

“*THE* PROPHETIC AMERICAN VOICE OF OUR DAY”:  
THE IMPLICATIONS OF WENDELL BERRY’S CULTURAL CRITIQUE  
FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

“*THE PROPHETIC AMERICAN VOICE OF OUR DAY*”:  
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This study examines Wendell Berry’s cultural critique to identify implications for American education. It explores three themes in Berry’s fiction: land and place, community, and character, and considers Berry’s observations about education in his non-fiction and interviews.

The health of natural resources is a fundamental value for Berry who believes that human beings have a moral obligation to be stewards of the Earth. Practicing stewardship enables the creation of valuable places. A vital connection links the health of the natural world and human community. Healthy communities are radically inclusive, work for a sustainable future, and care for those with special needs. Community “members” exemplify qualities of character, knowledge of the community, good work, and neighborliness, all essential for responsible stewardship.

The study assesses Berry’s claims that: (1) formal schooling often lacks vibrant association with the local community; (2) our reliance on discrete academic disciplines fosters over-specialization and academic isolation; and (3) the standard for education should be revamped to focus on the health of the community rather than job preparation. American education often serves economic and political agendas that ignore the well-being of natural resources and human communities.

In spite of our daunting challenges, Berry maintains hope and charts constructive steps forward. Students learn best, he believes, through apprenticeship and mentoring. The study concludes that with substantive changes education can play a major role in enabling students to grasp the needs of a healthy, life-supporting planet and to develop the skills, values, and disciplines of responsible community members. Replacing corporate-dominated, technology-driven, and shortsighted attitudes and behaviors with restorative practices and values requires commitment from all of society's sectors, and perhaps especially from our schools, colleges, and universities.

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## DEDICATION

With abiding love, respect, and gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation to the honor and memory of my parents, Ann Cherrington Driver (1917-2012) and Russell Broyles Driver (1918-2010). Both were deeply committed to education, were life-long learners, and made many sacrifices to provide educational opportunities for their children.

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And last, as others have also noted, we would not be discussing the value of Wendell Berry's wisdom and its eloquent expression were it not for his skill and

dedicated commitment. Our world is hungry for his message, and I hope my study will contribute to its dissemination and further influence.

B.A.D.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **What the Study Will Do**

In 1960, Wendell Berry, the owner and tender of a small family farm in north central Kentucky, published his first novel, *Nathan Coulter*. The prolific author, who was in his mid-twenties at the time and teaching at Stanford University, has been writing and publishing ever since. His list of credits includes over a dozen works of fiction, multiple collections of poetry and works of nonfiction, as well as interviews, recordings, and commencement addresses (Peters, 2007b, pp. 325-334).

In time the world began to notice. In 1991, Confluence Press published *Wendell Berry*, edited by Paul Merchant, in the American Authors series. It includes fifteen essays of appreciation. This was followed in 1995 by Andrew Angyal's *Wendell Berry*, part of Twayne's United States Authors Series. In 2003, Kimberly K. Smith's *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* was published by the University Press of Kansas. In 2007, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, a collection of interviews, was issued by the University Press of Mississippi. Also in 2007, the University Press of Kentucky published *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, as part of the series, *Culture of the Land: A Series in the New Agrarianism*. It includes thirty essays of recognition (Peters, 2007b, pp. ix-x). Additional studies followed with frequency, including *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* by Fritz Oehlschlaeger, published in 2011 by the University Press of Kentucky. Also in 2011, the

Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI Books) published *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, an anthology with seventeen contributions. In 2017, Jack Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro's *Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place* was issued by the University Press of Kentucky. Also in 2017, Baylor University Press published *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity* by Joseph Wiebe.

Berry began to appear in non-print media as well. In 2013, Bill Moyers broadcast a full-program interview, *Wendell Berry on His Hopes for Humanity*, filmed at St. Catherine's College during a celebration of Berry's work by renowned figures in related fields (Baker & Bilbro, 2017, p. 202; <http://billmoyers.com/segment/wendell-berry-on-his-hopes-for-humanity/>). And in 2017, the documentary, *Look and See: A Portrait of Wendell Berry*, directed by Laura Dunn and Jef Sewell, with input from Robert Redford, was released in select theaters nationwide. The works cited here are examples of the many and varied ways Berry has gained attention and become a prominent voice in the conversation regarding American culture. In addition, Berry has received numerous honors, including the 2010 National Humanities Medal presented by President Barack Obama and, in 2016, the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Critics Circle (Berry, 2017, inside back cover).

My own noticing occurred in the early 1980s. I was walking down the street one day in my Nashville neighborhood near Vanderbilt University and stopped in front of Mills Bookstore on 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue, intrigued by the front window display of multiple copies of *The Memory of Old Jack*. The cover of this 1974 edition had the title in large, brown, caps and lowercase print, dominating a small illustration tucked underneath the last word, "Jack." We see the side and the back of a man in a rocking chair; he is dressed simply in pants, cap, and jacket. He is looking out a window at a sparsely sketched farm scene—a tree bedecked in fall orange adjacent to a four-wheeled cart drawn by a team of horses with a driver at the helm. In the far distance are several additional trees and a bird in

fight. The author's name is under the title in black, all caps print, much smaller than the title. I am embarrassed to admit that I do not now recall if I had even heard of Wendell Berry at the time, though he taught at the University of Kentucky while I was a student there. The cover illustration of *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974) is very simple. The dominating feature is the flush right title, in four lines, three of which hold only one word. I was an editor at the time at a religious publishing house; we notice print, illustrations, and book covers. The book sold for \$5.95. I bought a copy either that day or soon afterwards. I read it. I liked it. And soon I was collecting Berry's work, especially his fiction and nonfiction. About five or six years later, I moved to New York City to study with Professor Maxine Greene, the well-known philosopher of education at Teachers College Columbia University, whose work got my attention while I studied English Education at Vanderbilt, formerly George Peabody College for Teachers. I have never stopped reading Wendell Berry. I read and re-read his fiction and many of his essays. And I have developed great respect and appreciation for his work. I find his fiction full of likable characters who struggle with real-life problems. While their setting is a rural community and many work the land, and I cannot claim familiarity with either their context or their livelihood, I find them memorable people whose lives demonstrate valuable qualities and who impart wisdom and hope to the reader. Berry's essays tackle the vast majority of our social, cultural, and environmental issues with profound insight and provocative reflections on the changes our toughest dilemmas call for. His wealth of knowledge, his vast reading in history, art, agriculture, and more, along with his practical work as a farmer have combined to render him an articulate spokesperson about our wellbeing, or lack thereof, as a culture and a planet.

When I began to consider writing a dissertation to complete the doctorate in Philosophy of Education, the question of what to write about presented itself. One friend who gently encouraged me to complete the degree responded unhesitatingly to my question, "Why me and not you? The faculty in your program have urged you repeatedly

to draft a thesis, and they will be delighted to bestow your degree!” My friend said simply, “You have a topic.”

I had not quite realized that indeed I did have a topic. This exchange, however, helped me to see that my interest in and appreciation for Berry could be constructively combined with my studies in education. Moreover, approaching the thesis this way also incorporated advice from a faculty member who exhorted, “Choose something you love.” There are disadvantages to choosing something you love. It is challenging to avoid telling your reader repeatedly that you are enamored with your subject. In addition it may be more difficult to strike the appropriate critical stance, the distance and objective appraisal customarily called for, than if you have a topic in which you are curious and interested but not overly passionate. And finally, perfectionistic tendencies may be exacerbated by one’s devotion to the subject, as well as difficulties in drawing the study to a close. Nevertheless, given the long, sometimes tedious road of researching and writing a major study, as required for the advanced degree, it is difficult to see how one could sustain the effort without a deeply held commitment to the work.

And so, my research question seemed to form itself: *What are the implications for contemporary American educators in the work of Wendell Berry, especially his cultural critique as set forth in his essays and works of fiction over the last half-century?*

I had no difficulty at first choosing themes in Berry’s fiction to explore. My short list included: *land and place, community, language, and work*. All are consistent themes in all three genres of Berry’s work. One could argue that they constitute the four-legged stool of Berry’s commitment, philosophy, and cultural critique. This is not to say that other themes are not present and significant. His writing and focus are much too comprehensive to be contained in a short list of themes. It is to say, however, that these four stood out in my initial reading and reflection. In time, though, well-intended advisers encouraged me to trim the list, arguing that themes inevitably grow larger as one’s research and writing get underway. Reluctantly, I set aside *language* and *work*. But I

could not see how to write about Berry and trace the meaning of his work for educators without considering *land and place* and *community*. And after additional reflection I back-slid a bit and added *character* as a third, significant theme, and one closely related to the other two. These three themes then: *land and place*, *community*, and *character* appeared to be a manageable package, among the most frequently addressed by Berry, and promising as foci for contemporary educators.

In addition, one friend asked with obvious eagerness to know, “What does Berry actually say about education?” This question helped me recognize the need to include Berry’s own thoughts, directly stated. And so one chapter consolidates his most frequent concerns and assessments regarding current educational practices in the United States.

And last, a choice had to be made about how best to generate the study’s conclusions about education. Should a section focusing on education be added to each theme examined? Or would compiling the implications for education in a separate chapter work better? Given that Berry’s work is so prolific and that I had already found it difficult to reduce the number of themes I would examine, I concluded that a separate section was preferable. Therefore, Chapter VI, entitled “Integration: Educational Concerns, Key Ideas, and Themes in the Fiction,” focuses on three of Berry’s most frequently discussed concerns about education: the lack of vibrant connection between schools and the local community; the hidden costs of dividing knowledge into discrete, separate academic disciplines; and the need for a substantive change in the standard for education. This chapter offers a summary of each concern, a discussion of how the concern relates to key ideas in Berry’s work, and a consideration of the link between the themes examined in Berry’s fiction and the educational concern. This chapter seeks to integrate multiple strands of insight and implications that emerge from my reading of and reflection on Berry’s creative and discursive work.

In concluding the overall focus of the study, I pause to take a step back. It is useful, I believe, to indicate both what the study will do and what it does not do. It is not a

survey of moral philosophy as moral philosophy relates to education. Such a study would consider the work of René Arcilla, Nel Noddings, Jack Willers, Jonas Soltis, and others who probe the history of moral philosophy for its significance for educators. However, I acknowledge that placing Berry within this context would be a fruitful endeavor. It is not a study of place-based education as currently unfolding in the United States and elsewhere, though again, bringing Berry's philosophy to bear on this promising frontier would be a valuable contribution. It is not an inter-disciplinary study in the Humanities, as exemplified in the work of noteworthy scholars such as Douglas Sloan and Parker Palmer, though this approach offers worthy options. Nor is it a study of political or agrarian philosophy as others, Kimberly Smith for example, have produced scholarly work along this line. And finally, this is not a study of literary interpretation, examining aesthetic works for their literary and philosophic significance, such as Maxine Greene and Martha Nussbaum so ably model.

Rather, my study is an effort to read Berry's fiction with an eye not only to my own experience of the work but with attention to its potential message for educators. How do we understand, for example, Andy Catlett's multiple experiences of discernment over his long, often thoughtful and reflective life, for their significance for education? Are there practical ways to bring to bear his growth and development, as given in Berry's fiction, in our formal and robust systems of education? Some theorists are already carefully probing this question. Jack Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro have published a ground-breaking study of their shared effort to do just this in higher education. Jane Schreck has authored a detailed study of similar questions in her dissertation at North Dakota. And Stanley Hauerwas, teaching theology at Duke Divinity School, is actively engaging the question of how university education can better reflect Wendell Berry's insights. In this study I use Berry's fiction to supplement his nonfiction, which includes numerous appraisals of modern American education, to identify not only what Berry feels is misguided in our



education system and why, but also what signals he gives about ways to make constructive change.

For Berry offers a consistent and praise-worthy balance, in my view, of both the serious problems we face as a nation, as neighbors, and as a species, and the possibilities that are also present, albeit within a narrow window of opportunity, to reverse the super highway of destruction on which he believes we are now well advanced. Berry *does* see ways to reverse direction, to recapture policies and simple actions that preserve, restore, and heal—our earth, our natural resources, and our human communities. My effort here is to attend closely to this message and say what I can about its importance for education. Surely education can and will be part of the solution, especially if we implement Berry's vision the best we can. Hence my study is a contribution to foundations of education by close attention to a self-taught Renaissance, agrarian farmer, with a remarkable mind and a gift for eloquent expression.

### **Why the Study Is Important**

It is appropriate to ask of any research study: Why is this inquiry important? What about it captures the dedication of its author? And, what might the study contribute—to our fund of knowledge or to resolving a difficult challenge? Or, as Berry would likely put it: How will the knowledge gained be used constructively?

First, one can argue that Berry brings an especially rich set of gifts to bear upon his cultural critique, what I am calling his “message” for educators. In the mid-'60s Berry returned to his native Kentucky to take up farming a small farm which, he says, had not been well cared for in the past. In addition, it had several geographical challenges for anyone striving to make it productive. There he and his wife, Tanya Berry, began to raise livestock and crops suited to the farm's particular features. As my knowledge of farming is quite limited, I cannot claim firsthand understanding of routine farming chores. To his

credit, my father raised and nurtured vegetable gardens in most of the places where we lived. All this is to say that my impression of the farming work that Berry and his wife undertook a half-century ago was, undoubtedly, enough to occupy them full-time with part-time assistance from others, including their children. And yet, Berry did not stop with the farm. He managed to make time for extensive reading, writing, and part-time teaching. As his work became more broadly recognized he took on significant public appearances—selected speaking engagements, commencement addresses, interviews, and civil disobedience, as these opportunities emerged and provided additional platforms. From my reading in various anthologies, many people testify to the gift of Berry's friendship, his extension of neighborliness to people both near and far.

My point is that Berry's work on the land, his discipline of writing and research in multiple fields of inquiry, and his public service expressed in a variety of forms, all work together to make his message complex, layered, and at times nuanced, but always worthy of attention. Berry deserves the time and effort his readers make to hear and comprehend his prophetic, inspirational call for a change of heart in our individual and collective livelihoods.

In addition to the merits that Berry brings to his legacy, his offering to the public at large, I want at the outset to acknowledge the seemingly incomprehensible challenges that conscientious educators currently face. In their efforts to impart to young people knowledge that is valuable, practical, and worthy, teachers on every level face a myriad of demands that appear staggering. Many pre-college teachers are expected to provide not just knowledge and information in multiple disciplines, but also to take up the slack where families have been unwilling or unable to provide support and stimulating learning experiences for their young people. In addition, teachers face a lengthy list of requirements and expectations from those who review and accredit institutions of learning. Funding and adequate test scores seem a constant hurdle that teachers who wish to remain employed can ignore only at their peril. Furthermore, the technology revolution

creates constant pressures to “upgrade” and learn new ways of presenting material and creating learning experiences. In addition, school administrations vary widely in their support of teachers serving on the front lines.

Educators at multiple levels are asked to prepare students for the future, a future too often narrowly defined by career path and quantitative barometers of success (salaries, one’s position in hierarchical structures, numbers of persons supervised, and so on). Post-secondary educators face astonishing pressure to “publish or perish,” and so the amount of energy and attention for developing skilled teaching is compromised. In addition, they are asked to work in discrete academic disciplines, often separated from colleagues in other disciplines by their specialization and the “in-house” language they themselves cultivate. The most important aspects of education, as Berry understands the role of teaching, are often lost in the shuffle as academicians scramble to maintain their own footing, indeed their personal survival, and to cope with overwhelming expectations and demands.

Before reviewing the scholarly criticism Berry’s work as related to education has prompted, I wish to cite brief comments by a few public figures who help us understand why studying Berry is a worthy pursuit. I start with the title of my study: “‘*The Prophetic American Voice of Our Day*’: The Implications of Wendell Berry’s Cultural Critique for American Education in the Twenty-first Century.” I am indebted to Page Smith (1987), the historian, who so aptly describes Wendell Berry in his review of *Home Economics* for *The Christian Science Monitor* (p. B1). I have yet to encounter a more succinct and apt description, though many eloquent statements have been crafted. Smith goes on to say that Berry is “certainly one of the most penetrating critics ... of the assumptions on which modern industrial society rests” (p. B8).

Donald Hall, poet laureate of the United States, describes first meeting Berry at a cocktail party in Manhattan in the early 1960s. He tells about getting to know him over subsequent years, referring to “the farmer who wrote books that I loved—novels, poems,

stories, essays—and whose smile and laugh were incomparable. Jane Kenyon said that Wendell’s laugh was the best noise in the world” (Hall, D., 2007, p. 45).<sup>1</sup> Hall further describes his friendship with and appreciation for Berry.

We were not farmers together, but we became fast friends. We are two people left in the world who love to write letters, and our correspondence is vast.... The quality and quantity of his work dazzles me, essays and fiction and verse, as multiple and fruitful as D. H. Lawrence—as passionate too, and as candid. (Hall, D., 2007, pp. 45-46)

The prolific Hayden Carruth (2007), describing his friendship with Berry in “At His Desk as on His Land” for the Peters anthology, said, “Without doubt Wendell is the best storyteller I know” (p. 211).

Berry’s close friend for many years, James Baker Hall (2007), also writing for the Peters anthology, describes the change in Berry he witnessed as Berry’s understanding of his mission or calling grew and clarified itself.

In 1957 he’d been a camper on that riverbank; now he was an outspoken citizen of the endangered world. He shook his head in despair often, and stared off into space as though he did not want to talk anymore about what he saw. His trotlines had grown heavy, I find myself saying, and the dark in which he worked them no longer a thrilling challenge, a source of juice, more like a fear now, a dread, a terrible drain. The delightful twenty-seven pound catfish had been replaced during the intervening years with two-ton tar babies like agribusiness and world population and the fossil-fuel culture. (p. 284)

Hall, an accomplished author himself, whom Berry describes as “the first friend of the fiction of Port William” (Berry, 2012a, dedication), had this to say about his friend’s work, speaking here specifically about the “Window Poems” which Berry apparently sent him for initial review.

I loved these poems when I first read them and found them thrilling, and inspiring—he was so far out ahead of the rest of us—already he knew what he had to write about and who he wanted to be and what he wanted to sound

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<sup>1</sup>Jane Kenyon (1947-1995) was an American poet and translator. Married to the poet Donald Hall, she was poet laureate of New Hampshire. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Kenyon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Kenyon))

like—already he was becoming very accomplished, one good book after another. (Hall, J. B., 2007, p. 285)

And Terry T. Williams (1991), a renowned conservation author and educator, whose reflection on attending Edward Abbey's memorial service with Berry, "A Full Moon in May," appears in Merchant's anthology, puts it quite eloquently. "Wendell Berry is our nation's conscience" (p. 67), she says.

More accolades could be included, but these serve to establish the reverence with which people have come to regard the Kentucky farmer and author.

I believe that Berry's work merits attention because he cares so passionately about the well-being of the planet, acre by acre, and the health and livelihood of human communities, local community by local community. In addition he values what those who came before us learned and sacrificed and strove to leave for those who followed. And he calls our attention to what we leave for those who come next. These are the enduring and driving motivations of a man Hayden Carruth (2007) says, "always worked harder than anyone else I know, at his desk as on his land" (p. 211).

Our society now faces ominous challenges on many fronts in spite of significant accomplishments and breakthroughs in multiple arenas over the years. We face life-threatening choices and decisions, the magnitude of which may be unprecedented in human history, even as I acknowledge that our woeful lack of historical awareness may cause us to underestimate the challenges our forebears faced. If we can choose well, thinking well beyond our individual comfort and life spans, if we can stymie the momentum of the heady arrogance that too often accompanies our frontier-conquering history, and rather discern what is most advisable within our limited knowledge and resources—then, I believe, and hope, that education may yet play a major role in that process.

For years, I understood that Berry was critical of, indeed vehemently opposed to, much of our corporate, industrial mindset, including many government decisions and the

ravages of agribusiness, as well as the cost and destruction of the military-industrial complex. Government, corporations, and the military were, as I understood Berry, his top three targets. But not until I began the research for this study did I realize how critical Berry is of much of our education, how he credits our misdirection educationally with so many of our biggest challenges. This has been a difficult, but important discovery for me. I was raised with much emphasis on the value of education. I believed, like many in the western world, that education would rise to the occasion and help us solve society's worst dilemmas. Berry cautions us—hold on, not so fast, look again. He calls this belief about education a “superstition” (Smith, 2007, p. 93).

And so we must listen, even if we struggle with what we hear. If we wish to maintain a realistic belief in the potential for education to play a crucial, constructive role in sustaining our livelihood and well-being—we must heed Berry's call for a radical re-working of educational goals, methods, and objectives. And if education does not play a central role in our recovery, healing, and survival, then we face a foreboding question: what *will* play such a role? I do not believe it is all up to the schools. However, I do believe we are on a path guaranteed to miss the mark educationally if we fail to listen to Berry and do all we can to implement his wisdom, his hard-earned truths.

In summary, then, my inquiry will pay especial attention to the interplay of land and place and human community in Berry's fiction and essays in an effort to say more about this essential relationship and how American education, be it rural, urban, or suburban, can be a constructive force in identifying both the losses or vulnerabilities in that relationship as well as the opportunities. The study will examine how teachers and learners, paying attention to that dynamic in their local communities, can discover and implement significant steps toward healing and repair.

My hope for this study is that it will play a positive role in helping educators better understand and implement Berry's focused and timely recommendations—for an overhaul in our approach to educating America's young people, an overhaul that targets

the sustainability of our natural resources and the health and vibrancy of our local communities.

### **Framing the Conversation**

In examining Berry's fiction, essays, and observations about education to identify the major implications of his work for contemporary educators, I strive to contribute to a conversation in which others have posed related questions and advanced their especial understanding for how to use Berry's philosophy to enhance education's role in facilitating the development of young people, to become caring, responsible members of the community. This conversation reveals the hopeful belief of its participants in the possibility that education will make such a contribution. In this section I listen to the conversation. It has helped me identify how and why Berry's work speaks to me. It also assists me in understanding how my own inquiry relates to the valuable contributions of other Berry scholars.

I identify four broad categories as a means to organize this literature: *biographical and interpretive studies* (which examine Berry's anti-status quo position from various perspectives); *broad educational concerns* (which include considerations of the philosophical roots of Berry's educational theory); *specific educational issues and contexts* (initial studies focused on rural education, for example); and *various literary perspectives* (or literary interpretations and analyses). Entries are in chronological order within the categories.

### **Biographical and Interpretive Studies**

Page Smith (1987), author of the eight-volume *A People's History of the United States* (p. B1), praises Berry's work with deep appreciation in "Responsibly at home in

the Great Economy,” a review of Berry’s *Home Economics* in *The Christian Science Monitor*. Smith places Berry at the center of American arts and letters.

Like Emerson, Berry is a master of the quotable sentence. But he is, of course, much more than that. He is, in the opinion of this reviewer, *the* prophetic American voice of our day. He is clearly in the tradition of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, with more than a dash of Melville, but he is also in the grand Southern tradition of Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Flannery O’Connor. And while Berry speaks in accents that are often reminiscent of Emerson, he goes substantially beyond the New Englander in his awareness of the tragic ironies and paradoxes of the human condition.  
(p. B1)

Smith’s respect for Berry is partly explained by his view of the intellectual climate in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century. “Berry’s poems and essays serve, among other things, to remind us of how few American literary figures (or any other figures) speak with what was once called moral authority” (p. B1).

Smith (1987) concludes his review by declaring Berry “‘Professor of Moral Philosophy at Large’... a teacher whose classroom is these United States” (p. B8). For the credentialed intellectual to offer such a heartfelt review of Berry’s work, three decades ago, is a significant tribute to the Kentucky farmer-poet’s legacy.

Andrew J. Angyal wrote one of the earlier studies of Wendell Berry. Published in 1995, *Wendell Berry* offers comprehensive biographical data, a 1991 interview, and chapters on Berry’s agricultural and cultural critiques, the Port William fiction, and the poetry. Angyal notes, “Seldom has an American writer used essays, fiction, and poetry to develop so consistent a set of themes” (p. 99). He further observes, “His abiding interest has always been in how people come to belong to a place, how they overcome the restlessness so prevalent in our culture and remain—or become—permanent members of a particular community” (p. xi).

Angyal (1995) helps the reader see the comprehensiveness of Berry’s vision and assessment.



His analysis of the social, political, and economic forces that have eroded rural America since World War II is perceptive and compelling. Berry's agrarianism is no mere sentimental attachment to the past, but a compelling critique of progress and of the kind of society ours has become. Like the earlier generations of Agrarians, he opposes industrialism, urbanization, and technology, but he sharpens his advocacy of rural life with an informed ecological vision and an understanding of the complex relationships among the health of the individual, the family, the community, and the environment. (p. x)

Angyal's deeply appreciative research of Berry's life and work is a major contribution to Berry scholarship.

In *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace*, Kimberly K. Smith (2003) has written a comprehensive exploration of the agrarian philosophy at the heart of Berry's cultural critique. She argues that Berry draws deeply from the agrarian tradition earmarked by southern agrarians, Thomas Jefferson, and others, and also revises that tradition in accord with his perception of our greatest challenges and social failings.

Smith (2003) claims that Berry's advocacy for viable, small, family farms and healthy local communities that support those who work the land, is supported not so much by logistical proof rooted in accepted premises and their consequent conclusions as by "contextual justification" whereby through his fiction Berry paints a picture of one possibility which we can see as preferable to our own state of affairs. Crediting Don Herzog for the term, Smith states, "Contextual justification proceeds by demonstrating that the institution, practice, tradition, or whatever you want to defend is better than the alternatives.... It starts not from foundational principles but from the problems and possibilities of a given social context" (p. 121). She observes the harsh realities that characterize life in Port William, arguing that it "is far from idyllic, much less utopian" (p. 125), even as she claims it presents an alternative to our reality and thereby stimulates readers to imagine how our own contexts could be changed for the better.

In concluding her study, Smith (2003) outlines the challenge of characterizing Berry's political philosophy, examining the "deep tension between ecocentrism and the practical work of farming" (p. 208).

Although he ultimately endorses liberal political institutions and some version of capitalism, many of Berry's basic principles are consistent with (if not derived from) socialist thought. In particular, he shares with leftist theorists a strong concern for the welfare of the producer and endorses much of their critique of corporate power and market-driven behavior. In addition, his belief in social equality, his critique of individualism, his interest in how physical labor shapes our character and consciousness, and his materialism (or, as he would put it, his rejection of body/spirit dualism) all resonate with leftist ideology.

But whatever his shade of green or red, we can at least conclude that Berry has formulated an intelligent, thoughtful agrarianism that encompasses a broad range of values—ecological, aesthetic, spiritual, economic, political, and cultural. To those of us interested in the evolution of ideas, that alone is a significant achievement. But of course this is not merely an intellectual exercise for Berry. His goal is not to design an elegant philosophical system but to create a new, politically useful language with which to press the claims of small farmers and the rural community. (pp. 209-210)

Smith's solid and stimulating study is a major contribution to Berry scholarship.

Fritz Oehlschlaeger's (2011) *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* is a thorough study of Berry's work that considers all three genres and their overriding themes in an effort to help the reader "see Berry's work as the integrated whole I believe it to be" (p. 5). Oehlschlaeger observes Berry's attention to "'kindly use'" (p. 29) in every endeavor, be it farming, writing about one's region, addressing a local problem, or participating in relationships. Oehlschlaeger describes the focus of Berry's work with an especially fitting phrase.

The end for Berry, as he's described it in "Imagination in Place," is what we might call the development of a comprehensive charity, the virtue that sees and acts from *an ever-deepening regard for the unique particularity of every created thing* [emphasis added]. (p. 4)

Oehlschlaeger (2011) discusses how knowledge and teaching must change in order to reflect the fundamental principles of Berry's cultural critique. He says at one point,

“Education becomes inseparable from love” (p. 40). For a fuller context of this evocative statement, I quote from the chapter, “Practices, Particulars, and Virtues: What Mules Taught Wendell Berry,” in which Oehlschlaeger encapsulates Berry’s philosophy, the foundation of which he learned on the farm at a young age.

To learn the practice of the teamster is to learn that one has not invented the terms of one’s existence. One must discover what works within a practice that one depends upon but whose possibilities and limits one did not create. To learn a practice in this way is to find oneself in the midst of an ongoing history. The practice must be learned from others: what one learns, in fact, is the history of others’ experiments in the practice. One comes, in short, to think of learning as a matter of discovering what is appropriate or fitting within limits inherent in the practice. As one can also see that this practice is vital to the lives of those for whom one cares, one comes to care about the practice or discipline. (p. 40)

Oehlschlaeger relates the discipline and practice of working with a team of farm animals to education and acts of love.

Learning it becomes an act of love, a way of giving allegiance to those who have come before one and found it good. One can see that those who are concerned to transmit the practice do so not because they want to bind or enslave the future to the past but because they care about passing on a way of life they have found to be good. Education becomes inseparable from love. When this process takes place within the context of rural or agricultural life, it is inevitably fleshly, embodied, particular. Mules differ; pieces of land differ; hillsides differ; bottomlands differ. These are things good farmers know. These are things that people who want to continue to live in the good land *must* know. (p. 40)

Additional understanding about how Berry views knowledge is offered in Oehlschlaeger’s (2011) reference to one of Berry’s poems.

In “A Praise,” a short poem from *Farming: A Handbook*, Berry gives homage to one, now dead, by acknowledging how “certain wise movements of his hands, / the turns of his speech / keep with me. His hope of peace / keeps with me in harsh days.” ...The man remains present with Berry, his hope a part of him, his wisdom carried in his movements. What one learns from such a man or woman is embodied knowledge, inseparable from the one who bears it. Moreover, to recognize that what one knows has been forever shaped by the memory of “certain wise movements” of another’s hands is to know that one resides ultimately in mystery. (p. 41)

Oehlschlaeger (2011) outlines in broad strokes the impetus of Berry's cultural critique, describing Berry's resistance to reductive modes of thinking. He says, "A distinction between mystery and problem is important to Berry" (p. 41). He notes Berry's resistance to Edward Wilson's theory of "consilience" with its unqualified faith in science to develop solutions to all problems, as developed in Berry's *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*. Oehlschlaeger links Berry's resistance to reductive thinking to the significance of particulars.<sup>2</sup>

To resist such reduction is at the heart of Berry's intellectual, political, and religious commitment. His way of doing so is to ceaselessly remind us of what is left out by the abstractions of our specialized knowledges, not because he fears those knowledges—though there is reason to fear some of what they have produced—but because he believes, much like Thoreau, that freedom for both scientists and artists lies in continually enlarging the contexts of their work.

A real, nonreductive enlarging of the contexts of artistic or scientific work must depend, however, on a knowledge of particulars. That knowledge requires the virtues, especially patience, humility, the courage to begin a practice like marriage that one cannot understand prior to its practice, hope, faith, the willingness to rest in ignorance. Knowledge of particulars requires love, perhaps especially in our time when the horizon of technology enframes everything as so much "standing reserve" to be converted into something else.... To be continually enlarging the context of one's work, then, without diminishing the weight of particulars, requires the continual extension of one's love. To think of love in this way is to understand it as a history—sometimes, perhaps even often, hard. Surely it is something one did not invent. (p. 41)

Oehlschlaeger's (2011) study may be said to examine Berry's skill in "continually enlarging the context" of his work "without diminishing the weight of particulars." His engaging study yields a valuable tool for all devoted to bringing Berry's vision of an alternative livelihood, centered in commitment to land, place, and local community, to fruition.

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<sup>2</sup>In the following passage, Oehlschlaeger (2011) cites Martin Heidegger for the quoted phrase and concept, [*The*] *Question Concerning Technology*, p. 17. (p. 275)

### **Broad Educational Concerns**

Perhaps the first to address Berry's educational philosophy, Paul Theobald and Dale Snauwaert (1990) begin by identifying Berry's fundamental views. In "The Educational Philosophy of Wendell Berry," they argue "that Berry conceives human beings as creators as well as moral agents who achieve their humanity only in relation to their geographical space (the land) and their community" (p. 1). They see Berry's educational philosophy as focused on the cultivation and enhancement of literacy, through a liberal curriculum, and critical judgment that includes experiential engagement with real world issues. They describe Berry's educational thought as "ecological" because of his overarching focus on our dependence upon and treatment of the land and human community. They trace Berry's philosophy to classical Greek (*paideia*), the Frankfurt School, and Deweyan progressivism. Hence, they launch what others have come to see as an essential conversation.

Seeking to identify Berry's educational theory, the authors note, "From this perspective, the purpose of education is the development of productive skills and the capacity to exercise judgment" (Theobald & Snauwaert, 1990, p. 6). They claim that "the purpose of education for Berry is fundamentally liberal; it is the development of the full potential of the individual" (p. 6).

Theobald and Snauwaert (1990) outline the teaching objectives implicit in Berry's critique of current educational praxis.

According to Berry, schools must teach literacy by providing access to the best that has been written and said. Schools must teach a critical awareness concerning the uses of language and an inclination to use language ethically. They must promote an accurate and true understanding of our nation's history, particularly with respect to our use of the environment. They must promote local knowledge and encourage membership into the local community by guiding students to understandings about the forces aligned against their communities. (p. 11)

They conclude by describing Berry's educational philosophy in their own words.

Berry's educational philosophy may be best described as "ecological," for it is concerned with the care and cultivation of our geographical space, as well as truth and justice.... The fundamental educational truth here is that how we treat the earth and its inhabitants will in the end determine our own character. (p. 18)

Theobald and Snauwaert (1990) were among the first to recognize the significance of Berry's philosophy, placing his views about education within the context of education theory.

Madhu Prakash (1994) is also among the first to analyze Berry's philosophy of education. Her *Educational Theory* article, "'What Are People For?' Wendell Berry on Education, Ecology, and Culture," claims that "Berry is a genuinely radical thinker, a master at making whole again our fragmented lives and learning" (p. 136).

In presenting Berry's proposals for change, for transforming our culture, agriculture, and education, Prakash (1994) observes the rush toward globalization, global thinking and global solutions, as well as the limitations of this move. She notes, "Real globalization is ecologically unsustainable" (p. 145). She elaborates, drawing together multiple strands of Berry's philosophy, "Responding to the structural impossibility and the moral undesirability of bringing economic development to the whole world, Berry encourages us to return home, empowering ourselves to perform human tasks that *are* feasible: local regeneration...cultural, agricultural, or ecological" (p. 145).

Maintaining her focus on the prevalent lure of global thinking and solutions, Prakash (1994) reconstructs the merits of Berry's concerns, analyses, and proposals for reversing our long-standing attitudes and practices resulting in environmental loss and destruction.

Berry's education for the remarriage of people with nature compels a thorough reconsideration of the institutional scale at which we can live "the good life." Today's inappropriate living and learning,...is the inevitable result of people moving beyond the human scale, beyond ordinary peoples' capacities to know, follow through, and care for the consequences of their actions. Humanizing us as Paulo Freire and other radicals do *not* [emphasis added], Berry's education helps us to move beyond the inhuman scale of our modern institutions. It teaches us to "think little," to stop our international

looting of the natural resources of distant, and therefore unknown, places by becoming more self-sufficient and autonomous. All of this entails an education that teaches us how to contain our needs once again.... Any other conception of “education for global responsibility” is a farce. (p. 148)

Endorsing Berry’s philosophy and personal example, even in the face of “the fabulous feats of the ‘information age’” (p. 148), Prakash (1994) makes explicit the ways Berry’s views could impact education.

For Berry...the contemporary educational challenge lies in deconstructing our “faith” or folly in modern science, technology, and economics. Instead of more “high-tech” fixes and scientific solutions, Berry proposes the experiences, knowledge, skills, and common sense of ordinary people that have demonstrated their educational and ecological value over centuries. He suggests radical reductions in the classrooms, books, and technologies that alienate us from our natural surroundings. These are replaced by daily experiences which teach us to regain the use of our hands and feet...to use our five senses...learning about our communal spaces in the concrete, and *not* in the abstract.... This intimate and concrete knowledge is exemplified by traditional peoples and indigenous cultures of the soil. (p. 148)

Prakash (1994) cites examples of current educational approaches that reflect Berry’s cultural and ecological ideas including David Orr’s Meadowcreek project, John Gatto’s community service opportunities outlined in *Dumbing Us Down*, and Eliot Wigginton’s Foxfire Project (p. 153).

Prakash (1994) links Berry’s philosophy and cultural critique, including his proposals for transforming education and increasing the autonomy of ordinary people, to his literary imagination and achievements. She observes,

Berry’s craft as a writer makes his educational thought accessible to ordinary people. It brings philosophy and education down to earth.... He is creating new public commons: where ordinary people can fully engage in philosophical explorations on how to live the good life in times socially troubled and ecologically devastating. Berry’s large public following is testimony to his success in rejecting forthright all professional talk and language. (p. 155)

Prakash (1994) and others opened the ground-breaking conversation about the significance of Berry's work, values, philosophy, cultural critique, and artistic expression in multiple genres, for American education at all levels.

In her 2013 *Educational Studies* article, "Eros, Education, and Eco-Ethical Consciousness: Re-Membering the 'Room of Love' in Wendell Berry's *Hannah Coulter*," Rebecca Martusewicz identifies herself as "an ecojustice scholar and teacher" (p. 444) and acknowledges her mother "as my first teacher" (p. 443). She identifies the importance of education in establishing healthy communities, ones that preserve Berry's "essential components of love—generosity, kindness, affection, sensuality, connection, mutual responsibility" (p. 444).

Describing the freedom of her childhood to play outdoors, ride horses from a very young age, and make "relationships with all sorts of animals and people, old and young," Martusewicz (2013) says she believes these experiences enabled for her "a powerful education in what it means to be responsible to a community," broadly defined to include the natural world (p. 446).

Reflecting on the "reciprocities" (p. 446) that healthy community membership makes possible and observing examples in her own life and in Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter*, Martusewicz (2013) sets forth what she sees as Berry's fundamental criticism of American education.

Wendell Berry uses his fiction to present a rare critique of the ways that education (or actually schooling in both primary/secondary institutions and institutions of higher education) teaches us to participate in the reproduction of individualism, progress and commodification, pulling us away from the important give and take necessary to community, especially farming communities, by convincing us that success is about moving out and up. For Berry, such an education is at the heart of the destruction of the small farming communities. (p. 448)

Martusewicz (2013) poses her overriding question, "What kind of education do we need to revitalize our sense of responsibility to one another and to the Earth that supports



us?” (p. 448). She replies in part by citing her 2005 statement in *Ethics, Place & Environment: A Journal of Philosophy and Geography*, “I am most interested in those embodied experiences that draw us closer, that create connection and pleasure, happiness and well-being, and thus could move us to protect each other and the living systems we depend upon’ (Martusewicz, 2005, 334)” (p. 446).

Martusewicz (2013) offers an insightful account of Berry’s work, anchored in her own experience and focused on connections between Berry’s *Hannah Coulter* and the need for more effective pedagogical approaches to responsibility and loving relationships. In the process she acknowledges Berry’s contribution to ecojustice education, healthy communities, and sustainable livelihood.

In their book chapter, “‘Putting Our Lives in Order’: Wendell Berry, EcoJustice, and a Pedagogy of Responsibility,” Jeff Edmundson and Rebecca Martusewicz (2013) identify in Berry’s work a philosophical and cultural critique that informs their goal of developing “EcoJustice” pedagogy. Berry’s account of the beliefs, values, and practices of our extractive, consumer-ridden society and his vision for alternative livelihoods, focused on preservation and viable local economies, prompt the authors to pose fundamental questions such a pedagogy would address: “‘To whom are we ethically responsible?’”; “‘What is to be conserved and what transformed?’”; and “‘What and whom do we need to protect in order to live well together?’” (p. 172). The authors note that “Wendell Berry helps us to recognize our capture in a violent culture” (p. 171). They identify the two primary objectives of EcoJustice education. One is to enable students to develop a critical awareness of “the ecological and social crises we face.” The second is to cultivate in young people the knowledge of “relationships, attitudes, beliefs and practices needed for mutual caretaking of each other and the planet” (p. 171).

The authors state especially well the fundamental connection that undergirds Berry’s work and wisdom. “At the center of Berry’s philosophy is the understanding that *the same forces that tear apart community also destroy the ecosystems upon which we all*

*rely* [emphasis added]” (Edmundson & Martusewicz, 2013, p. 172). This is the most succinct statement I have seen of the primary connection that, I believe, informs all of Berry’s work.

In contrasting Berry’s philosophy and its implications for education with the trends and practices of modern schooling and its focus on individual career success, narrowly defined, the authors observe, “A pedagogy of responsibility requires that we face the ways our institutions, including and especially educational institutions perpetuate violence in the name of progress and superiority” (Edmundson & Martusewicz, 2013, p. 178).

In the conversation that has developed around these themes and the question of whether EcoJustice pedagogy includes a focus on marginalized or minority groups, the authors observe how EcoJustice pedagogy differs from traditional liberation pedagogies.

In contrast to progressive and liberation pedagogies, which focus on the liberation and rights of oppressed Others, a pedagogy of responsibility shifts the focus away from the liberation of the Other, requiring instead that we take responsibility to look at *ourselves first* as members of colonizing cultures, turning the analytic lens and the transformational actions on those discursive structures and patterns, identities and practices that originate within and benefit those with privilege in the dominant culture. (Edmundson & Martusewicz, 2013, pp. 179-180)

Edmundson and Martusewicz (2013) thus focus on qualities of community membership as the foundation for “a pedagogy of responsibility” (p. 171), making a valuable contribution to the conversation about Berry and education.

### **Specific Educational Issues and Contexts**

Dale T. Snauwaert (1990) analyzes Berry’s social philosophy to determine its meaning for rural education in his *Peabody Journal of Education* article, “Wendell Berry, Liberalism, and Democratic Theory: Implications for the Rural School.” Snauwaert anchors his analysis in two observations about Berry’s views. One is the centrality of

land for Berry; the other is Berry's sense of the community as an indispensable component.

In placing human community at the front of his exploration, Snauwaert (1990) observes, "For Berry community is a condition of knowledge of sharedness, and out of this knowledge emerges a concept of one's self. In other words, the self is defined by its association with others within a shared geographical space" (p. 119). Snauwaert asserts that Berry's views about community and human development (or personhood) include a rejection of "classical" and "corporate" liberalism (p. 119).

Citing the philosopher Joseph Schumpeter, Snauwaert (1990) observes Berry's dedication to "communitarian notions of democracy" (p. 120). He states, "From Berry's perspective, however, mind domination is not inevitable, nor normatively justifiable; it is viewed by Berry as an instrument of exploitation" (p. 120). He goes on to observe,

Berry (1970, 1984) maintains that those who possess objective power in our society have the capacity to package thoughts. The media, the public schools, and other cultural institutions are the vehicles that convey "ready-made thoughts." The result is what Berry calls a "mind-dominated society." (pp. 120-121)<sup>3</sup>

Acknowledging Berry's attribution of "mind-domination" in part to our culture's "distortion of language" and noting how "the manufacture of consent conceals objective power" (p. 121), Snauwaert (1990) clarifies both our modern predicament and Berry's position.

The fundamental point here is that the cost of this hegemony is the loss of the opportunity to fully engage in shared, creative engagement with the earth in communion with others, which in turn debilitates our mental and spiritual condition; it robs us of genuine personhood. (p. 121)

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<sup>3</sup>Snauwaert (1990) further notes, "Berry's notion of mind domination is similar to [Antonio] Gramsci's conception of ideological hegemony in that a world view which serves to legitimate existing power relations is transmitted to the population through various cultural institutions controlled by elites." Snauwaert refers the reader to C. Boggs's *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (1984) for a discussion of Gramsci (pp. 121, 130).

Snauwaert (1990) asserts that Berry's social philosophy "demands a fundamental reconceptualization of rural schooling" (p. 124) and identifies Berry's central premises about education.

The purpose of education for Berry (1987) is fundamentally liberal; education should liberate the full potential of every individual. Berry (1987) conceives human potential in terms of two basic categories: productivity and judgement; "how to make and how to judge, are the business of education" (p. 81). Berry argues, however, that current educational policy is myopically skewed toward the productive dimension of human potential to the detriment of judgement. More specifically, shaped by corporate liberalism, "the purpose of education [in the United States] has been to prepare people to 'take their places' in an industrial society" (Berry, 1990, p. 25); in essence education for Berry has become, to use Joel Spring's (1976) phrase, a "sorting machine" rather than a process of human development. (pp. 124-125)

Arguing that Berry sees education's deficits in terms of failure to cultivate students' abilities for sound judgment and creative, imaginative endeavors, Snauwaert (1990) outlines the educational components he believes most clearly support Berry's views for enabling young people to develop as responsible, democratic citizens.

Judgement, according to Berry (1987), is best cultivated through a liberal education grounded in literacy, broadly defined.... This basic, liberal education would entail a general, core curriculum founded primarily on literacy and historical knowledge from which specialized pursuits could emerge. This literary education would include the teaching of a critical use of language with sensitivity to the ethical consequences of language. In addition to this literary education, Berry advocates the promotion of local knowledge and membership in the community. Local knowledge and membership can only be achieved through communion and shared work with adults. Hence, the liberal education Berry envisions has two fundamental dimensions: literacy and local knowledge and membership, both of which are designed to cultivate judgement and enhance creative work. (p. 125)

Snauwaert (1990) makes explicit how Berry's emphasis on enhancing judgment and imaginative, creative work as educational goals supports the strengthening of participatory democracy. "A liberal education grounded in local knowledge, entailing intimate involvement with adults and their community, would provide the necessary preparation for democratic citizenship" (p. 126).

Snauwaert (1990) deserves credit for launching the conversation about the meaning of Berry's philosophy and cultural critique for educators. This solid exploration lays the foundation for all who follow. I have two qualifying comments. First, does Snauwaert mean to imply that Berry's views about education are applicable only or primarily to rural schools? He simply does not address urban education, and thereby leaves us with an open question.

Second, Snauwaert (1990) discusses Berry's conviction that young people and adults working together "in the shared life" of the community create a rich learning environment for the young, accurately portraying Berry's views. I raise the question, however, whether we can always assume that the community is mature, or *more* mature than the students, the younger generation. We hear many stories in which young people assume the adult role in situations where "adults" are unable or unwilling to assume responsibility and demonstrate mentoring skills. Perhaps this assumption—that the grown-ups in the community are more mature than the young people—is a carry-over from earlier eras in which this was, in fact, a reasonable assumption. Nevertheless, I conclude that the conversation about Berry and education owes Snauwaert (1990) much gratitude.

Kimberly K. Smith threads a tricky needle in her 2001 *Women's Studies* article, "Wendell Berry's Feminist Agrarianism." She outlines major feminist concerns and identifies ways in which Berry's agrarian philosophy supports, challenges, or disregards those concerns. Her article is noteworthy for several reasons: she acknowledges a variety of feminist perspectives about women's oppression and its history; she offers a balanced read of Berry which neither writes him off as unsympathetic nor ignores places where she believes his awareness could be enhanced; she respects the complexity of the multiple voices she examines; and her analysis *precedes* the publication in 2004 of *Hannah Coulter*, the novel in which Berry breaks new ground by featuring a deeply engaging female voice.

Smith (2001) hypothesizes a constructive dialogue between Berry and leading feminist voices in America. She establishes the common ground shared by Berry and many feminist theoreticians.

Far from idealizing our agrarian past, as some have charged, the bulk of Berry's work is aimed at criticizing it, and often on the same grounds that feminists do. America, he insists, has a long tradition of bad agriculture and unhealthy, unstable communities, both maintained by violence and abuse. (p. 627)

Smith claims that Berry's agrarian philosophy argues constructively for a change in our cultural visions and understanding of masculinity.

While unwilling to jettison traditional constructions of gender altogether, Berry is acutely sensitive to the difficulties they create for us. His stories underscore the extent to which violence and domination are integral to manhood in rural American society.... For Berry's male characters, achieving manhood means coming to terms with this legacy and expectation of violence. (p. 630)

Examining examples from Berry's fiction, Smith concludes,

His heroes thus strive for a more positive, less destructive definition of masculinity, and the best of them deal with their violent pacts by rejecting it, by defining themselves and their roles in terms of nurturance, stewardship and responsibility, rather than domination, violence, and autonomy.... In fact, what is most striking about Berry's men is their willingness to express love and affection for other men.... Berry's rejection of violence and domination thus offers a conception of masculinity that would allow considerable freedom in reconstructing traditional gender roles. (p. 631)

Smith (2001) observes, "The theme of grace pervades Berry's work" (p. 644) and closes with a summary of Berry's value for advancing the feminist agenda as she interprets his agrarian philosophy.

In sum, Berry suggests that feminists adopt a more comprehensive moral ideal than autonomy—a vision of the good life that validates both the search for independence *and* the experiences of a fulfilling interdependence and responsibility that characterize a complete human life. Agrarianism, he insists, holds out the possibility of such a life, while industrial capitalism does not. (p. 642)

She restates her own objective in her conclusion.

I hope I have at least clarified Berry's complex relationship to feminism. His engagement with issues of gender is deeper and more pervasive than most critics recognize, and constitutes less a rejection of than a dialogue with traditional feminist complaints about rural life. Moreover, he offers a vision of social life that achieves many feminist goals.... In his world, stewardship—of the earth, the community, and the family—would be the common work of men and women, [superseding] and, if necessary, subverting conventional role definitions and practices. (pp. 642-643)

Smith's essay summarizes and extends an important conversation, exploring how Berry's agrarian philosophy embraces the natural world and at the same time addresses pervading inequities in society. She claims that Berry's philosophy challenges characteristics of dominance traditionally accepted as masculine and thereby invites both genders to strive for livelihoods that enhance the health and sustainability of community and the natural world.

Stanley Hauerwas (2007), a professor in theological ethics at Duke Divinity School, strives to envision "a university shaped by Christian practices" even as he acknowledges that "in America it is very hard to sustain a life of study without being parasitic on the university" (p. 93).

In his book chapter, "What Would a Christian University Look Like? Some Tentative Answers Inspired by Wendell Berry," Hauerwas (2007) outlines Berry's criticisms about the demise of our language, including the absolution of accountability and the role education plays in the deterioration of meaning, understanding, and responsibility.

Berry thinks the modern university is at least one of the institutions that should be held responsible for the corruption of our language. The university at once legitimates as well as reproduces the disintegration of the life of the mind and of communities through increasing specialization. (p. 97)

Citing multiple Berry essays, Hauerwas (2007) observes, "The dominance of science in the modern university reflects the captivity of universities to industrial societies" (p. 99). He further explicates Berry's views about language, community, and education.

For Berry the assumption that education is the solution to all our problems is a correlate to the increasing violence of what is taught. Berry thinks the violence of education is, as we should suspect from his analysis in *Standing by Words*, to be found in the destruction of language and community. (p. 99)

Hauerwas quotes Berry's *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (p. 123), "Real education is determined by community needs" (p. 99).

Hauerwas (2007) acknowledges the need for particular types of community in any successful endeavor to reduce the onslaught of abstractions and the lack of accountability they engender, whether the abstractions emerge in educational settings, faith organizations, or other social entities. He links his understanding of Berry's message for radical change in our culture and education to the poignant story in *Hannah Coulter*.

Berry's appeal to a religious sense of mystery for maintaining some sense of the "whole" is important, but a sense of mystery cannot be sustained absent a community in which the mystery is materially enacted. A university able to resist the mystifications legitimated by the abstractions of our social order will depend on a people shaped by fundamental practices necessary for truthful speech. In short, without the church, a church capable of demythologizing the false idealism that [possess] our imaginations, there is no possibility that a university can exist capable of educating a Caleb Coulter who might return home. (p. 104)

Hauerwas makes a compelling statement about Berry's *Hannah Coulter*. "The novel *Hannah Coulter* expresses Berry's deepest worry about the contemporary university, which is what an 'education' does to people" (p. 101). Elaborating, Hauerwas clarifies Berry's perspective.

It is a mistake to accuse him of being anti-technological or against all forms of specialization. His problem with technology and specialization is when they become ends in themselves producing people with no ends. As he puts it in *Another Turn of the Crank*, he is not ["'against technology' so much as I am for community. When the choice is between the health of a community and technological innovation, I choose the health of the community."...Technology, particularly in industrial economies, too easily becomes abstracted from the purposes that it was to serve. (p. 101)



In his conclusion, Hauerwas wrestles with a provocative question, “Do Christian academics, in spite of their criticisms of the university, legitimate those universities by our very presence?” (p. 106).

Hauerwas’s (2007) essay bespeaks his commitment to his faith as well as a deep appreciation for Berry and how Berry’s analysis can be implemented, realistically, in our colleges and universities. Joel Shuman in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, observes.

Any consideration of how the professions might recommit to working for the common good has necessarily to take into account the way those professions train their members. The essays in part 1 of the book do just that. The first, written by the eminent theologian Stanley Hauerwas, asks Berry to help him imagine what a Christian university might look like. Hauerwas concludes that it would have to be characterized first of all by propriety and truthfulness and that only through a firm commitment to these standards can it be saved from being beholden to corporations and their influence on the career interests of students, which are destructive of long-term fidelity to people and place. (Shuman, 2009, p. 6)

Jason Peters’s essay, “Education, Heresy, and the ‘Deadly Disease of the World,’” in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, offers the reader a rich exegetical tapestry of Berry’s work, especially his criticism of education. Repeatedly supporting Berry’s critique, Peters quotes Berry in three genres, eloquently and succinctly. He has a special gift for citing just the phrase that buffets the particular argument at hand.

For example, before posing his central question, “How do we craft that full human being?” (p. 263), Peters (2007a) cites a long-standing view of Berry’s and weaves it into his own exposition.

As early as *The Long-Legged House* (1969) he said, “No matter how sophisticated and complex and powerful our institutions, we are still exactly as dependent on the earth as the earthworms.”...

Berry has thought about education in terms of *net* gains—by remembering that after you add up your improved pumps, you must subtract for your depleted wells.... It is with this sort of calculus in mind that he has criticized education and offered his alternative vision, and we will neither see the genius nor understand the urgency of that alternative vision if we

refuse to acknowledge that we are as dependent on the soil as the earthworms. (pp. 262-3)

Peters observes that “‘Selective bookkeeping’ is a favorite idiom of Berry’s” (p. 278).

Peters (2007a) navigates the complexity of Berry’s critique using intricate details as well as over-arching conclusions. The following statement illustrates the latter.

Back of all that Berry says about education stands an ideal: truly large-minded, truly well-educated people. Such men and women have achieved a synthesis of the liberal and domestic arts; they have learned from, not merely about, Spenser; they can also (and also will) grow a potato. They understand that the less they do for themselves—the less walking and more driving, for example—the more they will be implicated in degradation of many kinds. (p. 267)

In the note that follows this passage, Peters quotes Berry about multiple generations of his family and the same tract of land.

“My grandson... is now following his father and me over some of the same countryside that I followed my father and grandfather over. When his time comes, my grandson will choose as he must, but so far all of us have been farmers. I know from my grandfather that when he was a child he too followed his father in this way, hearing and seeing, not knowing yet that the most essential part of his education had begun.” *Life Is a Miracle*, 151. (Peters, 2007a, p. 279)

Peters (2007a) pays especial attention to Berry’s consistent laments about the prevalence of the mind-body separation in our culture, history, and tradition, citing its several philosophical and theological characterizations and claiming its significance for education. He concludes his consideration of Berry’s importance for education on a prescient note.

When education makes its goal the degradation and obsolescence of the body—and it has—the recovery of the domestic arts becomes all the more urgent. When we take care of things at home, when we work well and to proper scale, and when we understand that work as vocation, we have begun to recover a lost wholeness. When we consider to what ancient heresies that lost wholeness attaches, we may at last become aware of how grave our condition is and how high the stakes are. (p. 274)

Peters (2007a) draws on two decades of teaching experience, “putting Berry’s essays in the hands of undergraduates,” to support his claim that, “most students are

looking for a vision like Berry's and a manner like his of articulating it" (p. 275). His essay is a major contribution to Berry scholarship. Fritz Oehlschlaeger (2011), in *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, observes,

Perhaps the most extensive survey and development of Berry's ideas about university education is Peters, "Education, Heresy." Peters's critique focuses on the commoditizing of contemporary education, proposing, as an alternative, one based on a "rediscovery [recovery] of character and skill—the character to choose less and the skill to do more for oneself" (263-64). (p. 278)

Phyllis Tickle praises J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens's (2008) *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader's Guide* as "the clearest ... overview of Berry that I have seen to date" (Bonzo & Stevens, 2008, back cover).<sup>4</sup> The authors establish their agenda from the start, "His persistent question must become ours: how can we sustain meaningful lives against the background of a consumeristic, dislocated age?" (pp. 18-19). They consider as well, "What makes Berry's ideas attractive to such a wide range of ideologies within our culture?" and "How might the educational systems in our culture be chastened and relocated along the lines that Berry has hinted at?" (p. 19).

Considering questions Berry poses about the farm he returned to in the 1960s, questions about how to farm the particular land well, with care and healing, Bonzo and Stevens (2008) observe,

These questions seem to have aroused in him a real need to understand *place* and *home* in some way far beyond a house and a geographic location. He was moved to look for the most basic motivations for why we are who we are and why we do what we do.... He had begun to feel "called out of" the typical institutions of American life. (p. 21)

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<sup>4</sup>Phyllis Tickle (1934-2015) was an author, lecturer, and educator in religion and spirituality. In addition, she worked in publishing and parented seven children. "It has been said that 'Over the past generation, no one has written more deeply and spoken more widely about the contours of American faith and spirituality than Phyllis Tickle.'" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis\\_Tickle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Tickle))

In outlining Berry's growing awareness of the challenges posed, especially for small farming communities post WWII, by modern industrial, capitalist society, the authors note, "Several concerns began to surface in Berry's essays and speeches, and especially the fiction, a set of realizations about the unsustainability of our culture's casual relationship to the land, the community, even the past" (p. 23).

His concern is still ultimately for the health of local communities everywhere, however clearly or obscurely this might translate into national policy. What made Berry's critique stick, and what gave strength to the subsequent volumes *Citizenship Papers* and *The Way of Ignorance*, was that despite the bristly tone of many of the pieces, they fit into a broader, deeper mosaic that has always been rooted in a hopefulness for life, a belief that care is a viable alternative to exploitation. (pp. 24-25)

They encapsulate Berry's emerging concerns which become the recurring themes in the prolific writing we know today.

If we had to boil down a whole career of lively and varied discourse into a single theme, it would be Berry's dogged search for health in the midst of disease. His notion of health is undergirded by a set of ideas that includes finitude, humility, localness, boundedness, propriety of scale, particularity. (p. 25)

In addressing the importance of Berry's work for educators, the authors state, "But if the question is 'Can education bring us home?' then we see Berry providing, in his broad strokes of hopefulness for healing communities, a pattern into which educational institutions can fit and offer good work" (Bonzo & Stevens, 2008, pp. 183-184). They identify the context for "the two-way conversation that Berry says will be essential for local places to flourish" (p. 184).

Thus a prior need exists for all the elements of all the different educational institutions to learn to dialogue across boundaries, an activity sorely hindered by specialization. Education for the sake of creating producers and consumers for the global economy is a very different end from producing members for a healthy local community. (p. 184)

They write about hospitality and “Berry’s vision...that the university has the potential to become a kind of workshop in membership, preparing students to help create and participate in healing communities once they leave” (p. 192).

