

## ABSTRACT

An Analysis of Wendell Berry's Vision for Creation Care

Anne B. Huntington

Director: Scott Moore, PhD

As technology has developed in the last century, many small farming communities in America have lost their connection with their community and their land. Previously, these communities need for each other, and dedication to caring for their farms, shaped their understanding of what it meant to be human and live well. There was a deeper care for the way their choices impacted the land. People understood that they were a part of a creation, rather than an environment. In Wendell Berry's fiction, he captures and expresses the experience of these small farming communities that have been lost. In his non-fiction, he explores some of the specific errors in understanding of land use and care, and corrects many of those errors. This work will explore some of these flawed assumptions and their corrections according to Berry and conclude with an evaluation of their efficacy and feasibility.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

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Dr. Scott Moore, Department of Great Texts

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

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Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

AN ANALYSIS OF WENDELL BERRY'S VISION FOR CREATION CARE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

Anne B. Huntington

Waco, Texas

December 2022

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Problem: Misunderstanding Land Health and Stewardship

As technology has developed in the last century, many Americans have shifted away from a wholistic view of humanity, creation, and community. A wholistic view of humanity, creation and community refers to the way small farming families formed connections with one's community and their farms, as seasons, weather, and the limits of human ability created a dependence on fellow humans and the land. These communities need for each other and their dedication to caring for their farms was shaped by their dependence on these farms, both for food and as a means of leaving an inheritance for their children. This shaped their understanding of what it meant to be human and live well. There was a deeper care for the way their choices impacted the land. People understood that they were members of the community, both of people and of the land. They also understood that they were a part of a creation, rather than viewing the land as a separate environment.

Technological developments have allowed people to divorce themselves from creation. When one's ability to eat depends on what grows in their garden or the milk that their cow produces, they are unable to forget their relationship to the earth. In contrast, when one purchases polished food from the store, it is easy to forget where it came from or how it got there. When it comes to the farming process itself, with the introduction of tractors and mechanized equipment, farmers were able to till more land, and, therefore, acquire more acres than is possible to know and care for intimately. This also meant that they no longer needed the help of their community members, and that as they acquired

more land, their communities became smaller in number, and their neighbors became further away.

In Wendell Berry's fiction, he captures and expresses the experience of these small farming communities that have been lost. In his non-fiction, he explores some of the specific errors in understanding about community, farming, land, and what it means to be human that have come out of this shift in technology in the last century. Berry's non-fiction also corrects many of those errors or expresses his hope for what their correction would look like. This work will explore some of these flawed assumptions and their corrections according to Berry and conclude with an evaluation of their efficacy and feasibility.

### *Agrarians, Conservationists & Corporations*

Wendell Berry's work exposes the contemporary ways in which agriculture, food production, industry, land conservation, and wilderness protection have been divided in to separate and fragmented spaces and how these divisions have distracted from the overall goal of land health. A core point in Berry's fiction is that there needs to be more collaboration across disciplines if any ground is to be gained in the fight to use our natural resources effectively and sustainably. Farmers and conservationists are often at odds because the primary goal of conservationists is to set aside sections of land to be protected from industry use, and farmers intend to use land to produce their crop. Often, for this reason, the sorts of policies that conservationists advocate for, inhibit what farmers, ranchers, and loggers are working to do and vice versa. This is an unnecessary

tragedy because farmers and conservationists should be on the same side, namely, that of land health. One cannot produce food from unhealthy land, at least not for very long, and conservationists seek to conserve for the sake of the land and its health for future generations.

Rather than misguidedly view one another as adversaries, farmers and conservationists should realize that many big corporations are the real problem. The function of corporations is to sell their product, and they are often willing to ignore the long-term consequences of exploiting natural resources to the point at which they are permanently destroyed, as their eyes remain fixed on sales rather than long-term land stewardship. Berry describes how farmers and conservationists have many common concerns and if they could work together towards these causes, they may have a better chance at convincing corporations to look past short-term sales goals, and care more about longer-term problems like land stewardship.

In his essay “Conservationist and Agrarian,” Berry describes how the land-exploiting corporations only appear to have more, because they are using resources in such a way that will eventually leave them with nothing to use, or rather, exploit. Another area in which farmers and conservationists are on the same side is food production. Farmers are explicitly involved in food production, but it is foolish for conservationists to think they are uninvolved in food production because they buy and eat the food that farmers grow. Berry says that we are all “farming by proxy” and that “... if conservationists will attempt to resume responsibility for their need to eat, they will be

led back fairly directly to all their previous concerns for the welfare of nature.”<sup>1</sup> All humans eat, and therefore, all humans should be invested in food production, which is dependent on long-term soil and land health.

Not only is there conflict between farmers and conservationists, who are ultimately working for many of the same causes, there is conflict within the conservation movement. Berry names three types of conservation: the preservation of wild or scenic places, conservation of natural resources, and industrial troubleshooting. Those who wish to preserve wild or scenic places are those who want to set aside beautiful or unique spaces, like National Parks for example, for their aesthetic value. The conservation of natural resources are things more like water or forests that are necessary for what they can provide. Industrial troubleshooting refers to efforts to set aside parts of land to reduce abuses by industry, like preserving a forest as a carbon sink to balance pollution. The efforts of all three conservation efforts have proven to be inadequate both on their own and combined, meaning the conservation movement will need the help of their Agrarian brothers and sisters to accomplish their ends effectively.

Much of Berry’s writing emphasizes the call for conservationists and farmers to work together. Berry includes Courtney White’s essay “The Working Wilderness: A Call for a Land Health Movement,” with his own in *The Way of Ignorance*, highlighting the importance of her work and writing. In this essay, White explicates another facet of the argument that farmers and conservationists should work together. Many people, and conservationists, seek to protect or restore land by sectioning it off to be unused or

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<sup>1</sup> Berry, “Conservationist and Agrarian,” 167.



untouched, either completely or at least by industry or agriculture. However, leaving land unused by ranchers or farmers does not automatically mean it is in better condition. Sometimes, land left unused in this way is in worse condition. White describes the way she herself had fallen into this trap, thinking “that protected areas, such as national parks, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges, must always be in better ecological condition than adjacent “working” landscapes.”<sup>2</sup> She recalls observing a protected wilderness area located next to a reservation with cattle, where she noticed that the grazed land was healthier. Initially, allowing overworked or overgrazed land to rest is good, but too much rest can work against the desired result. Ideally, land rotates between being used, not overused, and resting.<sup>3</sup> Current conservation efforts could stand to embrace an open-mindedness as to what is healthiest for the land, and in some circumstances this includes properly managed ranching, farming, or burning.

