

The Literary Club

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PLACE

*There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.*

--Sabbath 1997 – VII 'A Timbered Choir

Almost three decades ago, well before Wendell Berry became a cult figure, my wife had grown intrigued with his writing. So when I asked her how she wanted to observe her birthday, she suggested we spend a late summer afternoon driving over to Henry County to view the countryside that seemed to animate all of Berry's writing.

Exiting the interstate after an hour of travel, we followed the map paralleling the Kentucky River when soon we came to a fork in the county road. One way pointed to the village of Port Royal, which we knew to be the Berry's mailing address, but dead ahead loomed an inviting narrow lane. We drove straight and soon, in the rolling field to our left, we came upon a scene that could have been painted by Jean-Francois Millet – a lone horse plowing a furrow with a man driving the big Belgian and a woman walking behind. "Could that be him?" I whispered to my wife. "Why not stop and find out?" was her all too logical suggestion. I walked over to the fence as the animal drew to a stop. I could see the farmer was a little vexed by the interruption in his labor. "Are you by any chance Wendell Berry?" I clumsily inquired. "Yep," came the laconic reply. Fixed on the task at hand, he did not seem inclined to idle conversation with a passerby. By that time my wife was at my side, introducing ourselves and fumbling for reasons why we had descended unannounced. For the next few minutes, we engaged in some

pleasant talk with him and his wife Tanya. At one point, I asked, “You still teaching at the university?” “Nope,” he shot back, “they said I retired but I quit.” So much for that. As the horse snorted and stirred, its driver clearly anxious to start a new furrow, we apologized for our intrusion and he resumed his work, saying a courtly goodbye.

It was all over in a moment, birthday present delivered. Yet a link had been formed, however awkwardly, a link that eventually would allow us to get better acquainted with this farmer who was to become an icon in American letters and the idol of conservationists everywhere.

A few years later, the road to Lanes Landing Farm found another member of our family seeking out the Berry homestead. Our younger daughter had tackled William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* for her senior thesis and her mentor at the university suggested that Wendell Berry might serve as a reliable guide through the tangled pathways of the McCaslins of Yoknapatawpha County. Responding to her plea for help, Mr. Berry said he would talk to her if she would appear at 3 o’clock on a wintry Sunday, the only time slot in the week that he allotted for strangers wanting to visit (a strict observance, by the way, that he has maintained). In the hour they spent together in his living room, teacher and student hit it off. My daughter doesn’t recall that their conversation advanced her understanding of Faulkner very much, but out of her encounter with the kindly Wendell Berry, a pen-pal friendship emerged that has endured.

In the meantime, my wife had started writing to and about this author/poet/essayist who was attracting growing numbers of admirers, in her instance for his traditional views about land and community, fidelity and marriage. She wrote several essays about him for national publications, had a formal interview with him that was also published, engaged in a running

correspondence and became his friend. She eventually contributed a chapter to a 2011 volume, *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*.

I must confess I was not, at the outset, entirely smitten with him. The contrarian in me questioned some of his rough-hewn pronouncements on the state of modern culture. I wondered whether he was just another one of those dead-in-the-water New Dealers, the ones who preached the gospel of the good earth while taking federal handouts to grow tobacco. In fairness, though, I had to admit that he merited more respect than such glib judgments offered. So I started delving deeper, sampling here and there, and soon I found myself captivated by his poetry. It was fresh, incisive and full of wisdom. In one of those poems from the volume titled *Given*, I was struck by this particular line:

There are no unsacred places, there are only sacred places and desecrated places.

Here, I began to see, he was offering a clear clue to his thinking and his writing – his notion of place, or more to the point in his case, his small farm along the Kentucky River in Henry County. More reading clinched the conclusion that his concern for the land and his custody of it creates the central pivot to everything he wants to examine in the world around him. Again and again, I found him dwelling on this point, as in another volume titled *Wild Geese*:

What I stand for is what I stand on.

In his essay *The Long-Legged House*, he explains further: “If the word community is to mean or amount to anything, it must refer to a place and its people. It must refer to a placed people.”

