buildings are still at Squires Landing, but Jayber sees that such a

place would not support a family much longer. Trucks and improved roads make the river traffic less necessary, with goods and services moving farther away, to Port William, then to Hargrave, then to Louisville, with the small place losing out to the bigger place in each move.

Then as though always preparing a follow-up report on what he has learned for Dr. Ardmire, Jayber says:

This is one of the things I can tell you that I have learned: our life here is in some way marginal to our own doings, and our doings are marginal to the greater forces that are always at work. Our history is always returning to a little patch of weeds and saplings with an old chimney sticking up by itself. And I can tell you a further thing that I have learned, and here I look ahead to the resting of my case: I love the house that belonged to the chimney, holding it bright in memory, and I love the saplings and the weeds. (pp. 37-38)

Jayber loves what was, with all its loss and errors and regrets, and he loves what is, with all its unfulfilled promise and missteps—this is what he has learned.

In *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001), in the summer of 1945, Jayber is digging a grave for Ernest Finley who has killed himself. Jayber is laboring under the supervision and stupefaction of Stanley Gibbs, who will not let go of the idea that anyone who kills himself is insane. Indeed, he has “discovered in himself a righteous argument against suicide” (p. 276). Jayber, who considered Ernest a friend, feels duty-bound to fight back, challenging each of Stanley’s statements with a question. But “untouched by all the shrewd and telling logic of Jayber’s questions, Uncle Stan has insulted both Ernest’s life and Jayber’s intelligence with as much passion as if suicides were threatening to

overthrow the government” (p. 277). Finally, Stanley declares that if Jayber likes suicide so well he should just kill himself. This is too much for Jayber, whose patience has been overtaken by anger in the sadness and exertion of gravedigging. He stops, stands up straight, and says, “One thing, old man. Just remember one thing. You can only speak for yourself. You never know what the other man has to go through” (p. 277), emphasizing with a finger pointed at Stanley. Jayber is standing up for the lost, for the goats separated from the sheep, for the souls in Hell that he does not want to give up on. His heart is with those who are left behind in the rapture, left alone in the field or at the mill, and he is uncertain right then if that is Ernest or if that is himself and Uncle Stanley.

The question posed in this preamble to loving one’s enemies is this: With such magnanimity and understanding, how can Jayber have enemies? He has only two: One chooses him; the other he chooses. Cecelia Overhold chooses him as her enemy because she has chosen Port William as her enemy. As far as he knows, she never forgives either. Jayber chooses Troy Chatham, and as far as he knows, Troy never suspects it. Jayber’s struggle with himself is the same as his struggle for the world. How can we live in love? How can we find peace? He is reminded of his own shortcomings in this, in his long failure to forgive Cecelia or Troy. By the time he writes his life, he has forgiven both.

Cecelia Overhold took an instant dislike to Jayber, perhaps because as a single man with some education, without a farm or family to hold him, with a job that could as easily be done in a bigger place, Jayber could choose to be anywhere, while she was married to a man and a farm in Port William, which she never liked and regarded as “beneath her” (*JC*, p. 151). For his part, Jayber regards her as an enemy to him and to Port William. But he comes to realize, “If Cecelia was my enemy, that was because ...she

saw me as her enemy” (pp. 154-155). Long before Jayber writes his life, Cecelia moves to California and dies within a year. Jayber says he forgave her dislike of him early; forgiving “her own principled misery, her contempt for all available satisfactions on the grounds merely that they were available—that was harder and took longer” (p. 355).

Troy is even harder to forgive, perhaps because he is still there, still coming to the cabin for haircuts, clueless of what Jayber thinks of him. Jayber says:

In fact, of all the trials I have experienced, [Troy] was the hardest. He was the trial that convicted me over and over again. I did not like him. I *could* not like him. Maybe I didn't need to like him, but I needed at least not to *dislike* him, and I did thoroughly dislike him. I also enjoyed disliking him. In his presence I was in the perfect absence, the night shadow, of the charity that I sought for and longed for. ... And in the presence of Troy Chatham, which was getting to be about the only place where I really needed that charity and really suffered for the want of it, I didn't have it. (p. 337)

Jayber objects to Troy's farming methods, his financial management, his loud bragging, his lack of humor, his lack of sympathy, his contempt for his father-in-law, and his neglect of his wife, as well as his complete inability to recognize Jayber's dislike of him.

When his son Jimmy goes to Vietnam, Troy “became a fierce partisan of the army and the government's war policy” (p. 286). One day in the barbershop, he declares about war protestors, “They ought to round up every one of them sons of bitches and put them right in front of the damned communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good.” Jayber cannot let the comment stand. He quotes: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.” Troy looks surprised and asks,

“Where did you get that crap?” “Jesus Christ,” Jayber answers. But Jayber exposes to himself his own worse struggle: “It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy” (p. 287). There will come a time when Jayber will be Troy’s friend, but for now, Jayber still fantasizes about slicing his throat.

Still, Jayber manages to feel some sympathy too. Even if Troy had put himself in the very fix he is in, Jayber recognizes that debt has made Troy a slave to his creditors, and Jayber feels sorry for him in spite of his dislike of him. He is troubled too by Mattie’s apparent steadfast love and wonders how Mattie can love Troy. He says:

I did not love Troy Chatham. I was no longer capable of the effort of will it took to understand why Mattie did. Which would sooner or later remind me that I could not understand why God did. That was my sanity. (p. 342)

He even comes to feel certain that Mattie loves Troy. He knows this because, however at odds Mattie might have been with Troy, “she was not downbeaten” (p. 342). Jayber figures that “she remembered and kept treasured up her old feeling for him. She treasured up the knowledge that, though she was not happy, happiness existed” (*JC*, p. 342). He sees that “she persevered with dignity and good humor, and with a kind of loveliness that was her own” (p. 343). His love for Mattie makes her a model for him in how to love.

Jayber’s forgiveness of Troy comes at exactly the moment when he should hate and resent Troy the most. With Mattie dying in the Hargrave hospital, Troy tries a desperate move to save the farm he has burdened with debt, the farm that he will not even own until Mattie dies. He decides to sell the timber in the stand of woods known as the Nest Egg—Athey’s sacred grove, the place of several chance encounters and innocent walks for Jayber and Mattie. Jayber loves the place. He also knows Athey loved it, and he



knows Mattie loves it still. Selling the timber is the next step in Troy's mismanagement of the farm, an abuse consistent with his zeal to heed no limits. Jayber also suspects that Troy would never do it if Mattie were well, so it seems an exploitation of an opportunity that should have been for Troy, and definitely was for Jayber, the deepest of tragedies.

From his cabin, Jayber hears a commotion of machines and chaos. Afraid he knows what it is, he goes to see for himself, still hoping he is wrong. With chainsaws and bulldozers, the Nest Egg is being cleared. Troy is happy to see Jayber, oblivious to what he might think. Troy makes big small talk, with clichés such as “You’ve got to see it to believe it, don’t you” and “Lord Almighty, the power they’ve got!” and perhaps most telling of his lack of attention, “Who’d have thought such trees could have grown here?” (p. 359), as if he had not lived in Port William all his life and worked the very farm these trees grew on. Athey and Della Keith knew such trees could grow there; Mattie knew; Jayber knew. Anyone paying attention to the place would know, but Troy has never paid attention—from his wife to the farm to his generous and knowledgeable in-laws, Troy never has understood what he had been given and now stands to lose it all.

In a flash then, Jayber sees that he and Troy are the same. Jayber says, “What had happened to him seemed to happen to me, and for the first time I saw him apart from my contempt for him. I saw him clear-eyed” (p. 360). After all these years of trying to assert his difference from Troy, Jayber realizes that they are connected, the same in the most tragic way:

So there he was, a man who had been given everything and did not know it, who had lost it all and now knew it, and who was boasting and grinning only to pretend for a few hours longer that he did not know it. He was an exhausted man

on the way back, not to the nothing that he had when he started out, but to the nothing that everything had been created from—and so, I pray, to mercy. And there I was, a man losing what I was never given. (p. 360)

And if Troy is in need of mercy, then Jayber knows well that he himself is in need of mercy too. In this they are also alike.

In spite of what he stands to lose, Jayber is still “a man yet rich with love” (p. 360), and he is surprised to realize:

I stood facing that man I had hated for forty years, and I did not hate him. If he had acknowledged then what he finally would not be able to avoid acknowledging, I would have hugged him. If I could have done it, I would have liked to pick him up like a child and carry him to some place of safety and calm. (pp. 360-361)

Jayber and Troy are both finally redeemed for Jayber by love:

The time would come (and this was my deliverance, my Nunc Dimittis) when I would be, in the small ways that were possible, [Troy’s] friend. It was a friend, finally, that he would need. I would listen to him and talk to him, ignoring his self-pity and his lapses into grandeur and meanness, giving him a good welcome and a pat on the shoulder, because I wanted to. For finally he was redeemed, in my eyes, by Mattie’s long-abiding love for him, as I myself had been by my love for her. (p. 361)

This is success in life for Jayber: not simply to love his enemies or to bless them that curse him or to do good to them that hate him. His victory is finally to have no enemies, to make his worst enemy his friend.

Strictly speaking, Jayber has one other enemy that he makes peace with in his life. That enemy is expectation and the suspicion that his life is a disappointment to someone with power over him. He comes to this peace more easily than his peace with Cecelia or Troy. In chapter four of the novel *A Place on Earth* (1967/2001), we learn details about Jayber's background. The first section of that chapter is entitled "The Barber's Calling" (p. 63), echoing Dr. Ardmire's suggestion that Jayber may have been called to something other than the ministry, that all lives can be vocations. Jayber resists this idea in his mind, even as he understands it in his heart. When he first sets out from Pigeonville College, adrift from the calling he thought he had received, he thinks of himself:

If I was freer than I had ever been in my life, I was not yet entirely free, for I still hung on to the idea that had been set deep in me by all my schooling so far: I was a bright boy and I ought to make something out of myself—if not a minister of the Gospel, than something else that would be (I had by now actually thought this) a cut or two above my humble origins. (JC, 2000b, p. 56)

He carries with him the idea of making something of himself, and for a while at least, he does not expect that a barber is what he will make of himself.

The section of that chapter in *A Place on Earth* where Jayber agrees to take on the job of gravedigger and church janitor is entitled "A New Calling" (1967/2001, p. 73), elevating these jobs to vocation, even as Jayber does in the execution of his duties. For a man who gives up praying for twenty years, his work as gravedigger and janitor come close to prayer in action for the people of Port William. This is also the chapter, in the final section, when Mat first speaks aloud to someone outside the family that they have received news that his son is missing in action. He tells Burley and Jayber late that night

in Jayber's shop. Mat tells Burley because Burley will know his grief, having lost his nephew to the war. Mat tells Jayber because it is Jayber's calling to listen, "to wait with the others" (*ACET*, 2006, p. 139), as young Andy Catlett observes. At the end of that chapter in *A Place on Earth*, it says, "Jayber sits quietly in his chair, keeping the shop open for them, their talk his gift. Finally, as the subject changes, he takes part again" (*PE*, 1967/2001, p. 86). Even Jayber's silence has a prayerful quality, a duty lovingly fulfilled.

What Jayber comes to understand is that a life lovingly lived—a life of gratitude and fidelity—is a calling. He says of himself:

I have had a lucky life. That is to say that I *know* I've been lucky. Beyond that, the question is if I have not been also blessed, as I believe I have—and, beyond that, even called. Surely I was called to be, for one thing, a barber. All my real opportunities have been to be a barber, . . . and being a barber has made other opportunities. I have had the life I have had because I kept on being a barber, you might say, in spite of my intentions to the contrary. (*JC*, 2000b, pp. 65-66)

The story of Jayber's life is a book about Heaven, but it is also a book about love and a book about loss. He says:

I whisper over to myself the way of loss, the names of the dead. One by one, we lose our loved ones, our friends, our powers of work and pleasure, our landmarks, the days of our allotted time. One by one, the way we lose them, they return to us and are treasured up in our hearts. Grief affirms them, preserves them, sets the cost. Finally a man stands up alone, scoured and charred like a burnt tree, having lost everything and (at the cost only of its loss) found everything, and is ready to go. Now I am ready. (p. 353)

Finally, he has learned peace. Now he can depart.

### Peace

In 2003, with the United States in the midst of one war and on the brink of another, Berry published “A Citizen’s Response to ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States of America’” (CP, 2003). It is his response to the Bush Administration document that asserts the United States’ authority to act preemptively against security threats, even if such action is taken without the support of the international community. Berry objects to the good vs. evil polarization in the thinking and rhetoric after September 11, 2001, the hypocrisy of a nation acting preemptively and alone against terrorism, the dangers of unchecked presidential power, and the lack of awareness of vulnerabilities to national security arising from an economy that depends on importing and transporting food and other goods that should be produced locally. He sees most modern solutions to problems, especially those based on technology and cheap fuel, as serving the needs of large corporations. He ends the essay with a call for peaceability.

Among the questions Berry raises is to ask about the difference between terrorism as defined in The National Security Strategy and what is accepted as war. Says Berry:

To imply by the word “terrorism” that this sort of terror is the work exclusively of “terrorists” is misleading. The “legitimate” warfare of technologically advanced nations likewise is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents. The distinction between the *intention* to perpetrate violence against innocents, as in “terrorism,” and the *willingness* to do so, as in “war,” is not a source of comfort. We know also that modern war, like ancient war, often involves intentional violence against innocents. (p. 3; italics original)

Berry offers “a more correct definition” of terrorism: “violence perpetrated unexpectedly without the authorization of a national government” (p. 3), saying “violence perpetrated unexpectedly *with* such authorization is not ‘terrorism’ but ‘war’” (p. 3; italics original). Berry notes that The National Security Strategy parses a thin difference between war and terrorism, but terrorism is included with such recognized evils as slavery, piracy, and genocide, while the document “accepts and affirms the legitimacy of war” (p. 3). Berry asserts that when war includes tactics and weapons whose consequences cannot be controlled—such as nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons—the effect is that we are not only making war on our enemies, but also on our friends and ourselves. He asks, “Does this not bring us exactly to the madness of terrorists who kill themselves in order to kill others?” (p. 4). Instead of accepting this absurdity, Berry wonders about the causes and asks, “Why do people become terrorists?” (p. 4), a question that he says is not found in the language or posture of The National Security Strategy.

Casting the national response to terrorism as good vs. evil—making it a national purpose to rid the world of evil—presupposes that the United States is good while the enemy is evil. While such polarity of analysis may provide a certain righteous comfort, it also releases those who think of themselves as good from any obligation to consider a cause for the perceived evil. “But,” says Berry, “the proposition that anything so multiple and large as a nation can be good is an insult to common sense. It is also dangerous, because it precludes any attempt at self-criticism or self-correction; it precludes public dialogue” (p. 5). Berry says a presupposition of the definitional good of national policies and actions also contradicts both religious and democratic traditions, traditions “intended to measure and so to sustain our efforts to be good” (p. 5).

Likewise valid criticism is a guard against corruption. He notes that common religious teachings require self-examination and criticism and that “Thomas Jefferson justified general education by the obligation of citizens to be critical of their government” (p. 5). Indeed, Berry says, “An inescapable requirement of true patriotism, love for one’s land, is a vigilant distrust of any determinative power, elected or unelected, that may preside over it” (p. 5). In other words, citizens have a duty to themselves and their nation to question and judge policies and actions, and such questioning should not be regarded as unpatriotic or disloyal.

The essay offers criticism of The National Security Strategy, noting hypocrisies, contradictions, absurdities, and oversights in the reasoning and policy. Berry is critical of the superficial way the document deals with agriculture and ecological issues, adding that any discussion of terrorism and violence needs to include the violence of an industrial economy against the ecosphere, and noting that what the document says about agriculture will have the effect only of enriching global agribusiness and biotechnology corporations while ignoring the urgent need to enrich and protect topsoil. Also, discussions of national security need to include questions of thrift and self-sufficiency, with Berry insisting that “all our military strength, all our police, all our technologies and strategies of suspicion and surveillance cannot make us secure if we lose our ability to farm, or if we squander our forests, or if we exhaust or poison our water sources” (p. 13). When violence against the ecosphere is the question, the answer of peaceability becomes a matter of survival.

Further, when industrial war capabilities exist that can destroy the world, peace is no longer simply “a desirable condition”; it is “a practical necessity” (p. 15). Berry says, we must “make the world capable of peace” (p. 15). This work is made more difficult

since “we have not learned to think of peace apart from war” (p. 15). It seems to Berry that when up against “terrifying dangers and...bad alternatives,...we think again of peace and again we fight a war to secure it” (p. 15). Berry explains the continuing pattern:

At the end of the war, if we have won it, we declare peace; we congratulate ourselves on our victory; we marvel at the newly proved efficiency of our latest, most “sophisticated” weapons; we ignore the cost in lives, materials, and property, in suffering and disease, in damage to the natural world; we ignore the inevitable residue of resentment and hatred; and we go on as before, having, as we think, successfully defended our way of life. (p. 15)

But since our way of life is as “the richest, most powerful, most wasteful nation in the world” (p. 15), according to Berry, we should not be surprised to attract some enemies.

We long for peace, but, writes Berry, “our need for war following with the customary swift and deadly logic our need for peace, we [take] up the customary obsession with the evil of other people” (p. 15). Instead of condemning the warlike tendencies of other people’s religions and cultures, we need to recognize such tendencies in our own religions and culture, including our economic culture. Writes Berry, “It is the duty of all [religions and cultures] to see that it is wrong to destroy the world, or risk destroying it, to get rid of its evil” (p. 16). It is the duty—and an urgent requirement—of religions and cultures to ensure proper stewardship and care of the world.

Since we cannot achieve peace through war, Berry thinks we should try love: “try to love our enemies and to talk to them and (if we pray) to pray for them” (p. 16). Failing that, writes Berry, “we must begin again by trying to imagine our enemies’ children, who, like *our* children, are in mortal danger because of enmity that they did not cause” (p. 16;



italics original), and we must hope that sympathy and imagination might lead us to peace in a way that competition and ambition have not. Then our work can begin:

We can no longer afford to confuse peaceability with passivity. Authentic peace is no more passive than war. Like war, it calls for discipline and intelligence and strength of character, though it calls also for higher principles and aims. If we are serious about peace, then we must work for it as ardently, seriously, continuously, carefully, and bravely as we have ever prepared for war. (p. 16)

It is what Berry would call “a job of work,” one that we all need to take more seriously than we do now.

It is not hard to see Berry’s thoughts on peaceability reflected throughout *Jayber Crow*. Peace is the ideal that Jayber Crow strives toward in his personal life and longs for in the world. Jayber’s life is bookmarked by war: He is born into talk of the great war “over across the seas” (p. 13); during World War II, he embraces Port William in a more permanent way because of his decision to stand with Port William and not be a conscientious objector, and then he waits with the community for those who are away at war to come home; he finally recognizes his deep love for Mattie Chatham “at the start of another war” (p. 191)—the Korean War; and with the rest of Port William, he endures the tumult and death of the Vietnam Era, including the death and burial of Jimmy Chatham, Mattie’s son. If he had waited longer to write his life story and lived to tell it, he would have witnessed United States involvement in armed conflicts in the homelands of people in Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, and the Balkan countries, to name some of them, followed by the nebulous and ill-defined War on Terror, which in a twisted way turned into a war on ourselves, our rights, and our decency. I believe it is safe to say that Jayber

Crow would be as opposed to the Patriot Act and enhanced interrogation techniques as Berry is.

As deeply as Jayber feels connected to Port William, he remains on the outskirts of its life in some ways: “[Jayber] is seldom invited into the domestic life of Port William; he knows it by its manhood and boyhood passing in and out the door of his shop” (*PE*, 1967/2001, p.67). Still when World War II begins, Jayber has to decide where he stands. At the start of the war, Jayber is twenty-seven, certainly of an age for military service, but by then he knows himself as a pacifist, and he struggles with the possibilities of being a conscientious objector. He says, “I certainly did think that ‘love your enemies’ was an improvement over the other possibilities, but getting to be a conscientious objector required ‘sincerity of belief in religious teaching’” (*JC*, 2000b, p. 143), and he doubts that he meets the standard. He also wonders what he is expected to do after declaring himself a conscientious objector, when other young men from Port William were being hurt and killed in the fighting. Why should he be an exception? The whole issue disturbs his sleep for weeks.

Jayber decides he has “a conscientious objection to making an exception of [him]self” (p. 143). Finally, love makes the decision for him, his love for Port William:

What decided me, I think, was that I could no longer imagine a life for myself beyond Port William. I thought, “I will have to share the fate of this place.

Whatever happens to Port William must happen to me.” That changed me, and it cleared my head. (pp. 143-144)

However clarifying it was for Jayber to make a decision, he realizes the gravity of what he has declared, the implications of declaring his fidelity to Port William. He says:

It didn't make me feel good to be sharing the fate of Port William, for I knew there would be pain and trouble in that, but it made me feel good to have my head clear. Afterward, I slept all night for the first time in weeks. (pp. 143-144)

He has decided, but he does not have "at all the feeling of being right" (p. 144).

Jayber has made his stand with Port William, but as it happens, he is spared the first-hand experience of war. During the humiliation of the military examination—an experience of powerlessness that for Jayber is a cross between being a slaughter lamb at a stockyard and facing Brother Whitespade across his wide desk—Jayber is told he has a heart murmur. Jayber goes instantly "from feeling humiliated to feeling insulted" (p. 144), before realizing that the 4-F classification made him "a free man" (p. 144). He is "glad of it, and ashamed to be glad. I felt disgraced by my failure to be able to do what I did not want to do" (p. 145). When one of his customers wonders to Jayber what Port William will do for a barber once Jayber goes "off to the war" (p. 145), Jayber admit his classification, and his customer says, "Boy, you ain't got a thing to worry about" (p. 145).

Of course, Jayber's nature is to worry. If he is not in harm's way, many others are, others connected to Port William by love. When they are killed, if their bodies are sent home, Jayber digs their graves. Mattie and Troy's son, Jimmy Chatham, is killed in Vietnam, his body returned to Port William to be buried in the grave Jayber has dug. His death seems stranger to Jayber than the deaths in World War II because the war seemed so much more remote and removed from Port William. Jayber says of the Vietnam War:

It was smaller and seemed farther away. We at home were less involved. We sent fewer of the young. We made no sacrifices. There was nothing we used less of....It was easy for people to guess that things were mainly all right. (p. 293)

Mattie is quiet and resolute at the burial; Troy weeps aloud behind his hand, “almost unmade by his grief” (p. 293).

Jayber feels unmade himself, barely able to believe Jimmy is dead and bewildered by the loss. He says:

Both sides, in making war, agree to these deaths, this dying of young soldiers in their pride. And afterward it becomes possible to pity the suffering of both sides, and to think of the lost, unfinished lives of boys who had grown up under hands laid with affection on their heads. (p. 294)

It is a beautiful image—boys growing up “under hands laid with affection on their heads”—specific and tender, something a barber would notice, something maybe a barber has done at the end of the haircut of a boy who is good natured and good looking, a boy with a good sense of humor (p. 263), a boy whose grandfather the barber admires and whose mother the barber loves. And Jayber wonders what such tenderness can do—what love can do—“born into madness, preservable only by suffering” (p. 294). He decides there is nothing for love to do but wait and keep on.

In the madness that is war, “we were, as we said again, making war in order to make peace” (p. 294). Again, during the Vietnam War, Jayber finds he cannot pray, in part because he wants to pray for God to “reveal Himself in power” (p. 294), to cause the world to love out of sudden fright. But Jayber knows this cannot be, and he feels the fool for thinking he could advise God. Notably, what Jayber imagines—what Jayber wants—is for “the almighty finger [to write] in stars for all the world to see: GO HOME” (p. 295), as though everyone being home would lead to peace. Of course, in a way it would. In that aspirational way in which Berry thinks, everyone knowing himself or herself at

home, as part of a membership, imagining others knowing themselves at home—this is the way of peace.