### *Must Know It to Care for It*

Another major component of Berry’s vision for land use is that one must know the land to care for it well. In “Conservation and Local Economy,” Berry describes how land is ruined unless one cares for it, and one must know the land to care for it. It takes more than “general principles” to make people care. Living on land that you hope for your children and grandchildren to inherit creates a greater sense of belonging and care. When the land is overused or there is too much of it, the ability to care for it well also

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<sup>2</sup> White, 161.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 169.

declines. In *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry puts it simply: “the point is that, in using land, you cannot know what you are doing unless you know well the place where you are doing it.”<sup>4</sup> In Courtney White’s essay “The Working Wilderness: A Call for a Land Health Movement,” she describes how she has seen the effort being made on the part of ranchers and conservationists to gain the sort of intimate local knowledge of the land which is necessary to adapt and thrive in the ways Berry hopes. White makes the argument that contrary to what many conservationists may think, it is a lack of knowledge of these sorts of details of the land that can lead to poor land stewardship on the part of farmers or ranchers, rather than a lack of ethics or care for the land.

Just as it would be wise for corporations to steward the resources they profit from; farmers and ranchers should want to steward the land that they depend on. A failure to do so is typically a knowledge issue, not an ethical issue. For example, White describes how some ranchers are learning that when cattle graze matters as much as the number of cattle when it comes to overgrazing.<sup>5</sup> She also describes how much of the damage we see on smaller farms and ranches today is not always a product of the current farmer, but rather inherited damage from previous poor stewardship.

White also argues that most people, conservationists, and agrarians alike, struggle to define or determine what land health is, other than knowing it when they see it. She argues that common language helps, as well as looking at soil health. In the conclusion of

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<sup>4</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 161.

<sup>5</sup> White, 162.

her essay, White references Aldo Leopold,<sup>6</sup> who suggests that any activity that assists in land health should be done more, regardless of whether that activity is conserving, recreating or ranching. There are associations between ranching and agriculture or recreation and conservation, and it can be difficult for a farmer, for example, to accept that conserving is perhaps what is best for land health, or for a conservationist to accept that ranching may make the land healthier. However, if we can let go of our preconceived notions of whether an activity is associated with a certain movement and pursue more of the activities that make the land healthier, it will advance everyone's ultimate hope for healthier land. Berry puts it simply, "The paramount standard by which the work is to be judged is the health of the place where the work is done."<sup>7</sup>

Berry views the small rural farm communities, like the fictional town of Port William, as necessary for the sort of nation that wants to steward its land properly. It is the sort of intimate knowledge and personal, generational stewardship fostered by these sorts of communities, that create the attitude necessary to care for the land well.<sup>8</sup> Using his hometown of Port Royal, Kentucky as an example, Berry describes how the town no longer produces food for itself or anyone else, just tobacco, and how it is forested, but there is not a forest economy, leaving both farm and forest vulnerable to "abuse." In the same essay, Berry describes how Marion County, Kansas, had the most value of any

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<sup>6</sup> Aldo Leopold is an American author, philosopher, and scientist, most famous for his work *A Sand County Almanac*.

<sup>7</sup> Berry, "Conservationist and Agrarian," 170.

<sup>8</sup> Berry, "Conservation and Local Economy," 4.

county in the country in 1912 because assets other than just money (land) were considered in the evaluation. Although no one was exceptionally wealthy, the value of the county was spread evenly amongst its residents, very few of whom were in debt or in jail.<sup>9</sup> Berry's fiction takes place in Port William, Kentucky, which is based off his real hometown of Port Royal, Kentucky. The fictional town of Port William and the characters and events that take place there are one way Berry explores the change that has occurred in the last century, specifically the loss of cultural and communal traditions as well as environmental health.

### *Exploitative Corporations*

In "Conservation and Local Economy," Berry describes how our national economy has become more global, and in doing so has shifted from prospering from the health of its people and land, to prospering from their exploitation. A similar concern is expressed in "Conservationist and Agrarian," where Berry writes "I don't think we can preserve either wildness or wilderness areas if we can't preserve the economic landscapes and the people who use them."<sup>10</sup> Berry recognizes the economic realities we must operate under, and how if we cannot find a way to protect both the land and the people in an economically sustainable way, we will not get very far in wilderness preservation. In this same essay, Berry explains that the rich and powerful, who profit from the exploitation of

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<sup>9</sup> Berry, "Conservation and Local Economy," 9.

<sup>10</sup> Berry, "Conservationist and Agrarian," 166.

the nation's ordinary people and land, need those people and land, to assist in their use of the land.

In the last few decades, this shift from local economy and local agriculture to large-scale corporate farming has estranged people from the land. In "Conservation and Local Economy," Berry exposes the fallacy that it is economically wise to destroy the wilderness or that science will create solutions to soil degradation or the fallacy that we should not worry about the decline of small town America because city people will commute and factories will be placed in the country. There is this sort of myth that science, technology, and politics can work together to create a solution to these problems.<sup>11</sup> When exploitative corporations fail to think about the future and promote over-using and depleting resources, they harm not only others, but themselves, because there will be nothing left for them to use. There is this idea that depleting these resources will not become a problem because we will find a new way to make it or build it or fuel it, whatever it may be, but Berry is warning us that a day will come when this is no longer true. Eventually, we will run out. Berry writes, "we must see that it is foolish, sinful, and suicidal to destroy the health of nature for the sake of an economy that is really not an economy at all but merely a financial system, one that is unnatural, undemocratic, sacrilegious, and ephemeral."<sup>12</sup> Berry is describing how nonsensical it is that we consent to destroying the natural world that physically surrounds us, of which we are a part of, and depend on for our survival, for the sake of an economy that we have

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<sup>11</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Berry, "Conservation and Local Economy," 13.

created. Nature is more real than the economy in the sense that we cannot live without food, air and water; those are physical realities. But we can live without loans and money, those are systems we have created to support our way of life, yet they fail to support our way of life if they begin to destroy the physical world that we depend on to live.

Berry addresses another similar fallacy in “Conservation is Good Work.” These land-exploiting corporations make it seem like extreme environmental abuses, like the Flint River in Michigan or Chernobyl, for example, are the exception rather than the rule. This may be true when it comes to extreme catastrophes, but the small, regular abuses occurring daily are ultimately more damaging. In *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry uses global warming as an example of the idea that science, technology, and politics will work to solve our environmental issues. By setting our focus on this one, difficult to trace, metric (global warming), the corporations and politicians distract us from the numerous concrete and avoidable instances of waste and pollution happening regularly. Rather than look to the science of carbon emissions and the collective global impact on increasing temperatures, our attention and energy could be better harnessed toward reducing waste and pollution locally. Local waste reduction is a more deliverable result and a necessary step in reducing pollution and waste. Berry says it best,

...even if the global climate were getting better, our abuses of the land would still be the disaster most seriously threatening to the survival of humans and other creatures. Land abuse, ...is not happening in the whole world as climate change happens in the whole sky. It is happening, because it can happen, only locally, in small places, where the people who commit the abuses also live. And so my question has been, and continues to be, What can cause people to destroy the places where they live, the humans and other creatures who are their neighbors, and ultimately, themselves? How can humans willingly turn against the earth, of which they are made, from which they live? To treat that as a scientific and technological or political question is not enough, ... What is wrong with the way

we are keeping house, the way we make our living, the way we live? (What is wrong with our minds?) And to take the economic question seriously enough is right away to ask another that is also but not only economic: What is happening to our souls?<sup>13</sup>

There is a tendency to make the degradation of our environment an abstraction, a global phenomenon beyond our control, rather than the effect of each of our actions combined to make an impact. Berry is asking what has led us, as humans, to become so removed from the world we live in and with each other, to make the very physical reality we are a part of, and care for, an abstraction. What sort of concrete changes must be made to the way that we live to change this reality? This is a matter of how we live: what we eat, where we shop, how often and where, the way we get to work, where we work and live. All these decisions contribute. However, Berry suggests that more fundamental than even those things is a matter of what is within us, a matter of the soul. What do we believe about ourselves? About humanity? About the world? That has led us to become so removed from it.