Rather than being an end in itself, a university can become a complement to healthy local communities where the arts of living taught and modeled at the university are fully fledged by those who have learned them and seek to teach and embody them. (p. 196)

Bonzo and Stevens (2008) propose a positive template for implementing Berry’s vision for higher education. At the religious-affiliated undergraduate school where they team teach, they see evidence of success in enabling students to reflect on and practice forms of community membership. They thus offer a promising practical approach for creating the kind of dialogue that Berry believes would characterize healthy educational settings. The authors identify the goal that sustains their efforts. “Our hope is that education can slow young people down enough, can get in the way of ‘progress’ for a slice of the formative years, to let them see a ‘fully orbed glimpse of life’ lived within a finite community” (pp. 192-193).

Acknowledging the pervasive sense of displacement in American culture and the fact that many students arrive on college campuses already profoundly impacted by it, Bonzo and Stevens identify the fundamental work of an institution seeking to foster a different learning experience.

Our first task, then, is to welcome, to offer hospitality that is not a token orientation program or a dorm-oriented, superficial network of acquaintances. Rather, we need to let students feel that they have found a *place*, perhaps for the first time, where they can safely evaluate, struggle through, and steward a set of ideas. The classroom setting...can lead the way by showing a hospitable approach...can be a sort of dining-room table where the family gathers to discuss important family matters in a context of nourishment and pleasure. (pp. 193-194)

Bonzo and Stevens offer a thoughtful assessment of Berry’s work along with practical suggestions for implementing Berry’s values and educational theory in an undergraduate setting; thus they make a valuable contribution to Berry research.

A sobering yet thought-provoking effort to interpret and incorporate within their own educational praxis Berry's philosophy is found in Rhys and Ute Kelly's 2013 *Journal of Peace Education* peer-reviewed article, "An Education in Homecoming: Peace Education as the Pursuit of 'Appropriate Knowledge.'" Lecturers at the University of Bradford in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies respectively, they draw their understanding of "homecoming" from Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson's work, and "appropriate knowledge" is one tool in their "vision of peace education," adapting E. F. Schumacher's criteria for "appropriate technology" (p. 283).

What makes this an especially useful analysis is the way in which Kelly and Kelly (2013) acknowledge the changing context of education, observing both our escalating ecological crisis and the all-but-guaranteed shrinking of resources in the face of the reduction of cheap energy. "We consider the role education might play in enabling citizens and societies to adapt peacefully to conditions of energy descent and a less benign ecological system, taking seriously the possibility that there will be fewer resources available for education" (p. 283).

Noting that education proffers some vision of what the future will be, the authors point out our reliance "on the assumption of continuity" (Kelly & Kelly, 2013, p. 284). They call into question "assumptions of growth, continuous expansion and development that have underpinned so much human activity" (p. 284). They foresee a future that "will involve a recognition of [-] and a reckoning with [-] natural limits, a decline in the amount of energy at our disposal, and a long and probably difficult process of contraction (Homer-Dixon 2006; Greer 2008, 2011; Heinberg 2011)" (p. 284). This forecast causes them to argue for "rethink[ing] both the content and the form of education in general and peace education in particular" (p. 284). The authors challenge our long-held confidence in education's ability to solve our big problems; they question traditional education's potential for "wider transformations in society" (p. 285). In addition, they believe that our

customary views about education do not adequately acknowledge the implications of “declining fossil energy and a less benign climate” (p. 286).

Kelly and Kelly argue that current discussions about change in education tend to focus on technological innovation and “a new age of networked learning (Facer 2009)” (Kelly & Kelly, 2013, p. 286). They believe these discussions miss the mark and do not address the “wider natural and social forces” (p. 286) that will impact education in significant ways. Finally they acknowledge the charge of some, Berry included, who believe that schools and education are “complicit in the systemic roots of our current predicament” (pp. 286-7). They cite Berry’s belief that “education promotes the undoing of local communities and economies” (p. 287). They believe that the mobility we take for granted in developed nations as well as accepted benchmarks for success will and should be challenged. They admit that efforts to discuss these difficult issues with students and colleagues have been less than encouraging.

To move their reflection and inquiry from a theoretical to a practical plane, Kelly and Kelly (2013) introduce the notion of *permaculture* as a possible model for the changes they believe the context of education, and peace education specifically, calls for. They note how permaculture, as it emerged in the 1970s, exhibited “careful consideration of inputs and outputs of energy” (p. 290). They describe as well how “permaculture principles” link to Berry’s work.

The questions that permaculture education encourages people to ask about particular places are similar to those suggested by Berry (2010) as a framework for an education for home-coming. In its motivation to inform and improve practice, moreover, permaculture shares Berry’s insistence that ‘a change of heart or of values’ needs to be accompanied by practices that embody new values. This emphasis on practices that help to meet human needs more sustainably and effectively also increases the potential value of permaculture to people whose needs are not currently being met. (p. 291)

Kelly and Kelly (2013) cite “examples of permaculture practices and educational activities” (p. 291) worldwide and then examine in more detail the work of Permaculture

Institute of El Salvador (IPES). They acknowledge the impact of El Salvador's civil war on the environment and social relationships, the erosion of indigenous culture with the resulting difficulty in identifying with local history and current needs, and the vulnerability of the country to global climate change (p. 292). Yet the authors cite multiple examples of IPES participants' observations that support constructive learning outcomes, in spite of these formidable obstacles.

The authors are not naïve about the challenges of transferring insights gained from IPES to their own educational context.

Promoting permaculture in El Salvador has been possible not only because there is a demonstrable need to increase food production with fewer inputs (creating demand for 'appropriate knowledge'), but because there is still a significant number of people whose livelihoods and culture are connected to the land. In our own context, where ecological change or the impacts of resource limits are not yet experienced as a daily reality, it will be difficult to engage those in the mainstream of society with much of what we are arguing. *There is no appetite yet for radically reconsidering the purpose or character of education, even if the need can be clearly articulated* [emphasis added]. (Kelly & Kelly, 2013, pp. 295-296)

In their concluding remarks, Kelly and Kelly (2013) identify their study as “an attempt to work through some implications of our encounters with permaculture, with the writings of Wendell Berry and others, and to challenge ourselves to think about how we might integrate these insights into our own lives and educational practice” (p. 297). They note the broad outlines of their argument.

We argue for an education in homecoming, for the purpose of education to be framed by an understanding of what fosters resilience in social-ecological systems [-] adaptive, appropriate knowledge of how to promote healthy communities, a long-term commitment to place, an ability to acknowledge and live within natural limits (Bernard and Young 1997). (p. 297)

And they observe that they sought “to show how examples of permaculture practice illustrate the possibilities for an education in homecoming, even where resources are



limited and conditions are challenging. We suggested that this example was relevant beyond its own context” (p. 297).

Kelly and Kelly (2013) close with a poignant admission, acknowledging the likelihood of diminished resources for education “adding to the already daunting challenge of adaptation” (p. 297).

For us, this provides a compelling reason to begin investing the resources that are currently available in a different approach to education, such that education itself might be more resilient. For if we fail to protect the capacity to learn, there can be little hope for a peaceful future. (p. 297)

The authors perceptively analyze education’s role in peace-making, especially by attention to and care for local community and natural resources, and given the current and foreseeable challenges to ecological health, the all-but-guaranteed decline in educational resources. Their essay gives us pause; it raises pressing questions. In addition it holds implications for education in general and makes a major contribution to explicating the importance of Berry’s work for today’s educators.

Jane Schreck’s 2013 dissertation, *Wendell Berry’s Philosophy of Education: Lessons from Port William*, calls for major changes in educational priorities. She claims that what is most often left out is love (p. x). Focusing primarily on higher education, though generalizing to other levels at times, Schreck says, “Wendell Berry’s philosophy of education declares that the essential element missing from most current discussions and considerations of education is love” (abstract). She claims, furthermore, that “Berry’s philosophy centers on love as the best animator of learning” (p. x).

In her detailed, carefully documented study, Schreck (2013) examines Berry’s fiction and struggles with questions such as, “If the purpose of education is so necessary and if the learning relationship is as natural and necessary as Berry thinks, then how can the institutions of higher learning get it wrong?” (p. 348). She notes,

As far as Berry is concerned, higher education is mostly doing the bidding of the industrial economy....

With an urgent certainty that our lives depend on it, Berry wants education to contribute to our survival, not continue to chart the course of our ruin by shirking its purpose. (p. 29)

Schreck further observes the influence of Sir Albert Howard for Berry.

Understanding Berry's thinking on education means first understanding how he makes judgments. For some readers of Berry, part of the appeal of his thinking, especially his social theory, is the way it arises whole in itself, with little dependence on references to other theorists or scholars. His writing is clear, and he follows logic up from the bedrock of respect for people and the world, a respect for the fundamental processes and patterns of nature, including human nature. In his view, whatever is in violation of nature is unhealthy and unsustainable. So when he evaluates a situation or a subject, health is his ultimate standard. This is something he probably understood before reading Sir Albert Howard, but it was something deeply confirmed for him by his reading of Howard. (pp. 29-30)

Schreck (2013) offers many insightful observations about Berry's fiction and nonfiction as related to education. For example, she claims,

In short, if something seems to be contrary to the health of the ecosphere or the creatures in it, then as far as Berry is concerned, that thing needs to be questioned and reconsidered and resisted. As he writes in "Poetry and Place" ... "The order of nature proposes a human order in harmony with it" ..., and a great part of maintaining health is submitting to that order. (p. 30)

Quoting Berry's *A Continuous Harmony*, Schreck (2013) says that "Berry extends this standard of health in farming to health in education" (p. 31) and identifies "a theme Berry develops in his writing—that of a scholar's responsibility to community, and by extension, a school's responsibility to community" (p. 31).

Citing Berry's *The Way of Ignorance*, Schreck (2013) arguably re-asserts the thesis of her study.

Finally in the letter, he reminds us that the appropriate purpose for politics—just as it is the appropriate purpose for education—is the protection of every good thing.... These attributes—these standards—for a political party worthy of our respect and support when applied to education would enable us to educate against the loss of any good thing. (p. 348)

Schreck (2013) concludes by examining the possibilities of “homecoming” as a focus in education. She identifies work colleges as one vehicle for implementing Berry’s values and recommendations for education.

One paradigm in higher education that might serve as a model is a work college, and this may be the exemplar that Berry has been seeking in higher education. In these colleges, academic requirements are combined with requirements for work on campus and service in the community for all students. Typically tuition is reduced or waived based on the student’s campus work. The effect is not only an opportunity for deeper learning, but also lower costs. While once common in this country in the early part of the nineteenth century, only a handful of work colleges exist today, yet the idea they are built on seems universally applicable as both financially practical and educationally effective. (p. 411)

Schreck cites research that documents “long-term positive effects on work college graduates” (p. 412) and concludes,

These are the kinds of skills and knowledge that open possibilities for students after graduation, not close them off. Further, the study says that “the educational benefits we found associated with attending a work college may be attributed to the clear and integrated role of their work program within their overall educational process”.... In other words, the benefits for students are the result of the educational paradigm. (p. 413)

Schreck’s (2013) study, including reference to her interview with Berry, is a major contribution to the scholarship.

Jack Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro’s (2017) *Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place* is among the first fully developed studies of Berry’s work as it relates to education. While they focus especially on higher education, much of their exploration has implications for other educational levels and settings. The co-authors have obviously read Berry closely and write compassionately about his work and its meaning for education. In addition they strike a collegial tone that includes anecdotes, demonstrating their efforts to implement Berry’s critique in their own praxis. They corroborate most of Berry’s criticisms of American education and underscore the

relevance of his arguments for understanding and implementing the changes our survival requires.

Baker and Bilbro's (2017) study consists of two parts. Part I, "Rooting Universities," examines current higher education in the United States through three lenses which they describe as "interdependent means by which we come to care for our places" (p. 18). The lenses include imagination, language, and work. Part II, "Cultivating Virtues of Place," examines tradition, hierarchy, geography, and community. Working with these dimensions, the authors propose four virtues grounded in Berry's work: memory, gratitude, fidelity, and love. Throughout the study, Baker and Bilbro frame their foci with selections of Berry's fiction, poetry, and suggestions for how students can learn the associated skills, attitudes, and understanding.

The authors introduce their study with a descriptor, "An Education for Health and Homecoming" (Baker & Bilbro, 2017, p. 1). Before examining criticisms frequently advanced about Berry's work, they present the broad argument which they believe both motivates Berry's work and underlies their own study.

The American Dream that celebrates individual success and limitless upward mobility leads to an education in the virtues of personal ambition, dangerous risk taking, and careless transience. Yet this narrative and these supposed virtues are based on a dangerous myth: the belief that we are separate from our communities and places and that there is no ecological and moral order to which we are accountable. (p. 4)

While acknowledging the multiple obstacles to revamping education so that the health and well-being of the local community and natural world become the primary objectives, Baker and Bilbro (2017) are hopeful about the potential for higher education to make positive, effective contributions and changes in this regard.

It is our hope that practicing the virtues of memory, gratitude, fidelity, and love will aid students who strive to be rooted homemakers, people who are placed....

We believe that literature not only delights and instructs us but also moves us to moral action. And so we tell these stories of place and

contentment and gratitude to offer an alternative to the prevailing stories of upward and lateral mobility and to encourage action. (p. 20)

In the chapter on imagination, the authors cite Richard Gamble's sympathy with Berry's views even as they note his acknowledgment of the challenges for those seeking pedagogical direction from Berry's critique and art.

Richard Gamble draws on Berry's fiction to emphasize the need to recover a narrative of homecoming. Gamble points out, however, that this doesn't easily translate into abstract institutional or pedagogical principles. "It would be a mistake to distill anything so abstract as a 'philosophy of education' from the stories of the Port William membership."...Gamble is certainly right that we ought to avoid simplistic, prescriptive declarations, yet Berry's vision does have practical implications for how we teach. (Baker & Bilbro, 2017, p. 32)

Baker and Bilbro (2017) also discuss the importance of the stories educators tell students, picking up on Hannah Coulter's concern in Berry's novel named for her, about how she and Nathan told their own stories to their children.

One narrative thread in Hannah's life that speaks to educators in particular concerns what is perhaps the greatest challenge in higher education today: the failure of universities to imagine and serve the health of their places. This thread is woven into Hannah's story as she cultivates love for people and place, even as they are significantly altered—often negatively—by the academy....

At the heart of our book, then, is a desire to confront the contemporary academic ideology that claims the university should prepare students and faculty alike for a "better place" than home. (p. 2)

The authors examine Berry's commitment to "responsible language" (Baker & Bilbro, 2017, p. 50), "good work" (p. 70), and the importance of bringing together "the liberal and practical arts" (p. 78). They conclude their study with hopeful yet realistic observations.

Berry remains convinced that genuine change begins locally rather than in the halls of centralized power. Furthermore, there is no way that universities on their own can heal our deracinated culture. Rather, our hope lies in the good work being done by students and teachers and administrators across the country who are living as members of their communities. These people are asking of their place, "What do you need?" and then they are

setting about doing it. These particular actions, each adapted to their place, are the grounds of our hope.

By celebrating such efforts, we are trying to tell the stories right, to tell them in a way that will retie the threads that have been unraveled by American universities. These threads of imagination, language, and work might foster practices that can connect graduates to their places in healthy, sustainable ways. (p. 193)

They acknowledge the restraints always present to challenge those who strive to become better educators and reaffirm their motivating vision.

We can start doing good work where we are even without a better system or better policies or more money. Our contention is that a university that invites its students to memorize poems, observe the Sabbath, work in gardens, and ask studious questions will be more effectively educating placed inhabitants—people habituated to care for their place—than a university that pays lip service to the importance of local food or sustainability but fails to educate students in these virtues of place. And such virtues will sustain hope. (p. 193)

Baker and Bilbro (2017) have advanced the conversation about the meaning of Berry's cultural critique for American education. They have outlined and examined the major issues challenging educators, especially in our colleges and universities, and the themes that pervade Berry's work. They are committed to Berry's legacy and eager to identify how his wisdom can be brought to fruition in the "neighborhoods" of our colleges and universities. Explorations of these connections going forward will need to acknowledge their contribution.

### **Various Literary Perspectives**

In his *Southern Literary Journal* article, "A Form for Living in the Midst of Loss: Faithful Marriage in the Revisions of Wendell Berry's *A Place on Earth*," Jeffrey Bilbro (2010) examines the editorial changes Berry makes in the novel for its second edition, published in 1983. He claims that reviewers have not accounted for the impact of Berry's extensive revisions on the novel's "subject." Nor had they adequately analyzed the significance of marriage as a metaphor in Berry's work (Bilbro, 2010, p. 90).

Bilbro (2010) argues that the revisions, which included cutting nearly a third of the earlier text, improve the novel by deleting explanations and background stories. Hence, they bring the reader's experience closer to that of the characters, causing both to struggle with less information.

Quoting Berry's *A Continuous Harmony*, Bilbro (2010) asserts that for Berry marriage is the central relationship in human experience and resembles our position in a world beset by mystery and an "organic pattern" (p. 91).

As a farmer, Berry learns from the earth: each year the land's new lives spring from its deaths. Berry looks for hope in this cycle, even though it includes death and loss: "It is only in the processes of the natural world, and in analogous and related processes of human culture, that the new may grow usefully old, and the old be made new".... This organic pattern is, for Berry, an overarching normative ethic....The mysterious interweaving of death and life, he argues, is best realized by humans in marriage and its metaphorical extensions. (p. 91)

The marriage relationship parallels our complex relationship with the earth and all of creation, including our knowledge and ignorance. Marriage helps us understand the need for responsible care, work, and affection. "From this form, individuals can learn how they must love their children, their neighbors, and their land" (Bilbro, 2010, p. 96).

In focusing on marriage as a metaphor in Berry's work, the idea of "organic pattern," and Berry's revisions in *A Place on Earth*, Bilbro (2010) observes the resulting impact for readers.

In the revised edition, Berry skillfully brings his readers closer to the pattern: he flattens the perspective, removing the contexts and motivations that give readers distance from the action. In Berry's revised edition, his technique caught up with his subject. He allows us, as readers, to participate in the ignorance of his characters, and in doing so, we may be able to understand more fully the painful difficulty of choosing fidelity to the natural order while living in the midst of mystery. (p. 103)

Bilbro notes as well that "Berry's characters can be faithful to the little they know, and their actions should align with the natural pattern implicit in creation" (p. 96). Bilbro's

study helps us see how Berry's revisions of *A Place on Earth* strengthened this early novel and how marriage as a metaphor has an integral place in Berry's work.

Joseph R. Wiebe's 2013 dissertation, *Wendell Berry's Imagination in Place: Affection, Community, and Literature*, describes Berry's work as fundamentally tied to imagination, affection, and embodied relationship.

Berry's imagined community educates the affections in order to transform the way in which we relate to one another and treat the environment. His fiction is an education in being at home in the world as it is where we find it. Rather than theorizing the structure of a locally adapted community, or offering techniques for establishing the existence of such a community, Berry shows us how to live where we are through literary biography. (p. iii)

He says, "This thesis argues that Wendell Berry's idea of a healthy community and his understanding of membership is embodied in his fiction" (p. iii). Wiebe calls "Berry's vocation of local adaptation" (p. 333) "a theological task ... because his literature and its practicality is based on the Incarnation—the active reality of God's love and pleasure in the world" (p. 334).

Examining Berry's fiction and nonfiction as well as prominent themes throughout his work, Wiebe (2013) finds that,

Berry's essays, speeches, poetry, and fiction are attempts to delineate the experience of his soul's affections; he uses a variety of genres to try to describe what cannot, finally, be captured by words. Berry's entire corpus is a lifetime's attempt to give an account of affection as a motivation for being in the world, which has personal, social, political, economic, ethical, and religious ramifications. (p.340)

The implications of so comprehensive an effort are numerous, including the reticence Berry exhibits about political movements and large, broad-based solutions for complex challenges. Wiebe (2013) examines and clarifies this reticence of Berry's about ideological movements and big solutions.

All of his insights emerge from his own experience of dependence and responsibility. That his writing has gained numerous followers...he finds to be, perhaps surprisingly, worrisome. He is hesitant to allow his work to



become subsumed under a general protest or agrarian movement that transforms a searching and agonistic argument into an ideology.... Shallow slogans and self-righteousness tend to seep into ideological movements, which blind members to the difficulties of the problems at hand, not least of which is the fact that everyone is implicated in the economy that cultivates a corporate mastery over creation. (pp. 344-345)

Wiebe offers his understanding of Berry's fundamental objective.

Berry's work is to expand the imagination of those willing to take his argument seriously, trying to help them get beyond the slogans and protests and participate in the search for meaning and truth in human order by maintaining an affection for their particular places and communities, and transform those neighborhoods by transforming themselves through using careful, articulate language, using plants and water well, and recognizing their complicity in the political and economic system they wish to revolutionize. (p. 345)

Wiebe shows that, in spite of numerous foreboding realities, there are rewards, according to Berry, for fidelity, for stepping up to responsibility for nature's well-being and the health of local communities and family homesteads. There is reason to hope and remain committed.

There may not be a visibly successful triumph over the economic corporations and political powers of this world, but there is a possibility of remaining human and experiencing the fullness of the spirit in communing with others; there is conviviality and eating well with friends and neighbours; there is pleasure and satisfaction; there is faith, hope, and love; there is work. (Wiebe, 2013, p. 346)

Wiebe's thorough exploration of aesthetic and theological dimensions in Berry's work lays a solid foundation for the fully developed study he publishes a few years later.

Joseph R. Wiebe (2017) offers a comprehensive study of Berry's work, with especial attention to the fiction and the ways the Port William stories point toward the cultivation of "place-based identity" (p. 151), in his just-released book, *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection and Identity*. This is a detailed, carefully-documented exploration that includes close reads of three Port William characters, Jack Beechum, Jayber Crow, and Hannah Coulter. Wiebe strives to show that Berry's values and commitments as revealed in his work navigate complex and

varying “caricatures of rural communities” (p. 2), even as he admits, “How Port William contributes to Berry’s advocacy for the restoration of communities is not straightforward” (p. 3).

Wiebe’s (2017) study presents Berry’s work in its fullness and anchors his own study in the expanding conversation about Berry’s art, offering fruitful strategies for the development of substantive yet grounded interpretations. This ambitious agenda centers on two fundamental concepts advanced by Berry: affection and imagination. Wiebe notes, for instance, “The concern of Berry’s characters is not for permanency at all costs but rather to flourish amid the instability of time” (p. 157). And he maps out his exploration of three Port William characters for their respective achievements of “affectionate perception” (p. 151).

Aspects of each character clarify the role a particular virtue and experience has in shaping affectionate perception: Jack’s mind shows how wisdom and regret shape the intellect of affectionate perception; Jayber’s soul shows how magnanimity and despair shape the psychology of affectionate perception; Hannah’s body shows how patience and grief shape the spatial reality of affectionate perception. These are not just lessons about moral imagination but also lessons in it.... Jack, Jayber, and Hannah are members through whom readers can both understand and recognize as well as respond to these aspects [of] locally adapted community. (p. 151)

While I question the particular frames of reference Wiebe (2017) chooses for his study of Port William characters, disagree with his interpretation of Jayber Crow, and question as well his appraisal of Dunn and Sewell’s documentary, *Look and See: A Portrait of Wendell Berry*, nevertheless I recognize Wiebe’s exploration of the role of imagination in Berry’s work as a major contribution. Helping us understand the importance of Berry’s fiction and the significance of imagination in human awareness, Wiebe observes,

Imagination is the way of seeing the earth and its human and natural history reverently. Imagination enables fidelity to place through sympathy and affection, which is the basis for a conserving economy. There is no basic distinction between the private and public aspects of the task of embodying a

human economy.... Harmony and wholeness cannot be grasped or known in themselves, but they can be imagined, which is itself a spiritual experience of a person's sense of interdependence with all of creation. (pp. 159-160)

Wiebe's understanding of Berry's work is apparent throughout his text, even as he avoids over-stating his appreciation. For example, he states,

Put yet another way, Berry's wisdom cannot be explained entirely by words; it cannot be recorded and then learned, repeated, or imitated.... The challenge for his readers is to resist transforming his search as a ritual movement to discover the particular manifestations of the good, the true, and the beautiful in his time and place into a manifesto or rigidly defined political movement. (p. 158)

Wiebe (2017) re-contextualizes his own investigation by restating a well-accepted understanding of the role of fiction in human life. "Fiction portrays an imagined world in a way that capacitates recognition of a deeper meaning of social circumstances than what political rhetoric offers. In short, imagination produces a vision of the world that changes a person" (p. 155). Wiebe (2017) notes as well, "At his best, Berry's stories and memories clarify the experiences that turn people around, away from hubris and narcissistic ambition, toward a self-reflection that opens them to the depth of creation. He concentrates on virtues that habituate this self-opening" (p. 156).

Wiebe examines new terrain in this important study and makes a major contribution to the Berry scholarship.

### **Methodology**

This study examines three themes in Wendell Berry's fiction: land and place, community, and character, and links the educational concerns Berry expresses in essays and interviews with the themes examined in the fiction to discern implications for contemporary American educators. The study also identifies key ideas prominent in Berry's work, for example, the power of human choice, the connectedness of everything in the created world, and the concept of "the Great Economy." It links Berry's

educational concerns to selected key ideas. It identifies three educational concerns for more extensive exploration: the relationship of education to the local community, the consequences of discrete academic disciplines and the intellectual specialization they foster, and the need to reconstruct the standard for education.

The *working hypothesis* for the study is: Selected works of Wendell Berry's many books, especially his works of fiction, combined with his direct reflections about education, hold valuable directions for current educators facing 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges. Berry's commitment to land and place, his affection for human community (local communities) and the relationships they include, his love of land well cared for, nurtured, and cultivated—all point toward remedies for our overloaded education system. Present-day American schools (colleges, universities, and K-12) are often beset with budget deficits, drop-out rates, discipline problems, and ever-widening profiles of learning ability and socio-economic and cultural diversity. In their attempts to grapple with these issues and prepare young people for the challenges anticipated in adult life, many schools contribute, albeit unintentionally, to the destruction of natural resources and the diminishment of human community. Today's educators and administrators can gain valuable insight about our ecological, political, and social challenges from Berry's philosophy and cultural analysis. They would do themselves, their students, and the teaching profession a major service to "listen up," attend to Berry's words carefully crafted in three genres, to discern the meaning of his voice for education today. Receiving his message, we can work for educational reform that addresses our pressing need for a sustainable, life-supporting planet and healthy local communities.

To consider the hypothesis and address the study's underlying question, *What are the implications for contemporary American educators in the work of Wendell Berry, especially his cultural critique as set forth in his essays and works of fiction over the last half-century?*, I examine portions of the fiction that relate to the selected themes (land and place, character, and community) as well as nonfiction passages and interviews, in an

effort to trace Berry's philosophy and worldview, particularly as it relates to modern American education.

In considering the importance for education of Berry's work, one must infer how his concerns, critique, and vision of alternative livelihoods, which include his views about education, should be applied. It is not readily apparent from reading Berry's nonfiction what educators should do differently. Stanley Hauerwas (2007), for example, claims that "Berry's criticisms of the university are clearer than the alternative he offers" (p. 102). In order to discern what we need to change as educators, I look to Berry's fiction. The values made explicit through his imaginative narratives enhance our understanding of the more abstract concepts and arguments in Berry's nonfiction. The fiction contributes to a deeper understanding of the author. The fictional accounts about land and place, community, and character—help us see more clearly how we could make "the health of the community" a viable standard for education.

Thus, I use literary and cultural analysis to explore the data, which consists of selections from Berry's work, including his fiction, essays, interviews, and longer nonfiction texts such as *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

## Chapter II

### THE THEME OF LAND AND PLACE IN BERRY'S FICTION

#### **Our Duty to be Stewards of the Natural World**

Care of land and place shows the value of being true to our duty to be stewards of the natural world. In what ways does Berry's commitment to and concern for land and place come through in his fiction? In selected novels, I will look at the theme of land and place in Berry's fiction—what is the message? Why is it important? And how can we begin to identify the message's relevance for education?

Berry makes clear in his fiction how deeply he values being true to our moral obligation to be stewards of the natural world. I look first at one particular farm in the Port William community, the imaginary setting for Berry's stories. I consider the farm of Jack Beechum. In differing ways, this farm is a focus in three of Berry's novels. It is the main setting for *The Memory of Old Jack* (1999). And it is the focus of one of the stories in both *A Place on Earth* (1983a) and *The Wild Birds* (1986b). I will consider all three as examples of Berry's views about the responsibility of human beings to be caretakers of the Earth.

In *The Memory of Old Jack*, Jack Beechum's life-long dedication to the care of his farm is an exemplary picture of commitment to the duty of stewardship of the natural world. This novel is dedicated to the author's father, whom he identifies as "its true source" (Berry, 1999, frontispiece). This is a beautiful, complex, and often sad story of

recollection as Jack Beechum, now known as “Old Jack,” looks back upon his life and visits its occasional peaks and many valleys. He seems to be at the mercy of his reverie.

He can remember crops, their quality and weight and what they brought.... He can remember, in detail down to the markings of their faces, bunches of cattle that he owned, and can move among them in his mind, looking them over. Sometimes he can recover a whole day, with the work he did in it, and the places and the animals and the people and even the words that belong to it.

And that is all right. But there have been some bad days in his life, too. Plenty of them, and it is hard to keep his mind, ranging around the way it does, from crossing the track of his hard times. Though he would a lot rather let them lie still and be gone, once his mind strikes into his old troubles there is no stopping it; he is in his story then, watching, as he has helplessly done many times before, to see how one spell of trouble and sorrow led to another. Once he has started he has to go on, yet one more time, to the end. He knows now that, do what he may, his history is about to wash over his mind again, like water over a field under a hard rain. He will think again of Ruth and of Clara and of Rose; he will have to consider once more the way things might have been, and the way they were. Too old to work and get around, he can do nothing but let it come. (p. 25)

And so the reader is invited in, ushered as it were to a front-row seat, to join, as helplessly as the main character himself, the twists and turns of his life experience and the work of his mind and heart as he reviews it all again and sorts it out, making of it a kind of story. In a sense we find ourselves reviewing our own life experience as well—for there are parallels. *The Memory of Old Jack* calls upon us to work, along with the main character. But there are rewards for the work. We learn some things as we journey with Jack Beechum through the memories that “wash over his mind again.” In Chapter IV, I will explore more closely Beechum’s qualities of character. I will identify his valuable discoveries as well as his triumphs and defeats. For now, however, I want to consider his work as a farmer. I want to look at passages that help us see what the work meant for him. How did he value it and why? I start at the beginning. What does Old Jack start out with as a farm?

By Jack's time, the farm had been reduced by his father's money troubles to about a hundred and fifty acres. It was bounded in front by the road, and on the other three sides by the winding courses of Birds Branch and two of its tributaries. The hollows of these streams were narrow, offering little bottom land for crops. But there were cleared pastures on the slopes above them. Above the openings of pasture, where the hill steepened, the land was in woods. Wooded draws cut deeply into the upland, so that the long ride that formed the backbone of the farm was broken into three almost symmetrical broad hilltops. The upland fields had been divided from the steeper land by stone fences that followed faithfully the contour of the ground, keeping the line where the steeps gentled at the top of their rise. The house with its company of barns and outbuildings faced the road, set back from it in a yard shaded by big sugar maples and oaks. It was a farm that required a great deal of care, so much of it being steep. But its design had been cunningly laid out to preserve the land and to be convenient and pleasing to the eye. (Berry, 1999, p. 29)

The description of the physical place (details about the land) is followed by a description of the farm's place in the family, and as it came to be in Old Jack's mind and heart.

He had known no other place. From babyhood he had moved in the openings and foldings of the old farm as familiarly as he moved inside his clothes. But after the full responsibility of it fell to him, he saw it with a new clarity. He had simply relied on it before. Now when he walked in his fields and 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. (Berry, 1999, p. 30)

And then, to round out the picture, we are told of Old Jack's work on his farm in the early days of his new ownership and mastery of the place.

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 had 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. (Berry, 1999, p. 30)

Not only do we learn of the context of the work, how it connects Jack with kinsmen who have gone before; we learn what the day to day routine is like.



He remembers those days for their order, the comeliness of the shape his work made in each one of them as it passed. It was an order that came of the union in him of skill and passion, the energy that would not be greater in him than it was then. But it also came of solitude. He had no help except for the aged Negro man, Uncle Henry, whose greatest usefulness by then was to tend the garden and do the chore work around the barn. That set Jack's mind free in the fields, and except at the times of planting and harvest, when he teamed with his neighbors, he worked alone. His solitude assured that his work would have the coherence of his character. He went free of the awkwardness that comes of the mismatching of two men working together. He knew how much work he could do in a day, and how to do it. It was as if he worked always in the open then, and there was a clarity between him and the eye of heaven. He was in the clear with those gods of the fields about whom the men of his kind spoke sparingly and carefully. (Berry, 1999, p. 30)

In time, however, Jack acquires a neighboring farm, the Farrier place, and he needs help for the work. Mr. Will Wells joins him and for a time they work together in a harmonious partnership; they even “acquired a local fame as a team among the farmers who worked with them in the tobacco setting and in the harvest” (Berry, 1999, p. 59). As a team, Wells and Beechum demonstrate the stewardship of land I am focusing on.

In two years they set the Farrier place to rights with the same assured sense of order with which a housewife would have tidied a room. They repaired the fences and cleared the bushes and briars from the neglected pastures and removed the clutter that had accumulated in and around the buildings. The boundaries and edges became clear. There remained a number of jobs that waited on money, such as repairing and painting the buildings, and there remained the slow healing of the abused and weakened ground. But the healing had been begun. After the ragged idleness of neglect, the encroachment of thicket upon its cleared ground, the old place had resumed a kind of repose within its human limits. The daylight, falling on it, received an order from it that Jack loved to recognize as his own. And he was making it pay. At the end of two years he was beginning to see his way out. (pp. 59-60)

In spite of the gains he can point to, devotion to his farm and the perfecting of the skills needed to work the land effectively, enabling it to yield a living for its inhabitants, does not come to Jack Beechum effortlessly. He does not become a farmer with such devotion simply because a tract of land becomes available to him through the family or because he goes to college and studies agriculture. No, it is deeper than that. With all the

ups and downs in his home life and the advances and setbacks of the farm—acquiring more land and then having to give it up, breaking with Wells, the loss of the barn to fire—through all of this, something holds Beechum fast to the work itself. He struggles for years to recover financially, and finally is able to see that he has come through. What he sees, then, is worth our attention. Here is part of the description of Old Jack’s ultimate triumph.

Clear and whole before him now he sees the object of his faith as he has not seen it for fifteen years. And he feels opening in himself the stillness of a mown field, such a peace as he has never known. For the last five years he has lived at the limit of his strength, not looking up from the ground, perishing at night into lonely sleep as though his bed was a grave from which he rose again in the dark, sore in his bones, to take up again the labor of repaying the past. And now, the shudder of realization in his flesh, he sees that he has come through. He has been faithful to his land, through all its yearly changes from maiden to mother, the bride and wife and widow of men like himself since the world began. (Berry, 1999, p. 122)

One might argue that Old Jack had no alternative—no choice in the face of loss and disappointment and the cost of over-extension than to hunker down and push himself to the limit to dig out. One might argue that there is no evidence to *prove* his commitment and dedication to the land and working the land. Surely he endured not just one or two brutal years, or seasons of loss at the market. He endured a decade and a half of fighting to come back into the clear. But, when he does finally reach his mountain top, he has a depth and breadth of view that he might never have acquired merely from working an inherited farm and making a living off of it. He has made a reckoning now that includes an assessment of what his life is truly about, wherein its most precious value lies.

Words come to him: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [...] Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil”—the words of the old psalm that Nancy had made him repeat when he was a boy until he would remember it all his life. He had always been able to see through those words to what they were about. He could see the green pastures and the still waters and the shepherd bringing the sheep down out of the hills in the evening to drink. It comes to him that he never understood them before, but that he does now. The man who first spoke the psalm had been driven to the limit, he had seen his ruin, he had felt

in the weight of his own flesh the substantiality of his death and the measure of his despair. He knew that his origin was in nothing that he or any man had done, and that he could do nothing sufficient to his needs. And he looked finally beyond those limits and saw the world still there, potent and abounding, as it would be whether he lived or died, worthy of his life and work and faith. He saw that he would be distinguished not by what he was or by anything that he might become but by what he served. (Berry, 1999, pp. 122-123)

And then, Beechum's reverie offers this epiphany which, like all knowledge of worth and value for Old Jack, takes on the imagery of land and place.

Beyond him was the peace and rest and joy that he desired. Beyond the limits of a man's strength or intelligence or desire or hope or faith, there is more. The cup runs over. While a man lies asleep in exhaustion and despair, helpless as a child, the soft rain falls, the trees leaf, the seed sprouts in the planted field. And when he knows he lives by a bounty not his own, though his ruin lies behind him and again ahead of him, he will be at peace, for he has seen what is worthy. (Berry, 1999, p. 123)

We cannot read *The Memory of Old Jack* and not discover abundant evidence of Berry's commitment to land and place, as exemplified in the life of this provocative character. It is a major theme in Berry's work and, we must assume, a major value in his life.

In *A Place on Earth* (Berry, 1983a), we find further evidence of this commitment to land and place. While Old Jack is not the central character in this novel, he is one of several key figures, and we meet him again as a central player in the subsection "Daylight." Old Jack now resides at the senior residence in town, no longer able to keep up his place on his own. His visit one day back to his farm further reveals the significance of land and place, the value of stewardship of the natural world.

It is a day of shifting moods, experiences, and reflections for Old Jack. It begins with his great eagerness about the day and the planned trip to the old home place—an eagerness so great that he rises before anyone else, with only a hint of dawn on the horizon. He dresses, fixes his breakfast, picks up the sandwiches he ordered the day before from Dolf Courtney's store, and stands alert, waiting for Wheeler Catlett, his

lawyer friend, who will drive him to the farm. In fact, he imagines Wheeler's progress over the terrain. Soon, however, he gets frustrated that daylight is wasting and Wheeler has not arrived. He calls him. And an entertaining exchange ensues between them about what time it is and when they will get underway. In fact, they get provoked with one another—and this is not resolved until they are in the car heading for the Beechum place.

We learn that a series of tenant farmers has worked on the Beechum farm, but none has measured up to Old Jack's standards. Now, however, a new young couple is there, secured by Wheeler, and with whom Old Jack is slightly acquainted. This is an unannounced visit in order for Jack to inspect and assess how the young man is doing—how is he caring for the farm to which Old Jack has for so long been dedicated?

As Wheeler and Old Jack ride along they converse about various topics including the news that Mat Feltner's son, Virgil, has been reported "missing" in WWII. They share the heavy burden of this news. Indeed, WWII hangs over most everything that happens in Port William in *A Place on Earth*.

Wheeler lets Old Jack out by the barn and tells him when he will return in the afternoon. Now the day lies before Old Jack—to discover the state of his farm in his absence. Old Jack's first impressions are important.

The sun has risen above its first redness now, and is slanting and clear and bright. The dew is still on. The pastures are in excellent shape, the grass thick and deep. In the fresh sunshine, amidst the green of the trees and the grass, the buildings are white and clean. Old Jack stands and looks, gathering it all in. The place itself comes back into his mind. They come together like the two halves of the same thing. There is smoke rising from the kitchen chimney, and he hears from somewhere out back of the barn the sound of harrow disks striking rock, which tells him that his new tenant is at work. That is a relief. He purposely gave no warning of his visit, the better to get an idea of this man's way of doing, but he came half afraid of the pain it would cause him if this one too proved incompetent or lazy. (Berry, 1983a, p. 202)

Even if you have never read Berry, you will have a good idea of this scene, based on what we have said so far. Old Jack is not an enthusiastic boarder at the senior

residence, dubbed “the hotel,” and under the supervision of Mrs. Hendrick. He has left his beloved farm reluctantly, but finally convinced that the time has come. The fate of the farm now hangs in the balance. No tenant has proved promising as a tender of the land, let alone a possible future owner. But, here is a new candidate, and Old Jack is hopeful and anxious, over-eager and nervous, and touchy with Wheeler about punctuality. He would very much like to find the new person satisfactory. But his standards are high and, so far, no one has met them.

The day has its ups and downs. One difficulty is that Old Jack cannot recall the names of the young couple and this frustrates him. How this feels for Old Jack is made clear to the reader by the frequent references to “the young man” or “the wife.” Another problem is that Old Jack tends to fall asleep easily when sitting. Nevertheless, he subjects his place to a thorough scrutiny. And the reader is almost as eager as Old Jack to see what is found.

Standing in front of the barn, he has already begun his exploration of the young man’s ways, looking into the fence corners and into the open sheds and at the back porch of the house. All that he can see is orderly. The tools that are not in use have been put into the sheds out of the weather. The gates and doors are all closed and latched. Rows of young vegetables are growing in the garden. A flock of hens is scratching around the henhouse in the sun. In one of the front fields he can see three milk cows grazing, and there are a couple of sows and pigs in one of the small pens below the barn. All that is as it should be. These people are not the kind who will be running to the grocery store to buy all they eat. That means a great deal, to Old Jack’s way of thinking. (Berry, 1983a, p. 203)

The inspection continues throughout the visit, and the prospects are encouraging.

Turning and going into the feed barn, he puts his packet of sandwiches up on a shelf inside the door, and goes back through the clean-swept driveway, opening the stalls and looking in. All the stalls have been freshly bedded. The barn looks the way it ought to. He goes to the other barns and buildings. Everywhere there is the same orderliness. Everywhere he can see the signs of the presence of a good man, a good manager, a good head—a kind of intelligence that he recognizes and feels a kinship with. (p. 204)

The story “Daylight” in *A Place on Earth* is a wonderful snapshot of the value of land and place for Berry and the respect he has for good work on a farm—he places all this in the mind and heart and life story of Jack Beechum. And this visit back to his home place is so important. Everything now depends upon Mary and Elton Penn and what they have been able to do in the time they have served as caretakers of the Beechum farm.

After a bit the farmer’s work brings Elton Penn near to Old Jack, and they have a brief, pleasant exchange. Elton Penn seems not in the least unsettled that this day has turned into one of inspection and assessment. Perhaps Elton has accurately guessed his chance of success in meeting Old Jack’s standards. But we cannot be sure. We are not told that Elton has such confidence. Nevertheless, the day is a turning point for Old Jack and his well-cared for farm. A kind of righting of things for Jack Beechum begins that day, to a degree and in a form he has not experienced before. Old Jack begins to survey a new horizon.

Old Jack stands and watches until the man and the team reach the end of the field and make the turn and start back, and then he goes to the sled again and sits down. The terms of an unexpected happiness have begun to work themselves out in his mind, the possibility of an orderliness in his history that he has not dared to hope for, a clean transition from his life to the life of another man. It is as though he has come to a window looking out onto a lighted country where before was only darkness. While the young man makes the long rounds of the field, the old one continues to sit there on the sled and watch. (Berry, 1983a, p. 206)

Not wanting to be caught napping while the tenant farmer works, though he has fallen asleep and awakened, Old Jack gets up from his resting place and moves around, continuing to check things out, seeking to appear other than “useless.”

When he gets back to the barn lot he takes another look around, measuring the work there against his new estimate of the workman. There is little that needs doing. Such small evidences of neglect as he can find are attributable to the hurry of the spring work. He finds a loose board in the granary door, and nails it tight. He does a little straightening up in the harness room, though it is not really necessary. He finds a couple of hoes and an axe and a scythe that need sharpening, and he sharpens them. He cuts a few weeds that have begun to grow up along the lot fence. Hearing the

ringing of loose trace chains, he looks up and sees the young man coming in with the horses. He looks at his watch and then at the sun. It is dinnertime. (Berry, 1983a, p. 208)

Though Jack has brought his own lunch, the Penns invite him to dinner. And when the invitation is repeated with such sincerity, Old Jack accepts. Once in the house, where he and his wife and daughter once lived, he struggles momentarily with recollections of “where an old life deteriorated” (Berry, 1983a, p. 209). But the welcoming of Elton and Mary, and the meal, and the conversation shared make Old Jack’s painful reminiscences short-lived. And the meal serves as a kind of rounding out, a confirmation, of the positive impressions he has formed during the morning.

During the meal he has not ceased to study both the young man and his wife, and he is more than satisfied with what he sees. Everything about the young man speaks of his decent pride. Though he works for another man, he has the ways of a man who intends one day to work for himself. He has resigned himself to nothing inferior. And the husband’s character, it seems to Old Jack, is answered in the character of the wife.” (p. 210)

“Daylight” comes near the end of Part III of Berry’s five-part novel, *A Place on Earth*, and it is a happy little story. It ends happily for the reader and the character it features. It is a bright spot in a novel that has more than its fair share of loss, tragedy, and sadness. After many years of hard work on his beloved farm Jack Beechum can finally see an acceptable future for his place, and this matters greatly. The satisfaction it gives him is palpable, almost inexpressible. This man of country ways, of rural America, who has been through so many setbacks, in both his work and personal life, is granted a blessing he surely deserves but which was never guaranteed. In fact it was not even visible until this surprise visit to the home place. By the time Wheeler picks him up late in the afternoon, Old Jack is ready to see the farm passed on to “the young man” and is even hopeful that he will be able to help Elton Penn become the next owner. I recall the poignant statement Martin Luther King, Jr. often quoted, ““The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”” (<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of->

universe/). It seems that “the arc of the moral universe” has at last tilted “toward justice” for Jack Beechum, and readers familiar with his story breathe a sigh of relief.

My third example of Berry’s commitment to stewardship and husbandry of the natural world in his fiction comes from *The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership* (1986b). In “It Wasn’t Me,” Wheeler Catlett, the lawyer serving Hargrave and Port William and a long-time friend of Jack Beechum, shepherds Beechum’s farm after his death to the mooring Beechum had made clear to Wheeler he wanted. He wanted the farm to go to Elton and Mary Penn, whom he believed would be caring and responsible new owners. He had observed closely their work, and it had met his high standards. The Penns show great promise of carrying forth this commitment to care of land and place. We know from *The Memory of Old Jack* that after his wife’s death Jack makes a final effort to enlist their daughter’s presence on the farm. But, predictably, it proves unsuccessful. Clara Beechum, who has married “up,” cannot be enticed to return to the farm and put forth the devotion and commitment its good care would require. While not having a relative who can take over the farm is hurtful to Jack, and his relationship with Clara has long been a painful disconnection, at least he has tried. And having tried, he then faces the tough reality—yet another in a lengthy list of sorrows he is forced to accept. As we saw in *A Place on Earth*, however, the situation—the provisioning for the future of a farm loved and well cared for through generations—is not hopeless. Indeed, with the Penns in view, an unforeseen possibility emerges.

The terms of an unexpected happiness have begun to work themselves out in his mind, the possibility of an orderliness in his history that he has not dared to hope for, a clean transition from his life to the life of another man. It is as though he has come to a window looking out onto a lighted country where before was only darkness. (Berry, 1983a, p. 206)

In considering “It Wasn’t Me,” we understand that Wheeler knows what Old Jack desires for the farm. They speak about this as they leave the farm following the surprise visit. Quite likely they spoke of it again, and Old Jack has left notes in the small notebook



he carried in his shirt pocket, that make clear, to Wheeler at least, what he wants to happen. Old Jack even leaves financial assistance for Elton to become the new owner of the Beechum place. The notes in the notebook, however, do not constitute a legal document, as Wheeler well knows. And there is another hindrance to the smooth fulfillment of the deceased owner's plans and dreams—his daughter, for Clara considers herself the rightful heir. Her interest in the matter does not include her father's wishes. Clara and Gladston Pettit are set to sell the farm outright to the highest bidder. Wheeler's effort to persuade Clara to support a different resolution, just as Old Jack's effort to enlist her in the future of the farm, does not succeed.

"It Wasn't Me" is the dramatic story of the sale of the Beechum place following Old Jack's death. It is, arguably, a story about Wheeler Catlett into whose character, we can surmise, Berry interjects many of his own passions and convictions. As the day of the auction draws near and Wheeler's options have dwindled for bringing about the outcome Old Jack desired, Wheeler is troubled not just by restless thoughts but also recurring dreams in which Old Jack presses him to work this out. First, we have a brief description of the Beechum Place.

But it was not merely that the old man would not take no for an answer; Wheeler could not bring himself to offer it for an answer. The truth is that Wheeler is a seer of visions—not the heavenly visions of saints and mystics, but the earthly ones of a mainly practical man who sees the good that has been possible in this world, and, beyond that, the good that is desirable in it. Wheeler has known the hundred and fifty acres called, until now, the Beechum place all his life. It is a good farm, a third or so of it rough enough, but the rest of it plenty good, and all of it well cared for for a long time. It is a pretty place too. The fences and buildings have been kept up. The yard in front of the old house is full of low-spreading maples. And behind the house there is an ample garden plot with a grape arbor and a dozen old pear and apple trees. (Berry, 1986b, pp. 51-52)

Then we learn more about what the Beechum place represents to Wheeler, how it is part of a broader vision for Wheeler.

It is a place with good human life already begun in it, where the right sort of young man and woman could do well. Knowing all this, knowing the farm, knowing Elton and Mary Penn, Wheeler has irresistibly imagined the life they might live there. He does not think of it, of course, as the life they *will* live there, for he is aware of chance and human nature and mortality, but it is a life that they could hope to live, and a life that, Wheeler believes, a certain number of people in every generation *must* hope to live and try to live. He wants Elton and Mary to have that hope and make that effort there on Old Jack's place where they have, in fact, already begun. And so Wheeler has a reason of his own not to take no for an answer. (p. 52)

Few passages more aptly describe the hope, vision, and dream of the author regarding land, place, and community.

Though Clara proves a formidable obstacle in bringing about what her father envisioned, she is not the only stumbling block. Elton himself poses challenges for Wheeler. "Nothing in his [Elton's] experience had prepared him for a benefit that was unasked, unearned, and unexpected. Nothing in his character prepared him to be comfortable with an obligation he could not repay" (Berry, 1986b, p. 53).

And there are other prospective bidders. There is a neighbor who has his eye on the place, and a local doctor, a Dr. Stedman, with an acquisition itch who cannot quite bring himself to follow Wheeler's counsel.

"So if I could get the place and a good man on it at the same time, it would solve my problems, don't you see? It would kill two birds with one stone."

Wheeler knew very well the history of those two birds, the wish to own land, and the wish to have somebody else worry about it, and there were certain things that he was prepared to say on the subject. But he gently freed his elbow, and just as gently took hold of the doctor's arm. "Doctor, do you know that Elton Penn wants to buy that farm for himself?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Well, he does. Listen. If you want to do a public service, get out of his way and let him have it."

Wheeler turned away then, leaving the doctor's reply floating in the air.

And so there was another bad possibility to warn Elton about. (Berry, 1986b, p. 57)

This story reminds me of themes in “Fidelity,” the title story in another of Berry’s short story collections. In “Fidelity,” Danny Branch courageously rescues his father, Burley Coulter, from the intensive care unit of the local hospital when it is clear that Burley will not get better, regardless of the doctor’s hands-on manner and optimistic remarks. And so Danny moves skillfully and with the rather remarkable support of the community to give his father a death and burial with dignity. I will consider this story more closely in Chapter III. For now I note that Berry’s fiction focuses on dignity—death with dignity, work with dignity, life with dignity, and always as an overarching backdrop—the question of what is fair and right. How did we get here? Where are we headed? What do *we* have to do with it, when all is said and done? What truly matters? All these questions come together in a moving way in “It Wasn’t Me.”

I select additional excerpts from this story to demonstrate the significance of land and place in Berry’s fiction and his conviction that we have a major responsibility to care for the Earth. The drama of the story builds to the auction itself, and the outcome is impossible to predict. The reader, however, is clear about what is at stake when the bidding finally gets underway.

The auction concludes. By a slim margin, Elton comes out the new owner. He is not, however, the sole financier. Some of Old Jack’s money comes to bear, and Wheeler himself contributes. There follows then a lengthy conversation between Wheeler and Elton about what just transpired. It is almost a haranguing, for Elton is extremely uneasy about what he has gotten himself into. To sum up Elton’s position, he is committed to making it on his own, and this includes not incurring debts he may not be able to pay. He is hard-wired, we could say, not to be beholden to anyone. As he says to Wheeler, ““I want to make it on my own. I don’t want a soul to thank”” (Berry, 1986b, p. 67). Wheeler, had it gone differently—more straightforwardly, without Clara’s sense of entitlement wielding such influence—would have felt more comfortable as well;

however, he is not distraught. Wheeler envisions all of this coming to fruition. He sees the auction and its result more positively than Elton does.

“The place,” Wheeler says, “is not its price. Its price stands for it for just a minute or two while it’s bought and sold, and may hang over it a while after that and have an influence on it, but the place has been here since the evening and the morning were the third day. The figures are like us—here and gone.” (p. 66)

We could call this conversation between Penn and Catlett, following the dispensation of Old Jack’s farm, a tutorial. It is a wonderful dialogue; Wheeler is the teacher and Elton, the student. It is a tough sell for Wheeler.

“I mean you’re a man indebted to a dead man. So am I. So was he. That’s the story of it. Back of you is Jack Beechum. Back of him was Ben Feltner. Back of him was, I think, his own daddy. And back of him somebody else, and on back that way, who knows how far? And I’m back of you because Jack Beechum is, and because he’s back of me, along with some others.” (Berry, 1986b, p. 67)

Wheeler continues. Every reader now sits with Elton as Wheeler’s student. ““When you quit living in the price and start living in the place, you’re in a different line of succession”” (Berry, 1986b, p. 68). Wheeler even makes the case that the land, not just other people, played a part in choosing Elton. ““The place is crying out to us to do better, to be worthy of it”” (p. 69).

Wheeler considers goods and services as he makes his final argument, an impassioned plea, gifted lawyer that he is.

“Your debt to Jack Beechum *is* a debt, and it’s *not* payable—not to him, anyhow.... It’s not accountable, because we’re dealing in goods and services that we didn’t make, that can’t exist at all except as gifts. Everything about a place that’s different from its price is a gift. Everything about a man or woman that’s different from their price is a gift. The life of a neighborhood is a gift.... There’s lots of giving and taking without a price—some that you don’t remember, some that you never knew about. You don’t send a bill. You don’t, if you can help it, keep an account.” (Berry, 1986b, pp. 72-73)

This is a moving story, artfully crafted and full of Berry’s major themes: land, place, community, character, fairness, responsibility, hope, and justice. I believe Berry

encapsulates his deepest values in this account of the fate of Old Jack's beloved farm. Clearly it is about land, or more accurately the relationship of people to the land. It is about place, a place that for many years someone loved and cared for. It is about relationships. Some are not healthy, such as between Clara and her father. Some demonstrate considerable loyalty, love, attention, and commitment, such as Wheeler's commitment to Old Jack, or Elton and Mary's quality of work when no long-lasting reward even looms on the horizon. It is about community and multiple generations, and the way things of value, whether knowledge or possessions or livelihoods, are handed down. The story examines how obligations, debts, and gifts are accepted, or not. It considers how integrity of life and work are created. Clearly it is about work. Berry draws an exacting contrast between Elton Penn's work on the farm of Gladston Pettit's father-in-law and the son-in-law who comes off condescendingly about the farm. Penn models nurturance and the richness, we could say, of caring for things of value, while Pettit, in Wheeler's view, has a "way of reducing things to their barest (usually monetary) essentials—his habitual reduction of principle to his own interest" (Berry, 1986b, p. 50).

One last example of Wheeler's argument in "It Wasn't Me" is found in his plea to Clara before the auction.

"It's not a question of what was owed and what was paid, Clara. That wasn't what Uncle Jack had on his mind. There were other questions that he put ahead of that one. What would be best for this good pair of young people? What would be best for this good farm? What should be done here for the good of the world?—Uncle Jack would have put it that way.... He concluded that the best thing would be to put the good people and the good farm together—to bind their fates together, so to speak. I know he thought about it that way. I heard him talk about it that way. It's not an old man's senile foolishness. He knew what he was doing." (pp. 50-51)

I believe Berry wrote this story because its message lies at the heart of what he places as central in the life of Port William. He has already created an inimitable character in Old Jack. This story concludes the dedicated farmer's legacy and witness. It is filled with drama; we cannot guess how it will turn out, though we know the stakes are

high. The resolution of the drama is far from simplistic. Wheeler feels responsible to a degree for Elton's having taken the leap. He goes back to his office to assess how he can be faithful to his own responsibility in the situation. He establishes by a small loan a company in the name of Beechum, Catlett, and Penn. He hopes it will grow to amount to half of the overage incurred by Elton due to Clara's unwillingness to settle the accounts according to Old Jack's wishes. Catlett is splitting the difference with Elton. He is addressing himself to raise seven thousand, five hundred for the purchase of the farm. This story is about what matters. It is about hard choices, fairness, and integrity—in life, work, and inheritance. It is about being true to those who went before. I believe it shows how one man, listening to his heart, paying attention to his roots, observing human behavior in all its strengths and weaknesses, cultivates a fund of wisdom that he can draw from when he needs to sort out what truly matters. Wheeler recognizes the things that last—the things that honor the connectedness of human beings and the miracle of the natural world. Wheeler knows commitment, and honesty, and virtue in human affairs when he sees it. He does not have to go out on a limb for Elton. Nothing that Old Jack says to Wheeler, as the two discuss what will become of the farm, implies that Wheeler should jeopardize himself or incur financial obligation, trying to insure that the Beechum place ultimately comes into the ownership of Elton and Mary Penn. But life and people, being what they are, to do what Old Jack wanted calls for Wheeler to take a leap along with Elton; and so, he does. And while the Pettits do not appear to need money, they seem to need to exact the maximum of Clara's so-called inheritance rights. And so, they do.

If the reader wishes to select one of Berry's works, I can think of nothing better to choose than this short story. In thirty pages, all of Berry's major themes are explored and illustrated. Understanding his philosophy of education can be enhanced by careful attention to this masterful story.

### Stewardship of Natural Resources Creates Places of Value

Stewardship of natural resources creates places of value and comfort for human beings. Not only does Berry's focus on land and place in his fiction highlight his commitment to our moral duty to be stewards of the natural world, it also reflects how care of land and place can create places of value and comfort for human beings. This too is a major theme in Berry's work.

In the novel *Remembering* (1988), the Troyer farm offers an example of a sense of fit and appropriateness of scale as well as a welcoming hospitality, a sense of health and wholeness, that becomes an oasis for Andy Catlett. *Remembering* is a complex, though relatively short, novel which documents the journey of a deeply wounded Andy Catlett back to health and wholeness. The novel is aptly named, for Catlett's healing is aided by his memories. His encounter with the Troyer farm is one such recollection. Catlett happens on the Troyer farm after visiting an agribusiness farm, overly large and seemingly alien in many ways, a mega-farm that represents much Catlett opposes in the agriculture world. He discovers the Troyer farm by accident and spends time there with the owner, Isaac Troyer, and his family. Andy notices first the three-horse team and the beauty of the farm. He stops his car and makes acquaintance with Troyer. They talk, easily and comfortably. Troyer offers Catlett the chance to take a turn or two with the team. Andy accepts. It goes well and he is offered a second round. As he navigates the rich earth with the responsive team, Andy recalls his own family's connections with the land.