Still, Jayber knows that giving God such advice is as arrogant and foolish as those who thought Christ should come down from the cross to prove His divinity. Jayber understands in the same way that God will not coerce love, He will not compel love through a show of power and glory. What Jayber comes to know and finally admit to himself is that such a show of power would make God “the absolute tyrant of the world” (p. 295) and make humans “His slaves” (p. 295). Says Jayber, “From that moment the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another by love forever would be ended” (p. 295) because love must be free or it is not love.

This is the dilemma of parents, the dilemma Mat Feltner wrestled over with his son Virgil, as discussed in Chapter IV. Mat wanted Virgil to want to come home, but he tried not to make his desire known, hoped instead that Virgil would come to it on his own. Jayber knows that love is the answer, but he figures that God wants us *to want to* love and not just be cowed into loving. Instead of revealing Himself in power and glory, Jayber believes God presents Himself “only in the ordinary miracle of the existence of His creatures. Those who wish to see Him must see Him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world” (p. 295). As such, the instruction to love has to be an invitation to love.

Jayber’s love for Port William and his love for Mattie Chatham have not been without pain and difficulty. Still, loving something one loves has the benefit of being expected. It follows. It still may not be easy, but at least it is consistent with first impulses. For example, Jayber’s love of Port William is familiar and old, learned early in

his life with his parents and his life with Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy. If not quite as natural as breathing, it is close. Jayber's love for Mattie falls on him like a downpour. He can try to ignore it and go on, but he cannot deny that he is thoroughly soaked.

The continuing challenge for Jayber is in what he sees as the clear instruction from the Gospels to love his enemies. He struggles with this personally, and he struggles with it in terms of war, especially war from the context of a place like Port William. He says:

The thought of loving your enemies is opposite to war. You don't have to *do* it; you don't *have* to love one another. All you have to do is keep the thought in mind and Port William becomes visible, and you see its faces and know what it has to lose. Maybe you don't have to love your enemies. Maybe you just have to act like you do. And maybe you have to start early. (p. 142)

Again we see Berry's aspirational thinking revealed through Jayber: If love is not possible, Berry says, fake it. In a way, it is similar to the many examples in Berry's fiction of parents and teachers making young people do their work well and maintain a standard of excellence as something to aspire to. Then the right way can become a habit and anything less than that would be unthinkable. Act as though there is love, follow the disciplines and standards of love, and eventually the love can be real.

At first, to Jayber the idea of war seems baffling, it seems so separate from the life he knows in Port William. In thinking about war, he says:

Anyhow, what I couldn't bring together or reconcile in my mind was the thought of Port William and the thought of the war. Port William, I thought, had not caused the war. Port William makes quarrels, and now and again a fight; it does

not make war. It takes power, leadership, great talent, perhaps genius, and much money to make a war. In war, as maybe even in politics, Port William has to suffer what it didn't make. I have pondered for years and I still can't connect Port William and war except by death and suffering. (pp. 142-143)

War is another example of the larger world being heedless of the best interests of small places like Port William. More likely, the decisions of war are made in large places, from the perspective of distance and abstraction.

Then Jayber's understanding of war becomes associated with what he calls The News of the World, which has little or nothing to do with local news and events, and The War—and here Jayber emphasizes the power with the capital letters of a title—becomes indistinguishable from The Economy. Says Jayber:

The other news, The News of the World, seemed to have to do principally with The War and The Economy....Also it seemed that The War and The Economy were more and more closely related. They were the Siamese twins of our age, dressed alike, joined head to head, ready at any moment to merge into [one]. (p. 273)

On Port William's behalf, Jayber fears its powerlessness, saying:

It would be a considerable overstatement to say that before making their decisions the leaders of the world do not consult the citizens of Port William. Thousands of leaders of our state and nation, entire administrations, corporate board meetings, university sessions, synods and councils of the church have come and gone without hearing or pronouncing the name of Port William. (p. 139)

Indeed Jayber is afraid on behalf of small places everywhere:

And how many such invisible, nameless, powerless little places are there in this world? All the world, as a matter of fact, is a mosaic of little places invisible to the powers that be. And in the eyes of the powers that be all these invisible places do not add up to a visible place. (p. 139)

His fear for Port William and other small places expands then so that he is afraid on behalf of the whole world, which is made up entirely of small places even within big places, and frail people even among the powerful.

Finally Jayber fears the momentum of this alliance of The War and The Economy. He is too familiar with the exploitive effects in what he has already seen:

The War was good for The Economy. There was a certain airy, wordy kind of patriotism that added profit to its virtue. There was money in it, as Troy Chatham would say, who himself was being used by The Economy like lead in a pencil or in a gun. After he was used up, he would not be given a second chance. There is no rebirth in The Economy. (pp. 273-274)

The big lesson of industrialism, technology, and war is the doctrine of “maximum force relentlessly applied” (*CP*, 2003, p. 29), which, as far as Berry is concerned, is just another name for violence. It is bulldozers leveling the Nest Egg—no limits, no propriety of scale, no sympathy or gentleness, and apparently no thought for tomorrow. What will be left? Jayber’s answer about the Nest Egg is this: “Another cutting of timber, maybe, if he could wait another hundred or two hundred years” (*JC*, 2000b, p. 360).

Jayber’s life is a long search for peace. He enjoys hearing the hymns sung in the Port William church. He “loved the different voices all singing one song, the various tones and qualities, the passing lifts of feeling, rising up and going out forever” (p. 162),



and he says, “some of the hymns reached into me all the way to the bone” (p. 162). But some hymns failed to move him at all—“Onward, Christian Soldiers,” for example, or “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Jayber explains, “Jesus’ military career has never compelled my belief” (p. 162). Jayber’s interest and his faith have always been in Jesus the peacemaker, and in the last part of his life, Jayber makes his peace, saying: “Here on the river I have known peace and beauty such as I never knew in any other place” (p. 327). He has not quit worrying about the world, but he has made what peace he can.

It may well be that Jayber’s life story is a book about Heaven, but Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* is a book about peace—love certainly, gratitude too, but mainly peace. The events and themes of the novel all deal with peace on some level, not only making peace on earth in a geo-political sense, but also making peace with the earth, and making peace within a community and within a marriage, and making peace with the past. Jayber struggles with each of these, either in himself or on Port William’s behalf, and because of all he has learned, because of his imagination and reflection, because of his understanding and humor, because of mercy and love, he arrives by the end at a place of peace and beauty on the river, at home in the Port William membership.

The novel fits into Berry’s portrait of Port William, another piece in the order of a community trying to know itself and love itself as a membership, trying to be at peace. In a 2006 interview, Berry was asked about what seems to be a human desire to create order even as the universe tends toward disorder. Berry answered: “Nature just clatters along as it will, absorbing its losses, ignoring its losses in a sense, and human nature comes along with checks—charity, hospitality, generosity, love, loyalty, those things” (2006/2007b, p. 189). These human checks, as he calls them, come naturally to people who know

themselves as part of a membership, people who depend on each other economically and emotionally. Then Berry explained what he has tried to do with his Port William fiction:

My fiction has tried hard to escape the boundaries of what passes for realism, to pose a question that the realists usually don't deal with: what if a group of people in a little community were conscious of being members one of another? (p. 189)

In other words, Berry has asked himself to imagine what would happen in such a community through time and tumult. He sets his characters abroad in the world of his imagination and asks, "What would members do?" What does a community look like and act like when "it all turns on affection" (2012, April 23)? How does it fare against forces unmoved by affection or other human checks?

When Berry's fiction is understood that way, we can see that as he is always writing about education, he is also always writing about peace. And such a realization should make us all wonder what Port William can teach us about living in peace. What would Port William have us do, institutionally and individually, to pursue peaceability as our goal, to make our world capable of peace?

The final chapter of this analysis of Berry's fiction examines a short story that considers the goal of peaceability and how education supports or undermines that goal. The short story tells of an episode from Port William's past that Jayber Crow may not even know about, but an episode that, as far as Wendell Berry is concerned, explains why Port William enjoys as much local peace as it does during Jayber's lifetime and beyond.

## CHAPTER VII

### INCULCATING PEACEABILITY:

#### “LET US MAKE WHAT PEACE IS LEFT FOR US TO MAKE”

Wendell Berry’s short story “Pray Without Ceasing” (*Fid*, 1992) is worth a closer examination because so many relevant themes of education are played out in the story and how it is told. But also Berry himself cited this story as a way to gain insight into how education could better serve our world (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Formal education is never mentioned in the story—the closest we get is the appearance of Jack Beechum’s grade school teacher—yet the point of the story is closely connected to Berry’s deepest hope for education and its role in what he considers the “great moral issue of our time” (*WI*, 2005, p. 145). The story raises several important questions about the relationship between formal education and violence and wonders how education can be redirected, retooled, and reshaped to be a force for peace.

Andy Catlett is the narrator of the short story. He is thirty at the time and just newly moved back to the Port William area with his wife and children to farm. Braymer Hardy, an older neighbor, has found an old newspaper article from 1912 about the murder of Andy’s great-grandfather Ben Feltner by his neighbor and friend Thad Coulter. Andy is moved by this tangible link to the past to seek out what else can be known about what happened, to fill in the gaps of the story as he has absorbed it over time “from bits and pieces dropped out of conversations among [his] elders, in and out of the family” (*Fid*,

1992, p. 8). He goes to see his grandfather, Mat Feltner, ill and failing now, and ends up talking to his grandmother, Margaret Feltner, instead.

The murder of Ben Feltner is one of the greater tragedies in the history of Port William, relieved only by the certain knowledge that it could have been much worse. Ben Feltner was a good man, well liked in the community. Braymer Hardy tells Andy that he knew Ben and says he was “fine as they come. They never made ‘em no finer. The last man on earth you’d a thought would get shot” (p. 6). When Andy shows his grandmother the old article, her first response is to say, “It’s a wonder that Mat didn’t kill Thad Coulter that morning” (p. 11). The tragedy that could have been worse has its roots in the ambition to help a child get out and improve himself.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Thad Coulter’s son, Abner, wants to open a grocery store in the bigger town of Hargrave, county seat and a town with more promise than Port William. After all, “Abner had been reserved for something better” (p. 22) than farming, as his parents understand: “Abner was smart—too smart, as Thad and Rachel agreed, without ever much talking about it, to spend his life farming a hillside” (p. 22). Berry has a diagnosis for the condition, as he explains in the story:

And yet in Port William, as everywhere else, it was already the second decade of the twentieth century. And in some of the people of the town and the community surrounding it, one of the characteristic diseases of the twentieth century was making its way: the suspicion that they would be greatly improved if they were someplace else. (pp. 19-20)

Of course, as it would for any parent, this judgment causes some painful dissonance for Thad. He loves his farm, and he thinks it is “a pretty farm” (p. 22), largely because of the

work and thought he himself has devoted to it. To simultaneously deem the farm unworthy for his own son causes Thad to be “divided in his mind” (p. 22). It is as though to love his son, he must despise his life. Thad has trapped himself between these two extremes, confusing his judgment and pressing him to disregard his life and himself. But Braymer Hardy tells Andy, “Thad Coulter was a good kind of feller, too, far as that goes. I don’t reckon he was the kind you’d a thought would shoot somebody, either” (p. 6). But things get set in motion.

Abner takes out a loan from the Hargrave bank “secured by a mortgage on his father’s farm” (p. 12), so Thad “had in effect given his life and its entire effort as hostage to the possibility that Abner, his only son, could be made a merchant in a better place than Port William” (p. 12). When Abner fails and disappears into the night on a borrowed horse (p. 12), Thad is left to face the bank and the near inevitability of losing his farm. On top of that, he imagines the public ridicule he will face because of his broad boasting about Abner’s success in leaving Port William. His desperation turns to delusion with the help of two days of solitary drinking.

Disgusted with his son, he becomes further disgusted with himself, and in spite of the pleadings of his wife and daughter to come into the house, he declares that he is fit only to “shelter with the dogs and hogs, where he belonged” (p. 14). After two days and nights of drinking in the barn, he walks to town to seek help from his friend Ben Feltner, as much a leading citizen of Port William as his son Mat would become in later years. As Thad explains his situation to Ben, Thad lapses into irrational cursing, and Ben judges it best to allow Thad time to sober up and clean up. After listening for a time, Ben tells him to go and come back later. “And then we’ll see” (p. 15), he tells Thad.

Perhaps Ben should have expected this, but Thad is insulted to be so turned away, even if only temporarily. Broken and humiliated beyond redemption, Thad cannot see the sense of what Ben has proposed. The request that they discuss the matter when Thad is thinking clearly pushes him even further into despair, and he begins cursing Ben:

I cuss you to your damned face, Ben Feltner, for I have come to you with my hat in my hand and you have spit in it. You have throwed in your lot with them sons of bitches against me. (p. 16)

Ben remains even-tempered and not physically forceful, but escorts Thad to the door in a way that is beyond question or refusal. Far from wanting to insult Thad, Ben is already making plans to try to help, and after Thad finally leaves, Ben goes out, hoping to find some of Thad's kinsmen in town, to let them know what has happened and get them to help Thad sober up. Ben finds Dave Coulter, a cousin of Thad's, in town and tells him that once Thad is sober, "then we could see if we can help him out of his scrape" (p. 29). That he uses the word *scrape* suggests a deference to his friend's problem.

Meanwhile, Thad's rage at himself and the world gets redirected toward his daughter Martha Elizabeth, who has come to town to take him home. Once they are home, he threatens her with a whip for trying to help him, his uncharacteristic cruelty toward her further shaming and angering him until all his anger becomes focused on Port William itself and its living embodiment, Ben Feltner, his friend whom he thinks has turned him away. Ben has become in Thad's mind his only hope, his only friend, and his sharpest critic. Having encouraged his son to disown Port William, Thad finds it easier now to do the same—he too becomes afflicted with the disease of wondering if someplace else would be better. "If Port William could not save him," he thinks, "then

surely there was another place that could” (p. 20). But Thad cannot simply disappear into the night as his son did—his attachment to Port William is too strong for that. Instead he needs to destroy it: “he must rid himself of it somehow” (p. 20). Thad decides he needs to go back to town with a pistol, but first he finishes off his jug of whiskey.

At the very moment that Ben is standing on the street in Port William, laying out a strategy with Dave Coulter to help Thad, Thad arrives back in town and without warning shoots Ben through the forehead. As Thad flees Port William and moves inexorably toward Hargrave to turn himself in to the law, he realizes that “two lives had ended for a possibility that never had existed: for Abner Coulter’s mounting up in a better place” (p. 43). By the time he reaches Hargrave, the full reality of his act has descended on Thad, and he turns himself in to the sheriff, saying “I have killed a man...Ben Feltner, the best friend I ever had” (p. 45). But this short story is not complete; it does not end with this tragic death nor with Thad’s subsequent suicide in jail. Berry’s fictional world, while sometimes based on real people, landscapes, and events, is not history. He is a fiction writer, not a chronicler. He chooses where to begin and end; he chooses what details and characters to include; he chooses what order to present the events; he chooses the imagery; he chooses the point of view and voice. He uses imagination—his own and his reader’s—to shape the story and give it meaning and wholeness.

The point of “Pray Without Ceasing” is not senseless death. The deaths have to be placed into the context of the people, landscapes, and events—and it all needs to be placed into the context of time. We know something of the violent nature of Port William, particularly in the years following the Civil War, from stories such as “The Hurt Man” (*TDL*, 2004b) and “Fly Away, Breath” (*PT*, 2012). If violence can be stopped, it

has to be stopped with the decision for peaceability. It has to be stopped with mercy and an acknowledgement of human frailty. It has to be stopped finally with love.

Ben Feltner's son, Mat, is in town at the time of the murder. He is twenty-eight years old, a young husband and father with the potential for a long life ahead of him, a son yet to be born, and grandchildren still undreamed of. He has been away to college and is now back, settling in to what becomes a long life in Port William. But his life might have been sadly different. At the sight of his dead father bleeding into the dirt, he is seized with an impulse for revenge, the need to answer senseless violence with more senseless violence. Jack Beechum, Ben's brother-in-law and Mat's uncle, too is in town that day, and when he sees Mat running from Ben's body and toward his horse, Jack knows instinctively that Mat must be stopped. He does not have time to have puzzled it out—"Jack could hardly have known what he was doing. He had had no time to think. He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he *could* think" (p. 36; italics original). Jack himself loved and respected Ben Feltner as he would a father. Jack is known to be impulsive and heedless of consequences at times. He has also been known to indulge his anger and resort to physical violence himself (*OJ*, 1974/1999, pp. 63 and 67). His own grief and rage must have been tremendous, but in an instant, his own need for revenge becomes utterly subsumed by love. He knows instinctively what Ben would have wanted and what Mat now needs. He collides at a full run with Mat and is able to hold Mat in "a desperate embrace" (*Fid*, 1992, p. 37), stopping him from adding his own life to the lives destroyed that day. And Jack accomplishes this at considerable cost to himself, for the reader is told that Jack "ached afterward. Something went out of him that day, and he was not the same again" (p. 36).



Through their struggle, Jack has been able to redirect Mat's anger and grief, allow Mat the time to come to himself and end the violence, and give him the strength to contain that grief and anger (pp. 36-37). When Mat goes home to tell his mother of the murder, he is gentle again, he is clear in his thinking, and he is mindful of his responsibilities to those he loves and who love him. His four-year-old daughter, Bess, has been waiting with the women of the house for the men to come home for the noon meal. When her father comes in, she is happy that now they will be able to eat. The adults know from the look on Mat's face that something is gravely wrong, but Mat has the strength to spare his daughter the abruptness of the news that her grandfather is dead. He kindly suggests that his wife, Margaret, take Bess upstairs to read a book to her. Years later, as Margaret Feltner is remembering it all and telling the story to her grandson Andy Catlett, she says she knew then what had happened, and she "just wanted to crawl away" (p. 38). But she too has the responsibilities of love. She tells Andy, "I had your mother to think about. You always have somebody to think about, and it's a blessing" (p. 38).

Mat's turn from violence is tenuous, and Jack knows it. He stays by Mat's side all day while preparations are made for a vigil at the house. That evening, just as the Feltners and the neighborhood ladies and two or three of the neighborhood men are preparing to sit down to supper—a silent acknowledgement that the living must go on, in their ordinary routines and in their ordinary needs—a crowd gathers in front of their house.

It is the men of Port William, come to acknowledge their friendship with Ben and to make known their side in the divide. The town doctor is chosen as spokesman, and he tells Mat that they have heard that Thad is in jail at Hargrave. Then he says, as though it were necessary to clarify, "We want you to know that we don't like what he did" (p. 56),

and others from the crowd shout out their agreement. Without knowing the whole story, they have concluded that this was “a thing done out of meanness” (p. 56), and they are offering to preempt the legal system. “We’ll ride down there tonight,” Doctor Starns tells Mat, “and put justice beyond question” (p. 56). Then just to remove all uncertainty about their intentions, he adds, “We have a rope” (p. 56). Port William has never had organized law enforcement. The sheriff in Hargrave describes the town as “nothing but trouble, almost beyond the law’s reach and certainly beyond its convenience—a source, as far as he was concerned, of never foreseeable bad news” (p. 46). The story “The Hurt Man” (*TDL*, 2004b) says that the town “remembered all its history of allegiances, offenses, and resentments, going back from the previous Saturday to the Civil War and long before that” (p. 5). The town is described in that story, set in 1889, as “a dozen miles by river from the courthouse and the rule of law” (p. 5), where “anger had a license that it might not have had in another place” (p. 5). By the time of Ben Feltner’s murder, it is also connected to the courthouse by a road, but it is still far removed, in space and oversight.

Port William is used to dealing with its own, and too frequently it has selected violence in those dealings. So when the men of Port William come to the Feltner home that evening, probably a mix of some who witnessed the murder and some who have only heard about it, what they are proposing is a lynching. Indeed “a noose [is] already tied” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 56). With the town’s history, such an action is not unimaginable to them, but still they fear it enough to hesitate: They want Mat’s permission to proceed.

The crowd’s choice of spokesmen—and his acceptance of that role—is telling too in understanding Berry’s views on education. Doctor Starns has counted Ben Feltner as a friend, but so have all the men in the crowd that night. This is not the reason he is chosen

to speak for them. Nor certainly is he chosen because he has devoted his life to healing and sworn an oath to do no harm. No doubt he is chosen that night, as he probably has been chosen on other important occasions, out of deference and unquestioning respect for his education. This is an ongoing theme in Berry's writing: the misplaced regard people too often have for credentialed education over character, intelligence, or actual learning. When Berry was asked in an interview to identify the most dangerous superstitions of modern industrial culture, among the several that Berry named were "that education is good; that education makes people better" (1993/2007b, p. 93). Berry is not saying that education is bad or that it cannot make people better. What he is saying is that too often these ideas are accepted unquestioningly by modern industrial culture—in a superstitious way. A judgment based on superstition tends toward an uncritical acceptance of education. While Berry is certainly in favor of learning and admiring of intelligence, he avoids endorsing anything unthinkingly, including education.

In his essay, "A Remarkable Man" (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry reviews the book *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. Berry declares it "a remarkable book because Nate Shaw was a remarkable man" (p. 17). The book tells the life story of "Nate Shaw" (pseudonym) in his own words. He is a black Alabama farmer, born in 1885 and living into the 1970s, in spite of twelve years in prison for trying to defend a neighbor from having his livestock seized by the county.

According to Berry, Shaw tells of his life with intelligence and humor, with a language that is expressive and specific to his place, with a pride in his work, and with the deep conviction of character—all of which Berry admires deeply. As far as Berry is concerned, Shaw is "a man of exceptional competence, both practical and moral" (p. 21).

Berry says the book has two themes: Shaw's love for farming counterbalanced with his awareness of and his "uneasiness" (p. 23) about his lack of formal education (p. 23-24). Berry's own love of farming and his skepticism about institutionalized education make him wonder how education might have changed Shaw.

Would education have made him a better farmer? Possibly. But Berry believes it might well have led him away from farming (p. 25). Would education have made him a better man? This seems unlikely to Berry because "Shaw is not *potentially* admirable; he is admirable *as he is*" (p. 24; italics original), and his character is the result of "a strong, sustaining culture" (p. 24). But Berry says this book on Shaw is "a burden" (p. 25) to us, that Shaw "burdens us with his character" (pp. 25-26) because "here is a superior man who never went to school!" (p. 26). The book and the fact of Nate Shaw's life are a direct challenge to the superstitious acceptance of education as an absolute good. For Berry, this should make us all stop and consider what our educational institutions have produced for us, the purpose we have conventionally assigned to education, and what superstitions we cling to about education.

In the industrial culture, "the purpose of education," says Berry, "has been to prepare people to 'take their places' in an industrial society, the assumption being that all small economic units are obsolete" (p. 25), and "the superstition of education assumes that this 'place in society' is 'up.' 'Up' is the direction from small to big. Education is the way up. The *popular* aim of education is to put everybody 'on top'" (p. 25; italics original). Nate Shaw's life burdens us, as Berry puts it, with an obligation to reconsider our assumptions about education: "What a trial that ought to be for us," says Berry, "whose public falsehoods, betrayals of trust, aggressions, injustices, and imminent

catastrophes are now almost exclusively the work of the college bred” (p. 26). In other words, Berry wants us to confront a full accounting of the good of education, that here, as everywhere, the gains need to be balanced with the losses, advances with damages.