This leads to another one of Berry's core questions. As farms become larger and larger, there are fewer and fewer small farming families, leading rural farming communities to die out. What is the cost of the loss, socially and economically? We do not have a way to measure the value of these communities the way that we can put a value on other sources of wealth. Similar questions can be asked about the preservation of wilderness. What is the value of wilderness? Why is it important? Is it necessary to keep an area untouched as a place to compare with developed areas and determine land

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<sup>13</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 105.

health? Beyond environmental health, what do these spaces offer us socially, spiritually or emotionally? If we are preserving wilderness for these uses, one might wonder whether we are exposing these landscapes to degradation, as large numbers of people visit and use the land, rather than protect these spaces as intended. However, if we protect beautiful spaces only to keep them protected from visitors, that may also defeat the original intention. The way that we determine these values and answer these questions is more important, because these are the sorts of questions that corporations are overlooking.

### *Flawed Approach to Wilderness and Conservation*

Another misguided approach to conservation is the notion that we should only protect beautiful places. Berry calls this desire to protect only exceptional places as “implicitly dangerous” in his essay “Conservation is Good Work.” The seemingly unnoteworthy or mundane places need protecting, too. The ability to determine what is exceptional or beautiful often changes with the recreation and values of the time. However, not only that, but there are practical reasons for protecting these spaces, too. Sometimes we do not presently know the value, or potential, of various plants or land features.

In Berry’s essay “The Native Grasses and What They Mean,” he lays out all sorts of examples of this concept. He includes an anecdote about a family with a farm on the prairie. The wife asked the husband not to mow a certain section of grass because she was not sure what sort of wildflowers were growing and did not want to get rid of



something she could not identify. Years later, there are very few of these grasses and wildflowers left, and these particular flowers were preserved due to this woman's reverence for things she did not fully know or understand.<sup>14</sup> This is an example of the importance of preserving things that are not exceptionally beautiful or dangerous or noteworthy. If nobody preserves them, they are gone forever.

Additionally, preserving sections of the land provides a standard to reference for those who wish to look to nature as their guide for how to care for the land. Our history of inaccurately evaluating the need to protect particular landscapes and species suggests we are liable to make this mistake again. These instances should serve as a cautionary tale to leave at least portions of landscapes and species for future generations, whether it be for beauty, science or practicality.

Another dangerous component of current perceptions of conservation is the way people view recreation. Berry claims that part of our desire to recreate is rooted in our need to escape the land we have stewarded poorly. In other words,

There is a bad reason to go to the wilderness. We must not go there to escape the ugliness of the present human economy. We must not let ourselves feel that to go there is an escape... if, even as conservationists, we see the human and natural economies as necessarily opposite or opposed, we subscribe to the very opposition that threatens to destroy them both.<sup>15</sup>

Even if conservationists understand the human economy and natural economy to be working against each other as corporations work against care for the land, viewing these

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<sup>14</sup> Berry, "The Native Grasses and What They Mean," 82.

<sup>15</sup> Berry, "Getting Along with Nature."

two economies as opposed and separate from one another, leaving the man-made world to escape into pure nature, is perpetuating the fallacy that has created this reality. They are not separate. Man is a part of nature and his economy depends on nature regardless of whether he mentally separates them. The littered city park is no less a part of the environment than the beautiful canyon. As mentioned in the last section, we must not fall into the trap of focusing our conservation efforts exclusively on the massive abuses, because the many small abuses add up and create just as much, if not more, suffering to the land.<sup>16</sup>

Another misguided approach to conservation described in Berry's essay "Conservation is Good Work," is this notion that we can protect one area while abusing the other. This does not work because it is all connected. A similar train of thought follows that if it is not pristine wilderness, then there is no sense in preserving it at all. This line of thought is also flawed because there is really no such a thing as pristine wilderness. One would be hard pressed to find a part of this country that has not been visibly touched by man.

According to Berry, yet another problematic understanding of conservation is the idea that keeping animals or people off land is enough to heal it. Although ceasing land use may slow down the rate of degradation, it will not do so entirely. The goal must be to heal the landscape, rather than just reduce the rate of destruction, and this will require active measures. Part of the confusion about "conserving natural resources," is due to the distinctions between surface resources, like soil and trees, which can be used while being

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<sup>16</sup> Berry, "Conservation is Good Work," 27-44.

conserved, and underground resources, like coal and oil, which once used up are gone, so they can only be conserved by limiting use.<sup>17</sup> These are not the only misunderstandings regarding conservation and industry.

In *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry laments the foolishness of Industrial conservationists who only care about wilderness preservation, because these wilderness landscapes are only part of the whole environment. In his essay “Getting Along with Nature,” Berry affirms how wilderness preservation is essential. However, we cannot preserve wilderness if we do not preserve farms, because we will be unable to appreciate wilderness if we do not have the food necessary to feed our population sustainably.

Similarly, clean, well-preserved cities are a necessary part of caring for both farmland and wilderness. Once again, it is all connected. Only in living so removed from farmland and the subsequent processes by which food is grown, have Americans been able to perpetuate this notion that one area can be set aside to be preserved as wilderness while the rest of the land is abused. This separation from the farm, and separation from the awareness that one eats to live, and that food is produced from the earth, has allowed people to believe that the environment is something outside of oneself rather than something that quite literally surrounds and passes through oneself.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Berry, “Conservation is Good Work,” 27-44.

<sup>18</sup> Peters, 58.

### *Our Relationship with Nature*

Many of the misguided views surrounding conservation and wilderness have been formed out of a misunderstanding of man's relationship to nature. We are not outside nature; we are a part of it, and as such, we must use nature to survive, and part of using nature is changing it. Using and changing nature, in and of itself, is not necessarily bad.<sup>19</sup> There is an interdependence between human culture and nature and the way in which they interact can lead to their mutual building up or breaking down.