Mat, his grandfather, as a little boy, was sitting on a board that Jack Beechum had nailed to his plowbeam to make him a seat. As Jack walked behind the plow, Mat sat on the beam, and they talked. They talked about the pair of mules that drew the plow, and about the plow and how it was running, but they talked too about everything that a small boy could think to ask about, who had nothing to do but look and think and ask, except maybe, up in the afternoon, go to the spring to bring back a fresh drink of water in the gourd.

*Was that a school? It was a school.*

Andy thought of his own young children, who had descended, in part, from that school on the plowbeam, and did not know it. The mares strode lightly with their burden, the birds sang, the furrow rolled off the plow in a long, fluent motion, and a thrill grew in Andy at the recognition of something he wanted that he had forgotten. (Berry, 1988, p. 79)

Made comfortable already, though still something of a stranger, Andy returns the team to its owner and asks if he might look around, indicating his interest in farming. Troyer grants the request, and Andy sets off to explore. He notes the well-being of the place. It shows that it is well cared for. It shows it has been well managed. It shows that the scale of production fits the capacity of the workers. Andy makes many observations as he walks about.

He saw that the buildings were painted and in good repair. He saw the garden, newly worked and partly planted behind the house. He saw the martin boxes by the garden, and the small orchard with beehives under the trees. He saw fifteen guernsey cows and two more black mares in a pasture. He saw a stallion in a paddock beside the barn, and behind the barn a pen from which he could hear the sounds of pigs. He saw hens scratching in a large poultry yard. Now and then he could hear the voices of children. On neighboring farms, he could see other teams plowing. He walked as with his father's hand on his shoulder, and his father's voice in his ear, saying, "Look! Look!" He walked and looked and thought and wondered, and then he walked back down to the field that Isaac was plowing. (Berry, 1988, p. 80)

Andy and Isaac talk about the number of acres and the economics of the place, and how long the Troyers have been on this land. Isaac invites Andy for dinner, and he accepts. He learns that this is an Amish family with three generations living together. There is work for everyone to do, and three of the five children are in school. The meal provides Andy a chance for more observations.

He bowed his head with them over the food at the kitchen table. It was a clear, clean room. The food was good. A large maple tree stood near the back porch, visible from the kitchen windows, and the wind quivered in the new grass at its foot. Beyond were the white barn and outbuildings. It was a pretty place, its prettiness not so much made as allowed. It was a place of work, but a place too of order and rest, where work was done in a condition



of acknowledged blessedness and of gratitude. As they ate, they talked, making themselves known to each other. (Berry, 1988, p. 82)

They talk a little more and walk about the place after dinner. Then Andy takes his leave. This visit is a flashback in *Remembering*. And it is important because it helps Andy recall how he came to be where he is now, how he came to the decision to return “home” and farm on land that was available. The visit to the Troyer farm helps him clarify his own values. He likes the scale and fit of the place. He likes the livelihood he observes there. He compares it with Bill Meikelberger’s agribusiness farm and knows deep down which he prefers. The Troyer farm is an oasis that day for Andy—a place he stumbles on after visiting a troubling place, a different kind of farm and a different kind of farmer. The article he writes then for the farm journal he works for leads to a break with his boss. But Andy stands by what he believes. And he needs to remember this event now, as he struggles to re-connect with his beliefs and recreate his life. In *Remembering* he faces his biggest challenge yet. It is important for him to recall this earlier turning point, when discovering the Troyer farm helps to redirect his life. He is in need once more of a turning point. The care of the place and the land that Andy observes on this Amish farm helps him find his grounding, reconnects him with who he is, both when it happens and years later, when he remembers.

We can see in Berry’s fiction that places well loved and cared for can become places of value and comfort for human beings. Catlett looks back on his visit with the Troyers as a younger man. He remembers how pleased he was with the farm, how he liked the team Isaac used for plowing and the order of the place and its productivity. He admired the scale of the farm and the way it was a home for a three-generation family. He liked the way they welcomed him. And he wrote about this farm and its merits for the agribusiness journal he worked for. This act of courage led to his dismissal and the break with his editor who had also been a friend. But Andy lands on his feet, nevertheless. He returns “home” and creates a place for his family in Port William, a short distance from

Hargrave where he grew up. The Troyer farm is a catalyst that enables Andy to discover his deepest values. Indeed, it is a place well cared for—a place of value, comfort, and healthy living.

Another example of how the care of land and place creates places of value and comfort for human beings can be found in *A Place on Earth*. This is one of Berry's earlier novels and it introduces the reader to many "members" of "the Port William membership." Many stories here are artfully intertwined. They take place against the backdrop of the 1940s and the terrible war abroad, taking their young people and worrying their elders.

Burley Coulter is an especially interesting Port William character. I describe him as endearing, among other things, but it is not easy to say why. Burley is somewhat counter-culture. He is a good worker—does the farm work needed on his family land with his brother Jarrat and pitches in when help is needed at neighboring farms. He is a devoted uncle to his two nephews, Jarrat's sons Tom and Nathan, whose mother passed away when they were young. He seems to know everyone in the community and is well liked. He often comes up with unusual and thought-provoking things to say. He is a man who keeps his own counsel. He is independent and likes to break away from socializing, or treat himself after a long stretch of farm work by taking off in the woods at night, often with his dog and a rifle for coon-hunting. Burley is perhaps the most anti-status quo character that Berry offers us. He is devoted to Helen Kate Branch, but they never marry. They have a son, Danny Branch, who grows up calling Burley "Uncle Burley." Burley does not flaunt his seeming rebellion against social mores. He just does what comes naturally to him and is not preoccupied by others' opinions. Andrew Angyal, writing about the heartfelt debate between Burley and Wheeler Catlett about the meaning of community membership in *The Wild Birds*, makes this observation.

Burley's waywardness challenges the strong work ethic of the Port William Membership, but he is always there to lend a hand with anyone's

work. He tries to remain a free spirit within the confines of what his community will tolerate, and his transgressions are mostly common knowledge. The story's title perhaps comes from Burley and Kate Helen's long-standing relationship: are they the "wild birds?" (Angyal, 1995, p. 102)

In *A Place on Earth*, Burley writes letters to his younger nephew, Nathan, who is away in the war. Burley and Jarrat carry the sadness of having already lost the older son, Tom, in the war. In this respect Burley and Mat Feltner are kindred spirits, for Mat and Margaret have learned that their son Virgil is missing. Burley keeps up a respectable flow of letters to Nathan. And that is especially remarkable in view of the fact that Burley is not academic. He did not warm to school, you might say, and probably dropped out as soon as he could.

I cite several of these letters because Burley writes about the farm work, the people in the community, and the place that he and Nathan's father Jarrat care for and keep up. Burley writes about their life there, back at home, hoping of course that this news and his reflections will be a comfort to Nathan, far away in a strange place, doing what must seem an alien job for a rural farm boy. The letters Burley writes to Nathan are written in the spring and summer of 1945. The March 9 letter breaks the news of Virgil's missing and talks candidly about religion. It reflects on how inadequate the preacher's ministrations are to those who are grieving. It gives account of the weather, the rain, and the flooding they have had. This section is entitled "A Knack for Here." Burley gets going in this letter about the inexperienced minister. He and the barber, Jayber Crow, have noted Brother Piston going to talk with the Feltners. Burley reflects on this for several paragraphs and makes an important observation about people.

The difference between people is what has got to be taken notice of. There's the preacher who has what I reckon you would call a knack for the Hereafter. He's not much mixed with this world. As far as he's concerned there is no difference, or not much, between Tom Coulter and Virgil Feltner. Their names fit into the riddle he thinks he knows the answer to. I wouldn't try to say he ain't right. I do say that some people's knack is for the Here. Anyhow, that's the talent I'm stuck with. For us it's important to keep in mind who Tom was. And for Mat and them I judge it's important to know who is meant when they speak of Virgil. We don't forget them after

somebody who never knew them has said “Dead in the service of his country” and “Rest in peace.” That’s not the way these accounts are kept. We don’t rest in peace. The life of a good man who has died belongs to the people who cared about him, and ought to, and maybe itself is as much comfort as ought to be asked or offered. And surely the talk of a reunion in Heaven is thin comfort to people who need each other here as much as we do.

I ain’t saying I don’t believe there’s a Heaven. I surely do hope there is. That surely would pay off a lot of mortgages. But I do say it ain’t easy to believe. And even while I hope for it, I’ve got to admit I’d rather go to Port William. (Berry, 1983a, pp. 100-101)

As noted, this is a long letter that covers multiple topics. I choose this passage because of the title of the section, “A Knack for the Here,” and the details of Burley’s accounts. It is this care for the place, the land and the people and the community, that Burley weaves into his letter, perhaps unintentionally, but this care is what comes through. And Burley uses these “pictures” from home to connect with Nathan, his nephew off at war. There is enough here in a couple of pages to occupy a theology class for a semester. It is an eloquent testimony of the value of the here and now, and how the here and now forms the ground of our being.

There are two other letters in *A Place on Earth*. The March 25 letter is entitled “Green Coming Strong.” In this letter Burley tells Nathan about the little girl, Annie Crop, who drowns in the flood. He also says that the Feltners have received no word about Virgil. One of the things Burley does so well in the letters is to talk naturally. The letters surely were a comfort to Nathan. In this letter we also have the anticipation of spring, not just bad news.

I hate to write down these sad troubles. But I can’t think of any argument why I oughtn’t to tell you. They happened. And I’m in a way obliged to speak of them because they did happen and I know it. Seems to me that when you start home you’ll want to know what’s here and what’s not. And if anybody’s going to write it to you, looks like it’ll have to be me. I said to your daddy the other day, “Why don’t you write to Nathan?” And he said, “God Almighty, Burley, he knows what I’m doing.”

Making tracks is what he's doing. Making that team of black mules realize what he fed them through the winter for. Which I imagine you do know.

Well, spring is here, finally. And we've had some days of fine weather. This is one, clear and quiet, hardly any air stirring at all, just warm enough to be comfortable in the sun, and the country turning greener all the time. I'm happy today, in spite of everything, glad to see it all come back. (Berry, 1983a, p. 153)

Then Burley talks about the burdens they face as farmers in the spring. But he is not complaining, just detailing what Jarrat said, itemizing what Nathan already knows. And Burley knows that Nathan knows all of this as well. But Burley also understands what it might mean to Nathan under the circumstances to hear about the work, the place, and reports about the weather and the season. The "news" of things Nathan is familiar with and values will be welcome.

We've got ourselves behind an awful pile of work—farming on both of these places, and at Mat's. Plus we're trying to help Ida carry on until Gideon turns up, if he does. Plus there's no chance we can see of hiring much help. There's sort of nobody here but children and women and old men. I imagine I'm going to get mighty tired of looking at your daddy's back before October.

All week we've been breaking and burning and sowing plant beds—at Mat's, and then down at Gideon's, and since Friday afternoon up here. Fact is, that's what we're doing right now....

Everybody seems to be as behind in his work as we are, going early and late. From the house at night I can see the plant beds burning for miles, and smell them too. And you know people are awake and busy around them. It sort of brings the country together in a way it never is any other time. (Berry, 1983a, pp. 154-155)

These letters are gestures of love and devotion from an uncle to an enlisted nephew. Burley makes clear that he has to squirrel away the time to write. And he says it was not easy at first to do so, but with practice he has acquired a kind of rhythm for the letter writing.

The last letter in *A Place on Earth*, written June 7, 1945, is entitled "Hard at It." More "sad troubles" (Berry, 1983a, p. 153). Gideon is not back. Some are rumoring

about his wife, Ida, and the carpenter, Ernest Finley, who has been working to repair her barn and other buildings. Burley talks about that a bit and confides his distress over the talk and his concern about the “possibility of pain in it” (p. 234). But as always, there is a report on the work and the season and the land—about their continuing care of land and people.

We’ve been hard at it, trying to get the tobacco set. We’ve got out only about an acre of our crops here at home. And at Mat’s we’re not but a little better than half done. So we’ve got a long pull still ahead of us.

Also, sort of between times and when we can, we work some down at Gideon’s and Ida’s. Gideon is still unheard from, but we’re keeping the place going. And Ida keeps the slack taken up when we’re not there. When we are there she works right along with us. (p. 233)

The letters are also a chance to get a different view on the novel’s plot. The narration in *A Place on Earth* is third person. But the letters are in first person; thus they give us one character’s frame of reference. Because of this first person account communicating love and support and sharing events in Port William and the day to day work, we assume the letters create comfort and value for Nathan. They must keep him connected in a personal way with who he is and where he comes from.

*A World Lost* (1996) offers a third example of how the care of land and place creates places of comfort and value for people. The novel is Andy Catlett’s recollection of the tragic death of his Uncle Andrew, who was murdered when a misunderstanding erupts on a hot, humid day. Andy is but 10 years old at the time. He is close to this uncle for whom he is named; he emulates him and hopes to be like him when he grows up. Rather than becoming like him, he spends much of his life trying to reconcile himself to what happened the day Uncle Andrew and several others do heavy manual work in summer’s heat at an old mine. Andy wants to understand who this uncle was and what the meaning of his death might be for those who love and remember him.

Near the end of *A World Lost*, Andy recalls a day working in the fields when he has a kind of epiphany. He remembers pausing and looking about—seeing the land and crops, taking note of the animals and tools. And the 10-year-old Andy comes to see the goodness of it, the way it all fits together. This experience provides a wonderful example of how care of land and place can create places of comfort and value for people. In this case, it does so for a young boy. In this first person account, Andy sets the scene for this special memory.

In the summer that I turned ten, the summer of Uncle Andrew's death, all the tobacco and corn on the Crayton Place was grown in the same field in the middle of the farm. The field was divided in two by a road, just a dirt track, by which we went from the gate on one side to the gate on the other. To the left of the road, going back, was a long, broad ridge, sloping gently to the fences on either side. To the right of the road and in the far side of the ridge, the slope was broken by hollows and was somewhat steeper. The field was beautifully laid out, so that all the rows followed the contours of the ridge. This was particularly noticeable in that far right-hand corner where the plowlands were smaller and were divided by grassed drains. The design of the field would have been my father's work: a human form laid lovingly upon the natural conformation of the place. (Berry, 1996, p. 138)

Then, in remarkable detail, Andy shares his recollection.

There came a morning when I stood in the dust of the road with a hoe in my hands, looking at the field, and was overcome by sudden comprehension of what was happening there. The corn was a little above knee-high, the tobacco plants about the size of a man's hat, both crops green and flourishing. R. T. and I were hoeing the tobacco. I could see Jake Branch plowing corn with a riding cultivator drawn by a good pair of black, white-nosed mules named Jack and Pete. Somewhere beyond the ridgetop, Col Oaks was plowing tobacco with a single mule, old Red, and a walking plow. The air smelled of vegetation and stirred earth. Beside me, R. T. was filing his hoe. Standing there in the brilliance with my ears sticking out under the brim of my straw hat and my mouth probably hanging open (somebody was always telling me, "Shut your mouth, Andy!"), I saw how beautiful the field was, how beautiful our work was. And it came to me all in a feeling how everything fitted together, the place and ourselves and the animals and the tools, and how the sky held us. I saw how sweetly we were enabled by the land and the animals and our few simple tools. (Berry, 1996, pp. 138-139)

Just as Andy's father's vision as the lawyer, trying to be sure Jack Beechum's farm falls to responsible owners in "It Wasn't Me" (*The Wild Birds*, 1986b), stays with us, so does this vision of his son at age 10. It is, I believe, one of the most moving passages of Berry's fiction. Highlighting the value of land and place and the possibilities that responsible stewardship can yield, it also paints a memorable picture of difficult work undertaken responsibly. Andy describes the experience a bit further as well as its effect on him short- and long-term.

My moment of vision cannot have lasted long. It ended, I imagine, when R. T. finished sharpening his hoe and nudged me with the file and handed it to me. It was a powerful moment, a powerful vision, nonetheless. I have lived under its influence ever since.

Its immediate result was that I became frantic to own a mule. I saw how, owning a mule, a boy could become a man, an economic entity, dignified and self-sustaining, capable of lovely work. I fixed my mind on Pete, who was a little the tallest and a little the most stylish of the pair Jake Branch was working that day in the corn rows. My conversations with Uncle Andrew were all dominated by my obsessive importunings and proposals for the purchase of the mule. I wanted to buy him on credit, giving Uncle Andrew and my father my note for the full amount, and pay for him by my work—which, given my irregular employment at a quarter a day, would have taken quite a while.

It was a boy's dream, sufficiently absurd, and yet the passion that attached to it I am still inclined to respect, for I still feel it. (Berry, 1996, pp. 139-140)

He goes on to discuss how Uncle Andrew interacted with him around his boyhood eagerness to buy a mule. These reflections lead to the recognition of a difference between himself and the uncle he loved. It is an important discovery for Andy, that he and Uncle Andrew are not identical. Furthermore, this awareness of a 10-year-old boy—about a world in which things well cared for and close to the land can fit together and result from "lovely work"; how a field can be "beautiful" and work in a field, beautiful; and "how sweetly we were enabled by the land and the animals and our few simple tools"—is significant. As we reflect on the challenges educators face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I wonder



how likely it is that 10-year-olds today, so continually on the move and speeded up with social media and instant access to information, would view the land with this kind of reverence and an awareness of its value and possibility. How likely is a potential Andy to see what people working together with tools and animals on the land might accomplish, and to value the beauty and sense of fit that Andy Catlett describes here? For those arguably rare young people who still might get a glimpse of what Berry is talking about—are their experiences in the classroom likely to support such insights? I will look more closely at these questions when I trace the implications of Berry's work for education in Chapter VI.

In concluding this consideration of land and place as a theme in Berry's fiction, I turn to a portion of Andrew Angyal's 1991 interview with Berry that directly connects Andy Catlett's epiphany with the author's experience. Conversing at the Berry home in Port Royal, Kentucky, Angyal and Berry discuss community and what is involved in nurturing rather than destroying human community. Here is the first portion of this two-part exchange. (Note: the interviewer's words are in italics.)

*I was up last night thinking about all of this. It occurred to me that you write a great deal about pre-World War II self-supporting rural communities and the effect that World War II had on the American worldview. You could almost trace the dislocating effect back to World War II.*

That's where the explosion went off. Right there. Well, you see, my mind was formed by that other world. (Angyal, 1995, p. 147)

Then Angyal prompts Berry with a follow-up comment.

*Yes. Also, it occurs to me that you enjoyed the great benefits of the nurturing education from that older way of life.*

That's right. That world stayed intact here, you see, through the Depression and the war. Adversity maintained it. I grew up around people who were still farming with horses and mules and whose lives had been formed by that old discipline and that ethic that was based on animal power—my grandfather, really my father as well. And so it came to me in a big way, and I really liked it. I remember when it just kind of came to me

what a wonderful way it was that we had been empowered by animals and a few simple tools. I remember when it hit me. It was a kind of falling in love. In that way, I made common cause with my people, my forebears. So I know what were the informing passions in the best people of my grandfather's generation and to him. (p. 147)

Berry enfolds a valuable experience from his own boyhood on the family farm into the recollections of Andy Catlett, one of his most fully developed fictional characters.

### Chapter III

#### THE THEME OF COMMUNITY IN BERRY'S FICTION

Care of community goes hand in hand with care of land and place because the value of land and place is inextricably tied to the people who live on or near the land and whose work is this responsible stewardship.

In what ways does Berry's care for human community reveal itself in his fiction? As with land and place, I will look at the theme of community in selections from Berry's fiction. What is the message? Why is it important? And how do we begin to understand the importance of community for education? I begin with a working definition of *community* for this study.<sup>1</sup>

- *Community* for Berry is a group of people who live to a degree in close proximity and are associated with one another along essential dimensions. These include cultural, social, economic, and ecological components. Berry's communities are situated in particular places. He is not speaking about cyberspace, networks created around shared interests, or groups defined by religious or social affiliation. He states,

If the word *community* is to mean or amount to anything, it must refer to a place (in its natural integrity) and its people. It must refer to a placed people.... "Community" must mean a people locally placed and a people, moreover, not too numerous to have a common knowledge of themselves and of their place. (Berry, 1993, p. 168)

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<sup>1</sup>As concepts are defined, they will be identified by a bullet and italicizing of the major term or phrase.

Residents share social, cultural, and historical experience within a given locale. Shared components include the natural world, wildlife, air, water, woodlands, soil, and minerals.

Community for Berry is also closely tied to economic livelihood—how do residents provide for their physical, social, and spiritual needs? For Berry, there is a close connection between a community and its economic identity or footprint. He advocates for “stable, locally adapted communities in America” (Smith, 2007, p. 102). Berry envisions communities in which agriculture and small businesses, supported by fair market compensation (or parity), enable sustainable livelihoods for quality work. He sees communities as organic, complex, viable, and whole. They vary in terms of health and longevity, but all are evolving and dynamic along multiple dimensions. Berry identifies the especial quality of community in his essay, “The Loss of the Future.”

A community is not merely a condition of physical proximity, no matter how admirable the layout of the shopping-center and the streets.... A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves. (Berry, 2012b, p. 71)

Given Berry’s focus on particular places, the physical dimensions of community, and his attention to scale (a manageable proximity between community residents), we must recognize that America’s shift to urban living, continually on the rise, means that the majority of us do not live in communities that fit his definition. However, Berry does not claim that “community membership” is impossible in urban settings.

### **Port William Cares for Those with Special Needs**

Just as Berry’s focus is continually on land and place in all his work, so his focus is on communities on or near the land and those whose work is the land’s care and healthy productivity. One indicator of a community’s health has always been its care for those

with special needs. The community in Berry's novels makes a place for those with special needs.

In *A Place on Earth* (Berry, 1983a), the community reaches out to the Gideon Crop family in the wake of a terrible flood. *A Place on Earth* is really many stories. It is a rich introduction to "the Port William membership." Community manifests itself repeatedly. It is especially the story of Mat Feltner whose son Virgil is away fighting in WWII. Early in the novel, the Feltners receive word that Virgil is missing. I read this novel as especially focused on the destruction of that which is irreplaceable.

Gideon and Ida Crop are tenant farmers on Roger Merchant's land. Merchant is a cousin of Mat's. He inherited this farm but does not care for it well. He has a drinking problem that interferes in major ways in his life. The Crops stand in rather stark contrast to Merchant. The young couple is credited for the well-being of this land, in spite of particular characteristics that make its good care challenging. Here we learn what the Crops have been able to do *for* the land so far.

You will guess that the place must have declined unimaginably from what it was when Griffith Merchant was a young man.

But what is left of it has been well cared for. The fields in the bottoms along both sides of the creek show the signs of having been regularly mowed and sensibly cultivated. Here and there on the old buildings a loose board has been nailed back in place with new nails. Hinges and latches are in good shape. In the sheds and outbuildings things are put away neatly on their shelves and hooks.... There is evidence everywhere—around the other buildings, the house, the garden—of the presence of a strong, frugal intelligence, the sort of mind that can make do, not meagerly but skillfully and adequately, with scraps. (pp. 108-109)

Gideon learns from his father how to tend the land of another with dedication, skill, and an element of grace. We conclude: they are not comfortable; they are surviving, but there is little margin for error. Gideon learns also from the previous generation how to carry this station in life with poise and dignity.

Gideon had not forgot, and never has, the silence his father kept when once or twice a year Roger and the lawyer would drive down to the valley

farm. It would usually be in the middle of the day—as Gideon remembers it, it is the noon of a fair day in the summer; they have finished their dinner and are resting on the front porch—and Roger and the lawyer would drive in and stop in the road below the house and blow the horn. And John Crop would walk down to the car and stoop to the window. He nodded and spoke in answer to their questions, saying no more than necessary, volunteering nothing. Gideon, watching from the porch, knew that his father spoke out of the silence a man must keep when all abundance and order in his sight are to his credit but not in his possession. (Berry, 1983a, pp. 110-111)

The Crops, however, are fairly isolated on this farm. And when the flood comes through, and drowns their toddler daughter Annie, they face the tragedy of their lives. Mr. Merchant is in no shape to check on them or help. In fact, for the first few days no one knows what has happened but Ida and Gideon. Gideon, who was in the yard when it happened, is consumed with guilt over the death of their child. After making an extensive but ultimately futile search over the water for signs of the little girl, he takes off, horrifically broken over their loss and his perceived part in it. Ida is left with the farm and a mother's grief. In time, however, those who know them begin to suspect something is wrong. The first people to try to reach them are Ida's aunt, Lizzie Kate Skinner, and her husband, Mr. Greatlow. The story of this couple trying to reach the Crops is masterfully told, through Burley Coulter's eyes. Often it is amusing in spite of the tragic circumstances. The story exemplifies the work of community in Port William.

Condensing many details, Burley Coulter seeks out Mat Feltner on a Sunday morning to report how he and Jarrat helped the Greatlows when their car was stuck, not once but twice, in an effort to go to the Crops when phone Lizzie's phone calls did not go through. Burley is soliciting Mat to go with him to investigate what Lizzie maintains, that "Something ain't right." Here is the end of the story Burley shares with Mat.

"So, anyhow, we decided that Jarrat would take the old people home in the truck, and we'd let them know how Ida was as soon as we could find out. Jarrat started off ahead to get the truck, and I stayed back with the Greatlows, sort of helping the old woman up the climb. Jarrat had the truck waiting at my gate when we got there, and I helped them in.

“I’d already promised myself to go right on down to the Crops’. I hadn’t said so, but seemed to me I had to agree with the old woman—something ain’t right down there.

“Well, the more I thought about it, the more sure I got that they’re in some kind of trouble, and the more I sort of hung back from the thought of walking into it by myself, to tell you the truth. And then I thought of you, Mat, and decided I’d ask you. I know it’s Sunday and all, but would you mind?” (Berry, 1983a, pp. 139-140)

Mat agrees to go, of course. And they make it through and find Ida and learn of their situation. Having read this story of the flood and the aftermath several times, I find it incredibly moving. It is not easy to say why, but I believe it has to do with the artful use of detail in the telling. Berry paints the picture for his reader. You *see* what happens. You grieve for this humble, hard-working couple when their only child is swept away, right in front of the father’s eyes, by a flood that comes up in a matter of minutes. No warning system to encourage people to evacuate. So what does the community do? First, Margaret Feltner tells Mat that they should ask Ida to come and stay with them while Gideon is gone. As Margaret says, ““Mat, she oughtn’t to be there by herself”” (Berry, 1983a, p. 147).

But Ida has re-grouped in the face of several days of stark reality. She is keeping the farm going, looking after the animals, watching for Gideon’s return. She does not wish to come to town and stay with others. So they arrange for Ernest Finley, Margaret’s brother, a single man, wounded in WWI and lame from his injury, but a skilled carpenter, to come out to the Crop place and do needed repairs.

When the flood waters came through, little Annie was part way across a foot-bridge on the property. The flood took out the bridge and the child. Those few who have come and gone since have had to navigate around its absence. Fixing the bridge is a strong symbol of repair and healing, and it is one of the first things Mr. Finley attends to. While he is in a number of ways a loner, his work on the Crop place is so skilled,

concentrated, and generous, that it strikes us as exemplary of the care of community in Port William. The story of the repair of the bridge is especially poignant.

He makes his way with some difficulty into the swift water of the ford. The water comes nearly to the tops of his boots, caving them in coldly against his feet and legs. He is aware, almost as soon as he begins to move against the push of the current, of the absurdity of wading swift water on crutches. His gratitude that nobody is there to see him, and then his fear that somebody may come, make him ridiculous to himself. He crosses the creek, feeling his way over the uneven stones of the riffle with the crutch ends, and goes down the shallows along the far edge until he comes to where the bridge dangles in the trees. When he has fastened the rope to the end of one of the severed cables and weighted the free end of the rope with a rock and thrown it over to the other bank, he wades back across.

Using a block and tackle, he pulls the bridge out of the trees and across the [stream] and into place. He locks the pulleys and walks to the top of the high bank and stands there for three or four minutes, studying the job now that he has it out where he can look at it. The snarled skein of wood and cable and wire that he has hauled tense between the banks has not even begun to resemble a bridge. (Berry, 1983a, p. 162)

The work is detailed and painstaking, but once Ernest begins, he focuses on completing it and measures his progress against the remaining daylight.

Until after sundown, until the bridge is a bridge again, and looks like one, curving its perfect curve between its fastenings, he does not stop. He untwists and splices the severed cables, binds them back around the trunks of the two trees from which they were torn loose, rebuilds the steps up from the lip of the bank to where the end of the footboard will be laid. He goes into it then, building his way across, wedging his way into the mess of it, leaving it made and straight behind him.... Long before he is done, he already knows how it is going to be, and he is driven on by an appetite for the finished look of it. (pp. 162-163)

At last the job is done, and Ernest's work is rewarded by Ida's pleasure that the bridge is restored to order and usability.

Hearing something, a footstep maybe, he looks across the bridge at Ida standing on the top step at the other end of it....

"Can I come across now?"

"Yes. Come on across."



She comes out onto the bridge, giving her weight to the flexible strength of it, following down into the curve of it. And then, for the first time all day, he thinks of this woman's drowned child, and his remembrance flinches inside him. He is suddenly nerved tightly as one watching a tightrope walker. And he sees that a hesitance of some kind grows in her as she comes on toward the place where she knows Annie was sitting during the last half hour she lived. To Ernest she seems to force herself up to that place, and then past it. And once past it, she is all right. (pp. 163-164)

This walk of Ida Crop's across the bridge, this restored bridge, days following the flood that drowns their daughter and wipes out the bridge, is deeply moving.

"Lord, you sure did get it done fast. I thought, the mess it was in, it would take a week."

"Well, it wasn't too much trouble. Once you get started into a thing like that it'll usually turn out very well."

"I declare, it's nice to have it up again. I ain't been on this side of the creek in I don't know how long." (Berry, 1983a, p. 164)

I cite this story in some detail because I believe it shows how the work in Port William is most often carried out, including the work of human community. It is clear that Ernest Finley does not slough off or cut corners when it comes to repairing the farm that Gideon and Ida Crop care for as tenant farmers for Roger Merchant. He does the work with knowledge, commitment, skill, and dedication. And the value of his work for Ida is made clear in the story. His steady, quality contributions to her damaged landscape help with the healing of her broken heart.

We note as well that the give and take among Port William residents is reciprocal; rarely is the giving simply one-way. Ida Crop has a sense of obligation toward Ernest Finley, and she graciously repays him. We are not told anything about the financial arrangement here. Perhaps Mat arranged for money from the Merchant estate to be paid to Ernest for his work. But we are not certain of that. It is difficult to believe that Mat would ask Ernest to do this extensive repair simply as a contribution, given Ernest's especial challenges. But we honestly do not know the financial transactions in place.

Ida, however, makes her own contribution, independent of whatever Mat may have arranged. She is cooking dinner every day. And she makes it clear that Ernest is welcome for the noonday meal. He tries, it seems, to keep his options open when it comes to this courtesy. However it is also clear that he is touched by her kindness and generosity.

He has misgivings at the thought that she feeds him by her own troubling and providing even though the work he is doing there is not necessarily for her. Aware of the delicacy of the question, and made awkward by it, he has asked several times if there is not some way that he can repay her for her kindness to him. And each time she has scoffed at the idea.

“I’ve got plenty of canned stuff in the cellar,” she told him once, “and meat in the smokehouse. Somebody just as well be eating it.”

Now and then when he sees she needs it, he will buy some staple such as salt or coffee or flour and bring it to her, and always she will take it with simple thanks and the observation that she was needing it, as if the whole business is perfectly natural and even ordinary. It would delight him to bring more, to buy and bring by the armload, but he knows that to buy more where there is already plenty would seem ridiculous to her.

Nothing has passed between them except her hospitality, the same as she would offer to anybody who might come there to work. (Berry, 1983a, pp. 194-195)

A number of people clearly participate in the community outreach to Ida Crop during this anguishing time of loss and survival. But Ernest Finley is the most frequent helper on the scene. Coming almost daily, his contribution is obvious. Unfortunately, rather early on, Ernest begins to fall for Ida. It is never clear if she is aware of this or not. She is a bright and capable woman, holding up admirably under very difficult circumstances. And that is partly why this story is so moving. We sense that Ernest’s work is valuable to her. His presence is welcomed day by day, as Ida carries on the farm chores and watches for Gideon to return, or at least send mail. But Ernest is a hurt man long before the flood and his work at the Crops’ place. He brings back from the war deep physical and psychological wounds. He makes the best of his situation and is productive as a carpenter for the community. He is at home, living with Margaret and Mat. But his

falling for Ida leaves him more alone and vulnerable than ever. And he does not ask for help. Nor do those who might have picked up on the situation and found a way to prevent the ensuing tragedy figure it out in time. In the end Ernest takes his own life. It is a grievous loss to the community, especially for Mat and Margaret.

I cite this story in *A Place on Earth* with mixed feelings. I believe it demonstrates in powerful ways how the community comes to the aid of one of its own. For surely Ida is helped greatly in the waiting, to tend the farm and prepare for Gideon's return whenever it happens, by the offerings of others in the community, freely given, with nothing asked for in exchange. However, the helping ends tragically for Ernest. It is not possible to say whether something else might have pushed him over the edge. We do not know. But it is clear that this experience ends tragically for him. He realizes at times his dilemma, but does not seek the help that might have saved him. Ernest glimpses his predicament and describes it to himself as that of a trapped animal.

There are times when he realizes vaguely that he is trapped, endangered, like an animal that has crept through a narrow opening and fed until it has grown too large to escape. The orderly interior of his shop is remote from him now, of little use to him. In these moments of understanding, he knows that something behind him in his life is being destroyed. Even if he could escape and make his way back to it, it would no longer serve. (Berry, 1983a, p. 195)

It is not a perfect community. It is a good one, but it is not perfect. As such, it is more realistic than we may sometimes credit it. Criticism, I think, is sometimes leveled at Berry for an alleged nostalgia, a looking back that longs for days gone by and perhaps remembers them as better than they were. But Ernest Finley's death and other examples of tragedy rebut this charge. This is "a real world." Soldiers come home from war badly wounded, or they do not come home at all. Natural disasters hit and take the only child of capable tenant farmers, leaving a bereft father and mother, hanging on. Things happen, and people respond out of their strengths and weaknesses. The events in Port William

invite us to visit the experiences in our own lives when community either helped or let us down. We all have such stories.

In *Remembering* (Berry, 1988), the community surrounds a deeply injured and distraught Andy Catlett. While he must do the work of recovery on his own, in time the community's love and care, combined with his own effort, enable him to heal. As noted in the Chapter II, *Remembering* is a complex though relatively short novel, the journey of a deeply wounded Catlett back to health and wholeness.

When we meet Andy Catlett in *Remembering*, he is far from home. He is a broken man, the victim of a farming accident. And he is struggling mightily to get his bearings. We recall that Andy grew up in the Port William-Hargrave community. He visited two sets of grandparents throughout his childhood. He has attended college and worked as an agriculture journalist before returning with his wife and two children to his home community. Many of the details of this journey are re-lived in *Remembering* as Andy struggles to come back from the October work day, now seared in his memory, when he, Nathan Coulter, and Danny Branch help Jack Penn with his harvest. The day is described as "brilliant, warmish fall weather" (Berry, 1988, p. 13), and the men work well together, but there is pressure to get as much done as possible. And Andy's job in the late afternoon is to drive the picker. When it becomes clogged, he attempts to clear it. And due to fatigue or hurry or inattention, or all three, his hand gets caught in the machine and is so badly mangled that it must be amputated. His right hand. As the story puts it, "The machine took his hand" (p. 14).

So this novel begins in darkness. Darkness is a pervading theme, for Andy has quarreled again with his wife Flora and then left for agriculture conferences in the Midwest and California, not having resolved their painful exchange. One of the reasons *Remembering* is a complex novel is because of the many stories tied up in it. All have to do with Andy. It is told in third person, with omniscient voice. Impressive stretches of

life, time, and distance are covered. Overall though, it is the journey of a few days, a major turning point in the life of the main character.

Along with darkness is the theme of loss; darkness and loss go together in *Remembering*. Andy recalls the death of Elton Penn, who was like an uncle to him and his brother Henry. Penn is the tenant farmer Andy's father, Wheeler Catlett, secured for the Beechum place. Elton has been unwell toward the end of his life. His family and friends can see it, but Elton refuses to visit a doctor. Finally, there comes an evening when Mary Penn invites Andy and Henry and their families for supper: "Come over and cheer us up" (Berry, 1988, p. 20). Well, they have a good time, and remember many things from the past and laugh over familiar stories. And then Elton, exiting the room, stumbles, falls, and is gone. In Andy's current distress, he recalls this loss. And the memory focuses for him the multiple losses he now carries.

To Andy, Elton's absence became a commanding presence. He was haunted by things he might have said to Elton that would not be sayable again in this world.

That absence is with him now, but only as a weary fact, known but no longer felt, as if by some displacement of mind or heart he is growing absent from it.

It is the absence of everything he knows, and is known by, that surrounds him now.

He is absent himself, perfectly absent. Only he knows where he is, and he is no place that he knows. His flesh feels its removal from other flesh that would recognize it or respond to its touch; it is numb with exile. He is present in his body, but his body is absent. (Berry, 1988, p. 21)

The depth of pain in this story of Andy Catlett is hard to find words for. The author draws our attention to it over and over, placing it in different contexts and offering repeated examples. He is broken in his family and community. He is angry over agribusiness and where it is taking rural farming in the United States. He is face to face with a major physical limitation that calls into question his identity and usefulness, to everybody, for everything. He recalls a conversation with his mother, Bess Catlett,

sometime after the accident. Urging him to learn from the event, she reminds him of his maternal grandmother, Margaret Feltner.

He went as an exile into his own house and barn and fields. His wound had showed him the world and, at the same time, his estrangement from it. It was as though he continued to speak to his hand, which did not answer....

His mother gave him no chance to shy away. "Come sit here," she said, reminding him for the first time of her mother.

"Andy, I'm sorry for what's happened. I can't tell you how sorry. But you must learn something from it."

"Learn!"

"What you don't know, you'll have to learn."

"What?"

"I don't know. But you must accept this as given to you to learn from, or it will hurt you worse than it already has..."

He had become a special case, and he knew what he thought of that. He raged, and he raged at his rage, and nothing that he had was what he wanted. He remained devoted to his lost hand, to his body as it had been, to his life as he had wanted it to be; he could not give them up. That he had lost them and they were gone did not persuade him. The fact had no power with him. The powerlessness of the fact made him lonely, and he held to his loneliness to protect his absurdity. But it was as though his soul had withdrawn from his life, refusing any longer to live in it. (Berry, 1988, pp. 32-33)

How this tragic dismemberment for Andy affects everything he does now is spelled out.

He was out of control. He *is* out of control. For months now he has not had the use of his best reasons. He is where he is, two thousand miles from home, where nobody knows where he is, in a room he has never seen before, because of a schedule that he made once and did not especially want to make when he made it. For months he has merely fallen from one day to another, with no more intention than any other creature or object that is falling, only seeing afterwards, too late, what his intention might have been, but by then fallen further.

And this fall of his involved or revealed or caused the fall of appearances. He no longer trusted the look or sound of anything. He no longer believed that anything was what it appeared to be. He began to ask what had been secretly meant or ignorantly meant or unconsciously meant. And once his trust had failed there was no limit to his distrust; he saw that

the world of his distrust was bottomless and forever dark, it was his fall itself, but he could not stop it. (pp. 33-34)

And there is the poignant exchange between Andy and his daughter.

There were days when he could not bear the eyes of his daughter Betty, who saw everything, and loved him, and was hurt by him, and could not be helped.

“Daddy,” she said, “are you all right?” And then, correcting herself, “Are you going to be all right?”

“Sure,” he said. (Berry, 1988, p. 32)

Earlier we are told more about how the family is coping.

He knew that Flora talked to the children about him. He knew, as well as if he had overheard, what she had said. “Well, now, listen. This is a hard time for your daddy. You’ll have to understand and be patient with him. He’ll be better after while.” This was what she said to the children, he knew, because it was what she said to herself. (Berry, 1988, p. 30)

I quote at some length to show what great a distance Andy must work from in order to “come back.” Berry writes so movingly about Catlett’s brokenness and dismemberment—the reader can *feel* it. The reader readily goes to places in his or her own life that feel similar. Our focus here is community and its role in helping its members with special needs. But first we must understand the depth of brokenness Andy Catlett is experiencing. This depth of loss, and the accompanying rage and sense of helplessness, are aptly illustrated in the account of neighbors coming to help Andy at harvest time after the accident.

When his first crop of alfalfa was ready to harvest in mid May, they came to help him—Nathan and Danny and Jack, and Martin and Arthur Rowanberry. Or, rather, they came and harvested his hay, he helping them, and doing it poorly enough in his own opinion, with embarrassment, half resenting their charitable presumption, embarrassing them by his self-apology.

Nathan, who ran the crew—because Andy was useless to do it, and somebody had to do it—mainly ignored him, except to give him orders in the form of polite questions: “Don’t you think it’ll do to go up this afternoon?” “What about you running the rake?”

When they were finished, Andy, speaking as he knew out of the worst of his character, said, “I don’t know how to thank you. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

And speaking out of the best of his, Nathan said, “Help *us*.” So saying, he looked straight at Andy, grinned, took hold of his right forearm, and gave just a little tug. (Berry, 1988, pp. 38-39)

Then the story specifies the significance of this experience for Andy.

That was in another world. That memory in the flesh of his arm could not be stranger if it were some spirit’s parting touch that he had borne with him into the womb.

The incident gave him no ease. It placed an expectation on him that he could not refuse and did not want. He did go to help them, but only as a nuisance, he felt, to them and to himself. He had little belief that they needed him or that he could help them. And, faced with his uncertainty, they seemed not to know what to ask of him. Except, that is, for Nathan. Nathan ignored him as he was, and treated him as if he were a stranger who required an extraordinary nicety of manners, speaking to him almost exclusively in polite questions. How would he feel about doing this? Would he mind too much doing that? (p. 39)

*Remembering* is a novel that, I believe, engages many readers deeply, inviting them down whatever long, difficult, corridors their own lives may have taken. Most of us, at some point in our lives, experience an especially challenging journey not unlike the one Andy Catlett works through in Berry’s novel.

But darkness turns out not to be the last word. Andy recalls important episodes from his past, such as the time he quarrels with Tommy Netherbough who wants him to write an article for *Scientific Farming* that showcases an agribusiness farm. The disagreement causes a break with Netherbough, and Andy chooses to move with his family back to Kentucky. He also recalls what he knows of pivotal moments in the lives of some of his forebears. His father Wheeler decides to return and practice law in Hargrave rather than take the position in Chicago his professor thinks is an ideal fit. His grandfather Mat decides to return to Port William after time away at a boarding school. Andy recalls Elton’s excitement about the possibilities of the Harford Place, how Elton



envisioned the way it could become a homestead for the right young couple. Eventually it does become Andy's home place, but not when Elton first seizes on the idea.

Visiting these stories that are part of who Andy is somehow enables him to move forward from his own place of being stuck. He is able to piece together a way forward, but it is not just out of his individual experience. It is due to the lives that have surrounded and influenced him. In Chapter 4, "A Long Choosing," we learn more about the terrain Andy has been covering in his mind and heart, as he wanders the streets of San Francisco in the early morning. The passage does not explain his decision, but it enhances our understanding of Andy's transition.

Though he has not moved, he has turned. *I must go now. If I am going to go, it is time.* On the verge of his journey, he is thinking about choice and chance, about the disappearance of chance into choice, though the choice be as blind as chance. That he is who he is and no one else is the result of a long choosing, chosen and chosen again. He thinks of the long dance of men and women behind him, most of whom he never knew, some he knew, two he yet knows, who, choosing one another, chose him. He thinks of the choices, too, by which he chose himself as he now is. How many choices, how much chance, how much error, how much hope have made that place and people that, in turn, made him? He does not know. He knows that some who might have left chose to stay, and that some who did leave chose to return, and he is one of them. Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it, which he did once, and now has done again. (Berry, 1988, p. 60)

So Andy does turn, now, with purpose and direction, no longer at drift in a tumultuous and dark seascape. He turns almost with haste to make his way back home. He is focused, he is clarified; he is, at last, recovering. Of course, there is no knowing what he will find at home or how his new direction will turn out. But he has, with the help of relatives and people who love him, and love him still, gathered himself up, and found that in spite of an inexplicable tragedy, there is more left of him than he realized. There is almost a sense of calling about this story. One might argue that Andy experiences in the nearly empty streets of an early San Francisco morning a calling—to return to himself, his best self, and to those he has built his life with. He understands now

his need for forgiveness and is ready to ask for it; whereas before this turning, when Flora talked of the need for forgiveness Andy would shut down.

He makes his way back to the hotel room, prepares for the journey home, and works through the challenges of airports and the cross-country flight. He finds no one at home, though Flora, sensing or hoping (we are not told which) that he may arrive while they are at the Rowanberries picking beans and visiting, has left a note on the kitchen table. Andy unpacks his suitcase and heads out for a walk, first replying to the note. Then he has an epiphany of sorts, a long sleep in a field and a detailed vision which includes a guide. It is, arguably, Andy's transition from darkness to light and might be interpreted in various ways. I see it as confirmation of the turning he began in California. He arrives home and finds that the direction within himself is true, on the mark. He does not get home and find the same feelings and struggles still going on. He does not find Flora still angry over their quarrel, for instance. This is not to say the challenges are over. It is to say that a new man faces them. And confirmation of this newness comes through in this epiphany he experiences. Instead of going to join the family he walks the fields and lies down to sleep. He is weary, beyond imagining. But the sleep that comes to him at first is troubled. This is a profound transition Andy is in the midst of.

But the sleep that comes to him now is not restful. He has entered the dark, and it is such a darkness as he has never known. All that is around him and all that he is has disappeared into it. He sees nothing, remembers nothing, knows nothing except a hopeless longing for something he does not know, for which he does not know a name. Everything has been taken away, and the dark around him is full of the sounds of crying and of tearing asunder. If it is a sleep that he is in, he cannot awaken himself. Once he was nothing, and did not know it; and then, for a little while, it seems, he was something, to the sole effect that now he knows that he is nothing. And somewhere there is a lovely something, infinitely desirable, of which he cannot recall even the name. What he is, all that he is, amid the outcries in the dark and the rendings, is a nothing possessed of a terrible self-knowledge. (Berry, 1988, pp. 120-121)

Andy has what some might call a death experience. The author tries to *show* us what has happened for Andy, rather than merely tell us he has changed.

But now from outside his hopeless dark sleep a touch is laid upon his shoulder, a pressure like that of a hand grasping, and his form shivers and forks out into the darkness, and is shaped again in sense. Breath and light come into him. He feels his flesh enter into mind, mind into flesh. He turns, puts his knee under him, stands, and, though dark to himself, is whole.

He is where he was, in the valley, on the hillside under an oak, but the place is changed. It is almost morning and a gray light has made its way among the trees. (Berry, 1988, p. 121)

He sees a short distance away a man walking away from him. He understands that the man came near and looked at him, as he slept, and touched him, but now is moving away. The visage is described as “dark as shadow,” and is perceived as a kind of guide.

He understands presently that he is hearing the light; he is hearing the sun, which now has risen, though from the valley it is not yet visible. The light’s music resounds and shines in the air and over the countryside, drawing everything into the infinite, sensed but mysterious pattern of its harmony. From every tree and leaf, grass blade, stone, bird, and beast, it is answered and again answers in return. The creatures sing back their names. But more than their names. They sing their being. The world sings. The sky sings back. It is one song, the song of the many members of one love, the whole song sung and to be sung, resounding, in each of its moments. And it is light. (Berry, 1988, p. 122)

After having seen Andy initially in the novel as a deeply broken man, we see him being transformed.

The dark man points ahead of them; Andy looks and sees the town and the fields around it, Port William and its countryside as he never saw or dreamed them, the signs everywhere upon them of the care of a longer love than any who have lived there have ever imagined. The houses are clean and white, and great trees stand among them and spread over them.... Over town and fields the one great song sings, and is answered everywhere; every leaf and flower and grass blade sings. And in the fields and the town, walking, standing, or sitting under the trees, resting and talking together in the peace of a sabbath profound and bright, are people of such beauty that he weeps to see them. He sees that these are the membership of one another and of the place and of the song or light in which they live and move. (Berry, 1988, p. 123)

Andy’s recovery is based on multiple components: his own work and effort, his revisiting in his mind and heart earlier chapters of his life and those of people close to him, and the presence of a potentially healing community. It is not as if family or friends offer

Andy heroic gestures of support or healing. They simply love him and withstand his brokenness, offering their help and honest feedback. His marriage has been deeply impacted, it is clear. His children and parents, in addition to his wife, worry and stand by. We can assume that some pray for him. The journey is tough. And Andy does not come through it alone. I view this story as an example in Berry's fiction of the strength of community to help one of its own.

Turning to "Watch with Me," in *Watch with Me and Six Other Stories of the Yet-Remembered Ptolemy Proudfoot and His Wife, Miss Minnie, Née Quinch* (Berry, 1994), we find another example of how community in Berry's fiction makes a place for those with special needs. In this little story, Tol Proudfoot, the husband of Miss Minnie who is the one telling the story, and others form a literal half circle around Thacker Hample, better known as Nightlife, when he has one of his "spells." Proudfoot and his team monitor the distressed Nightlife as he roams the woods armed and confused for over 24 hours.

It is marvelously told. The first time you read it, you wonder up to the last word what will happen. This Mr. Hample is known in the community for his quietness and lapses of stability. It is not clear what causes these episodes, but they come on periodically and sometimes require intervention.

They called Thacker Nightlife on the theory that he could not tell daylight from dark, and therefore was liable to conduct his nightlife in the daytime. The name had a certain sexual glamour that appealed to Thacker Hample himself. When he had occasion to call himself by name, he usually called himself Nightlife....

But Nightlife was incomplete, too, in some other way. There were times when spells came on him, when he would be sad and angry and confused and maybe dangerous, and nobody could help him. And sometimes he would have to be sent away to the asylum where, as Uncle Otha Dagget said, they would file him down and reset his teeth. (Berry, 1994, pp. 141-142)

Hample's family has farmed in a hollow near Katy's Branch for several generations. And Nightlife, though related to this somewhat unusual clan, has his own special version of unusual.

Even as a Hample, Nightlife was an oddity, and nobody could quite account for him. He had inherited the mechanical gifts of the Hamples; people said that he could do anything with his hands. And yet he seemed also to have been endowed with an ineptitude that was all his own.... Nightlife lacked almost entirely the rough sense of humor that had accompanied other Hamples into and out of this world.... His mind, which contained the lighted countryside of Katy's Branch and Cotman Ridge, had a leak in it somewhere, some little hole through which now and again would pour the whole darkness of the darkest night—so that instead of walking in the country he knew and among his kinfolks and neighbors, he would be afoot in a limitless and undivided universe, completely dark, inhabited only by himself. From there he would want to call out for rescue, and that was when nobody could tell what he was going to do next, and perhaps he could not tell either. (Berry, 1994, pp. 151-152)

The lead character in the story, however, is Tol Proudfoot. Tol is a good farmer, heavy set, and often a bit disheveled; his clothes do not naturally adorn him. He is married to the former school teacher, Miss Minnie; in many ways she is his opposite, petite, neat, and acquainted with books. One day, Tol is addressing his list of tasks for the day, following a night when Nightlife was aggravated at the annual revival. Nightlife had wanted to preach, we are told, but was prevented from doing so. Proudfoot was secured to help Nightlife calm down, which he accomplished by talking with him at length and finally encouraging him to go home. But the next day Nightlife comes around to Tol's residence. And if Tol thought he was having setbacks and unexpected challenges *before* Nightlife's visit, they turn out to be minor in comparison with what is to come. This is not a social call from Nightlife. As luck would have it, Tol has positioned his gun nearby, thinking he might need to shoot a snake in the barn.

Nightlife then started toward the garden gate, went past the shop, saw Tol's old shotgun leaning there, and picked it up. He opened the breech to see if it was loaded. When he closed the breech again they could hear the snap of the lock all the way up there in the garden. Nightlife balanced the

gun in his hands for a moment as if he were thinking of buying it. And then he laid it over his shoulder and turned away.

“Uh-oh,” Tol said. He started toward the gate with Sam Hanks stepping between the same pair of rows behind him.

“Don’t take my gun, Nightlife!” Tol called, trying to sound not too much concerned, and yet unable to keep the tone of pleading entirely out of his voice. “I’m liable to need it!”

Tol had started to hurry. He hung his hoe on the fence by the gate and went on toward the shop.

Nightlife was hesitating. He turned back toward the door of the shop, as though he might actually put the gun back where he got it.

But then he turned away again. He said, not to Tol and Sam, rather to himself, but in too loud a voice, as if he did not quite expect himself to be able to hear, “Why, a damned fellow just as well shoot hisself, I reckon.” (Berry, 1994, pp. 144-145)

And the story is launched. Armed, perhaps dangerous to himself or others, and deep in one of his mental lapses, Nightlife wanders off with Tol Proudfoot’s gun in tow.

“Wait, Nightlife!” Tol said. And then he added an endearment, as he usually did, to soften what might have seemed a reprimand: “Hold on, sweetheart.”

But Nightlife was already starting down through the pasture toward the woods with the gun on his shoulder.

“I expect I’ll just ease along with him a ways,” Tol said to Sam. “You go tell Miss Minnie, and then drive over and tell Walter Cotman and Tom and Braymer. Or send word to them if they’re out at work. And then you come with us.” (p. 145)

Tol is forced to let go of the other distractions and frustrations of the morning. He now must rivet all his attention on this neighbor who has walked into the woods, armed and, by all evidence, in a semi-deranged state.

An engaging short story, with suspense established early on and not relieved until the end. But what do we take from it? We take this detailed image of a half dozen men forming an arc behind the troubled one, trailing him through the woods, uphill and down, through the day, into the night, and on into the next day. Led by Proudfoot, they fall in

and cope with the situation in all its gravity and uncertainty. And Tol demonstrates something about the kind of community Port William is.

He decided just to follow along, keeping Nightlife in sight as best he could. He would not try to catch up; he would try not to fall too far behind; he would say nothing. And Tol's decision then established what he and the others would do the rest of that day and into the next. They would let whatever it was run its course, if it would. They would stop Nightlife from using the gun, if they had to and if they were able. At every considerable change of direction, Tol broke a branch end and left it dangling as a mark for Sam. Otherwise, the passage of two men over the dead leaves of the woods' floor ought to be legible enough. (Berry, 1994, p. 148)

Nightlife walks continuously hour after hour. And they follow. Tol continues to lead, support, and establish their strategy, such as it is.

Tol had just begun to wonder when Sam was going to show up when Sam showed up. Tol raised his hand to him, and Sam nodded. In silence then they picked their way along together, Sam walking behind Tol. Between themselves and Nightlife, they kept a sort of room of visibility....

After a while Braymer Hardy was there behind Sam. And not long after that, when Tol again looked back, Walter Cotman and Tom Hardy were there. Tol stopped them then, and beckoned them close. He was older than the oldest of them by twenty years; he could have been father to them all, and they came obediently into whispering distance.

"Boys," he said, "ain't no use in us walking lined up so that old gun could hit us all with one shot. Kind of fan out. We'll keep him in sight better that way." (Berry, 1994, pp. 157-158)

There are few breaks for drinks of water or other creaturely comforts. But there are a few. The scope of what they are up against slowly begins to sink in.

Tol was hungry. He had not forgotten the smell of fried fish wafting out from Aunt Cordie Dagget's kitchen. He was sorry he had not thought to leave Walter or Sam to wait for Uncle Otha to open the store and bring along maybe some cheese and some crackers, or maybe a few cans of sardines....

But he was troubled also because he knew—he had known ever since that moment at the Daggets' when he had watched Nightlife walk unchecked and preceded by no warning through Aunt Cordie's kitchen door—that the day was beyond their control. The only man who had control was Nightlife, who did not know he had it. Their proven helplessness at the Daggets' forced Tol to acknowledge that he could not foretell any of the bad outcomes that

might lie ahead or any outcome at all, for that matter. (Berry, 1994, pp. 172-173)

Tol's concern is not only for himself and those following with him, it is for Nightlife as well. Difficult as the man sometimes is, Tol does not want him to commit suicide. How word travels about what is going on is not clear. Yet somehow others know to come and join in the watch. Reading it, you cannot help but feel *you* are walking along with them. We feel what the author wants us to feel, which is what his characters feel.

The story ends memorably. But the meaning for us, along with the seeming absurdity of the situation, is nicely captured when Tol reflects on his own involvement. These guys end up with plenty of time to think in the 24-plus-hour vigil that they keep. Here's how Tol sorts it out.

It was not going to make sense, not yet, and maybe not for a long time, if ever. And for a while, maybe a longish while, there would not be food or rest or comfort either. When they got to the end of the story, he reckoned, they would at least eat. He said to himself, "I reckon it would be better not to have got involved." But he knew even so that helpless or not, hopeless or not, he would go along with Nightlife until whatever happened that would allow him to cease to go along. And he knew that Walter and Sam and the Hardys would keep going as long as he did, just as he knew that Put would not. He thought, "I reckon I am involved." (Berry, 1994, pp. 173-174)

We step back a moment from this memorable drama in "Watch with Me" to consider again the meaning of community, and it is often described by its author as a "membership." In "The Wild Birds," the title story of *The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership* (Berry, 1986b), Burley Coulter clarifies the meaning of "membership." Burley has enlisted Wheeler Catlett for assistance in writing his will. Burley wishes to leave what he has, including the Coulter farm, to his son, Danny Branch, even though Burley's "family life" does not fit customary conventions. Burley and Wheeler, well as they know each other, have lived differently. Burley has been on the margins, we might say, with his forays into the woods day or night and often alone, while Wheeler has lived at the center of respectable society, practicing law and supporting his wife and children. Their differences prove challenging for Burley and Wheeler in this



story. Wheeler asks questions, trying to understand Burley's plans and intentions. He hazards one more explanation, asking Burley if leaving his property to Danny is an effort to admit wrong and strive to make it right, or at least better. Burley is finally provoked into defining "membership." He must go to lengths to clarify his intentions. The story showcases the concept of community in Berry's fiction.

"No! God damn it, Wheeler—excuse me, Hannah—no! What is done is done forever. I know that. I'm saying that the ones who have been here have been the way they were, and the ones of us who are here now are the way we are and to *know* that is the only chance we've got, dead and living, to be here together. I ain't saying we don't have to know what we ought to have been and ought to be, but we oughtn't to let that stand between us. That ain't the way we are. The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't. What has been here, not what ought to have been, is what I have to claim. I have to be what I've been, and own up to it, no secret faults. Because before long I'm going to have to look the Old Marster in the face, and when He says, 'Burley Coulter?' I hope to say 'Yes, Sir. Such as I am, that's me.'"