This lengthy digression from “Pray Without Ceasing” has two purposes: first, to illuminate Berry’s skepticism about the absolute good of formal education, and second, to highlight his opinion on the pattern of misdeeds of the “college bred.” Berry has noted this relationship between education and damage elsewhere. In a commencement address to the Northern Kentucky University graduates of 2009, he quoted Canadian ecologist Stan Rowe: “well-educated people, not illiterates, are wrecking the planet” (quoted in Berry, *WM*, 2010c, p. 33). The dynamic is simple: because of greater influence, the educated can do greater damage, and because educational institutions tend to train students to serve the industrial economy not the ecosphere, that damage is often done on a bigger-is-better scale. In that same speech, Berry says this about education today:

To have founded an enormously expensive system of education on the premises of, and in service to, such an economy has been a mistake, calling for a long, arduous work of revision. If authentic hope is to survive in our present circumstances, education will have to change..., both self-education and the work of schools. (*WM*, 2010c, p. 33)

The change Berry advocates is that formal education change its focus “from the economy to the ecosphere as the basis of curriculum, teaching, and learning” (p. 33). This is not simply the plea of a nature lover. This is, for him, the practical calculation of a thinker who recognizes that any legitimate, genuine economy must be sustainable, it must be locally adapted, and it must ultimately be based on the material world.

Likewise to be legitimate and genuine, education must be based on the material world. “Education in the true sense,” says Berry in “Higher Education and Home Defense” (*HE*, 1987), “is an enablement to *serve*—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit” (p. 52; italics original). He reminds us that “to educate is, literally, to ‘bring up,’ to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures” (p. 52). To Berry, the “up” of “bring up” is very different from the “up” that has education be the way “up,” the direction of “small to big” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 25). And the “place” of “take their places in an industrial society” is very different from the sense of “home place” or from “place” in the description of Nate Shaw and his personal character as being “native to his place in the world” (p. 25).

No doubt Doctor Starns did much good for the people of Port William in his time, and no doubt much of that good was due to his education, training, and experience as a doctor. But all that good could have been undone in a moment by his leading part in turning that group of Port William citizens—his neighbors and his patients—into a lynch mob. In that moment, standing up for the crowd of men in front of the Feltner house, Starns was standing against his place—very different from Nate Shaw’s stand for his place and his neighbors.

Berry would have us wonder about the impact of formal education on our understanding of place, but also on both the arrogance of the educated and the ready acquiescence of power by the uneducated. When they arrive at the Feltner house, rope in hand, someone shouts out, “let the Doc do the talking” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 56). Starns is in the

front of the crowd—apparently he has been among the leaders as they approached the house—and he does not seem to hesitate to step forward and speak. He announces that they are ready to “put justice beyond question” (p. 56), as though a lynching could ever end the possibility of reflection or reappraisal or regret in an issue like justice.

So now it is all on Mat Feltner: his mother stands behind him at his right, his Uncle Jack stands behind him on his left. The crowd goes silent, waiting for Mat’s response. No doubt some in the crowd are expecting self-righteous anger from Mat and a hearty endorsement of their plan; maybe some have the sense to fear that response. Instead Mat’s response is steady and clear: “No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it” (p. 57). He is gracious and formal with them, elevating them all above mobs and nooses. It is only at that moment, finally, that Jack Beechum is able to relax the fierce tension that has held him on his feet and close to Mat all day long out of love for him and dread for what he might do. Upon hearing Mat’s words, Jack “stepped back and sat down” (p. 57) for the first time since morning.

Mat’s mother, Nancy, steps forward and speaks then too, emphasizing Mat’s wishes and calling forth the weight of Ben’s authority. She too thanks them and acknowledges them with the distinction of being Ben Feltner’s friends. But she leaves no room for question about what should be done. She tells them:

I know you are my husband’s friends. I thank you. I, too, must ask you not to do as you propose. Mat has asked you; I have asked you; if Ben could, he would ask you. Let us make what peace is left for us to make. (p. 57)

The possibility of peace is small, but the word has been uttered aloud now, and now there is hope.

Mat invites the men inside if they want, to sit with them and eat the food the townswomen have provided in the town's shock and grief. Some do, the rest disperse, going back to their lives to follow this current of Port William's future and not the one that would have made them into a lynch mob forever.

And what of poor, faithful, loving Martha Elizabeth Coulter, Thad's daughter? She trails her father into town to bring him home—twice. The first time, she takes him home, and in telling the story to Andy, Margaret Feltner remembers “how gentle Martha Elizabeth had been with him” (p. 18). Martha Elizabeth is Thad's youngest child, but now already seventeen. He thinks she has “the levellest head of any of his children” (p. 21), and he regards her as “the best” (p. 21) of the five of them. She is described as “responsible beyond her years” (p. 21), “a tall, raw-boned girl, with large hands and feet, a red complexion, and hair so red that, in the sun, it appeared to be on fire” (p. 21). For a time, Thad is relieved to be in her care, “resting in being with her” (p. 21) on the wagon ride home the first time. But even Thad's love for her and her love for him cannot lessen the pain he feels at the sight of the “pretty” farm that he now stands to lose.

By the time they get home, he is too ashamed to look at his farm or his daughter. When she tries to get him in the house to eat and rest, he cannot bear her kindness and literally pushes her away, and she falls. “He could have cut off his hand for so misusing her, and yet his rage at himself included her” (p. 23), and he threatens her with a whip. They are both shocked by his treatment of her, and she goes into the house, leaving him to sink further into despair and delusion and drink. When he finally comes into the shelter of the house, it is not for healing; it is to get his pistol. Armed and wildly unlike himself in his actions, neither Martha Elizabeth nor her mother dare to stop him.



The second time Martha Elizabeth comes to town for her father, she is too late. The murder has already happened, and her walk to town becomes a walk through town, past the dead body and horrified citizenry of Port William, and all the way to Hargrave. Then it becomes a devoted vigil with her father, first outside the courthouse, then inside the cell, Saturday evening and all day Sunday. She tries to get him to eat something and drink some water. In his terrible shame and guilt, he is unable even to look at her. Each night, the sheriff takes her home with him, and his wife gives her something to eat and a safe place to sleep. On Monday morning, when the sheriff brings her to the cell to resume her vigil, they find Thad has killed himself.

What becomes of this long-suffering girl with the fire-red hair? Andy Catlett knows part of her story because he knows Miss Martha Elizabeth, but always as an old woman to him. He knows her as “always near to smiling, sometimes to laughter. Her face, it seemed, had been made to smile. It was a face that assented wholly to the being of whatever and whomever she looked at” (p. 48). But Andy struggles to see her as the girl swept up in this terrible drama and wonders that she could have become the old woman he knows.

Martha Elizabeth “had gone with her father to the world’s edge and had come back with this smile on her face” (p. 48), and that seems hard for Andy to reconcile. But his grandmother has had more time to consider it all, and she understands, in part because she has imagined it all: Thad’s despair and shame and the quiet, unwavering love of Martha Elizabeth. She sees it in the particulars of familiarity. She tells Andy, “All these years I’ve thought of him sitting in those shadows, with Martha Elizabeth standing there, and his work-sore old hands over his face” (p. 50-51). She imagines God’s love, aware

that it “included Thad Coulter, drunk and mean and foolish, before he killed Mr. Feltner, and it included him afterwards” (p. 49), and that finally Thad must have seen his daughter, his “best,” standing by him in his guilt, as the very face of God’s love. While acknowledging that Thad was wrong to kill himself, Margaret also says, “surely God’s love includes people who can’t bear it” (p. 50). In her imaginings, she comes always to the mystery of love and the forgiveness required in loving frail human beings. “If God loves the ones we can’t,” she says to Andy, not doubting God’s love, but trying to comprehend the immense implications of that love, “then finally maybe we can” (p. 50). It is a hope in the possibility of mercy and peace, but it is also a necessity if we are to survive with each other.

The title of the story is provided, nearly at the end of the story, by the character Della Budge. Aged and ailing, able to walk now only with great difficulty, she still comes to the Feltner home where Ben’s body is lying in state, to offer an iced cake and a presence of grief and respect. Della Budge was once the school teacher in Port William. Indeed, she had been Jack Beechum’s teacher, and they recognize each other with something between fondness and respect. We are told their teacher-student relationship was not an easy one—“For years they had waged a contest in which she had endeavored to teach him...and he had refused to learn....He was one of her failures, but she maintained a proprietary interest in him nonetheless” (p. 54). Jack is by now a man past fifty years old, and we are told that Miss Della is “the only one left alive who called him ‘Jackie’” (p. 54). Jack’s response to almost everything she says is a respectful, “Yes, mam” (p. 54), and as she is leaving, he helps “her out the door and down the porch steps” (p. 55). But before she goes, she and Jack share a brief conversation, nearly perfunctory

in tone and content—a good man is dead, we are surprised, but we never know when our time is up. Jack agrees at each statement. Then she says, “So we must always be ready,” then advises, “Pray without ceasing,” quoting from the New Testament (1 Thes 5:17), a verse no doubt familiar to any who regularly attend the Port William church, a part of the culture of the place.

This is the chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians that compares the return of Jesus to a thief coming in the night. Because of the possibility of such a surprise, this is also the chapter that encourages constant good behavior. Paul cautions against drunkenness, and he instructs the Christian community of Thessaloniki to support each other, giving comfort to each other and encouragement. Paul says, “admonish the disorderly, encourage the fainthearted, support the weak, be longsuffering toward all” (1 Thes 5:14). It is a good program for harmony in a community. Indeed, it is an outline of what Ben Feltner was trying to do for Thad. Ben would have wanted to help Thad, not simply out of human sympathy or a tradition of moral instruction, but also out of practical necessity. No doubt Ben knew well that a good farmer tending his farm well is valuable to the community, that a good neighbor is an asset. Paul’s further advice—“See that none render unto any one evil for evil”—speaks directly to Mat and Jack and their decisions not to answer a senseless killing with more killing, more violence.

The verse is a curious one for the title of such a tragic story because of the joyful context it has within scripture. The verse immediately before it is, “Rejoice always” (1 Thes 5:16), and the one immediately after is, “in everything give thanks” (1 Thes 5:18). The verse is crowded on both sides by the exuberance of a pep talk from Paul to the Thessalonians. The moral instruction earlier in the chapter does not seem burdensome.

Instead it is presented as something more like a privilege to know, the not-so-secret secret to a happy life, especially a happy life in community.

The verse is also an acknowledgement that all life is a prayer, it is an acknowledgement of mystery, it is an acknowledgement of hope, and it is an acknowledgment of the constant need for mercy in the face of human frailty. Finally, it is an affirmation of Mat's decision on the steps of his porch before the crowd of men seeking vengeance; it is an affirmation of Jack's instinctive decision for love. That this line is delivered by Della Budge is probably no accident. Heavy as it is both with its weight as the title and with the weight of all the scriptural implications, it is fitting that it be delivered by a school teacher, indeed by Jack Beechum's teacher. This is consistent with Berry's hopes for education: that it could preserve the good of local culture in a place and that it could "inculcate a capacity for peaceability" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011).

What makes this short story all the more poignant as told by Andy Catlett is that Andy shares ancestors with both the murdered and the murderer. Ben Feltner was his great-grandfather, father of Andy's grandfather, Mat Feltner. But Thad Coulter was also kinsman, first cousin to Andy's grandfather Marce Catlett, the lines joining eighteen years after the murder in the marriage of Andy's parents. Had Mat not made the decision for peace—had Jack not stopped him and held him fast until that decision became a possibility for Mat—things might have happened very differently, and Andy knows this now. He knows he stands in time, uniting the two lines in that place that might otherwise have been hopelessly divided. The weight of that tragic moment is balanced against the weight of what followed and the alternate history of violence that ended on the Feltner's

front porch. “My grandfather,” Andy Catlett says as narrator, “made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 59).

As Berry crafts the short story and as he himself regards it, it is not too much to say that the future of Port William changed that day. In considering the events surrounding the murder and his grandfather’s own quiet death of old age all those years later, Andy becomes awash in time, the what-is asserting itself finally over the what-might-have-been:

This is the man who will be my grandfather—the man who will be the man who was my grandfather. The tenses slur and slide under the pressure of collapsed time. For that moment on the porch is not a now that was but a now that is and will be, inhabiting all the history of Port William that followed and will follow.  
(p. 58)

A space was created—first for Mat Feltner and then for the town itself—to decide against violence, to decide for love, and it is accepted as fact that it would not have happened without Jack Beechum and what he did in that moment to stop Mat. As Margaret Feltner tells Andy, “If it hadn’t been for Jack Beechum, Mat *would* have killed [Thad]” (p. 11; italics original), confirming her own witness to the events then and family lore since. “That was the point” (p. 11), Berry has Andy understand within the short story, that Jack had stopped Mat from escalating the violence and sending Port William into a very different future.

It is worth noting here too that in the face of such a tragedy, the women of the town bring food to the Feltner home, and the men bring a noose. The women speak of

peace and prayer, and the men speak of justice and vengeance. The women are animated by quiet, steadfast service, concerned for immediate physical needs such as hunger and comfort, and the men are animated by violence, unconcerned for the long-term consequences. The women offer their presence; the men offer their action. The women tend to their business; the men try to step beyond their business.

A direct comparison of Della Budge and Doctor Starns illustrates this contrast well, particularly from the perspective of education. Typically the town schoolteacher and the town doctor would be among the most educated of the citizenry, with each afforded a sort of deference as a result of that education. Miss Della arrives in the afternoon, in the daylight, and she is “bearing an iced cake on a stand like a lighted lamp” (p. 53). In contrast, the men, led by Doctor Starns, arrive at sundown, “the light cool and directionless” (p. 55), a “deepening twilight” (p. 57). It is not yet dark, but it is heading there. Miss Della comes into the house; Doctor Starns stays outside. If he comes into the house later when he is invited, to join the family and the neighbors who are there, we are not told. Miss Della brings comfort and some cheer in her iced cake, but she also brings instruction—she is a teacher to the end with Jack, still working to enlighten, to bring light into darkness. She speaks in support of the best in the local culture. Doctor Starns brings anger and the threat of violence in the tied noose. He speaks with a chorus of “That’s right!” (p. 56) from the men behind him, urging him on and escalating the animus. He says of the issues of justice and legality, “We think it’s our business, and we propose to make it our business” (p. 56), planning to disrupt the order of law.

Most strikingly, when Doctor Starns comes to the Feltner home that night, he does not bring healing, to which he is supposed to have dedicated his life, and with the

authority granted him by his neighbors, he speaks in support of the worst in the local culture. The respect afforded Miss Della then is appropriate because in this case she uses her education to serve the community, while the respect afforded Doctor Starns—and the destructive license that accompanies that respect—is misplaced because in this case he acts in defiance of what is best in his education and what is best for the community.

But both the women and men of Port William are moved by their culture and its expectations of them. Only Jack Beechum does the unexpected, moved by love rather than expectation in a radically countercultural way. And his unexpected radicalness allows Mat to do the same and opens a new future for Port William.

Jack Beechum is a frequent character in the fiction of Port William, sometimes appearing in minor roles, sometimes featured as he is in the novel *The Memory of Old Jack*. Mostly in the fiction he is highly respected as a smart, careful farmer, a tireless worker, and a faithful friend and neighbor. He is that, but he is also flawed.

Proud and somewhat vain, Jack sometimes displays a dangerous insensitivity in his dealings with people, and even when he recognizes the hurt he causes, he seems unable to effect a remedy. He can be hot-tempered and defiant, and as noted above, he is capable of physical violence himself. One cannot help but wonder if a little study of psychology or literature might have improved his interpersonal skills. When asked how a liberal arts education might have helped Jack Beechum with his personal relationships, Berry said, “I don’t know. That’s an interesting question because I somehow don’t want him to have a liberal arts education. And that’s because he was indigenous in a way that a liberal arts education is not going to allow” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). The use of the word *indigenous* may seem unexpected here or even extreme,

accustomed as we are to thinking of its use in describing native peoples. After all, Jack Beechum is probably no more than second or third generation in Kentucky. We do not usually think of the children or grandchildren of white settlers as indigenous, but perhaps we should. Perhaps that sort of connectedness should be our standard for a person's relationship to place. In describing Jack as indigenous, Berry indicates the depth and seriousness with which he regards Jack's connection to his land and community, and he reveals too his opinion of education's role in disrupting that connection.

When pressed about the pain Jack caused for himself and others, Berry agreed that he had, but he noted that Jack "was a model and a standard for a lot of people too." Then he said, "And he held Mat Feltner and kept him from killing" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011), as though to offer that act alone as redemption for any failings, however grievous. Berry clearly credits Jack with stopping Mat from seeking revenge on Thad Coulter, and in turn giving Mat the strength and the capacity to stop the crowd from lynching Thad. It does not take the skills of a fiction writer to imagine how a man's life might be changed by taking part in a lynching or encouraging one, and those changes would surely never be for the good. The mortal lives of Ben Feltner and Thad Coulter both end as a result of this tragic incident in Port William. But because of Jack Beechum—just as he is, indigenous and "native to his place in the world" (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 25) in the same way that Nate Shaw was—Mat has a better future than he would have had without Jack, and the would-be lynch mob and all of Port William have a better future, a future that allows for "what peace is left for us to make" (*Fid*, p. 57).

Would a college education have prevented Jack from acting on instinct to stop Mat in that instant? Would it have caused him to hesitate while he thought things



through? Would it have emboldened a righteous sense of justice or self-importance in him that could have made violent vengeance acceptable? Would it have caused him to value reason over love or power over grace or justice over mercy? Would it have made him disregard the possibility of mystery and expect that all things are explainable and somehow reversible? Would it have removed him from his place to such an extent that he would lose sight of the connectedness of all things, the sense of grave consequence arising from grave action? Would a liberal arts education have displaced Jack, disrupted his indigenouslyness to such an extent that he would not have been able to instantly see what the local culture would expect of Mat, nor see what the radically countercultural stand had to be? We cannot know this about Jack or about anyone, but we can see what was essential in Jack at that moment and ask what higher education does to support that in a person and what it does to destroy it. In closing his discussion of that story and that incident in the history of Port William, Berry said, “If you’re not going to have an educational system that inculcates that capacity for peaceability, for the refusal of that doctrine of maximum force relentlessly applied, then what’s the use of it? Why not keep your kids at home?” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). And that, finally, is Berry’s point and his deepest hope for education.

The final chapter of this study pulls back from this examination of Berry’s fiction to try to apply to higher education what we have learned about and from the Port William neighborhood. How might higher education be reformed or redirected to reinforce the lessons of membership, stewardship, and work—indeed, to inculcate peaceability?

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE HOMECOMING SOLUTION

For Berry, any solution to what is wrong with formal education should move toward peaceability or peaceableness. It should be consistent with plans to achieve peace. In “Peaceableness Toward Enemies” (*SEFC*, 1992/1993), Berry proposes “an agenda for peaceableness,” noting that this agenda is “unlikely to be advocated at first by any political leader” (p. 90). Instead, he says, this agenda “must rest on the changed lives and economies of individuals, families, and neighborhoods” (p. 90). Berry includes seven agenda points that chart a path toward peace.

The first is to admit that war has become too powerful and too dangerous to use safely, that war is unlikely to “improve anything” (p. 90), but it will surely destroy. The second agenda point is to learn from models of peace—individuals, groups, and nations that have maintained non-violence as their way of dealing with conflict. Third, Berry believes we need to “give the same status and prestige to the virtues and the means of peaceableness as we have heretofore given to the means of war” (p. 91). He even calls for the establishment of a “peace academy” (p. 91). Fourth, he thinks the industrial economy and its standards “lead inevitably to war against humans...[and] against nature” (p. 91), and as Port William knows well, “We must learn to prefer quality over quantity, service over profit, neighborliness over competition, people and other creatures over machines, health over wealth, a democratic prosperity over centralized wealth and power, economic

health over ‘economic growth’” (p. 91). In other words, we have to reject the standards of industrialism, and in his fifth point, he says we must instead build an economy of peace—“a domestic economy that is sound, diversified, decentralized, democratic, locally adapted, ecologically responsible, and reasonably self-sufficient” (p. 91).

An economy of peace depends on Berry’s sixth agenda point: “we must repair our country and our society” (p. 91). He specifies this point with a number of sub-points:

We must stop the ruin of our forests and fields, waterways and seacoasts. We must end waste and pollution. We must renew our urban and rural communities. We must remake family life and neighborhood. We must reduce indebtedness, poverty, homelessness, violence. We must renew the possibility of a democratic distribution of usable property. We must take proper care of our children. We must quit treating them as commodities for the “job market” and teach them to be good neighbors and citizens and to do good work. (pp. 91-92)

Berry never suggests that peaceableness will be easy. But Berry’s list of sub-points does suggest how thoroughly he thinks a war economy penetrates society—its thinking, its assumptions, and its day-to-day practices.

Berry’s seventh point sounds simpler than it is. “If we want to be at peace,” he says, “we will have to waste less, spend less, use less, want less, need less” (p. 92). In other words, we should embrace something like a Port William way of life. Writing in the shadow of the First Gulf War in 1991, Berry ends his peace agenda with this observation:

The most alarming sign of the state of our society now is that our leaders have the courage to sacrifice the lives of young people in war but have not the courage to tell us that we must be less greedy and less wasteful. (p. 92)

Such an observation suggests how far the American culture is from a peace agenda.

In another way, however, Berry's observation indicates a direction forward. Being less greedy and less wasteful does not require official direction or even official permission. It requires, as Berry writes in that same essay, "the changed lives and economies of individuals, families, and neighborhoods" (p. 90), and it can begin now. It must begin now, in part, because we have no other time to begin than now. Additionally, for anyone who sees the need and the connections, it must also begin now for the sake of "one's own heart and spirit" (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 62). Berry's essay "A Poem of Difficult Hope" (*WPF*) is an analysis of Hayden Carruth's poem "On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam." The poem, quoted in its entirety in Berry's essay, seems to say that, after all the protest poems the poet has written, it will do no good to write another one. The poem goes on from there, then, to articulate in specific detail some of the good his past poems have *not* done. Berry sees the poem's continuation as having a more hopeful meaning, even a necessary meaning, noting that "the distinguishing characteristic of absolute despair is silence" (p. 59). The fact that the poem, in effect, speaks aloud the acknowledgement of its own uselessness suggests to Berry that its despair is not absolute. Berry says, "A person who marks his trail into despair remembers hope—and thus has hope, even if only a little" (p. 59). This is not the silence of absolute despair; even a statement of uselessness still has a use and a hope.

Later in that essay, Berry wonders about such hope, saying, "What is the use of saying 'There is no use'?" (p. 61), since because of the publication of the poem, Berry thinks, "a use is thus clearly implied" (p. 61). The meaning of this protest poem serves us, writes Berry, because it "complicates our understanding of what political protest is and

means” (p. 61). Calls for improvement too often fade away, says Berry, because the protesters want change fast, and when it does not happen, they give up. For Berry, lasting protest needs more: “If protest depended on success, there would be little protest of any durability or significance” (p. 62). Acts of protest—including individual acts of reform—require something more to continue. Lasting protest, says Berry, “is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one’s own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence” (p. 62). Lasting protest must be embodied in people’s lives. Always with Berry, the ground for hope, however difficult, is at our feet, here and now, and we must act here and now, in the ways we can, for the sake of peace and for the sake of our own hearts and spirits.

Whether the war we protest is against people or against the world itself, clearly, based on his peace agenda, Berry identifies industrialism as one cause of modern war. Elsewhere, he described the world’s embrace of industrialism and the industrial economy as “an emergency of the worst kind: one that cannot be resolved by ‘emergency measures’....an emergency that calls for patience” (*CP*, 2003, p. 179), noting that “to be patient in an emergency is a hard requirement” (p.179). To illustrate the depth of the emergency and the folly of trying to balance a bigger and bigger industrial economy on a more and more fractured and fragile land economy, he tells of a dream he had. He dreamed that humankind had built a huge airplane, “enormous...., an aeronautical Tower of Babel” (p. 180), designed to accommodate “all the world’s people who wished to escape the limits of earthly life” (p. 180). The plane took off with billions of people on board. As big as the plane was, however, it could not carry an infinite supply of fuel, so it eventually needed to land again, but the runway had been destroyed in the great effort of

takeoff. Writes Berry, “While the escapists circled the globe, free of their ancient limits and restraints, but running out of fuel, a small ground crew worked to rebuild the runway, hoping to bring the wanderers safely down to earth again” (p. 180). The dream captures many of Berry’s worries—from a denial of the human relationship with nature to what he sees as our spendthrift ways with nonrenewable resources, from a defiance of limits and proper scale to a faith in science and technology that fails to consider the full context of a proffered solution. And Berry, as always, speaks for the ground crew.