Since we must use nature, we should do so with care; "...the integrity of the natural world depends upon the maintenance by humans of their integrity by the practice of the virtues."<sup>20</sup> This will require a shift in culture, where more people choose to care, and grow intimately knowledgeable of the land, rather than exploit it under the guise of separation from nature. Although caring for the land in this way requires working and living close to the land, people have been leaving farms. Small family farming is, according to Berry, what is necessary to reduce and reverse the disastrous effects of land-exploiting agribusinesses. In *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry warns that conservation and preservation efforts will fail if we do not change the morals and habits we have developed in line with our exploitative culture. We always seem to be operating within this dichotomy of pristine wilderness and polluted wasteland. What we need is to expand our imagination, understanding, and reality, of what it looks like for humans to

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<sup>19</sup> Berry, "Getting Along with Nature."

<sup>20</sup> Berry, "The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation," 111.

simultaneously use and care for the land.<sup>21</sup> We must be careful to remember our potential for destruction as well as leave some spaces pristine and untouched. We can do both of those things, while also seeing “human beings in the fullest sense of the term, understanding ourselves in the fullness of our cultural inheritance and our legitimate hopes.”<sup>22</sup> A future where land is both used and cared for can come from a more complete understanding of who we are and where we have come from.

*Pride: There is No Quick Fix*

There is this sort of foolish human optimism that we can outsmart, solve, invent, evolve, adapt our way out of any problem we face, but the current state of the American people and their land suggests that this problem is different. Irreversible damage has been done and it will be necessary to make major changes, not only in our approach, but in the way we think and live. The damage is not to a point that nothing can be done to help, but it will take more than ingenuity alone to make a difference. There is a level of ignorance and pride that suggests there is a quick fix but exhausting the supply of non-renewable resources cannot be easily solved. Courtney White puts it so eloquently, “at present, too ignorant to know how ignorant we are, we believe that we are free to impose our will upon the land with the utmost power and speed to gain the largest profit in the shortest time, and we believe that there are no penalties for this... The only possible result of the

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<sup>21</sup> Berry, “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity,” 72.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 72.

human effort to ‘conquer’ nature and one another is human defeat.”<sup>23</sup> Berry suggests we are quickly approaching this defeat, and much of his literature seeks to expose the flaws in our current trajectory, offering thoughtful solutions to get us on a sustainable track.

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<sup>23</sup> White, 159.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Solution: Working Together to Build a New Connection with the Land

The problem of natural resource depletion and poor land stewardship is not a problem so great that we cannot make a difference. This issue is created and remedied by individual actions and choices. Wendell Berry's vision for agrarianism and conservation is hopeful because it means the choices that we make do indeed matter and can help solve the problem with the way we currently use, relate to, and understand land.

Berry warns that solving these land health problems will require more than just sustainability as a trend but fundamental change and some real sacrifice, and not just from "urban liberals" or "rural conservatives," or any other kind of demographic, but many people working very intentionally to create this change.<sup>24</sup> Although large entities like corporations and the government cause and perpetuate the current system, Berry believes the real change will occur by altering the way we live our private lives.<sup>25</sup> In this same vein, Berry continually emphasizes the importance of small-scale farming. He imagines small-scale farms worked by ordinary people, as in not particularly powerful, wealthy, or privileged people, as important and necessary. The more of these sorts of farms that exist, the better.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, one would infer that any sort of benefit or

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<sup>24</sup> Berry, "Conservationist and Agrarian," 170.

<sup>25</sup> Berry, "Conservation is Good Work," 27-44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

incentive for these sorts of farms, whether it be financial, cultural or otherwise, would be encouraged.

In his work “The Third Landscape: Wendell Berry and American Conservation,” Jason Peters lists the considerations he believes Berry would want these small farmers to make. To be more specific, the farmers of these well-made small-scale farms must live within their means, determined by the land’s ability to cultivate (not industrial ability). This farmer “willingly [lives] on and from the farm by nature’s economic principle of return” and treats the land in such a way that fertility and health are maintained for years to come, allowing this standard to determine how much is extracted.<sup>27</sup>

In “Conservation and Local Economy” and “Conservation is Good Work,” Berry argues that this sort of small-scale farming is one way of protesting or fighting back against this exploitative economy. This is accomplished by growing and making what one can on their own, by reducing the amount that they are exploited, or by protecting their section of land from being further exploited. Berry makes no illusions that this will be easy.

In “Conservation is Good Work,” he names that this will require “more intelligence and more pleasure than all the technological breakthroughs of the last two hundred years.”<sup>28</sup> There is a joy to creating the sorts of solutions needed to address these concerns. In this contemporary culture where so much is automated and prescribed, individuals rarely have the chance to experience the satisfaction of solving a problem for

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<sup>27</sup> Peters, 50-64.

<sup>28</sup> Berry, “Conservation is Good Work.”



themselves. Problems themselves are not pleasant, of course, but coming up with a solution is very satisfying. Berry draws attention to the pleasure that can be experienced as creative solutions to our environmental concerns are created, arguing that these discoveries will be more pleasing, and require more intelligence, than the joy that came from inventing the technology we currently have and use.

### *Forestry and Sustainability*

In *Our Only World*, Berry describes how forestry can be used as a model for sustainability. Although much has been said about sustainable agriculture, little has been written about sustainable forestry.<sup>29</sup> Sustainable forestry requires a radical shift in perspective, from thinking about forestry as an extractive industry to thinking about forestry as a sustainable practice. Berry describes how “one ceases to think of the source of sawlogs as trees, which can be cut according to wishes or needs to standards that are merely economic and begins the understanding—far more complex and difficult, but also far more interesting—that the source is the forest ecosystem.”<sup>30</sup> Berry also describes how managing a forest well for a human lifetime is important, but a human lifetime is short compared to the age and lifetime of a forest.<sup>31</sup>

In *Our Own World*, Berry tells the story of sustainable forester Troy Firth, who created a land trust that promotes sustainable forests beyond the forests that he owns,

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<sup>29</sup> Berry, *Our Only World*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Berry, *Our Only World*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

because a handful of well stewarded, yet fragmented, forests are limited in their impact. Firth is working on a vision for a sustainable forest economy, which serves as an example of how, with creativity and a holistic picture, new visions can be casted. Berry emphasizes two aspects of Firth's work. First, that Firth started locally, and second, that he made his land trust in such a way that others could join.<sup>32</sup> In other words, it is important to steward a forest economy; however, that individual forest economy is located within a greater forest ecosystem which must be held together for the stewardship of this single economy to matter in a significant way. Holding a forest economy together requires buy in from, and existence of, a human community.<sup>33</sup> Troy Firth and his land trust serve as an excellent example of the sort of intelligent, creative, satisfying problem-solving that is necessary.

### *Small Farms and Fiction*

Berry also explains the importance of these farms being small, because a farmer can only maintain the level of responsibility necessary to care for the land the way it needs to be cared for if the plot of land remains small enough. A farmer can only be intimately aware and knowledgeable of so much land before it becomes unreasonable, and the closeness and attention to detail must decline. Berry's vision for how small farms and careful attention to the land can restore this communal relationship is illustrated in several of his fiction works.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 30-34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 35.

In Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*,<sup>34</sup> we see an example of what happens when a farmer has too much land to care for intimately in the character of Troy Chatham. Troy is the antagonist, the counter example to the main character, Jayber, who has a close appreciation for the land. Troy continues to acquire more and more land, requiring him to go into debt, not just to purchase the land, but to purchase ever more new and big machinery to be able to farm so large a space. Unlike mules, tractors can work at all hours of the day and never tire. This creates an opportunity to overwork and overuse the land. Troy in *Jayber Crow* is a counterexample to the type of farmer and farming Wendell Berry hopes for and imagines.

Also set in the same fictional town of Port William, *A Place on Earth*, *The Memory of Old Jack*, *Hannah Coulter* and *Nathan Coulter* tell the stories of characters Mat Feltner, Jack Beechum, Hannah Coulter, and Nathan Coulter, all of whom serve as positive examples of the sort of small farming, care for the land, and attention to detail that Berry imagines farmers would have. These men and women view their farms almost as extensions of themselves and put much pride in restoring and caring for the land, creating farms that have the potential to thrive for years to come.

In *A Place on Earth*, there is extensive description of the way Mat Feltner cares for his family farm and how his identity is wrapped up in that of the land, "Mat prunes the tree. He likes this work—the look of his hands moving and choosing, correcting,

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<sup>34</sup> Berry, *Jayber Crow*.

among the tangle of the branches. The orchard is one of the works of his life.”<sup>35</sup> In a later chapter, Mat takes a walk around the farm with his pregnant daughter-in-law Hannah, both of whom are grieving the loss of Virgil, Mat’s son, and Hannah’s husband, who has been declared missing in action. Hannah mentions that Mat does not seem to be enjoying his work lately, and Mat agrees with her observation, but says “... if a man doesn’t farm for his own satisfaction, he’ll have a hard time finding another good reason to do it.”<sup>36</sup> To which Hannah asks “But you do like it?” and Mat declares “There’s not any other life for me... I’m not saying it’s not hard. But I can tell you that all my life, in spite of the worst, I’ve been inspired by this place, and by what I foresaw or hoped I could do in it. I’ve lived my life the way a hungry man eats.”<sup>37</sup> This exchange reveals how Mat’s identity is tied up with the land. He loves this place, and his sense of grief and loss over his son impacts the way he interacts with it. Even in declaring how this farm has been a source of inspiration, he can admit the challenges and hardship it brings. Like any real love, it is nuanced, and painful at times, but prevails none the less. Caring for this farm is his life’s work.

The final passage from *A Place on Earth* reveals Mat’s beautiful understanding of, and relationship to, the land:

And afterwards, now, the trees rise on the slope again. And the dead who made that clearing are as forgotten as the forest they destroyed. As he sits looking at the heaped rocks, guessing the little he is able to guess about them, there comes to Mat the sense of a lost and dead past, a past perfect, without even the force of a

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<sup>35</sup> Berry, *A Place on Earth*, 163.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

memory. And though he resisted the thought, fearing it would sadden him, it does not sadden him. There in the presence of the woods, in the sounds of the water and the leaves falling, he does not feel the loss of what is past.

He feels the great restfulness of that place, its casual perfect order. It is the restfulness of a place where the merest or the most improbable accident is made a necessity and a part of a design, where death can only give into life. And Mat feels the difference between the restful order and his own constant struggle to maintain and regulate his clearings. Although the meanings of those clearings and his devotion to them remain firm in his mind, he knows without sorrow that they will end, the order he has made and kept in them will be overthrown, the effortless order of wilderness will return.

The leaves brightly falling around him, Mat comes into the presence of the place. It lies clearly and simply before him, radiant as though a light in the ground has become visible. He has come into a wakefulness as quiet as sleep.<sup>38</sup>

Mat is aware of the people who came before him, and the way they have helped to shape the land into what it is, when he thinks of “the dead who made that clearing.”<sup>39</sup> He holds no illusions that the work he has done to shape the land will last or be remembered, he knows that “the order he has made and kept in them will be overthrown, the effortless order of wilderness will return.”<sup>40</sup> But leaving one’s mark on the place is not the point, it is not what matters. Mat is not saddened, “he does not feel the loss of what is past” because he is instead feeling “the great restfulness of that place, its casual perfect order.”<sup>41</sup> Mat understands that he is a part of the creation, something larger than himself, and peacefully trusts himself and his land to this greater force. One can assume that Mat’s relationship to creation is the sort of relationship Berry hopes to inspire in a new generation of small farmers. There is such a beauty to Mat’s lifetime spent caring for this

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<sup>38</sup> Berry, *A Place on Earth*, 321.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

place, while holding it loosely enough to know that it is not really his to control, despite his attempts, because this place has existed long before he came, and will continue to exist long after he leaves.

In *The Memory of Old Jack*, the reader meets Jack Beechum in his retirement, as he looks back on his life. As Jack remembers his life, it has not been an easy life; it is full of its fair share of mistakes. However, the many points of pride and joy, as well as deep loss, surround his life and his farm. Even in his old age, when he is moved into a hotel in town because he is no longer able to care for the farm, Old Jack wakes up before the sun, a habit he has developed from a life of farming. As a farmer like Mat Feltner, Jack's very identity is tied up with his land; Jack "... has known no other place... when he walked in his fields and his pastures and woodlands he was tramping into his mind the shape of his land, his thought becoming indistinguishable from it, so that when he came to die his intelligence would subside into it like its own spirit."<sup>42</sup> The characters of Port William do not farm simply because they must or because they want to, there is something deeper in their connection to this place. Berry writes of Jack,

The work satisfied something deeper in him than his own desire. It was as if he went to his fields in the spring, not just because he wanted to, but because his father and grandfather before him has gone because they wanted to—because, since the first seeds were planted by hand in the ground, his kinsmen had gone each spring to the fields. When he stepped into the first opening furrow of a new season, he was not merely fulfilling an economic necessity; he was answering the summons of an immemorial kinship; he was shaping a passage by which an ancient vision might pass once again into the ground.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack*, 30.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

This deep, communal relationship to the land is something that Berry captures so expertly in his stories of Port William. It is something that has been severed in the last century as family farms have been bought up by agribusinesses.

Hannah and Nathan Coulter each have their own novels, *Hannah Coulter* and *Nathan Coulter*. We learn how Hannah is widowed by Mat Feltner's son Virgil and goes on to marry Nathan Coulter. In Nathan's story, we learn the way Nathan's mother's death fractures his family and how his demanding father finds little joy in his farm work. Like Mat Feltner and Jack Beechum's stories, Hannah and Nathan's lives are wrought with grief and sorrow, yet filled with joy and love, nonetheless. There is a sense of redemption in their life together, as Hannah and Nathan are partners in the restoration of a small farm, where they renovate the run-down farmhouse piece by piece and care for its land. Hannah cooks, keeps house and garden, cares for goats, and helps during harvest time, while Nathan works the land, trains the mules, and grows the crops. However, their work alone is not enough, and they rely on the help of their community during harvest time. They also raise a family on their farm. The Coulter family, in both its joys and struggles, serves as another example of love for, and dedication to, the land that defines much of their marriage, family, and sense of self.