And now he leans forward and... hooks his forefinger into the breast pocket of Wheeler's vest. He does not pull, but only holds, as gently as possible given the hand's forthrightness and the rigor in the crook of the old finger.

"And, Wheeler, one thing I am is the man who cared about Kate Helen Branch—all her life, you might say." (Berry, 1986b, pp. 136-137)

Noting Burley's definition of community "membership" allows us to see how the story "Watch with Me" is an example of community and community membership in Port William. It shows a troubled person surrounded and looked after by a group of community members even when offering that care places them in danger and interrupts their work days, not just for a few hours but for several days. Tol, it seems clear, knows that he is a community member. Nightlife does *not* know he is a member. During this two-day vigil, of those who choose to get involved, some think it might have been better had they not stepped up. I find this a moving story, a compelling picture of what human community can be. Such examples of community may happen still, but I think they are

rare. Surrounding a troubled one and moving with him, as Tol and his “little company” (Berry, 1994, p. 175) do for Nightlife, seems the exception rather than the rule in present-day American culture. We would do well to consider what conditions make such a community likely. What helps people make choices that lead to the recognition, “I reckon I am involved” (p. 174)?

### **Port William Responds to the Elderly**

Another major indicator of a community’s health and effectiveness is its response to the elderly and those nearing the end of life. Berry’s novels offer examples of love and care of the elderly. In *The Memory of Old Jack* (Berry, 1999), community members reach out to Jack Beechum throughout the day as he recalls his long life and its many chapters. They catch him when he falls, call out to him if he seems distressed, and invite him for midday dinner. They are there for Old Jack to the end.

The midday dinner, on this day of reverie for Old Jack Beechum, takes place at the Feltner home where the women have gathered and prepared food for the team working in the fields. Mat has already found Old Jack and delivered Margaret’s invitation to come for the meal. When dinner time comes, it is Hannah Coulter who goes to find Old Jack and escort him to the house. Hannah is like a daughter to the Feltners, having been married to their son Virgil. Virgil was killed in WWII. Hannah has a daughter, Little Margaret, from her marriage to Virgil. Now, in the late summer of 1952, she is married to Nathan Coulter, and they are expecting their second child. Over the years something about Hannah has endeared her to Old Jack and vice versa. She welcomes the opportunity to go and walk with him back to the Feltners’.

She feels good. She feels full of the goodness, the competency, of her body that can love a man and bear his children, that can raise and prepare food, keep the house, work in the field. She is living deep in her body now as she goes under the hot, bright sky into the town of Port William. (Berry, 1999, pp. 78-79)

We know from meeting Hannah in other novels that life has not always been this way. She went through a difficult period of loss and grief over Virgil, slowly coming to understand that “missing” meant dead. She faced the birth of Little Margaret basically alone, though nurtured by the love and support of Mat and Margaret.

Old Jack has been dozing through much of this morning, but when awake he is deeply occupied with the recollections of his life that wash over him. As she comes to meet him, Hannah reflects on the concern many in the community now have about Old Jack; his aging has become too obvious to deny. There is also her awareness of what Old Jack means to her.

Now that she feels herself on Old Jack’s trail she has him on her mind. She is aware of his isolation, his remoteness, now, from the daily life the rest of them are living. In the stillness of his old age he is beyond them, as though he looks back upon the world from a lofty island in the middle of a river. But she is aware of something else too. Over the last several months it has come to her that of all those near her Old Jack most carefully understands the fullness she has come to, and most exactly values it. From Mat and others she knows his story, or much of it, and knows that he recognizes her out of pain and loss. (Berry, 1999, p. 79)

After finding him in the barber shop and exchanging pleasantries with Jayber Crow, Hannah and Old Jack set out together for the Feltner’s. Their walking together and conversing as they go shows their special connection.

They walk slowly up the street toward Mat’s, Hannah holding to the old man’s arm as if to be helped, but in reality helping him. And yet she knows that, by taking that arm so graciously bent at her service, she *is* being helped. She is sturdily accompanied by his knowledge, in which she knows that she is whole.... As they walk, she tells him such news as there is: how they all are, where they are working, what they have got done, what they have left to do. From time to time she stops, as if to give all her attention to her story, to allow him a moment of rest. But she is glad to prolong the walk. She is moved by him...who has been faithful unto death to the life of his fields to no end that he will know in this world. As for Old Jack, he listens to the sound of her voice, strong and full of hope, knowing and near to joy, that pleases him and tells him what he wants to know. He nods and smiles, encouraging her to go on. Occasionally he praises her.... “You’re a fine woman. You’re all right,” he says. And his tone implies: Believe it of yourself forever. (Berry, 1999, p. 81)

I am touched by this gentle, loving relationship between two people who know one another in a shared community, are of the opposite sex and represent different generations, but who, nevertheless, share the pain of loss and have empathy and understanding for one another, difficult to put in words. They affirm one another and they enjoy each other's company. They respect what each has done in life. They stand taller in each other's presence. This connection could happen anywhere that people share a history and a community. And yet, perhaps it is more likely to occur in smaller places and eras long gone. This coming together of half a dozen family units for a noonday meal during the work week would be quite unusual in today's American culture. But note the opportunity it affords—a chance for these two to walk together, conversing and enjoying each other's company, looking forward to the food and the gathering of those who know one another, who work the land and work together when necessary. It would have been easier, obviously, for Margaret Feltner to leave Old Jack out of the dinner meal—another mouth to feed, someone must go to extend the invitation, and someone must escort Old Jack to the house. And yet, it does not occur to her *not* to include him. He is an important part of the community, and they care for him in loving ways.

Another moment that shows this care for Old Jack comes after the meal. Andy Catlett, a late teen at the time, is leaving the next day for college. This was talked about at the dinner table. His grandmother, Margaret Feltner, has had her farewell conversation with Andy and instructs him to go and tell Old Jack good-bye as he leaves. It is clear that Andy planned to do this even without a reminder from his grandmother.

When Andy finds Old Jack he must sit and wait for a time as Old Jack weaves in and out of sleep. "For a while, as he sits in silence with Old Jack, thoughts and griefs, fantasies and hopes as customary as ritual occupy his mind. But the changing light distracts him. He looks at his watch and stands. He will have to get on his way" (Berry, 1999, p. 118).

Contemplating what he must do to be ready to leave the next day and how the evening is set aside for time with his girlfriend, Andy prepares to go, but only after he pays Uncle Jack some attention.

And suddenly Andy understands the bewilderment in the old man's face. He senses the deep forgetfulness that is coming over him, the present more and more a series of unjoined moments from which he takes shelter in the firm sequence of the past. He has forgotten what happened earlier today, the conversation at dinner, even Andy's arrival a few minutes ago.

"I'm going away to school," Andy says. "I'm going to leave in the morning."

"Up there to the college," Old Jack says.

Andy nods.

Old Jack holds to Andy's arm, looking intently up into his face. What lies ahead of this boy? Where will this departure lead him? What will he have to face? What strength is in him for the work he will have to do? He sees that he has come to an end in this boy. When Andy Catlett turns and leaves he will step away into a future that Old Jack does not know and that he cannot imagine.

His eyes blur. Though the boy is standing there, he cannot see him now. And he has turned him loose. His hand is opened and raised in benediction and farewell. "Learn your books," he says. He means more than that, but that is what he says again: "Learn your books."

There are three quick steps across the boards of the porch, and the boy is gone. (Berry, 1999, pp. 118-119)

This account of Andy Catlett seeking out Old Jack Beechum to tell him good-bye is touching. It reminds us of similar occasions and the sad feelings that seem inevitable. And the farewell also impacts Old Jack.

For a moment Old Jack feels unsupported, as though he might fall one way or another out of the chair. That passes. He recognizes himself again. He is as he is and as he has been, remaining after departure and after taking away. He knows that as one of the inescapable themes of his life: the departure from him, from the beginning, of men and women he has loved, of days and years, of lightness and swiftness and strength. The other theme is faithfulness to what has remained. What has remained is the good darkness out of which all things come, even the light, and to which they all go back

again. Too little respect is paid to that now, he thinks, but he has respected it. He has thought of it without ceasing. It has been the center of his mind. By that he has endured and come through. He has not looked back from it or dreamed of an easier way. Having put his foot into the furrow, he has not looked back, though he has known that it must deepen into a grave. (Berry, 1999, p. 119)

Saying good-bye to Andy leads Jack to profound recollections of consistent themes and values in his life. It is clarifying for him. He recalls his own strength in the face of change, in the face of challenge. He has met many challenges. He has stepped out, and having stepped out, he keeps going. His mind is thoughtful and tough. He is a man of principle who has dealt with the losses and setbacks that came his way or were caused by overly ambitious or unwise decisions. Yet Old Jack has moved forward, faithful to “what has remained,” to “the good darkness out of which all things come” (Berry, 1999, p. 119). Andy’s courtesy and respect are gifts, in ways neither Old Jack nor Andy may have realized at the time. Following this exchange, Old Jack begins to focus on his own endurance, how “coming through took him a long time” (p. 119). To get out of debt and make his land and farming a supportive enterprise again, to square himself with the bank—took years of hard work. This is important for Old Jack to recall.

In an earlier part of the novel, Jayber Crow provides another example of reaching out to Old Jack on this summer day in 1952. Old Jack has been visiting the tough story of his marriage to Ruth, how it started and went awry, and the twists and turns of this painful memory. He has just recalled the birth of their son who was stillborn. And he has apparently called out in his distress.

“What’s the matter, old friend?”

“Who’s that?”

“Are you all right?”

Now there is a hand on his shoulder, friendly, careful of him.

“I’m all right. I thank you, Irvin.”

And now that he is paying attention again, he sees that it is Jayber Crow.

“I thank you, Jayber. How are you, son?”

“I’m fine. I thought a minute ago you didn’t sound all right.”

And now Old Jack remembers the sound of his outcry, and feels the coolness of tears on his face.

“Ah,” he says, “ay Lord,” ashamed to have made a fuss, not having meant to. (Berry, 1999, p. 46)

There is a naturalness in this exchange. Each line spoken is very much in character. It is customary now for Old Jack to forget names, and he often covers over his embarrassment by calling a man “Irvin” or “Son.” He’ll call a woman “Honey” or “Susie.” He tries to be polite and civil, though his memory makes it difficult for him to personalize his part of the conversation. Jayber in this passage does what people in Port William have been doing for a while for Old Jack. He steadies him, makes him comfortable, pulls him back to the present, and safeguards the wavering old codger. And we get a picture of Jayber Crow from Old Jack’s perspective.

Jayber is standing in front of him now, watching him. Everything about Jayber is long—body, legs and arms, hands face, nose. He is all a morose, downward-hanging length, except for his mouth, which is customarily turned up like a saucer in a lean, boyish smile. And his eyes—his eyes are large and brown and round, full of little glistenings and foretokenings of humor. The men who know him will always remember him in profile, that alert brown eye watching from its vantage in the long face like a squirrel looking out of a hole in a tree. Just now he has his barber’s comb stuck over his ear. And he is smiling at Old Jack, beginning to believe that he is indeed all right. (Berry, 1999, p. 46)

Jayber does not just stop with a little orienting conversation. He extends shelter to Old Jack, a reprieve from the relentless pursuit in his memory of events from the past.

“Why don’t you come in and sit down a while?”

Old Jack nods, and Jayber leads him to the door and up the step into the barbershop.

“Right over here now. See if that chair won’t fit you,” Jayber says, guiding him toward the back of the room, to what he considers the best of his mixed collection of chairs.

With Jayber's help, Old Jack lets himself down.

"Ay!" he says, glad to be off his feet.

Besides himself and Jayber the shop is occupied at present by a fat young woman with three little boys getting hair cut in preparation for the start of school. (Berry, 1999, p. 47)

Unfortunately, though, Old Jack does not get to languish in the present. It is as if, as his life nears its end, he is driven to review all he can remember, driven, whether he wishes to or not, to walk the road once more, to revisit the work and the relationships, re-examine what happened and why, and make sense as best he can of all this experience one more time. We are grateful, though, that Jayber's kindness allows Old Jack a little break from these often laborious recollections of days of hard living.

The shop settles down now and Old Jack settles with it. He can smell the mixed smells of talcum and lotion and soap. The burner on which Jayber heats his shaving water whispers busily, and there is the rhythmic snick-snick of Jayber's scissors. The barber's face has taken on the bemusement of his work. Old Jack recognizes the mood and takes comfort. Eased again of the present, his mind resumes its task: to come through, to survive yet again its old trial. (Berry, 1999, p. 47)

We have, then, evidence that the community is watching over and walking with Old Jack through these days of slowing down and this particular day of remembering. Hannah provides the special camaraderie that their mutual understanding affords. Andy's courtesy is a gesture of respect, from the young to the old. And Old Jack's recognition that Andy is headed off into a future Old Jack cannot imagine is a moment in which a community member participates with Old Jack in shaping this narrative of his life. Old Jack resumes recollections of "coming through" tough setbacks he once faced after Andy bids farewell and walks off the hotel porch. And then Jayber makes his contribution, steadying the old man, drawing him out of a painful recollection, making him welcome in the barbershop. Port William shows its strength as a community in its response to Jack Beechum as Old Jack nears the end of his life.



In *Fidelity: Five Stories* (Berry, 1992), the title story is a rich example of the community's commitment to one near the end of life. I believe it is a beautiful account of a death with dignity and a moving description of a community's support for its members.

Burley Coulter has not been well. He resists going to the doctor. Family and friends make unsuccessful efforts to get him to go. Nathan, his nephew, holds out the longest in the debate about getting Burley to a doctor. Finally, though, Nathan reluctantly submits. They take Burley to be evaluated. The doctor says that Burley is not well and too frail to withstand surgery. He advises that Burley be hospitalized and offers an upbeat banter to the family about getting Burley back on his feet. Those who know Burley well and have visited him at the hospital in Louisville know he is not likely to get back on his feet. He is being kept alive by tubes and respiratory equipment.

These loving friends and family members agonize over Burley's condition, feeling that he is held captive in the hospital. At last his son, Danny Branch, decides to do something. He removes his father from the hospital and takes him to a remote wooded area, the Stepstone Hollow, a short distance "beyond Port William" we are told. As is often characteristic of Berry's stories, it is not just one story, but multiple stories artfully interwoven. As noted, Burley has lived on the margins, between wilderness and cultivated farm land and on the margins of polite society. He has done things his way, all his life. Father and son are alike in some ways; they understand the lure of the woods, coon hunting at night, and the joy of hours spent fishing in nearby rivers. Danny can see that recovery for his father is out of the question. And he and the others grieve over Burley's hospital confinement.

Danny gets up in the middle of the night, prepares for the journey by packing tools and food and instructs his wife Lyda what to say when questions begin about his whereabouts; then Danny sets out on his mission. We are taken along, moment by moment in the truck, as Danny makes his way to Louisville, parks and enters the hospital, and carries out what some will label a "kidnapping." The first moment of relaxation in

the story comes after Danny and Burley arrive at the destination Danny selected. There is still much to do and many twists and turns yet for the reader (and the community), but the sense of rightness, the sense of fit about what is happening, comes into focus as we learn about Danny's actions and whereabouts.

He switched off the engine and sat still, letting the quiet and the good darkness settle around him. He had been gone perhaps two hours and a half, and not for a minute during that time had he ceased to hurry. So resolutely had he kept up the momentum of his haste that his going and his coming back had been as much one movement as a leap. And now, that movement completed, he began to take his time. In the quiet he could hear Burley's breathing, slow and shallow but still regular. He heard, too, the slow rain falling on the woods and the trees dripping steadily onto the roof of the truck. "Well," he said quietly to Burley, "here's somewhere you've been before." ...

"Listen," Danny said. "We're in the Stepstone Hollow. It's raining just a little drizzling rain, and the trees are dripping. That's what you hear. You can pret' near just listen and tell where you are. In a minute I'm going to take you up to the old barn. You don't have a thing to worry about anymore." (Berry, 1992, p. 125)

The reader simply feels this incredible love Danny has for his father, coming through in his actions, decisions, and words—how he carries out this act of grace and courage, how he speaks to Burley under the circumstances. And as the story unfolds, one feels the love of the community.

To demonstrate how these actions on the part of those who love Burley fit with who he is, we consider the reflections that Hannah Coulter nurtures as this episode unfolds. Hannah is now married to Nathan Coulter, Burley's nephew. However, Nathan in many ways is more like a son to Burley than a nephew. Nathan's mother died when he and his brother Tom were young. Tom goes to war and does not return, and Jarrat, their father, never truly recovers from his wife's death. As a beloved and attentive uncle, Burley plays a key role in raising Nathan and Tom. Hannah, whose first husband, Virgil Feltner, also did not return home from the war, is now married to Nathan. They have made a home and family together. Hannah has several parents-in-law, Margaret and Mat

Feltner, Virgil's parents, and Burley Coulter, Nathan's uncle and stand-in dad. Hannah is a thoughtful, capable person; it comes as no surprise that she has much to ponder in these days of watchful waiting and bidding farewell to Burley.

They were her study, those Coulter men. Figuring them out was her need, her way of loving them, and sometimes her amusement. The one who most troubled her had been Nathan's father, Jarrat—a driven, work-brittle, weather-hardened, lonely, and nearly wordless man....

Burley lived in a larger world than his brother had lived in, and not just because, as a hunter and a woods walker, he readily crossed boundaries that had confined Jarrat. Burley was a man freely in love with freedom and with pleasures, who watched the world with an amused, alert eye to see what it would do next, and if the world did not seem inclined to get on very soon to anything of interest, he gave it his help. Hannah's world had been made dearer to her by Burley's laughter, his sometimes love of talk (his own and other people's), and his delight in outrageous behavior (his own as a young man and other people's). She knew that Burley had his sorrows.... But she knew, too, how little he had halted in grief and regret, how readily and cheerfully he had gone on, however burdened, to whatever had come next. And because he was never completely of her world, she had the measure of his generosity to her and the others. (Berry, 1992, pp. 155-156)

Again, it is Hannah's sense of things that we turn to, as we wait along with others for this drama to play out. Hannah reliably represents the feelings of the community.

And now the thought of him did return to her. As he had grown sicker and weaker, the thought of him had come more and more into her keeping, and she had received it with her love and her thanks as she had received her children when they were newborn.

She thought it strange and wonderful that she had been given all these to love. She thought it a blessing that she had loved them to the limit of her grief at parting with them, and that grief had only deepened and clarified her love.... It was her truest self, that stream always astir inside her that was at once pity and love, knowledge and faith, forgiveness, grief, and joy....

Like the others, she had mourned her uselessness to Burley in his sickness. Like the others, she had been persuaded and had helped to persuade that they should get help for him. Like the others, once they had given him into the power of the doctors and into the sterile, hard light of that way and place in which he did not belong, she had wanted him back. And she had held him to her in her thoughts, loving the old, failed flesh and bone of him as never before.... Knowing now that he was with Danny, hidden away,

somewhere at home, joy shook her and the window blurred in her sight.  
(Berry, 1992, pp. 156-157)

We see from Hannah's reflections that key players in the community are of one accord. They want the best thing for Burley. But of course the effort to take Burley back to where he belongs, to familiar territory, to extract him from the sterile confines of the medical world he now inhabits, taking matters into their own hands and bringing about a death and burial that fits Burley, is no simple thing. Fortunately for Danny and Nathan and others who care, among their friends in Port William are the two skilled lawyers, Wheeler Catlett and his son Henry. From the beginning they are involved, for Lyda, Danny's wife, calls Henry in the middle of the night after the hospital has called to report that Burley Coulter "has disappeared" (p. 130). The next day they must contend with the investigation that was an expected consequence of Danny's actions. The investigation takes the form of Detective Kyle Bode, who is working on behalf of the hospital to solve the awkward and embarrassing mystery. Bode needs to absolve the medical profession of mishandling. But Bode's understanding of his job does not coincide with the views of Port William members. When Lyda has to face Mr. Bode, she is, however, equal to the situation.

Lyda looked straight at him. Her eyes were an intense, surprising blue, and sometimes when she looked suddenly at you they seemed to leave little flashes of blue light dancing in the air. And the detective saw her then: a big woman, good-looking for her age, which was maybe forty or forty-five, and possessed of great practical strength (he remembered her tossing the contents of those heavy buckets over the fence), but her eyes, now that he looked at her, were what impressed him most. They were eyes not at all in the habit of concealment, but they certainly were in the habit of withstanding. They withstood him. They made him feel like explaining that he was only doing his duty.

"Mister," she said without any trace of fear that he could detect, "it scares me to be talking to the police. I never talked to the police before in my life. If you want to know any more, you'll have to talk to Henry Catlett down at Hargrave."

"Is Henry Catlett your lawyer?"

“Henry’s our friend,” she said.

“Yes,” the detective said. “I’ll go see him. Thank you very much for your time.”

When Detective Bode walked away from Lyda, he already felt the mire of failure pulling at his feet. (Berry, 1992, pp. 143-144)

The story proceeds, back and forth between Danny and his progress at Stepstone Hollow and the scene in town as the community, with Henry’s legal guidance, strategizes to meet the investigation. How Kyle Bode sees his assignment is important, for at the heart of this story is the difference in how some gate-keepers, like Bode and others, or Wheeler and Henry Catlett and the Port William community, see the world. As Bode travels from place to place, interviewing and conferring, trying to get to the bottom of the case, he assesses the challenge before him.

He had understood all too well, anyhow, the rather cynical grin with which his friend, Rich Ferris, had handed him this case. “Here’s one that’ll make you famous.”

And what a case it was! Here was an old guy resting easy in the best medical facility money could buy. And what happened? This damned redneck, Danny Branch, who was his nephew or something, came and kidnapped him out of his hospital bed in the middle of the night. And took him off where? To Indiana? Not likely, Detective Bode thought. He would bet that Mr. Burley Coulter, alive or dead, and his kidnapper, Mr. Danny Branch, were somewhere just out of sight in some of these god-forsaken hills and hollows.

Kyle Bode objected to hills and hollows. He objected to them especially if they were all overgrown with trees. They offended his sense of the way things ought to be. That the government of the streets and highways persisted in having business in hills and hollows and woods and briar patches in every kind of weather was no small part of his disillusionment. (Berry, 1992, pp. 144-145)

Bode could be called something of a whippersnapper. It does not take long for him to sense that he may be in over his head. But backing out is not an option. We return to Hannah and her confidence that whatever is happening will work out well. Her reflections clarify not just the community but who Burley is as well. And they show how

those who know Burley and Danny feel relief that something has finally shifted in the situation.

Danny was the right one for the rescue that Hannah did not doubt was being accomplished, though she did not know quite how. He had some grace about him that would permit him to accomplish it with joy. She smiled, for she knew, too, that Danny was a true son to Burley, not only in loyalty but in nature—that he had shared fully in that half of Burley’s life that had belonged to the woods and the darkness. Nathan, she thought, had understood that side of Burley and been friendly to it without so much taking part in it. Nathan would hunt or fish with Burley and Danny occasionally and would enjoy it, but he was more completely a farmer than they were, more content to be bound within the cycle of the farmer’s year. You never felt, looking at him, that he had left something somewhere beyond the cleared fields that he would be bound to go back and get. He did not have that air that so often hung about Danny and Burley, suggesting that they might suddenly look back, grin and wave, and disappear among the trees. (Berry, 1992, pp. 154-155)

My focus is the community, and the community comes off well in “Fidelity.”

Henry Catlett has asked that when those close to Burley have completed their morning chores, they should come ahead to the law office. The community takes matters into its own hands.

Lyda called Nathan after she had talked to Henry the second time. Nathan, as was his way, said “Hello” and then simply listened. When she had told him of Burley’s disappearance and of Danny’s, Nathan said, “All right. Do you need anything?”

“No. We’ll be fine,” she said. “But listen, Henry called back while ago. He said the police didn’t find any fingerprints at the hospital. The only witness they found was somebody who saw a man in a blue shirt. Henry wants you and Hannah and me to come to his office as soon as we get our chores done and all. When the police find us, he said, he’d just as soon they’d find us there. He said to tell you, and he’d call Jack and Andy and Flora and the Rowanberrys. He wants everybody who’s closest to Burley to be there.”

“All right,” Nathan said. “It’ll be a little while.” (Berry, 1992, pp. 139-140)

No one has to say much. They pick up the phone, they get the word, they understand what needs to happen in order to create a safety net around this event, an

event they understand and welcome. They seem to know instinctively what to do so as to manage those who will turn what has happened into something it is not. The drama builds. And it hinges on little things, like the presence or absence of fingerprints, the location of Danny's truck, and the color of a shirt.

The tough talk is left for Henry and his father. And while Henry does not know how this will all play out, he handles well the hand he is dealt. He also ponders Danny's actions.

It was a lonely gathering for Henry Catlett. He was riding as an humble passenger in a vehicle that he ought to have been guiding—that would not be guided if he did not guide it—and yet he had no better idea than the others where it might be going.

So far, he thought, he had done pretty well. He had gathered all parties to the case—except, of course, for the principals—here under his eye for the time being. How long he would need to keep them here or how long the various ones of them would stay, he did not know....

Either he would be able to keep them there long enough, or he would not. Either Danny would show up, or he would not—wearing, or not wearing, that very regrettable blue shirt. At moments, as in a bad dream, he had wondered what it would portend if Danny showed up with fresh earth caked on his shoes. He wondered what concatenation of circumstances and lucky guesses might give Detective Bode some purchase on his case. It occurred to Henry to wish that Danny had given somebody a little notice of what he was going to do. But if Danny had been the kind of man to give such notice, he would not have done what he had done. It did not occur to Henry to regret that Danny had done what he had done. (Berry, 1992, pp. 186-187)

This story is about many things. But, unquestionably, it is about community. I leave the suspenseful and masterly crafted conclusion for the curious reader. It is not a story easily summed up. We cannot confidently identify the “moral” of the story. The most challenging responses to the investigation on the part of the community fall, as noted, to the father-son lawyer team, and they point to the story's main themes.

Earlier in the day, before the gathering at the law office, Detective Kyle Bode has, as he promised Lyda Branch he would, shown up at the law office. He speaks first with Henry. Their exchange is instructive. Bode has already told Henry that they have a set of

fingerprints from the hospital. Henry knows that this is not true and he calls Bode on the lie. The two are in a dramatic face-off.

“I want to find the victim’s nephew, Danny Branch. Do you know where he is?”

“Son,” Henry said. “The victim’s son. I only know what his wife told me.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She said he said something about Indiana.”

“We have an APB on him in Indiana.” Detective Bode said this with the air of one who leaves no stone unturned. “But we really think—I think—the solution is to be found right here.”

But looking at Henry and remembering Lyda, he felt unmistakably the intimation he and his purpose were not trusted. These people did not trust him, and they were not going to trust him. He felt his purpose unraveling in his failure to have their trust. In default of that trust, *every* stone must be turned. And it was a rocky country. He knew he had already failed—unless, by some fluke of luck, he could find somebody to outsmart. Or, maybe, unless this Danny Branch should appear wearing a blue shirt.

“Maybe you can tell me,” he said, “if Danny Branch is Mr. Coulter’s heir.”

“Burley was—is—my father’s client,” Henry said. “You ought to ask him about that. Danny, I reckon, is my client.” (Berry, 1992, pp. 163-164)

Their conversation is a match of wits—about the end of one man’s life and the community that knows and loves him. It is about the challenges they face in their efforts to care for him in his final days, and about the policies and procedures that make death with dignity for one of their members a major struggle. Their conversation is also about what the detective stands for. Bode and Catlett thrash out what truly matters from their respective positions.

The detective made his tone more reasonable, presuming somewhat upon his and Henry’s brotherhood in the law: “Mr. Catlett, I’d like to be assured of your cooperation in this case. After all, it will be in your client’s best interest to keep this from going as far as it may go.”



“Can’t help you,” Henry said.

“You mean that you, a lawyer, won’t cooperate with the law of the state in the solution of a crime?”

“Well, you see, it’s a matter of patriotism.”

“Patriotism? You can’t mean that.”

“I mean patriotism—love for your country and your neighbors. There’s a difference, Mr. Bode, between the state, or any other organization, and the country. I’m not going to cooperate with you in this case because I don’t like what you represent in this case.”

“What I represent? What do you think I represent?”

“The organization of the world.”

“And what does that mean?” In spite of himself, and not very coolly, Detective Bode was lapsing into the tone of mere argument, perhaps of mere self-defense.

“It means,” Henry said, “that you want whatever you know to serve power. You want knowledge to *be* power. And you’ll make your ignorance count, too, if you can be deceitful and clever enough. You think everything has to be explained to your superiors and concealed from your inferiors. For instance, you just lied to me with a clear conscience, as a way of serving justice....” (Berry, 1992, pp. 164-165)

Like the dialogue in “It Wasn’t Me,” when Jack Beechum’s farm is auctioned following his death, this conversation includes instruction: one party teaches and another is forced to listen and learn. In the case of “Fidelity,” Detective Bode is forced to listen to Henry Catlett, the junior law partner. We cannot be sure what Detective Bode learns here. But Catlett’s argument is compelling. Again, the author has put some of his highest values into the words of one of his characters; it is a profound and beautifully crafted dialogue.

“What I stand for can’t survive in the world you’re helping to make, Mr. Bode.” Henry was grinning, enjoying himself, and now he allowed the detective to see that he was.

“Are you some kind of anarchist?” the detective said. “Just what the hell are you, anyway?”

“I’m a patriot, like I said. I’m a man who’s not going to cooperate with you on this case. You’re here to represent the right of the state and other large organizations to decide for us and come between us. The people you represent will come out here, without asking our opinion, and shut down a barbershop or a little slaughterhouse because it’s not sanitary enough for us, and then let other businesses—richer ones—poison the air and water.”

“What’s *that* got to do with it?”

“Listen,” Henry said. “I’m trying to explain something to you. I’m not the only one who won’t cooperate with you in your search for Danny Branch. There are several of us here who aren’t reconciled to the loss of any good thing. We know that for a hundred years, the chief clients and patrons of that state of yours have been in the business of robbing and impoverishing the country people and their places.” (Berry, 1992, p. 165)

One might claim that Catlett in fact strays afield of the issue here. After all, a patient disappears from a hospital without explanation. The hospital presumably has legal obligations. Perhaps the hospital and the legal world assume that the family will demand an explanation. The detective proceeds on that assumption, that he must garner an explanation he can present to his superiors and the family. The question has become: to whom does Burley Coulter belong? The detective appears to claim that Coulter now belongs to the state, by way of his status as a patient in a reputable medical facility. Port William sees it differently. Burley Coulter’s friends and family are prepared to make their case. The lawyers give the case voice.

“I’m not in charge of the state,” Kyle Bode said. “I’m just doing my duty.”

“And you’re here now to tell us that a person who is sick and unconscious, or even a person who is conscious and well, is ultimately a property of the organizations and the state. Aren’t you?” Henry was still grinning.

“It wasn’t authorized. He asked nobody’s permission. He told nobody. He signed no papers. It was a crime. You can’t let people just walk around and do what they want to like that. He didn’t even pay the bill.”

“Some of us think people belong to each other and to God,” Henry said. “Are you going to let a hospital keep a patient hostage until he pays his bill? You were *against* kidnapping a while ago.”

Detective Bode was resting his brow in the palm of his hand. He was shaking his head. When it became clear that Henry was finished, the detective looked up. “Mr. Catlett, if I may, I would like to talk to your father.”

“Sure,” Henry said, getting up. “You going to tell on me?”

And only then, finally, did Detective Bode smile. (Berry, 1992, p. 166)

I pause here to consider an observation from Andrew Angyal (1995). He states, “Another discordant note is in Berry’s stereotyped depiction of Kyle Bode, the detective who futilely pursues the case” (Angyal, 1995, p. 106). I respectfully disagree. The portrayal of Bode, in my view, is excellent. It is part of the “dramatic conflict” that Angyal claims good stories must have. This story has multiple themes and is riveting to the end; detail adds to detail as the drama builds. The reader has no idea how the tough situation, with many poignant feelings attending it, will be resolved. And the lawyers’ conversations with Mr. Bode are excellent examples of Berry’s convictions finding expression in the words of his Port William “members.”

Returning to the story, there is evidence that the detective may have begun to see some things differently. He never abandons his role, however, and we are told little to support our hunch that he wavers slightly from his toughness and insensitivity, arguably his blind adherence to standard procedures and all they entail. Another crafty argument ensues as the senior Catlett and the detective banter back and forth. Wheeler proposes the possibility that some things are above the law. He may have made a bit of headway with the headstrong detective.

Kyle Bode had not been able to see where he was going for some time, and now suddenly he did see, and he saw that *they* had seen where he was going all along and had got there ahead of him. His mind digressed into relief that he was assigned to this case alone, that none of his colleagues could see his confusion. Conscientiously—though surely not conscientiously enough—he had sought the order that the facts of the case would make. And not only had he failed so far to achieve that clear and explainable order but he had been tempted over and over again into the weakness of self-justification. Worse than that, he had been tempted over and over again to leave, with Wheeler, the small, clear world of the law and its explanations

and to enter the larger, darker world not ordered by human reasons or subject to them, in which he sensed obscurely that something might live that he, too, might be glad to have alive. (Berry, 1992, p. 179)

I cannot argue that “Fidelity” is the story of a toughened detective being transformed. And yet, Detective Bode may have gained something besides a sense of defeat. What I can assert is that “Fidelity” is a story about the meaning of a human life, the need for a humane provision for the end of life when the time comes, and the need for an end that harmonizes with the person’s identity, the things he or she values and worked for in this world. As Angyal (1995) notes, and I concur, “Danny’s ‘rescue’ of his father shows deep compassion and an instinctive understanding of what Burley would have wanted” (Angyal, 1995, p. 106).

In addition, there is the need for an ending that satisfies the community, that fits their sense of rightness and honors their love and care for the one crossing over. This story shows how a community gently but confidently closes ranks when it needs to in order to claim what rightfully belongs to it. It shows how a healthy community can honor one it has loved. While some of the themes addressed in the story’s dialogues were not central in the drama of the story, nevertheless, they are important. Berry wants us to think about “the organization of the world” and what that organization and the power structures it has erected can mean for people, people who care about one another and live close to the land. Something has gone missing; something has been lost in most of our communities. “Fidelity” is a story of recovery. It is a story of justice as exemplified by the actions of a dozen people in a small American town. It is a story that leaves its readers with much to think about.

In *The Wild Birds* (1986b) we have a third example of how the community follows one of its own to the end of a long and productive life. “That Distant Land” is a simple story, told through the eyes of Andy Catlett, the grandson, 31 years old at the time of the story’s events. It is the story of the last days of Mat Feltner, Margaret’s beloved husband, the only child of Ben and Nancy (Beechum) Feltner, the nephew of Old Jack, the father

of Virgil who goes off to the war far away and does not return, and the father of Bess who marries Wheeler Catlett, the town's respected lawyer. Mat is also a father in all but blood to Hannah (Steadman) Coulter, once married to Mat and Margaret's son Virgil. Mat was all his life a member of the Port William community, one of its most respected. He is not effusive. He is hard-working, dedicated to his farm, his family, and his community. He grieves deeply his lost son. He returns home as soon as he has spent the required time away to grow up. He marries Margaret, his childhood sweetheart, and they stay sweethearts. He picks up the slack in caring for a relative who has alcohol problems. He helps out at Ida Crop's farm when the flood takes their little girl and Gideon goes off indefinitely. He looks after his uncle, Old Jack Beechum, when looking after is needed.

And now, they look after him. From sometime in the early summer until a hot August day, as the farm year turns, with the harvesting of the tobacco crop, they simply look after him. Arranging a room for him downstairs where he can look out on his fields, and where family and friends can come in and visit with ease, they take turns. During the day one of the women comes and keeps Margaret company, helping with the work. This might be Hannah Coulter, Bess Wheeler, or Flora or Sarah Catlett. Every day, one of them is there, doing what can be done. And in the evenings, one of the men comes, and spends time with Margaret and Mat, and then beds down for the night in the same room with Mat, doing what is needed to help him sleep. Wheeler Catlett, Nathan Coulter, and Andy or Henry Catlett take turns. They put in place these simple remedies, and Mat slips slowly away, no sudden changes, no severe illness, just a big weariness, we are told, that cannot be thrown off. Fortunately, after a bout of confusion and mental disorientation, his mind settles and returns to clarity; he knows them and can enjoy their presence.

There is no doctor's visit. No trip to a doctor's office. No talk about what is to come. No visit from a minister. Just a simple plan worked out for moving through the days, one after another, together as a family and with friends. There is harvesting, with the needed work patterns of the men in the fields toward summer's end. There is the team

in front of the picking, the team in the middle, which Andy is part of, and those bringing up the rear. And Andy's account makes clear that his grandfather is very much with them. He is close to their work, and he is in their minds and hearts.

There is a beautiful acceptance in Mat of where he is. There is recognition and acceptance. We cannot always say that about those we love who reach this stage of life. But it is a comfort, I believe, for Mat and those who love him that he is so apparently accepting.

He did not get out of bed again. What troubled us, and then grieved us, and finally consoled us, was that he made no effort to get up. It appeared to us that he felt his time of struggle to be past, and that he agreed to its end. He who had lived by ceaseless effort now lived simply as his life was given to him, day by day. During the time his mind had wandered he ate little or nothing, and though his mind returned his appetite did not. He ate to please my grandmother, but he could not eat much. She would offer the food, he would eat the few bites that were enough, and she would take the plate away. None of us had the heart to go beyond her gentle offering. No one insisted. No one begged. He asked almost nothing of us, only to be there with us, and we asked only to be with him. (Berry, 1986b, p. 100)

This is a wondrous blessing, to get to the end of one's days and be able to accept it, apparently without fear, or flailing, or resisting. To come to terms with the loss of control that is part of this stage of life is not easy. But Mat accomplishes it. And we are grateful, for his sake and those close to him.

This rotation of supporters which they set up in the household seems as natural as breathing. It is not something that we are shown being planned. The logistics of it are just taken care of. The reader's attention is not pulled to details of the arranging. We are told this is in place, and it works.

And others who were not family came: Burley Coulter, Burley's brother Jarrat, Elton and Mary Penn, Arthur and Martin Rowanberry. They would happen by for a few minutes in the daytime, or come after supper and sit and talk an hour or two. We were a membership. We belonged together, and my grandfather's illness made us feel it.

But "illness," now that I have said it, seems the wrong word. It was not like other illnesses that I had seen—it was quieter and more peaceable. It

was, it would be truer to say, a great weariness that had come upon him, like the lesser weariness that comes with the day's end—a weariness that had been earned, and was therefore accepted. (Berry, 1986b, p. 102)

We sense that Andy enjoys those nights when he sleeps over and attends to his grandfather. We are told that he would not have been surprised if some of the duties had been off-putting. But, he says, they are not. He enjoys helping his grandfather use the bed pan, or turn, or have the flashlight close at hand in case he wants to look at the clock in the middle of the night. He enjoys talking with his grandparents. He especially enjoys listening, and he encourages them to tell stories of the past and memories from their early years. He enjoys being witness to the sweet interchange between his grandparents at the end of the day.

Because the role of community is my focus here, I include an additional observation about the network of caring that is in place.

As the summer went along, he weakened, but so slowly we could hardly see it happening. There was never any sudden change. He remained quiet, mainly comfortable, and alert. We stayed in our routine of caring for him; it had become the ordinary way of things. (Berry, 1986b, p. 106)

It is pretty obvious how the story ends. We have had the little episode of the shoes. Margaret gives Andy a pair of his granddaddy's shoes. Andy starts to tuck them away, and then his grandmother instructs him to put them on. He does so, but shortly he starts to take them off. Again she instructs, this time telling him to wear them. And so, he wears them that day to the field. Burley notices the shoes, and recognizes them.

“New shoes!” Burley said, recognizing them, and I saw tears start to his eyes.

“Yes,” I said.

Burley studied them, and then me. And then he smiled and put his arm around me, making the truth plain and bearable to us both: “You can wear ‘em, honey. But you can’t fill ‘em.” (Berry, 1986b, p. 109)

No one can fill them. That is what we take from this exchange. Nobody will take Mat's place. Once again, Burley Coulter speaks a profound truth.

It is touching to see how the community simply does what is needed. No committee meeting, no council to decide anything, no unwelcome visits from family or community members, or those striving to do a duty. This is a relief! But, mercy! Do they, and we, ever feel it, deeply, when Mat passes on. When word reaches the working crew in the fields that hot summer day, the reader can feel what the team harvesting the crop that day felt. Burley is not the only one with tears in his eyes.

It is a beautiful little story. I think it is a wonderful example of community in Port William. And, as we have seen, it is not hard to find examples of community, people caring for people, in Port William. Indeed, it is “the ordinary way of things” (Berry, 1986b, p. 106).



## Chapter IV

### THE THEME OF CHARACTER IN BERRY'S FICTION

Choosing which characters in Berry's fiction to explore in some depth is not easy. When I talk about character here, I am not talking about character development from a literary standpoint. Rather I mean people who exemplify positive attributes—who, as a result of the interplay of land and place and community in Port William, make noticeable contributions. They not only hold the place together but, arguably, help craft it—help shape it into the unique locale that it is. My working definition of *character* for this study follows.

- *Character*. Since this study examines multiple themes in Berry's fiction and thereby gives the fiction special recognition, I want to avoid confusing the two meanings of the word *character*. The themes I explore are: land and place, community, and character. By character, as a theme in Berry's fiction, I am focusing on qualities in a person's make-up, especially qualities that reflect community "membership," as Berry describes those who support the local community and help make it the viable, cohesive group of residents it is. There are many examples of people in Port William who exhibit qualities of character, including those related to community. When I speak of character as a theme in Berry's fiction I am focusing on these qualities in Port William residents. And of course, Berry also refers on occasion in his essays and interviews to qualities of character, especially community identity and membership.

Also at times I refer to Berry's characters in the fiction. At these times I am using *character* as the standard term of reference for players in a story. And again, Berry also refers at times in his nonfiction to characters in his fiction. I hope the context of each reference will make clear the meaning in use.

To explore the theme of character in Berry's fiction I have chosen to pay especial attention to the qualities of character in Jack Beechum, Andy Catlett, and Jayber Crow. These are Port William residents who appear in multiple novels and whom we get to know over extended periods of time in their lives. Two are farmers, Beechum and Catlett. And Crow is Port William's barber for over three decades. All are male, Caucasian, and "members" of the community, the small town not far from Louisville. They are different generations. And Beechum and Catlett are directly related. Beechum is an uncle of Catlett's maternal grandfather.

As the theme of character is closely related to the concept of *community* "members," I include a working definition for this study.

- *Community membership* for Berry includes the recognition of a power beyond the created world. This is how he puts it in a 1993 interview: "It seems to me that we belong to each other and to God. If that's accepted, there are many practical things that you are committed to do" (Brown, 2007, p. 107). We are, as Scripture puts it, our "brother's keeper," Gen. 4:9 (King James Version).<sup>1</sup> This set of basic relationships creates the foundation and justification for responsibilities on the part of human beings. Berry lists some of the duties that become imperative for us as community members—providing for those with special needs, educating the young, making sure everyone has food and shelter. This awareness of belonging is essential to community membership as Berry

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<sup>1</sup>Berry acknowledges his upbringing in the Christian tradition and reflects on its influence in his life. He uses Christian terminology at times in his work and examines Christian concepts and sacred texts. The values and principles he most frequently embraces, however, are germane to the world's major faith traditions, though terminology, history, and imagery will vary from one tradition to another.

defines it. He makes an important distinction; community membership is not a matter of who is in or out. It is, rather, a matter of who sees themselves as belonging. And this awareness of belonging is expressed in actions and attitudes, such as the way Port William residents rally to help Ida Crop after the flood. This kind of help is freely given and received. It is expected in a sense. Community members understand they have an obligation to be there for one another, just as they also know they can count on others to be there for them when there is need. These concepts are interwoven in many of Berry's fictional accounts. However, the definition of "community member" is made explicit in the title story of *The Wild Birds* (Berry, 1986b) when Burley Coulter says,

"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't. What has been here, not what ought to have been, is what I have to claim." (Berry, 1986b, pp. 136-137)

### **Andy Catlett: A Life of Discernment**

Andy Catlett: a Port William member who demonstrates growth and development from childhood onward and works through significant challenges along the way.

Why choose Andy Catlett? Well, Andy exhibits a number of admirable qualities. As a youngster he visits his grandparents, spending time at each of the two farms. He explores beyond Port William as a young man. He studies his dad, Wheeler, and has a good understanding of what makes his dad tick. And I am especially moved by how Andy works to come through the tough things that life sends his way. He does not just react. Over time he sorts out his own personal tragedies including the complexities of the uncle he is named for—to reach acceptance and move forward. Andy exemplifies growth. If you ask, how does this quality of addressing challenges and continuing to grow make him an especially note-worthy member of the Port William community, I may not have an answer. Perhaps we cannot argue that Andy is exemplary. Or perhaps we can agree

that these qualities render him exemplary. Surely he can serve as a mentor for young people. In any case, I believe Andy makes a major contribution because of the events he withstands, the happenings he faces and somehow comes to grips with. I will examine two tragic events that Andy confronts and then consider several epiphanies that emerge from these experiences.

In *A World Lost* (Berry, 1996) we have the gripping story of Andy coming to terms with the uncle for whom he is named—the complexities of this man including the murder that ends his life. That is when fate calls on Andy to begin some of his toughest reckonings. The work Andy begins in *A World Lost*, the summer he turns 10, is work he will address for years to come. It is a first person account, told from his perspective as an older man, recalling the events and how they felt at the time. His Uncle Andrew, his dad's brother, is murdered. How news of the event is broken to Andy, how those around him respond, how he and his brother are shielded from the funeral—Andy remembers all of this in vivid detail. And the reader cannot help but feel the sadness and perplexity a 10-year-old would feel under the circumstances. Andy was close to this uncle. He did not fully understand him; he seems to know early on that Uncle Andrew is different from his dad and many other adults in the community. But he loves Uncle Andrew, enjoys the things they do together, and hopes to grow up to be like him. When Uncle Andrew is abruptly and violently taken from them it is wrenching. It creates a heart-break that never goes away.

As *A World Lost* shows, for long stretches of time Andy cannot even ask his closest relatives the questions that would naturally come to a boy facing such a loss; he fears upsetting them further. It seems better simply to accept what they offer in the way of explanation or diversion and not pick open the wound by asking questions. Andy's dad and his Catlett grandparents do not offer much information. Maybe they do not have a lot of information themselves and hope that by focusing on other things, the young nephews will be helped to get over this loss as rapidly as possible. The adults in the story act as

many adults likely would. They are kind to the children, and they shield them, thereby failing at meaningful talk about the event. They hope to hide their own unspeakable feelings from the children, even as they cannot see how impossible it is to hide such deep and permanent feelings of loss.

Andy eventually goes to the courthouse clerk and asks to see the record of the trial of Carp Harmon. The clerk accommodates him, albeit reluctantly. He seems to know the record, such as it is, will not answer Andy's real questions. And this foretelling proves accurate. Andy also queries an eye-witness. This provides a few clues, but hardly solves the bigger mystery. Meanwhile, Andy revisits, over and over again, all his experience with Uncle Andrew—combing it for missing links—information that will help him grasp what kind of person this uncle was and what Andy's connection with him means. It is painstaking work, begun on a hot day in the summer of 1944 when a young boy's world falls irrecoverably apart.

In the novel *Remembering* (Berry, 1988), we focus on Andy approaching middle age. As outlined in Chapter III, he is established, has been to college and worked in a mid-western city as an agriculture journalist. He has returned to his native community with Flora and the children to make a life there. When the novel opens Andy is a hurt and broken man, having lost his right hand in a farming accident. The wound is deep, and he grieves his injury, struggling with nearly uncontrollable anger. The dismemberment leaves him dependent on the field team (Burley and Nathan Coulter, Danny Branch, and the Rowanberries) for help with his crops. He feels unable to care for his family as he did before the accident. He is turned upside down.

He is in California, having gone there for an agriculture meeting. But he leaves home in Kentucky with an argument still brewing with Flora, his wife. He deserts one meeting where he was scheduled to speak. And then he sits observing sessions in San Francisco that irritate him no end for the misguided views of featured speakers—people who do not understand or respect farming, who seem to be only after the money that

mega-farms, machinery, and pesticides usher in. Plagued with domestic unrest, a handicap he has not yet accepted, and besieged by the nonsense at the meeting, Andy sleeps fitfully and explodes at the podium when it is his turn to speak. He walks, early in the morning, the streets of an awakening San Francisco and revisits other chapters of his life.

Particularly vivid is the contrast he recalls between two farms—the one that belonged to Bill Meikelberger, a mega-farm his employer sends him to visit so he can write a story that showcases this farm as the wave of the future, and the Amish farm he stumbles upon after visiting Meikelberger. Isaac Troyer's Amish farm wins Andy's heart for a number of reasons, and he boldly chooses to write his article showcasing it instead. This causes a contentious exchange with Tommy Netherbough, his boss and college friend and results in Andy's dismissal from the job. Striking in this account is Andy's calm. Though he pays a high price for his values, for speaking truthfully, he has an alternate plan in mind.

Recalling this event in his life serves, I believe, to remind Andy of his own strength. He is in a situation—with the injury, and the propaganda about farming at the meetings, and the brokenness in his relationships—in which it would be easy to forget his own strength. Easy to forget who he is. So it is helpful that he can revisit this experience in his life.

I do not mean to subject Berry's character to psychological analysis. I think Andy Catlett is a well-developed character in a difficult place. And there is no guarantee he will come through it as a whole person. The trip to California becomes the turning point. What he hears at the conference, how things were left with Flora, and what he is able to do with all of this in a different setting is significant. He looks at his life, weighs his options, and ultimately makes a life-saving choice. And the choosing is connected to the remembering.

It is not only *his* experience Andy remembers. He recalls stories of those important in his life, as he has heard these stories. Especially meaningful is his recollection of his father's decision to return to Kentucky and make his life there, foregoing the option advocated by a Mr. Franklin, the congressman in Washington for whom Wheeler Catlett works while attending law school. Mr. Franklin, undoubtedly well-intentioned, urged Wheeler to take a lucrative position in Chicago. Andy recalls exactly what was said in this instance.

He has a similar memory about his maternal grandfather, Mat Feltner. He has the whole story of Mat being sent away to school by well-meaning parents and what that was like for his granddad. He recalls how the day came when Mat informed his parents he planned to stay the next time he came home. And that is what Mat did, marrying Margaret Finley and starting their home and family, their place. Andy sees himself in this line of men in his family who have left and then chosen to return.

And he sees now that once again, in a different but related way, he faces another pivotal return—another chance to choose between options, with one choice leading to his community of origin and another leading elsewhere. He has already exited home again, and his brokenness endures, traveling with him. The question seems to be: Will Andy choose to return—not just literally but, more importantly, mentally and spiritually, being present on multiple levels?

Andy is likeable, in my view, because he must work to grow up and keep growing. He faces life's hardships and continues to create and understand his place in the world. It is not handed to him, this understanding. But he does the work. And in the process he endears himself to us.

Andy has several epiphanies along the way. I examine selected events in each novel as well as their provocative conclusions. As he works over the years on this complex story, in the poignantly named novel *A World Lost* (Berry, 1996), Andy constructs an understanding of Uncle Andrew and reveals in the process the person of

depth and maturity he himself has become. First he addresses the relationship of stories and reality.

Now that I have told virtually all I know of the story of Uncle Andrew and of his death and how we fared afterward, I see that I must return to my old question – What manner of man was he? – and make peace with it, for I am by no means certain of the answer. A story, I see, is not a life. A story must follow a line; the telling must begin and end. A life, on the contrary, would be impossible to fix in time, for it does not begin within itself, and it does not end.

Within limits we can know. Within somewhat wider limits we can imagine. We can extend compassion to the limit of imagination. We can love, it seems, beyond imagining. But how little we can understand! (Berry, 1996, p. 149)

Then Andy reconstructs his relationship to his uncle in the present, accommodating the complex facts.

Whatever he was, Uncle Andrew was more than I know. In drawing him toward me again after so long a time, I seem to have summoned, not into view or into thought, but just within the outmost reach of love, Uncle Andrew in the plenitude of his being—the man he would have been for my sake, and for love of us all, had he been capable. In recalling him as I knew him in mortal time, I have felt his presence as a living soul....

That light can come into this world only as love, and love can enter only by suffering. Not enough light has ever reached us here among the shadows, and yet I think it has never been entirely absent. (pp. 149-151)

And finally, Andy gathers up his understanding about this beloved uncle and his difficult story to discern in a profound way his own life and its place in the created order.

Remembering, I suppose, the best days of my childhood, I used to think I wanted most of all to be happy – by which I meant to be here and to be undistracted. If I were here and undistracted, I thought, I would be at home.

But now I have been here a fair amount of time, and slowly I have learned that my true home is not just this place but is also that company of immortals with whom I have lived here day by day. I live in their love, and I know something of the cost. Sometimes in the darkness of my own shadow I know that I could not see at all were it not for this old injury of love and grief, this little flickering lamp that I have watched beside for all these years. (p. 151)



Such clarity is hard-earned, from the time Andy is 10 until the telling of the story, in the present, years later and looking back.

Another epiphany for Andy comes in *Remembering* (Berry, 1988) as he recalls the break with his boss Tommy Netherbough. This is a critical moment of assessment and choosing. It solidifies in his own eyes who he is and what he values. On assignment for the publication he works for, he visits Bill Meikelberger's mega-farm in Ohio. It is a large farm with a modern house and kitchen gadgets seldom used, where neighbors have been bought out, and Meikelberger copes with health issues and debt. Andy does not like the picture. As outlined in Chapter II, wending his way toward Pittsburgh, Andy happens on Isaac Troyer's farm where he spends some quality time. When he leaves he is faced with a dilemma. Resolving that dilemma changes the direction of Andy's life.

In the middle of that afternoon, after Andy had been back on the main road a long time, all that he had learned in the last two days finally settled into place in his mind. He braked suddenly and again pulled over to the side of the road, for at last he had seen what was unmistakably the point: Twenty-five families like Isaac Troyer's could have farmed and thrived—could have made a healthy, comely, independent community—on the two thousand acres where Bill Meikelberger lived virtually alone with his ulcer, the best friend that the bank and the farm machinery business and the fertilizer business and the oil companies and the chemical companies ever had.

Andy sat for a long time then with his hands on top of the steering wheel and his head on his hands, and then he picked up a pad of paper from the seat beside him and outlined an article about Isaac Troyer. He would write it for his friend Rove Upperson, the only agricultural journalist he knew who would want to read it. (Berry, 1988, p. 84)

The break with Tommy Netherbough, which Andy knows will be the result, comes in the midst of a heated argument. But the argument holds something valuable for Andy.

The dividing of ways had come, but Andy made no move to get up. He was not arguing for himself now.

“What is this magazine trying to do—improve farming and help farmers, or sell agri-industrial products?”

Tommy sat looking at him, slowly nodding his head. He was angry now, Andy saw, and he did not care. He was angry himself. He was going to go. He had known it ever since the afternoon after his visit with the Troyers. He knew he was going; he did not yet know where.

Tommy said, "What you are, you know, is some kind of anarchist."

And then Andy knew what he was. He was not an anarchist. He was a throwback to that hope and dream of membership that had held together his lineage of friends and kin from Ben Feltner to himself. He was not arguing for himself, and not just for Isaac and Anna Troyer. He was arguing his father's argument. He was arguing for the cattle coming to the spring in the cool of the day, for the man with his hand on his boy's shoulder, saying, "Look. See what it is. Always remember." He was arguing for his grandparents, for the Coulters and the Penns and the Rowanberrys. And now he had seen that hope and dream again in Isaac Troyer and his people, who had understood it better and longer, and had gauged the threat to it more accurately, than anybody in Port William. (Berry, 1988, pp. 85-86)

Noteworthy in this exchange is the way Andy stays calm. He is angry and disagrees vehemently with Netherbough; however, he holds his own.

They were not even in the same argument that Andy had thought they were in. It was not an argument about right and wrong ways of farming. It was an argument about the way things were going to be for the [foreseeable] future. And he was losing that argument.... He felt his fury singling him out. And he was exultant. He stood, to discover that he was shaking.

For the foreseeable future, then, no argument would be effective against the blocks of economic power. Farmers were going to fail, taking the advice of Netherbough and his kind. And Netherbough and his kind were going to thrive, giving bad advice....

But that an argument was losing did not mean that it should not be made.... He would stand up on it here, in Tommy Netherbough's office.... That it was losing did not mean it was beaten. (pp. 86-87)

The importance of this event and its consequences is made clear in what follows.

He knew then where he was going. As he was leaving Tommy's office, it came to mind, all of a piece, a place familiar as if both dreamed and known: the stone house above the wooded bluff, the spring in its rocky cleft, the ridges, the patches of old woods, the smell of bruised bee balm in the heat of the day, the field sparrow's song spiraling suddenly up into the light on the ridgetop, the to-whee calling "Sweet!" in the tangle. (pp. 87-88)

This is a shift in life direction for Andy. He discovers himself equal to the test, to his understanding of who he is and what he values. And blessing him, as it were, is Flora's remark when he tells her they are returning to Port William. "She looked at him with her mouth full of pins, and then she took them out. 'Well, it's about time'" (p. 92). Flora seems to have known all along they would eventually go back. In *Remembering*, it is useful that Andy has this turning point to recall.

And last, as each of these novels, *Remembering* and *A World Lost*, comes to a close, Andy gains further enlightenment. In *A World Lost* he comes to terms with the questions he has struggled with over the years and achieves a sense of peace.

And all along I have had to wonder what difference I might have made if Uncle Andrew had let me go to Stoneport with him, as I wanted to. Might my presence somehow have unlocked the pattern of the events of that day? Might a small boy, just by being there, have altered the behavior of two reckless men by the tiny shift that might have been needed to change all our lives? Might it be that Uncle Andrew's great mistake was so small a thing as ignoring my advice that I should be taken along? Who can know? Who can know even that the difference, if it had been made, would have been for the better? It might be that if I had gone I would merely have witnessed the shooting. In which case I would not have needed to ask certain questions.

Finally grief has no case to make. All its questions reach beyond the world. And now I am done. The questions remain; the asking is finished. This gathering of fifty-year-old memories, those few brown and brittle pages of newsprint, all those years stand between me and the actual event as irremediably as the end of the world. (Berry, 1996, pp. 125-126)

He achieves this hard-earned peace about his uncle and the relationship they had when he was a young boy in part by answering his own questions, identifying what matters, and also relinquishing his understandable need to control.

Finally you must believe as your heart instructs. If you are a gossip or a cynic or an apostle of realism, you believe the worst you can imagine. If you follow the other way, accepting the bonds of faith and affection, you believe the best you can imagine in the face of the evidence. And so at last, like R. T., I must believe as I imagine and as I therefore choose. I choose not to argue with the story of the "remark" to Carp Harmon's daughter, because it seems both likely and unlikely, and now it makes no difference. I choose not to believe the argument of self-defense; why would even a reckless man with

only a two-by-four attack a man with a pistol? I choose to believe that Uncle Andrew said, “Don’t shoot me,” for it is too plain and sad to be a lie.