He sees our present economy as “fantastical” and “airy,” “proposing to grow infinitely from finite resources” (p. 180), and he wonders “how to get this economy safely down to earth” (p. 180). Should the plane ever be able to land again, says Berry, “the returnees will need careful instructions on how to live again on the earth. That is why we dare not permit our thinking to become too simple or uncritical or impractical” (p. 180). To land the economy, Berry sees the need for “an ongoing, vigorous conversation about farming, forestry, local economy, energy, ecology, health, and the domestic arts” (p. 180). The “careful instructions on how to live” and the other half of the “ongoing, vigorous conversation”: these have to be provided, as Berry sees it, by communities like Port William or like the real Port Royal. Berry has written:

I believe that such remnant communities as my own, fallen to the ground as they are, might still become the seeds of a better civilization than we now have—better economy, better faith, better knowledge and affection. That is what keeps me awake, that difficult hope. (*ATC*, 1995, p. 47)

Berry is right, of course. The seeds of a better civilization will come from small places because even the large places are made up of small places, and those small places should

be supported, and they should be studied and listened to. Examining the Port William neighborhood provides insight into what matters to Berry about education, especially higher education. Understanding the impact of higher education on Port William is as important as understanding the potential that higher education has to help Port William.

To that point, Berry is critical of higher education as it exists today, and regarding higher education, he is generally more filled with fear than with hope for the small places of the world. At an appearance at Warren Wilson College in November 2011, he said plainly, “College has been oversold by the colleges and universities” (2011, November 9). He had just been asked why young people should go to college, and he allowed that maybe some should not, saying, “There are lots of considerations about it. Probably a lot of people in college now don’t want to be in college in the first place” (2011, November 9). Elsewhere, in an interview, Berry has questioned “our now rather facile assumption that everybody needs to be at least a bachelor of arts” (2006/2007b, p. 195), and he has written that he doubts “the invariable goodness of a college education” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 119). With such statements, he is not objecting to education or learning as such. Instead he is objecting to an embrace of education that is unthinking or unconscious. This is the teacher, after all, who wanted to suggest to his students “the possibility of a life that is full and conscious and responsible” (*LLH*, 1969/2004, p. 75). Such consciousness and responsibility has to extend even to one’s education.

During that question-and-answer session at Warren Wilson College, Berry went on to explain himself more precisely, saying:

I don’t think you ought to accept it as true that it’s a good thing to go to college any more than you should accept it as true that it’s a good thing to stay out of

college. This is something that has to be thought about, and that's what a college is for. (2011, November 9)

Here is where Berry gets himself into a bit of a tangle. He believes, for example, that sometimes a person has to begin hard work in order to realize he or she feels like doing the work (*ACH*, 1970/2003, p. 112). Of course, college is not the only place to learn to think, but Berry recognizes it as one way. So if part of education is the discovery of the possibility of a life that is full and conscious and responsible, and if part of the role of college is to provide the time, the space, and the tools to think critically about issues, then how can one know if college would be a good thing personally without beginning college? His comments in the question-and-answer session did not go that far.

It is safe to say that, as with most subjects, Berry urges thought and appropriate judgment and standards in making a decision about college. Some students, he said, “are there because of parental pressure, social inclination—a kind of gravity. Those people probably ought to go out and work a while and see if they want to come back” (2011, November 9). He noted in particular the current cost of higher education and the debt students often accrue as a result, debt that can force students to make life decisions—whether about a major or a job—based on earning potential not vocation or aptitude.

Further, an unquestioned acceptance of the need for a college degree, in Berry's view, has had “a cruel result:...It has made people who don't have a college degree feel inferior, which they are not” (2011, November 9). Also when something is assumed to be necessary, it may not get proper scrutiny and criticism, and this has become the case with higher education. That is, when Berry says “college has been oversold,” he is objecting to the selling, not to college itself. He understands the value of education.



Indeed, he has also made this statement, very plainly endorsing education: “Look, there’s a valid role for education. That’s a generalization that I would put out there and leave. Some people need more than others. Some people can use more than others” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Furthermore, he sees learning as necessary and, for most people, innately recognized as such: “When you have somebody who knows something and somebody who doesn’t and wants to, then you’ve got a school. And there’s no need to justify that. That just comes. That’s a fundamental” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). His skepticism is not with learning per se; his skepticism and his criticism are directed at *institutions* of learning. Berry went on:

From there you go into the modern diseases of institutions and organizations.

When you’ve got to justify the physical campus and the payroll and the maintenance fund and the building fund and the expansion plan and all that, you’re just pretty soon lost. But when people sit down together and talk—a teacher and a student—that’s good. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

With such a statement, Berry identifies how the activities of maintaining an institution can obstruct the institution’s real purpose of teaching and learning. Further, the statement reveals Berry’s idea of the teacher-student relationship at its most elemental.

Berry has described education as “atmospheric. It’s going on everywhere, all the time” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). That requires an openness to learning and an awareness of the possibility of learning. In the same conversation, he said of his home community, “You know, you hang around a place like this and the odds are—” and then he stopped himself, correcting and emphasizing his point: “No, no—the

certainty is just there that somebody a lot less educated than you are is going to teach you something that you needed to know, that you'll be grateful for. It's going to happen" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Often in essays and interviews, he refers to his elders and neighbors as among his best teachers. Continuing, he said:

Wonderful things will be said to you by people who aren't educated. Do you know how many teachers I've had who didn't get past the eighth grade, who taught me necessary things? One of the best ones—one of the smartest teachers I ever had—didn't get past the eighth grade. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011).

For someone who has learned to pay attention, life and learning are all of a piece. Perhaps this springs from the seamlessness of a life that Berry's character Burley Coulter was so pleased to imagine for Jayber Crow, where someone can "have his dwelling place and his place of business right together" (*JC*, 2000b, p. 99). Whatever the cause, for Berry as for Port William, education cannot be confined to the school classroom, nor should it be.

### The Purpose of Education

For Wendell Berry, the purpose of education is "to prepare students for life" (*HE*, 1987, p. 89); it is "the making of a good, fully developed human being" (p. 77). Without question, that is fulltime work—broad, interdependent, and all-encompassing. As such, Berry believes it cannot be utilitarian. This may sound contradictory to the views of the author of characters such as Hannah Coulter, who claimed that what she learned from her grandmother was "just as worthy" and "of more use" than what she learned in school or from books (*HC*, 2004a, p. 13), or Jayber Crow, who claimed, "The best part of my education, and surely the most useful part, came from [Aunt Cordie]" (*JC*, 2000b, p. 23).

What elevates the teaching of Grandmam and Aunt Cordie above the utilitarian is that they were not simply teaching gardening skills or how to care for chickens. They were teaching the work, but also how to work. They were teaching the skills of living, but also how to live. In other words, Aunt Cordie and Grandmam were such good teachers and taught such useful and worthy things because they were teaching Jayber and Hannah as whole people. Their aim was to help make “good, fully developed human beings” (*HE*, 1987, p. 77), not merely workers to complete a job. There was nothing departmentalized or fragmented about either curriculum. So it is not contradictory: Education is never utilitarian for Berry, but it should always be practical. That is, education should be applied, and it should be applied in a particular place by a particular person.

Education should teach how to do things, according to Berry, as well as judgment of those things. “These two problems,” says Berry, “how to make and how to judge, are the business of education” (p. 81). This is especially true of the judgment required to identify the good things that need protecting. He points out the tradition in human culture of comparing knowledge to a tree, and that the tree in Genesis is often referred to as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This judgment—this knowing—is not always expressed in such starkly moralistic terms. For example, such judgment could provide instead the distinction between needs and wants, or enough and too much, or necessary and unnecessary. The point is that, in order to educate against loss of any good thing, we must be able and willing to judge what is good or to judge what is important and what is unimportant or less important. Elsewhere, Berry has said this about education:

Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible. This cannot be done by gathering or

“accessing” what we now call “information”—which is to say facts without context and therefore without priority. A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first” (*CP*, 2003, p. 21).

In other words, it means being able to make judgments. And grounding such judgments in context—turning information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom—requires an education that will enable students to think, to imagine, and to know themselves as connected to the world in a tangible way. Berry describes such an education this way: “The need for broadly informed human judgment nevertheless remains, and this need requires inescapably an education that is broad and basic” (*HE*, 1987, p. 83). This speaks to the content of the education as well as the means of that education.

With the content of education, Berry believes modern education has abdicated its responsibility to decide what students should know, deferring instead to what industry wants them to know (e.g., *WM*, 2010, p. 32). This is a double disappointment. First, he sees such decisions as the responsibility of teachers, and he sees failing to make them as crippling to education’s credibility and effectiveness. Second, he thinks conversations—both within the academy and between the academy and the community—on what students should know would enliven education. So for higher education not to profess the value of what needs to be learned is both a lost opportunity and a lost trust for education.

The loss of trust springs from responsibilities unfulfilled. Berry believes it is the responsibility of one generation to teach the next, and with that responsibility comes the question of what the young need to learn. “The failure to answer [that question] (or even to ask it) imposes severe penalties on teachers, students, and the public alike” (*HE*, 1987,

pp. 83-84), says Berry, noting that the “failure to get a broad, basic education” imposes obvious penalties on graduates and the public (p. 84), when students are not “prepare[d] for life” by their education (p. 89). This failure imposes the same penalties on teachers, “plus one more,” writes Berry: “The failure to decide what students should be required to learn keeps the teacher from functioning as, and perhaps from becoming, a responsible adult” (p. 84). The job is not easy, but it must be done. In the same essay, he writes:

There is no one to teach young people but older people, and so the older people must do it. That they do not know enough to do it, that they have never been smart enough or experienced enough or good enough to do it, does not matter. They must do it because there is no one else to do it. This is simply the elemental trial—some would say the elemental tragedy—of human life: the necessity to proceed on the basis merely of the knowledge that is available, the necessity to postpone until too late the question of the sufficiency and the truth of that knowledge. (p. 84)

Whether we understand “older people” in terms of age or experience, the difficulty of the task mitigates neither the responsibility nor the tragedy.

Again, Berry is noting “the way of ignorance” (*WI*, 2005c, p. ix) as a necessary and inescapable predicament for humankind, both for students and teachers. He says:

To prepare young people for life, teachers must dispense knowledge and enlighten ignorance, just as supposed. But ignorance is not only the affliction that teaching seeks to cure; it is also the condition, the predicament, in which teaching is done, for teachers do not know the life or the lives for which their students are being prepared. (*HE*, 1987, p. 85)

Berry believes this predicament is not an excuse to avoid the responsibility, nor is it an excuse to narrow the curriculum or lower the standards.

With curriculum, his attitude is not “either/or” but rather “both/and.” For example, he endorses the idea of adding local and regional writers to literature courses, but he shows no interest in eliminating any of the classics. When discussions on college campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s raised issues of relevance, with the implied goal of eliminating some academic requirements, he took the side of adding requirements (1973/2007, p. 11). Likewise, on the question of student preparation for college-level work, Berry favors maintaining rigor in academic standards.

The question, then, is what is to determine the pattern of education. Shall we shape a university education according to the previous schooling of the students, which we suppose has made them unfit to meet high expectations and standards, and to the supposed needs of students in some future still dark to us all? Or shall we shape it...according to the essential subjects of study? If we shape education to fit the students, then we clearly can maintain no standards; we will lose the subjects and eventually will lose the students as well. If we shape it to the subjects, then we will save both the subjects and the students. (*HE*, 1987, p. 88)

Such calls for rigor are balanced in Berry by a generosity of possibility and a vision of mastery that is not common in modern education, but not unlike a farmer’s expectation of a perfect crop. Such expectations define a means of education for Berry.

*Angling at Large in the Realm of the Possible*

For all its talk of opportunity and upward mobility, our modern system of education at all levels could be described as built on an assumption of eventual failure.

Yes, people complete degrees and even learn things, but not without a rubble of failure left in the wake. Such failure may come from those who give up or are given up on, or those who need more time than others to learn and thus learn incompletely. It may come in diminished goals or inadequate understanding. It may come in narrowed focus or a willful disregard of other disciplines or fields. The system does not accommodate universal mastery. It expects some students to fail or all students to fail in some way.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Berry has an aspirational view of learning, envisioning the possibility of eventual success, even mastery. As he explained it:

What I've learned is that the conventional educational system is artificial and probably wrong—misleading. The time it takes a student to learn a subject is not necessarily a semester or four years, and reality doesn't stop and start over again two or three times a year. So my thoughts have tended for a long time toward the idea that probably the apprenticeship idea is right. So that a teacher would take on a student and when the teacher thought the student was ready, when the student had got the good out of the teacher, the teacher would say, "All right, you can go now. You're ready to go." If it takes two years for a one-semester course, tough. Stay with it until the problems are solved. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

He made a similar statement in a letter:

There is something inherently false in the notion that everybody's education can be ordered in the same neat scheme of semesters and years. Students really should be let go only when they have learned what a teacher has to teach. (W. Berry, personal communication, August 28, 2009)

Berry is not blind to the possibility of failure nor is he naïve about students' limitations. But he values effectiveness over efficiency and quality over quantity, envisioning the possibility of success. However chaotic it may seem as the basis of an education system, such a view honors the worth of the subject to be learned while it also honors the worth of the student. This view is consistent with the lessons of the Port William farmers, who each year dream of the perfect crop, a possibility that remains lively in their minds even as they adjust to something less, as good teachers are always doing as well.

This view is consistent too with things Berry has said elsewhere. After a reading in Washington, D.C., a questioner posited to Berry that our language has become “bereft of meaning,” and she asked what he thought we should do. His answer was, “Read the King James Bible, read Shakespeare, read Milton. Make yourself able to read those people” (2003, November 10). While perhaps more glib than he intended, the answer is striking. He expresses little doubt that reading Shakespeare or Milton is possible. But then he is also the one who connects learning to survival, both for individuals and for humanity. When everything is a matter of survival, mastery is an appropriate standard.

Imagine, moreover, the effect on students if they knew that mastery was expected, that they would not be let go until mastery was achieved, and that someone believed that for them mastery was necessary and possible. A 1970 collection of essays entitled *Writers as Teachers—Teachers as Writers*, includes an essay by Berry called, “Some Thoughts I Have in Mind When I Teach.” Among the ideas he explores in the essay is the dynamic between teacher and student, what he calls “the confrontation between experience and possibility” (p. 16), and he writes that, as he understands it, “education is meant to give...[a student]...an enlarged sense of possibility, his own and humanity's”



(p. 17). That Berry yokes a student's sense of possibility so directly to the possibility for humanity is worth noting. Whatever possibility we have as individuals, he seems to say, it is mirrored in and not larger than the possibility for humanity or the community.

In that essay, Berry writes, "it is exciting and often deeply moving to work and think and speak in the atmosphere of possibility that surrounds students," but he is mindful too of "an irreducible bewilderment...in dealing with possibilities that belong to other people," saying, "I would rather enlarge a student's sense of possibility than 'direct' it" (p. 16). Then he describes what he sees as the obligation and predicament of teaching:

Experience speaking to possibility has also the obligation to pass on some sense of what may be expected, a sense of the practicable, and at the same time to avoid condescension and discouragement. This is what I think of as the moral predicament of a teacher, and as it can have only particular solutions in the lives of particular students it remains a predicament, almost as liable to failure as to success. (p. 16)

Expressed as experience speaking to possibility, the teacher-student relationship is for Berry not exactly a meeting of equals, though there can be friendship. He recognizes a distinction, mostly in responsibility, between teacher and student.

Then he writes, "My aim as a teacher, as I have said, is to angle at large in the realm of the possible" (p. 19). But he writes too of the student's responsibility in this:

I base nearly everything I attempt [as a teacher of writing] on one assumption: that every person's experience is in some way different from anybody else's.

Hence, everybody has something to tell me that I would be interested to know.

The student's task is to find out what it is and to write it well. (p. 19)

More generally, Berry says of teaching: “[A teacher’s] great function, or opportunity or obligation, is to manage somehow to address himself openly and generously and invitingly to the unknown—the *possible* that presents itself to him in the minds and lives of his students” (p. 24). It all sounds lovely, but what about Berry’s respect for limits? Early in that same essay, Berry clarifies that some of the possibility that students enjoy is due to “the circumstance of school” (p. 16), the suspension of permanent commitment that enrollment in college can still afford and afforded more readily in 1970.

Still, Berry makes a vital distinction between the possibility of something and the possibility of anything. Indeed, in *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he expresses this idea thirty years later with some impatience as he considers how the standard of good work has been eclipsed by the goal of high achievement, which too frequently becomes equated reductively with money alone. Writes Berry:

Moreover, in education, to place so exclusive an emphasis upon “high achievement” is to lie to one’s students....The goal of education-as-job-training, which is now the dominant pedagogical idea, is a high professional salary. Young people are being told, “You can be anything you want to be.” Every student is given to understand that he or she is being prepared for “leadership.” All of this is a lie....You *can’t* be everything you want to be; nobody can. Everybody *can’t* be a leader; not everybody even wants to be. (p. 58)

While some might try to argue that setting goals would motivate students, Berry’s point is that goals based on the narrow standard of money are lies with destructive effects.

“These lies are not innocent,” he writes. “They lead to disappointment. They lead good young people to think that if they have an ordinary job, if they work with their hands, if

they are farmers or housewives or mechanics or carpenters, they are no good” (p. 58). For Berry, a big part of the generosity of possibility is embracing the possibility of good work as a carpenter or farmer or anything else. The important standard is not a high salary or a lofty title, but rather it is doing necessary work and doing it well, with intelligence and awareness. Anything less than that is drudgery and unworthy of human beings, who are, according to Berry, “not too good to work with our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone” (UA, 1977/1996, p. 140). Necessary work, well done—it elevates a job to a vocation.

In an interview in 1993, Berry discussed the effect of a system of education based on the wrong standard or on narrowed standards:

Education now, you see, works toward the idea of making people able to take tests, or to meet the needs of an employer. And this means that education’s going to run to minimums. It runs to the minimal fulfillment of whatever requirement is hypothesized. An educational system that concentrates on the minimum is going to reduce the minimum. (1993/2007a, p. 110)

However unexpected or counterintuitive it might seem, Berry believes that focusing on the low bar works to lower that bar.

Instead, like a good farmer, he keeps the image of perfection in sight. Continuing in the same interview, he said:

There has to be a better standard, and the better standard, I think, is the health of the community. If the standard of education is job qualification and an intelligence test or a college entrance examination, then education’s going to get worse. If you have an educational system that’s not prepared to ask every student

to get better no matter how good he or she already is, then you've got a failing system" (p. 110).

Still, Berry has taught; he knows the practical truth about "the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men" and teachers too. In that same interview, he went on to say:

The first rule of education is that it's not going to work the way you think it's going to work. You can set up an ideal system; you think "Well, I know how to do it this time," and the first thing you know you have to quit fooling yourself. It's not going to work ideally. A lot of things you do are not even going to work pretty well. (p. 111)

Like a good farmer, he understands "the need to accept something less than perfection as the best that could be done" (Hall & Berry, p. 12), as noted in Chapter II.

Berry does not prescribe what to do. Instead he points out the right standards to follow, saying, "I'm not ever, in anything I've written, trying to say exactly how anything ought to be done....I don't have a program. My argument is that if you change the standards of your work, you'll finally change your work" (1993/2007a, p. 111). His statement can be applied to agriculture, but in this case he was speaking about education:

If you're a teacher and you're trying to teach to the career needs of every individual student or you're trying to teach to the presumed career needs of a conglomeration of young people, then you're not going to do well. If you're a teacher and you make the health of the community the standard of your work, then you're going to teach better. (p. 111)

Here, too, he stresses the value of imagination when considering one's students and one's own community:

If you teach with the good health of your community in mind, you're going to try to make every one of your students the best possible member of the community. You're going to fail a lot, but you're going to change the way you teach and maybe you'll succeed some, too. If you suppose to yourself, "Well, when these kids graduate, that's probably the last I'm going to see of them," you're going to teach differently than you would teach if you assume that you're going to spend the rest of your life with these people. These kids are going to grow up. They're going to take their place in the community you live in. They're going to be your fellow citizens, your fellow members" (p. 111).

Helping to create one's own neighbors—that is a learning goal too frequently ignored, but it is one that is likely to enliven education.

Seeing teaching in such terms has the effect of putting a new edge on one's teaching tools. There is a new urgency, and suddenly one is teaching "like fury" (1991/2007, p. 45). Berry explained: "It doesn't have to make a difference on a grand scale. It has to make a difference on the individual or local scale....I think that changing yourself—by doing the best work you can—is of major importance" (1993/2007a, p. 111). Part of the definition of what is possible is what a person can do, and for Berry, the first change is always changing oneself.

### *Experience Speaking to Possibility*

When experience speaks to possibility, for Berry, the best teachers are models as well as instructors. In an essay about his own teacher, Wallace Stegner, Berry describes how Stegner taught "by bestowing a kindness that implied an expectation and by setting an example" (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 49). At an appearance in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2009,

he gave a similar description of the power of Stegner as a teacher, saying, “[Mr. Stegner] had a way of...emitting a kind of aura about himself, and if ... you weren't working as hard as you could, you felt embarrassed because you knew he was working as hard as he could” (2009, October 11). Setting an example counts with Berry.

Berry articulates the value of setting an example in a testimonial on sustainable forester Jason Rutledge's skills as a teacher. Berry, in part, wrote this:

Jason's principles and his practice as a forester are coherent and sound. He is a born teacher, but his excellence is that he is a teacher who does every day what he teaches. He teaches first of all by his example. His students like and admire him. They learn from him by listening, by observing, and by doing the work under his supervision and judgment. (2009, July 22)

If the whole student is to be taught, then the teaching should be done by a whole person.

As Stegner and Rutledge serve as models for their students, Berry's descriptions of them serve too. Note the qualities Berry admires: kindness, high expectations with rigor and standards to match, and actual experience doing what is being taught. Note too that this experience—this practice—is supported by principles, giving a coherence and integrity to the practice and the principles. To those qualities, add teaching techniques that include instruction, experience, and observation and reflection. Finally there is affection—from the students for the teacher and the other way around.

By the end of a letter Berry wrote to Daniel Kemmis, published in *The Way of Ignorance* (2005c) and noted in Chapter II of this study, Berry has excluded either major political party from favor, but he describes a political party worthy of our respect. It turns out to be a good description of an educational system worthy of our respect. Berry writes:

It will have to defend the health of ecosystems and watersheds. It will have to advocate the development of local economies: the interdependence of cities and towns with their adjoining landscapes of farms or ranches, gardens, forests, lakes and streams; the cooperation of farmers, ranchers, gardeners, foresters, fishermen, and other users of the land and water with homegrown, locally-owned, appropriately-scaled businesses that will process and distribute the local products. It will know and say that such economies, providing a significant measure of local self-sufficiency, are indispensable to the security of the nation. (p. 149)

What Berry has just described—what he says is worthy of our support politically—is what he has elsewhere described as “an authentic economy” (*WM*, 2012c, p. 3).