The followers of Wendell Berry have long appreciated that as one advances through the outpouring of his novels, poems and essays, there is this unmistakable, irresistible theme of

consummate dedication to his sacred corner of the world and the love, and sweat, he has lavished on it – just as my wife and I had witnessed when we first found him plowing his field. (I learned later, by the way, that he sees tractors as tyrannies of technology. Working with a tractor, he once remarked, is like making love in boxing gloves.)

Nothing in his remarkable portfolio – fiction or non-fiction, stretching over more than a half century -- has not had Henry County woven intimately into its plots and ideas. “The place,” he has written, “is precedent to my work.” In fact, going back to his early novel, *A Place on Earth*, published in 1967, the central character is arguably not a person but a place – his fictional Port William (population 60). It exerts a primal influence on him.

In his essay *The Gift of Good Land*, he talks about his conviction of land being “not a free or a deserved gift, but a gift given upon certain rigorous conditions . . . what is given is not ownership, but a sort of tenancy, the right of habilitation and use.” Yes, place is sacred, not to be desecrated.

His devotion to land was brought home vividly in a visit Berry and his wife Tanya paid to our Rabbit Hash farm one sunny May afternoon several years after we had met. Before we sat down to lunch on our lawn overlooking the Ohio River, Wendell wanted to take a hike to see our property. His practiced eye immediately recognized far more in the surroundings than I ever could, conversing about the birdsong he heard, the trees he examined, and the undergrowth we uncovered as we walked along paths carved through the forested acreage. Eventually we reached a wooden bridge we had built over a dry creek bed. There we paused. Wendell, who at times is a reticent talker, began to open up. We wanted to know more about his work, especially his latest novel, *Jayber Crow*, which had just been published and which was already being called a classic. We were anxious to learn about the memorable parade of locals who flow through the

story, especially Jayber himself, whose barber shop is “the loafing and talking place, (the) living room for the townsmen” in Port William. Told in the first person, Jayber says his is “a book about heaven.” For a good half hour, as we listened to Wendell, we were the ones enjoying a piece of heaven. None of us gathered on the bridge that afternoon will likely forget that moment.

*This is the vision seen
as on a Sabbath walk;
The possibility
of human life whose terms
are heaven's and this earth's.*

--Sabbath 1991 – IX 'The Farm'

+ + +

It is his books of essays, covering his lifetime of thought on agrarian issues, that have attracted much of Wendell Berry's acclaim and cemented his international reputation. In them, one hears the prophetic voice of a working farmer, bonded to his place, calling humankind back from the brink of self-destruction – as in his celebrated 1978 debate with the U.S. secretary of agriculture in which he declared: “The farmer standing in his field is not simply a component of a production machine.” He angrily mourns the ravages wrought on sacred places by the nation's agribusinesses, claiming their impact has lured people from their native ground into anonymous cities. He is saddened by the consequences he sees in broken marriages, dysfunctional child-rearing and disappearing local institutions and crossroad villages. “My purpose,” he has written, “is a language that can make us whole.”

I myself confess a preference for his stories and poems. Although he would doubtless scoff at the comparison, I can see the two faces of a Janus dividing Berry's work. To me, his essays present a dystopian side --- a scowling social critic peering into the future, solemn and

serious, scolding and at times obstreperous. The novels and poems, on the other hand, wear a utopian mask -- a masterful storyteller celebrating a rural life ensconced in the past, familiar, gentle, reverential and, oh yes, rollickingly hilarious. Together the two sides of this Janus offer a powerful, unified message about the place of place. They convey his decidedly contrarian views that the rudderless modern embrace of science and technology has spoiled the environment, run rough-shod over rural values, and shattered what once were universally accepted moral standards.

One thing is for sure and on this there is little doubt: Berry is an original. Since boyhood he has been casting a critical eye on the world around him. When he turned 9 or 10, his grandmother threw a birthday party for him, inviting family and neighbors. Wendell issued one invitation on his own -- to his constant pal, Nick Watkins, an aging black farmhand employed by his grandfather. He didn't recognize the social embarrassment this created in their segregated society. Since Nick was not allowed to mingle with the other guests inside, Wendell spent the time of the party sitting outside on the cellar wall with Nick. He said he found it the decent thing to do. "I was full of a sense of loyalty and love that clarified me to myself as nothing ever had before."