And so at last I can imagine it as it might have been. (p. 126)

Andy constructs a vision of what may have happened, one he can live with, and discovers the power of a belief—believing “as your heart instructs.” What wisdom we can gain from walking with Andy Catlett.

In *Remembering*, when he decides to reclaim his life and marriage, hoping it is not too late, Andy hastens home. He finds a note from Flora on the table, almost as if she knew or still hoped he would come back. She and the children are at a neighbor’s. He changes clothes and goes outside to await their return. Everything bespeaks his transformation. He takes a long nap outside under a tree and experiences a mystical visitation.

Andy looks and sees the town and the fields around it, Port William and its countryside as he never saw or dreamed them, the signs everywhere upon them of the care of a longer love than any who have lived there have ever imagined. The houses are clean and white, and great trees stand among them and spread over them. The fields lie around the town, divided by rows of such trees as stand in the town and in the woods, each field more beautiful than all the rest. Over town and fields the one great song sings, and is answered everywhere; every leaf and flower and grass blade sings....

He sees that he lives in eternity as he lives in time, and nothing is lost. Among the people of that town, he sees men and women he remembers, and men and women remembered in memories he remembers, and they do not look as he ever saw or imagined them. The young are no longer young, nor the old old. They appear as children corrected and clarified; they have the luminous vividness of new grass after fire. And yet they are mature as ripe fruit. And yet they are flowers. All of them are flowers. (Berry, 1988, pp. 123-124)

And then we are given the almost poetic lines that close this novel and confirm for us the profound healing we have had opportunity to witness.

He has come into the presence of these living by a change of sight, by which he has parted from them as they were and from himself as he was and is.

Now he prepares to leave them. Their names singing in his mind, he lifts toward them the restored right hand of his joy. (Berry, 1988, p. 124)

It is a beautiful culmination to this tough story. This closing passage is open to multiple interpretations. I believe it shows Andy coming to full awareness of his place, not just in Port William, or in his life on earth, but an even deeper awareness. I believe Andy comes to understand profoundly his place in the universe. This is the reward that comes to him out of deep suffering and struggle—to regain solid ground after losing his hand in a farming accident. He returns, and he returns a changed person, stronger, clearer, with more to offer than ever. I believe he is gifted with a healing miracle.

These pivotal moments of insight, these epiphanies, tell us much about Andy Catlett. Maybe this is one test of characters in Berry's fiction—would we like to meet them again in another story? Yes, we would be most pleased to meet Andy Catlett again.

### **Jack Beechum: Endurance, Good Work, and Dignity**

Old Jack Beechum: Port William member, dedicated to “the old school” of farming, who exhibits perseverance in the face of major setbacks and leaves us with valuable lessons about life's meaning and dignity.

Jack Beechum is another memorable Port William character. Once we meet “Old Jack,” as he is known in most of the fiction, and see him in action, we cannot forget him. He makes an impression. He is portrayed most often as an old or aging man. And the novel where we learn the most about him is *The Memory of Old Jack* (Berry, 1999). He is nearing the end of his life, and he looks back over it throughout a summer day in 1952. We learn of his childhood, his eventual purchase of the family farm, his young manhood, his courtship of Ruth, and the challenges and setbacks his life includes as a farmer and domestically. We learn also what he has learned as his trials and tribulations have yielded valuable wisdom. We are privy to the thoughts and provocative reflections of this 92-year-old Port William senior.

Many episodes clarify Jack Beechum for us, help us get to know this central Port William character. And since I have already explored his life of dedicated work on the land in Chapter II and considered how the community cares for him as its oldest member in Chapter III, here I will examine Beechum's special character as a Port William member by looking at significant lessons he learns during his long life. I will consider how he starts out, different in basic ways from his wife Ruth, and **what goals he initially sets his sights upon**. I will look at the long-standing **disappointment that earmarks his marriage**. I will observe the victory he enjoys after years of work and sacrifice to **settle debts** incurred from expanding the farm beyond a manageable scale. And last, I will note the **disenchantment** he feels when he considers new inventions in the early 1950s, fads he frequently describes as "this modern ignorance" (Berry, 1999, 141).

### **Beechum's Initial Goals**

Beechum's childhood is neither fun nor carefree. He is the youngest of four. His older brothers go off to fight in the Civil War and never return. His mother's grief brings about her early death. Loneliness and sadness dominate Beechum's childhood home. He recalls the courtship of his sister Nancy and remembers in detail Ben Feltner's coming to see her. Feltner is a tall, friendly, striking man who arrives on a big horse and asks if Nancy is home. When both of Jack's parents are deceased Ben and Nancy become parent figures for the young Jack. By now he has watched and helped his father and others on the farm. The outdoors—crops, animals, and farming—become Jack's escape.

As a young man, Jack eventually purchases his sister's share of the Beechum place and becomes responsible for the family farm. He sets about caring for it as Ben Feltner had. He works initially alone and likes it. He puts in long days, and as the years turn, Jack has something to show for his efforts. On weekends he frequently goes into town to enjoy some night life. He likes to dance, and word of scheduled dances usually guarantees that

Jack will finish up his work and head to town. He works and plays hard. Occasionally he gets to church on Sundays.

One day he notices a woman in church he does not recognize. It turns out that Ruth Lightwood is there to visit relatives. Something about her claims Jack Beechum's attention from the start. We are told that she has beautiful hair and lovely eyes. We cannot be certain what it is about Ruth that so captivates Jack on that first meeting. But we know that he is quite taken with her. He finds out who she is visiting and shows up, ostensibly to trade some livestock. He strategizes to be present at dinner. And soon their courtship and what proves a fated life-long relationship begins.

They have their differences. He is a farmer. He lives and works close to the land. It is his life. And he is good at it. She, on the other hand, hails from a family striving to move up. They eye the social ladder and encourage their young people to climb. Ruth and Jack are single when they meet, perhaps each a bit lonely. It is hard to determine what plays out in their minds and hearts at the beginning. Yet they court, and in time they marry. Ruth accepts Jack as a kind of "mission field" (Berry, 1999, p. 39), believing she can change him into the husband she envisions.

Their troubles begin immediately. For example, Jack and the couple who work for him have spruced up the home place in anticipation of Ruth's arrival after the wedding. They clean, paint, and air out, readying everything. For Ruth, though, it all falls flat. She feels herself in foreign territory from the moment of arrival. Jack is taken aback by Ruth's initial reactions, but he is not easily defeated. He concentrates on his land and how to make the farm productive. He senses from the beginning, however, that they are undone, perhaps unable ever to salvage their situation. We note that they had few options. Under the circumstances at the time they would not likely separate.

Jack focuses on the possibilities of the land. And early on he makes a fateful choice. Against his nature and perhaps his better wisdom, he casts about for more land,

courting expansion. We note how his and Ruth's predicament is described and what Jack's initial goal is as a landowner, newly wed.

He was no longer thinking about the possibilities of his own place that had once so held and exalted his mind.... He no longer seemed to himself to be enough. He knew that he had been found wanting in Ruth's eyes, which meant, since her eyes had become the only qualification of his, that he was now found wanting in his own.... He did not want to improve himself or enrich himself or come up in the world. He was a limited man, and offensively so insofar as he appeared satisfied within his limits. And so he began to move now, as he thought, in defiance of her judgment, but actually in unconscious obedience to her judgment's chief implication: that no place may be sufficient to itself, but must lead to another place, and that all places must finally lead to money; that a man's work must lead not to the health of his family and the respect of his neighbors but to the market place, to that deference that strangers yield to sufficient cash. (Berry, 1999, pp. 49-50)

Their predicament is significant. When they look toward the future they picture opposing outcomes. And, as it is Jack Beechum's story, we learn more about his side of the matter, and how his and Ruth's differences affect him.

What he had in his mind now as he sat and thought, or walked the lengths of afternoons and thought, or worked and thought, was more land. He wanted more land. A man falling in his own esteem needs more ground under his feet; to stand again he may need the whole world for a foothold. His thoughts now ranged over the resources within his boundaries, and over the possibilities that lay outside them, seeking the terms of some new balance. His mind played over and over again the airy drama of ambition: how to use what he had to get what he wanted—a strange and difficult understanding for him, who until then had wanted only what he had. Once he had hungered for the life his place could be made to yield. Now he would ask it to yield another place, at what expense to itself and to him he could not then have guessed. (p. 50)

This is a key turning point for Jack Beechum. Until now, important things have happened in his life—the loss of brothers in a war, the deaths of parents, the acquisition of a family farm, his courtship and marriage—but these events did not require him to assess his situation deeply and embrace a strategy for addressing unforeseeable challenges. Considering the text again, I note the word *offensively*. “He was a limited man, and offensively so insofar as he appeared satisfied within his limits” (Berry, 1999,



p. 50). We must ask: Who is offended? And we know the answer: Ruth and those with similar ambitions, who harbor for more, who imagine success and comfort, and strive for society's recognition. This is not a new debate. And Berry's novel situates us dramatically in the middle of it—in the particulars of the troubled union of Jack and Ruth Beechum. And Jack will play out portions of their story throughout this entire day of reverie.

We are led to believe that Jack had a choice at this critical juncture and that he chose against his more basic, authentic self. He went from one satisfied with what he had, not looking for more or desiring to become a success, to one who, until he was soundly defeated and forced to turn back, sought more—was enticed by the pursuit of expansion.

What caused Jack to choose as he did? Surely it was not to please Ruth. By then he knew they were broken, probably irreparably, and pleasing her was not his ambition, so deep was his disappointment in their failed coupledness. Nor did he choose for his sister Nancy or Ben Feltner, his friend and substitute father. Nor was he likely responding to the propaganda, the political spin accompanying agribusiness, exhorting farmers to “get big or get out.” The agribusiness movement did not ravage United States farmers until after Jack Beechum's work days. It seems unlikely that he aspired to purchase the adjacent Farrier farm simply to spite mean-spirited neighbors, though the neighbor and his sons are usually eager to pick a fight or cast an insult, daring Jack to compete with them for nearby land up for auction. But Jack seems strong enough within himself to resist such taunts, even if the contest focuses on something he believes he wants.

None of these hypothetical intentions on Jack's part are especially plausible. And so, I claim he made this fateful choice as the narrative tells us, “in defiance of her judgment.” This is a move, a new direction, propelled out of spite: “I will show you. Just watch,” is what Jack is thinking. And because of his indomitable will and sometimes headstrong ways, he “unconscious[ly]” plays into, “[obeys]” her mantra—“that no place

may be sufficient to itself, but must lead to another place, and that all places must finally lead to money” (Berry, 1999, p. 50).

Despite Jack Beechum’s strengths, which are significant and which sustain him in the end, at this point, he is a driven man—driven out of desperation into the headwinds of a country’s romance with progress, crudely defined as having more, and leaving the small (small farm, small town, or small livelihood) behind. Had Jack thought more carefully, had he felt less abused, he might have chosen differently. I believe this turning point for Beechum encapsulates part of the message of the novel. Beware of striving for more. Consider this aspiration carefully and where it will likely lead. Ask what lies behind one’s own motivation. Face the tough questions. Is this worth investing all you have? Spite and expansion were not Beechum’s initial goals. And the lessons from this choice come later.

### **Disappointment in Marriage**

And so, Beechum buys the Farrier place. To work it, in addition to his own farm, he hires Mr. Wells, and for a time they make a good team. They understand what is needed and how to go about it. Their conflicts are few, their productivity impressive. Others note their remarkable output. For a stretch Jack Beechum can be said to thrive, insofar as his work on the farm is concerned.

But the thriving cannot last. While Ruth nurtures hopes that her dreams might eventually be fulfilled, that Jack will continue to acquire new land tracts and become an overseer with the accompanying wealth, power, and status, Jack runs the course seemingly fated for him and Wells. A quarrel erupts between them one day that makes their break unavoidable. Jack learns from this. He discovers the difference between those whose work is connected to ownership and those whose work is *for* others, directed and overseen by others, and for whom the compensation is but a making of ends to meet—who work for survival. Jack remembers this difference.

Losing Wells, however, forces him to sell the Farrier place, for he cannot handle all the work alone and is determined never again to be part of a relationship of servitude. He sees it as “the difference between hopeful and hopeless work” (Berry, 1999, p. 64).

Everything shifts then for Jack and Ruth, in a curious interplay of hope and despair. Having lost their first-born, a stillborn son, they become wary of one another, staking out their differences and establishing boundaries. The additional land and the short-lived prospects of more does, however, take the chill out of the air for a time. Ruth continues nurturing her hopes and visions of the future. Another child is conceived. But the painful break with Wells, which forces Jack to sell the extra land, deflates Ruth’s longings. The second child, a daughter, survives, but Ruth vows there will be no more children. The terms of their estrangement are sealed. And their suffering and seemingly helpless tendencies at times to inflict harm on one another cannot be overlooked.

The misery for Jack is not confined to his home life. He has humiliating encounters in town with the McGrother boys. His barn burns in the middle of the night, killing some of his livestock. He is seriously set back and forced to go to his brother-in-law for help. He faces a long period of digging out.

He who so short a time ago saw his work leading him to new land will now have to struggle for years to keep from losing the land he has. But he has come to the depths of a strange quietness in himself as he stands on the verge of his ruin, breathing the air. (Berry, 1999, pp. 69-70)

To offer a complete summary of Jack Beechum’s life and character we must include the story of Rose McGinnis. Jack’s encounter with Rose, wife of the town doctor, begins when he visits the doctor after cutting a deep gash in his leg during the collapse of his wagon in a swift river current. Arguably he is lucky to be alive. Rose assists her husband in stitching up the wound. The doctor can be described as brutal but effective; he takes no care for the pain his procedure will cause. He does, however, stop the bleeding and sets the leg toward healing. Rose contrasts with the doctor, offering gentleness and medicinal liquor. She is considerably younger than her husband. And in time the doctor

passes away. Rose remains in their homestead, and occasionally she and Beechum pass one another in town. She does not re-marry or move away.

Beechum and McGinnis begin to notice one another. Nothing except the ministrations to the cut leg before the doctor's death throws them together. But slowly, they communicate interest and curiosity. Eventually Jack offers to go and see Rose. This short chapter in the novel covers a significant event in Jack's life. With this visit, a "balm in Gilead" emerges for him. As one can expect, there is talk in the town. But their closeness and the way it is worked out seems initially uncomplicated. And the wonder and elation for Jack cannot be overstated.

He would care for Rose. He would care for the workings of the dark and the ground that she had newly alerted him to. He would care for the cottage and its garden and the great elm that stood like a guardian over it. He would care for the night's coming, and for the light that his desire cast around him, and for his arrival at the door, and for their talk and laughter falling to silence. And for nothing beyond the reach and touch of Rose would he care now, for there was a joy in him that overrode all outside itself, she had so imparadised his mind. She so received and welcomed him, and made him such delight, that it seemed to him his very life struggled and broke free and passed into her, and he lay in the dark beside her in a strange sleep, empty of strength and thought as a dead man. He went away from her newborn. (Berry, 1999, p. 101)

Time passes; Jack works through the reservations that visit his conscience. Eventually Rose is killed in a tragic fire. The person who shares the news seems to know how devastating it will be. But before that, Ruth confronts Jack one night as he starts to leave for a presumed errand. She asks where he is going. We are not told if gossip has alerted her or just careful observation of his comings and goings. But their encounter adds a new component to the situation for Jack.

For a moment the question angered him, "You've made that none of your business, my girl," he thought. And then he sensed the pain in her that the stance and look of her defied, and he grieved for her. He saw that his infidelity had touched her as his love had not, that she who could not abide his passion now helplessly and deeply bore his wound. It turned her toward him, revealed her to him, too late, too late, and for no mercy or denial that was in his power—that beautiful woman with her gray eyes so fine. And he

said with a gentleness that she had not stirred in his voice for a long time: “I’m going to look at a red calf with a white tip on the end of its tail.” And he said: “You look fine this evening, Ruth.” (Berry, 1999, p. 102)

This meeting, further forcing them to acknowledge their failure and its consequences, changes things for Jack. It introduces complexity to what earlier appeared acceptable and perhaps relatively simple for the participants. Jack is forced to sort out the way in which both relationships have proven incomplete.

It was as though he bore for these two women the two halves of an irreparably divided love. With Ruth, his work had led to no good love. With Rose, his love led to no work. With Rose he had come within the gates of Eden, but had found there no possibility for a worldly faith or labor. With Ruth he had made an earthly troth and travail that bore no delight; they had lost the vision of their paradise. (Berry, 1999, p. 103)

It is not clear that Ruth and Jack had ever realized “their paradise.” The vision of it, or of its possibility, may have been the glue that held them together and to which they maintained, however incompletely, some loyalty. This experience is central for Jack—the failure of his loves. And he bears the grief about each to the end of his days. He never gets over either loss. In the loss of Ruth, their bond is marked from the beginning by their failure to encounter one another realistically, to discover who each is and what matters to him or her. And in the loss of Rose, their deep connection ends abruptly and wrenchingly. Jack is left to find nurturance and comfort in other, simpler pleasures, such as his friendship with Hannah Coulter, explored in Chapter III.

When Jack and Ruth’s final break comes, the lesson learned in this long, difficult yet sustained, relationship emerges. Jack is on an upturn with respect to the farm since clearing his debit with the bank. For her part, Ruth notices and appreciates Jack’s attentiveness to their place, now that he is set free from the grueling years of recovery. She likes the improved grounds, homestead, and barns. But nothing erases their long-standing pain. Perhaps this is part of the reason we rejoice in the peace Old Jack manages to achieve near the end. The broader picture of their relationship is outlined in this description following Jack’s emergence from debt and the fear of financial ruin.

It was too late, and he accepted that. But he felt keenly the want of words between them. If they could have spoken with some candor of themselves, with some mutual pleasure of their place in the world, looking ahead with concern or with hope, that would have made them both different lives and different deaths. But she could not offer, and he could not ask. That was his failure: he had not united farm and household and marriage bed, and he could not. For him that was not to be, though the vision of what he had lost survived in his knowledge of his failure, and taught him the magnitude of his tragedy, and made him whole. It was too late for a woman's love. And that was all that was lacking. (Berry, 1999, p. 126)

We are left both to grieve what was lost and the suffering endured, and yet also to celebrate and rejoice in the victories won, the things that brought healing, peace, or satisfaction. The story of Jack and Ruth Beechum can be interpreted in part as a holding up of the value, the goodness of marriage, especially when it encompasses both productive work and healthy pleasure.

### **Settling the Debt**

Undoubtedly the high point of Jack Beechum's story as he looks back from 92 years is his victory in settling the debt. He wins multiple hard-earned lessons from this experience, including the meaning of *freedom*, *peace*, *enough*, and *service*. The account of this victory is central to our understanding of Beechum's character and his life as a Port William community member. He carries a noteworthy dignity to the end. And this dignity comes through, in part, in his fighting spirit.

It takes Beechum fifteen years to work his way out of the burden of acquiring more than he could manage. His reflections on this achievement, which accompany his ride home from the bank, heading through his beloved countryside on his "good black horse ... named Socks," sets the stage for and anticipates his recognition of what he has accomplished.

He touches the folded mortgage in his pocket; his fingertips press upon the crisp edges of the paper that had pledged him to the loss of everything and bound so many years of his labor to the fear of ruin; with his thumb he feels the flatness and smoothness of the paper, affirming the reality of that death pledge, now broken. After so long a time he is free. And the farm is

free. He names in defiance and triumph the names of those who thought him beaten. But his words to himself are without strength, as though repeated from memory, and his deliverance remains unreal. Still, he rides along with a strange alertness, looking eagerly around him, as though his eyesight has been freed from a long confinement. (Berry, 1999, p. 121)

There are several phases of this journey home, in many ways a rebirth for the then 48-year-old Jack.

At the top of the rise beyond the ford on Birds Branch he comes in sight of the upland fields of his own place: the house and outbuildings and barns, the winter-deadened sod of the pastures, the veil of green wheat over last year's croplands, the gray stone of the fences bending along the contour of the slopes, the trunks and the webbed and spiked branches of the unleaved woods. And now it seems to him that his soul breaks open, like a dull coal, shattering brilliance around him. He has been gone but little more than two hours, and yet he returns as from a long voyage or a war. Now he does consciously feel the open sky above him, the eye of heaven clear upon him. In that long, unwearying gaze he feels the clarity of his outline. Over his farm in the distance the broad cloud shadows pass, darkening and leaving bright again the rinsed air. (Berry, 1999, pp. 121-122)

This is such a compelling transformation in this hardened, crusty, old codger of a farmer that we attend to every detail.

Clear and whole before him now he sees the object of his faith as he has not seen it for fifteen years. And he feels opening in himself the stillness of a mown field, such a peace as he has never known....

He is returning home—not only to the place but to the possibility and promise that he once saw in it, and now, as never before, to the understanding that that is enough. After such grievous spending, enough, more than enough, remains. (Berry, 1999, p. 122)

Old Jack revisits the words of Psalm 23, which his sister Nancy made him memorize as a young boy. He observes that he could always picture the images of the psalm, but not until now does he grasp their true meaning.

He knew that his origin was in nothing that he or any man had done, and that he could do nothing sufficient to his needs. And he looked finally beyond those limits and saw the world still there, potent and abounding, as it would be whether he lived or died, worthy of his life and work and faith. He saw that he would be distinguished not by what he was or anything that he might become but by what he served. Beyond him was the peace and rest

and joy that he desired. Beyond the limits of a man's strength or intelligence or desire or hope or faith, there is more. (Berry, 1999, pp. 122-123)

Old Jack's rebirth is transforming. It is told in detail, with reference to the particulars of Beechum's situation and larger truths from our cultural, historic, and religious tradition.

That his life was renewed, that he had been driven down to the bedrock of his own place in the world and his own truth and had stood again, that a profound peace and trust had come to him out of his suffering and his solitude, and that this peace would abide with him to the end of his days—all this he knew in the quiet of his heart and kept to himself. Who, in those days, could he have told? (p. 123)

While the victory is hard won for Old Jack, it is abiding. Nevertheless, it does not blot out the losses. In addition, it seems to strengthen and clarify for Jack and others his place in the community.

The renewal of his life made no change in the look of him or in his ways. By then he was determined and hardened; outwardly he had become what he was to be. From then on only time would change him. His hands and face and body were marked by his years of work and exposure; their shape and attitude were fixed as though his flesh had been annealed to the toughness of wood or live bone. And there was about him an air of stubbornness and withstanding; it was in the way he stood and moved, in the set of his face, in the directness of his stare.

Anyone who looked at him in those days sensed that he was a man who would do unflinchingly whatever he thought necessary, whatever affection or loyalty or obligation demanded. He had become a man whose presence changed other men; when he came among them his influence was discernible in the way they looked or stood or spoke. (Berry, 1999, p. 124)

The particulars of the story help us understand what happened to the senior Port William member—why his attention returns with depth and clarity many years later. First we learn how the ordeal impacted his beloved farm—he sees things now he could not see during the painstaking fight to recover.

But however little change there was in his aspect and his ways, the inward change was deep and permanent, and where this change was made visible was in his place. Coming home that February afternoon after he had paid his debt, he saw that under the oppression of his darkness and his long struggle the farm had grown stark. The yard trees standing nearest the house had died or grown too infirm to be trusted to stand, and had been cut down



and not replaced, leaving the house without shade. The orchard that his father had planted had nearly died out. The buildings all needed paint.... Most troubling of all were the two or three of his fields that under the constraint of his debt he had neglected or overtaxed. Wherever he looked he saw the need for remedies and repairs, and he felt the satisfaction he would take in those attentions. (Berry, 1999, pp. 124-125)

We learn how the restored, renewed Jack Beechum spends his days and views his world.

His thoughts no longer ranged the distances of possibility but were contained inside the boundaries of his farm. He became again the true husband of his land. He still worked and went ahead as before, but now his work was healing; it restored the health of his place and his own satisfaction. He had come a long way from what he might have been. Now as he drove to the field in the morning and returned again at night, as he looked after his stock in the pastures, and made his rounds of the pens and barns, doing his chores, there was a joy deep in him, shining, reflecting the sky, like water in a well. (Berry, 1999, p. 125)

In addition to healing his place, attending to neglected pastures and buildings needing paint and repair, Beechum also reinforces his relationship to his nephew.

He began spending more time on the Feltner place than he had before. When he could spare a half day or a day, he would get on his horse or take a team and go to Mat's, and just step into whatever work was going on. He gave Mat his help; more important, he gave him his presence. As thirty years before Ben [Mat's father and Jack's brother-in-law] had been on hand for him, so now he was on hand for Mat. He gave him the steadiness, and he gave him the little uneasiness and the pressure, that a young man can only get from an older man's knowing eye. It was one of the good fortunes of his life that when Mat needed him he was in the clear, for then the time of his solitude was ended." (p. 127)

Old Jack and Mat's is a special relationship.

The careful reader cannot help but rejoice with Old Jack in his coming through. The account we are given is movingly rendered. And the lessons are deep and lasting.

### **Disenchantment with the New**

The story draws to a close by examining Old Jack's final years, including his reaction to new inventions and what I call Old Jack's final confirmations. Jack Beechum takes a remarkable amount of dignity with him into his last years. After the effort to see

his farm passed on in the family fails, he sharpens his view of what matters and how he will focus his remaining time.

He would be faithful to what he belonged to: to his own place in the world and his neighborhood, to the handful of men who shared his faith. He had taken his final stand. He would accept no comfort that was not true. (Berry, 1999, p. 140)

In time, of course, big changes are required. He cannot continue alone on the farm; the younger men are dropping by more often to check on him though he knows they have many obligations of their own. Wheeler Catlett suggests a move to the hotel in town, now a senior residence. At first Old Jack resists, but he does not hold out for long. He knows there are no other options, and he does not want to be a burden to Mat, Wheeler, and the others.

As discussed in Chapter II, a great fortune comes Old Jack's way at this difficult time when Wheeler secures Elton and Mary Penn, able tenants for the Beechum farm. At last Old Jack can picture a future for his beloved place and feel assured it will be cared for responsibly. This is a genuine source of peace and comfort in his life.

Old Jack's time in town is marked by occasional confrontations with Mrs. Hendrick who manages the senior residence. He insists on planting a vegetable garden, for instance, and bestows its produce upon her periodically, no matter the time of day or night. He has the occasional dinner with friends or visits from someone like Andy Catlett, heading off to college. But much of his time is spent in these reveries about his earlier years.

When he moved to town he knew the last of his life's hinges had turned. It seemed to him then that he was finished.... Having no longer the immediate demands of his place and work to occupy his mind, he began to go into the past. His place and his life lay in his mind like a book and what is written in it, and he became its scholar. His thoughts went back to his place and moved obsessively over it, whether in the pleasure of familiarity or in the pain of old reminding. His mind was formed long before the days when maps were commonplace, and even longer before the time of aerial views and photographs. His memory of his place was never overlooking and

abstract, but ground-level, as immediate always to his hand as to his eye. It was unified in his mind not by the geographical relationship of its various boundaries and landmarks but by his old routes over it, its aspects opening ahead of him as he ascended heights of the ground or emerged from trees, moving over it in his memory, on horseback or behind a team or on foot. (Berry, 1999, p. 141)

I see Jack Beechum as an exemplary character because of the profile he gives us of survival and endurance—pressing on, against incalculable obstacles. We may not like everything he does. We may criticize aspects of his life. But to me this is a man “schooled” in the school of hard knocks, thrust into the furnace. And somehow he digs down into his resources and values and does not quit. In time Old Jack not only survives, he triumphs. He becomes one respected and looked up to by others. He carries a respectable dignity into his final days.

This dignity is revealed when he considers “the modern ignorance” (p. 141). He sits at the supper table at the “hotel,” this last evening of his life. Others have finished the meal and adjourned to a nearby room to watch television. Mrs. Hendrick is clearing the table, washing dishes and keeping an eye on him. Presently she inquires if he would not like “to go in there and watch the TV?” (p. 141).

He shakes his head. “No,” he thinks. “God, Almighty, no.” For the cost of living beyond his time is in putting up with the various noises and contraptions of these new times, this modern ignorance, as he has come to call it in his mind. The modern ignorance is in people’s assumption that they can outsmart their own nature. It is in the arrogance that will believe nothing it cannot prove, and respect nothing it cannot understand, and value nothing it cannot sell. The eyes can look only one way, and Old Jack believes in the existence of what he is not looking at and what he does not see. The *next* hard time is just as real to him as the last, and so is the next blessing. The new ignorance is the same as the old, only less aware that ignorance is what it is. It is less humble, more foolish and frivolous, more dangerous. A man, Old Jack thinks, has no choice but to be ignorant, but he does not have to be a fool. He can know his place, and he can stay in it and be faithful. (Berry, 1999, pp. 141-142)

And then his thoughts sum up his philosophy, which we know has developed over a lifetime of challenges and a few precious victories. It includes his unequivocal assessment of the world he sees about him.

That a whole roomful of people should sit with their mouths open like a nest of young birds, peering into a picture box the invariable message of which is the desirability of Something Else or Someplace Else; that a government should tax its people in order to make a bomb powerful enough to blow up the world; that a whole country would attempt a civilization with the exclusive aim of getting out of work—all that is strange to him, unreal; he might have slept long and waked in a land of talking monkeys. He is troubled and angered in his mind to think that people would aspire to do as little as possible, no better than they are made to do it, for more pay than they are worth, as if the old world were destroyed and a new one created by Gladston Pettit. (Berry, 1999, p. 142)

As noted, Pettit is Old Jack's son-in-law, and Jack's relationship with him has not been warm. As Jack comes to believe, they live in different worlds. And as he says to Mat, speaking about Pettit and the question of Clara and Gladston buying the farm,

“I know him. I know what's in him. He don't want to take care of anything outside of figures in a book. He wants to lend money to people to make worthless things and buy worthless things. Worth would put him to too much trouble.”

And then, after a long silence, looking away, he let it go. He grinned. His big hand came down heavy on Mat's shoulder. “Bank stock don't eat grass, Mat—and nothing eats bank stock.” (p. 139)

As often as I have read the stories of Jack Beechum in the Port William membership, I still find it difficult to say how Old Jack comes through loss and defeat on multiple levels to his own “higher ground.” I suggest a few components that enable Old Jack's basic and endearing character: (1) he is not a quitter; (2) he is a hard worker; (3) when necessary, he stands firm and is assertive; (4) he is not a loner, though he enjoys working alone and relishes his independence; (5) he is there for neighbors when needed, and they are there for him; (6) he is an astute judge—of people, stock, farming methods, sensibility, and what we might call right action; (7) he learns from his mistakes; (8) he is human and does not hold back when healing or pleasure come his way or struggle unduly

over social conventions; and (9) he faces tough realities again and again and uses them to strengthen his core identity and deepest convictions. As we might say today, Old Jack Beechum “takes no fools.” No doubt additional qualities contribute to his endurance, good work, and dignity, but these are the qualities I find most salient.

### **Jayber Crow: Port William Philosopher**

Jayber Crow: Orphaned as a youngster, schooled in three institutions, and a life-long lover of books, Jayber Crow makes his way back to the land of his origin and becomes the Port William barber. There he serves for over three decades as barber to the men and boys of Port William. His journey includes constant reflection about life’s big questions, and his story offers valuable insights for appreciative readers.

My third example of strong character in the Port William membership is Jayber Crow. Unlike my other two examples, Andy Catlett and Jack Beechum, Jayber Crow is not a farmer. He lives and works among people who make their livelihoods on the land. But Jayber’s love is books, and he is one of the most inquisitive of Berry’s characters. His story in *Jayber Crow: A Novel—The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, As Written by Himself* (2000a) is told in first person.

I begin with a short summary of Jayber’s account of his life, followed by a two-part look at selected portions or snapshots of his story. The first part links the three themes I examine in Berry’s fiction with observations Jayber makes about life in Port William. For the **theme of community**, I consider his recognition of changes in Port William over three decades. Exploring the **theme of character**, I focus on Jayber’s friendship with Burley Coulter, another noteworthy Port William character. And for **the theme of land and place**, I invite us to listen with Jayber to the concerns about the future of their farms as expressed by his customers. Part two of my look at Jayber’s story poses **three philosophical questions** that emerge as I read the novel and that relate to concepts I find

helpful in considering Jayber Crow. These questions and the related concepts will be given following the short summary of Jayber's life and my consideration of the three themes I traced in Berry's fiction as they relate to Jayber Crow. This organization plan facilitates my examination of Crow as a provocative community member and reflects the complexity and range of topics his story presents.

Jayber Crow is both a complex and a simple character. Why is he important? What does he help us see? How does his story enhance our understanding of Berry's philosophy?

Berry gives much of his philosophy and his faith or theology—his wrestling with the big questions we all face—in his nonfiction. These reflections are in his fiction, too, but they are generally more subtle in the fiction, not declared outright. However, in *Jayber Crow* both fiction and philosophy are intertwined. With the first person narrative and Jayber Crow a lifelong self-taught student, a gold mine of Berry's perspective is available. What he sees as the enduring worth and value of human life is “packaged” in a masterfully crafted narrative. A good story, that spans years and includes wonderfully developed characters, moves along, propelled by an unpredictable plot. The novel is a first-rate work of art.

Jayber Crow, I contend, is a philosopher—a thinker of deep thoughts, a true reflector. But he is other things too—large-hearted, friendly, able to enjoy laughs and a good party. He is not somber, heavy, or overly serious—despite the fact that he is busy thinking, often and deeply. Clearly he is not given to the trivial. Jayber is thoughtful and intelligent; perhaps that is the simplest way to describe him. He considers becoming a minister. He is an astute observer of what goes on around him and what the news brings him about life elsewhere. And he has walked through “the valley of the shadow.”

The parents of “Jonah” Crow, as Jayber is known as a youngster, die when he is very young. The aunt and uncle who take him in after his parents' deaths have themselves passed away by the time he is 10. He is placed in The Good Shepherd orphanage, and

there he copes with the strict rules and regulations, social dynamics, and the education that is offered. He deals with the homesickness he feels, especially at night, and meets the first serious authority figure of his life—“the superintendent himself, Brother Whitespade . . . . His stare was the most concentrated part of him. . . . All that he was seemed to be gathered up in his eyes and pointed across that wide desk at me” (Berry, 2000a, p. 30). The one who dubs him ““J. Crow”” (p. 31), “a man who was filled with power” (p. 30), will never be forgotten. Jonah Crow will go out of his way thereafter to avoid the Brother Whitespades of the world, the one he dubs “the man behind the desk.”

Striving to discern his place in the world and satisfy his innate curiosity, the person we come to know as Jayber becomes an avid reader, works his way through major portions of the school library, and initiates his own vocabulary study and discipline. In time he perceives that he may be called to the ministry. And so, from The Good Shepherd he advances to Pigeonville College as a pre-ministerial student. Here Jayber calls himself “J.” His curiosity is enhanced by a caring teacher, Dr. Ardmire, “a master of the Greek New Testament . . . known, behind his back, as Old Grit” (Berry, 2000a, p. 53).

While “J” is grateful for his education and wrestles with issues of religion and philosophy as a young man, he admits he was following, without question, the mandate to “make something out of myself—if not a minister of the Gospel, then something else that would be (I had by now actually thought this) a cut or two above my humble origins” (Berry, 2000a, p. 56). He leaves the college. He decides that being a minister is not for him. The designation, “Brother Crow,” which would be his as a minister, does not ring true. While at The Good Shepherd he picks up basic barbering skills and is able to enhance these skills in Lexington. By this time, he has also faced some rugged days of survival, pitching in at a horse farm. Through it all, the pull to return to the land of his origins emerges and persists. Eventually, Jayber breaks loose, surrendering the injunction to “make something” of oneself. He heads back to his homeland, enduring an arduous journey that includes a historic flood.

Once returned to more familiar terrain, Crow takes up the community's barber post and serves for over three decades. In time he "retires" to the two-room dwelling by the river that Burley Coulter offers.

This is a rough summary of an engaging story. The patient reader will find a wealth of philosophical and theological musings along with detailed observations of many Port William members. To delve more deeply into Crow's long and thoughtful life, I turn now to selected snapshots from the three themes of this study.

### **The Theme of Community in *Jayber Crow***

Focusing on the theme of community in *Jayber Crow*, I first make observations about Jayber and community in general. Then I note the changes in the community that stand out for Jayber when he reviews his years as Port William's barber. (For the definition of *community* for this study, see pp. 81-82.)

Crow is, at heart, not just a person interested in ideas and the wisdom available in books, he is also "a people person." He is interested in humankind—the variety of people he encounters wherever he finds himself. He studies them. People intrigue him. And while he does not choose the ministry, I suggest that Jayber becomes the true minister of Port William—from behind the barber's chair. His willingness to share the shop with customers, loafers, and those needing to talk any time of the day or night is a kind of ministry. In addition to barbering, Jayber also agrees to become the community gravedigger and church custodian. He therefore sees and interacts with people on a daily basis in several venues. And so, I ask, what do we learn about community and the character for whom Berry names his longest novel? Part of the answer comes in Jayber's recognition of the changes in Port William over three decades.

After 32 years as community barber, Jayber decides to close the shop and move to a small cabin on the river that Burley Coulter makes available. Jayber seems ready to make this move; however, we note that this change is precipitated largely by the visit of a



public health inspector. Paying an unannounced visit to the shop, “Mr. Mumble Something of the Forces of Health and Sanitation” (Berry, 2000a, p. 288) wanders around the shop, peering here and there and checking items on a clipboard. He serves notice to the veteran barber of ways the shop does not comply with established protocols for such venues. Afterwards Jayber seeks legal counsel from Wheeler Catlett. What are the implications of the inspector’s visit and the presumed report to authorities? What might he face if he does not make the specified changes?

For Jayber the inspector is reminiscent of “the man behind the desk” at The Good Shepherd orphanage, the one who presumes to change Jayber’s name. He is not eager to renew this acquaintance and decides this is a good time to retire. The night before he moves to his new home, Jayber cannot sleep. He gets up and takes a long walk. Being Jayber, he chronicles the striking changes in Port William over his decades as community barber, church custodian, and grave digger.

I went out. It was late. There was enough moonlight to brighten the trees and the roofs and walls of the houses and throw their bottomless black shadows beyond them. The town, filled with sleep, was just wonderfully quiet. Nobody was out. The young had finally gone to bed. The old had not yet begun to wake up.

Loafing and wakefulness are two of the principal arts of Port William. Maybe, too, they pass in Port William for public duties. In the business places and the street, people loaf and talk to the point of discomfort and the neglect of other things....

In its conversation, its consciousness of itself, its sleep and waking, Port William has always been pretty much an unofficial place. It has, really, nothing of its own but itself. It has no newspaper, no resident government, no municipal property.... Mostly the town’s history had become its ways, its habits, its feelings, its familiarity with itself.

In the quiet, in the fall of moonlight upon it that last night of my life there, Port William slept and dreamed the dreams its history had brought it to. In the time of my stay it had suffered its own history, of course, but also the history of the larger world that contained it. In those thirty-two years that now seemed almost no time at all, the town had shrunk and declined. Some

of its quiet that night was the quiet of sleep. Some was the quiet of emptiness and absence. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 299-300)

Jayber details the evidence for his claim that Port William is in decline. In addition he searches for a succinct generalization to encapsulate this awareness.

The blacksmith shop was long gone. The hotel was gone; the empty lot where it had stood had become (in the way of Port William) a sort of happenso parking place for cars and pickup trucks. Burgess General Merchandise, which would remain standing for a little while yet, was closed, useless, as still as a grave. The poolroom was closed. The school was closed. Mr. Milo Settle and the garage were in decline and soon to be gone. The barbershop would be closed forever. In many of the houses, now, widows and widowers slept alone. Even in the daytime those houses had begun to give off the feeling of vacancy. Their windows had begun to have the look of sightlessness.

If you knew the place, if you had known it for long, you could not look at it without feeling that its life was being irresistibly pulled at by larger places. It was stretching itself farther and farther in order to hold together, traveling farther in order to stay in place. It was like a spider's web that will stretch so far and then break.

I thought, "Here once, forever gone." (Berry, 2000a, p. 300-301)

Jayber sees he must revise his representation of the reality he is witnessing. And then, perhaps a bit overwhelmed by the magnitude of his awareness, he diverts his attention back to the particulars of his own transition already underway.

But then, in the flimsiness of time, in the moonlight, the presence of the town so strong upon me, I thought, "Now and forever here."

It was a little port for the departure and arrival of souls, and was involved in more than time. It seemed all alight with the ghost that, so to speak, wore it. I walked slowly out of town and past the graveyard and on out to that Grandstand, from where I could see the valley a long way up and down. And then I walked back again. I fixed my breakfast and washed and packed up the dishes and the skillet. Daylight came. Soon Elton Penn was there with his truck. And then Burley and Nathan Coulter came, and Andy Catlett and Martin Rowanberry. We were ready to load up and go. (p. 301)

The primary focus of this inquiry is not what has happened in rural America over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, what has happened in rural America and its nearby towns surely impacts education and is a relevant focus in discerning the meaning of Berry's

work for today's educators. Community, according to Jayber Crow, has all but vanished in so many places—and especially those with small populations, where people work the land to make a living and harvest the food that feeds everyone, wherever they live. Nowhere, perhaps, does Jayber express himself more movingly about the ravages visited upon small communities than in this passage near the beginning of the chapter, “A Period of Disintegration”:

When I say that Port William suffered a new run of hard times in the 1960s, I don't mean that it had to “weather a storm” and come out safe again in the sunshine. I mean that it began to suffer its own death, which it has not yet completed, from which it may or may not revive. And here, talking against the wind, so to speak, I must enter, along with my lamentation, my objection. You may say that I am just another outdated old man complaining about progress and the changes of time. But, you see, I have well considered that possibility myself, and am prepared to submit to correction by anybody who cares about a community, who can show me how the world is improved by that community's dying. (Berry, 2000a, p. 274)

While a central theme for Berry is the demise of community, which he believes is happening all across the land, in this passage his concern is summed up in five poignant sentences.

### **The Theme of Character in *Jayber Crow***

In considering the theme of character in *Jayber Crow*, I look at Jayber's character somewhat indirectly, unlike my consideration of Andy Catlett and Old Jack Beechum, where I focus more directly on their individual lives. By devoting a lengthy novel to Jayber Crow and naming it for him, Berry makes clear that Jayber is an important Port William member. That fact does not need to be established. For my snapshot about character in *Jayber Crow*, I focus on one of Jayber's friends, a person he likes and respects. As already noted, Jayber studies people. He is an astute observer of people. So, we want to know: With whom does he “pal around,” and why? Jayber does business with nearly all the men and many of the mothers in Port William—the young, the old, the productive and the so-called misfits, those he likes and those he lets us know he could

probably do without. Jayber gives the reader much information about what he appreciates, admires and respects, as well as what confuses, irritates, or dismays him. Of the Port William members with special ties to Jayber, I select his buddy Burley Coulter for further exploration of qualities of character. (For the definition of *character* in this study, see pp. 127-128.)

Burley, as we know, is well-known and well-liked in Port William. As already noted, he has always done things his way. And *Jayber Crow* testifies to a long friendship between the two. Indeed, meeting up with Burley when he returns to Port William and environs is one of the fortunate developments for Jayber. Burley takes Jayber “under his wing” as it were, quietly, simply, and steadily, standing by him over the long run, and without melodrama. It is one of the pleasures of the novel to see Jayber and Burley’s connection, even though there are not a lot of passages that describe this friendship directly. It is just there—understood and felt, part of the fabric of the novel, part of the life of Port William’s philosopher-barber. One episode, however, nicely describes their friendship.

As for advantages, they were there right from the start, and there were several of them.

One was, I felt at home. There is more to this than I can explain. I just *felt* at home. After I got to Port William, I didn’t feel any longer that I needed to look around to see if there was someplace I would like better. I quit wondering what I was going to make of myself. A lot of my doubts and questions were settled....

Burley Coulter was correct, for instance, about the goodness of having your dwelling place and your place of business right together. When I came down the stairs and into the shop I was “at work.” When I went back upstairs I was “at home.” This was handy in a lot of ways. (Berry, 2000a, p. 123)

Jayber elaborates the convenience of having work and residence in the same place. He says that not many people come to his upstairs quarters, but many come to the shop. Burley, however, does visit upstairs.

My occupancy of the ramshackle little building seemed to give him immense satisfaction, as if he had foreseen it all in a dream and was amazed that it had come to pass. He didn't harp on the subject, but if it came up he enjoyed talking about it. And he made occasions to review my situation and accomplishments.

One day he came in and walked all around the shop, looking at everything in it and out every window. He then sat down and rubbed his hands together. "Yessir," he said, "it's fine. You got your working and your living right here together."

And then the others took it up:

"Yessir, it's hard to tell whether he's working or living." (p. 124)

And then, Jayber offers his candid assessment of Burley.

Burley Coulter himself was one of the best perquisites of my office. Burley was nineteen years older than I was, old enough to have been my father, and in fact he was the same age my father would have been if he had lived. He was the most interesting man I ever knew. He was in his way an adventurer. And something worthy of notice was always going on in his head. I found him to be a surprising man, unpredictable, and at the same time always true to himself and recognizable in what he did. I had lived in Port William several years before I realized that Burley was proud of me for being a reader of books; he was not himself a devoted reader, but he thought it was excellent that I should be. It must have been 1940 or 1941 when he first came all the way into my upstairs room and saw my books in my little bookcase.

"Do you read in them?"

"Yes," I said.

He gave the shelves a long study, not reading the titles, apparently just assaying in his mind the number and weight of the books, their varying sizes and colors, the printing on their spines. And then he nodded his approval and said, "Well, that's all right."

I knew him for forty years, about, and saw him endure the times and suffer the changes, and we were always friends. (pp. 124-125)

In no small way does Burley Coulter deserve credit for Jayber Crow's feeling at home back in Port William. From the start of Jayber's return, Burley is there. He helps him find this workable employment-residence arrangement. And years later he loans Jayber his riverfront cottage. I find reading about Jayber and Burley's friendship

heartwarming. They have an authentic and resilient connection. As Jayber puts it, observing his sense of finally being at home, “There is more to this than I can explain” (Berry, 2000a, p. 123). There is something, then, about the community and these particular people, Jayber and Burley, and the fact that their families lived in this same place for several generations. And so there is recognition between Burley and Jayber when Jayber comes back from the city. And these elements work together, perhaps a bit mysteriously, to yield a healthy, long-lasting friendship. As Jayber implies, we probably cannot identify all the ingredients, but we can assert that character, place, and community come together in a particular ways and so yield valuable connections.

### **The Theme of Land and Place in *Jayber Crow***

I turn to a third snapshot of the life of Jayber Crow as an example of qualities of character, the theme of land and place in the novel. There are many references throughout *Jayber Crow* about life on the land, the work of farming, given that Port William is home to people living close to the land. Indeed, industry, government, and other kinds of “business” are at a minimum in the little town. As the town barber, Jayber Crow has a front-row seat on the talk of the town, its pulse and concerns. He bears witness to the transition of the times.

The farmers were getting older. The young people were leaving or, if they stayed, were not interested. Sheep require a lot of work and trouble. People were less willing to be up at night in the winter with lambing ewes. But also once a fabric is torn, it is apt to keep tearing. It was coming apart. The old integrity had been broken.

And the farmers, some of them at least, were worrying. They knew that farming was in decline, losing diversity, losing self-sufficiency, losing production capacity. A sort of communal self-confidence, which must always have existed, had begun to die away.

You could hear it in the talk. Elton Penn, say, would come in on a Saturday night for a haircut, and then another good farmer, Nathan Coulter maybe or Luther Swain, would come in, and then others. Prices and costs would be quoted, news exchanged, comments made, questions asked. It

would be a conversation that I could pretty well have written down word for word before it took place. They would talk quietly, humorously, anxiously about what was happening to them. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 276-277)

Jayber's witness, his testimony about the concerns of Port William farmers, who perhaps shared their worries more openly in his shop than elsewhere, becomes a sobering prophecy—or a eulogy on the passing of a way of life. Again we hear about a quality we have focused on before in these hard-working, devoted men who spend their lives working the land—there is an undeniable dignity about them and their work. Or as Jayber Crow describes it, “the old integrity.”

They were worrying about the fate of their life, what they had lived by and for, their work, their place. They ventured even to worry about the fate of eaters (who were not worried about the fate of farmers)....

Most of them kept on farming until they died. They kept on because they had no choice, or because that was what they had always done and was the way they knew themselves, or because they liked it. Or for all of those reasons. And as long as they farmed they worried about farming and what was to become of it. This worry was maybe the main theme of conversation in my shop for a long time. The older men and some of the younger ones returned to it as if dutifully. But it wasn't a duty. It was just a continuation of the pondering and the wondering and the fear and the great sorrow that had been in each of their minds as they went about their often lonely work. (Berry, 2000a, p. 277)

Jayber Crow makes important observations here. It seems that it took a Jayber Crow to articulate these insights. While the farmers themselves no doubt deeply sensed all these harsh realities—after all, they were *living* them—we might not expect Jack Beechum or Nathan Coulter or Andy Catlett, Athey Keith or Mat Feltner, to say these things this way. For whatever reasons, the farmers themselves did not generally make such bold assessments (though Beechum says clearly what he thinks of his son-in-law). Jayber, though, says outright what he sees and hears, what he believes. He probes for the causes and often finds them.

I don't think that such thoughts had ever been in the minds of farming people before. Before, no matter how hard they worked or how little they earned, farmers had always had at least the assurance that they were doing

the necessary work of the world, and that before them others (most likely their own parents and grandparents) had done the same work, while still others (most likely their own children and grandchildren) would do when they were gone. In this enduring lineage had been a kind of dignity, the dignity at least of knowing that the work you are doing must be done and that it does not begin and end with yourself. Now the conversation in my shop was burdened with the knowledge that their work might come to an end. A good many of them already knew to a certainty that they did not know who would be next to farm their farms, or if their farms would be farmed at all. All of them knew that neither farming nor the place would continue long as they were. *The dignity of continuity had been taken away.* Both past and future were disappearing from them, the past because nobody would remember it, the future because nobody could imagine it. *What they knew was passing from the world. Before long it would not be known* [emphasis added]. They were the last of their kind. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 277-278)

There is much in *Jayber Crow* about land, place, and home. I note that for Jayber, returning to the place of his origin, or very nearby, is a decision that resolves several dilemmas in his life. It clarifies for him his identity and ends the search he had struggled with, to go “somewhere else” and “become somebody.” These admonitions from his schooling and the surrounding culture are laid to rest when he takes up life in Port William, casting his lot with the community, seeing himself and the membership inextricably entwined. He feels “at home,” finally, in a way he had not for a long while. This is a valuable discovery in *Jayber Crow* about land and place.

The other significant phenomenon to observe is this transition going on for small communities and those farming. While these changes are observed and reflected upon in all of Berry’s work, there is a particular angle on these issues in *Jayber Crow* that I think is due to Jayber’s unique position as a community member, as a friend to farmers and one who studies the workings of the world about him. At the same time, he is not a farmer. He has a definite distance on the challenges that threaten the livelihoods of Beechum, Feltner, Keith, Coulter, and more. He raises vegetables, in town and later out by the river, and he hunts and fishes. But he never has to care for livestock, or worry about how the weather will impact a year’s earnings, or carry food, grain, or livestock to market to



discover the value of a year's work. He is spared all of this which, we remember, is extremely unpredictable. And so, perhaps Jayber sees this passing of a way of life that worries his customers and is a focus of conversation in the shop a bit more clearly, more perceptively than others, Port William residents and many of Berry's readers for that matter. In any case, Jayber gives a solemn and sad account of the changes in the Port Williams all over America. The novel documents the decline of land and place and the damage to local communities.

### **Philosophical Questions for the Port William Philosopher**

I round out my focus on Jayber Crow as a central Port William figure with qualities of character that support community membership with a look at his especial insights. The Port William barber has reflected on life's difficult issues with careful reasoning, astute observations, and the benefit of his inquiring mind for years when he offers his life story. I consider three promising questions: (1) What does Jayber Crow conclude to be behind these unwelcome changes in Port William—why is farming declining, and why are rural communities in America drying up? For this question I look at insights about *schools, organizations, and institutions* in the novel; (2) How does Jayber Crow's life and work in Port William lead to his broader understanding about life in this world? Does he make helpful discoveries about why we are here and what we are called to do? This question takes me to the *faith and philosophy* so abundant in the novel; and (3) What does Jayber Crow learn about himself that gives us hope and encouragement? How does he "square" his individual life as it were with a world beset by so much violence and destruction? Here again I consider *faith and philosophy*, as *Jayber Crow* explores many life issues.

(1) What does Jayber Crow conclude to be behind the numerous unwelcome changes in Port William—why is farming declining and rural communities in America drying up? For this question I examine insights about *schools, organizations, and institutions* in the novel.

It is not simple to identify the causes that lie behind the changes in Port William that Jayber sees, the seismic shifts in working the land that keep his farmer friends and customers worried. Yet it is possible to trace some causal connections in the conclusions Jayber develops. Especially striking is the contrast between old school farmers, such as Athey Keith, and some of the younger ones, Troy Chatham for example. The “new” way focuses on expansion at most any cost, great risk taking, the tolerance of large amounts of debt, and a kind of casting of fate to the winds, a willingness to plow over most anything, be it neighbor or pristine forest, in the insatiable desire to grow larger. We can say that greed is one of the big causes, manifested in disrespect or lack of appreciation for the healthy balance between input and output that traditional farming strove to implement.

Jayber sees organizations and institutions, including government and schools, as often part of the problem. While he is saddened by the closing of the Port William School and points out how this event is hurtful to the community, including its impact on local business, Jayber does not endorse educational institutions without reservation, or other highly structured, hierarchical arrangements. It is well to note that when he gets so low and filled with loneliness, just before deciding to withdraw from the university, Jayber comes to see all institutions as islands.

Along in the fall of 1936, after the weather got cold, about the time I finished figuring out that all the institutions I had known were islands, the whole weight of my unimagined, unlooked-for life came down on me, and I hit the bottom—or anyhow I hit what felt mighty like the bottom. For the first time, maybe, since my early days at The Good Shepherd, I felt just awfully lonesome. I felt sad beyond the thought or memory of happiness. (Berry, 2000a, p. 71)

Jayber goes on to say that when he is alone he returns to memories of his Aunt Cordie, who was so good to him after his parents passed away, “and I would cry” (p. 71). He says he felt this at times before, but he could usually stop the feelings. Now he cannot stop them.

He focuses on the places he has lived and what they offered, or failed to offer. This turning point for Jayber reveals what matters most to him and what fails to add up in his life. He recalls the small community where he was born and the memories he still has of the place.

The memories of my days at Squires Landing—which I had once been able to walk about in, in my mind—had shrunk and drawn away. That old life had come to be like a little painted picture at the bottom of a well, and the well was getting deeper. The picture that I had inside me was more real than anything outside, and yet it was getting ever smaller and farther away and harder to call back. That, I guess, is why I got so sad. I was living, but I was not living my life. So far as I could see, I was going nowhere. And now, more and more, I seemed also to have come from nowhere. Without a loved life to live, I was becoming more and more a theoretical person, as if I might have been a figment of institutional self-justification: a theoretical ignorant person from the sticks, who one day would go to a theoretical somewhere and make a theoretical something of himself—the implication being that until he became that something he would be nothing. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 72-73)

Jayber is reflecting on messages he has received from the society he lives in and schools he has attended. To become somebody, one must go “somewhere” other than where you are from—nearly always a place larger, and by implication more important. You become somebody, perhaps, if you pass through enough hoops erected by other, ostensibly more important, people who supposedly know better—what you should do and who you should be—than you or those close to you. And what does all of this mean, for Jayber? It means that prior to this lengthy, often costly, evolution he was “nothing.” Jayber remembers his aunt, and he knows she thought differently. She believed that they lived in a place of value, and that her young nephew was already a person of worth. And this conflicting picture between the beliefs of one who loved and cared for him and the messages of a powerful, displacing culture, including schools that exert great influence on those who walk through the door—all of this makes Jayber sad. Most of us have been troubled by such questions at one time or another.

On a more philosophical note, Jayber connects his loneliness with sadness, and sometimes with hate and darkness. He determines that love is probably the antidote, but love is not predictable. Sometimes it succeeds and puts out the darkness; at other times love fails. Hate and greed triumph. In time, Jayber declares himself a man of faith. He will say about his life story that it is “a book about heaven.” But he also admits, “It has been a close call” (Berry, 2000a, p. 354).

This is, as I said and believe, a book about Heaven, but I must say too that it has been a close call. For I have wondered sometimes if it would not finally turn out to be a book about Hell—where we fail to love one another, where we hate and destroy one another for reasons abundantly provided or for righteousness’ sake or for pleasure, where we destroy the things we need the most, where we see no hope and have no faith, where we are needy and alone, where things that ought to stay together fall apart, where there is such a groaning travail of selfishness in all its forms, where we love one another and die, where we must lose everything to know what we have had.

But the earth speaks to us of Heaven, or why would we want to go there? If we knew nothing of Hell, how would we delight in Heaven should we get there? (pp. 354-355)

Lest we think Jayber is greatly removed from the rest of the world, hopelessly isolated in a small farming community, we are assured that his awareness extends beyond Port William. How does the news affect him? He talks about “The War” and “The Economy.” They are powerful and negative forces. He says the news makes him “sick.” The war he refers to is the Vietnam War. Keeping my question in mind, how does Jayber account for the changes, the decline, he sees in Port William? I attend to his sobering reaction to the news.

In any moment when I was quiet, tenderness and madness would come upon me and contend to no purpose, to the making of no sense. I could hardly bear to read the newspaper, which filled me with disloyalty and unbelief. We were, as we said again, making war in order to make peace. We were destroying little towns in order to save them. We were killing children in order that children might sleep peacefully in their beds without fear. We were raping and plundering a foreign land (and our own) for the sake of “love of country.” We were carrying into the heavens this cruelty and emptiness of heart. I felt involved in an old sickness of the world. I was sick

with that sickness and could see no end. We had waded halfway across a bloody mire and could not get out except by wading halfway again either forward or back. (Berry, 2000a, p. 294)

I see Jayber's reactions to the news, to our country's role in the world at the time, as a stirring and passionate statement about American culture in post-modern times. Surely the seemingly golden era of the 1950s is gone, and when we pay closer attention we recognize it had not been "golden" for everyone.

This is a recurring theme in *Jayber Crow*—the changes in the town, the deaths of young men at war, the worry about their livelihood and the futures of their farms for the farmers. Someone makes these decisions—to go to war, to close a school, to consolidate farms, or to make the survival curve steeper for small family farmers, simply because it benefits other invested constituents. These trends and policies do not "just happen." And Jayber asks: Why, how, and how come? Where is the voice of "our better angels"? It renders him, "involved in an old sickness of the world" (Berry, 2000a, p. 294). And it all contributes to the decline of the community he loves.

(2) How does Jayber Crow's life and work in Port William lead to his broader understanding about life in this world? Does he make helpful discoveries about why we are here and what we are called to do? These questions draw me to the *faith and philosophy* in the novel.