His list of aspirational attributes for a worthy political party in that letter goes on to honor human dignity and worth, as individuals and in community:

It will insist that the working people are not readily transportable or dispensable “resources” for industry, but instead are honored and necessary members of their communities, entitled to just wages, decent working conditions, and pleasant places to live. It will honor the idea of vocation: that young people should find the work to which they are called or are naturally suited, and, having found it, should be able to devote their lives to it. (*WI*, 2005c, pp. 149-150)

From there, he notes the ills of the industrial mindset, for the economy and for any human interaction, especially and most dangerously war:

It will, in short, tell the truth about the human economy: Competitiveness, covetousness, ruthlessness, and greed are not economic virtues; the economic virtues are neighborliness, generosity, trust, good workmanship, thrift, and care. It

will tell the truth also about war: We can no longer afford it, or bear it; we will have to think of better ways—good economic practice, honest talk, peaceable resistance—to protect the things needing to be protected. (p. 150)

He recognizes limits even when he is limning out the ideal.

Finally in the letter, he reminds us that the appropriate purpose for politics—just as it is the appropriate purpose for education—is the protection of every good thing:

It will repudiate all narrow and special definitions of conservation, but will use the term in the broadest sense to mean giving care to everything needing care: wilderness, all bodies of water, the air, farms and working forests, all the creatures (living and not-living), neighbors, families and communities, languages, cultures, minds, souls, freedom, democracy, the Constitution. (p. 150)

These attributes—these standards—for a political party worthy of our respect and support when applied to education would enable us to educate against the loss of any good thing.

A true conservationist, Berry recycled these words in the 2005 commencement address at Lindsey Wilson College (2005b). Having built up to that passage with a list of complaints about our extractive and therefore violent industrial economy, he finished the address by explaining that he has described “yet another ‘required course’” (2005b) in the “curriculum of a ‘continuing education’” (2005b) in the necessary and endless effort to take on “the issue of human violence” (2005b), violence against each other and against the world.

If the purpose of education is so necessary and if the learning relationship is as natural and necessary as Berry thinks, then how can the institutions of higher learning get it wrong? Berry has some specific criticisms of higher education that I think explain.



## Criticism of Higher Education

Wendell Berry is not reticent about stating what he thinks is wrong with higher education today, with many of his criticisms summed up in this quote:

Education has been oversold, overbuilt, over-electrified, and overpriced. Colleges have grown into universities. Universities have become “research institutions” full of undertaught students and highly accredited “professionals” who are overpaid by the public to job-train the young and to invent cures and solutions for corporations to “market” for too much money to the public. And we have balanced this immense superstructure, immensely expensive to use and maintain, upon the frail stem of the land economy that we conventionally abuse and ignore. (WM, 2005c, p. 26)

The passage comes toward the end of the essay “Money Vs. Goods” (WM, 2010c), in which Berry explores the false assumptions of the modern industrial economy, including his opinion that “the industrial system is disconnected from, is unconcerned about, and takes no responsibility for, its natural and human sources” (p. 7). While an ecologist’s or agrarian’s view recognizes that “the context of everything is everything else” (WI, 2005c, p. 76)—that all things are interconnected—someone schooled in the thinking and tools of industrialism tends to isolate to analyze, simplify to understand, and separate to manage. In as much as industrialism asserts itself as the “primary reality” (HE, 1987, p. 169) and holds itself answerable to no “ideals and standards outside itself” (p. 169), Berry believes it works toward the disconnection and disintegration of all things, including education.

One way to understand Berry’s criticism of higher education is through the idea of disconnection. In the preface to *Home Economics* (1987), he acknowledges that the

essays in the volume continue the argument he began years before, the subject of which “is the fact, and ultimately the faith, that things connect—that we are wholly dependent on a pattern, an all-inclusive form, that we partly understand. The argument, therefore, is an effort to describe responsibility” (p. ix). Then he writes, “The understanding of connections seems to me an indispensable part of humanity’s self-defense” (pp. ix-x). If understanding connections is indispensable, then so too is understanding disconnections.

Berry is not alone in his concern over disconnection in education. Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1967) wanted to “eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum” (p. 6), and he regarded such eradication as a “solution” to the problem of how “to make the pupil see the wood by means of the trees” (p. 6), or how to move students beyond “an airy path of brilliant generalizations” (p. 6). Berry embraces this view. He argues that higher education represents disconnection itself: institutions disconnected from their communities, disciplines disconnected from each other, research disconnected from its consequences, teaching disconnected from emotions or values, and curricula disconnected from possibility. Often the result is that higher education works to disconnect students from home, and for Berry this final disconnection is dangerous for our world and all the creatures in it—especially students.

#### *Disconnection from Community*

Much of Berry’s thinking on higher education comes from his experience with and study of land-grant colleges and universities, those institutions of learning founded on a mandate to serve and support agriculture and rural life. As noted in both Chapters I and IV, Berry believes the land-grant system has failed in this mission. Indeed, he claims these institutions have “betrayed this mandate” (*HE*, 1987, pp. 51-52), citing the decline

in rural populations and communities, as well as declines in the quality of such basics as soil, water, and air (pp. 170-171). Berry holds a standard for the land-grant institutions, with disappointment in their failure to serve rural people and communities such as his own. More broadly, he extends that expectation of community and regional service to any publicly-funded college or university. Likewise, private institutions have a responsibility to serve their communities and regions. And, as far as Berry is concerned, all colleges and universities have a responsibility—and an opportunity—to connect their students' learning to the students' home communities. The point is that while Berry focuses on land-grant institutions in his criticism, his observations apply to any college or university.

In an interview in 1988, Berry spoke about schools generally and at all levels, noting what he regards as their misplaced focus on the future instead of on community:

The schools have become detached from the communities. The schools aren't educating children to serve the community [and] to return to the community better able to serve it because of their education. They're educating the children in order to help them escape from the community. The reference of the schools is the future, the world of tomorrow as they put it. (1988, Winter, p. 14)

And as Berry has pointed out elsewhere: "The school system...does not expect [the world of tomorrow] to take place in any rural area" (1989, September, p. 20). The insinuation is that going home—especially if home is in a small place—is following the path of defeat.

This disposition of the schools toward the future and away from place creates a multiple failure for higher education in Berry's view, with destructive consequences:

The schools are no longer oriented to a cultural inheritance that it is their duty to pass on unimpaired, but to the career, which is to say the future, of the child. The

orientation is thus necessarily theoretical, speculative, and mercenary. The child is not educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community. (*WPF*, 1990/1998, pp. 162-163; italics original)

Far from educating against loss, colleges and universities are, for Berry, fulfilling the worst suspicions of Port William and educating toward loss: loss of cultural inheritance, of local knowledge, of community, of the young, and of an opportunity for meaningful education through meaningful connections to a place that is known and loved.

Rather than focusing on the local community here and now, each college or university tends to focus on the same “theoretical, speculative, . . . mercenary” future as every other one, which means that they are now tending to be all alike. As Berry notes:

The land-grant college legislation obviously calls for a system of local institutions responding to local needs and local problems. What we have instead is a system of institutions which more and more resemble one another, like airports and motels, made increasingly uniform by the transience or rootlessness of their career-oriented faculties and the consequent inability to respond to local conditions. (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 147)

Local conditions, local problems, local needs—these are, for Berry, exactly what university scholars, researchers, and thinkers ought to focus on but most often do not.

One reason is the allure of innovation. Berry said the following about colleges of agriculture, but it could be said of colleges of engineering or business or arts and letters:

The colleges of agriculture, entrusted though they are to serve the rural home and rural life, give themselves over to the hysterical rhetoric of “change,” “the future,”

“the frontiers of modern science,” “competition,” “the competitive edge,” “the cutting edge,” “early adoption,” and the like, as if there is nothing worth learning from the past and nothing worth preserving in the present. The idea of the teacher and scholar as one called upon to preserve and pass on a common cultural and natural birthright has been almost entirely replaced by the idea of the teacher and scholar as a developer of “human capital” and a bestower of economic advantage. The ambition is to make the university an “economic resource” in a competition for wealth and power that is local, national, and global. Of course, all this works directly against the rural home and rural life, because it works directly against community. (WPF, 1990/1998, pp. 133-134)

Hysterical rhetoric of innovation and competition is now common in higher education, and for Berry, innovation and competition do not necessarily lead to quality.

It is not that Berry fails to recognize the intelligence and expertise available at a university; instead, he believes that intelligence and expertise could be better applied. As noted in Chapters I and II, he wants a conversation between the intelligence and expertise of the academy and the intelligence and expertise of the local community, something that would require humility from colleges and universities and confidence from the communities. What Berry refers to as “the ascendancy of the expert” works against communities because it encourages “a withdrawal or relinquishment of confidence in local intelligence” (WI, 2005c, p. 118), with higher education disconnecting even further.

Not only does higher education often ignore local communities, but sometimes, in Berry’s opinion, it works against local communities and thrives on their failure. Using the word *professionalism* to mean *careerism*, Berry writes:

The hegemony of professionals and professionalism erects itself on local failure, and from then on the locality exists merely as a market for consumer goods and as a source of “raw material,” human and natural. The local schools no longer serve the local community; they serve the government’s economy and the economy’s government. (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 164)

The situation is bad for local communities, but no less so for scholars since disconnection from community means disconnection from affection. Berry writes, “Unlike the local community, the government and the economy cannot be served with affection, but only with professional zeal or professional boredom” (p. 164). Affection relies on particular knowledge, based on context and complex understanding.

Without context, without understanding, without affection, the standards of professionalism tend toward oversimplification, until everything becomes about money:

Professionalism means more interest in salaries and less interest in what used to be known as disciplines. And so we arrive at the idea, endlessly reiterated in the news media, that education can be improved by bigger salaries alone. There must also be love of learning and of the cultural tradition and of excellence—and this love cannot exist, because it makes no sense, apart from the love of a place and a community. Without this love, education is only the importation into a local community of centrally prescribed “career preparation” designed to facilitate the export of young careerists. (p. 164)

Considering all the local problems higher education could help with if it turned its care to the community, considering all the possible advantages that a local focus could afford schools and faculty as well as students, and considering the potential improvement in

learning that could result from solidarity with the community, what is standing in the way?

### *The Disconnection of Specialization*

For Berry, much of higher education's disconnection from the community comes from the disconnection of specialization, and modern higher education specializes in specialization. In *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), Berry refers to "the isolation of specialization" (p. 154), and this isolation disconnects higher education from its purpose. Writes Berry, "The proper university product is therefore not the whittled-down, isolated mentality of expertise, but a mind competent in all its concerns" (p. 43). "Whittled-down" is not his only colorful description for the ills of the specialist system. If a tree is an apt metaphor for knowledge, then as Berry puts it, "The modern university...more and more resembles a loose collection of lopped branches waving about randomly in the air" (*HE*, 1987, p. 82). Also, he regrets "the compartmental structure of the universities, in which complementary, mutually sustaining and enriching disciplines are divided, according to 'professions,' into fragmented, one-eyed specialties" (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 43). The seriousness of his point should not be missed. The forces driving higher education toward specialization have a damaging effect on higher education and the good that it can do.

As Berry writes: "the modern university is organized to divide the disciplines" (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 129). The problem for Berry is that expert ideas are "extremely generalized" (1989, September, p. 20). However counterintuitive that may sound, what he means is that ideas rise above generalization when they are applied in a particular place and when context is considered. In the same way, according to Berry, making things well "answers the requirements of good stewardship" and "requires both good artistry and

great breadth of mind. It requires a mind capable of seeing human work within its various contexts: religious, ecological, economic, cultural, and political” (*CP*, 2005c, p. 182). For this reason, Berry believes, “The modern, specialist mind makes things badly, by the measures of stewardship, of artistry, and often even of utility. It is a mind too narrow, and its artistry is incomplete and destructive” (p. 182). Disconnected from community, the specialist mind or the expert mind makes things badly for the community especially.

As Berry explained in an interview in 1993: “There’s a difference between thinking about problems and having problems. Where experts are thinking about problems, the people who have the problems are usually absent, are not even well represented” (1993/2007b, p. 101). Berry insists that it does not have to be this way—there is a way “to make common cause with a community” (p. 101). As he went on:

The teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist...must commit themselves to a community in such a way that they share the fate of that community—participate in its losses and trials and griefs and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions—so that they don’t have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers. Then they’d begin to learn something. New knowledge would come from that, and it would be better than “information.” (p. 101)

Clearly Berry sees the disconnection of specialists from the community as damaging to the community as well as to the specialists.

Just as importantly, the specialization fostered by the modern university makes specialist professors ineffective at the very things for which they could be useful, such as due criticism or social commentary. As Berry writes:



The careerist professor is by definition a specialist professor. Utterly dependent upon his institution, he blunts his critical intelligence and blurs his language so as to exist “harmoniously” within it—and so serves his school with an emasculated and fragmentary intelligence, deferring “realistically” to the redundant procedures and meaningless demands of an inflated administrative bureaucracy whose educational purpose is written on its paychecks. (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 148)

However aptly the use of strictly masculine pronouns might reflect the traditionally patriarchal and masculine nature of higher education, it was also the rhetorical practice of the time. Had Berry written the passage even a few years later, he would likely have used more gender-inclusive language, but his critique of the febleness of disconnected specialization operating in an institution would remain. Especially telling is that last image that pairs educational purpose with paychecks. Along with a suggestion of both hush money and prostitution, it carries the abstract utility and potential corruption inherent in salary issues.

Additionally, for Berry, the liberal arts faculty should be providing guidance for students and the community in how to apply its disciplines to practical problems. Instead, the knowledge and analytical tools for understanding and applying the liberal arts get sidetracked by calls for relevance, where relevance is made absurd in its definition based on short-term, monetary standards about the future. Isolated from each other and disconnected from the community, the liberal arts professors begin to believe in their irrelevance, and in Berry’s opinion, “become a world of their own, a collection of ‘professional’ sub-languages, complicated circuitries of abstruse interpretation, [and] feckless exercises of sensibility” (p. 158). Further, Berry notes: “Liberal education,

divorced from practicality, gives something no less absurd: the specialist professor of one or another of the liberal arts, the custodian of an inheritance he has learned much about, but nothing from” (p. 158). This is the cultural inheritance upon which Berry believes our humanity and survival depend, and he contends that academia has made this inheritance into museum pieces rather than valuable human instruction. In spite of recent scholarly interest in interdisciplinarity and the recognition of its educational value, specialists and their disciplines remain isolated. Such everyday concerns as faculty workload, academic credits, and transferability—even the placement of faculty offices on campus—can stymie efforts to expand interdisciplinary study for students, especially undergraduates.

Possibly the biggest problem for Berry with specialization is how it inhibits higher education’s conversation, not only conversation with the community, but also conversation among the disciplines. Berry is a believer in conversation, with confidence in the give and take of ideas and the human connections that come from it. He makes an important, if obvious, distinction between communication and conversation, noting that communication goes only one way—from power and influence outward—while “a conversation goes two ways; in a conversation the communication goes back and forth. A conversation, unlike a ‘communication,’ cannot be prepared ahead of time, and it is changed as it goes along by what is said” (WI, 2005c, p. 122). Berry believes further that the participants in the conversation are changed by what is said and what is heard. Says Berry, “There is always the possibility that a conversation, by bringing its participants under one another’s influence, will change them, possibly for the better” (p. 122). His trust in the power of conversation is one reason why his favored pedagogical approach is classroom discussion (W. Berry personal communication, July 17, 2011).

Berry lives in hope, but his hope of productive conversation is threatened by the language of specialization, understandable only within the academy and often only among the specialist professors of a particular discipline. Such language provides comfort and cover for specialists. In describing what he regards as questionable research to develop more productive dairy cows, Berry writes, “Such work is permitted to continue, I suspect, because it is reported in language that is unreadable and probably unintelligible to nearly everybody in the university, to nearly everybody who milks cows, and to nearly everybody who drinks milk” (*HE*, 1987, p. 78). Specialized language disconnects, but Berry’s quote also highlights his belief that academic research needs to be made understandable to the people it affects. Even if language needs to be specialized among specialists, they should be able to render the ideas in a common language for others. Anything else devalues people and falsifies the research by undermining its applicability.

Worse, specialized language is often used as a weapon or a tool of intimidation, legitimizing itself by its own impenetrableness. Berry described a meeting between the government and nuclear power officials proposing a nuclear power plant and the local people objecting to its location. As he describes the meeting, “The fears, objections, questions, and complaints of the local people were met with technical jargon and with bland assurances that the chance of catastrophe was small” (p. 49). Under the weight of credentials and wielding words like cudgels, the specialist has a voice, however bland, that seems to shout down ordinary opposition. “In such a confrontation,” Berry continues, “the official assumption apparently is that those who speak most incomprehensibly and dispassionately are right and that those who speak plainly and with feeling are wrong” (p. 49). This happens in part because of the misuse of specialized language.

Language matters to Berry, both as a poet and as someone who enjoys and values conversation and storytelling, and he believes language should matter to education.

“Language is at the heart of the problem,” he writes, “To profess, after all, is ‘to confess before’—to confess, I assume, before all who live within the neighborhood or under the influence of the confessor” (p. 78). Again this quote speaks to what Berry sees as education’s responsibility to be part of the community. He continues:

But to confess before one’s neighbors and clients in a language that few of them can understand is not to confess at all. The specialized professional language is thus not merely a contradiction in terms; it is a cheat and a hiding place; it may, indeed, be an ambush. At the very root of the idea of profession and professorship is the imperative to speak plainly in the common tongue. (pp. 78-79)

If Berry believes it is the responsibility of specialists to speak plainly and not to veil their message in language that cannot be understood, he also believes it is the responsibility of everyone to improve reading and listening skills to take on difficult or complex language and ideas. This is the man, after all, who thinks we all should learn to read Shakespeare and Milton and the King James Bible.

Of course, Berry recognizes that some specialization is necessary, even desirable. He writes:

You can’t think, read, research, study, learn, or teach everything. To choose one thing is to choose against many things. To know some things well is to know others things not so well, or not at all. Knowledge is always surrounded by ignorance. We are, moreover, differently talented and are called by different vocations. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 60)

Berry grants that some level of specialization is expected, especially if our aim is some level of mastery in a field. He continues:

All this explains, and to some extent justifies, any system of specialization in work or study. One cannot sensibly choose against specialization because, if for no other reason, all of us by nature are to some degree specialized. There can be no objection in principle to organizing a university as a convocation of specialties and specialists; that is what a university is bound to be. (p. 60)

His point is that such a convocation could be better than it is and a greater force for good.

At the same time, admitting that some specialization is good does not mean that more specialization is better. As Berry notes:

To assume that there is a degree of specialization that is proper is at the same time to assume that there is a degree that is improper. The impropriety begins, I think, when the various kinds of workers come to be divided and cease to speak to one another. (*HE*, 1987, p. 77)

Specialization inhibits and damages conversation, when what is needed—not only for correction but also for effective local application—is more conversation among the disciplines and with the community. Berry writes, “The university’s convocation of the disciplines is not a conversation; it is incapable of criticizing itself. One of the most dangerous effects of the specialist system is to externalize its critics, and thus deprive them of standing” (*LM*, 2000/2001, pp. 69-70). Due criticism of the university should come from the community and from within the university, among the disciplines.

Of course, if speaking to one another is important, so is listening to one another. Returning to his description of the meeting on the nuclear power plant, Berry notes how

lightly the objections of the non-specialists were regarded. He writes, “Local allegiances, personal loyalties, and private fears are not scientifically respectable; they do not weigh at all against ‘objective consideration of the facts’—even though some of the ‘facts’ may be highly speculative or even false” (*HE*, 1987, p. 49-50). This dismissal of legitimate objections comes more easily in disconnections, not only the disconnections from the community and within specialties, but also the disconnection caused by an unthinking deference to objectivity that the other disconnections support.

### *The Disconnection of Objectivity*

As explained in Chapter I, Berry recognizes ways of knowing beyond objective knowledge. Indeed, he is doubtful of an ability to be utterly objective and thinks that to cling to the possibility of objectivity is to deny how limited and misleading it is. He also thinks objectivity gives a high-sounding justification for disconnection. He writes, “‘Objectivity’ has come to be simply the academic uniform of moral cowardice; one who is ‘objective’ never takes a stand” (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 149). The quotation marks serve to highlight his disdain.

However compelling and necessary facts are, for Berry they are incomplete. They must be known within a complex knowledge and understanding tied to context and affection, with the moral obligations that attend them. As he writes: “Under the discipline of unity, knowledge and morality come together. No longer can we have that paltry ‘objective’ knowledge so prized by the academic specialists. To know anything at all becomes a moral predicament” (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 47). Berry presses for wider context and a deeper, more interconnected view of consequences and responsibilities, saying, “Aware that there is no such thing as a specialized—or even an entirely limitable or

controllable—effect, one becomes responsible for judgments as well as facts” (pp. 47-48). Berry believes that in its “specialist absorption in career and procedure,” academia has lost “the indispensable interest in the question of the truth of what is taught and learned, as well as the equally indispensable interest in the fate and the use of knowledge in the world” (*HE*, 1987, p. 90). The pose of objective observer is easy to adopt because taking a stand is not required, nor is accounting for consequences. Writes Berry:

This is the “objectivity” of the schools and the professions, which allows a university or a corporation to look at the community—its *own* community—as one looks at a distant landscape through fog. This sort of objectivity functions in art much the same as in science; it obstructs compassion; it obscures the particularity of creatures and places. In both, it is a failure of imagination. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 86; italics original)

For Berry, failure of imagination is among the worst kinds of failure because, as he said, “without imagination you don’t have compassion. You don’t have forgiveness” (2003, November 10), and without forgiveness, frail human beings do not have much chance.

Devotion to objectivity is widespread if not deep. Even the humanities have fallen under its sway, and Berry is critical of teachers of literature who dodge their obligation to teach and apply literary texts instructively as well as aesthetically. As Berry explains the current approach for too many literature teachers, he says, “The poetry is to be learned *about*; to learn *from* it would be an embarrassing betrayal of objectivity” (*HE*, 1987, p. 91; italics original). Again, Berry views literature not as curious artifacts to be studied, but as part of the integral fabric of who we are as human beings and how we are to live, which naturally puts an obligation on writers as well.

The colleges of agriculture fair no better than do the humanities for Berry, and by extension, neither do other sciences. He writes, “The tragedy of the land-grant acts is that their moral imperative came finally to have nowhere to rest except on the careers of specialists whose standards and operating procedures were amoral: the ‘objective’ practitioners of the ‘science’ of agriculture” (*UA*, 1977/1996, pp. 155-156). For Berry, any science could be substituted for agriculture in that quote. Their fault is to trust too fully in objectivity and too little in such subjective impulses as loyalty or affection.

Berry continues, “[Specialists] have no apparent moral allegiances or bearings or limits. Their work thus inevitably serves whatever power is greatest” (p. 156), and he notes that currently the greatest power is industrialism. He goes on: “Lacking any moral force or vision of its own, the ‘objective’ expertise of the agriculture specialist points like a compass needle toward the greater good of the ‘agribusiness’ corporations” (p. 156). Again, his criticism extends to other scientific or technical disciplines and corporations. “The objectivity of the laboratory,” writes Berry, “functions in the world as indifference; knowledge without responsibility is merchandise, and greed provides its applications” (p. 155). For Berry, it is here that the objectivity so prized by academic specialists combines for disastrous effect with the cult of progress and utility so prized by industrialism:

Far from developing and improving the rural home and rural life, the land-grant colleges have blindly followed the drift of virtually the whole population away from home, blindly documenting or “serving” the consequent disorder and blindly rationalizing this disorder as “progress” or “miraculous development.” (p. 156)

The mandate for land-grant institutions is clear to Berry, but he argues that any publicly-supported institution has a responsibility to the well-being of its state—the people and



landscapes that support it—and indeed, even a privately-supported institution has a responsibility to its community and region. In other words, higher education should be answerable to the well-being of its home communities and neighbors.