#### *Closeness to the Land: Community*

In "Conservation and Local Economy," Berry makes the claim that, "community, then, is an indispensable term in any discussion of the connection between people and

land.”<sup>44</sup> What does he mean by this? When Berry uses the word community, he is referring to what one might think— the relationships between people or between someone and a physical place they love, but he does not only mean this sort of community. His focus is the relationship between “the human economy and nature.”<sup>45</sup> If we are thinking about the relationship between economy and nature as a community, we view abuses to the land in a whole new light. Suddenly, over-using and abusing the land is like overworking or abusing a person you are in a relationship with. If one wants employees at work to perform well, one knows that they need rest, breaks, and boundaries. We know that people can work too much and too hard. The same is true for the land. This sort of language, and this way of thinking, creates a connection point for conservationists and small farmers.<sup>46</sup>

Another question that can, and should, join both farmers and conservationists, is what the economy of a healthy land-centered community looks like? It must look different from the current exploitative approach.<sup>47</sup> Berry claims that “to be healthy, land-based communities will need to add value to local products, they will need to supply local demand, and they will need to be reasonably self-sufficient in food, energy, pleasure, and other basic requirements.”<sup>48</sup> There is hope for the actualization of these healthy-land

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<sup>44</sup> Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy,” 3-18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



based communities as smaller sub-cultures have begun to emphasize the value of local products with the rise of farmers market culture. However, this will need to go further if these local farms are to meet local demand and be self-sufficient. Additionally, the high prices associated with these farmers markets products are inaccessible for most American budgets. But the presence of these trends does create hope for continued change in this direction.

Berry describes small farms as having the ability to act like a “secession” from big businesses when small farms make it possible for communities ask for and deliver help from within. There is a scene in *The Memory of Old Jack*, where aging Jack gives his adult daughter, Clara, and her husband, Glen, farm goods like vegetables, milk, eggs, and hams that they have grown and produced themselves, to take back home with them to the city. Removed from farm life, Jack’s daughter Clara and her husband Glen do not quite understand the gravity of the gifts that they are receiving. There were months, if not years, of labor and careful attention that led up to the moment that these goods were able to be produced and given, all of which is lost on Clara and Glen. This serves as an example of the way that a true understanding of the value of local farm products must be cultivated by those who are removed from the process, as well as the way that it is possible to support oneself and one’s family largely from the land of a small farm.

In “Conservation is Good Work,” Berry makes some distinctions between the words we use for the natural world and how this impacts the way we think about it. When we use the word environment, it conjures up this image or idea of something out there, separate from us. However, the term creation suggests that we are within it, we are a part

of it. This concept of creation, a natural world that we are a part of, is a better understanding. Humans are inhabitants of the natural world, rather than dwellers, who go out into nature to extract what they need, before returning home to the unnatural world. No matter where one goes, one is still within the natural world which surrounds them, even though that can be easily forgotten when one is surrounded by man-made creations. Another important distinction between creation and environment, is that environment is simply there, while creation implies a purpose, that it is there for something. This implies, therefore, that we must steward the environment and treat it well in order that it, and us as members, can achieve our purposes.

We can, and must, use the resources of the natural world to survive. We must eat, drink, and build shelters, all requiring the use of natural resources. However, we must also use these resources in such a way that there will be some left for later use and that what we do use can be replaced in a reasonable amount of time. As members of this natural world, we also understand that our health and the health of the natural world influence one another. In *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry goes so far as to say we are not merely connected to the land, but that the land is part of who we are, part of our identity.<sup>49</sup> It is not a thing outside of us that we own or possess. We must necessarily use and take from it responsibly.

How does one use and take part in nature responsibly? By living closely and intimately with it. Small farmers, who must depend on the health of their land as the source of their family's own health, care more deeply and look more closely. The reality

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<sup>49</sup> Berry, "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," 75.

is that, regardless of whether one personally farms the land, each of us eats from it and survives off it. Therefore, everyone who eats should have a level of care for or responsibility to the land. One of Berry's points in describing the difference between environment and creation is that the environment cannot be entirely conserved in the sense that it is protected and unused. To feed and house the people of the world, some of the land must be tilled. We must protect and care for all the land, but it would be impossible to conserve all the land and continue to survive. This is yet another reason for conservationists and agrarians to work together, along with every other human who eats food, to care for the land that supports our own ability to live. Berry makes it explicitly clear that it is essential that conservationists and agrarians work together if they hope to have a chance to stand up against the "global economy" that has been, and is, exploiting beyond repair the very land from which we eat.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Agrarian Conservationists and Conservationist Agrarians*

Berry envisions conservationists that care about food production as well as farmers that care about conservation. He claims the first and most important step in becoming a conservationist farmer is maintaining a love for farming and independence. I can infer that what he means by independence is independence from debt, from big business, from fossil fuels and expensive machinery. This love of farming and independence is necessary for a farmer to be motivated to know and love his land, his

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<sup>50</sup> Berry, "Conservationist and Agrarian," 174.

crops, his animals, and to do the incredibly hard work of doing things slowly, by hand, being as self-sustaining as possible and caring for the long-term health of the land, rather than merely the short-term potential for profit. Berry imagines a world where farmers with this sort of mindset thrive, becoming more and more sustainable and independent with time.<sup>51</sup>

On the part of conservationists and other consumers of food, the market must continue to demand “the best food, produced in the best way” which will require these consumers to be educated on what it means for food to be good and well produced. As previously mentioned, consumers have begun to be more discerning about local and organic food than they have been in the past. But it will require more knowledge about where foods come from and how they are grown to make the required changes. Most consumers do not currently know enough to make this shift, but it is possible, and once the consumers who are able to, begin to “vote with their wallets,” more and more change will come.

This sort of economic shift could create space for the shift in land use that Berry is championing. Currently, one of the largest problems is that there is not enough financial backing for the small farms of Berry’s imagination. Consumers must begin to see the power they have to address the problem of sustainability by changing the way they eat and shop. There is such a sense of hope in this sort of suggestion. The choices of individuals and families in the sort of food that they eat and businesses they support, one

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 164 and 171.

by one, can be the source of change. Consumers already think of their own bodily health, but once they begin to see that the way they purchase food impacts the land, and that the health of this land impacts their own personal health and the health of their children and future generations, the interconnectedness and importance of these consumer choices increases greatly.