As already noted, Jayber supplements his income from barbering by serving as custodian for the local church, cleaning and readying it every Friday for the Sunday service. He also accepts the role of grave digger. In rain or shine, whether he knows the deceased or not, Jayber shows up to do the tough physical labor of digging the grave. This is hard work, often made worse by weather complications. Jayber cultivates acquaintance with the cemetery as a result.

It was a strange thing to cut out the blocks of sod and then dig my way to the dark layer where the dead lie. I feel a little uneasy in calling them "the dead," for I am as mystified as anybody by the transformation known as death.... I understand that people's dead bodies are not exactly *them*, and yet

as I dug down to where they were, I would be mindful of them, and respectful, and would feel a curious affection for them all. They all had belonged here once, and they were so much more numerous than the living. I thought and thought about them. It was endlessly moving to me to walk among the stones, reading the names of people I had known in my childhood, the names of people I was kin to but had never known, and (pretty soon) the names of people I knew and cared about and had buried myself. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 157-158)

The details of the work Jayber does in the cemetery, good work, usually done alone and often difficult—are details he gathers up and forms into reflections or statements of faith.

Some of the older stones you could no longer read because of weathering and the growth of moss. It was a place of finality and order. The people there had lived their little passage of time in this world, had become what they became, and now could be changed only by forgiveness and mercy. The misled, the disappointed, the sinners of all the sins, the hopeful, the faithful, the loving, the doubtful, the desperate, the grieved and the comforted, the young and the old, the bad and the good—all, sufferers unto death, had lain down there together. Some were there who had served the community better by dying than by living. Why I should have felt tender toward them all was not clear to me, but I did. (p. 158)

Through his experience in Port William, his work in the barbershop, his friendships, and his part-time work at the church, including the duties at the cemetery, Jayber comes to wrestle with the big questions of life: How did we get here in the first place? What are our obligations in this world? What happens after this life? He sees life on Earth as temporal, and the answers to these questions do not come easily. But he sees other truths as well. He sees that in spite of our differences, we have more in common than we realize. Life is a mystery. And much of it is good. But especially important—he sees that we are in this together. And the togetherness can be made better if we acknowledge that each of us struggles, and all make mistakes. Redemption can occur when we open our hearts—when we allow for the change that can come “only by forgiveness and mercy.” Jayber thinks about the lives he encounters at the cemetery. He wonders why he “felt tender toward them all...but [he] did” (p. 158). It is a profound reckoning we are offered here. Life is often hard; we are joined one to another; and we can neither control nor know what our futures hold. But we can be made whole, more

healthy—by choosing mercy and forgiveness—for ourselves and each other. Sometimes I wonder that they did not ask Jayber to preach as well at that little church, at least now and then. In any case, I believe Berry uses the narrative to remind us of the miracle of life, to urge us to pay close attention, to look with care, and to choose with wisdom, compassion, and understanding our thoughts and actions.

Jayber is deeply touched by reflecting on life and death as Port William’s cemetery custodian. His conclusions are profoundly stated. Powerful feelings are stirred in Jayber as a result of this work, bringing him so close to both human strength and frailty.

There were a lot of graves of little children—most of them from the last century or before—who had died of smallpox, cholera, typhoid fever, diphtheria, or one of the other plagues. You didn’t have to know the stories; just the dates and the size of the stones told the heartbreak. But all those who were there, if they had lived past childhood, had twice in this world, first and last, been as helpless as a little child. And you couldn’t forget that all the people in Port William, if they lived long, would come there burdened and leave empty-handed many times, and would finally come and stay empty-handed. Seeing them come and go, and come and stay, I began to be moved by a compassion that seemed to come to me from outside. I never said to myself that it was happening. It just came to me, or I came to it. As I buried the dead and walked among them, I wanted to make my heart as big as Heaven to include them all and love them and not be distracted. I couldn’t do it, of course, but I wanted to. (Berry, 2000a, p. 158)

Perhaps no other passage in *Jayber Crow* shows more clearly the quality of his character, the bigness of his heart, the depth of his perceptions. He is not without faults. But he pays attention and does what he can. He takes on the least popular job in the community and uses it to enlarge his understanding, to broaden his capacity for care. From Jayber’s perspective we are here because of a power beyond us, and we are called to respect, care for, and nurture all of creation.

(3) What does Jayber Crow learn about himself that gives us hope and encouragement? How does he “square” his individual life as it were with a world beset by so much violence and destruction? Again I turn to the *faith and philosophy* that comes through in *Jayber Crow*, as so many issues about life are explored in the novel.

Jayber Crow's contribution as an exemplary character in Port William is highlighted in those passages where he reflects on life and its meaning. Near the end of the novel, he looks back over many years and much experience and draws fundamental conclusions.

I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life, when poured out at the end, would say, "Good-good-good-good-good!" like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am a man of losses, regrets, and griefs. I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith. (Berry, 2000a, p. 356)

In the end, Jayber Crow opts for heaven. The scales finally tip toward joy, love, light, hope, and redemption. It is not a preachy conclusion. He does not proselytize or try to win his reader to his particular view. He offers himself and his candid lessons from the life he chose, ultimately, and made the best of.

He says a little more about this faith he salvages by the thinnest thread. He describes how he wonders frequently about a hypothetical person, "the Man in the Well." This man lives in a city, but has taken off one Saturday for a hunting excursion in the country. The Man in the Well is frustrated; he works at a non-satisfying job and carries assorted burdens. But the hunting trip promises some hours of escape. He is alone; no one knows where he is, and no one can bother him. But he has a dreadful accident. He stumbles into one of the countryside's well-concealed wells and tumbles far down, eventually hitting the water. Jayber ponders how this story can end. Does the man manage to yell loudly enough, and fortunately someone happens by? Does he kick off his boots and somehow muster the strength to climb out, inching his way up the rock-enclosed passage? Does he give up and drown? Or perhaps he prays? What happens? It is a haunting question. And Jayber has given this frightening, imagined scenario his earnest attention. He does not lay out the steps he navigates, but he reaches a conclusion.

Listen. There is a light that includes our darkness, a day that shines down even on the clouds. A man of faith believes that the Man in the Well is not lost. He does not believe this easily or without pain, but he believes it. His belief is a kind of knowledge beyond any way of knowing. He believes



that the child in the womb is not lost, nor is the man whose work has come to nothing, nor is the old woman forsaken in a nursing home in California. He believes that those who make their bed in Hell are not lost, or those who dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, or the lame man at Bethesda Pool, or Lazarus in the grave, or those who pray, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.*"

Have mercy. (Berry, 2000a, p. 357)

*Jayber Crow* is an engaging novel. In a humble and perhaps unrecognized way, he serves as his community's true pastor. His shop is not just a place where boys and men get haircuts. It is a gathering place, a community center. Jayber is generous with his time, his place, and his presence. He leaves us with much to think about. Complex and simple, thoughtful and kind, and deep and joyful, Jayber enjoys good laughs, healthy friendships, and living and working in the place of his origin. He values time alone and collects and reads good books. In a bittersweet move, he gives his heart to a woman not free to reciprocate and lives with that reality with grace and dignity. *Jayber Crow* leaves us with a moving philosophy to embrace—"a kind of knowledge beyond any way of knowing" (Berry, 2000a, p. 357).

## Chapter V

### HOW WENDELL BERRY VIEWS EDUCATION

I have explored three themes in Wendell Berry's fiction: (1) Land and Place; (2) Community; and (3) Character. These themes are significant for my inquiry about Berry's educational philosophy. Berry, however, has not confined his writing to fiction. His nonfiction includes valuable observations and assessments about contemporary American education, and supplementing the nonfiction are multiple provocative interviews.

Berry's thoughts and statements about education, about how we attempt to prepare young people for adulthood, can be organized around four benchmarks. The first, **Berry's reflections on his own experience in education**, draws from Berry's recollections as a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and his chapter in *Writers as Teachers, Teachers as Writers*.

In the second organizing unit, I examine **Berry's observations of trends and practices in education**, paying especial attention to his detailed analysis of America's land-grant colleges in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

The third section identifies **Berry's major concerns about education** as they emerge throughout his work. What is his argument about specialization, which includes the division of academic disciplines? Why is he concerned about the focus on students' preparation for jobs and careers? Additional concerns include our failure to teach the

difference between information and knowledge, the myth that all learning should be easy and entertaining, and the correlation between education and the decline of valued places.

In the fourth section, I consider **Berry's proposal for the standard of education**. Berry questions our focus on the future with so little recognition of the past. He identifies the major purpose of education and claims that we should reform the standard for education.

### **Berry's Reflections on His Own Experience in Education**

A useful starting point for my inquiry into Berry's observations about American education is his chapter entitled "Some Thoughts I Have in Mind When I Teach" in a 1970 anthology. Here Berry reflects on his teaching of writing at the college level. Since writing is, arguably, more of a skill one may develop rather than a body of knowledge one masters and becomes conversant about, there are some limitations as to how much we can generalize from these reflections to his views about education in general. Whether or not writing can be taught is an open question, for instance. Nevertheless, Berry's reflections about his own teaching hold clues about his more broad-based philosophy of education.

Berry (1970) begins "Some Thoughts I Have in Mind When I Teach" by identifying the major difference he sees between students and teachers. Most students, because they are frequently younger than their teachers, bring to the classroom a "sense of possibility" (p. 15) that is usually greater than that of their teachers. The student has more of a future to anticipate. Students look toward open-ended futures with multiple options. The teacher, on the other hand, brings experience to the exchange. He or she has learned things it is safe to assume most of the students have not. Berry writes, "As I see it, the confrontation between teacher and student is essentially a confrontation between experience and possibility" (p. 16). While observing this difference between students and

teachers, Berry nevertheless envisions a level playing field in the classroom. And this level playing field includes respect on the part of teachers for the complexity of their role in relationship to students.

It is exciting and often deeply moving to work and think and speak in the atmosphere of possibility that surrounds students. But in this there is also an irreducible bewilderment, for though one presumably has some measure of control over facts, and even over one's own possibilities, I think that one must be extremely hesitant and uneasy in dealing with possibilities that belong to other people. I would rather enlarge a student's sense of possibility than "direct" it. (p. 16)

Berry's (1970) thoughts about how teachers can best work with the "sense of possibility" in their students is qualified by his recognition of "the moral predicament of a teacher" (p. 16).

Experience speaking to possibility has also the obligation to pass on some sense of what may be expected, a sense of the practicable, and at the same time to avoid condescension and discouragement. This is what I think of as the moral predicament of a teacher, and as it can have only particular solutions in the lives of particular students it remains a predicament, always as liable to failure as to success. (p. 16)

Berry (1970) discusses "the administrative machinery" (p. 17) he observes in the university. The typical university administration is so constructed and "programmed" that it becomes an obstacle to the teacher who is focused on enhancing students' sense of possibility. Berry talks about the "useless work and waste paper" which university administrations have made it their "major business" to produce (p. 17). And he observes the inflated pressure on students to succeed. The mismatch between university administrations and the goals of teaching and learning the university is in place to facilitate is striking, according to Berry.

And so I have come to look upon the university as a machine that one must to a considerable extent work against in order to work within. The machine seeks an outcome that is altogether predictable: the student is to "learn" certain designated facts and procedures; the syllabus and the tests may all be written in advance.

But the teacher of writing is not concerned to transform the student into a finished product. He is concerned with possibility.... This intent to encourage and foster the unexpected, then, immediately sets the teacher of writing at odds with the machine. (p. 18)

It does not require a leap of imagination to believe that teachers in other disciplines experience similar struggles between their goals as teachers and the expectations and requirements set forth by many education administrations.

Berry (1970) says that his “primary interest is not in raising the average, but in fostering excellence. If the exceptional are brought to excellence, then the average will have models” (p. 18). He describes various student-teacher relationships and says that the best student-teacher relationship becomes a friendship. “The student comes to know the teacher, which in my opinion is a thousand times better than knowing what the teacher knows” (p. 18). Somewhat surprisingly, Berry claims that the next best student-teacher relationship entails enmity. He learned from teachers he disliked and believes that “an enemy may do one the valuable service of exemplifying what one does not want to be” (p. 18). A student who dislikes a teacher monitors him or her closely for evidence to “justify his low opinion” (p. 19). Berry admits, “This can be a strenuous and exacting mental exercise, useful to both parties” (p. 19).

Berry (1970) believes the worst student-teacher relationship occurs when a student simply wishes to be told what to do. This, he says, “reduce[s] teaching to a dutiful servitude, deadening and exhausting to the teacher because they [the students] do not respond; they absorb everything and give nothing back” (p. 19). Sadly, he believes that this type of student is often considered ideal by “the education machine” (p. 24) and by corporate America. Nothing pleases like one who is willingly “pigeonhole[d],” taking his or her rightful ““place in society”” (p. 24).

Berry (1970) steps back from his observations about the typical university administration to focus again on his objective as a teacher. He identifies a basic, underlying assumption.

My aim as a teacher, as I have said, is to angle at large in the realm of the possible, to be always responsive to *what might be*. There is little chance of system in this, if by system you mean an ordered progression, laid out in advance. If it goes as I think it should, there is no knowing what will happen next. It is when my students begin to go beyond what I expect, surprising and informing me, that I think the work is succeeding.

I base nearly everything I attempt on one assumption: that every person's experience is in some way different from anybody else's. Hence, everybody has something to tell me that I would be interested to know. The student's task is to find out what it is and to write it well. (p. 19)

Berry (1970) cites teaching strategies he attempts to implement in his writing classes.

1. He "encourage[s] the students to read" and expresses surprise that so many think they can write *without* reading. He sees the absurdity of this and claims, "I believe that we need more than ever to look on literacy, the knowledge of books, not as a polite accomplishment or social ornament, but as a moral necessity, a form of moral self-defense" (p. 20).
2. He "read[s] aloud in the class everything that is written by the students," with few exceptions. He believes this enhances critical listening. He invites student comments, sharing his own last. He hopes someone will disagree with him, thus leading to a fruitful exchange. And he admits, "I am made uncomfortable by the authority that many of my students insist on conceding to me" (p. 21).
3. He "encourage[s] perceptiveness and accuracy" (p. 21). He aspires "to get them to looking at things" (p. 22) and speaks of how writing is "an act of discovery" (p. 22) rather than a simple recording of something already in one's mind. Berry describes his teaching praxis with thoughtful statements: "To me the aim of literacy is to have a language capable of telling the truth and of responding freshly to experience" (p. 21).
4. He works to cultivate "a perceptiveness which depends on ... accuracy in the observation of detail," and that moves the process to another level, which

includes discerning “the sense of form” (p. 22). “Good writing and good thinking,” Berry claims, are related to “perceptiveness,” or the task of “the discovery of relationships within experience and with the discovery of the way consciousness moves into and among these relationships” (p. 22).

5. Berry insists on competence in the basics of writing: spelling, diction, punctuation, and syntax. He says, “The teacher should do everything possible to encourage, and even enforce, careful use of the materials of writing: the words and the sentences” (p. 22).

The complexity of teaching writing is captured in Berry’s (1970) statements about his own teaching:

Language is both the instrument of the discovery of form and form’s graph and embodiment. Form cannot be predicted, but only made, and so it is impossible to tell how to make it. In teaching, one is limited to showing examples and to pointing out failures. In a given piece of work it is possible to say whether or not there is a coherent form and whether or not the form is of any interest or value. It is possible to say what is arbitrary or irrelevant. But it is impossible to say what *ought to be* the form of work that is formless. (p. 22)

In the last section of this chapter, Berry (1970) revisits the question of whether writing can be taught. He claims that the five things he tries to do in writing classes can be exemplified and learned, but he is much less convinced that they can be taught. He identifies the essence of good writing, as he sees it.

What gets my interest is the sense that a writer is speaking honestly and fully of what he knows well, and it is stupid to think that he could have received this power from a book or a teacher. It is a power that he has made in his life by the practice of his art and attentiveness to his experience. No good book was ever written according to a recipe. Every good book is to a considerable extent a unique discovery. (p. 23)

Berry (1970) concludes his reflections about his own teaching by stepping back once more from the more practical elements and finer points of teaching to surveying the broad vista. He talks about “the great function” of the teacher. “His great function, or

opportunity or obligation, is to manage somehow to address himself openly and generously and invitingly to the unknown—the *possible* that presents itself to him in the minds and lives of his students” (p. 24).

Berry (1970) contrasts “the most meaningful calling” with “a mere mechanic of facts and procedures” (p. 24).

I believe that the most meaningful calling, for both teacher and student, is not the making of a product—not even a great book—that will be worthy of the attention and interest of other people, but the making of a life that will be worthy of *one’s own* attention and interest. The highest creativity, as always, is to come to a sense of the amplitude of life and the largeness of possibility. (p. 24)

These noble and enlivening ends differ dramatically, in Berry’s view, from the typical agenda of many higher education institutions.

In our own time the most necessary and useful act of creation will not be to produce a great work of art, but to imagine and implement a meaningful alternative to the pigeonhole—the narrowly specialized and all too well prepared “place in society”—that the education machine offers as a goal, but which is really a dead end and a death. (p. 24)

In closing, Berry (1970) recaps the way the teaching of writing defies programming.

I think there is a good chance that the best result of a writer’s teaching may be wholly inadvertent. His greatest service to his students may not be anything he *intends* to do for them, but in his chance revelations of himself... He brings a mind somewhat formed and prepared by what he has experienced and written into the presence of minds less formed and prepared. (p. 24)

He compares this “formed and prepared” mind to an artifact which, in the process of teaching, may enliven the minds of students and enhance their sense of possibility.

Berry’s (1970) reflections on his own teaching, especially the ways in which he strives to encourage his students, offer a thoughtful and perceptive outlook on education. He recognizes the possibilities of good teaching, even as he acknowledges the differences between what students and teachers bring to the process. He also identifies formidable



limitations—those inherent in the process as well as those often created by education administrations. And he balances a hopeful attitude about the possibilities of effective teaching and learning with an attitude of humility. A sense of balance characterizes Berry's account.

Berry points further toward his philosophy of education, reflecting on his own practice, in a 2006 interview. At one point the discussion focuses on raising children and the challenge of preparing the young for “living in an unpredictable world” (Dalton, 2007, p. 196). Berry and the interviewer consider what is owed to society's young people. And Berry brings up the fact that his two youngest grandchildren spend a morning a week with him. It is not “school” as such. It is not set up that way, but they spend time together and they all work. He cites examples of their exchanges. Maybe one asks how to spell a word or for a definition. Or Berry notices a particular bird and points it out to the children. He believes this time together creates the opportunity for “teaching situations” (Dalton, 2007, p. 196). Berry appears understated about this, yet he does not hesitate to call it educational.

I can't say that I'm teaching a great deal, but the situation is relaxed to some extent, and it's structured at least to the extent that they feel obliged, since I'm at work, to be at work. What will come of it, I'm not sure. Eventually I'll assign them a book to read, and we'll talk about it. I did that with [granddaughters] Katie and Virginia. We'd talk about *King Lear* and at the end of our conversation they'd get up and give me a kiss and say, “Goodbye, Granddaddy,” and be off. (p. 196)

Berry says that he had this type of education himself as a young boy. He thinks he “learned a lot” from these unplanned interactions when children and adults work together at something: “wonderful stories, wonderful talk, wonderful English. I was being taught but as a rule nobody was trying to teach me” (Dalton, 2007, p. 197). Berry believes that formal education is not paying enough attention to the kinds of learning that can take place when young people and adults work together and share a livelihood in the same place.

And I think that what the education industry has not thought of is the kind of education that simply takes advantage of opportunities in the shared life. For that, there has to be a shared life; parents and children and neighbors have to be sharing their life, and then beautiful times occur in the midst of work.... We need to pay attention to those things, for they can be profoundly instructive as well as profoundly pleasurable. (pp. 197-198)

Before concluding Berry's reflections on his experience in education, I note his observations about being a student, specifically a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Berry was chosen in 1958 to be a Stegner Fellow; he reflects on this experience in his 1985 essay, "Wallace Stegner and the Great Community" (Berry, 1990).<sup>1</sup> Working with other would-be writers and the well-known author, Berry completed his first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, while at Stanford. In the essay, written years later, he identifies qualities of good teaching exemplified by Stegner. These include:

1. An attractive *appearance*: Berry says Stegner was tall and handsome and dressed well. He interpreted Stegner's effort in regard to appearance as a statement of respect for self, others, and the work at hand (Berry, 1990, pp. 49-50).
2. *Modeling* for students what it meant to be at work: Stegner was himself at work on his own writing which he sometimes shared with the class, inviting their comments. The picture of Stegner as a writer at work, apparently, stayed with his students.

We felt in him, rather, the authority of authentic membership in the great community, of one who had thought and worked in solitude, in quiet, in the company of the past—an authority that would be destroyed in being asserted.

It was this implicit authority in him that most impressed me during my time at Stanford. That and an expectation implicit in his dealings

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Paul Theobald and Dale Snauwaert (1990) for their identification of Berry's essays particularly focused on education: "'Wallace Stegner and the Great Community' in *What Are People For?*, 'The Loss of the University' in *Home Economics*, and 'Discipline and Hope' in *A Continuous Harmony*" (pp. 21-22).

with me, that perhaps was not conscious with him, but which I felt keenly. (p. 51)

3. Stegner also *expected his students to be at work*. This was a lesson about the nature of work that was long-lasting for Berry. He describes a writing block he encountered during the fellowship and how Stegner responded.

And I remember both my embarrassment, for I felt that Mr. Stegner expected me to be at work, and how paltry, in light of his expectation, my excuses appeared in my own eyes. That was, maybe, my definitive encounter with the hardest truth that a writer—or any other worker—can learn: that, to all practical purposes, excuses are not available. (p. 52)

4. An attitude of *openness* in class discussions: Students were encouraged to make their contributions, and they were listened to by the other class participants and Stegner. From Berry's description, it seems that learning took place as a result of work, modeling, respect, and a degree of gentleness—not prodding, pushing, or punishing.
5. Stegner exemplified a notable *humility* in his work with the students. He did not take an authoritarian role, implying his own superiority or elevated intellectual status. And yet, because of his own work and his expectation of work by the fellows, Stegner had “this implicit authority” (p. 51) which Berry recalls so many years later—an authority that was anything but authoritarian.

He did not pontificate or indoctrinate or evangelize. We were not expected to become Stegnerians. None of us could have doubted that he wanted us to know and think and write as well as we possibly could. But no specific recipe or best way was recommended. The emphasis was on workmanship. What we were asked to be concerned with was the job of work at hand, what one or another of us had done or attempted to do. (p. 52)

6. Stegner did not offer his students false assurance about their chances of success in the publishing world. Nor did he take credit for their success, either as their mentor or subsequently (p. 53). Berry writes about the “*courtesy*” Stegner exemplified.

And so what I began by calling reticence... finally declares itself as courtesy toward both past and future: courtesy toward the art of writing, which needs to be carefully learned and generously passed on; and courtesy toward us, who as young writers needed all the help we could get, but needed also to be left to our own ways. (pp. 52-53)

7. Berry cites a number of reasons for his respect for Stegner as a gifted and productive “*regional writer*.” He says, “It was not until I began the struggle to live and write in my region that I began to be aware of Wallace Stegner as a writer struggling to live and write in *his* region” (p. 55). Berry talks about re-reading Stegner and noticing new things. “One sees him becoming a new kind of writer: one who not only writes about his region but also does his best to protect it, by writing and in other ways, from its would-be exploiters and destroyers” (p. 55).

This little essay, written nearly three decades later, says much about Berry’s philosophy of education by lifting up qualities in the teaching of another whom he liked and respected, one considered exemplary on multiple levels. It is based on Berry’s direct experience of this teacher’s particular approach, having been a Wallace Stegner Fellow, and it points toward Berry’s own emerging philosophy.

### **Berry Observes Trends and Practices in American Education**

I turn now to Berry’s (1986a) observations of trends and practices within American educational institutions. Some of Berry’s most passionate critique of American education is found in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. Chapter eight, “Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust,” focuses on what came to be known as the land-grant college complex. While Berry’s focus here is on a specific arena of American education, I believe his most salient observations can be generalized to other education settings and disciplines. I also believe that this critique, authored in the 1970s, is central

to a study of Berry and American education. I therefore provide a detailed exploration of his major arguments.

Berry (1986a) begins his assessment of the land-grant-college complex by paying attention to Thomas Jefferson's conviction that there is a close connection between three components: (1) people working the land, (2) education, and (3) democratic liberty (p. 143). Jefferson believed in a kind of innate goodness in America's farmers. He believed they had knowledge, a lifestyle, and an approach to work that yielded stability, virtue, and independent living. Jefferson recognized this coherence in people near the earth as an asset, perhaps somewhat unique to the new country, as compared with societies he knew outside the United States. Berry writes,

In the mind of Thomas Jefferson, farming, education and democratic liberty were indissolubly linked. The great conviction of his life, which he staked his life upon and celebrated in a final letter two weeks before his death, was "that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." But if liberty was in that sense a right, it was nevertheless also a privilege to be earned, deserved, and strenuously kept; to keep themselves free, he thought, a people must be stable, economically independent, and virtuous. He believed...that these qualities were most dependably found in the farming people: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." (p. 143)

In addition, Jefferson believed that education was the vehicle best suited for enhancing both citizenship skills in the general populace and leadership ability in the more gifted. Jefferson's focus differentiated manufacturing from farming, and he viewed the former with reservation. Berry (1986a) quotes Jefferson, "I consider the class of artificers as the panders of vice, and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned" (p. 144). Berry elaborates further to help us understand Jefferson's concern.

By "artificers" he meant manufacturers, and he made no distinction between "management" and "labor." The last-quoted sentence ["I consider

the class of artificers....”] is followed by no explanation, but its juxtaposition with the one first quoted [“Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens.”] suggests that he held manufacturers in suspicion because their values were already becoming abstract, enabling them to be “socially mobile” and therefore subject pre-eminently to the motives of self-interest. (p. 144)

These convictions in Jefferson, Berry (1986a) points out, were advanced against the backdrop of agriculture’s fluctuations and challenges. Jefferson was aware of the obstacles farming communities faced. And he championed the best public education possible for the new country’s citizens. Jefferson perceived the preservation of a democracy to be dependent upon an informed and vigilant citizenry.

Berry (1986a) outlines the rolling out of the land-grant college legislation from 1862, thirty-six years following Jefferson’s death, to 1914. The first law, the Morrill Act, established the land-grant colleges. Berry quotes the original purpose of these institutions: “To teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts [...] in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (pp. 144-145).

The Hatch Act, passed in 1887, established the agricultural experiment stations. The purpose of the agricultural experiment stations was to promote “a sound and prosperous agriculture and rural life as indispensable to the maintenance of maximum employment and national prosperity and security” (Berry, 1986a, p. 145). Berry observes additional goals of the Hatch Act. “It is also the intent of Congress to assure agriculture a position in research *equal to that of industry*, which will aid in maintaining an equitable balance between agriculture and other segments of the economy” (p. 145). He notes as well how the law emphasized “the development and improvement of the rural home and rural life” (p. 145).

Rounding out the land-grant college complex legislation is the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 which established the cooperative extension service. The purpose of the cooperative extension service was, “to aid in diffusing among the people [...] useful and practical

information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics” (Berry, 1986a, p. 145). These three laws, according to Berry, reflect the vision and goals of Justin Smith Morrill, who represented Vermont in the House of Representatives and later in the Senate. Morrill had interests and concerns similar to Thomas Jefferson’s. Both men saw the vulnerability of agriculture and rural life in the new world. Both believed in the value of education to address these and other challenges the country faced. Morrill differed from Jefferson, however, in several ways. His emphasis was more practical and utilitarian. In addition, Morrill viewed those in industry more favorably than did Jefferson.

Berry (1986a) says the most significant difference between Jefferson and Morrill was “the apparent absence from Morrill’s mind of Jefferson’s complex sense of the dependence of democratic citizenship upon education” (p. 146). He explores this difference in some detail.

For Jefferson, the ideals and aims of education appear to have been defined directly by the requirements of political liberty. He envisioned a local system of education with a double purpose: to foster in the general population the critical alertness necessary to good citizenship and to seek out and prepare a “natural aristocracy” of “virtue and talents” for the duties and trusts of leadership. His plan of education for Virginia did not include any form of specialized or vocational training. He apparently assumed that if communities could be stabilized and preserved by the virtues of citizenship and leadership, then the “practical arts” would be improved as a matter of course by local example, reading, etc. Morrill, on the other hand, looked at education from a strictly practical or utilitarian viewpoint. He believed that the primary aims of education were to correct the work of farmers and mechanics and “exalt their usefulness.”...

Whereas Jefferson regarded farmers as “the most valuable citizens,” Morrill looked upon the professions as “places of higher consideration.” (pp. 146-147)

Berry (1986a) says that despite important differences between Jefferson and Morrill, their common ground constitutes the basis of our land-grant colleges.

The apparent intention in regard to agriculture remains the same from Jefferson to Morrill to the land-grant college acts. That intention was to

promote the stabilization of farming populations and communities and to establish in that way a “permanent” agriculture, enabled by better education to preserve both the land and the people. (p. 147)

Berry (1986a) sees the visions and the proposals of Jefferson and Morrill generally reflected in our land-grant college legislation. He gives, however, a scathing review of the performance of America’s land-grant college complex. He attributes their overwhelming failure, to be true to their original purposes, in part to the differences between the two men. It is important that we have a full understanding of Berry’s criticism of America’s land-grant college system. Berry writes,

The failure of this intention, and the promotion by the land-grant colleges of an *impermanent* agriculture destructive of land and people, was caused in part by the lowering of the educational standard from Jefferson’s ideal of public or community responsibility to the utilitarianism of Morrill, insofar as this difference in the aims of the two men represented a shift of public value. The land-grant colleges have, in fact, been very little—and have been less and less—concerned “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes” or of any other classes. Their history has been largely that of the whittling down of this aim—from education in the broad, “liberal” sense to “practical” preparation for earning a living to various “programs” for certification. They first reduced “liberal and practical” to “practical,” and then for “practical” they substituted “specialized.” And the standard for their purpose has shifted from usefulness to careerism. And if this has not been caused by, it has certainly accompanied a degeneration of faculty standards, by which professors and teachers of disciplines become first upholders of “professional standards” and then careerists in pursuit of power, money, and prestige.

The land-grant college legislation obviously calls for a system of local institutions responding to local needs and local problems. What we have instead is a system of institutions which more and more resemble one another, like airports and motels, made increasingly uniform by the transience or rootlessness of their career-oriented faculties and the consequent inability to respond to local conditions. (p. 147)

Berry (1986a) says, “The careerist professor is by definition a specialist professor” (p. 148). He bemoans the careerist professors’ dependence upon the institutions in which they teach. “Utterly dependent upon his institution, he blunts his critical intelligence and blurs his language so as to exist ‘harmoniously’ within it...deferring ‘realistically’ to the redundant procedures and meaningless demands of an inflated administrative



bureaucracy” (p. 148). As a result, “The tendency is to make a commodity of education: to package it attractively, reduce requirements, reduce homework, inflate grades, lower standards, and deal expensively in ‘public relations’” (p. 148). The true meaning of education is lost in the shuffle. Berry sees the legacy of the land-grant colleges as “a betrayal of trust” (p. 154).

As self-interest, laziness, and lack of conviction augment the general confusion about what an education is or ought to be, and as standards of excellence are replaced by sliding scales of adequacy, these schools begin to depend upon, and so to institutionalize, the local problems that they were founded to solve....

The impression is unavoidable that the academic specialists of agriculture tend to validate their work experimentally rather than practically, that they would rather be professionally reputable than locally effective, and that they pay little attention, if any, to the social, cultural, and political consequences of their work.... There is nothing more characteristic of modern agricultural research than its divorcement from the sense of consequence and from all issues of value. (p. 148)

Berry’s (1986a) disappointment in America’s land-grant educational experiment is impossible to miss. He points to underlying contributors. One is “the academic ideal of ‘objectivity’” (p. 148). He says, “One who is ‘objective’ never takes a stand” (p. 149). Another contributor is what he calls the “strange doctrine of the ‘inevitability’ of undisciplined technological growth and change” (pp. 148-149). He paints a sobering picture.

Education is relieved of its concern for truth in order to prepare students to live in “a changing world.” As soon as educational standards begin to be dictated by “a changing world” (changing, of course, to a tune called by the governmental-military-academic-industrial complex), then one is justified in teaching virtually anything in any way—for, after all, one never knows for sure what “a changing world” is going to become. The way is thus opened to run a university as a business, the main purpose of which is to sell diplomas—after a complicated but undemanding four-year ritual—and thereby give employment to professors. (p. 149)

Berry (1986a) calls attention to the term “agribusiness” and notes how in the 1950s agriculture policy-makers “were advocating ‘corporate control to “rationalize” agriculture

production” (p. 152). He believes references to “agribusiness,” a term coined by John Davis serving as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in the 1950s, reflect a failure to distinguish agriculture and industry (p. 149). Berry also criticizes the application of economic measures to agricultural health and productivity, an inherently complex process that cannot be assessed adequately by simple, quantitative indices. As Berry observes, “The farm must provide, not a living, but a profit” (pp. 151-152). The attitudes and policies that launched the agribusiness movement contributed to the failure of the institutions created by the land-grant college legislation. Berry identifies this outcome when he discusses the term “agribusiness.”

That the land-grant college complex has fulfilled its obligation ”to assure agriculture a position in research equal to that of industry” simply by failing to distinguish between the two is acknowledged in the term “agribusiness.” The word does not denote any real identity either of function or interest, but only an expedient confusion by which the interests of industry have subjugated those of agriculture. This confusion of agriculture with industry has utterly perverted the intent of the land-grant college acts. (p. 149)

Berry (1986a) does not rely solely on his own experience and opinions in assessing the record of the land-grant colleges. He cites the Agribusiness Accountability Project, quoting Jim Hightower and Susan DeMarco on the results of this extensive research.

“Who is helped and who is hurt by this research?”

“It is the largest-scale growers, the farm machinery and chemicals input companies and the processors who are the primary beneficiaries. Machinery companies such as John Deere, International Harvester, Massey-Ferguson, Allis-Chalmer and J. I. Case almost continually engage in cooperative research efforts at land grant colleges. These corporations contribute money and some of their own research personnel to help land grant scientists develop machinery. In return, they are able to incorporate technological advances in their own products. In some cases they actually receive exclusive licences to manufacture and sell the products of tax-paid research.” (p. 149)

Berry (1986a) notes additional statements in the accountability report with further astonishment.

“Farmworkers have not been compensated for jobs lost to mechanized research. They were not consulted when that work was designed, and their needs were not a part of the research that resulted. They simply were left to fend on their own—no re-training, no unemployment compensation, no research to help them adjust to the changes that came out of the land grant colleges.

“Independent family farmers also have been largely ignored by the land grant colleges. Mechanization research by land grant colleges is either irrelevant or only incidentally adaptable to the needs of 87 to 99 percent of America’s farmers.” (p. 150)

The report also found evidence of “academic featherbedding.” Berry (1986a) defines the term and gives an example.

The task force also raised the issue of academic featherbedding—irrelevant or frivolous research or instruction carried on by colleges of agriculture, experiment stations, and extension services. Evidently, people in many states may expect to be “served” by such studies as one at Cornell that discovered that “employed homemakers have less time for housekeeping tasks than non-employed homemakers.” (p. 150)

Berry (1986a) traces such hypothetical “‘agricultural’ service” to Section 347a, a 1955 amendment to the Smith-Lever Act. As Berry describes it, Section 347a was prompted by a “‘charge’” in 1913 by Representative Lever to the Extension Service, “‘to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education and better citizenship’” (p. 151). As this law was interpreted and implemented, it opened the door for assessing rural farm communities and measuring size, productivity, and profitability of farms. Thus economic criteria came to be applied to agricultural problems, something Berry finds especially unacceptable.

Profitability may be a standard of a sort, but a most relative sort and by no means sufficient. It leaves out of consideration, for instance, the possibility that a family might farm a small acreage, take excellent care of it, make a decent, honorable, and independent living from it, and yet fail to make what the authors of Section 347a would consider a profit. (p. 152)

Berry (1986a) is incredulous that farms could be declared “too small or too unproductive” (p. 152), the fundamental rationale for the 1955 amendment. But that is not all that troubles him.

But the third definition is, if possible, even more insidious: a farm is “too small” or “too unproductive” if it cannot “make full use of current extension programs.” The farm is not to be the measure of the service; the service is to be the measure of the farm. (p. 152).

This upending of responsibility is the most startling aspect of Section 347a for Berry. The extension service was created to serve the farms, not the other way around.

Berry (1986a) observes that in the mid-50s farmers were being exhorted by Ezra T. Benson, then Secretary of Agriculture, “to ‘Get big or get out’” (p. 152). At the same time educators in the colleges of agriculture were developing “a vested interest in their own failure” (p. 152). Rather than working to enhance the welfare of farmers, they became focused on the fate of ex-farmers, to insure their own job security.

It will be argued that Section 347a was passed in response to real conditions of economic hardship on the farm and that the aim of the law was to permit the development of *new* extension programs as remedies. But that is at best only half true. There certainly were economic hardships on the farm in 1955; we have proof of that in the drastic decline in the number of farms and farmers since then. But there was plenty of land-grant legislation at that time to permit the extension service to devise any program necessary to deal with agricultural problems *as such*. What is remarkable about Section 347a is that it permitted the land-grant colleges to abandon these problems as such, to accept the “agribusiness” revolution as inevitable, and to undertake non-agricultural solutions to agricultural problems. And the assistances provided for in Section 347a are so general and vague as to allow the colleges to be most inventive. After 1955, the agricultural academicians would have a vested interest, not in the welfare of farmers, but in virtually anything at all that might happen to ex-farmers, their families, and their descendants forevermore. They have, in other words, a vested interest in their own failure—foolproof job security. (p. 152)

It seems astonishing that thoughtful, carefully crafted legislation, passed in the relatively young United States and predicated upon the wisdom and far-reaching vision of one “founding father” and another early congressional representative, who in spite of

their not insignificant differences nevertheless shared important points of agreement, could in so short a time be so greatly misinterpreted as to become the vehicle for efforts that worked *directly against* the legislation's original intentions. We have to wonder: How did this happen?

Berry (1986a) sees the intent of this legislation and the structures it created as occupying positions of service. The land-grant college complex was created to serve people close to the land, to conduct research and education in order to enhance the viability of farming in America, to support the difficult work of producing food and sustaining the resources that are integral to the process, and to undergird the quality of life in rural America. The vision, thus, of these early legislators was to insure the viability of rural America, creating supports to keep those close to the land on a level playing field with emerging business, industry, and economic and urban investments. Farmers and the rural community are seen by Berry as the clients of the land-grant college complex, the latter working *for* the former.

But it is hard to see how the language of Section 347a, loose as it is, justifies the teaching of highway numbers to waitresses, the promotion of tourism, and the planning of industrial developments, sewer systems, and housing projects. For justification of these programs we apparently must look to the language of Representative Lever's "charge," which in effect tells the extension agents to do anything they can think of.

These new "services" seem little more than desperate maneuvers on the part of the land-grant colleges to deal with the drastic reduction in the last thirty years of their lawful clientele—a reduction for which the colleges themselves are in large part responsible because of their eager collaboration with "agribusiness." As the conversion of farming into agribusiness has depopulated the farmland, it has become necessary for the agriculture specialists to develop "programs" with which to follow their erstwhile beneficiaries into the cities—either that or lose their meal ticket in the colleges. If the colleges of agriculture have so assiduously promoted the industrialization of farming and the urbanization of farmers that now "96 percent of America's manpower is freed from food production," then the necessary trick of survival is to become colleges of industrialization and urbanization—that is, colleges of "agribusiness"—which, in fact, is what they have been for a long time. Their success has been stupendous: as the

number of farmers has decreased, the colleges of agriculture have grown larger. (pp. 152-153)

Berry (1986a) asks a series of pointed questions about how the land-grant colleges formulated the focus for their work and expended the remarkable resources made available to them. He concludes that academic specialization and the division of disciplines have contributed to the preponderance of myopic vision.

That the colleges of agriculture should have become colleges of “agribusiness”—working, in effect, *against* the interests of the small farmers, the farm communities, and the farmland—can only be explained by the isolation of specialization.

First we have the division of the study of agriculture into specialties. And then, within the structure of the university, we have the separation of these specialties from specialties of other kinds. (p. 154)

Berry (1986a) cites a 1974 article in *Daedalus*, “Agriculture, the Island Empire” by André Mayer and Jean Mayer, which traces the growing isolation of agriculture and other intellectual disciplines as separate academic disciplines emerge in nineteenth century universities.

The founding fathers, these authors point out, “placed agriculture at the center of an Enlightenment concept of science broad enough to include society, politics, and sometimes even theology.” But the modern academic structure has alienated agriculture from such concerns. The result is an absurd “independence” which has produced genetic research “without attention to nutritional values,” which has undertaken the so-called Green Revolution without concern for its genetic oversimplification or its social, political, and cultural dangers, and which keeps agriculture in a separate “field” from ecology. (p. 154)

Berry builds his argument with care, moving back and forth between the goals of the land-grant college legislation and the results their efforts have delivered, developing a coherent explanation for the outcomes so apparent and unfortunate in his view.

In a subsection of Chapter Eight, entitled “A Betrayal of Trust,” Berry (1986a) traces what he calls “the educational ideal.”

The educational *ideal* that concerns us here was held clearly in the mind of Thomas Jefferson, was somewhat diminished or obscured in the mind of

Justin Morrill, but survived indisputably in the original language of the land-grant college acts. We see it in the intention that education should be “liberal” as well as “practical,” in the wish to foster “a sound and prosperous agriculture and rural life,” in the distinction between agriculture and industry, in the purpose of establishing and maintaining a “permanent” agriculture, in the implied perception that this permanence would depend on the stability of “the rural home and rural life.” This ideal is simply that farmers should be educated, liberally and practically, *as farmers*; education should be given and acquired with the understanding that those so educated would return to their home communities, not merely to be farmers, corrected and improved by their learning, but also to assume the trusts and obligations of community leadership, the highest form of that “vigilant and distrustful superintendence” without which the communities could not preserve themselves. This leadership, moreover, would tend to safeguard agriculture’s distinction from and competitiveness with industry. Conceivably, had it existed, this leadership might have resulted in community-imposed restraints upon technology, such as those practiced by the Amish. (pp. 154-155)

Thus, a practical as well as a moral purpose lay behind the rich resources of land, funding, and work force, set aside and earmarked for the support and enhancement of America’s agriculture and rural communities by the land-grant college acts.

The land-grant acts gave to the colleges not just government funds and a commission to teach and to do research, but also a purpose which may be generally stated as the preservation of agriculture and rural life. That this purpose is a practical one is obvious from the language of the acts; no one, I dare say, would deny that this is so. It is equally clear, though far less acknowledged, that the purpose is also moral, insofar as it raises issues of value and feeling. (Berry, 1986a, p. 155)

Berry anchors this profound vision on the part of far-seeing early Americans, along with the plans for its implementation, in the context of America’s history.

When the Hatch Act, for instance, imposed upon the colleges the goals of “a permanent and effective agricultural industry” and “the development and improvement of the rural home and rural life,” it implicitly required of them an allegiance to the agrarian values that have constituted one of the dominant themes of American history and thought. (p. 155)

Working to ascertain why “the tragedy of the land-grant acts” (Berry, 1986a, p. 155) occurred, Berry notes the impact of educational arenas in which the preoccupations of career specialists, often dominated by “the logic of experimentation”

(p. 156), causes educators to lose sight of the “moral imperative” (p. 155) that should inform their work.

Far from developing and improving the rural home and rural life, the land-grant colleges have blindly followed the drift of virtually the whole population away from home, blindly documenting or “serving” the consequent disorder and blindly rationalizing this disorder as “progress” or “miraculous development.” (p. 156)

Berry (1986a) assesses the interplay of the two distinct strands of education which the land-grant legislation held up as worthy objectives.

Nevertheless, the law evidently sees “liberal and practical” as a description of *one* education, not two. And as long as the two terms are thus associated, the combination remains thinkable: the “liberal” side, for instance, might offer necessary restraints of value to the “practical”; the “practical” interest might direct the “liberal” to crucial issues of use and effect. (p. 156)

But the liberal and practical strands of education that make up “the educational *ideal*” (Berry, 1986a, p. 154) were not held together.

In practice, however, the Morrill Act’s formula has been neatly bisected and carried out as if it read “a liberal *or* a practical education.” But though these two kinds of education may theoretically be divided and given equal importance, in fact they are no sooner divided than they are opposed. They enter into competition with one another, and by a kind of educational Gresham’s Law the practical curriculum drives out the liberal. (p. 156)

Berry (1986a) traces this split in part to the fact that the two kinds of education have different standards.

The standard of liberal education is based upon definitions of excellence in the various disciplines. These definitions are in turn based upon example. One learns to order one’s thoughts and to speak and write coherently by studying exemplary thinkers, speakers, and writers of the past....

The standard of practical education, on the other hand, is based upon the question of what will work, and because the practical is by definition of the curriculum set aside from issues of value, the question tends to be resolved in the most shallow and immediate fashion: what is practical is what makes money.... Practical education is an “investment,” something acquired to be exchanged for something else—a “good” job, money, prestige. It is oriented entirely toward the future, toward what *will* work in the “changing world” in



which the student is supposedly being prepared to “compete.” The standard of practicality, as used, is inherently a degenerative standard. There is nothing to correct it except suppositions about what the world will be like and what the student will therefore need to know. (pp. 156-157)

The negative impact of this division of liberal and practical education, especially as manifest in the land-grant colleges, cannot be overstated. Berry (1986a) observes, “Lacking any moral force or vision of its own, the ‘objective’ expertise of the agriculture specialist points like a compass needle toward the greater good of the ‘agribusiness’ corporations” (p. 156).

Further examining the differences between liberal and practical education, Berry (1986a) compares liberal education to “a bequest” in which the student is “the potential heir of a cultural birthright” (p. 157). A practical education, by contrast, “has the nature of a commodity to be exchanged for position, status, wealth, etc., *in the future*” (p. 157). Berry identifies important underlying assumptions of each educational strand.

A liberal education rests on the assumption that nature and human nature do not change very much or very fast and that one therefore needs to understand the past. The practical educators assume that human society itself is the only significant context, that change is therefore fundamental, constant, and necessary, that the future will be wholly unlike the past, that the past is outmoded, irrelevant, and an encumbrance upon the future—the present being only a time for dividing past from future, for getting ready. (p. 157)

Then Berry (1986a) makes a crucial observation. The problem he is exploring, the tragedy in fact, came about not because one educational vein is right and the other wrong, or one is better than the other. Rather, the fault lies “in their division” (p. 157). He states provocatively the reason he wrote this compelling analysis early in his adult life. “One of the purposes of this book is to show how the practical, divorced from the discipline of value, tends to be defined by the immediate interests of the practitioner, and so becomes destructive of value, practical and otherwise” (pp. 157-158).

With steady attention to the importance of holding these educational strands together, Berry (1986a) points out the negative consequences of dividing the two, for

“divorced from the practical, the liberal disciplines lose their sense of use and influence and become attenuated and aimless” (p. 158). Furthermore, “Without the balance of historic value, practical education gives us that most absurd of standards: ‘relevance,’ based upon the suppositional needs of a theoretical future” (p. 158). Continuing to describe the adverse consequences of separating the two educational strands, Berry observes,

But liberal education, divorced from practicality, gives something no less absurd: the specialist professor of one or another of the liberal arts, the custodian of an inheritance he has learned much about, but nothing from.

And in the face of competition from the practical curriculum, the liberal has found it impossible to maintain its own standards and so has become practical—that is, career-oriented—also. (p. 158)

Berry finds it regrettable that in the current educational climate one would study literature or philosophy only to become a teacher of that discipline, “in order, that is, to get an income from it” (p. 158). He credits the lack of balance in educational offerings, including the division of knowledge and human experience into separate academic disciplines, in part, as the explanation for this inadequate apprehension of human understanding. What is potentially so rich for the interested student is thereby forfeited.

Berry (1986a) examines the result of separating liberal and practical education with respect to agricultural education.

The education of the student of agriculture is almost as absurd, and it is more dangerous: he is taught a course of practical knowledge and procedures for which uses do indeed exist, but these uses lie outside the purview and interest of the school. The colleges of agriculture produce agriculture specialists and “agribusinessmen” as readily as farmers, and they are producing far more of them. Public funds originally voted to provide for “the liberal and practical education” of farmers thus become, by moral default, an educational subsidy given to the farmers’ competitors. (p. 158)

In the subsection “The Vagrant Aristocracy,” Berry (1986a) considers “the modern disconnection between work and value” (p. 159). He points out “how certain

‘aristocratic’ ideas of status and leisure have been institutionalized in this system of education” (p. 159).

Democracy has involved more than the enfranchisement of the lower classes; it has meant also the popularization of the more superficial upper-class values: leisure, etiquette (as opposed to good manners), fashion, everyday dressing up, and a kind of dietary persnickiness. (p. 159)

He notes the classism and mobility increasingly characteristic of American culture.

It is extremely difficult to exalt the usefulness of any productive discipline *as such* in a society that is at once highly stratified and highly mobile. Both the stratification and the mobility are based upon notions of prestige.... Thus doctors are given higher status than farmers, not because they are more necessary, more useful, more able, more talented, or more virtuous, but because they are *thought* to be “better”.... Thus a farmer’s son does not usually think to “better” himself by becoming a better farmer than his father, but by becoming, professionally, a better *kind* of man than his father. (p. 159)

Berry (1986a) explores the split between work and value, as well as the negative results of separating liberal and practical education, by calling attention to the confusion that has emerged in qualitative and quantitative assessments.

It is characteristic of our present society that one does not think to improve oneself by becoming better at what one is doing or by assuming some measure of public responsibility in order to improve local conditions; one thinks to improve oneself by becoming different, by “moving up” to a “place of higher consideration.” Thinkable changes, in other words, tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative, and they tend to involve movement that is both social and geographic.... The typical American “success story” moves from a modest rural beginning to urban affluence, from manual labor to office work. (pp. 159-160)

In considering the example of the farmer’s son who becomes a professor of agriculture, believing he has bettered himself, Berry (1986a) raises the question of quality: “Has he not improved himself by an ‘upward’ motivation which by its nature avoids the issue of quality—which assumes simply that an agriculture specialist is better than a farmer?” (p. 160). He asks also about the message this professor sends his

students. “And does he not exemplify to his students the proposition that ‘the way up’ leads away from home?” (p. 160).

Much of the trouble and the confusion, Berry (1986a) concludes, must be traced to education, perhaps especially higher education, as it has developed in the United States.

I am suggesting that our university-based structures of success, as they have come to be formed upon quantitative measures, virtually require the degeneration of qualitative measures and the disintegration of culture. The university accumulates information at a rate that is literally inconceivable, yet its structure and its self-esteem institutionalize the likelihood that not much of this information will ever be taken *home*. We do not work where we live, and if we are to hold up our heads in the presence of our teachers and classmates, we must not live where we come from. (p. 160)

Berry (1986a) admits that much of this chapter on the land-grant college complex is based on his own experience, observations, and research. And so, before concluding he turns to the work of Professor Earl O. Heady, then the Director of the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development at Iowa State, for “a prominent expert’s justification of the agricultural status quo” (p. 160). Drawing from Heady’s 1976 *Scientific American* article, Berry (1986a) observes that Heady looks upon America’s rural communities, farmlands, and agricultural output with enthusiastic admiration. He quotes the professor, ““Over the past 200 years the U.S. has had the best, the most logical and the most successful program of agricultural development anywhere in the world. Other countries would do well to copy it”” (p. 161). Berry claims surprise at so bold an assertion at the beginning of a scientific article. He proceeds, nevertheless, to review the article.

Berry (1986a) accepts Heady’s description of American agriculture prior to World War II. And he pays close attention to the changes in agriculture as described and evaluated by the professor.

In the nineteenth century, he [Professor Heady] tells us, after the United States had expanded to its westward limits and the public land grants had all been taken up, the government’s agricultural policy shifted its emphasis from expansion to productivity.... Science and technology became “an effective substitute for land.” As a result, production “approximately

doubled” in the period from 1910 to 1970, and “by 1970 the nation was producing its food on considerably fewer acres than it had been in 1910.” Rapidly put into use, the new technology “became an effective substitute not only for land but also for labor. The result was that between 1950 and 1955 more than a million workers migrated out of the agricultural sector into other sectors of the economy.” (p. 162)

Berry (1986a) sees this wide-sweeping change in American agriculture differently from the professor. He calls attention to the professor’s one-sided balance sheets.

We are asked to accept that our agricultural policy-makers displayed profound wisdom in shifting their emphasis from expansion to productivity—as if, after the possibility of expansion had ended, the choice was difficult. And we are asked to accept productivity as a sufficient criterion; nothing is said, here or elsewhere in Professor Heady’s article, about the issues of restoration and maintenance. The displacement of a million workers in five years is cited merely as evidence of the efficacy of technology. One wonders what may have been the social and economic costs of that “migration.” Into what “sectors of the economy” did those workers move? And it may not be impertinent in a democracy to ask, Did they want to go? (pp. 162-163)

According to Berry (1986a), the professor cites additional facts and figures, considering 1950 to the early 1970s: ““farm labor declined by 54 percent over that period as labor productivity quadrupled and total farm output increased by 55 percent”” (p. 163). Berry analyzes the assumptions and omissions that underlie the professor’s showcasing of American agriculture.

Again, highly problematic changes are cited solely as evidence of the advance of technology, which we are evidently expected to regard as simply good. And again a massive displacement of “labor” is treated as if people were merely underpowered, slow machines, now happily replaced by machines of a better make. (p. 163)

Berry (1986a) focuses on the dilemma created for farmers as they navigate the labyrinth of food production and consumption in order to illustrate how the so-called experts assess these major shifts in agriculture using simplistic economic analysis. First he quotes the professor and then offers his own perspective.

“The food-processing sector has in recent years come to represent a larger proportion of the total agricultural industry than farming itself. In 1975, 42 cents of each consumer dollar spent for food at retail prices went to

the farmer and 58 cents went to the food processor. Even the typical commercial farm family now buys frozen, packaged and ready-to-serve foods from the supermarket rather than consuming products raised and prepared on the farm.”

So much for the ideal—and the practical values—of independence. If the farmer sells his foodstuff to “agribusiness” at a narrow profit, if any, and buys it back ready-to-serve from “agribusiness” to its great profit, then the cash flow has at that point deftly inserted its tail into its mouth, a wonder of sorts has been accomplished, and a reverent “Golly!” is heard from certain agricultural economists. (p. 165)

No one seems to calculate, in the midst of this jubilant astonishment, who takes the economic “hit.” Berry’s point, of course, is that the farmer takes the hit.

Berry (1986a) also focuses on two practical matters which he believes are not faced in all the efforts to dazzle by impressive numbers. One issue is replacing skilled farmers—if the size of farms is increasing dramatically, as it did between 1950 and 1970, and yet the farm population is simultaneously decreasing, how will a sufficient number of skilled, knowledgeable farmers be found to address the resulting need (p. 166)? Berry observes, “By this accounting, the knowledge and interest of the many young farmers who are now being priced off the land amounts to a sizable loss” (p. 166).

Another practical matter is measuring agricultural output. Berry (1986a) raises the question of how productivity is measured. Referencing the challenge of feeding the world’s growing population and the consensus “that large farms do not produce as abundantly or efficiently as small ones” (p. 166), Berry cites another article in the same 1976 issue of *Scientific American* in support of a return to the small family farms.

Sterling Wortman, for instance, writing in the same issue of *Scientific American*, says that “mechanized agriculture is very productive in terms of output per man-year, but it is not as productive per unit of land as the highly intensive systems are.” Why, then, does it not make sense to advocate a return to smaller, family-type farms, on which human and animal labor can be effectively substituted for machines? (p. 166)

But agribusiness proponents argued for consolidating small farms into the much larger mega-farms. They admonished farmers to ““Get big or get out,”” creating severe

hardships for farming communities. Berry faults the professor and his colleagues for failing to calculate the losses that are inherent within the so-called “progressive” agricultural trends they hail as exemplary for the world.

In wrapping up his analysis of America’s land grant colleges, Berry (1986a) states a further misgiving.

I cannot have the comfort of looking upon Professor Heady as an anomaly. I am constrained to regard him as representative of that academic upper crust that has provided a species of agricultural vandalism with the prestige of its professorships and the justifications of a bogus intellectuality, incomprehensible to any order of thought, but decked out in statistics, charts, and graphs to silence unspecialized skepticism and astonish gullibility. (p. 167)

Berry (1986a) compares *experience* and *experiment*, observing the highly controlled atmosphere of most “experimental intelligence,” and faults the touted findings for their uselessness. He accuses the professor of advancing a “defense” based on “deduction *without* logic, a kind of disordered scholasticism that proceeds merely by flinging statistics at a premise” (p. 167). He writes, “That his premise is called into serious question—if not disproved—by his ‘proof’ does not cause Professor Heady to hesitate” (p. 167). Berry says that because “Professor Heady and his kind” have so much influence, “so much power.... it is important to understand how, and how poorly, they think” (p. 167). Noting the dangers of specialization, including the narrowed frames of reference of experimental science, Berry observes the resulting intellectual quality.

It would be possible to calculate the probable monetary cost of the unemployment, community and family breakdown, crime, vandalism, pollution, and soil loss that are the results of overwhelming “inputs” of technology—but apparently an agricultural economist is not expected to look either so widely around or so far ahead. Nor is any other agriculture expert. They are free to argue with the blind determination of fanatics from the premises that they prefer to the conclusions that they desire. (p. 168)

Berry (1986a) lifts up the value of *experience* in comparison with *experimentation*, especially as exemplified in American agriculture.

The expert knowledge of agriculture developed in the universities, like other knowledges, is typical of the alien order imposed on a conquered land. We can never produce a native economy, much less a native culture, with this knowledge. It can only make us the imperialist invaders of our own country.

The reason is that this knowledge has no cultural depth or complexity whatever. It is concerned only with the most immediate practical (that is, economic and *sometimes* political) results. (p. 168)

Berry (1986a) says that this kind of superficial or artificial thinking has “never mastered the crucial distinction between experiment and experience” (p. 168).

Experience, for Berry, is valuable. He says it is “the basis of culture” and “tends always toward wholeness because it is interested in the *meaning* of what has happened; it is necessarily as interested in what does not work as in what does” (p. 168). It is important that we grasp the contrast Berry draws between *experience* and *experimentation*.

Its [experience’s] approach to possibility is always conditioned by its remembrance of failure. It is therefore not an “objective” voice, but at once personal and communal. The experimental intelligence, on the other hand, is only interested in what works; what doesn’t work is ruled out of consideration. This sort of intelligence tends to be shallow in that it tends to impose upon experience the metaphor of experiment. It invariably sees innovation, not as adding to, but as replacing what existed or was used before. Thus machine technology is seen as a *substitute* for human or animal labor, requiring the “old way” to be looked upon henceforth with contempt. In technology, as in genetics, the experimental intelligence tends toward radical oversimplification, reducing the number of possibilities. (pp. 168-169)

One of Berry’s (1986a) most troubling conclusions is that the modern university structure, rather than correcting and replacing these detrimental miscalculations, creates instead structures, policies, and procedures that *protect* those whose interests are vested in these pursuits. He compares these mental hoodwinks to religious fanaticism.