Instead the opposite can happen, and all the disconnections of higher education foment and combine in a scientific fundamentalism that can be as stultifying as the most extreme religious fundamentalism. “Modern science,” writes Berry, “has encouraged a healthy skepticism of everything but itself” (*IP*, 2012a, p. 182). This quote is from “God, Science, and Imagination,” and he goes on to wonder, “Surely it implies no disrespect for science if we regard it with the skepticism upon which it prides itself” (p. 182). A fair concern, but self-criticism is unthinkable with a fundamentalist’s belief in the rightness of one’s position. As he writes in *The Unsettling of America* (1977/1996), “What we now have in agriculture—as in several other ‘objective’ disciplines—is a modern scientific orthodoxy as purblind, self-righteous, cocksure, and ill-humored as Cotton Mather’s” (p. 173). He declares change unlikely, adding: “one who presumes to *know* the truth does not *look* for it” (p. 174; italics original). Such scientific orthodoxy is tied directly, as Berry notes, to “the larger orthodoxy of industrial progress and economic growth, which argues the necessity of pollution, unemployment, war, land spoliation, the exploitation of space, etc.” (p. 173n), and such orthodoxy corrupts attempts at legitimate problem-solving.

For Berry, problem-solving in the modern university can get reverse-engineered for a chosen solution, and specialization and objectivity combine to allow unintended consequences to arise either by surprise or by indifference. About agriculture he explains:

To turn an agricultural problem over to the developers, promoters, and salesmen of industrial technology is not to ask for a solution; it is to ask for more industrial

technology and for a bigger bureaucracy to handle the resulting problems of social upset, unemployment, ill health, urban sprawl, and overcrowding. Whatever their claims to “objectivity,” these people will not examine the problem and apply the most fitting solution; they will reverse that procedure and define the problem to fit the solution in which their ambitions and their livelihoods have been invested.

They are thriving on the problem and so can have little interest in solving it. (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 219)

Berry’s experience and observation make him most familiar with this dynamic when it comes to agricultural problems, but he believes it applies to other fields as well.

This objective disconnection seems especially dangerous to Berry when related to ecology and conservation. He writes about the language of detachment: “The world thus becomes ‘the environment,’ a word which...means ‘surroundings,’ a place that one is *in* but not *of*” (*LM*, 2000/2001, pp. 25), and Berry doubts “whether the problem of conservation can be accurately defined by an objective observer who observes at an intellectual remove, forgetting that he eats, drinks, and breathes the so-called environment” (p. 26). The pose and language of objectivity can make people forget they have a stake in what happens. The result can be a disconnection from consequences and an abandonment of care and protection of what should be loved. Writes Berry:

We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people *exploit* what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they *defend* that they love. To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know. The abstract, “objective,” impersonal dispassionate language of science can, in fact, help us to know certain things, and to know some things

with certainty. It can help us, for instance, to know the value of species and of species diversity. But it cannot replace, and it cannot become, the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 41)

In other words, specialized language has a role and a value, but not to the exclusion of common language. And the power of particularizing language comes in its ability to help us imagine and know something particularly and love it as unique.

The clinically detached pose of the objective observer does damage in one more way: It aspires to make objectivity a respectable standard. But objectivity is no standard; in a way, it can lead to the absence of standards.

#### *Disconnection from Standards*

Two observations from Berry show different facets of his misgivings about higher education's disconnection from appropriate standards. The first comes from a conversation I had with him when he wondered how many flagship universities in states have as their mission to become a top-20 research institution. The question was rhetorical; he suspected he knew the answer: "Every damned one of them." He wondered too at the absurdity of such a quest: "Do they think that Harvard and Princeton and Stanford are going to stand tied while their would-be competitors catch up?" He wondered at the waste: "So you've got a poor state like [Kentucky], and the so-called flagship university is overstraining everything in order to be a top-20 research institution." Mostly, he wondered how such judgments can be made since, he thinks, "the most noticeable thing about it is that they don't have adequate standards of performance or purpose" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Berry was not quite

right in claiming higher education has no standards, however, and the mad scramble for top-20 status proves it: Higher education has surrendered to the attitudes of modern progress—competition, ambition, and defiance of limits—with an embrace of the standards of modern industrial culture that follow.

The second observation that reveals Berry misgivings about higher education's disconnection from appropriate standards is from *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001). He asks, "If a tree falls in the absence of a refereed journal or a foundation, does it make a sound? The answer, in the opinion of the imitation corporate executives who now run our universities, is no" (p. 62). This observation identifies higher education's other false source of standards—careerism or, as he uses the term, professionalism. The problem with both models—industrialism and professionalism—is that they hold to standards that are incorrect and damaging for education, standards that disconnect education from the very standards that could improve learning, improve teaching, and improve our world. "Standards of excellence are replaced," according to Berry, "by sliding scales of adequacy" (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 148). Perhaps educational institutions have always been more inward-looking than is healthy, but now this self-absorbed professionalism is further distorted by the perceived need to impress business and industry. In an effort to curry favor and funding, not only do colleges and universities try to emulate the industrial model, but also they often seem content to serve as the handmaidens to industrialism.

The great problem with higher education's following the standards of either industrialism or professionalism is that it disconnects colleges and universities from the standard of the health of the community. The cycle is vicious: As states withdraw funding because of budgetary constraints, higher education can begin to feel less responsibility

to or for the local region, which can dim a legislature's view of requests for funding from higher education, making colleges and universities even less interested in local responsibility and more likely to seek other funding sources.

Berry identified in conversation what he called "an astonishing disposition in the universities to be fashionable." Likewise, he referred to the great regional and land-grant universities as "cliché-ridden," saying, "They nearly all subscribe to the idea that you can cure the economic ills by bringing in industry. Bringing in industry is the motto of virtually every state." Aside from the absurdity of unlimited competition to attract limited outside industry, he objects to the missed opportunity and dismissed responsibility:

This just overlooks the possibility of making the most of what you have locally.

It's virtually impossible to get a college of agriculture, for instance, interested in the really practical, local problems. What's the best way to farm this piece of land, for example? (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

For Berry, the greatest opportunities for learning and the greatest opportunities for serving are provided by the local community and region.

Professionalism, the first source of standards used by higher education, however, makes those local opportunities unattractive, even unthinkable. As Berry writes:

Now we seem to have replaced the ideas of responsible community membership, of cultural survival, and even of usefulness, with the idea of professionalism.

Professional education proceeds according to ideas of professional competence and according to professional standards, and this explains the decline in education from ideals of service and good work, citizenship and membership, to mere "job training" or "career preparation." (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 130)

One cause of what Berry sees as this kind of decline in education can be tied to the placelessness of professionalism. Writes Berry, “The context of professionalism is not a place or a community but a career, and this explains the phenomenon of ‘social mobility’ and all the evils that proceed from it” (p. 130), including possible disconnection from responsibility and consequences.

Indeed, the modern definition of success demands not only mobility in place but upward mobility as well. Writes Berry:

It is characteristic of our present society that one does not think to improve oneself by becoming better at what one is doing or by assuming some measure of public responsibility in order to improve local conditions; one thinks to improve oneself by becoming different, by “moving up” to a “place of higher consideration.” Thinkable changes, in other words, tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative, and they tend to involve movement that is both social and geographic. (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 159)

This is part of the great unsettling that Berry refers to in *The Unsettling of America*.

What might be worse than placelessness and upward mobility as the context of professionalism is the airy and never-attained possibility of the future. Writes Berry:

The religion of professionalism is progress, and this means that, in spite of its vocal bias in favor of practicality and realism, professionalism forsakes both past and present in favor of the future, which is never present or practical or real.

Professionalism is always offering up the past and the present as sacrifices to the future, in which all our problems will be solved and our tears wiped away—and which, being the future, never arrives. (*LM*, 2000/2001, pp. 130-131)

For Berry, the landscape of the future is particularly well-suited for the professional minds of academia, perhaps because they cannot be proven wrong. He writes: “The future is the utopia of academic thought, for virtually anything is hypothetically possible there” (p. 131). Furthermore, the future is “the always-expanding frontier of the industrial economy, the fictive real estate against which losses are debited and to which failures are exiled” (p. 131). In the minds of futurologist, especially those with faith in technology, the accounting of the future seems to be all gain and no loss. This is not to say that Berry sees no point in planning, and certainly his concerns about ecological damage reflect his understanding about care for tomorrow, but he knows any speculation about the future has to be grounded in the experience of the past and the reality of the present, and should not be too influenced by magical thinking about the power of technology.

The future is also a safe harbor for those who would avoid making a judgment or taking a stand. Combine a future focus with “the fashionable ‘realism’ of technological determinism” (UA, 1977/1996, p. 149), and we are spared “the embarrassment of moral and intellectual standards” (p. 149) and delivered of “any need to define what is excellent or desirable” (p. 149). The effect on education is crippling, says Berry, because “Education is relieved of its concern for truth in order to prepare students to live in ‘a changing world’” (p. 149). Rather than raising the standards to create rigor or improve skills and knowledge to meet the uncertainty of a changing world, a mindset that accepts that anything might be true tends to lower the standards. Berry explains:

As soon as educational standards begin to be dictated by “a changing world” (changing, of course, to a tune called by the governmental-military-academic-industrial complex), then one is justified in teaching virtually anything in any

way—for, after all, one never knows for sure what “a changing world” is going to become. The way is thus opened to run a university as a business, the main purpose of which is to sell diplomas—after a complicated but undemanding four-year ritual—and thereby give employment to professors. (p. 149)

Berry’s grounding point is that the patterns and processes of nature do not change much, nor is human nature as changeable as some think. Because of this, he says, the world is not changing as much as futurists say. There is and will be knowledge that we need, knowledge gained from the past and present, not the future. We still need to do good work and recognize good work measured by the standard of the health of the community.

The second source of standards embraced by modern higher education, according to Berry, is industrialism. Having higher education tied to the industrial model, both in structure and operation and in funding and influence, is dangerous for higher education, not only because the industrial model and standards are ineffective or even damaging for education, but also because it serves to reinforce all the ills, attitudes, and presuppositions of industrialism. In *Life Is a Miracle* (2000/2001), he writes:

The modern university thus enforces obedience, not to the academic ideal of learning and teaching what is true, as a community of teachers and scholars passing on to the young the knowledge of the old, but obedience rather to the industrial economic ideals of high productivity and constant innovation. (p. 63)

Educational standards such as truth, judgment, and mastery, or Berry’s standard of the health of the community, have been brushed aside by standards more befitting a factory, and industrialism’s interest in innovation makes industrialism as future-focused as professionalism.



Says Berry, “We certainly can find reason to object to turning schools into factories, and to making originality or innovation the exclusive goal and measure of so much effort” (p. 63). Elsewhere, he refers to originality as heroic discovery or original discovery (p. 55), but he claims much of it is “helping to perpetuate a system of education that conforms exactly to the demands of the economic system” (p. 63). He says, “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with heroic discovery. However, it is as much subject to criticism as anything else. That is to say that it may be either good or bad, depending on what is discovered and what use is made of it” (p. 55). A vivid example illustrates:

Intelligence minimally requires us to consider the possibility that we might well have done without some discoveries, and that there might be two opinions from different perspectives about any given discovery—for example, the opinion of Cortés, and that of Montezuma. (pp. 55-56)

He even asserts the possibility that “some unexplored territory had better be treated as forbidden territory” (p. 56). Once again, Berry is charting the limits to what we should take on, based on propriety or scale or good health or any number of standards that might prove more appropriate than simple innovation and heroic discovery.

Likewise, later in *Life Is a Miracle*, he says, “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with an interest in discovery and innovation. It only becomes wrong when it is thought to be the norm of culture and of intellectual life” (p. 140). That is, discovery and innovation are not standards, but they need to be subject to appropriate standards and to a valid general criticism. Otherwise discovery and innovation can be damaging. Writes Berry:

The difference is that innovation for its own sake, and especially now when it so directly serves the market, is disruptive of human settlement, whereas the

revelations of familiarity elaborate the local cultural pattern and tend toward settlement, which they also prevent from becoming static. (p. 140)

We cannot afford to be heedless or resigned to innovation and discovery as inevitable. Writes Berry, “We, in making a cultural ideal of the same heroic ambition, see only the good that we believe is inevitably in it” (p. 57). He says, we ignore “how much it may partake of adolescent fantasy, adult megalomania, and intellectual snobbery, or how closely allied it is to our continuing history of imperialism and colonialism” (p. 57).

Additionally, we seem blind to the possibility that something bad could happen from discovery or innovation. This is a familiar call from Berry for full accounting in whatever we do: “Nobody seems able to subtract the negative results of scientific ‘advances’ from the positive” (p. 70), he writes. Furthermore, Berry sees a danger in an infatuation with the new, that it can blunt the capacity for critical judgment. He worries that too often, “there is no functioning doubt or question, no live sense of the possibility of regression, no acknowledgment of the possibility that knowledge, if it can be accumulated, can also be lost. There is no hint that knowledge can be misused” (p. 67). Again, this is the linear view of progress discussed in Chapter II, where from the narrow view out the front window only, everything is trending up, whether we tend to the necessary things or not.

Just as importantly, when a culture puts “an absolute premium upon...stardom” (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 57), it loses its grounding in the day-to-day that keeps a culture alive:

This degrades and impoverishes ordinary life, ordinary work, and ordinary experience. It depreciates and underpays the work of the primary producers of goods, and of the performers of all kinds of essential but unglamorous jobs and

duties. The inevitable practical results are that most work is now poorly done; great cultural and natural resources are neglected, wasted, or abused; the land and its creatures are destroyed; and the citizenry is poorly taught, poorly governed, and poorly served. (p. 57)

If the standards were based on what is necessary and not on what is glamorous, ordinary work could be done extraordinarily.

In addition, an emphasis on innovation and originality skews our thinking until it seems that anything is justified in the name of innovation. Berry explores the effect of this mindset on academic scholars in science as well as in the arts: “Scientists who believe that ‘original discovery is everything’ justify their work by the ‘freedom of scientific inquiry,’ just as would-be originators and innovators in the literary culture justify their work by the ‘freedom of speech’ or ‘academic freedom’” (pp. 72-73). But Berry is distrustful of freedom in the absence of responsibility. As he continues:

Ambition in the arts and the sciences, for [some time] now, has conventionally surrounded itself by talk of freedom. But surely it is no dispraise of freedom to point out that it does not exist spontaneously or alone. The hard and binding requirement that freedom must answer, if it is to last, or if in any meaningful sense it is to exist, is that of responsibility. For a long time the originators and innovators of the [arts and sciences] have made extravagant use of freedom, and in the process have built up a large debt to responsibility, little of which has been paid, and for most of which there is not even a promissory note. (p. 73)

For Berry, responsibility in this case would be the arts and sciences holding themselves responsible for the one value, the one standard, of “the life and health of the world”

(*ACH*, 1970/2003, p. 157), as discussed in Chapters I and II. Innovation and originality and anything else, then, would have to be measured against that standard.

Ironically, this rush toward innovation is now routine and anything but innovative—everyone is doing it and without standards to judge need, effectiveness, or consequence. As Berry explains:

The “cutting edge” is not critical or radical or intellectually adventurous. The cutting edge of science is now fundamentally the same as the cutting edge of product development. The university emphasis upon productivity and innovation is inherently conventional and self-protective. It is part and parcel of the status quo. The goal is innovation but not difference. The system exists to prevent “academic freedom” from causing unhappy surprises to corporations, governments, or university administrators. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 63)

Berry is more colorful in his imagery and his point is clearer here: “the cult of originality and innovation is in fact a crowd of conformists, tramping on one another’s heels for fear of being the last to buy whatever is for sale” (p. 133). In fact, being innovative is now conventional in higher education, with journals, workshops, webinars, task forces, and conferences devoted to it. His point again is that innovation in itself is not intrinsically good, and it must be judged within the context of the health of the community.

When higher education is unwilling or unable to admit its responsibility to the community and the life and health of the world, it adopts the standards of industrialism and professionalism while ignoring or weakening the cultural and intellectual governors that should guide decision-making. In addition, the knowledge and expertise within a college or university could be useful both in establishing better standards and in

providing the criticisms, cautions, and governors, but the disconnection and isolation of disciplines can make that knowledge and expertise ineffectual. Writes Berry:

It is clearly bad for the sciences and the arts to be divided...It is bad for scientists to be working without a sense of obligation to cultural tradition. It is bad for artists and scholars in the humanities to be working without a sense of obligation to the world beyond the artifacts of culture. It is bad for both of these cultures to be operating strictly according to “professional standards,” without local affection or community responsibility, much less any vision of an eternal order to which we all are subordinate and under obligation. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 93)

Worse than a simple split between arts and sciences, Berry says, we “are actually confronting...a whole ragbag of disciplines and professions,...all saying of the rest of the world, ‘That is not my field’” (p. 93). Where sciences could be “supplying the checks of skepticism, doubt, criticism and correction” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011) to the hegemony of industrialism, instead they serve as collaborators and capitulators, embracing uncritically every innovation, discovery, or technology offered.

Reading from notes for a draft of an unpublished essay, Berry said this about how academic science has misapplied its expertise:

Often science has hired out to the ready-made markets of depravity, as when it has served the military-industrial complex, which is solidly founded upon the unending logic of revenge, or the medical and pharmaceutical industries, which are based not only on the relief of suffering, but also on greed, on the endless logic of hypochondria, and on the inducible fear of suffering yet to come. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

Then, as a reminder of the possibility of fraud and exploitation abounding in a slavish and exclusive submission to the market economy, he continued: “The commodification of genome reading rides upon the same fears of the future—illness and death—that phrenology and palmistry once rode upon” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). This quote reminds us how little human nature changes, but more than that, how easily people are exploited by those with even a thin patina of scientific aura.

The arts and humanities are no better for Berry. If the sciences have an inflated sense of purpose, then purpose for the arts and humanities has been reduced more and more, even in their own eyes, to mere window dressing. Uncertain of their purpose, departments of English, for example, try to regain lost respectability by mirroring the objective stance of science and questing abroad for heroic discovery. As Berry describes it, based on his experience and observation:

The cult of progress and the new, along with the pressure to originate, innovate, publish, and attract students, has made the English department as nervously susceptible to fashion as a flock of teenagers. The academic “profession” of literature seems now to be merely tumbling from one critical or ideological fad to another, constantly “revolutionizing” itself in pathetic imitation of the “revolutionary” sciences, issuing all the while a series of passionless, jargonizing, “publishable” but hardly readable articles and books, in which a pretentious obscurity and dullness masquerade as profundity. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 69)

His description would be funny if it were not so often pathetically true. Berry is not alone in his disdain for this abuse of language. Indeed, in his book *Telling Writing* (1985), Ken Macrorie coined the word *Engfish* for this kind of thick academic writing (p. 11).

Perhaps Berry's view is too influenced by his own experience at a major research university like the University of Kentucky, but he thinks the disconnection and isolation of the disciplines weakens the disciplines individually and weakens the possible good a community of scholars can do for the larger community in which it lives. Writes Berry:

The modern university is organized to divide the disciplines;...universities pay little or no attention to the local and earthly effects of the work that is done in them; and...in the universities one discipline is rarely called upon to answer questions that might be asked of it by another discipline. If the universities sponsored an authentic conversation among the disciplines, then, for example, the colleges of agriculture would long ago have been brought under questioning by the college of arts and sciences and of medicine. A vital, functioning intellectual community *could* not sponsor patterns of land use that are increasingly toxic, violent, and destructive of rural communities. (p. 129; italics original)

In other words, working together, with the health of the community as a goal, the disciplines would come to authentic standards.

Instead, Berry wonders how the lessons of literature or history can be ignored; how the science labs can be hijacked by corporations, while local problem go unexplored and unsolved; and why the ancient philosophies and wisdom, developed through long experience, have to be tripped over in the dark and not made bright by conversation and local application. He places the blame on disconnection and specialization where there should be integration and interdependence, on innovation and originality where there should be familiarity and faithfulness, on professionalism and industrialism where there should be community and affection. Writes Berry:

This agreement [among the disciplines]...on the primacy of originality and innovation...is [a] result of the absorption of all the disciplines into the organization (and the value system) of the modern, corporatized university, and of the literary culture's envy of the power, wealth, and prestige of the scientific culture within that organization. Given the present structure of incentives and rewards, it is perhaps only natural that non-sciences would aspire to become sciences, and that non-scientists would aspire to be, like scientists, heroes of original discovery (or at least of "the liberation of the human spirit"), scouting the frontiers of human knowledge or experience, wielding the cutting edge of some social science or some critical theory or some "revolutionary" art. (p. 59)

Rejecting—or uncertain of—their appropriate role in the community, colleges and universities can alienate the community further by what seems like a kind of disdain, interacting with the community either as specialized expert or as cultural provocateur. Typically, communities find both roles unattractive.

Corporate industrialism's mechanical and technological conquest is nearly complete, and as Berry writes, educators buy in largely without objection:

The complicity of the arts and humanities in this conquest is readily apparent in the enthusiasm with which the disciplines, schools, and libraries have accepted their ever-growing dependence (at public expense) on electronic technologies that are, in fact, as all of history shows, not necessary to learning or teaching, and which have produced no perceptible improvement in either. This was accomplished virtually without a dissenting voice, without criticism, without regard even for the economic cost. (pp. 132-133)



Even Berry would remind us, however, that it is possible to gain from innovation used well. “To be intelligent,” he said, “you don’t become a fanatic. I mean, you don’t say it’s all bad. But you do try to work toward some idea of the net result” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). It is not innovation and originality that are bad; it is the uncritical acceptance of innovation and originality that is bad.

Lack of appropriate standards reduces the credibility of higher education, leaving it weak and drifting with fads. As a result, higher education seems to be struggling even to establish criteria for what students should learn, relying instead on what Berry calls “the improbable assumption that young students, before they know anything else, know what they need to learn” (*HE*, 1987, p. 81). Here too, for Berry, higher education is flailing for how to judge itself and direct its work. He sees the influence of commercial standards misapplied to education. In “The Loss of the University,” he writes:

If the disintegration of the university begins in its specialist ideology, it is enforced by a commercial compulsion to satisfy the customer. Since the student is now so much a free agent in determining his or her education, the department administrators and the faculty members must necessarily be preoccupied with the problem of how to keep enrollments up. (*HE*, 1987, pp. 81-82)

Then, more sardonically, he adds, “Something obviously must be done to keep the classes filled; otherwise, the students will wander off to more attractive courses or to courses more directly useful to their proposed careers” (p. 82). The image may be humorous, but his point is serious and the consequences damaging: “Under such circumstances it is inevitable that requirements will be lightened, standards lowered, grades inflated, and instruction narrowed to the supposed requirements of some supposed career opportunity”

(p. 82). He rejects outright the paradigm of student as customer and sees that mindset as symptomatic not only of the reductive influence of business and industry on higher education but also of an abdication of responsibility by faculty and administrators.

Berry wants higher education, in all its disciplines, to understand how valuable and powerful it can be when it is working together and working toward the good of the community health. He believes learning would improve, job satisfaction and efficacy would improve, and communities would improve. He also sees something of a sacred trust in that responsibility to do good work and pass on knowledge and skills to the young. He believes this responsibility must be met, not only for the good of the students, but also for the good of the colleges and universities. He writes:

The responsibility to decide what to teach the young is an adult responsibility.

When adults transfer this responsibility to the young, whether they do it by indifference or as a grant of freedom, they trap themselves in a kind of childishness. (p. 86)

Into the vacuum left by abandoning this responsibility will flow the simplified and mechanical thinking of industrialism, imposing on education a smooth corporate efficiency that fails to ask if the logic of efficiency leads to quality. Writes Berry:

In that failure to accept responsibility, the teacher's own learning and character are disemployed, and, in the contemporary industrialized education system, they are easily replaced by bureaucratic and methodological procedures, "job market" specifications, and tests graded by machines. (p. 86)

When Berry wrote this passage in the 1980s, machine-graded tests were the new example of disemployed faculty. He surely would cite other examples were this written later.