The son of a local lawyer/farmer, he was sent several years later to the Millersburg Military Institute for his teenage education. There he encountered what he viewed as a set of "outworn and fanatical" rules -- a "moral dogmatism" he called them. He concluded that the school was aiming to produce "a perfectly obedient, militarist puritanical moron who could play football." He adds: "I was a conscious student of resistance, and got pretty good at it."

He was also getting pretty good at crafting short stories and his early poems were soon being recognized and winning awards. After earning bachelor and master's degrees in English

literature from the University of Kentucky at Lexington, he became the proverbial young man going west -- on a Wallace Stegner fellowship to study creative writing at Stanford University, where he would stay an extra year to teach. But even in those heady times he was experiencing the haunting tug of that place in Henry County where both sides of his family had farmed for almost 200 years now stretching over six generations.

“I began to see, however dimly,” he would recount, “that one of my ambitions, perhaps my governing ambition, was to belong fully to this place, to belong as the thrushes and the herons and the muskrats belonged, to be altogether at home here.”

Still his growing reputation as a writer kept drawing him away from Kentucky. Next he went to Tuscany on a Guggenheim fellowship and then to a faculty appointment to teach at New York University.

Yet the restless longing for the home place persisted. Looking back on his ultimate decision to pull up stakes from campus life in Greenwich Village and to return to the land of his birth, he remembered a pivotal conversation with a faculty elder who tried to talk him out of it. Invoking the specter of Thomas Wolfe, the professor asked, “Young man, don’t you know you can’t go home again?” “I knew,” Berry writes, “that as the sentence was spoken to me it bore a self-dramatizing sentimentality that was absurd.” He thought the old colleague’s argument was based on the belief that “once one had attained the metropolis, the literary capital, the world of one’s origins was cancelled out.” There was the assumption that “the life of the rural towns, the farms, the wilderness places is not only irrelevant to our time but archaic as well because unknown or unconsidered by the people who really matter – that is, the urban intellectuals.”

His literary friends warned him that in moving back home his work ran the risk of being infected with what they termed the “Village Virus” and the attitudes of Main Street. They said he couldn’t enter the literary world “with manure on his barn boots and expect to be welcomed.” They worried that “I would grow paunchy and join the Farm Bureau.”

He knew in his heart he had never really intended to “escape” Kentucky. He grasped the fundamental truth, once expressed by Simone Weil, that having roots is “perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

“Kentucky was my fate,” he concluded.

*. . . the man born to farming,
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout
to him the soil is a divine drug.*

--The Man Born to Farming

So in 1963 with his wife Tanya and their two young children packed in a VW Beetle, he resisted “the current of intellectual fashion” and headed home to the agrarian life into which he had been born. He yearned to resume farming in the places where his forbears had worked for generations and where he had tagged along as a boy, soaking up the life. “I was born to people who knew this place intimately and I grew up knowing it intimately.”

“I think this was particularly important and necessary to me,” he has written, “for whereas most American writers – and even most Americans – of my time are displaced persons, I am a placed person. . . . my connection with this place comes not only from the intimate familiarity that began in babyhood, but even more from the even more profound and mysterious knowledge that is inherited, handed down in memories and names and gestures and feelings, and in inflections and tones of voice.” These abound throughout his many stories.

Once, speaking about the regional writer, the late Flannery O'Connor observed that "the writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. The problem is to find that location." She believed that the best in American fiction has always been regional, noting that through our history the literary focus has moved from New England to the Midwest to the South. "It has stayed longest," she said, "wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of likeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light."

Then the ever-so-droll Ms. O'Connor added: "Somewhere is better than anywhere."

Today there is widespread critical agreement that Wendell Berry's "somewhere" has taken its place on the literary map alongside Thoreau's Concord, Faulkner and Eudora Welty's Mississippi, Mark Twain's river, John Steinbeck's California.