The experimental intelligence, which behaves strangely like the intelligence of imperialists and religious fanatics, says, “This is the *only* true way.”

And this intelligence protects itself from the disruptive memories and questions of experience by building around itself the compartmental



structure of the modern university, in which effects and causes need never meet. (p. 169)

Berry (1986a) concludes his examination of the land-grant college complex in the United States with, perhaps, his most poignant allegation. We recall that Berry wrote in the 1970s about legislation that was enacted in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Therefore, he was looking at a 60- to 90-year history of the implementation of these laws. As I have shown, Berry looks closely at the actions and statements of those invested in “agribusiness,” be they academicians, representatives of government agencies, or CEOs of large corporations that market to mega-farmers. He examines their thinking and commitments, trying to understand and apply the principles of logic to their premises and conclusions. While much of Berry’s work examines facts, trends, and attitudes that point toward the likelihood of destructive and costly outcomes, he does not customarily subject his readers to dire forecasts. In this case, however, his closing observation sounds an ominous warning.

But it is imperative to understand that this sort of intelligence *is* tyrannical. It is at least potentially totalitarian. To think or act without cultural value, and the restraints invariably implicit in cultural value, is simply to wait upon force. This sort of behavior is founded in the cultural disintegration and despair which are also the foundation of political totalitarianism. Whether recognized or not, there is in the workings of agricultural specialization an implicit waiting for the total state power that will permit experimentally derived, technologically pure solutions to be imposed by force. (p. 169)

Berry (1986a) provides a passionate critique of American agriculture through the lens of assessing the land-grant colleges and their contributions over a near century. He brings to bear his gifts of eloquence, understanding of sustainable farming practices, and appreciation for the possibilities of vibrant rural communities to elucidate important parts of the vision of our nation’s founders in a critique that makes unmistakable his disappointment and sometimes amazement over the land-grant college complex legacy. He charges that America’s land-grant colleges came to be invested in propitiating the problems and issues they were created to solve.

As I have shown, Berry (1986a) explores the land-grant college complex legislation and its implementation in American education in detail. His observations of trends and practices in American educational institutions are not limited, however, to the land-grant colleges and the accompanying agriculture experiment stations and extension services. He makes other valuable observations, and I will examine selected ones. Many of Berry's statements about education, whether in essays, book chapters, or interviews, are interrelated. Hence, the subsections in this chapter can overlap. Some of his *major concerns* about education, which I will identify next, are not entirely separate from his *observations of trends and practices*. And all these sections relate as well to his views about the *standard for education*, which I will explore last. Nevertheless, my organizational plan enables an orderly focus on multiple components in Berry's critique. I will now consider Berry's observations of trends and practices in education separate from his thoughts on land-grant colleges. One source for these observations is *Conversations with Wendell Berry*. Each interview has its especial focus and tone, and I will offer a brief context, indicating the conversation's theme, as particular insights are identified.

In a 1991 interview, Berry and the interviewer discuss the community as a context for learning. They note the advantages of staying settled in one place and having multiple generations form a mature community. This creates a rich learning environment, Berry contends.

Society proceeds on a crude, a very crude, understanding of what goes into the making of a human being. This society proceeds on the assumption that a child is a kind of bottle and that people fill that child up with various ingredients, and that it's all done consciously.... There's much more to it than that.... All we want to do is draw a little circle around what we are conscious of and try to control that—and, of course, the results are disastrous. (Pennington, 2007, p. 39)

This observation seems obvious when Berry states it, but his critique catches us by surprise—we *do* operate this way. And it is not easy to justify. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we

would hope to have moved beyond the *tabula rasa* notion of human cognition, for we know much more now about how people learn. Yet there is evidence that we have not advanced as far as we would expect in applying learning theory to praxis. We are often, still, striving to fill up the bottle.

Later in the same interview, the discussion focuses on how education and community should be deeply interconnected, but frequently are not. Berry says that education often fails to focus on the most important things to teach. Students by and large are not taught “to be members of communities” (Pennington, 2007, p. 44) or “to maintain the indispensable things of human culture” (p. 45).

If you’re trying to teach people to maintain the indispensable things of human culture, you know immediately that it’s a desperate business. You’ve got to teach like fury. Most teachers now don’t want to teach very hard. So they learn to teach literature, for instance, as if it were simply a matter of curiosity—what people thought in other, less enlightened historical periods. (Pennington, 2007, p. 45)

Education, in Berry’s view, all too often is missing the mark.

In a 2006 interview, the interviewer asks Berry about how to educate young people effectively; she wonders if they spend too much time at school and not enough time at home. Berry replies, “There is too much school and not enough time at home. Not enough time with parents. There’s not enough working with parents.... I think that the issue of education really does need to be re-ransacked” (Dalton, 2007, p. 195).

Later they discuss *Hannah Coulter*, the novel in which Coulter looks back over a long life and observes many experiences and insights. The interviewer asks Berry about Caleb, the son so suited for farming who never becomes a farmer, apparently because he goes to college. Berry says, “It’s a story that happens over and over” (Dalton, 2007, p. 195). Then he elaborates his view that education is falling short.

I don’t think the education industry has been asking the essential question: What must we teach? What do we owe the young? It’s *not* just a good living, and it’s *not* just employability. It’s *not* just job training. What do we owe them that can possibly prepare them for the experience of living in

an unpredictable world? The education industry doesn't accept the inherent tragedy of that. We don't know enough to teach the young. We don't even know enough to decide what they need to know. But we've got to make a gamble....

The question is, how do you prepare young people for a world in which *anything* might turn out to be relevant? We've come probably to the necessary conclusion, tragic and foolish as it may be, that we have to require them to learn certain things.... But then certain things are going to happen in anyone's experience that weren't foreseen by their teachers. (p. 196)

Berry speaks of how we fail to “suffer those decisions as they need to be suffered” (Dalton, 2007, p. 196), referring to the gamble educators must make in choosing what to teach. He views teaching as a serious undertaking, fraught with risks and surprises. And unfortunately, all too often, Berry believes education is not well conducted in America.

Again, in this same interview, Berry returns to the importance of community in authentic education. In describing informal educational opportunities that can arise when young people work with parents, neighbors, and relatives, Berry gives several examples of these “teaching situations,” including some in his own life. In one example he is, for the most part, the learner. Other times he functions as the teacher. These informal teaching-learning opportunities can be educationally valuable, and the “shared life” of the community is the essential component.

And I think that what the education industry has not thought of is the kind of education that simply takes advantage of opportunities in the shared life. For that, there has to be a shared life; parents and children and neighbors have to be sharing their life, and then beautiful times occur in the midst of work. Suddenly everybody's having a good time, suddenly everybody's having something good to say, suddenly something awfully funny has happened, maybe to you, and you're the hero of the story everybody's telling. We need to pay attention to those things, for they can be profoundly instructive as well as profoundly pleasurable. (Dalton, 2007, pp. 197-198)

Berry believes that formal educators could learn something about how to improve their practice by noticing these informal learning opportunities. Something useful could be carried over from one arena (informal learning in the shared life of the community) to the other (institutions where enabling teaching and learning is the primary objective).

Another observation by Berry about education is found in a 1993 interview in which the discussion focuses on the significance of knowledge about the past, how it is worthwhile to know what one's forebears did and whether it worked or not. The interviewer asks Berry, "What...are the most dangerous superstitions, as you refer to them, of modern industrial culture?" (Smith, 2007, p. 93). Berry replies,

That industry will inevitably come up with solutions for the problems that it has created; that knowledge is neutral or value-free; that education is good; that education makes people better; that you can make people better by means of technological progress. Those are some of them. (p. 93)

This statement is filled with implications for education. I believe Berry is correct that people have long thought education is good, that it improves everything. Many have made big sacrifices to educate themselves, people they love, and even those they do not know, believing in the intrinsic value of education. Berry questions these beliefs. What education is used *for* matters, more than we usually acknowledge. How connected education is with the local community matters. The results of education programs need to be assessed from multiple perspectives. These casual assumptions, "superstitions" according to Berry, are not helping us create healthy communities, sustainable agriculture, or a world free of natural and human-made disasters.

Later in the same interview the discussion focuses on the question of intellectual specialization. Berry frequently traces the decline of rural communities, the economic demise of the small farm, and the overwhelming failure of the land-grant colleges to address the issues they were created to solve to academic specialization and the division of academic disciplines. As a corrective, he encourages a more generalist or interdisciplinary approach for most academic inquiry. The interviewer in this conversation, however, admits, "I have trouble visualizing how the body of knowledge would continue to grow if everyone was a generalist" (Smith, 2007, p. 101). Berry's reply is provocative.

Adding to knowledge is not the first necessity. The first necessity is to teach the young. If we teach the young what we already know, we would do

outlandishly better than we're doing. Knowing is overrated, you know. There have been cultures that did far better than we do, knowing far less than we know. (p. 101)

In an effort better to understand what Berry means when he says “Knowing is overrated,” I turn to his essay “Letter to Wes Jackson” in *Home Economics*. In this 1982 letter to his friend, Berry continues a conversation they have underway about knowledge. More specifically, they are considering aspects of randomness and pattern in the natural world. And the pivotal insight for Berry is encapsulated in his statement, “My answer is based on the belief that pattern is verifiable by limited information, whereas the information required to verify randomness is unlimited” (Berry, 1987, pp. 3-4). Then Berry expands on the implications of the need to acknowledge “mystery.” And his remarks help elucidate his sense that “knowing is overrated.”

To call the unknown by its right name, “mystery,” is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be damaged or destroyed and, with it, the smaller patterns....

What impresses me about it, however, is the insistent practicality implicit in it. If we are up against mystery, then we dare act only on the most modest assumptions. The modern scientific program has held that we must act on the basis of knowledge, which, because its effects are so manifestly large, we have assumed to be ample. But if we are up against mystery, then knowledge is relatively small, and the ancient program is the right one: Act on the basis of ignorance. Acting on the basis of ignorance, paradoxically, requires one to know things, remember things—for instance, that failure is possible, that error is possible, that second chances are desirable (so don't risk everything on the first chance), and so on. (pp. 4-5)

It is this sense in Berry of the limits to human knowledge in every arena, in spite of noteworthy advances in the accumulation of knowledge, that makes him respectful of our ignorance and causes him to be cautious, urging us to hedge our bets at times, particularly when the stakes are high. In *Life is a Miracle*, Berry (2000b) says, “The radii of knowledge have only pushed back—and enlarged—the circumference of mystery” (p. 135). Furthermore, he says,

We should abandon the idea that this world and our human life in it can be brought by science to some sort of mechanical perfection or

predictability. We are creatures whose intelligence and knowledge are not invariably equal to our circumstances. (p. 135)

As he concludes his letter to Jackson, Berry (1987) notes their shared vantage point in viewing “a definition of agriculture as up against mystery and ignorance-based” (p. 5). He closes the letter with a reference to hubris and observes, “Both the Greeks and the Hebrews told us to watch out for humans who assume that *they* make all the patterns” (p. 5).

We are failing, according to Berry, at a basic level, not teaching the young what we have learned. I recall Berry’s thoughts about his own teaching. Berry faults teachers for not bringing their own experience (which, he believes, they have more of than most of their students) to bear in classroom exchanges. He believes that if teachers bring their experience, as students bring their sense of possibility (which they have more of than most teachers), then a richer exchange in the classroom becomes possible. Berry extends this view and introduces the value of the usability of knowledge into the discussion.

The knowledge that a good farmer has, for instance, is a far different thing from the knowledge that most university experts have. For one thing, a farmer’s knowledge is usable knowledge; a lot of it comes from experience, and a lot is inherited. The knowledge of most university experts is self-centered—committed to their own advancement in their careers and therefore, indifferent to the effects of the work they’re doing or going to do. And they’re usually not committed to any community. (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

I cite one additional example of Berry’s views about American educational trends and practices. In a 1983 essay, “Higher Education and Home Defense,” Berry describes being in the audience at a meeting of citizens who reside near a nuclear power plant already under construction in Indiana. Representatives from Public Service Indiana and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission are on the stage. Berry describes the conversation between them and the local citizens. He prefaces his observations by saying, “But that meeting produced one question and one answer that tell us all we need to know about the nature of such an enterprise, and about the role of education in it” (Berry, 1987, p. 50).

A lady rose in the audience and asked the fifteen or twenty personages on the stage to tell us how many of them lived within the fifty-mile danger zone around Marble Hill. The question proved tactically brilliant, apparently shocking the personages on the stage, who were forced to give it the shortest, plainest answer of the evening: *Not one*. Not a single one of those well-paid, well-educated, successful, important men would need to worry about his family or his property in the event of a catastrophic mistake at Marble Hill. (p. 50)

Berry (1987) sees the Marble Hill meeting as “emblematic of the fate of our country in our time” (p. 49). From this experience and others like it, he concludes, “A powerful class of itinerant professional vandals is now pillaging the country and laying it waste” (p. 50). He identifies two requirements for “this prestigious class of rampaging professionals” (p. 51). First they must be transient, willing to move any place at any time for the sake of their profitable careers. They are ““upwardly mobile,”” Berry says, and “must believe that no place is as valuable as what it might be changed into or as what might be taken out of it” (p. 51). He states his conviction of this requirement for members of this powerful elite provocatively.

In order to be able to desecrate, endanger, or destroy a *place*, after all, one must be able to leave it and to forget it. One must never think of any place as one’s home; one must never think of any place as anyone else’s home. (p. 51)

Then Berry outlines the second requirement.

The second requirement for entrance into the class of professional vandals is “higher education.” One’s eligibility must be certified by a college, for, whatever the real condition or quality of the minds in it, this class is both intellectual and elitist. It proposes to do its vandalism by thinking; insofar as its purposes will require dirty hands, *other* hands will be employed. (p. 51)

Berry (1987) offers his definition of education and thereby positions himself to argue convincingly that education, higher education in this case, is failing to live up to its potentially noble possibilities.

Education in the true sense, of course, is an enablement to *serve*—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should



inherit. To educate is, literally, to “bring up,” to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures.... And if this education is to be used well, it is obvious that it must be used some *where*; it must be used where one lives, where one intends to continue to live; it must be brought home. (p. 52)

Berry (1987) follows this statement with an important observation about education and the all-too-frequent message to young people about leaving home.

When educational institutions educate people to *leave* home, then they have redefined education as “career preparation.” In doing so, they have made it a commodity—something to be *bought* in order to make money. The great wrong in this is that it obscures the fact that education—real education—is free.... What is taught and learned is free—priceless, but free. To make a commodity of it is to work its ruin, for, when we put a price on it, we both reduce its value and blind the recipient to the obligations that always accompany good gifts: namely, to use them well and to hand them on unimpaired. (p. 52)

When these observations from the early 1980s are placed along with those Berry makes in the 1970s about the land-grant colleges in the United States, I claim that Berry establishes himself as an eloquent critic of American education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately Berry finds little in current American education to applaud. If educators are committed to making constructive, substantive changes, they will need to listen to Berry’s thoughtful assessments and discern why his criticisms ring true and how, in local and unique settings, we can make changes for the better.

### **Berry’s Major Concerns about Education**

There are a number of educational concerns that Berry returns to frequently as he writes and speaks about society’s most fundamental challenges. I identify those I find most striking.

Berry believes we have let young people down in America. From different vantage points, he continues to shape his argument that we are failing our young people. Adults—parents, teachers, neighbors, relatives, and members of the community at large—are

falling short. We fail adequately to meet the awesome responsibility of raising and educating our young so that, to the best of our ability, they will be as prepared as possible to face what life brings their way.

There are multiple ways to describe and examine this failure. But if we ask, *How* have we failed the young?—that question will help us focus, however partially, on an answer. I believe that Berry sees our failure linked to the following missteps:

1. We do not provide our young people with thoughtful critics.
2. We have deluded our young into believing that learning should always be easy, fun, and entertaining.
3. In our classrooms and in the organization of our educational institutions we have shifted the focus of learning dramatically from what is worthy to be preserved and passed on to a focus on individual careers, intellectual specialization, and the rigid division of academic disciplines, with unfortunate results.
4. We have failed to teach and demonstrate the difference between information and knowledge.
5. And, as educators we have failed to establish and maintain vibrant connections between what happens in the classroom and the needs and resources of the local community, thereby enabling education to play a significant role in the destruction of valuable places.

First: *we do not provide our young people with thoughtful critics*. In a 1973 interview, Berry states that “The young have had lots of praisers and lots of detractors but few critics ... few friends” (Williamson, 2007, pp. 11-12). He speaks here also about the segregation of young and old; he says it is “one of the worst possible kinds of segregation” (p. 10). Berry (1970) also reflects on student-teacher relationships in his own teaching.

At least in the circumstances I have described, I think that the best relationships of teacher and student are those that turn into friendships. In friendship the education machine is entirely circumvented and removed from consideration, and the two minds can meet fully and freely. The student comes to know the teacher, which in my opinion is a thousand times better than knowing what the teacher knows. The teacher ceases to function merely as a preceptor and becomes an example—an example of something, good or bad, that his life has proved to be possible. (p. 18)

Berry believes that young people gain immeasurably when authentically engaged with people different from themselves—people who are older, for instance, people with memories of events outside the experience of the young person, people who can tell good stories. This authentic engagement can happen during shared work, on the farm or elsewhere in the community. It can happen in the classroom—when teachers make themselves available for authentic intellectual and personal engagement.

Berry has an important point. Where do young people learn, for instance, how to deal with the deaths of loved ones, if not from someone else along the way? Where do we learn how to deal with setbacks, work-related or in our personal lives? How might any of us deal with a catastrophic event, a natural disaster, or a horrific crime that renders us or someone close to us a victim? And where do we find models of people carving out time and energy to work for a cause, a value bigger than themselves, an investment that will still be here after they pass on? These skills and values are not taught in books, though Berry will argue for the engaging teaching of Shakespeare and other great literature. In reality there is no substitute for a model, a good example, one young people can look up to and emulate.

As Berry sees it, young people deserve better counsel, guidance, and instruction than they customarily get. Much of this type of assistance now comes from the “helping professions.” Surely these professionals make important contributions. However, I think Berry sees the preponderance of helping professions more as symptomatic of a serious underlying issue (the pervasive dis-ease of our society) than as a creative solution to life’s difficulties. A good critic asks pertinent questions, shows genuine interest in the other,

learns how the other thinks and feels, and discovers how to encourage the young person. A thoughtful critic offers constructive criticism or feedback, albeit in a loving and affirming way. He or she does not simply say what the other wishes to hear. Young people too often do not receive such gifts. Where might thoughtful critics for young people be found? How could we begin to address this gap?

Second: *We have deluded our young into believing that learning should always be easy, fun, and entertaining.* In the 1973 interview cited earlier, the conversation turns to “the daily interchange between old and young” (Williamson, 2007, p. 10), and Berry makes the case that the young bring “a sort of gift to humanity that each generation of young people renews” (p. 10). The young advocate for what they believe is desirable (freedom, equality, healthy planet, etc.). And Berry adds that the old in the community provide an important check on the sometimes overly eager push on the part of the young, calling attention to alternative ways a chosen goal can be reached and pointing out the merits and pitfalls of various paths. “The old are the ones who will put their hands on you and say, ‘Well, be a little steady now,’ or ‘No, you can’t quit, you’re not finished yet’” (p. 11). The interviewer asks Berry if he is assuming that role. Berry replies by referring to the duress he experienced in the 1960s when he encouraged young people to get a broad education. He had claimed, for example, that students should learn a foreign language, and he received harsh criticism as a result. He believes that young people cannot always be expected to know what they need to know.

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

Earlier in the interview Berry says, “We’ve failed to teach the young people to expect that a worthy thing might be difficult to learn” (Williamson, 2007, p. 8). Berry makes these observations over 40 years ago. Given the overwhelming array of options for

entertainment and social media engagement now available in society, and apparently relished by most young people, I believe that this expectation that learning should be easy and fun has undoubtedly grown more prevalent.

In a 1991 interview, Berry observes “how important it is to learn young” (Pennington, 2007, p. 38). Discussing the importance of staying settled in one place and learning about “the best ways of land use,” an education that calls for “physical sympathy with the materials” (p. 38), Berry exhorts,

People who do hand labor, who work with materials, have to have a kind of physical sympathy with the materials that they’re using and the motions of the work and the tools, and so forth. And that comes hard late in life. It has to be learned before the child realizes that he or she is learning. (Pennington, 2007, p. 38)

Later in the same interview, the discussion examines the importance of discipline in any worthy pursuit. The focus at this point is marriage and the relationship of couples. Yet Berry’s observations are relevant to multiple endeavors as he makes clear in his examples.

Love is *not* just a feeling; it’s a practice, something you practice whether you feel like it or not. If you have a relationship with anybody—a friend, a family member, a spouse—you have to understand by the terms of that relationship to do things for those people, and you do them whether you feel like it or not. If you don’t, it’s useless. You’re not always going to feel like it. This is what you learn as soon as you become a farmer, for instance. Once you get into a relationship with even so much as a vegetable garden, you realize that you have to do the work whether you want to or not. (Pennington, 2007, p. 42)

Two decades after the 1973 interview in which Berry points out the disservice of pretending that learning can be constantly entertaining, he reiterates his earlier belief. The discussion focuses on standards in education and the teaching of literature, and Berry says that he reads literature for pleasure and instruction.

The idea that education ought to be painless and fun all the time is something new. Nobody with sense and experience has ever believed that. Some things are hard to learn, and if they’re going to be learned, the student has to submit to difficulty. And that, again, is an issue of faith. One teaches

that way with the faith that a time will come when the student will be glad to have made the sacrifice. You can't learn a language easily. You can't learn to read Milton and Shakespeare and Chaucer easily. It takes some trouble, and there are rewards for that trouble. If there weren't, nobody would teach it. (Beattie, 2007, 84)

Berry is realistic about the challenges of teaching and learning. Neither task is easy. There will always be challenges to navigate, and the work is constant. His point is that the work will pay off in time. Most likely, not every student will enjoy a payoff. Not every teacher will see lots of “aha' moments” in the classroom. But the work is worthy, if chosen with care and worked at with dedication and discipline. The long-term value will emerge.

Third: *In our classrooms and in the organization of our educational institutions we have shifted the focus of learning dramatically from what is worthy to be preserved and passed on to a focus on individual careers, intellectual specialization, and the rigid division of academic disciplines, with unfortunate results.* Berry calls attention to this shift in priority repeatedly. In 1991 he says, “The educational system is geared to individual careers. In general, the education system doesn't educate people to be members of communities” (Pennington, 2007, p. 44).

In a 1993 interview, Berry establishes the legitimate authority of teachers.

But you have to have authority as a teacher that does not come from an individual, but comes from a community that says, “These are beloved things, they must be passed on; these are the indispensably beloved, and everything will suffer if they are not learned.”...

The justification of schools is the body of work that needs to be passed on to another generation. (Beattie, 2007, pp. 84-85)

Berry makes this point explicit in speaking about the teaching of literature.

The problem with the way literature is taught now is that people don't teach it as something that's of great importance. It's taught as a “subject” and as a specialty. I think a great change would come about if literature were taught by people who believed that it's of great importance to everybody, that it's necessary to everybody, that it says things that are indispensable to us. (Beattie, 2007, p. 84)

This identification of the locus of authority for teachers is important. I think the educational system would welcome this observation by Berry. In taking up the responsibility to teach the young, we do not have to rely simply on individual interests, skills, and our best guesses about what students will face as adults. Rather, we can claim our heritage and take responsibility both to identify its valuable components and to help the young to learn “things that are indispensable to us.” Teachers who understand their authority in this way are thus relieved of the burden of championing their own interests and hazarding unwieldy guesses about the future.

In 2006, Berry again focuses on the overemphasis on careers and specialization. In discussing the novel *Hannah Coulter*, especially noting how Caleb moves away from his love of farming after attending college, Berry observes,

It’s a story that happens over and over. I also had in mind the kids who become biologists because they love the outdoors, and they end up computer modeling, or in molecular biology. I’ve been increasingly convinced that the careerist/professionalist paradigm is dead. You just can’t assume, as I think a lot of college professors still assume, that if you merely pursue your specialty your work will be used for good. I just don’t think that is assumable any longer. (Dalton, 2007, pp. 195-196)

Earlier in the same discussion, the interviewer asks, “You have grandchildren whose education you’re deeply interested in. How should we educate our children in a world that is so often pushing them where we don’t want them to go?” (Dalton, 2007, p. 195). Berry acknowledges that working with parents often is not an option in today’s world. He highlights one example of education in American culture that he believes has merit and prefaces it by identifying the responsibility he believes belongs to parents.

Nevertheless, to have committed other people’s lives to this world, as you have your children’s, is an extremely serious thing, and it establishes a priority that people don’t think about until they have children.

I think that the issue of education really does need to be re-ransacked. You know the Amish don’t educate their children formally past the eighth grade. But this doesn’t keep the Amish from learning as much as they are capable of learning.... For instance, there are Amish factories that are run by

eighth-grade-educated Amishmen who have taught themselves enough mathematics and physics to calculate gear ratios and to design complex manufacturing procedures. They are capable of mastering as much mechanical engineering as they need. They don't have to bring in a mechanical engineer to solve their problems for them. That to me is a kind of marker. That brings into question our now rather facile assumption that everybody needs to be at least a bachelor of arts. (Dalton, 2007, p. 195)

Berry continues to deliver his assessment that contemporary American education is letting students down, even as he maintains it has the potential to do better.

In 1993, Berry talks about the disservice to education of rigid, discrete academic disciplines. In replying to the question, "What would be your approach to improving education?" Berry proposes a major shift in the standard of education (a topic I will examine more closely in the next section) and voices his concern about discrete academic disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

Once you begin to ask what would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing that we can do here for our community, you can't rule out any kind of knowledge. You need to know everything you possibly can know.... And then you begin to see that these supposedly discreet and separate disciplines, these "specializations," aren't separate at all, but are connected. And of course our mistakes, over and over again, show us what the connections are, or show us that connections exist....

*So this calls into question, doesn't it, the whole structure of postgraduate work where people find a tiny specialty to become the world's foremost expert on it?*

It calls into question the whole organization of intelligence in the modern world. We're teaching as if the purpose of knowledge is to help people have careers, or to make themselves better employees, and that's a great and tragic mistake. (Smith, 2007, pp. 100-101)

Earlier in the same interview they consider the value of local engagement, and Berry says, for example, that Kentuckians "ought to eat more catfish" (Smith, 2007, p. 98). He speaks about fishing "in a way that preserves the supply and, therefore,

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<sup>2</sup>In the block quotations of exchanges between Berry and an interviewer, the interviewer's words are shown in italics.



preserves the livelihood of fishing” (p. 99). Then he makes observations that get at the heart of the issue of specialization.

What I’m trying to talk against is the idea that a so-called environmental problem can *ever* be satisfactorily reduced to a simple moral choice. It’s always complex in its causes, and so its solutions will also have to be complex.

*It seems to me that you’ve turned these words “complex” and “simple” upside down, in terms of their usual positive or negative values. You’ve said you wish to complicate, not to simplify, every aspect of daily life.*

Absolutely! Simplicity means that you have brought things to a kind of unity in yourself; you have made certain connections. That is, you have to make a just response to the real complexity of life in this world. People have tried to simplify themselves by severing the connections. That doesn’t work. Severing connections makes complication. These bogus attempts at simplification ignore or despise the real complexity of the world. And ignoring complexity makes complication—in other words, a mess. (Smith, 2007, p. 99)

Berry feels that education contributes to this severing of connections, that it is guilty of “these bogus attempts at simplification”—when in fact it should be elucidating the complexity, calling learners’ attention to the vast interconnectedness associated with life and the natural world, and doing so in an orderly manner. Understanding and constructive problem-solving should be the goals—not overwhelming students with “great stockpiles of data” (Smith, 2007, p. 101) and inviting them to carve out “successful,” narrowly-focused careers.

Berry is attempting to elucidate the result of education’s failure to give students an appropriate and sharpened focus on their world—its needs, possibilities, limits, and their own abilities to impact that world in healing and constructive ways. He continues to call our attention to valuable places and addresses the tensions emerging between global and local foci. As society’s focus broadens more and more in a “global” framework, our ability to see clearly, long-range and close up, diminishes, as also do our options. Berry observes a long-standing myth in American culture.

Now there's no place else to go. The "other places" are gone. If we use up the possibility of life here, there's no other place to go....

"Space," I guess, is the new "other place"—places for a few privileged people to get government subsidies, take souvenir photographs, and have expensive mystical experiences. But it's important to see that all these "other places" have been bad for us. They have been the poor excuses that have allowed us to ignore the limits of nature and our own intelligence, and so avoid our responsibilities. One of the oldest American assumptions is that if you don't like where you are you can move: if you don't like Virginia, go to Kentucky; if you don't like Kentucky, go to Missouri; if you don't like Missouri, go to Texas or Oregon or California. And that assumption has done damage everywhere it has gone.

But what if people gave up that idea or began to move away from it, and began to ask, "What can we do here?" and "What that we need can we produce here?" and "What that we need can we do for each other here?".... I mean it's not just enough to find out which tuna fisheries are killing the dolphins. If you really want to get radical, the question is what have we got here that we can eat instead of tuna fish? (Smith, 2007, p. 98)

Educators need to work to enable young people to assume responsible action in a world beset by tough challenges. For Berry, education's failure of students through its preoccupation with careers, specialization, and narrowly-defined benchmarks of success means that not only have students *not* become adequately aware of connections and issues, but the focus on misguided priorities has allowed education to exacerbate, rather than work to resolve, our greatest challenges.

One additional example helps us see why the preoccupation with careers and academic specialization strikes Berry as unwise and costly in the long run. His distinction between education (in the broad sense) and training merits our consideration. In his essay, "Discipline and Hope," written partly in response to America's political turmoil in the late 1960s, Berry (1972) rebuts what he calls "one of the most often repeated tenets of contemporary optimism...that 'a nation that can put men on the moon certainly should be able to solve the problem of hunger'" (pp. 98-99). After calling into question the significance of moon landings and observing the way in which this claim confuses

technology and agriculture, Berry addresses the third of “three important flaws” in this proposition, stating what he sees as crucial differences between education and training.

The notion that the moon voyages provide us assurance of enough to eat exposes the shallowness of our intellectual confidence, for it is based upon our growing inability to distinguish between training and education. The fact is that a man can be made an astronaut much more quickly than he can be made a good farmer, for the astronaut is produced by training and the farmer by education. Training is a process of conditioning, an orderly and highly efficient procedure by which a man learns a prescribed pattern of facts and functions. Education, on the other hand, is an obscure process by which a person’s experience is brought into contact with his place and his history. (pp. 102-103)

The scope of education, the remarkable task that educators should strive to address—if education is envisioned and understood in its deepest and broadest sense—is the focus of this cogent assertion by Berry (1972). He makes explicit the difference he sees between training and education.

A college can train a person in four years; it can barely begin his education in that time. A person’s education begins before his birth in the making of the disciplines, traditions, and attitudes of mind that he will inherit, and it continues until his death under the slow, expensive, uneasy tutelage of his experience. The process that produces astronauts may produce soldiers and factory workers and clerks; it will never produce good farmers or good artists or good citizens or good parents. (p. 103)

I cite this comparison between education and training because Berry claims repeatedly that with the ascendance of practical education, crowding out or diminishing liberal education, American education has made a radical shift toward training, or career and job preparation. This statement helps us see why this is such a concern for Berry. It is his statement about what we are losing in the scramble toward jobs and employment. It is not that Berry feels that work is insignificant. Quite the opposite. He offers many observations that make clear how he values good work, carried out with skill and commitment. It is rather that education’s focus on employment, making job security the primary goal, and opting for academic specialization in the process is, so to speak, choosing the low road. For Berry, we are thereby settling for something far less

substantial and less certain than what could be gained if the broader understanding of education were our guiding objective.

Fourth: *We have failed to teach and demonstrate the difference between information and knowledge.* Berry gives his friend, Wes Jackson of the Kansas Land Institute, credit for helping him pay closer attention to the difference between knowledge and information.

We need to see...that knowledge is not at all the same thing as “information.” There’s a world of difference—Wes Jackson helped me to see this—between that information to which we now presumably have access by way of computers, libraries, and the rest of it, great stockpiles of data, and that knowledge that people have in their bones by which they do good work and live good lives. The knowledge that a good farmer has.... is usable knowledge; a lot of it comes from experience, and a lot is inherited. (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

This observation is part of a larger discussion about knowledge and education, standards for education, and how intelligence is organized in the modern world. In this 1993 interview, Berry compares the farmer’s knowledge with that of most academicians and identifies the only solution he sees to their overriding isolation and specialization.

The knowledge of most university experts is self-centered—committed to their own advancement in their careers and therefore, indifferent to the effects of the work they’re doing....

The only way out of this is for the teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist, to make common cause with a community. They must commit themselves to a community in such a way that they share the fate of that community—participate in its losses and trials and griefs and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions—so that they don’t have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers. Then they’d begin to learn something. New knowledge would come from that, and it would be better than “information.” (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

We begin to see the distinction Berry is making between information and knowledge. He claims that, “Adding to knowledge is not the first necessity. The first necessity is to teach the young.... Knowing is overrated” (Smith, 2007, p. 101). Data and

facts are amassed, and some of this information is, indeed, proven. Information undoubtedly has relevance and value for many of our endeavors. Berry does not claim otherwise. Knowledge, on the other hand, is more complex than information. Knowledge is a higher level thinking skill. It may include information and facts. But it includes as well discoveries and wisdom, often hard-earned, and memories about what worked and what did not—in raising a crop, or a child, in teaching a group of children, or hearing something worthwhile passed on by an older relative. Knowledge includes synthesis; it is a rational integration of facts and experience that includes an assessment of how to proceed, a thoughtful choosing from among available options, and the ability to articulate the reasons for a given choice. Facts may stand alone, while knowledge consists of facts synthesized with experience. This synthesis may include historical accounts or the wisdom of one's forebears, and it may be constructively applied to authentic life problems. Facts in the service of knowledge entail use, application, and rational analysis. For Berry, knowledge is more valuable than information. And knowledge has to do with use—to what use do we put this wisdom, or data, theory, concept, or frame of reference? How does it *help* us?

In another 1993 interview, Berry speaks again about this difference between knowledge and information. The discussion focuses on the cost of continued trial and error in learning—a cost incurred when important things are not remembered and passed on to new generations.

And if the things that need to be remembered are forgotten, then the learning becomes more costly than it ought to be....

I mean, neither the world nor the community can afford a trial-and-error education in these practical things every generation....

You have to remember what you tried and you have to remember whether it worked or not. If it failed, then the community has to build into itself the authority to say to the young people, “No, that won't work.” The grownups have to have the guts to say, “You mustn't do it because I say you

mustn't, because I remember. I remember, and you don't." (Brown, 2007, pp. 109-110)

The interviewer observes how this legitimate authority on the part of the community, the “elders” in the community as it were, tends “to get lost in today’s automated, technological society” (Brown, 2007, p. 110). And Berry returns to this distinction between information and knowledge.

Well, we’re assuming in this society that we can “access” the necessary information. But “accessing” the information takes time. And then determining which information is pertinent is an impossible task if you’re overloaded with information that you don’t know how to apply....

So there’s a difference between so-called information and the knowledge that is shapely in the mind of a good worker. That knowledge is immediately available because it lives not just in the mind and the memory, but in the body and hands of the person doing the work. (p. 110)

Berry returns often to this issue of use—the practical usability present in knowledge. The value of knowledge should be assessed then, in terms of its practical usability.

In the passage just cited, Berry also alludes to another important concept in much of his thinking—scale. It is possible to be “overloaded with information that you don’t know how to apply” (Brown, 2007, p. 110). Berry notes, “There is nothing deader or of more questionable value than facts in isolation” (Berry, 2005, p. 121). Our education system, then, often fails to enable students to distinguish knowledge and information. If the proper use of data and facts were better taught, we could enable students to avoid being overloaded with information. This is truer now than ever, with our bewildering reliance on information-generating gadgets of every imaginable configuration.

*Fifth: as educators we have failed to establish and maintain vibrant connections between what happens in the classroom and the needs and resources of the local community, thereby enabling education to play a significant role in the destruction of valuable places.* It is nearly impossible to overstate Berry’s concern for the ways education works against America’s local communities.

In 2006, Berry reminds us of several important definitions useful for this discussion. The interviewers have asked a multi-layered question about vocation, the idea that people should do the work they are best suited for “by nature,” and how that relates to the “roles of men and women in marriage and households” (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 205). They note that “some would argue nature has pushed women only into childrearing, housekeeping, and caregiving roles and that modern society has liberated them from these constraints of nature” (p. 205). Berry’s reply includes his definition of *home* and his list of “the most noble” vocations. First, however, he identifies an overarching assumption about most of what we take for granted in postindustrial society.

We have to acknowledge that we’re talking about this issue of vocation in an age made unique in all of human history by the abundance of supposedly cheap fossil fuel. This has enabled us to make assumptions about vocation, work, and leisure that would not have been possible for most people until about the middle of the twentieth century. At present some people *would* argue as you suggest in your question. A more ordinary and I think a more realistic argument would be that nature has pushed us *all* into childrearing, housekeeping, and caregiving. Because of intellectual fashion, it has become too easy in our time to assume that childrearing, housekeeping, and caregiving, along with all the varieties of manual work, are somehow undignified and unworthy.... But I would argue that these are the most basic and the most noble vocations. How can we live, or how can we live for very long, as a people if we don’t take care of the children, keep house, and give care to all things needing care? I think the hierarchy that places work done away from home above work done at home is utterly phony. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 205)

This statement should grab our attention. The prevailing cultural message is that worthy work (i.e. work that is respectable, deserving of pay, and so on) includes leaving home, keeping clean, and using one’s head rather than one’s hands or muscular strength. The work that involves caring, cleaning, food raising and preparation, and transporting those unable to transport themselves—we tend to outsource in postindustrial America. We pay others to look after these tasks. Our careers and work lives call us, we think, to more important tasks.

Berry challenges these prevalent assumptions about work. He wants us to consider their implications. In this 2006 interview, he underscores the vibrant connection he sees between home, household work, and household economy. Household work should be taught to young people. It is worthy work; it deserves respect.

I don't believe in slavery. I don't believe in a life so burdened with work that one cannot write or read or sing or dance or listen to music.... On the other hand, I don't believe in being too smart or important or talented to take part in the daily maintenance of the world. I don't see working away from home as a liberation or an exaltation for men or women either. I need to add that by "home" I mean a household with a household economy, a place where all members of the family always have work to do in their own support.

I wouldn't expect a child to be conscious of having a vocation.... But I don't think it ruins childhood at all for a child to be given tasks to perform that are useful to the family and that contribute to the economic maintenance of the family. Such work, I think, can give a child a sense of worth that is not available any other way. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, pp. 205-206)

We note that education is not listed in Berry's "most noble vocations." This is not to say that Berry does not consider education potentially "noble" and "basic." However, he claims that some of the troubling issues in education come from this separation of teaching and learning from our "most noble" and "most basic" vocations. Childrearing surely includes education, so also housekeeping and caregiving. Berry observes that much of the valuable learning of our young does not take place in school. What is the outcome when education is taken out of the home, the farm, and the household economy? To what kind of a world have we transported ourselves in our efforts to deliver as many as possible from the supposed drudgeries of manual work? These are a few of the questions Berry believes we have not addressed.

In this same 2006 interview, the interviewers observe that Berry's writing causes readers to "yearn to live, to have a 'membership,' in a pastoral place like Port William among the sort of folks able to sustain the countryside and the village" (Muller & Vogt,



2007, p. 206). They ask if such a life is possible in cities and suburbs. Berry quotes one of his own characters in reply and extends our understanding of “community membership.”

I certainly do think it is possible to live as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are. For help here I will quote some sentences of Burley Coulter’s, in which he is perhaps improving on Saint Paul. “The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t.” So I guess I would say that a better question is whether or not you can know yourself as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are. When enough people in a place know themselves as members, then I believe the place will change for the better. That’s a statement of faith, necessarily, because most of us now don’t live in such a place. There are exceptions.... But most of us live in places and in neighborhoods dominated by the influence of individualism, by the endlessly justified selfishness of the consumer economy, and by the principle of competition. But we don’t, as individual people, have to submit to the shaping of those influences. We can imagine a difference and a better thing. And we can change ourselves. I suppose what begins this is an insight something like Burley Coulter’s. (p. 206)

One of the ways that educators have failed to foster connections between teaching and learning and local communities is in failing to instill in students an awareness of their membership in a community, or of the possibility of such memberships. Valued places are being increasingly destroyed by multiple factors including education.

In 1991, Berry discusses learning and how “a community maturing” includes “at least three generations” (Pennington, 2007, p. 37). He observes how valuable knowledge, whether about farming or child-raising or other important skills, can be transmitted from the older to the younger people. Then, in reply to a question about *The Memory of Old Jack*, Berry describes what he sees as the advantages of growing up in “a somewhat established community” (p. 38).

It’s pretty clear that I’m aware in writing my books that the family is not a large enough vehicle for passing these things down. When it works it works, but it may not work, and you may lose parents or grandparents. In that case you’ve got to have other people who can step in and do the job. In my own life the influence of parents and grandparents has come to me from people outside the family who were influenced by my parents and grandparents. Being a child in a somewhat established community is like

being in a room full of mirrors: things are reflected back toward you from many different directions. You can learn about your parents by seeing what your parents have meant to other people, for instance, and the same for your grandparents. And there are certain things about your parents that you won't learn from them, that other people will tell you. So it would be extremely difficult to mark the real lineages of a person's consciousness. You sit down and try to think, by the time you're my age, who's responsible for the making of your mind, and you face a bewilderment of influences that have been important to you.

*And thus the importance of community.*

That's right. The community is the vessel of inheritance. Families die out, families come and go, parents and grandparents die, people are orphaned. There are too many bad possibilities. But the community is an adequate vessel. (Pennington, 2007, pp. 38-39)

Later in the same interview, the discussion focuses on commitment, as part of a broader discussion about the Great Chain of Being. The interviewer notes Berry's view of society as hierarchal, something Berry at times diagrams "using concentric circles" (Pennington, 2007, p. 43). Berry does not hesitate in his reply. There may be multiple reasons for our difficulties in living out commitments, but Berry places much of the responsibility on education.

*Why do you think that, as a society, we have such a hard time making these lifelong, or even short-term, commitments and then living them out?*

One large reason is that the education system is geared to individual careers. In general, the educational system doesn't educate people to be members of communities. The education system is not saying we must teach these people what they must be loyal to, or how to be loyal to the things they want to be loyal to. There is no loyalty. How could you be *loyal* to a corporation, for instance, that you *know* will fire you as soon as you become dispensable?

...The idea of community loyalty removes the whole glamour of ambition from education, and it makes education a desperate undertaking. If you're trying to teach people to maintain the indispensable things of human culture, you know immediately that it's a desperate business. You've got to teach like fury. (Pennington, 2007, pp. 44-45)

Berry later expands on this idea that young people need more assistance to learn about loyalty and community membership. In responding to an interviewer in 1993, he

underscores the value of community and acknowledges the daunting task educators face when the importance of community is recognized.

That story [“Fidelity”] is certainly a story that’s informed by an idea of community—by the thinking that I’ve done over a good many years now about what it is to be a member of a community. It seems to me that we belong to each other and to God. If that’s accepted, there are many practical things that you are committed to do. You see that nobody gets hungry, for instance. You see that nobody sleeps in the street. You see that children are taught—not just enough to get them a job or get them a diploma—but taught enough to function as responsible, affectionate members of that community. They’d be taught the community’s history. They’d be taught the ecological limits of the local countryside. It would be a matter of great importance that children should know what their grandparents and great-grandparents did. They would be taught what has gone wrong. They would be taught what’s worked. All that in addition to the larger cultural inheritance that they’re going to need. It’s a complex commitment.

And I think the educational system, whatever it would be, should take into consideration the complexity of that local commitment. Of course, our educational system has failed completely to do that. We’re educating kids to live anywhere, not somewhere in particular....

This generic education is like distilled water, as opposed to water off your own roof or out of your own well, tasting of your local bedrock. (Brown, 2007, p. 107)

In considering how education could do more to nourish and maintain places of value, it is helpful to note again Berry’s definition of community.

What I’ve tried to do is work out a definition of community that’s not sentimental and is not metaphorical. There’s a lot of sentimentality about community now. It’s a cliché: “I love my community.” Well, a community is not something you love all that simply. A community is going to present you with problems, and some of them are going to be big....

People use the term metaphorically when they talk about “the community of business leaders” or the “community” of some professional group. In other words, community is used as a synonym for what’s better called a network. But community in the real sense is a commonwealth. It’s a holding in common of many different things of value. (p. 106)

Berry addresses the question of education’s relationship to the local community repeatedly. Discussing the value of knowledge in the 1993 *Orion* interview, Berry spells

out his understanding of the lack of connection between education and the local community—a disunity he believes contributes significantly to the destruction of valued places.

There's a difference between thinking about problems and having problems. Where experts are thinking about problems, the people who have the problems are usually absent, are not even well represented. The only way out of this is for the teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist, to make common cause with a community. They must commit themselves to a community in such a way that they share the fate of that community—participate in its losses and trials and griefs and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions—so that they don't have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers. (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

The interviewer asks Berry about the potential disadvantages of “this strong identification to the local community” and the “strong self-other distinction” that can result. He cites historic struggles between ethnic groups (p. 102). Berry's reply acknowledges the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes.

It's an old problem, and it has an old solution.... Of course, you can make a chauvinistic, xenophobic stranger-hating little old small town. You can also make a large city or a whole nation that hates strangers and is xenophobic and chauvinistic and arrogant and condescending—genocidal in fact. So, when you say that one of the dangers of community life is xenophobia, I say of course that's one of the dangers. That's the very job of work we're talking about, not just to become a community, but to become a good community, and a *good* community has to imagine the strangers that come to it; it has to imagine its misfits and its enemies; it has to imagine its natural membership. (p. 102)

The interviewer presses Berry about the kind of community he believes we should work to create, prompting Berry to identify what gives him hope, arguably the overarching vision for his work.

*So your vision is not, as a shallow reading of your work might make somebody think, regressive, a kind of nostalgic longing for a rural nineteenth-century ideal with horse-drawn equipment? But in fact, the kind of community you envision hasn't existed yet. Is that right?*

That's right—at least it hasn't existed in America yet.... If your work includes a criticism of history, which mine certainly does, you can't be

accused of wanting to go back to something, because you're saying that what we were wasn't good enough.... It has been unsatisfactory for the simple reason that we haven't produced stable communities well adapted to their places.

What I'm talking about in my work is the hope that it might be possible to produce stable, locally adapted communities in America, even though we haven't done it. The idea of a healthy community is an indispensable measure, just as the idea of a healthy child, if you're a parent, is an indispensable measure. You can't operate without it. (Smith, 2007, p. 102)

For Berry, education has a vital role, a crucial responsibility, in helping create “stable, locally adapted communities in America” (Smith, 2007, p. 102). His judgment is that our schools have not supported and cultivated such communities. They have focused instead on tests, job training, and careers, and advocated moving anywhere for the sake of employment. For Berry, these ill-chosen educational priorities contribute significantly to our failure to revive once valuable, thriving, and potentially healthy local communities throughout the land.

Berry puts this cluster of concerns especially well in his 1997 essay “A Long Job, Too Late to Quit” in *Citizenship Papers*.

Of all our needs none is greater or more urgent than that of encouraging farm-raised children to become farmers. For generations now a large percentage of farmers' children have been raised for export. Much the same can be said of the children of business and professional people in our country towns. We must learn to look on this as a problem, and try to find solutions. If we want our rural economy to survive, we must learn to educate our children, as Wes Jackson has said, not for “upward mobility” but for homecoming. We must not depend on the school system for this. The school system educates for export. (Berry, 2003, p. 82)

### **Berry's Proposal for the Standard of Education**

In essays, interviews and public speeches, Berry consistently calls for revitalizing the standard for education, the criteria by which we determine our success or failure. Berry sees economic barometers, for instance, inappropriately applied to agricultural problems. He sees our focus on the future without recognition of the past as misguided.

He argues for a different standard to replace the prevailing evaluative measures, a standard he believes can more accurately bring into focus our most critical problems and the means to address them. I begin with a working definition of *standard* for this study.

- *Standard.* Given the multiple meanings of *standard*, I want to clarify the word's meaning when Berry refers to changing the standard of education. At times Berry talks about the standard of performance, focusing on students and teachers, as he does in "The Loss of the University." There he considers the issue of raising or lowering expectations for students and notes the domino effect of both options across educational levels. One meaning of standard is expectations for students or teachers, and Berry discusses standards as expectations on occasion. However, when he speaks or writes about the standard for education, the meaning is different. In proposing a change in the standard for education, Berry focuses on the big objective—the goal that lies behind and informs our investment in education—all the effort on the part of teachers, school administrators, parents, and the community to prepare the young for adulthood. Berry believes the primary goal, the standard, of current American education, is careers, test-taking, and job preparation—in other words, meeting the needs and criteria of prospective employers. Education prepares students to succeed according to society's definition of success. This is a misdirected objective, resulting in inferior, inadequate teaching and learning. As part of his advocacy for a broad-based overhaul of American education, Berry believes the big objective should be the health of the community.

In 1993, Berry is asked how he would improve education. His reply goes right to the question of the standard.

My approach to education would be like my approach to everything else. I'd change the standard. I would make the standard that of community health rather than the career of the student. You see, if you make the standard the health of the community, that would change everything. Once you begin to ask what would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing that we can do here for our community, you can't rule out any kind of knowledge. You need to know everything you possibly can know.

So, once you raise that standard of the health of the community, all the departmental walls fall down, because you can no longer feel that it's safe not to know something. And then you begin to see that these supposedly discreet and separate disciplines, these "specializations," aren't separate at all, but are connected. And of course our mistakes, over and over again... show us that connections exist. (Smith, 2007, p. 100)

Berry advocates for this change in the standard for education because he believes that educators presently target the wrong goals. When we focus on individual careers, test-taking, and prophecies about what students will need in the future, we miss the mark. Only by recognizing our connectedness do we begin to create a world that can survive, one that will provide quality livelihoods for its inhabitants. We need to aim higher, according to Berry.

As noted earlier, in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* Berry (1986a) lifts up liberal and practical education. He traces to the land-grant college legislation the idea that liberal and practical education should *both* be offered. This was Jefferson's vision about how best to educate the country's citizenry and insure that agriculture and rural communities would stay on a solid footing with industry and urban development. But Jefferson's vision was more or less abandoned by the interpretation given the land-grant college laws. As Berry puts it, "the Morrill Act's formula has been neatly bisected and carried out as if it read 'a liberal *or* a practical education'" (p. 156).

As discussed in section two of this chapter, *observations of trends and practices in education*, the two strands of education are quite different. The liberal strand studies "exemplary thinkers" and values the knowledge and discoveries of the past (Berry, 1986a, p. 156). The practical strand focuses on the question of what works and resolves it in "the most shallow and immediate fashion," resorting to quantitative, monetary measures (p. 157). Berry maintains that when educators interpreted the legislation to offer a choice between the two educational strands, practical education soon dominated the liberal strand. And the focus on the practical strand issued in a degenerative standard.

Because the future is by definition unknown, one person's supposition about the future tends to be as good, or as forceful, as another's. And so the standard of practicality tends to revise itself downward to meet, not the needs, but the desires of the student who, for instance, does not want to learn a science because he *intends* to pursue a career in which he does not *think* a knowledge of science will be necessary. (p. 157)

Berry (1986a) compares a liberal education to a bequest wherein the student may inherit "a cultural birthright" and a practical education to a commodity, something the student can exchange "in the future" for wealth or status (p. 157).

This theoretical background from Berry's examination of the land-grant colleges facilitates our understanding of the change he advocates in the standard of American education. In calling for the health of the community as the overarching standard for education, Berry resets the focus to include both practical and liberal education. In proposing the health of the community as the primary objective, Berry invites educators to change our teaching so that society's biggest challenges can be identified and students will develop the skills and qualities of character needed to address those challenges. This educational approach is more in keeping with the original goals of the land-grant college legislation in that it avoids division and competition between legitimate and distinctive educational strands. As such, focusing on the health of the community undergirds and strives to implement the wisdom of some of America's earliest leaders.

Asked in 1993, "What's your perception of what's wrong with our society?" Berry replies,

The fundamental thing that's disturbing, I think, is that we've lost the sense of connection between ourselves and the natural world.... And this connection is economic, necessarily. That is, we live from the natural world one way or another. And because of the relative ease of (and cheapness of) transportation, and because of our mobile and unsettled population, we have extremely extensive personal economies; we don't know where the things we consume come from.... We're so far removed from the economic sources of our lives. That's not all that's wrong, of course, but a lot of the other things that are wrong relate to that problem. (Brown, 2007, pp. 103-104)



As the discussion turns to knowing and caring, Berry observes, “And of course, one of the responsibilities of a culture is to see that people know enough to care. And our educational system doesn’t deal with that problem. Really, as a system, it hasn’t heard of that problem” (p. 104).

As Berry and the interviewer continue to examine our loss of connection with the natural world, the question of the roles of education and the community, in addressing this divide at the center of society, emerges. Berry argues against big solutions even as he recognizes the scope of the challenge. He points out the difference between knowledge and “so-called information,” underscoring the value of “knowledge that is shapely in the mind of a good worker” (Brown, 2007, p. 110). The interviewer poses a question that prompts further reflection from Berry about the purpose of education.

*Therefore, it could be that education today is solely for getting by, whereas knowledge is forever? That knowledge is for processing all of this, for helping to stop the depletion of natural resources and for helping to provide the sense of community?*

It’s for taking care—taking care of things that are worth taking care of. Education now, you see, works toward the idea of making people able to take tests, or to meet the needs of an employer. And this means that education’s going to run to minimums. It runs to the minimal fulfillment of whatever requirement is hypothesized. An educational system that concentrates on the minimum is going to reduce the minimum.

So there has to be a better standard, and the better standard, I think, is the health of the community. If the standard of education is job qualification and an intelligence test or a college entrance examination, then education’s going to get worse. If you have an educational system that’s not prepared to ask every student to get better no matter how good he or she already is, then you’ve got a failing system. (Brown, 2007, p. 110)

The temptation for readers and interviewers in hearing Berry’s views, his assessment of our problems and critique of education, is to ask for his program—how would he fix it if he were in charge? The following exchange in this 1993 *Bluegrass* magazine interview gives a partial answer.

*Do you think that strengthening the sense of community within each individual can possibly help strengthen the quality of education? Or is it entirely up to the community?*

You can't make it work the way you think it ought to work. I mean, the first rule of education is that it's not going to work the way you think it's going to work. You can set up an ideal system; you think, "Well, I know how to do it this time," and the first thing you know you have to quit fooling yourself. It's not going to work ideally. A lot of things you do are not even going to work pretty well. I'm not ever, in anything I've written, trying to say exactly how anything ought to be done. I mean, I don't have a program. My argument is that if you change the standards of your work, you'll finally change your work. If you're a teacher and you're trying to teach to the career needs of every individual student or you're trying to teach to the presumed career needs of a conglomeration of young people, then you're not going to do well. If you're a teacher and you make the health of the community the standard of your work, then you're going to teach better. If you teach with the good health of your community in mind, you're going to try to make every one of your students the best possible member of the community. You're going to fail a lot, but you're going to change the way you teach and maybe you'll succeed some, too. If you suppose to yourself, "Well, when these kids graduate, that's probably the last I'm going to see of them," you're going to teach differently than you would teach if you assume that you're going to spend the rest of your life with these people. (Brown, 2007, pp. 110-111)

The interviewer follows with a question about scale, "Can individual change really make a difference on the grand scale?" (p. 111). Berry's reply is a summons.

It doesn't have to make a difference on a grand scale. It has to make a difference on the individual or local scale. You don't have any obligation to save the world. Edward Abbey said that saving the world is a good hobby, by which he meant you shouldn't take it too seriously. But I think that changing yourself—by doing the best work you can—is of major importance. (p. 111)

In this chapter, I have focused on what Wendell Berry actually says about education. He addresses contemporary American education repeatedly in essays and interviews over many years. He says much that we would do well to hear. And because we cannot relinquish faith and hope in education as part of the answer to our threatened survival, I return once more to Berry's words. Here Berry (2003) describes how our

education system must change in order to become meaningful, relevant, and part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by industry-subsidized research. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible. This cannot be done by gathering or “accessing” what we now call “information”—which is to say facts without context and therefore without priority. A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first. (p. 21)

It is hoped that this inquiry will encourage educators who make decisions every day, whose decisions tilt the balance one way or another, to ask some different questions and think anew about their influence in the lives of young people. I would like my work to support the hope that Berry identifies, that “people everywhere are in fact becoming less submissive to the global economy” (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 212). This is the meaning of progress for Berry. The work for educators is neither easy nor simple; it is daunting. Often we will have to push against prevailing tides. And we will fail. But Berry holds out the hope that we can succeed too. We can change our praxis, he maintains, and bring it more in line with our fundamental values. “But I think that changing yourself—by doing the best work you can—is of major importance” (Brown, 2007, p. 111). We can “change [ourselves].” We can do “the best work [we] can.” It will “make a difference.” And be “of major importance.”

Chapter VI  
INTEGRATION: EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS,  
KEY IDEAS, AND THEMES IN THE FICTION

**Chapter Introduction**

This study of Wendell Berry's work, especially his fiction, essays, and interviews, to identify implications of his cultural critique for contemporary American education began with an exploration of three prominent themes in the fiction: land and place, community, and character. In the chapter on *land and place*, I examine Berry's commitment to the stewardship of natural resources as exemplified in the story of Jack Beechum and explore how land well cared for creates places of value and comfort for human beings. In the chapter on *community*, I observe how healthy communities offer healing and care for those with special needs, including the elderly and those nearing the end of life. I also consider how healthy communities pass on to young people what is worthy to be learned. In the chapter on *character*, I explore the positive attributes of several Port William members whose temperaments, skills, and stories emerge from the interplay of land and place and community: Andy Catlett, Jack Beechum, and Jayber Crow.

After examining these themes in Berry's fiction, I consider what Berry actually says about American education. He has been observing and reflecting on education for decades. I note his *reflections on his own teaching and learning*. He underscores his wish to "angle at large in the realm of the possible" in teaching writing at the college

level (Berry, 1970, p. 19). I also examine Berry's *observations of trends and practices in American education*, paying especial attention to his critique of land-grant colleges in the United States. I identify Berry's *major concerns about education*, including the over-emphasis on specialization, the division of academic disciplines, and the preoccupation with individual careers. And I consider Berry's views about *the standard for education*.