*Why: The Relationship Between Humans and Nature*

In *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry claims that part of what it means to be human is to be a good caretaker of one's land or resources. Therefore, it is not just a good thing to do, but it is our imperative to care for nature, and a failure to do so will damage not just the land or our health but will be damaging to our degree of humanness.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, by choosing to care for land and animals, we communicate our acknowledgement that they are indeed a part of the "order and harmony" that we belong to.<sup>53</sup> This idea that our humanity hinges on our ability to care for the world can be overwhelming or even seem impossible. But rather than fix the environmental issues, we should strive to become whole in a world that is greater than us, that encompasses us. Berry concludes, "for the good solutions must come from our wholeness, our affection and reverence, not from our sense of duty, much less from desperation."<sup>54</sup> By wholeness, Berry means our understanding of ourselves as not merely bodies or minds, but whole

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<sup>52</sup> Berry, "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," 74.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

people whose body, mind and soul all come together to form a whole. Similarly, the environment is not just a location but one part of an ecosystem of which we, and every other life form, is a member of. It may seem like nature is limiting us because it is. It is important to recognize these limits because when these limits are ignored, exploitation to the point of no return will reduce options for the future. Like many generations before us, accepting the “world’s real limits and the responsibilities” can bring us to a place where we can actually be honest and responsible to the land in such a way that we can “hope to transcend our limits, so that our life may grow in generosity, love, grace, and beauty without end.”<sup>55</sup>

Having a relationship with nature means that nature responds to us, and we respond to nature, but Industrialism has reduced this relationship. We assume we can use and abuse nature or we must protect only little sections of the “environment” that we deem beautiful or worthy of setting apart. Both extremes forget the possibility that there is a relationship that goes both ways where we are both taken care of and cared for.<sup>56</sup> In other words, “... the needs of the land and the needs of the people tend always to be the same.”<sup>57</sup>

Taking care of nature, being in relationship with nature, listening to nature or looking to her for guidance does not always mean it will be somehow worse or more difficult. Nature also provides “helps that are free or cheap” sometimes “the land survives

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>56</sup> Berry, “The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation,” 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 167.

and even thrives in human use.”<sup>58</sup> In short, Berry is suggesting that instead of opting for either extreme (and completely unused by humans or land completely overused by humans) that there is a mutually beneficial option, where humans use land to get what they need, while protecting it for future use.<sup>59</sup> Berry is breaking down the dichotomy that suggests land must be taken for all its worth, exploited, used, and abused, or protected, untouched and preserved. There is a mean, and this is the one we must take in the future. However, it will require changing the way that many people think about and use land.

*How: Looking to Nature*

To move forward, standards regarding land use must be set, and we should set them according to nature, not according to the endurance or potential of our equipment, market, or imagination.<sup>60</sup> We would be prudent to follow the example of farmers of old who did their best to avoid spending money, using their minds, rather than buying tools, as their guides and solutions.<sup>61</sup> In this same wisdom, we look to nature for guidance in farming and forestry, because nature productively manages farms and forests without destroying herself.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps we could learn from this. We can and should assume that

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>59</sup> Peters, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy,” 12.

<sup>61</sup> Berry, “The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation,” 156.

<sup>62</sup> Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy,” 11.

“Nature is the perfect—and, for our purposes, the exemplary— proprietor and user of any of her places.”<sup>63</sup>

By looking at nature, Berry means, doing “not as [Nature] does, but what she does to protect the land and preserve its health...”<sup>64</sup> Wendell Berry has found himself in conversation with Wes Jackson of The Land Institute, over the years, and Jackson came to the same conclusion as Berry and the thinkers before them, a “perception of the waste of fertility and of soil, recognition of the failure of the current standards, and the turn to Nature for a better standard.”<sup>65</sup> The Land Institute is one of Jackson’s projects aimed at solving these problems. His organization breeds plants to find a way to “replace the monocultures of annual grains with polycultures of grain-bearing perennials.”<sup>66</sup>

More specifically in the spirit of looking to nature, Berry suggests we consider the fact that much of this land was originally forest, and therefore, one should study forests first to learn how to care for the land.<sup>67</sup> In “Getting Along with Nature,” Berry warns against the post-Industrial-Revolution desire to throw out the cultural tradition of agriculture and replace it with “intelligence, information, energy and money.” Berry puts it so eloquently in *The Art of Loading Brush*:

Industrial agriculture... has instead and from the beginning forced land to submit to the capabilities and the limitations of the available technology. From the ruinous and ugly consequences, now visible and obvious everywhere the land can

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<sup>63</sup> Berry, “The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation,” 162.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 163.



be farmed, one turns with relief to the great good sense, the mere sanity, the cheerful confidence of [Sir Albert] Howard's advice to farmers: Go to the woods and see what Nature would be doing on your land if you were not farming it, for you are asking her, not just for her "resources," but to accept you as her student and collaborator.<sup>68</sup>

Examples of people using this sort of method as their guide for land use are cited in "The Native Grasses and What They Mean," where Berry describes the Land Between the Lakes which has been created by TVA to be a conservation and recreation area. This area contains forty to fifty Buffalo and wild grasses, some of which are now ankle height. Historically, there were thousands of buffalo, with grasses as tall as the buffalo. Although small in comparison, this improvement is good to see. However, Berry describes the way that 95,000 of the 170,000 acres that make up this area were people's farmland and the way it was taken from them by the government via eminent domain, with the justification that "their way of life never quite succeeded."<sup>69</sup>

Berry describes another example of a special rare grass that only grows in this one particular area, not anywhere else, and how it survived there because one of the farm families kept it on account of a wife who thought the flowers were pretty and asked her husband not to mow them because, "I don't know what they are, but I don't want anybody fooling with them."<sup>70</sup> Areas like these sections of prairie mentioned above are important beyond just memories of the past because they provide a sort of "control variable," a way of knowing what the land looked like and how it functioned, prior to our

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>69</sup> Berry, "The Native Grasses and What They Mean," 81.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 82.

current agricultural methods. They provide a way of determining how our current treatment of the land is changing it, as well as a source for ways to mimic what nature does successfully, in areas where our methods are unsuccessful; “the condition of the land as it was when we came to it is the only possible measure of our history. Only by knowing what it was can we tell what point or result it has been changed.”<sup>71</sup> In the same text, Berry describes how the high value we place on what we can imagine something becoming has allowed us to chase money and industry, abstract values, at the price of the reality of land health and sustainability<sup>72</sup> Berry praises the farm wife from the story about the wild grass for adhering to “the first duty of stewardship” which is refraining from using things carelessly, which includes but is not limited to destruction, particularly if one does not know what it is.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Berry, “The Native Grasses and What They Mean,” 82.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

## CHAPTER THREE

### In Response: Can Small Farms Address the Environmental and Communal Crisis?

I agree with Wendell Berry's argument that agrarians and conservationists must work together for change to be made regarding the environmental crisis. The categorizations that have divided up those who care for the Earth and its health have reduced the effectiveness of both. However, what exactly should these movements fight for or work towards? Should they lobby against the policies and practices that allow big agriculture to degrade the environment? Do they work toward creating a comprehensive and concrete understanding of what land health means and looks like? Do they work to change public opinion about resource consumption, and therefore, lifestyle choices? If agrarians and conservationists decided to work together to take on exploitive corporations, what would that look like? What would it require?

Wendell Berry's vision of a generation moving back to small farms that they know and care for intimately, where they are as self-sustaining as possible, is alluring, but there are some questions that remain. Berry makes a wonderful argument for how this sort of lifestyle would reduce the number of resources required by these families (compared to city life), help create small, unique, rural communities, and provide the sort of intimacy with the land that is needed to steward it well.