"I have made the imagined town of Port William, its neighborhood and membership," Berry once explained, "in an attempt to honor the actual place where I have lived. By means of the imagined place, over the last fifty years, I have learned to see my native landscape and neighborhood as a place unique in the world, a work of God, possessed of an inherent sanctity that makes any human valuation that can be put upon it."

Across this single setting – fictionalized and yet so real, this rural place perched along the Kentucky River -- march generations of Port William families – the Catletts, Coulters, Feltners, Rowanberrys and Beechums – and the likes of Kate Helen and Danny Branch, of Old Jack ("a draft horse of a man"), of Big Ellis and Gideon Crop, of Uncle Peach and Ptolemy Proudfoot. It was Jayber Crow who first started calling them the "members," as in the "membership."

In weaving a rich tapestry with these families and the community they form, Wendell Berry possesses a creative genius recording their everyday lives with their everyday challenges,

the sorrows and the happy times, the tears and the laughs, passing in rhythmic cadence through generations. Finally there are the haunting questions surrounding death and the ultimate fate of their way of life in a world changing around them.

Of course, Berry's imagined place with its membership constitute but the utopian dream. These people and their town never really existed and never will. Yet their stories force us to consider how modern life – rootless and ever more reliant on the engines of technology – threatens one's capacity for self-reliance, yearnings for independence, and ultimately the very ability to love.

Burley Coulter, the lovable rogue who pops in and out of so many of the Port William stories, appears in one memorable scene as a hillbilly preacher in extolling the idea of members of a community being united by love and acceptance: “Oh, yes, brothers and sisters, we are members one of another. The difference, beloved, ain't in who is and who's not but who knows it and who don't. Oh, my friends, there ain't no nonmembers, living nor dead nor yet to come. Do you know it or do you don't? . . . Oh, beloved, it's all one piece of work.”

Ernest Finley, a regular in Jayber Crow's barber chair, was wont to say “in Port William, we don't distinguish the masses from the classes.” For Jayber, that rang true. From his unique post cutting hair and listening to the talk in his shop, he was a daily witness to how “people loved and befriended one another and were loved and befriended, talked with and about one another, quarreled with and resented and sometimes fought one another, all pretty much without thought of ‘special privilege.’”

. . . *Here in time*

We are added to one another forever.

--Epitaph

Andy Catlett, who is clearly the mirror image of the author himself, tells how ordinary life unfolds in Port William. Andy is nine, visiting his grandparents and prowling through town just before nightfall. He peers into Milton Burgess's store and there he sees a group of men inside loafing. Andy explains, "The conversation that these loafers kept going, night after night, was Port William's sole indigenous public institution. By it, the manhood at least of the town reminded itself of itself, preserved its history to the extent that it was preserved, entertained and comforted itself and in some measure even governed itself. And . . . there was a kindness to it, too, inadvertent as it may have been." Later in life, Andy reflected how his clan, the Catletts, worked for years alongside the Rowanberrys, the Sowerses, the Coulters and the Branches, and how much of that time was spent in endless hours of talking. "They talked of course of the weather and their work, of things they remembered . . . They told stories that all of them were in, that they had told and heard and laughed at and revised and told again any number of times. They told and wondered at bits of local gossip. They spoke of their life histories . . ." Yet Andy was struck by how little they spoke of public issues. He could remember only one political discussion in all those years and it came at a Rowanberry family reunion. The subject was a disgraced eminent politician, prompting one of the in-laws, Pascal Sower, to exclaim: "I'm not going to tell you who I voted for. But I'll tell you this much. I'll never vote for that son of a bitch again."

No character is more central to the Port William of his day than Burley Coulter, part comic, part oracle. As a boy, he attended school for as long as he could be kept there but that was not for long. Burley's grandfather thought he was a disgrace because he would rather hunt or fish than work. His grandmother grieved because she thought he was an abject sinner. As the

story is told in *The Wild Birds*, Burley's faults were from an early age a source of public entertainment in the town.