As noted in Chapter II, Berry believes the industrial revolution has had only two purposes: “to replace human workers with machines and to market its products, regardless of their usefulness or their effects, at the highest possible profit” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). With so much emphasis on technology and profit, insinuations follow about the relative worth of different academic disciplines. Berry strenuously doubts “the idea that we’ve got to educate every student or most students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or else all will be lost” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Though he respects and understands the place of science and math in the workings of the world, he also knows that their place is not to the exclusion or even the diminishment of all other disciplines.

Berry thinks innovation and originality as standards unto themselves are reductive and inappropriate for a culture, but they are especially damaging to education. He writes:

Teaching, anyhow, cannot do well under the cult of innovation. Devotion to the new enforces a devaluation and dismissal of the old, which is necessarily the subject of teaching. Even if its goal is innovation, science does not *consist* of innovation; it consists of what has been done, what is so far known, what has been thought—just like the so-called humanities. And here we meet a strange and difficult question that may be uniquely modern: Can the past be taught, can it even be known, by people who have no respect for it? If you believe in the absolute superiority of the new, can you learn and teach anything identifiable as old?” (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 65)

Since what we learn is dependent on what we have learned in the past, that attitude, as it turns out, is a serious problem for education of all kinds, not just history and the classics.

Likewise, the community suffers when science adheres to the combination of flawed standards of industrialism and professionalism and is loosed from cultural constraints. Berry notes, “Originality and innovation in science may be a danger to the community, because newness is not inherently good, and because the scientific disciplines use only professional standards in judging their work. There is no real criticism” (p. 70). Real criticism comes from outside, from other disciplines and from the community. But again higher education is undone by disconnection. As Berry writes:

The specialist system, using only professional standards, thus isolates and overwhelmingly empowers the specialist as the only authorizer of his work—she alone is made the sole moral judge of the need or reason for her work. This solitary assumption of moral authority, of course, must *precede* the acceptance of patronage. Originality as a professional virtue gives far too much importance and power to originators, and at the same time isolates them socially and morally. (p. 77; italics original)

Here Berry interjects yet another way higher education is led away from standards that support the health of the community: the influence of corporate funding.

Potentially more corrupting than professional standards or standards of the industrial model are the standards of the corporate patrons who fund the research. Berry worries such a system “would seem to eliminate the scientist as a person or community member who would judge whether or not the work *ought* to be done” (p. 64). While Berry does not want the propriety of research judged by one person, isolated from the community, worse is to have it judged by the corporation holding the purse and possibly living half a world away. Writes Berry of the research process in higher education now:

It removes the scientist from the human and ecological circumstances in which the work will have its effect, and which should provide one of the standards by which the work is to be judged; the scientist is thus isolated, by this principle of following patronage, in a career with a budget. What this has to do with the vaunted aim of pursuing truth cannot be determined until one knows where the money comes from and what the donor expects. The donor will determine what truth (and how much) will be pursued, and how far, and to what effect. (p. 64)

Isolation, both from community and from other disciplines, plus the undue influence of money, all add up to trouble. Writes Berry:

The modern university specialist moves ever away from health toward the utter departmentalization and disintegration of the life of the mind and of communities. The various specialties are moving ever outward from any center of interest or common ground, becoming ever farther apart, and ever more unintelligible to one another. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 61)

Such isolation and misapplied and misguided standards create an atmosphere that is not healthy for the community, but neither is it healthy for higher education, for the faculty and administrators, for the researchers and scholars, nor least of all for the students.

Even for colleges and universities with good relations with their communities, financial and political forces can shift and skew their focus. What is needed in higher education is a reconnection to standards that would benefit students and higher education itself. If higher education follows standards that are internal only, then it is seeking only to maintain itself without respect to anything outside itself. If it follows the standards of the corporate funders or the industrial model, such standards are corrupting of the

purpose and need to serve the community. “If standards are to be upheld,” writes Berry, “they cannot be specialized, professionalized, or departmented. Only common standards can be upheld—standards that are held and upheld in common by the whole community” (*HE*, 1987, p. 89). Such standards have to center on the health of the community.

Berry ends his essay “The Loss of the University” with a statement of his view of how higher education could improve itself with a renewed focus on consequences, responsibilities, and service to the community. He writes:

If, for the sake of its own health, a university must be interested in the question of the truth of what it teaches, then, for the sake of the world’s health, it must be interested in the fate of that truth and the uses made of it in the world. It must want to know where its graduates live, where they work, and what they do. Do they return home with their knowledge to enhance and protect the life of their neighborhoods? Do they join the “upwardly mobile” professional force now exploiting and destroying local communities, both human and natural, all over the country? Has the work of the university...increased or decreased literacy and knowledge of the classics? Has it increased or decreased the general understanding of the sciences? Has it increased or decreased pollution and soil erosion? Has it increased or decreased the ability and the willingness of public servants to tell the truth? Such questions are not, of course, precisely answerable. Questions about influence never are. But they are askable, and the asking, should we choose to ask, would be a unifying and shaping force. (pp. 96-97)

Such a unifying, shaping force would reconnect higher education to the standards it needs for revitalization, both within itself and within the communities it should be serving.

### *The Disconnection of Utilitarian Education*

One of the great problems with formal education at any level is that it narrows itself when it should enlarge. Where life and learning should be all of a piece, formal education often creates the idea that learning is about the next test or a job and not about life. Where teaching and learning should aim for mastery, mass formal education has to be tolerant of good enough. Where the effectiveness of education should be judged by the broadest, most all-encompassing of standards, too often it is judged by the reductive standards of the industrial model: efficiency or profit or faddishness. An aspect of higher education that makes this narrowing clear is the shift from a curriculum that is “broad and basic” (HE, 1987, p. 83) to one that is specialized and utilitarian, something closer to job training than to education. Says Berry, “The thing made by education now is not a fully developed human being; it is a specialist, a careerist, a graduate. In industrial education, the thing *finally* made is of no concern to the makers” (p. 81; italics original). This is a harsh assessment from Berry and obviously not true of everyone in education. His point though is valid. As education is fitted more closely to the industrial model—indeed, as the industrial model is increasingly accepted as appropriate for education—both teaching and learning take on the ills associated with industrial manufacturing, including shoddy workmanship and the anonymity of the assembly line. Indeed, it is a long way from the care and accountability required in helping to create one’s own neighbors.

Berry insists, however, that the world needs people able to think and to make informed judgments, and that, as noted above, “how to make and how to judge is the business of education” (p. 81). When colleges and universities teach only “how to make,” it is, in Berry view, a betrayal of public trust, particularly for the land-grant institutions.

We still have a need for “broadly informed human judgment” as well as the education required to develop such judgment, and, as Berry writes:

In the face of this need, which is *both* private and public, “career preparation” is an improper use of public money, since “career preparation” serves merely private ends; it is also a waste of the student’s time, since “career preparation” is best and most properly acquired in apprenticeships [with] employers. (p. 83)

If his disdain for career preparation in an academic setting is not clear enough through his use of quotation marks, he states it forthrightly a few pages later, saying: “This idea of education as ‘career track’ diminishes everything it touches: education, teaching, childhood, the future” (p. 85). Here he is writing specifically about a program of career preparation proposed for students as early as sixth grade, but he notes that such a course would be unthinkable for sixth-graders were it not already embraced for undergraduates.

It may seem surprising that Berry includes the future among the things diminished by career training. Some might say training students for careers prepares for the future, but Berry views it as a narrowing of choices, a restriction of freedom that applies in the same way to a reduction in requirements for a college education. As he writes:

To require or expect or even allow young people to choose courses of study and careers that they do not yet know anything about is not, as is claimed, a grant of freedom. It is a severe limitation upon freedom. It means, in practice, that when the student has finished school and is faced then, appropriately, with the need to choose a career, he or she is prepared to choose only one. At that point, the student stands in need of a freedom of choice uselessly granted years before and forfeited in that grant. (pp. 85-86)



Berry notes again the moral predicament and tragedy of teaching: not knowing enough to know what to teach the young. He writes:

Teachers do not know the life or the lives for which their students are being prepared. This condition gives the lie to the claims for “career preparation,” since students may not *have* the careers for which they have been prepared: The “job market” may be overfilled; the requirements for this or that career may change; the students may change, or the world may. (p. 85; italics original)

Even in a state of ignorance about the future, adults must not give up the responsibility of deciding what the young need to learn, in a curriculum that expands not reduces a student’s eventual choices. Again, for Berry, this translates to an education that is “broad and basic” (p. 83), with “the knowledge of letters and the knowledge of numbers” (p. 86). Of course, Berry’s notion aligns with a long tradition of general education requirements in an undergraduate program, but increasingly it seems that the purpose and value of these requirements are not appreciated. Currently, while we are decrying a lack of readiness for college study among our high school graduates, for example, we are also devaluing that college study by pushing general education courses into the high schools with dual-credit courses in several areas of study, including math and composition.

Berry’s suspicions about career training does not mean that he thinks education need not be practical or justify itself with practical use. As noted, practical application of education keeps the schools connected to the community. Also, formal education should be ready with an answer when students ask why they need to know what is being taught. “That should be a great teaching opportunity for a good teacher,” Berry said. “It seems to me great teachers would smile at that and say, ‘OK, what do you need to know?’ And

make a connection if possible” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Then Berry added two statements that characterize both his disposition toward learning and his criticism of formal education. He said, “I assume connections can always be made,” capturing his view of the interconnectedness of all learning and the applicability of learning to life. Then, about the particular case he was citing of a student questioning the usefulness of a course, he said of the teachers, “But they resented it” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). In this case, when faced with the challenge to connect the curriculum to the student’s life, instead of making the connections that Berry believes are always there, the academy gathered its robes and fled into the safety of its castle keep. Whether because the teachers could not imagine a connection or because they did not feel they should stand for a challenge, such a retreat demonstrates education’s disconnection, from the community, from interdisciplinary exchange, and from its students.

It has to be remembered here that Wendell Berry has an ecologist’s mind: For him everything is interconnected, and “connections can always be made,” as he says. As far as Berry is concerned, Virgil’s *Georgics*, for example, is an appropriate and necessary text for anyone studying farming or ranching, as well as anyone who wants to eat.

Berry laments that many teachers of literature teach literary texts as entertaining or clever or interesting, but not as instructive. It seems accepted and expected that works of poetry or fiction will be confined to English classes and analyzed as literature only, without regard for what it is possible to learn from it—“as if we do not care, as if it does not matter, whether or not it is true” (*HE*, 1987, p. 92). Because of this, writes Berry:

Literature ceases to be the meeting ground of all readers of the common tongue and becomes only the occasion of a deafening clatter *about* literature. Teachers

and students read the great songs and stories to learn *about* them, not to learn *from* them. The *texts* are tracked as by the passing of an army of ants, but the power of songs and stories to affect life is still little acknowledged, apparently because it is little felt. (p. 79; italics original)

He accuses literature and humanities teachers of “a kind of shame...that their truths are not objectively provable as are the truths of science” (p. 92). This he attributes in part to the preeminence of objective thinking in the academy discussed above. Writes Berry:

There is now an embarrassment about any statement that depends for confirmation upon experience or imagination or feeling or faith, and this embarrassment has produced an overwhelming impulse to treat such statements merely as artifacts, cultural relics, bits of historical evidence, or things of “aesthetic value.” We will study, record, analyze, criticize, and appreciate. But we will not believe; we will not, in the full sense, know. (pp. 92-93)

This is the work of what Berry called “the people in the humanities who are envious and emulators of science” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2012), as though some believe that maintaining critical objectivity would raise the study of literature to the prestige currently granted science.

Berry does not stop with literature, but extends his curricular enhancement requests to all disciplines. He believes that learning in the liberal arts tradition should be treated as a precious gift by the teacher and the student. Using the terms *liberal education* and *practical education* from the Morrill Act, he writes:

It could be said that a liberal education has the nature of a bequest, in that it looks upon the student as the potential heir of a cultural birthright, whereas a practical

education has the nature of a commodity to be exchanged for position, status, wealth, etc., *in the future*. (UA, 1977/1996, p. 157; italics original)

As usual, he builds his reasoning from the ground up, saying:

A liberal education rests on the assumption that nature and human nature do not change very much or very fast and that one therefore needs to understand the past. The practical educators assume that human society itself is the only significant context, that change is therefore fundamental, constant, and necessary, that the future will be wholly unlike the past, that the past is outmoded, irrelevant, and an encumbrance upon the future—the present being only a time for dividing past from future, for getting ready. (p. 157)

It is hard to know if Berry objects more to futurology's dismissal of the past or to its disregard of the present, but he is unwilling to give up either.

His point, however, is that the danger is in trying to divide liberal education from practical education or practical education from liberal education. Writes Berry:

The practical, divorced from the discipline of value, tends to be defined by the immediate interests of the practitioner, and so becomes destructive of value, practical and otherwise. But it must not be forgotten that, divorced from the practical, the liberal disciplines lose their sense of use and influence and become attenuated and aimless. (p. 158)

His worry is that modern industrial thinking endorses the utility of practical education to the detriment of liberal education.

Education—what has been learned—must be applied in the world. As Berry writes in “Higher Education and Home Defense” (HE, 1987, pp. 49-53), “If this

education is to be used well, it is obvious that it must be used some *where*; it must be used where one lives, where one intends to continue to live; it must be brought home” (p. 52; italics original). This finally gets to Berry’s biggest criticism of higher education: It disconnects students from home, and in so doing, higher education has devalued education overall. He writes: “When educational institutions educate people to *leave* home, then they have redefined education as ‘career preparation.’ In doing so, they have made it a commodity—something to be *bought* in order to make money” (p. 52). Indeed, Berry says that real education is free (p. 52). While acknowledging the obvious costs of schools, books, and faculty, Berry argues that putting a price on education as though it were a commodity only lowers the value and that the utilitarian view of education strictly as career training confuses the sense of responsibility and stewardship that should accompany it. He continues:

What is taught and learned is free—priceless, but free. To make a commodity of it is to work its ruin, for, when we put a price on it, we both reduce its value and blind the recipient to the obligations that always accompany good gifts: namely, to use them well and to hand them on unimpaired. (p. 52)

The obligations of a good gift require place and people—a home and family and neighbors—because to be used well, a good gift has to be used in some place and, to be handed on, a good gift must be handed on to someone.

In spite of tuition costs, to see education as good gift with obligations creates a fundamentally different paradigm from the modern view of education as purchased ticket with privileges. The good gift model associates education with peace, while the purchased ticket model associates education with violence. Completing this reasoning,

Berry writes, “To make a commodity of education, then, is inevitably to make a kind of weapon of it because, when it is dissociated from the sense of obligation, it can be put directly at the service of greed” (p. 52). And one lesson Port William teaches clearly is that thrift is a virtue, but greed is not. Indeed, for Berry, the line is short and direct between greed and violence, which is “the great moral issue of our time” (*WI*, 2005c, pp. 145-146).

Berry once wrote, “So long a complaint accumulates a debt to hope, and I would like to end with hope” (*WI*, 2005c, 25-26). To honor that desire in Berry, this study will end with hope. The final section of this final chapter examines some of the ideas Berry has put forward or endorsed for how to improve higher education.

#### A Major in Homecoming

As a way to explain his disinterest in computers, Wendell Berry once wrote: “I do not see that computers are bringing us one step nearer to anything that does matter to me: peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 171). This list of what matters to Berry would probably be rejected as learning objectives—not specific enough, too hard to measure, and not clearly connected to articulable skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

As broad program goals for a curriculum to educate against loss, however, they serve well. Imagine an educational system that worked toward such goals and held such values. What if learning objectives were all supporting peace? What if economic justice and ecological health were prized above corporate profit and career promotion? What if honesty, political and otherwise, were valued over manipulation and rhetorical sleights of hand? What if schools at all levels formally articulated and supported the goals of family

and community stability? What if good work were expected and required of students every day and modeled by professors every day, not just in research, but in teaching—the work that most directly affects students? What if good work, dependably done, were valued over innovative work? Would such an education help to educate us against loss? More precisely, what if, as Sir Albert Howard advocated, we recognized health as the “one great subject” (1947/2006, p. 11) and health as the standard for our work?

Wes Jackson has given a name to this kind of education. He calls it educating for homecoming. Jackson—botanist and geneticist, former head of the environmental studies department at California State University, sustainable agriculture researcher, founder of The Land Institute in Kansas, farmer, and friend to Wendell Berry—published a book in 1994 entitled *Becoming Native to This Place* (1994). He writes that the “book is a challenge to the universities to stop and think what they are doing with the young men and women they are supposed to be preparing for the future” (p. 3). Like Berry, Jackson believes “the majority of solutions to both global and local problems must take place at the level of the...community” (p. 2). Just as Berry’s fiction encourages us to reconsider the lessons we can learn from the small places of the world, Jackson says that learning to be at home in small places is a requirement if we are to continue to live in this world. Writes Jackson, “In effect, we will be *required* to become native to our little *places* if we are to become native to this *place*, this continent” (pp. 2-3; italics original). He continues with this accusation: “The universities now offer only one serious major: upward mobility. Little attention is paid to educating the young to return home, or to go some other place, and dig in. There is no such thing as a ‘homecoming’ major” (p. 3). This is Jackson’s way of saying what all of Berry’s fiction suggests: When we could be

educating against loss, we are educating toward loss, and just as certainly, we are educating toward violence against the earth and each other.

Jackson writes, “But what if the universities were to ask seriously what it would mean to have as our national goal becoming native in this place, this continent?” (p. 3), noting that this is more than a question of “sustainability or bioregionalism” (p. 3), that “the subject is broader than that, for it is largely cultural and ecological in scope” (p. 3). Like Berry too, Jackson insists he is “not talking here about mere nostalgia. To resettle the countryside is a practical necessity for everyone, including people who continue to live in cities” (p. 4). Jackson calls for “our universities to assume the awesome responsibility to both validate and educate those who want to be homecomers—not necessarily to go home but to go someplace and dig in and begin the long search and experiment to become native” (p. 97). For this to happen, Jackson says, “classroom work alone won’t do. They will need a lifetime of field experience besides” (p. 99). Just as Berry doubts big solutions, so does Jackson, saying:

Those grand solutions are inherently anti-native because they are unable to vary across the varied mosaic of our ecosystems....The need is for each community to be coherent. Knowing this, we must offer our homecomers the most rigorous curriculum and the best possible faculty, the most demanding faculty of all time. (p. 100)

Much like Berry’s peace agenda, Jackson sees his major in homecoming as necessary but not easy.

Berry likes this idea of a major in homecoming so well that he has written about it in essays (e.g., *ATC*, 1995, p. xi; *CP*, 2003, p. 82; and *LM*, 2000/2001, p. 136), and in



2009, his commencement address at Northern Kentucky University centered on the idea. That address, published in *What Matters* (2010c) as an essay entitled “Major in Homecoming” (pp. 31-36), cautioned graduates that they have to continue learning. Berry admitted this is what commencement speakers “conventionally advise graduates” (p. 31), that graduates “must not think of the end of school as the end of education: They must continue to think of themselves as students and to study and learn for as long as they live” (p. 31). Then he said he agreed “as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough” (p. 31), telling the graduates that their “education must continue, but also that it must change” (p. 31). Further, he added that the institutions of education must change too. “As loyal alumni and responsible citizens,” he told them, “you are going to have to help them to change, even as you change yourselves” (p. 31). The change required, as far as Berry is concerned, is “a shift from the economy to the ecosphere as the basis of curriculum, teaching, and learning” (p. 33). Berry explained this requirement by reminding the graduate that “the ecosphere is inescapably the basis and context of any possible economy” (p. 34), as noted in Chapter VII of this study.

Jackson explicitly states that his idea of homecoming does not necessarily mean returning to one’s actual home. He is content to have people “dig in” (p. 3) wherever they find themselves and make it a home. He would still have people learn about where they are and defend where they are—that this would be good for the place and the person. This would be acceptable to Berry, but based on his writings, I think Berry would rather see people actually want to—and be encouraged to—return home, that in most cases the benefits to the place and to the person would be greater, with benefits to that person’s family as well.

In that 2009 commencement address, Berry said that he sees Jackson's major in homecoming as the educational process of local adaptation—"a necessity for the survival of all species: They either adapt to their places, or they die" (WM, 2010c, p. 34). Local adaptation is widely recognized as necessary to the survival of species, yet Berry noted that it seems to be something from which "our learned teachers and researchers have exempted our own species" (p. 34). Because local adaptation is necessary for survival in the long-term, Berry said he believes "this process of local adaptation that Wes Jackson appropriately calls homecoming...is not an elective. It is a requirement. We could call it Emergency Ecological Training" (p. 34). By definition, local adaptation, as Berry noted, "will begin, and end, with a confession of ignorance" (p. 34). Local adaptation does not declare, "Here I am." Instead, it asks, "Where am I?" The disposition is humble and questioning, admitting of ignorance and ready to learn, alert and ready to pay attention.

Indeed, as Berry said in his address at Northern Kentucky University and as he advocates in essays, the curriculum of homecoming would be a curriculum of questions about the local place—the history, the nature, the damage, the possibilities, the limits. Such a curriculum of questions would be a direct challenge to the specialist system of higher education and would require "a conversation across the disciplinary boundaries" (p. 35). A curriculum of questions with a local focus would ensure an interdisciplinary approach while turning the convocation of specialists and experts into a conversation:

The convocation would have to have a common purpose, a common standard, and a common language. It would have to understand itself as a part, for better or worse, of the surrounding community. For reasons both selfish and altruistic, it would have to make the good health of its community the primary purpose of all

its work. If that were the avowed purpose, then all the members and branches of the university would have to converse with one another, and their various professional standards would have to submit to the one standard of the community's health. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 60)

An acknowledgement of their shared fate and dependence, according to Berry, would work to strengthen the connection between the college or university and the community.

More than that, however, faculty and students accustomed to asking questions would not enter the community filled with "hubris and abstraction" (*GGL*, 1981, p. 278), like the modern outside expert, like Milton's Satan, as noted in Chapter II. Instead of approaching a community problem with a lecture and theoretical solutions generally applied, scholars trained in homecoming and a curriculum of questions would know to ask and listen, honoring the local knowledge.

Berry illustrated this relationship with an example of visiting "a really good Amish farmer." Berry said he asked if the farmer got help from the state's Extension Service. The farmer said, "When we have a problem, we do." Then Berry explained that he did not understand the answer at first, but that he came to see that the farmer was saying, as Berry put it, "We are in charge of our problems. We define the problems. We don't let the Extension Service come out here and freelance about, pointing out what's a problem and what isn't. We are in charge of this conversation" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). In other words, the Amish farmer was guarding against the typical way the center communicates with the periphery. For this farmer, being in charge of the conversation was the only way to ensure that it remained a conversation where he had a voice.

In his essay “Local Knowledge in an Age of Information” (WI, 2005c), Berry makes this same point, extending the paradigm of the Extension Service at its best to the possibilities for the entire university. Writes Berry:

To use the handiest practical example, I am talking about the need for a two-way communication, a conversation, between a land grant university and the region for and to which it is responsible. The idea of the extension service should be applied to the whole institution. Not just the agricultural extension agents, but also the graduate teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other community servants should be involved. They should be carrying news from the university out into its region. (pp. 123-124)

Then Berry “extends” this service beyond our conventional image:

But this would be extension in two directions: They would also be carrying back into the university news of what is happening that works well, what is succeeding according to the best standards, what works locally. And they should be carrying back criticism also: what is *not* working, what the university is not doing that it should do, what it is doing that it should do better” (p. 124; italics original)

This is Berry’s description of the ideal working relationship between an institution of higher learning and the community and region it should be responsible to and for. Such involvement by the colleges and universities in the community has the potential in Berry’s view to strengthen and improve the community while at the same time strengthening and improving teaching and learning in the colleges and universities. Rather than a relationship that is dead and disconnected—or worse, hostile—it can become a relationship that is lively and embraced.