I agree with Berry's assessment that change begins with daily individual decisions about what to buy and how to live. However, how many families would need to have small farms for a noticeable difference to be made in our current environmental

concerns? Would a thousand families doing so make a difference? Would it take a million?

My next concern is the financial feasibility. I know many young people are captivated by the vision of moving to a small farm, creating a home and a family. However, this dream seems to be financially out of reach for most, unless one could maintain a job to support his family in addition to living on a remote farm, or his farm is producing enough to support his family. Both of those scenarios require a combination of factors to be on one's side, which is not particularly likely for a young farmer without many resources, financial or experiential.

Another problem to explore regarding financial feasibility is the market for this food. There are many people for whom healthy, ethically produced food is out of reach; either because it is too expensive, or because it is both too expensive and quite literally out of reach due to the reality of living in "food deserts," places where there is not access to a grocery store given the limits of distance, transportation, and finances. So, the problem occurs on both ends. It is difficult for farmers to sell their food, either because they would have to charge too high a price or because it is too difficult to get the food to the consumers, and on the buyer's end, because they cannot afford the price of the food, or it is too difficult to purchase.

For those who do not find Berry's small farm vision alluring, how do we motivate these individuals to work toward more sustainable and lower impact practices? How do we teach these individuals to care about where their food comes from and how it is produced? There needs to be a way to care about land other than personally living on it.

In the last century, we have lost the generational connection to the land that we see described in the characters from Port William, people like Mat Feltner, Jack Beechum, Hannah and Nathan Coulter. This next generation needs to find a reason to connect with and care for the land now that many of the generational ties have been severed.

Living on a farm requires a special type of care and produces the best results for the land. However, even if there is a large movement back to small farming, there must be another way to inspire others to care for the environment other than moving to a small farm. It seems that this would require a change in public opinion, imagination, and thought regarding care for the Earth and oneself, as well as what it looks like to live well. There is a need for more people to understand how farming impacts the environment, and how the things one eats are farmed and where they come from. Berry's work suggests he is attuned to the fact that we need to alter the way we think about nature and ourselves to change how we live, because what one does flows out of what one thinks and believes.

To return to the question posed in the first chapter, what has happened to our souls that has allowed us to become so removed from the land, and, therefore, ourselves and each other? In the last century, we have come to view everything as mechanized, containing individual and separate parts that can be exchanged or replaced. If there is something wrong with one's body, it is separate from their mind and soul, and can be replaced or fixed accordingly. If the fields can be tilled more efficiently with a tractor than a mule, it would seem obvious to replace the mule. However, humans are whole beings, and what happens to the body does impact the mind and the soul. A farm is a part of creation, and the way crops are tilled impacts the health of the soil, and, therefore, the

crops that are produced and the people who consume the crops. This mechanized, compartmentalized thinking has made way for the current reality of people, land, and food production and consumption. Another contributor is that we have lost our collective understanding of what it means to be human, what the goal or hope for this life is. There is a stark contrast between the goals of most contemporary Americans and the characters of Berry's fiction, who value sacrifice and responsibility. This emphasis on sacrifice and responsibility has been replaced with a happiness borne of ease and personal satisfaction. There will need to be a change in what we value, to change how we live.

Each of us need to change the way we live in a real way to address this crisis, the environmental crisis, as well as our communal crisis, the one going on in our souls and in our relationships to one another. This crisis of community has paved the way for the current mistreatment of the environment. Changing what we think is not enough, action is necessary. More people are aware of the climate crisis than before, and they respond by recycling or buying an electric car. But in many places, there is more demand to recycle than demand for recycling, so much of the recycling ends up in landfills anyway. When it comes to electric cars, the mining process for producing the batteries that power the cars is as destructive, if not more destructive, than extracting fossil fuels. There is a disconnect between understanding and awareness of the environmental crisis and meaningful and beneficial lifestyle change in response. The reality is that this change in thought is not thorough enough, and that even someone who wants to live differently struggles to do so in our consumer culture. In *Consulting the Genius of the Place*, Wes

Jackson advocates for a reduction in population as the solution.<sup>74</sup> I do think Wes Jackson is correct that a reduced population would indeed reduce how many resources are used. However, due to the high value of human life, I do not agree with the human reality of reducing the population, in any of the various approaches.

Ultimately, the collective understanding of what it looks like to be happy will need to change for Berry's vision to make ground. If happiness is acquiring new technologies and possessions, more resources will be consumed, and our environmental crisis will only increase. For us to continue to live healthfully and steward this Earth well, which Berry claims is necessary to preserve our humanity, there will need to be a shift in our vision for happiness. I do think that this is possible, and that there is an increased desire among people of the next generation to be self-sufficient, to have a sense of place, of home, as well as a need for a sense of purpose in their lives, in response to the sense of lostness produced by our unrooted, virtual culture. Perhaps this seeking can lead the way for a renewed commitment to wholeness and care, a new commitment to the sort of sacrifice, responsibility and community that has been largely left behind.

Lastly, in examining Berry's fiction, what does it look like for the characters in his fiction to be happy, to thrive? Is that how we want to define success and thriving? If so, is that truly the realistic result of this lifestyle? Let's begin with *Jayber Crow*. The novel ends with him living independently, yet alone, in a self-sufficient existence. He loves Mattie Chatham, and she knows this; however, they are never truly together. He loves the

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<sup>74</sup> Jackson, 247.

Nest Egg, the forest on Mattie's land, as his space to be at one with nature, yet it gets cut down.

If happiness means being with the one you love, or not being alone, then Jayber Crow does not achieve this. If happiness means owning your own farm or land, or leaving the land better than you found it, then Jayber does not achieve this because his cabin is borrowed and the land, he loves is not his and gets destroyed.

However, Jayber does live simply and within his means. As a barber, he listens and creates a space for male community in his town, and in this way love the people of his town. He does deeply love and care for Mattie Chatham, a married woman in a difficult marriage, and they do run into each other in the Nest Egg, the forest, where they mutually understand one another's love for the place. Although intimate in a way, and although they do seem to understand one another deeply, this is never expressed verbally, and they never act on this mutual love or understanding, until their goodbye at the end of Mattie's life. And even then, it is only an implicit admittance or understanding of this love. Does loving someone require possessing them, in the sense of being with them and speaking to them about all these things, or is knowing from afar enough? Of course, Jayber Crow is a fictional character, but he represents one example of the sort of life Berry might imagine for someone who cares for their place but is not a farmer. Is this sort of happiness and success one that can gain traction on any sort of larger cultural scale? In the words of Berry himself, "Surely, most of us still have, somewhere within us, the fundamental human wish to die in a world in which we have been glad to live."<sup>75</sup> To

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<sup>75</sup> Berry, "Conservation and Local Economy," 12.



make this fundamental wish a reality for future generations, a greater level of care for the earth we inhabit will be required.

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