Andy's father, Wheeler Catlett, the town lawyer, nonetheless considered Burley the most interesting man he ever knew. "He didn't steal or lie or misrepresent himself. . . . Once I said to him, 'Burley, I know you've drunk and fought and laid out at night in the woods. How come you've never gambled?' And he said, 'No son of a bitch is going to snap his fingers and pick up *my* money.' I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'Because I never got it by snapping my fingers.'

Wheeler liked to tell what happened when Burley was drafted into the Army during the First World War: "He hit an officer for calling him a stupid, briar-jumping Kentucky bastard. . . . He hit him, as he said, 'thoroughly.' I asked him, 'how thoroughly?' And he said, 'thoroughly enough.'" Wheeler added, "For that they locked him up for a while."

His favorite tale about Burley, however, involved the time Burley exited from the back door of Grover Gibbs' house, "having paid his compliments to Beulah Gibbs," as Grover returned unexpectedly through the front door. "Carrying his clothes in his arms through a night black as the inside of a gourd, Burley ran through the stock pond behind the barn, and then, heading downhill into the woods, got behind a big calf who was going slower than he was, whereupon, according to him, he cried, 'Calf, get out of the way! Let somebody run who knows how!'"

When Jayber Crow was a newcomer to Port William, Burley slipped him a note inviting him to "a little worter drinking party" on a Saturday night. To a designated lonely spot in the woods there had gathered, in addition to Burley, some townsmen who were frying catfish and corn pone in an open fire. From out of shadows came a half-gallon glass jug, its mouth stopped

with a corncob. Handing it to Jayber, Burley said “that fish’ll dry you out. See if this won’t moisten your swallow.” And so the jug was passed – again and again through a night of riotous revelry. Jayber finally succumbed to sleep. When he awakened, it was morning and three of the party goers were still there playing cards. A fourth one, Roy Overhold, suddenly grew alert when he heard a car coming down the road. In a flash he began climbing a small sugar tree. The other three quickly followed. “And then I saw Cecilia Overhold coming up the path,” Jayber recalled, “and she was walking like the Divine Wrath itself.” She gathered up the scattered cards and pitched them into the fire. Seizing a limb, she knocked loose a hanging lantern and began smashing the empty glass jugs once filled with the party’s “worter.” Then she confronted the tree, the men in it “wishing it was Jack’s bean stalk” so they could climb higher. Looking up, with fists on her hips, she shouted: “Come down from there, you Sunday card-playing sons of bitches!” Word of her rage spread across the countryside and Jayber concluded that the party had turned out to be one of the most famous social events in the history of Port William.

As Burley grows older, his appearances in the stories take on a more responsible personality even though he still slips out for an occasional night of coon hunting.

*Alone, afoot, in moonless night
Out on the world’s edge with his hounds,
What was he looking to set right?*

--Sabbath 2000 VI

Burley senses changes coming to the membership and how they are altering the places he loves. “Wayward” is the way he describes it. “I thought things would go on here always the way they had been,” he ruminates in *Wild Birds*. “The old ones would die when their time came, and the young ones would learn and come on . . . And then, about the end of the last war, I reckon, I seen it go wayward. Probably it had been wayward all along. But it got more wayward

then, and I seen it then. They began to go and not come back . . . and now look at how many are gone – the old ones dead and gone that won't ever be replaced, the mold they were made in done throwed away, and the young ones dead in wars or killed in damned automobiles, or gone off to college and made too smart ever to come back, or gone off to easy money and bright lights and ain't going to work in the sun ever again if they can help it.”

I find nothing in all of the Berry canon where a story is told with more tenderness, and one that speaks more to place, than when, in the story titled *Fidelity*, Burley Coulter comes to the end of his road. He complains about feeling “as no-account as a cut cat,” but blames his arthritis. “There’s a whole family of them Ritis boys,” he explains, “and that Arthur’s the meanest one of the bunch.” This time something far meaner than Arthur has attacked his 82-year-old body. He ends up in a Louisville hospital, attached to tubes and wires in a condition that the membership quickly grows to regret. Danny Branch is his lately claimed son, the product of his “should-have-been” marriage to Kate Helen. Danny decides he is going to kidnap Burley from the hospital to free him from the clutches of modern medicine and bring him back to his native ground to die. Masquerading as an orderly, Danny slips into the hospital, grabs a gurney, wraps his father in a sheet and wheels him into his pickup in the dead of night. “Listen,” whispers Danny, “I’m going to take you home.”