None of Jackson's and Berry's focus on the life and health of the world or Sir Albert Howard's one great subject of health is as original as it might sound—it is simply rare in higher education today. No less than Alfred North Whitehead wrote in "The Aims of Education" (1929/1967), "There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations" (pp. 6-7). More recently, in his book *Ecological Literacy* (1992), educator and ecologist David W. Orr insists that "the ecological crisis represents, in large measure, a failure of education. Said differently, educational institutions represent a major and largely ignored leverage point to move us toward sustainability" (p. x). As Orr explains in the Introduction, Part 2 of his book centers on education and:

The role education must play in the journey to a postmodern world. Education in the modern world was designed to further the conquest of nature and the industrialization of the planet. It tended to produce unbalanced, underdimensioned people tailored to fit the modern economy. Postmodern education must have a different agenda, one designed to heal, connect, liberate, empower, create, and celebrate. Postmodern education must be life-centered. (p. x)

Further, Orr advocates a "reinvigoration of the curriculum around the issues of human survival" (p. 107) and calls it "a plausible foundation for the liberal arts" (p. 107). What distinguishes Berry's and Jackson's vision of a major in homecoming is all that, plus a local focus. Indeed, Berry has written, "I am more and more failing to see how an integration of the disciplines or an establishment of the work of husbandry can ever be achieved without a local focus in education" (W. Berry, personal communication, March 21, 2012). And as noted in Chapters I and II, Berry regards it all as a matter of human survival, as Orr does.

Berry's critique of higher education does not stop with its standards or curricular focus. When Berry writes, "Education has been oversold, overbuilt, over-electrified, and overpriced" (WM, 2005c, p. 26), concerns about cost are implicit and explicit in that critique. "I'm trying to keep cheapness toward the top of my list of criteria," he said. "One of the virtues of a good general education is that it could be cheap. You don't need a lot of laboratory equipment and that sort of thing to have a good general education" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Berry would almost always prefer to spend money on people than on equipment.

This position is evident in a public disagreement Berry voiced with higher education in his state. Berry (2009, December 20) objected, swiftly and publicly, when the presidents of four of Kentucky's leading colleges and universities called for a statewide focus—from government, from business and industry, and from education—on energy, including a focus on a science-technology-engineering-math (STEM) initiative for the state's elementary and secondary schools (Ramsey, Roush, Shinn, & Todd, 2009, December 13). Berry's objections are not surprising: the focus on energy rather than health of the local community, the promotion of STEM over other academic disciplines and subjects, the tacit expectation that such a curricular focus would also be expensively technological, the exclusion of farming and forestry from the discussion, and the continued enthrallment of education to the extractive thinking of the industrial economy, just to name a few. What might seem surprising at first is that he ends his statement this way: "If, for example, these presidents were really interested in improving education in Kentucky, they would be lobbying hard to increase teacher salaries and decrease class sizes in the public schools" (2009, December 20). While for some this ending may seem

like a non sequitur, in fact, Berry is proposing a solution consistent with his philosophy. He is saying, in effect, that if the goal is better learning, we must value better teaching. And teaching and learning for Berry is always a people issue.

At the same time, he expects much from teachers, whether in primary, secondary, or higher education. For this higher pay, Berry expects broad competence. For example, he said, “When you hire a teacher, you ought to be hiring somebody who’s capable of giving a test and grading it. That ought to come for the price of that teacher” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Here, specifically, he cited Alfred North Whitehead’s “Aims of Education” (1929/1967), where Whitehead writes, “No educational system is possible unless every question directly asked of a pupil at any examination is either framed or modified by the actual teacher of that pupil in that subject” (p. 5). We call it standardized testing now; Whitehead called it “uniform external examination” and declared it “deadly” (p. 5). Berry’s concurrence on this reflects his local focus once again, not only educationally but also economically.

Educationally, such outsourcing of pedagogical responsibilities tends to disconnect teachers, and the practice appears to be on the rise at all levels of education. This includes the standardized tests that Whitehead and Berry object to, but also such things as prepackaged lessons and curricula that can turn teachers into mere facilitators of pedagogical practices that they have invested nothing in intellectually, emotionally, or creatively, encouraging or at least allowing teachers to disengage from the formalistic demands of good teaching. Such trends also undermine efforts to create a more local focus in education, something dear to Berry’s vision of education. And when the system assumes this sort of disengagement from teachers and, for example, raises class size

based on the expectation of automated evaluation of students, efforts by teachers to localize or personalize instruction and curricula can be thwarted.

If the educational impact of outsourcing pedagogical responsibilities works to decrease the connections between the teacher and the students and thereby drive down the quality of education, then the economic impact of such outsourcing is to drive up costs. Berry continued, “So now we hire the teacher, we pay the teacher, and then we hire a corporation to sell us a test, and then we hire somebody to grade it, and it’s running the costs out the roof” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Berry wants to keep costs down, but his solution is not to shift costs from paying skilled teachers to buying corporate services, materials, and equipment. That starts a downward spiral of expectations of teachers and satisfactions for teachers that undermines the skills, intelligence, and creativity good teachers need. In the short-term, costs can be held down by devaluing good teaching and relying on outsourced pedagogy, but for Berry this is no doubt as false and short-sighted a solution as a system of agriculture that devalues good soil conservation practices while relying on manufactured inputs of chemicals and fossil fuel. In the long run, costs will run out the roof, as he says.

Still, cheapness remains high on the list of criteria for Berry. “We’ve got to make education a lot cheaper—in the land-grant system anyway—if we want it for the people that it was meant for in the first place: the children of the industrial classes” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011), he said, using “industrial classes” from the Morrill Act. He went on to reassert his opposition to upward mobility as an unquestioned good: “And the point is maybe not to get them out of the industrial class, but to make them better members of it” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011), by which



he means not only more skilled at their work, but also more supportive of the community and more fulfilled in their lives. As Berry puts it in an essay, they can live a life that is “full and conscious and responsible” (*LLH*, 1968/2004, p. 75), or as he puts it in his fiction, they can understand themselves as “members one of another” (*HC*, 2004a, p. 97).

Berry is keenly aware of how the magnitude of student debt can have the effect of driving students away from home in a quest for an income high enough to repay loans, and he throws down a challenge for schools to seize an opportunity that would be supportive of both homecoming and membership. He asked:

When is some smart little school finally going to draw the line and say, “This is far enough. This is enough. We don’t have to make it more expensive to make it as intelligent as it can be”? When are the refusals, the institutional refusals, going to start coming? That would be really radical. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

Where education should be opening possibilities for students, college debt narrows possibilities as surely as does education that is utilitarian career preparation. Making college cheaper but still “as intelligent as it can be”—are such goals radical or simply “exuberantly sane” in a mad time (2008, p. v)?

A local focus and the health of the community as the standard, an interdisciplinary approach and a curriculum of questions as the methodology, creative use of local intelligence in pedagogical decisions, and careful stewardship of financial resources—these are all aspects of a major in homecoming as Berry and Jackson lay it out. This is a start. What is needed beyond this start is what Wheeler Catlett, Jayber Crow, and Andy Catlett never got from any of their professors in college: that is, even a passing nod to the

option of returning home. Further, students need the occasional unembarrassed mention of love for home. Too frequently in higher education, the insinuation is—particularly for those from rural places—that home is not a place to be loved but a place to be sneered at or scorned or merely escaped from. This attitude does not serve a major in homecoming. It does not serve the heart or the earth. It does not even serve the colleges and universities.

In his commencement address to the College of the Atlantic in 1989, Berry summed up the interplay of forces necessary for care of the earth. As we might expect from him, it is a global initiative worked out locally. He said:

Our understandable wish to preserve the planet must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence—that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods. What can accomplish this reduction? I will say again, without overweening hope but with certainty nonetheless, that only love can do it. Only love can bring intelligence out of the institutions and organizations, where it aggrandizes itself, into the presence of the work that must be done. (1989, September, p. 20)

Stronger than competition, stronger than ambition, limitless in depth if not in breadth—love is the great motivator for the human heart, and higher education can no longer afford to sever students—whether intentionally or by neglect—from their best instincts of homecoming and membership.

For Berry, love is nurtured and honored in education when the student is educated as a whole person and when connections are made among various disciplines and various aspects of that student's life. This is one reason why Berry so values the relationship

between the teacher and the student and why frequently he speaks of that relationship as apprenticeship, where the term of the apprenticeship is determined not by time but by student mastery. His concern for proper land use and its dependence on local adaptation makes apprenticeship a natural mode for learning the skills and knowledge of farming and forestry, and he writes of each using that language (*ACH*, 1970/2003, p. 94; *ATC*, 1995 p. 40). As noted earlier in this chapter, Berry thinks the career preparation that now passes for education would be more effectively and efficiently carried out through apprenticeships not necessarily associated to the schools. But he has even gone further than that, writing, “My own years of teaching were always troubled by the suspicion that the only authentic way of teaching and learning is by apprenticeship” (W. Berry, personal communication, August 28, 2009), a statement that extends the chemistry or dynamic of apprenticeship to all kinds of education. Combine the master-apprentice relationship with Berry’s esteem for work, especially physical work, and his insistence on local focus, and a possible new paradigm for education begins to emerge, and with it hope.

### *Two Paths for Hope*

However much our educational system may need an overhaul, Berry himself resists grand plans. His opinion is that “people with large solutions are dangerous” (1993/2007a, p. 104), and he does not intend to be one of them. When pressed on what can be done, he said, “Changing the universities at this point would be like turning a battleship around.” There he paused a beat. Then with a quick gesture out his window, he added for emphasis, “in the Kentucky River.” After the laughter, he explained, “It’s just not going to happen very predictably or very soon” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). Like farming and food, education is intricately and complicatedly

entangled with government, corporations, and people's lives. As such, agriculture provides a useful analogue for how education might change, and Berry sees two paths for hope.

The first path for hope starts modestly. Berry explained, "People are seeing what needs to be done" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). He has seen it all over the country, again and again in farming and the food movement, but he is seeing it now also in education. "There is something working up from underneath," he said, "I've been calling it leadership from the bottom. And education is involved" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). He explained:

Real research is happening. Real innovation is happening, on the part of ordinary farmers and gardeners and foresters, who are just seeing what needs to be done and are doing it....They're just going ahead and doing what needs to be done. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

This statement echoes what he said in an appearance at the University of Virginia in 2009: "I'm putting my hope on these people who are actually doing things without permission" (2009, December 3). Speaking specifically of changes in farming, he said:

I think that there's a kind of leadership from the bottom that is happening on the part of people who are starting farmers markets, community supported agriculture farms and the like, and this to me is a great source of hope because these people have not applied for grants and received grants for their work. They haven't received official permission or asked for it. They haven't received official instruction. They're just people who have seen something that needed to be done, that could be done, that they knew how to do or could learn how to do and they

have started doing it. And this is going on all over the country and all over the world. So the contrary movement is taking place” (2009, December 3)

While he is speaking here about farming and food, for Berry, this sort of energy and interest from individuals extends to changes in education as well.

The health and resilience of the community stands as a standard for work, but for Berry, the community thrives because of individual affection and responsibility. For all his talk of community, Berry recognizes the power of the individual and the change that can be effected by individual people doing the right thing, maintaining the disciplines, fulfilling the responsibilities, and working well. When asked about maintaining hope while operating inside a system where change can sometimes seem hopeless, Berry said:

To keep from being bitter and disillusioned, you’ve got to know the good possibilities. And to keep from being a bitter and disillusioned teacher in a school is to know the good teachers, that there are some and have been some. Otherwise your affirmation is theoretical, and it won’t stay. Good teaching is getting done. There are going to be people who care enough about it to do it well. (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011)

Individuals seeing what needs to be done and doing it—there is great hope for Berry in this, but he also recognizes it as a human necessity in any area of life.

Berry argues against what he refers to in *The Unsettling of America* (1967/1997) as “institutional solutions” (p. 23): “one must begin in one’s own life the private solutions that can only *in turn* become public solutions” (p. 23). At the Q&A session at the 2003 reading in Washington, D.C., after urging people to improve the nation’s language use by reading Shakespeare or Milton, Berry continued in the same way to encourage individual

work and improvement in the face of a national problem. He said, “And speak well yourself. Learn how to construct a sentence” (2003, November 10). In other words, when a problem is identified, rather than wringing hands, Berry advocates doing something, even if it is only to correct the problem in one’s own life. Later Berry gave an answer in the same spirit when an audience member asked a long question that tried to encompass all the problems of the nation. Berry said, “You go ahead and do your work.” When the questioner pressed on and implied he felt overwhelmed, Berry said, “We mustn’t get to the point where we can’t think of anything to do. That’s the main thing: to have good work to do and do it. Do it every day” (2003, November 10). For Berry, our hope, inside education and out, comes in understanding standards and doing good work within those standards; our hope is in discipline and responsibility maintained day by day.

He is aware too of his duty as a critic, saying, “Any criticism of an established way, if it is to be valid, must have as its standard not only a need, but a better way. It must show that a better way is desirable, and it must give examples to show that it is possible” (*UA*, 1977/1996, p. 218). In what he sees as a crisis in rural communities and their inability to care for the land due to the push for modern industrial farming and forestry practices, he offers examples—particularly in *Gift of Good Land* (1981)—that he sees as better and possible. Indeed, his fiction gives a similar portrait. In considering possible improvements in education, he also seeks out the working models to be studied.

His second path for hope starts modestly, too—with small schools as models. “What I’m thinking these days,” he said, “is that the smaller the institution, the more promising it’s going to be” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). He finds exemplars nearly priceless, noting, “There’s more power in something good that works

than there is in books and books” (2003, November 10). He feels so strongly about this that he actually made this statement while standing in the middle of a bookstore.

One paradigm in higher education that might serve as a model is a work college, and this may be the exemplar that Berry has been seeking in higher education. In these colleges, academic requirements are combined with requirements for work on campus and service in the community for all students. Typically tuition is reduced or waived based on the student’s campus work. The effect is not only an opportunity for deeper learning, but also lower costs. While once common in this country in the early part of the nineteenth century, only a handful of work colleges exist today, yet the idea they are built on seems universally applicable as both financially practical and educationally effective.

An article in *University Business* entitled “A Working Education” (David, 2007) sums up the aim of work colleges this way: “work colleges serve a niche for those who want to avoid debt while achieving work experience that can be applied to life after college” (p. 56). The article notes that the work on campus “is designed to teach teamwork, responsibility, self-discipline, and the importance of serving others” (p. 56). Even though high numbers of students now work while attending college, David observes that “most institutions don’t attempt to integrate work experiences into the classroom setting” (p. 57). Since such a system is institutional and part of the school’s mission, connecting work with the classroom and the classroom with work happens more naturally at a work college. David refers to work colleges as “a holistic education” (p. 58) and notes that “by participating in the work program, students develop an appreciation for the dignity and utility of labor. They are also exposed to a variety of learning outcomes” (p. 58), noting further that “students are taught that all work has value and all workers should

be valued” (p. 56). For students who have cleaned up the cafeteria or worked on custodial duties or groundskeeping, it is not hard to imagine that they also gain a deeper respect for stewardship of the campus facilities, something that can extend to all areas of their lives.

A publication from the Work Colleges Consortium (2012) echoes David’s observations, where educational benefits are touted with cost savings: “Work College graduates have some of the lowest student debt in the nation, are more engaged in community service after graduation and report having better career preparation than their counterparts” (p. 3), and “The work-learning-service approach has been proven to build character, work ethic, leadership, critical thinking and time management skills” (p. 6). Such claims have the virtue of common sense, but are they borne out in research?

It turns out they are. An in-depth statistical analysis (Wolniak & Pascarella, 2007) of between-college comparisons of alumni from five work colleges, twenty liberal arts colleges, and five public universities—all in and around Central Appalachia—indicates long-term positive effects on work college graduates. Researchers called work colleges:

uniquely effective at developing educational outcomes related to: *learning and intellectual skills* (e.g., problem solving [*sic*], speech, and writing skills, appreciating the arts, and life long [*sic*] learning), *entrepreneurial and leadership skills* (e.g., ability to manage one’s time and finances, self confidence [*sic*], working as a member of [a] team, and getting along with people with different perspectives), *orientations towards [*sic*] citizenship and the global environment* (e.g., attention to environmental and international issues, positive interactions with people of different races and cultures, and exercising one’s rights as a citizen), and *overall satisfaction with college*. (p. 64; italics original)



These are the kinds of skills and knowledge that open possibilities for students after graduation, not close them off. Further, the study says that “the educational benefits we found associated with attending a work college may be attributed to the clear and integrated role of their work program within their overall educational process” (p. 65). In other words, the benefits for students are the result of the educational paradigm.

These results did not seem incidental to the researchers. They noted, “The work activities of students are intended to provide a rich context for learning that, according to our results, appears to be effective from the perspective of alumni” (p. 65). Further:

The clear mission of work colleges, and a culture built around the merits of work and the application of knowledge, fosters a level of involvement among students that appears to be effective at developing a variety of socially and economically relevant skills and orientations. (p. 65)

Or, to quote David again, work colleges can provide “a holistic education” (p. 58), educating the whole student in a way that less integrated educational experiences cannot.

If all that were not enough to impress Wendell Berry, then add thrift. Wolniak and Pascarella found that “attending a work college clearly limits the accumulation of loan debt” (p. 65), something that is all the more impressive since they also found that “Work college alumni also tended to come from families with relatively low parental education attainment and incomes, and had considerably greater expectations for needing financial aid to attend college” (p. 49). Cheap and effective—that is an exemplar.

But what does Berry actually think of such schools? He has had some firsthand experience with Berea College over the years, with an interest in the Ecovillage on their campus as well as their work with sustainability. Berea is a work college that “only

accepts students who can't afford a college education" (Hamilton, p. 22), with a long tradition of diversity. Berry also knows Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, another work college. Invited for a visit in November 2011, he toured the college, spoke to students, spoke to faculty, and wound up his visit with a reading and question-and-answer session.

Afterward, when asked about his impressions of the Warren Wilson College and its emphasis on service and work along with academics, Berry wrote:

The faculty and staff people I spoke with seemed totally committed to the college and its idea, and the students were busy and enthusiastic. Their work contributes directly to the maintenance and daily life of the school. This seems to make them extraordinarily aware of the school and the place as the context of their education.

(W. Berry, personal communication, March 21, 2012)

About the opportunities for teaching and learning at Warren Wilson College, he wrote, "It certainly is a situation in which teaching ought to be unusually interesting" (W. Berry, personal communication, March 21, 2012). He also noted that "Interesting things are going on [at Berea]" (W. Berry, personal communication, March 21, 2012), and referring to both Berea College and Warren Wilson College, he wrote, "Both schools, I think, pretty much require the students to be involved in the life of the place, which surely mitigates against passive consumption of a commodified 'education'" (W. Berry, personal communication, March 21, 2012). These are ideas that are consistent in language and sentiment with something he wrote years before: "We must quit treating [our children] as commodities for the 'job market' and teach them to be good neighbors and citizens and to do good work" (*SEFC*, 1992/1993, pp. 91-92). The philosophy and

approach behind work colleges seem tailor-made for Wendell Berry and perhaps something to give us all hope for the future of education.

Beyond individual work and exemplars, hope comes to Berry through honest conversation—no posturing, no obfuscation, just an agenda for mutual understanding. He writes, “What gives hope is actual conversation, actual discourse, in which people say to one another in good faith fully and exactly what they know, and acknowledge honestly the limits of their knowledge” (2010/2011, p. 30). At an appearance at Xavier College in Cincinnati in 2010, Berry said this about how he prefers to find a way forward:

I don't want to listen to pessimists on the subject. And I don't want to hear optimists either....The pessimists and the optimists are just boring. I want to hear from hopeful people who are at work. (2010, April 11)

Hopeful people who are at work—Berry was speaking of land use, but he could as easily have been speaking of education and where he will put his interest and hope for improvement.

#### *Putting Ourselves to School to Wendell Berry*

If the major in homecoming does what it is supposed to do—what Berry and Jackson imagine it could do—it will help communities, especially rural communities. It will also help families. It will help students. It will help the land. It will help society. After so long a wait, playing the meaningless, never-ending game of cards in the back of Burgess's store, Port William might be able to welcome its children home. And the children? Having been educated against loss, having learned to love and care for their place and all the creatures in it, having come to know that every place on earth should be loved and cared for, they can be happy to be home.

The major in homecoming should teach us all to value Port William and all the small places of the earth as our future. If they can be preserved and protected, it will mean we have finally come to understand local adaptation for ourselves. Berry writes:

If local adaptation is important, as I believe it unquestionably is, then we must undertake, in both science and art, the effort of familiarity. In doing so, we will confront the endlessness of human knowledge, work, and experience. But we should not mislead ourselves: We will confront mystery too. There is more to the world, and to our own work in it, than we are going to know. (*LM*, 2000/2001, p. 140)

The curriculum of questions that Jackson and Berry advocate is a proper disposition to bring to education. Not only does such questioning get us deeper into a local place—in effect, making all places small places ready to be loved—but also questioning is the appropriate way to approach mystery. A questioning heart is humble, it is ready to learn, and it does not pretend to know everything. It does not even pretend that it is possible to know everything. A questioning heart seeks answers while acknowledging mystery.

Berry uses an expression in his fiction that captures this necessary humility in learning: Some of his characters are said to have put themselves to school to someone else. For example, Berry's character Elton Penn is described as having “put himself to school to Walter [Cotman]” (*PT*, 2012, p. 218). Walter is described as “the best farmer” in the neighborhood (p. 218) and elsewhere as “a fine farmer” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 68), so Elton's choice is a good one. Likewise, Burley Coulter's son, Danny Branch, is described this way: “In his wide-eyed, quiet way he put himself to school to his uncle Jarrat, to Mr. Feltner, to Nathan, to Elton Penn, and to every other good farmer he worked with or

could listen to” (*HC*, 2004a, p. 150). It is another example of how frequently Berry uses the language of formal education even in situations of informal learning.

More than that, though, the phrase—put oneself to school to someone—suggests both the responsibility and the humility required in learning. Clearly action and judgment are required: Putting oneself to school to someone carries with it the idea of intention or purposefulness about learning, but also judgment in the choice of teacher. Further, the phrase connotes a sense of supplication or submission to another, the humility to get past one’s own ego and admit to ignorance. But this is not an attitude that should be reserved for students only. In a world of mystery, along the way of ignorance, we cannot afford to ever quit learning, so teachers should put themselves to school to others, too. They should put themselves to school to each other, to their students, and to the community.

It is this disposition—responsible and humble—that is rare in higher education today, lost in the noise of careerism, cocksure specialization, detached objectivity, unbridled competition, and ceaseless innovation. But it is a disposition we need. It is a disposition that can educate against the loss of any good thing. It is a disposition that can educate toward peace.

In spite of the forces working against it, Berry does manage to keep his hope. He studies the exemplars. He watches for and encourages small signs of positive change. He works where he is to “preserve the qualities in [his] own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 62). But for Berry, to maintain hope means also to believe in the ideal as a possibility, the kind of idealism, as noted in Chapter I, that Berry thinks is “native to farming” (Hall & Berry, p. 12). It is the standard he believes good farmers keep in their minds of “the never-forsaken possibility of a

perfect crop” (p. 12). This kind of thinking is not limited to farming for Berry. It is his understanding of the world and the basis of his philosophy of education or anything else.

In the midst of a long and challenging essay on the nature of poetry, Berry states this idea axiomatically: “no ideal is invalidated by anyone’s, or by everyone’s, failure to live fully up to it” (*SBW*, 1983/2005, p. 11). This is a lesson Berry no doubt learned early, when he put himself to school to the good farmers among his family and neighbors on those small, hilly farms along the Kentucky River. It is a lesson that has shaped his understanding of the world. It is a lesson that gives him hope. Finally, it is the lesson we must remember in order to understand Berry’s philosophy of education and to benefit fully from putting ourselves to school to him.

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