Returning to a remote part of Port William in the place they know as Stepstone Hollow, Danny carries his barely breathing father to the stripping room of an abandoned tobacco barn. After carefully removing the medical devices piercing Burley’s shriveled body and making him comfortable, Danny chooses a spot under a chinquapin oak to carve a grave out of the rocky soil. As Burley grows weaker, Danny digs feverishly.

Not far away a state police detective is looking for him, questioning the townspeople about the hospital “kidnapping.” They are not inclined to help. Wheeler Catlett’s son Henry, also a lawyer, says to the detective: “Some of us think people belong to each other and to God. Are you going to let a hospital keep a patient hostage until he settles his account?”

Back in the remote hollow, Danny Branch is finishing his work. He is making a grave “as he knew the Indians of that place had made long before Port William was Port William.” He returns to the barn, where in a dark corner he finds that his father is no longer breathing.

With backwoods reverence, this is the way Wendell Berry describes Danny Branch’s final loving act as he carries his father to the grave he has chiseled from the rocky ground:

“Now they had come to the last of the last things. A heavy pressure of finality swelled in his heart and throat as if he might have wept aloud, but as he walked he made no sound. He stepped into the grave and laid the body down. He composed it like a sleeper, laying the hands together . . . And the body seemed to accept again its stillness and its deep sleep, submissive to the motion of the world until the world’s end. . . .

“He picked spires of goldenrod, sprays of farewell-summer and of lavender, gold-centered asters; he picked yellow late sunflowers, the white-starred flower heads of snakeroot with their odor of warm honey, and finally, near the creek, the triple-lobed, deep blue flowers of great lobelia. Stepping into the grave again, he covered the shrouded body with these, their bright colors and their weedy scent warm from the sun. . .

“And then, having touched Burley for the last time . . . he let the quiet reassemble itself around him, the quiet of the place now one with that of the old body sleeping in the grave. Into

that great quiet he said aloud, ‘Be with him, as he has been with us.’ And then he began to fill the grave. . . .

“When the grave was filled, he spread and levelled the dirt. He gathered leaves and scattered them. . . . From 20 feet only a practiced and expectant eye would have noticed the disturbance.”

+ + +

Spread through Berry’s later stories is that same sense of foreboding among the membership that Burley felt, about what will happen to their rural ways and to their community as all those signs of so-called progress make their inevitable inroads into Port William. Andy Catlett, having grown older, ponders the changes: “Increasingly over the last maybe forty years, the thought has come over me that the old world in which our people lived by the work of their hands, close to weather and earth, plants and animals, was the true world; and that the new world of cheap energy, and ever cheaper money, honored greed, and dreams of liberation from every restraint, is mostly theater. This new world seems a jumble of scenery and props never quite believable, an economy of fantasies and moods, in which it is hard to remember either the timely world of nature or the eternal world of the prophet and poets The world I knew as a boy was flawed, surely, but it was substantial and authentic.”

Here in his fiction Wendell Berry anguishes over what he sees vanishing in real life as well. His revered place is imperiled. The stability and dignity of the membership are eroding. Their sense of shared belonging is disintegrating. With “a tongue set free from fashionable lies,” his words – spread over 40 volumes – transport readers to an awakened sense of reality. Our

eyes open to essential truths that have become blurred in the onrush of technology and consumer gluttony.

*In plentitude too free,
we have become adept
beneath the yoke of greed.*

--We Who Prayed and Wept

At the outset, this modern day Jeffersonian agrarian was sometimes dismissed as a radical, a reactionary or even a Luddite. The smart set asked, was his simply a nostalgic call to a lost past. Over the years, however, as present-day America has grown uncertain of its moorings in the face of unwanted wars, despoiled natural resources, dehumanized moral standards, and now a pandemic, thoughtful people are paying attention to his arguments. They may not be prepared to accept all of them, but they have to admit there is a compelling quality to them even if they are at times contradictory. Gradually there has arisen a broadening awareness that this once-lonely voice from fly-over country is saying things that cry out for closer scrutiny. In an admiring letter, his one-time mentor and friend Wallace Stegner once wrote to him that “little as you reflect the homogenized and hyperventilated lives of termite Americans, stoutly as you rebuff the blandishments of technology and progress and the efforts to make life effortless, you have won a large and respectful audience . . . as lost dogs turn toward some friendly stranger in hope of rescue.”

In today’s topsy-turvy climate, respect for Berry’s views crosses the political spectrum, from both the left and the right. Ideologies aside, agreement can be found coalescing around such themes that local may well be superior to global; that sustainable farming may not be a pipe dream after all; that farm to table makes sense; that self-sufficiency beats supply-chain

corporatism; that there is something to global warming; and that just maybe science and technology don't have all the answers after all.

*I see all that we have ruined in order to have, all
That was owned for a lifetime to be destroyed forever.*

--The Dream

My wife and I have sat among a liberal-leaning group of latter day flower children crowded into a gymnasium to hear Wendell's views on the conservation struggle and the green movement. We have also joined a group of young conservative academics who made a pilgrimage to Henry County to hear him discuss the challenges threatening the moral and literary traditions of Western civilization. As my wife observed, Wendell Berry can't be politicized, pigeonholed or fitted into a sound bite.

Increasingly his work has been celebrated through countless awards, prizes and honorary degrees. President Obama bestowed on him the National Humanities Medal and Wendell was chosen to give the accompanying Jefferson Lecture, the nation's highest recognition for achievement in the humanities. He has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and to the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame, the only living author so recognized in his state. The Library of America has introduced three initial volumes in a planned five-book series that will ultimately present all of his essays, poems and stories – a recognition given only once before to a living literary artist.

Closer to home, his daughter Mary has created the Berry Center -- "to put his writings to work," as she says, by helping local farmers, encouraging land-conservation communities and promoting healthy regional economies. Teaming with a Vermont college, the center is offering tuition-free degrees in regenerative agriculture to youngsters interested in family farming careers.

The center is also enabling enterprising local livestock farmers to market their fresh meat in a pilot project aimed at directly linking farm to table, producer to consumer.

Even in his 86th year, honors and adulation do not appear to have fazed Berry. Wendell remains Wendell. In a poem, he asserts, “I am not bound for any public place but for ground of my own.” Now that he is older, he chuckles that he has disappointed those New York friends from of old by not becoming a Lil Abner in the “cultural desert” of Kentucky. No doubt to his surprise, what he has become is a beloved figure in the world of American letters, a true celebrity. His fans smile at his sometimes crotchety ways and most everyone stands in awe of his story-telling mastery.

Looking over his life, he professes to remain hopeful -- while standing by his words. He told an interviewer, “Part of the reason for writing all these essays is my struggle never to quit, to never utter those awful words, ‘It’s inevitable.’”

In his last book of stories, *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry stares down the one final question that haunted Burley and Wheeler and Jayber: what does the future hold for the membership? As the book concludes, Berry’s alter-ego Andy Catlett is asked to say some words at the funeral of Danny Branch, his friend and long-time neighbor:

“Looking at the younger ones, his and Danny’s, who now were looking back at him, he spoke the names of the old membership, dead and living, into whose company the younger ones had been born. He spoke of their enduring, their sweat, and their laughter. ‘This is your history,’ he said. ‘This is who you are, as long as you are here and willing. If you are willing, this is yours to inherit and carry on.’”

Perhaps Wendell Berry's own personal answer can be found in a note my wife and I received a while back from Tanya Berry. "We're still above the river," and a grandchild is living on the other side of Port Royal, she happily reported. But the "best news," she said, is that a third great-grandchild had been born into the Berry family.

Reading that, I couldn't help but think of Jayber Crow's observation: "We are in an eternal story happening partly in time."

SOURCES

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