In this chapter, I identify more specifically the implications for education to be found in Berry's work. I highlight his major criticisms and consider how they can be addressed. Berry's most frequently expressed **educational concerns** are:

1. The lack of connection between schools and the local community;
2. The way in which an over-emphasis on the division of academic disciplines results in specialization and the inability of experts to speak effectively to scholars in other disciplines or the public at large;
3. The failure to teach the difference between knowledge and information;
4. The value of informal learning opportunities, especially where adults and young people work together in the community, and the lack of "thoughtful critics" for the young; and
5. The need for a change in the standard of education from the current focus on test-taking, job preparation, and career development to focusing on the health of the community.

I examine three of these concerns more closely: the lack of connection between schools and the local community, the consequences of our over-emphasis on discrete academic disciplines, and the need to revise the standard for education. For each educational concern I give a summary of the concern, outlining Berry's views and offering definitions of his central concepts for this study. I relate the concern to one or more of the **key ideas** prevalent throughout Berry's work. These include the following:

1. Everything is *connected*—everything we do matters—has consequences.  
There are no absolute vacuums.

2. The created world is *sacred*—places are sacred; people are sacred; creatures are sacred; and resources are sacred. All are invaluable and irreplaceable. We must pay much closer attention.
3. Our nation’s history includes a troubling litany of *violence* and destruction. Much of this destruction is permanent and cannot be redeemed. We cannot, for example, undo the damage we did to Native Americans in the Trail of Tears and other confrontations. Nor can we erase the stain of slavery or the blight of racism that continues to this day. We cannot recover lives lost or property and resources destroyed in any of our armed conflicts, even though we may argue that some conflicts were more justified than others. Nor can we build back a forest quickly when it has been subjected to aggressive logging for profit. There are differing forms of violence, yet the list of grievances is long.
4. As human beings, though, we have *choices*. We can choose to farm a damaged acreage with care, using knowledge of the principles of agriculture and knowledge of the particular place (its unique composition and therefore its especial needs, strengths, and weaknesses) in such a way that healing may come about. We can, by what we choose to do, honor the place and its livelihood, its potential for restoration. We can perhaps “bring it back” somewhat. And it matters—how we choose—what we decide to do.
5. While *love* cannot solve all our dilemmas, love is an essential ingredient in all viable options, all solutions that promote and work toward restoration. Love, affection, and healing, the conditions that make for life, that enable thriving—these are inextricably linked. You will not find them separated. You will be hard pressed to find an example of authentic love that does not welcome life, health, and healing. Nor will you see something healed and restored, or a creative, constructive, imaginative enterprise carried out—be it a person’s life,

a hillside farm, a relationship, a creative story or documentary, a classroom alive with effective teaching and learning—that does not, somewhere in its coming to be, include love.

6. There is a prevailing *disrespect for things small* in our society—small people, small farms, small profits, small towns, small incomes, and small solutions. We ourselves are belittled by this attitude which often fails significantly in discerning true value.
7. Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to live in a society that embraces *an economy based on cooperation and preservation* rather than competition, greed, destructiveness, and violence. Berry offers a name for it, “*the Great Economy*.” Whatever we name it, it is much more encompassing than the human economy (i.e., it *includes* the human economy) and stands in stark contrast to our postindustrial, technological, and quasi-totalitarian economy where a few are very well off and powerful, many struggle to manage the basics, and too many are simply hurting. Creating a human economy in harmony with the Great Economy is not impossible, according to Berry. We could do it.<sup>1</sup>

As a third step in exploring Berry’s educational concerns, I consider each with respect to the three themes I examined in his fiction. This chapter, then, seeks to pull together my explorations of Berry’s fiction, essays, and thoughts about education in order to address the question: How might we change our current education system so that it better reflects Berry’s insights and vision? Due to the integrative nature of this chapter and the compilation of multiple primary sources, it is necessary at times to repeat prior quotation of key passages.

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<sup>1</sup>Key ideas: As key ideas are identified in the following discussion of Berry’s educational concerns, they are italicized.

## **Education and the Local Community**

When it comes to Berry's ideas about American education, it would be difficult to identify any concern more important than the lack of connection between schools and the local community. *Schools, more often than not, are not deeply connected to the local community. Berry believes schools would become much better if they took steps to engage the local community in significant and committed ways.*<sup>2</sup>

Berry has spent a lot of time thinking about community membership, working to discover its meaning. This is a value he holds high, even as he observes how sorely it is missing from most places where Americans live (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 206). His understanding of community membership lies at the heart of his distress over the lack of vibrant connection between education and the local community.

First I identify concepts in Berry's work that relate to this discussion. These include *community*, *local community*, and *community membership*?

- *Community*. (See pp. 81-82 for definition.)

- *Local community*. When Berry talks about *local community*, he is underscoring his focus on physical proximity among residents. He is making explicit the particularity of communities, which is part of the meaning of community for him. One might think that he is identifying a subset of "community" when he speaks or writes about "local community." However, I believe he is simply stating what is implied in nearly all his general references to community.

- *Community membership*. (See pp. 128-129 for definition.)

### **Summary of Educational Concern**

In Chapter V, I identify a number of Berry's concerns about education and discuss his commitment to the local community, including his concern about the lack of

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<sup>2</sup>Main ideas: As the main idea is identified in the introduction for each of the educational concerns explored in this chapter, it is italicized.



connection between schools and local communities. Here I emphasize key portions of the 1993 interview in which Berry spells out his understanding of community membership and links the nurturing of this essential responsibility to education.

It seems to me that we belong to each other and to God. If that's accepted, there are many practical things that you are committed to do. You see that nobody gets hungry, for instance. You see that nobody sleeps in the street. You see that children are taught—not just enough to get them a job or get them a diploma—but taught enough to function as responsible, affectionate members of that community. They'd be taught the community's history. They'd be taught the ecological limits of the local countryside. It would be a matter of great importance that children should know what their grandparents and great-grandparents did. They would be taught what has gone wrong. They would be taught what's worked. All that in addition to the larger cultural inheritance that they're going to need. It's a complex commitment.

And I think the educational system, whatever it would be, should take into consideration the complexity of that local commitment. Of course, our educational system has failed completely to do that. We're educating kids to live anywhere, not somewhere in particular. (Brown, 2007, p. 107)

This passage offering Berry's definition of community membership makes clear his commitment to the health and stability of local communities. It also underscores his belief that educators have a major responsibility to be committed to the well-being of the local community. Through the curriculum and their daily teaching, educators should strive to enable students to become stewards of healthy local communities upon reaching adulthood.

To further contextualize the role of schools in developing responsible community members, I identify components of community membership. Community membership includes intergenerational exchange. Berry believes the segregation of generations so prevalent in our culture has been injurious to all. He sees fruitful benefits in places where the generations come together, especially to share work. Closely related to the value of intergenerational exchange is the way in which communities serve as vehicles for passing down what is important. Young people need to learn from their elders. This learning can

be facilitated by, but is not confined to, the family. Berry underscores the advantages of growing up in “a somewhat established community” (Pennington, 2007, p. 38) and says that the community, in its fullest sense, becomes “the vessel of inheritance” (p. 39). The community passes down valuable knowledge—about farming, child-raising, holding a job, creating harmonious family life, dealing with conflict and hardship, and being true to one’s values. Berry describes the complexity of identifying all the sources of one’s maturation and identity.

Being a child in a somewhat established community is like being in a room full of mirrors: things are reflected back toward you from many different directions. You can learn about your parents by seeing what your parents have meant to other people, for instance, and the same for your grandparents. And there are certain things about your parents that you won’t learn from them, that other people will tell you. So it would be extremely difficult to mark the real lineages of a person’s consciousness. You sit down and try to think, by the time you’re my age, who’s responsible for the making of your mind, and you face a bewilderment of influences that have been important to you....

The community is the vessel of inheritance.... Families come and go....  
But the community is an adequate vessel. (pp. 38-39)

In addition, community membership includes loyalty, commitment, and taking responsibility. Berry does not believe these qualities are abstract, tied somehow to the future, and easily imported. Rather the work of commitment, loyalty, and responsibility takes place in a context. These qualities and practices are recognized and implemented in particular places.

Berry believes that today’s students learn little about commitment and community membership. Since the schools give primary attention to preparing students for the workplace rather than community membership, and since, as Berry claims, corporations are likely to fire you whenever they find a more efficient way to produce whatever you helped them produce (Pennington, 2007, p. 44), it follows that schools teach little about commitment, loyalty, and responsibility.

In the 1993 interview where Berry defines community, he elaborates on his definition, positing the economic component of community. He says, “Community in the real sense is a commonwealth. It’s a holding in common of many different things of value” (Brown, 2007, p. 106). He summons his listeners to recognize the value and complexity of the created world and calls us to restore and preserve irreplaceable resources. Doing so is a community venture, not something we can do on our own.

So a community is, for one thing, an economy. And if you have a community but no economy—if you have a local community but no local economy—then your community is seriously impaired. It becomes a thing of feeling only. And you can’t exclude any members from a community. If a community becomes false, it becomes artificial, and is in danger the way all false things are. A community can’t exclude the nonhuman creatures, for instance, if it hopes to last. It can’t exclude the streams and rivers and other bodies of water. It can’t exclude its climate. It can’t exclude the air. All these, in a real community, are members. So if you are careful enough in defining a community, you see that it’s a pattern of practical relationships. It’s also, of course, a pattern of loyalties and it’s an emotional pattern. It’s a cultural pattern. It’s a known thing. It depends on being commonly known by its members. (Brown, 2007, p. 106)

This passage underscores Berry’s sense of the interconnectedness of all of life. No matter how we may wish, or find it convenient, to separate various components, Berry affirms the point that in a community everything belongs. There are no vacuums.

Berry’s belief in the interconnectedness of all of life, and hence the value of multiple components in healthy communities, is the basis for his concern about the prevailing isolation and aloofness of many intellectuals, specialists, and academics. I touch on this issue briefly here and will examine it more closely in the following section. Commitment to the local community is the only solution for Berry. These specialists, he says, need to make “common cause” with the community.

There’s a difference between thinking about problems and having problems. Where experts are thinking about problems, the people who have the problems are usually absent, are not even well represented. The only way out of this is for the teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist, to make common cause with a community. They must commit themselves to a community in such a way

that they share the fate of that community—participate in its losses and trials and griefs and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions—so that they don't have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers. Then they'd begin to learn something. New knowledge would come from that. (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

Berry is troubled by educational curricula not anchored in specific contexts. In addition, he says we are educating our young people “for export” (Berry, 2003, p. 82). This is a serious problem. Berry believes that the message to youth to move away from home and not return is injurious to communities, especially small, rural towns where people work the land. It is the lack of connection between schools and the local community that contributes to this futuristic, placeless approach to educating young people for adulthood.<sup>3</sup> He says, “This generic education is like distilled water, as opposed to water off your own roof or out of your own well, tasting of your local bedrock” (Brown, 2007, p. 107). He believes the work of the school should be grounded in a commitment to the local community.

It is important to remember the overarching goal for Berry, the vision that gives him hope and undergirds his observations and critiques. Berry's sights are set, as he describes it in 1993, on the possibility of “stable, locally adapted communities in America” (Smith, 2007, p. 102). This is a hope he has not surrendered in spite of all that works against its realization. He spells out the rationale for this profound hope in another 1993 interview. He and the interviewer have been discussing whether it is possible to safeguard the food supply. And Berry speaks about “trust[ing] this continuing potentiality that people and the landscape possess” (Brown, 2007, p. 108).

And I'm taking the side of the potentiality. You can't make the future safe, because you don't know what the future's going to be. We really don't owe the future anything except to do the right thing now, which is to take good care of what we have and to protect this power to grow and make the

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<sup>3</sup>While Berry creates a small, rural community as the imaginary context for his fiction, Port William, and while he may be most familiar with rural education, having both grown up and raised his family in a farming community, many of the concerns he raises about American education are applicable to urban and suburban settings as well.

things we need, which doesn't exist in humans alone, or in the world alone, but in both together in specific localities. (Brown, 2007, p. 108)

Berry seeks a way forward toward health and sustainability and away from destruction and disease. He believes American education is teaching young people to look to a future in which they might live anywhere and failing to teach and nurture community health and membership. Yet Berry believes alternatives exist—in spite of the power of many vested interests now impacting education, changes can be made. It is possible to help young people learn to be members of the local community. Through education, formal and informal, they can practice commitment, loyalty, and responsibility. If we hope to turn our fractured society away from encroaching disasters, including climate change, multiple forms of social injustice, entrenched economic disparities, and escalating global conflicts, each with vast destructive potential, we can do no better than start close to home and cultivate vibrant bonds between education and our local communities.

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Key Ideas in Berry's Work**

Berry's belief that education should be connected to the local community is reflected in key ideas permeating his work: that everything is *connected*; that the created world is *sacred*; that there is a prevailing *disrespect in our culture for things small*; and that, as human beings, we have *choices*.

**Discussion of key idea: The connectedness of the created world.** Berry's educational concern about the lack of connection between education and the local community parallels the key idea in his work that: *Everything is connected—everything we do matters—has consequences. There are no absolute vacuums.*

- *Connection.* I use the idea of *connection* to describe Berry's sense about the created world. He believes that there are consequences for everything. He almost never hails the advantages of separation, isolation, or specialization. He puts forth an organic view—he sees the created world as *organically interconnected*, such that the migratory

pattern of butterflies in one part of the globe may impact wildlife in another area. I note a helpful definition of *organic* in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: “of, pertaining to, or characterized by connection or coordination of parts in one whole” (Brown, 1993, p. 2019). This interconnectedness, as Berry sees it, is both our strength and our vulnerability. Things others do impact us and vice versa. This reality needs to be better factored into our awareness, our behaviors, and our education.

The idea that educators could effectively dissociate themselves from the local community, that is take up teaching young people the important knowledge and skills that must be handed down, in a sense *in a bubble*, is difficult to understand. When we pause to consider it, we must ask: how did well-intended adults, striving to help young people grow and learn, come to believe that this worthy effort could be carried out successfully in an atmosphere that turns its back on the local community? Assuming that the local community is not a significant context in one’s formative education and glossing over the uniqueness of specific locales to encourage students to aspire to livelihoods anywhere defy common sense. Several of Berry’s observations help us understand better how American education could wander so far off track. In 1993, responding to the question, “What’s your perception of what’s wrong with our society?” Berry replies, “The fundamental thing that’s disturbing, I think, is that we’ve lost the sense of connection between ourselves and the natural world” (Brown, 2007, p. 103). Berry elaborates some of the implications of this observation.

Even though we have a good many people who “love nature,” we still lack, and lack increasingly, any precise sense of our connection to nature. And this connection is economic, necessarily. That is, we live from the natural world one way or another. And because of the relative ease of (and cheapness of) transportation, and because of our mobile and unsettled population, we have extremely extensive personal economies; we don’t know where the things we consume come from. And so it’s not just that we don’t care what the ecological costs of those products might be; it’s also impossible for us to know these costs because we’re so far removed from the economic sources of our lives. That’s not all that’s wrong, of course, but a

lot of the other things that are wrong relate to that problem. (Brown, 2007, pp. 103-104)

The interviewer follows up, asking, “So it’s more a not knowing than not caring?”

And Berry replies,

This issue of caring depends on the other issue of knowing. And of course, one of the responsibilities of a culture is to see that people know enough to care. And our educational system doesn’t deal with that problem. Really, as a system, it hasn’t heard of that problem. (Brown, 2007, p. 104)

This exchange highlights the scope of Berry’s vision. While many of his practical suggestions about healing our planet focus on local efforts, and hence his concern about education and its relationship with the local community, his assessment of our greatest challenge is far-reaching. He is focused on the planet, and he draws our attention back to a basic truth often ignored or sidestepped: “We live from the natural world one way or another” (Brown, 2007, p. 104). In addition to highlighting his frame of reference, Berry makes clear the vital role of education in our awareness of “what’s wrong with our society.” Caring and knowing go hand in hand; as separate qualities, they are of little use.

Another of Berry’s observations that helps clarify education’s wrong turn comes in his discussion of liberal and practical education. As discussed in Chapter V, Berry laments how quickly educators succumbed to choosing between liberal and practical education, rather than holding them together and offering both. He notes striking differences in the standards of the two educational strands.

The standard of liberal education is based upon definitions of excellence in the various disciplines. These definitions are in turn based upon example. One learns to order one’s thoughts and to speak and write coherently by studying exemplary thinkers, speakers, and writers of the past....

The standard of practical education, on the other hand, is based upon the question of what will work...what is most practical is what makes the most money. Practical education is an “investment,” something acquired to be exchanged for something else—a “good” job, money, prestige. It is oriented entirely toward the future, toward what *will* work in the “changing world” in which the student is supposedly being prepared to “compete.” The standard of practicality, as used, is inherently a degenerative standard. There is nothing to correct it except suppositions about what the world will be like

and what the student will therefore need to know. (Berry, 1986a, pp. 156-157)

Berry notes how the educational strands also differ in assumptions about life.

A liberal education rests on the assumption that nature and human nature do not change very much or very fast and that one therefore needs to understand the past. The practical educators assume that human society itself is the only significant context, that change is therefore fundamental, constant, and necessary, that the future will be wholly unlike the past, that the past is outmoded, irrelevant, and an encumbrance upon the future—the present being only a time for dividing past from future, for getting ready. (Berry, 1986a, p. 157)

As we have observed, Berry believes that both educational strands are compromised when separated. These observations help us understand Berry's sense of reality as a created world fundamentally interconnected. When it comes to education, we need to recognize the significant responsibility of teachers. Young people should be encouraged to learn about the economic venues in their communities; they should visit them, ask their own questions, and imagine themselves doing the same work. How much richer would be the educational experiences of young people if schools created such educational links within the local community. Such opportunities, for the most part, have not been adequately explored. Schools typically are not vibrantly connected to the local community, and this is a costly oversight in Berry's view.

**Discussion of key idea: The created world is sacred.** Another key idea in Berry's work that relates to his concern about the separation between education and the local community can be found in the assertion that: *The created world is sacred—places are sacred; people are sacred; creatures are sacred; and resources are sacred. All are invaluable and irreplaceable. We must pay much closer attention.*

- *Sacred.* Berry's view that the created world is *sacred* is a result of his belief in a higher power. Human beings did not create the world, and human beings do not totally control all that takes place in the created world. This view derives from Berry's Christian upbringing which he acknowledges and continues to elucidate in his work as a writer and



speaker. As earlier noted, Berry's religious views parallel the major tenets of other world faiths, even as the language, history, and imagery Berry draws on is centered in the Christian tradition. Berry invites his listeners to recognize the sacred nature of people, places, and the natural world. By sacred, he means valuable and often irreplaceable, though he allows that some things may be revived, to the degree that human beings practice careful and knowledgeable stewardship.

When educators take up "common cause" with local communities, everything changes, according to Berry (Smith, 2007, p. 101). Educators will see their work in relationship to the community; they will not assume that students will move away and never be seen again. Nor will they buy into the fashionable prejudice that those who remain in or return to their communities of origin have somehow failed to "make it."

In addition, when educators consider the natural world to be sacred they will see people, places, resources, and creatures, all as sacred. They will be less likely to create artificial divides between the classroom and the local community. They will see the richness of the world we inhabit and will be eager to introduce that richness into the classroom. They will want students to discover the value of the local community and begin to envision their own responsible membership in it. These maxims should hold not only for rural or small communities, but for large cities and suburban areas as well.

Our reticence to nurture a connection between the school and the local community is based more on habit and unexamined assumptions than on careful reflection and recognition of significant realities. One such reality is a favorite subject of Berry's—the great wastefulness of the long distances we transport our food; he details often for patient listeners all that could be gained and saved by the consumption of food produced locally. Berry believes we could address many issues in our local communities by inviting students to imagine meaningful lives carved out in the places where we find ourselves. He asks us to see our places of residence, our communities, as places of value and calls us to preserve and enhance them. He notes the damage done by the long-standing

assumption of Americans that if we do not like where we are, we can always move to a better place. He says there are no places free of problems now. All face serious challenges and need community members willing to work for the needed solutions.

Now there's no place else to go.... If we use up the possibility of life here, there's no other place to go....

It's important to see that all these "other places" have been bad for us. They have been the poor excuses that have allowed us to ignore the limits of nature and our own intelligence, and so avoid our responsibilities. One of the oldest American assumptions is that if you don't like where you are you can move.... And that assumption has done damage everywhere it has gone.

But what if people gave up that idea ... and began to ask, "What can we do here?" and "What that we need can we produce here?" and "What that we need can we do for each other here?" (Smith, 2007, p. 98)

Focusing on the possibilities where we are does not mean we would be unsupportive of young people who relocate outside the local community. It does mean, however, that we acknowledge how the education system, by virtue of its definition of success, encourages students to focus more on moving away than on staying. Educators could make an important contribution by readjusting their focus to give the local community a better chance of keeping students as long-term residents or community "members." This is not to advocate that everyone should stay home. The problem now is that almost no one stays home or returns. Educators can play a crucial role in helping young people consider coming home as a viable option rather than equating success always with moving away.

**Discussion of key idea: The disrespect for things small.** Another key idea in Berry's work that resonates with his belief that education and the local community would both be healthier and more effective if interconnected can be found in the recognition that: *There is a prevailing disrespect for things small in our society—small people, small farms, small profits, small towns, small incomes, and small solutions. We ourselves are belittled by this attitude which often fails significantly in discerning true value.*

• *Small*: Berry's writing, interviews, and lectures call attention to the tendency in American culture to discount, ignore, and even at times treat violently, things that are small—be they places, people, resources, incomes, solutions or communities. He wants us to recognize our favoritism for bigness. Perhaps the size and scale of America, the new and unexplored frontier that the earliest settlers came upon, contributed to this well-established partiality for things big in the mindset of Americans. Once this bias in favor of bigness is called to our attention, we are forced to acknowledge its prevalence in our culture and to begin to see how it impedes our ability to recognize many things of value.

Berry sets the framework for this key idea and his concern about the connection of schools and the local community when he observes a prevailing characteristic of the American economy. In 2006 an interviewer asks Berry about his assertion that the destruction of our country “is not inevitable, except that by our submissiveness we make it so.” Berry replies,

The single goal of the industrial economy, from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, has been the highest possible margin of profit. That is to say that its single motive has been greed. This economy justifies itself as a sequence of innovations that it calls “progress.” But it is progress for the sake of the biggest possible profit. Industrialism is the most effective system ever devised for the concentration of wealth and power. Its most characteristic “progress” has been the increasing ability to concentrate wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands. People are talking now about the imperialism of the United States, but the real imperialist power is that of the corporations that are in charge of the global economy. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 212)

This attitude of disrespect for things small is reflected in American education when young people are subtly or overtly encouraged to leave home and not return as adult residents (especially in small towns or communities where people work the land). America's young people are repeatedly urged to equate “success” with the attractions of big cities often far away.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of this message in our culture causes Berry to

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<sup>4</sup>The concern about young people growing up and leaving home and the local community and not returning as adult residents, however, is not exclusively a rural issue. Urban and suburban

say that the most serious problem now confronting farm communities is the failure of young people raised on farms to return to those communities and take up working the land (Berry, 2003, p. 82). We believe that when young people are pushed, overtly or subtly, by teachers and guidance counselors to focus on promising futures as possible only in large metropolitan areas, the quality of their education is subject to question.

This issue of disrespect for things small is more insidious and destructive in our culture than most of us recognize. This attitude is significantly linked to the question of the relationship between education and the local community. As one example, Berry gives especial attention to the history of land-grant colleges. Since the land-grant colleges were created to focus on agricultural issues, and since agriculture communities are most often small, rural farming communities, Berry's criticisms of the colleges frequently parallel his broad-based concern about schools and local communities as well as his recognition of our disrespect for things small in American society. In addition, Berry's concerns about the land-grant colleges are arguably generalizable to other American educational institutions.

There may be no greater failure in American education than the failure of the land-grant colleges and their related branches, the agricultural experiment stations and the cooperative extension service, to live up to their mandates, as Berry sees it. They were created to give agriculture the support of academic research and scientific discoveries and to insure sustainability in terms of healthy land, resources, and viable farming communities. The crafters of this legislation envisioned skilled and educated farmers, with agricultural America on an even footing with industrial America, due to the support

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areas also feel the loss of young people and note the ways their communities are negatively impacted by their absence. Wherever people know neighbors and local business venues, have a network of support, and feel invested in what happens is a community. And every community, regardless of size, is strengthened when those most familiar with it, having grown up there or lived there as children or adolescents, take up residence there as adults. Communal neighborhoods can be found in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

of these specifically focused and well-endowed educational institutions. Berry describes the goal of these early American legislators.

The apparent intention in regard to agriculture remains the same from Jefferson to Morrill to the land-grant college acts. That intention was to promote the stabilization of farming populations and communities and to establish in that way a “permanent” agriculture, enabled by better education to preserve both the land and the people. (Berry, 1986a, p. 147)

The land-grant colleges were intended to be vitally connected with the local community, identifying agricultural challenges and difficulties and striving to resolve those issues *in partnership with* those doing the work of producing the nation’s food. That these institutions instead came to depend for their livelihoods on the problems they were created to solve is a tragedy as Berry views it. He offers cogent analysis to explain his conclusions about the performance of land-grant colleges, an explanation that should call into question every attempt to solve complex issues simply by awarding robust funding and resources.

The failure of this intention, and the promotion by the land-grant colleges of an *impermanent* agriculture destructive of land and people, was caused in part by the lowering of the educational standard from Jefferson’s ideal of public or community responsibility to the utilitarianism of Morrill, insofar as this difference in the aims of the two men represented a shift of public value. The land-grant colleges have, in fact, been very little—and have been less and less—concerned “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes” or of any other classes. Their history has been largely that of the whittling down of this aim—from education in the broad, “liberal” sense to “practical” preparation for earning a living to various “programs” for certification. They first reduced “liberal and practical” to “practical,” and then for “practical” they substituted “specialized.” And the standard of their purpose has shifted from usefulness to careerism...

The land-grant college legislation obviously calls for a system of local institutions responding to local needs and local problems. What we have instead is a system of institutions which more and more resemble one another, like airports and motels, made increasingly uniform by the transience or rootlessness of their career-oriented faculties and the consequent inability to respond to local conditions. (Berry, 1986a, p. 147)

Berry identifies additional implications of the derailment of the vision that informed the creation of the land-grant colleges.

These schools begin to depend upon, and so to institutionalize, the local problems that they were founded to solve....

The impression is unavoidable that the academic specialists of agriculture tend to validate their work experimentally rather than practically, that they would rather be professionally reputable than locally effective, and that they pay little attention, if any, to the social, cultural, and political consequences of their work. (Berry, 1986a, p. 148)

He (1986a) notes that we have failed as a society to calculate the true costs and consequences of this “betrayal of trust” (p. 154). There is a prevailing belief that the “good life” lies elsewhere, not in any place small or where we grew up (p. 160).

The university accumulates information at a rate that is literally inconceivable, yet its structure and its self-esteem institutionalize the likelihood that not much of this information will ever be taken home. We do not work where we live, and if we are to hold up our heads in the presence of our teachers and classmates, we must not live where we come from. (Berry, 1986a, p. 160)

The good life includes academic degrees, paychecks larger than those of parents, and positions of status and power. Berry believes that the damage of these notions is difficult to overestimate.

One of the most troubling things Berry documents is the death and dying of small communities—all over America. Not only are many people at bay in unfamiliar environments, but the health of the soil, the viability of resources essential in food production, and the knowledge of good farm practices—all are under siege, irreplaceable resources dying out. Unless different choices are made, Berry contends, multiple crises will in time engulf our nation, our species, and planet Earth as we know it. Berry’s focus is unwavering—the viability of the food supply, the hospitality of the environment for living creatures, and the issues we associate with “climate change.” Their growing immanence will force the enactment of alternative measures, one way or another, if Berry’s prophecies prove accurate.

Berry (1983b) encapsulates these complex and interwoven phenomena and their relatedness to human community in the essay, “People, Land, and Community.”

For human life to continue on the hillside through successive generations requires good use, good work, all along. For in any agricultural place that will waste or erode—and all will—bad work does not permit “muddling through”; sooner or later it ends human life. Human continuity is virtually synonymous with good farming, and good farming obviously must outlast the life of any good farmer. For it to do this...we must have *community*. Without community, the good work of a single farmer or a single family will not mean much or last long. For good farming to last, it must occur in a good farming community—that is, a neighborhood of people who know each other, who understand their mutual dependences, and who place a proper value on good farming. In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in *ways*. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality. (pp. 72-73)

Berry’s own farm in northern Kentucky, we note, is on a hillside, one he indicates presents particular challenges for one seeking to farm it well.

Berry consistently offers not only an in-depth analysis of our biggest challenges, but also practical, pragmatic recommendations for how people can make a difference. He does not enjoy frightening his audience, however alarming may be the realities he brings to light; he does not strive for sensationalism. Asked repeatedly how we can resolve these issues, Berry advocates intelligent choices, on the small and local scale. Asked if the individual can “make a difference on the grand scale,” he offers a provocative summons.

It doesn’t have to make a difference on a grand scale. It has to make a difference on the individual or local scale. You don’t have any obligation to save the world. Edward Abbey said that saving the world is a good hobby, by which he meant you shouldn’t take it too seriously. But I think that changing yourself—by doing the best work you can—is of major importance. (Brown, 2007, p. 111)

A vibrant connection between schools and the local community, in places large and small, would go a long way in shifting us toward what Berry believes is part of any

effective solution, “stable, locally adapted communities in America” (Smith, 2007, p. 102).

**Discussion of key idea: Human beings have choices.** Berry’s belief that educators should be invested in the local community and should reflect that commitment in their teaching fits with a fourth key idea in his work, the idea of human choice: *As human beings, though, we have choices. We can choose to farm a damaged acreage with care, using knowledge of the principles of agriculture and knowledge of the particular place (its unique composition and therefore its especial needs, strengths, and weaknesses) in such a way that healing may come about. We can, by what we choose to do, honor the place and its livelihood, its potential for restoration. We can perhaps “bring it back” somewhat. And it matters—how we choose—what we decide to do.*

- *Choice.* The idea of *choice* is crucial in Berry’s work. He is ever eager for us to understand: (1) that we have power by virtue of our choices—we can reduce our complicity in enterprises we judge to be harmful (for example, we can seek out local produce options rather than rely on the easiest, most accessible and expensive produce that includes multiple middlemen, long transportation lines, and unfair compensation for the farmer); and (2) the destruction of things we value is not inevitable. Berry is eager for his listeners to recognize the power of many choosing, on however modest a scale, the option that is preservative, healing, and restorative over the option that is quick, profitable for a few, and often destructive of things of value. Berry believes our choices are significant. The choices Berry is talking about are economic, social, moral, and political; he wants us to be more fully aware of what we build up or tear down by the choices that we make, large and small.

There is no question that teachers face mandates of all sorts and, as such, are not free to go into their classrooms, close the door, and begin teaching however they prefer. Nevertheless, Berry calls on educators to recognize both their power and responsibility. He makes a number of observations that clarify his understanding of the teacher’s role. In



writing about his own experience as an educator, he refers to “the most meaningful calling.”

I believe that the most meaningful calling, for both teacher and student, is not the making of a product—not even a great book—that will be worthy of the attention and interest of other people, but the making of a life that will be worthy of *one’s own* attention and interest. The highest creativity, as always, is to come to a sense of the amplitude of life and the largeness of possibility. In our own time the most necessary and useful act of creation will not be to produce a great work of art, but to imagine and implement a meaningful alternative to the pigeonhole—the narrowly specialized and all too well prepared “place in society”—that the education machine offers as a goal, but which is really a dead end. (Berry, 1970, p. 24)

Berry frequently asserts the difference he perceives between the true calling of educators and the mandates that regularly confront teachers in our current system. He encourages teachers to choose calling over mandates wherever possible. In a 2006 interview, Berry empathizes with teachers who grasp the depth of their responsibilities.

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

The question is, how do you prepare young people for a world in which *anything* might turn out to be relevant? We’ve come probably to the necessary conclusion, tragic and foolish as it may be, that we have to require them to learn certain things. (Dalton, 2007, p. 196)

Berry acknowledges the uphill challenges conscientious teachers face. He also discusses the cost to society of continued trial and error living and reiterates his belief in the need to pass down the most indispensable knowledge.

And if the things that need to be remembered are forgotten, then the learning becomes more costly than it ought to be....

I mean, neither the world nor the community can afford a trial-and-error education in these practical things every generation....

You have to remember what you tried and you have to remember whether it worked or not. If it failed, then the community has to build into itself the authority to say to the young people, “No, that won’t work.” The grownups have to have the guts to say, “You mustn’t do it because I say you mustn’t, because I remember. I remember, and you don’t.” (Brown, 2007, pp. 109-110)

Acknowledging the reality that the older generation has a responsibility to pass down to the younger generation valuable knowledge and discoveries, as well as limits that the young need to observe, helps establish a teacher’s authority. She or he generally has more experience than the student and, therefore, has a right, indeed a responsibility, to claim that experience.

In the 1993 interview, when the conversation turns to society’s responsibility “to see that people know enough to care” (Brown, 2007, p. 104), Berry acknowledges the difficult choices teachers face, even as he points out that the system is not meeting its responsibility.

Education now, you see, works toward the idea of making people able to take tests, or to meet the needs of an employer. And this means that education’s going to run to minimums. It runs to the minimal fulfillment of whatever requirement is hypothesized. An educational system that concentrates on the minimum is going to reduce the minimum....

If you have an educational system that’s not prepared to ask every student to get better no matter how good he or she already is, then you’ve got a failing system. (Brown, 2007, p. 110)

While Berry makes astute observations about the demands in place for most educators, he still believes that individual teachers make many choices. Educators can argue for changes in curricula; they can think with greater care about definitions of success—what messages we give young people about what it means to succeed. Educators can choose the focus of lessons and the use of examples. These choices matter; they impact students’ lives. The daily choices teachers make influence the lives of their students, short- and long-term, and teachers may never fully realize the impact their choices have on their students.

Teachers can work toward healing and repair in their classrooms. They do not have to focus simply on advancement as fashionably defined in terms of wealth and status. Berry is convinced that educators have many choices, especially when he proposes a change in the standard of education (a topic I address in the last section of this chapter).

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Themes in Berry's Fiction**

In considering Berry's concern about the relationship between the school and the local community and the three themes this study explored in his fiction, I note again Berry's definition of *community*—his belief “that we belong to each other and to God” (Brown, 2007, p. 107). Focusing on *the theme of community* in the fiction, I note as well Berry's definition of *community membership*—if we accept the definition of community as belonging to one another and to God, then “there are many practical things” we must do (p. 107). These responsibilities call for work, commitment, and loyalty. It is a short step from these realizations to the recognition that a healthy connection between the school and the local community will benefit *both* school and community. The two together will constitute more than the sum of their parts. Again, Burley Coulter's definition of community membership is central. Berry himself refers to Burley's words as he responds to a question in a 2006 interview.

*Your work makes many readers (us) yearn to live, to have a “membership,” in a pastoral place like Port William among the sort of folks able to sustain the countryside and the village. Do you think it is possible to experience life in a similar order of satisfactions and affections in neighborhoods, suburbs, and cities? ....*

I certainly do think it is possible to live as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are. For help here I will quote some sentences of Burley Coulter's, in which he is perhaps improving on St. Paul: “The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't.” So I guess I would say that a better question is whether or not you can know yourself as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are. When enough people in a place know themselves as members, then I believe the place will change for the better. That's a statement of faith, necessarily,

because most of us now don't live in such a place. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 206)

Berry also demonstrates the consistency and coherence of his views about community over time. This passage in which Berry cites Burley Coulter on community membership follows Berry's definitions of *community* and *community membership* by 13 years.

If we wish to live in healthy, vibrant communities as defined by Berry, it is imperative that schools and local communities work together more effectively to enhance learning, to facilitate the development of young people into responsible community members, and to enable the local community to be the best it can be—strong and attractive for current and prospective “members” or residents.

Berry's concern about education and the local community also relates to *the theme of character* in his fiction. (See pp. 127-128 for definition.) A school that exhibits a strong bond with the local community is more likely to produce young people who possess the qualities and traits that build and support healthy communities, than schools either lacking or having a poor connection to the local community. A school that is invested in the local community will cultivate students willing to assume responsibility, graduates able to make commitments and see them through, adults capable of what Berry calls “good work.” Schools that focus on preparing young people for life in particular places are more likely to nurture the development of students able to meet such commitments, whereas schools that educate students for futures in any of innumerable, undesignated places will be less likely to graduate young people prepared for such responsibilities.

Consider Andy Catlett. As previously noted, Andy grew up in the Port William-Hargrave community. He visited two sets of grandparents who had farmed for years. His father, a lawyer by profession, was also deeply committed to the small town where many worked the land. Andy worked with others in the fields as a youngster and an adolescent. He went off to college after high school and took a job in a northern city after college,

working with a friend on an agriculture journal. In time, however, he broke with the friend and the journal and returned to his community of origin and to the work he learned as a young boy. It took time and experience for Andy to sort out where he fit—where he would know himself as a community member. But he takes the time and does the work. The work involves exercises in clarifying his deepest values. Andy has learned, from working with older community members, the fundamentals of good farm work. This work within the community proves nurturing for him; it forms a fertile basis for his character development. The goal then, for Berry, would be to get young people working actively in the community as early and as much as possible. Such work could be through an outreach from the school. It could be in a family business, on a family farm, through summer volunteer work, or any of various internships. Learning the craft or trade, as well as how the community works, would be the focus. Such learning in the community would engage the young person's skills, interests, and curiosity and would support the development of character.<sup>5</sup>

In considering Andy as one Port William resident, reflecting on his development and eventual return home, I note his sense of being settled and a right fit when he decides to return. He has journeyed to Kentucky from Pittsburgh alone, immediately following

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<sup>5</sup>This interaction between students and the local community is beginning to happen in selected locations and with commendable results. Efforts to strengthen the involvement of young people in the community and increase opportunities for youth and adults to work together include: *Generations United*, supports ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) and partners with MetLife to recognize five United States communities. Read about Lamoni, IA, Georgetown, TX, and Oberlin, OH, (<https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/learn/civic/americas-best-intergenerational-communities-aarp.pdf>); *Ma'yan*, a Jewish women's project in New York City, works collaboratively to enhance equality and create an educational culture that helps young people value themselves and relate to community. See "The 8 things we most love about working with young people" (<https://www.mayan.org/our-mission/>); and *The Innovation Center*, offers experiential workshop formats designed by youth and adult teams, serving as springboards to community enhancement throughout the United States. (<https://www.theinnovationcenter.org/files/CreatingYouth-AdultPartnerships.pdf>).

the blowup with his boss at *Scientific Farming*, to examine the Harford Place and consider its prospects as a family home.

He had begun to dream his life. As never before, he felt it ahead of him, not maybe, not surely, as it was going to be, but as it *might* be. He thought of it, longing for it, as he might have thought of a beloved woman, known and dreamed. He dreamed, waking, of a man entering a barn to feed his stock in the dark of a winter morning before breakfast. Outside, it was dark and bitter cold, the stars glittering. Inside, the animals were awaiting him, cattle getting up and stretching, sheep bleating, horses nickering. He could smell the breath and warmth of the animals; he could smell feed, hay, and manure. The man was himself. (Berry, 1988, p. 91)

After he surveys the house, the barn, and other buildings and saunters over some of the field, all in the dark and by memory, having no flashlight, he returns to the car. His decision and ease with his new plan are apparent.

His hurry was over then. He walked, taking his time, around the boundary of the hundred acres. After he had done that he went back to the car and put on his overcoat and got in under the steering wheel again and slept. As soon as it became light enough to see, he started the car and backed it out of the lane. (Berry, 1988, p. 92)

The journey to find where one is most at home, where the fit is right, the work adequate and acceptable, and where one senses oneself living out of a fullness of one's being and character, can be long, difficult, and circuitous. In the story of Andy Catlett, a young man who makes the journey finds that it leads back to the land of his origin.

Another example in Berry's fiction of the search for a right fit between place and person is found in Jayber Crow. As noted, Jayber Crow is the Port William resident who reflects with care on his experience in school. And what Jayber observes is significant.

Every one of the educational institutions that I had been in had been hard at work trying to be a world unto itself.... The university thought of itself as a place of freedom for thought and study and experimentation, and maybe it was, in a way. But it was an island too, a floating or a flying island.... What was missing was the world of the present. (Berry, 2000a, pp. 70-71)

Jayber's time in school is a time of growth, development, and searching. He searches for his identity and for a life that feels right, that has meaning. He wrestles with messages from his culture about what it means to "make something of myself" (Berry, 2000a, p. 73). He goes through a dark and difficult time, overwhelmed, at one point, with sadness and loneliness. He notes how his memories of Squires Landing, his home as a young boy, are fading. At length he concludes, "I was living, but I was not living my life. So far as I could see, I was going nowhere" (pp. 72-73). He makes a startling observation, "I was becoming more and more a theoretical person...who one day would go to a theoretical somewhere and make a theoretical something of himself—the implication being that until he became that something he would be nothing" (p. 73).

The cultural mandate to "make something of myself" is eroding for Jayber. He thinks about his Aunt Cordie, whom he loved and who took him in after his parents passed away, suddenly and close together. Jayber knows that Aunt Cordie would question the messages he is receiving from school and society. "Aunt Cordie's voice troubled my mind, but it told me I didn't look down on my humble origins and didn't yearn to rise above them. It took me a long time to see what was happening to me then" (Berry, 2000a, p. 73). In the midst of this struggle, often a deep anguish, Jayber says, "I began a motion of the heart toward my origins. Far from rising above them, I was longing to sink into them until I would know the fundamental things" (p. 73).

This is a major turning point for Jayber Crow. He decides to leave the university after Christmas break. As he departs the college town, he notes that his sadness and loneliness have lifted. He feels he is "leaving behind the little closed spaces of my room and Skinner's Barbershop and the university" (Berry, 2000a, p. 76). He is, at last, "out in the wide world. I welcomed even the cold and the wet.... I didn't feel sad and lonely anymore but just alert" (p. 76). He is open to whatever adventures and discoveries await him. Jayber's story makes us stop and think—about freedom, success, education, the passage of time, and the value of place.

The stories of Andy Catlett and Jayber Crow in Berry's fiction, their twists and turns in growing up and making life-changing decisions, invite us to think about the role of education in the development of character in young people. In differing ways, the education each receives in the local community proves crucial for their development as responsible adults. Catlett and Crow exhibit qualities of character in community membership, and it is the local community, more than their formal schooling, that facilitates their growth and maturation. This study underscores the question: what can schools do to enable young people to become responsible, caring, and generous members of their local communities?

In considering *the theme of land and place* in Berry's fiction and his concern for a bond between the school and the local community, I claim that as students come to focus on their local communities, including the land, forests, waterways, and wildlife, this focus will be a positive development for the students and the natural world. It will enable young people to play influential roles in preserving and restoring resources and valuable places. Students' questions, discoveries, and political action on behalf of the resources in their local communities will be constructive for multiple stakeholders. They will discover that they can impact the world they find themselves in. This will be a rich discovery, and it will hold lasting meaning for their lives.

### **Specialization and Academic Disciplines**

Berry refers to education frequently, offering his critique about what is working and what is not. One well-established, often taken for granted practice that he questions extensively is the division of knowledge into academic disciplines. Berry believes that this practice separates scholars from one another, causing them to miss important parts of the picture and leading them to work in isolated enclaves. *The reliance on separate academic disciplines characteristic of American education has brought disadvantages*



*that, for the most part, we have failed to recognize. Berry believes that dividing knowledge into discrete academic disciplines, when unbalanced by interdisciplinary learning opportunities, contributes to narrowed thinking about complex situations as well as difficulties on the part of so-called experts in communicating effectively with those in disciplines other than their own, lay persons, and the public at large.*

The most obvious loss created by this academic norm is the sense of the interconnectedness of phenomena in our natural, cultural, and social worlds. We have let ourselves believe that the processes focused on in different disciplines take place more or less in a vacuum. We have become so accustomed to this bifurcation in the way we approach education, understand knowledge, and organize curricula that we cannot imagine alternatives. Yet, picture teaching and learning differently, we must.

I begin consideration of this established practice in American education by identifying several concepts in Berry's work that relate to this discussion. What does Berry mean by *worthy to be learned*? And how do the concepts of *holistic thinking* and *fragmentary thinking* aid our inquiry?

- *Worthy to be learned.* In speaking about education Berry often refers to what is *worthy to be learned*. It is important that we understand how he distinguishes learning objectives worthy to be learned from those unworthy to be learned. When Berry talks about what is worthy to be learned he is not offering a simplistic notion such as math is more important than the arts. For Berry there are big pieces of learning that adults are responsible for passing on to the young. These primary learning objectives include what worked for previous generations and what did not (Brown, 2007, p. 107).

Because much of Berry's life has been spent in a farming community, the specifics of what he views as working and what does not often include agricultural practicalities, such as the way in which soil becomes depleted when crops are not rotated. But the meaning of "what worked" is broad. It can include business realities, lessons in getting along with others, insights about the natural world where one resides, lessons from

history, the identification of factors that support and those that work against healthy democratic communities, and more. What is worthy to be learned includes knowledge of one's forebears—who were one's grandparents and great grandparents? What did they do for a living? What was life like for them? What were their especial qualities? What were some of their achievements and setbacks? (Brown, 2007, p. 107). Knowledge of one's community is worthy to be learned. And so is the broader cultural landscape—the history of one's region and country, as well as the great literature and classical traditions of one's cultural inheritance.

The length of the list of what is worthy to be learned should alert us to Berry's sense of the importance of teaching the young. He sees it as a daunting undertaking, one we can never be fully prepared for, but one we must, nevertheless, undertake as best we can (Dalton, 2007, p. 196). Berry does not spend time talking about what is *not* worthy to learn. However we can assume he may have in mind the distinction he sees between knowledge and information; Berry believes we must do better in teaching young people to differentiate information and knowledge. In addition, he believes that educators' focus on careers and job preparation is disproportional to their real value. This inflated career-oriented focus and this attempt to impart information rather than wisdom represent efforts to anticipate a future impossible to predict, according to Berry.

Berry also believes we have limited our ability to recognize what is worthy to be learned by allowing such a high degree of specialization to emerge in our culture and centers of learning. If our focus could be shifted to the health of the community, if health of the community became our main objective in education—the walls that separate academic disciplines and create so many individual arenas of inquiry, so prevalent in our academies, would come down (Smith, 2007, p. 100). We would see that almost everything is important to know. Deleting topics from the curriculum would become more difficult, not easier. Pausing to consider what Berry means by the phrase “worthy to be learned” causes us to recognize Berry's great respect for the significance of teaching

and learning. It is, he says, “a high calling, deserving of a life’s work” (Berry, 1972, p. 135).

• *Fragmentary thinking.* *Fragmentary thinking* is not a term that Berry uses to describe the effect of the less desirable trends he identifies in American education. However, I introduce it as a secondary concept useful in this consideration of academic disciplines. Because Berry calls attention to the way in which our taken-for-granted reliance on separate academic disciplines has been damaging to learning—has narrowed our foci and limited our ability to communicate—I have come to recognize that discrete academic disciplines can negatively affect our thinking. Most importantly, they affect our problem-solving ability. Fragmentary thinking zeroes in on several parts of a situation while leaving other parts, and potentially significant factors, out of the range of vision. While I understand the value of isolating variables in scientific experiments so that cause and effect relationships can be established, I nevertheless believe there is a need to be vigilant about any approach that encourages fragmentary or simplistic thinking. Such thinking causes us to over-emphasize some aspects of an issue or phenomenon while completely missing or discounting others. Fragmentary thinking is therefore limited in its ability to grasp the totality of a situation. What I am calling fragmentary thinking closely resembles Berry’s description of “the Rational Mind.”

The Rational Mind...is the mind all of us are supposed to be trying to have. It is the mind that the most powerful and influential people *think* they have. Our schools exist mainly to educate and propagate and authorize the Rational Mind. The Rational Mind is objective, analytical, and empirical; it makes itself up only by considering facts; it pursues truth by experimentation; it is uncorrupted by preconception, received authority, religious belief, or feeling. Its ideal products are the proven fact, the accurate prediction, and the “informed decision.” It is, you might say, the official mind of science, industry, and government.... Its purpose is to exclude everything that cannot empirically or experimentally be proven to be a fact. (Berry, 2003, p. 88)

Noting the limitations of fragmentary thinking, we cannot claim that one exhibiting such thinking is unable to identify factors of importance or make helpful contributions as

part of a problem-solving team. However, it is to say that when we focus selectively on certain aspects of a problem for whatever reason (our specializations, our over-reliance on discrete disciplines, or our blinders by virtue of trauma, handicap, fatigue, professional mores, or other limiting factors), our insight, our ability to make a comprehensive assessment or an effective problem-solving contribution, is going to be limited. Berry would remind us that under the best of circumstances, our analyses will always be limited, in spite of our tendencies at times to believe otherwise. And so, there is an advantage in taking pains to minimize the degree of limitation to which our efforts are subject. We need to be mindful of the factors that contribute to fragmentary thinking, to recognize its limitations, and to take steps to minimize its impact on our endeavors. We need to be pro-active in creating interdisciplinary learning opportunities so as to reduce over-reliance on discrete academic disciplines.

- *Holistic thinking*: *Holistic thinking* is also a term that Berry does not use to build his arguments about the natural world, human community, and his critique of American culture. I introduce it here as a secondary concept, useful in exploring Berry's concern about the division of knowledge into separate academic disciplines and the often unrecognized limitations of this long-standing educational practice.

We can think of holistic thinking as the opposite of fragmentary thinking. Holistic thinking strives to establish a detailed yet comprehensive view of the situation, problem, or question being examined. It is continually vigilant about factors that may have been inadvertently omitted. It stays on the lookout for relevant considerations that may have been missed in the preliminary stages of an investigation. What I am calling holistic thinking parallels Berry's focus on "the Sympathetic Mind."

The Sympathetic Mind differs from the Rational Mind, not by being unreasonable, but by refusing to limit knowledge or reality to the scope of reason or factuality or experimentation, and by making reason the servant of things it considers precedent and higher....

The Sympathetic Mind is motivated by fear of error of a very different kind: the error of carelessness, of being unloving. Its purpose is to be considerate of whatever is present, to leave nothing out....

The Sympathetic Mind, however failingly, wishes to be inclusive.  
(Berry, 2003, p. 88)

Holistic thinking is characterized by a sense of humility about human cognition.

This is not to say that one who thinks holistically does not respect research based on the scientific method or appreciate the advances made throughout human history. However, holistic thinking does not ignore investigations that went awry because important factors were overlooked. It recognizes that such omissions happen frequently and strives to minimize this possibility in current problem-solving. In addition, holistic thinking views errors and failures as opportunities for learning. Holistic thinking will be watchful for tendencies to shortcut comprehensive assessments, whether the result of an over-eagerness for closure, an over-reliance on the perspectives of particular disciplines, conflicts of interest, or other impediments to a thorough viewpoint. Berry is arguing consistently for this kind of thinking. His attention to the complexity of arguments, his ability to examine contrasting views, and his respect for the human condition propel him consistently to seek vantage points that miss as little as possible.

### **Summary of Educational Concern**

In considering Berry's concern about discrete academic disciplines and the ways they foster separate, often isolated specializations, I acknowledge that a degree of organization is needed when we seek to impart valuable knowledge to a new generation. Yet Berry is concerned that subject matter divisions have transcended classroom exercises. As knowledge is separated into discrete disciplines, potentially relevant knowledge is sidestepped, and fields of study grow narrower. Berry believes this practice works against teaching what is worthy to be learned.

How did discrete academic disciplines come to dominate American education?

Berry traces the emergence of this tendency to divide knowledge into separate disciplines

to those who subsequently interpreted the legislation that created our land-grant colleges. As already observed, the legislation that gave birth to the land-grant colleges and their related branches, the agricultural experiment stations and the cooperative extension service, emerged from the vision of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson valued the people who worked the land and the small communities that grew up around them. He understood the challenges of good farming and held the work of farmers in high regard. Justin Morrill, the Vermont representative, first in the House and then in the Senate, shared some of Jefferson's views. Berry believes that the legislation that launched the land-grant college complex fundamentally reflects the vision and hopes that Jefferson and Morrill shared (Berry, 1986a, p. 147). They wanted to insure the sustainability of healthy food production by supporting the rural communities where farming took place; they wanted to insure education for farmers and research that would facilitate responsible farming and care of both the land and those who worked it. Perhaps they foresaw how a focus on industrialization and urban living could overshadow rural communities and thereby threaten their essential life-supporting work. Jefferson and Morrill understood the long-term importance of the land economy, and they sought to establish educational venues that would support farming communities.

Jefferson and Morrill, as Berry points out, also had their differences. Morrill was less concerned about the self-interest that Jefferson believed motivated the urban populace and the move toward industrialization. Morrill also did not see as clearly as Jefferson the necessity of education for all the citizenry in a democracy (Berry, 1986a, p. 146).<sup>6</sup> It is from their differences that some of the confusion in educational objectives

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<sup>6</sup>Jefferson worked passionately to nurture the new country and implement policies to sustain healthy agriculture, vibrant communities, and capable leadership. Nevertheless, his remarkable political legacy did not extend full citizenry in a democracy to include women or slaves. As Jon Meacham, the presidential historian, states in *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, "Jefferson fought for the greatest of causes yet fell short of delivering justice for the persecuted and the enslaved" (Meacham, 2012, p. xxiv). When it came to

emerged, according to Berry. One far-reaching outcome of the differences between Jefferson and Morrill is this breaking up of subject matter, this division of knowledge into separate academic disciplines. Berry analyzes how this came about.

The land-grant college mandate, as defined in the original legislation, called for

“The endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be [...] to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts [...] in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” (Berry, 1986a, pp. 144-145)

Furthermore, this first of the land-grant college acts set aside, “an amount of public land, to be apportioned to each state a quantity equal to thirty thousand acres for each Senator and Representative in Congress” (Berry, 1986a, p. 144). I cite these specifics of the land-grant legislation to highlight the large investment that was voted into law in order to support and insure the stability and sustainability of the provision Jefferson and Morrill envisioned for the country’s future.

Berry describes these two strands of education, “the liberal and practical,” and demonstrates the importance of offering both. Liberal education is associated with Jefferson’s focus on community responsibility. Berry compares liberal education to a bequest, a handing down of what is indispensable. Liberal education strives to define excellence through the use of examples, often introducing exemplary thinkers. Liberal education is based on the belief that nature and human nature do not change significantly over time (Berry, 1986a, pp. 156-158). Liberal education seeks the meaning of events in human experience and tends toward wholeness.

Practical education, in contrast, is associated with Morrill’s focus on utilitarianism. Berry compares practical education, as it has developed, to a commodity—an investment

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an inclusive definition of citizenry, Jefferson accommodated, sometimes against his best efforts and vision, the customs of his day. For a balanced discussion of this question, see “Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue” by Douglas Wilson, *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1992.

acquired in order to be exchanged in the future for something considered more valuable. He says that value and meaning can be lost in the process, as practical education posits a continually changing world. In such a world, lacking continuity, the past is seen as outmoded, and human society is viewed as the only significant context (Berry, 1986a, p. 157). Rather than exploring examples of excellence as in liberal education, practical education “is based upon the question of what will work” (p. 157).

As noted earlier, a major goal of the land-grant college legislation (the Morrill Act in 1862, establishing the land-grant colleges; the Hatch Act in 1887, establishing the agriculture experiment stations; and the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, establishing the cooperative extension service) was to insure that farmers and rural communities would have access to education and research on an equal footing with urban and industrial communities (Berry, 1986a, pp. 144-145). With the rapid urban and industrial development that emerged, however, the education goals that informed the founding of the land-grant colleges were soon abbreviated. Practical education gained dominance. This trend was not confined to agricultural education, though agricultural education is Berry’s especial focus in his discussion of the land-grant colleges. As the focus on practical education replaced attention to “the liberal *and* practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (p. 145), academicians became increasingly specialized and their frames of reference increasingly limited. As Berry observes in a 1993 interview, “The knowledge of most university experts is...committed to their own advancement in their careers and therefore, indifferent to the effects of the work they’re doing” (Smith, 2007, p. 101). Over time, with the focus centered on the practical, the definition for value became markedly constricted. Berry links the problem of narrowing frames of reference and diminishing attention to value directly to education.

The standard of practical education, on the other hand, is based upon the question of what will work, and because the practical is by definition of the



curriculum set aside from issues of value, the question tends to be resolved in the most shallow and immediate fashion: what is practical is what makes money; what is most practical is what makes the most money. (Berry, 1986a, p. 157)

Berry argues that it is not that one of the two streams of education is better than the other. Rather, the trouble comes with their separation; their division leads to one dominating the other (p. 156). He clarifies his reasons for supporting the holding together of liberal and practical education. He says that practical education separate from value leads to a focus on “the immediate interests of the practitioner, and so becomes destructive of value, practical and otherwise” (p. 158). On the other hand, “liberal education, divorced from practicality, gives something no less absurd: the specialist professor of one or another of the liberal arts, the custodian of an inheritance he has learned much about, but nothing from” (p. 158). Separating the two strands of education leads to significant limitations in learning, as Berry sees it.

Berry describes the issues he sees related to the ascendance of practical education. Agricultural education, for example, shifted from being central in the Enlightenment, and thereby related to multiple arenas of inquiry, to being “alienated” from such concerns in the modern university (Berry, 1986a, p. 154). The study of agriculture was divided into specialties, and these were separated from specialties of other kinds within the university structure (p. 154). Berry outlines the difference between *experience* and *experimentation*. Further exacerbating the isolation of academic specialties and the narrowing of foci within academic research is the move toward the validation of one’s work experimentally. Berry observes this transition in schools of agriculture (p. 158). He notes the tendency for scholars to “impose upon experience the metaphor of experiment” (p. 168). Too much experimental intelligence, he claims, is marked by oversimplification and the presence and impact of vested interests (pp. 168-169).

Berry offers further clarification of his concerns about our approach to knowledge in his essay, “The Loss of the University.” He discusses the comparison of knowledge with “the Tree of Life.”

This Tree, for many hundreds of years, seems to have come almost naturally to mind when we have sought to describe the form of knowledge. In Western tradition, it is at least as old as Genesis, and the form it gives us for all that we know is organic, unified, comprehensive, connective—and moral. (Berry, 1987, p. 82)

Berry references Samuel Johnson on advice Johnson received from a cousin about education.

Dr. Johnson told Mrs. Thrale that his cousin, Cornelius Ford, “advised him to study the Principles of every thing, that a general Acquaintance with Life might be the Consequence of his Enquiries—Learn said he the leading Precognita of all things [...] grasp the Trunk hard only, and you will shake all the Branches.” (Berry, 1987, p. 82)

Berry describes how this analogy applies to teaching and learning and educators’ efforts to understand knowledge and how best to conceive it.

The soundness of this advice seems indisputable, and the metaphor entirely apt. From the trunk it is possible to “branch out.” One can begin with a trunk and develop a single branch or any number of branches; although it may be possible to begin with a branch and develop a trunk, that is neither so probable nor so promising. (Berry, 1987, p. 82)

Berry makes an important observation about today’s higher education, quoting H. J. Massingham in the process.<sup>7</sup>

The modern university, at any rate, more and more resembles a loose collection of lopped branches waving about randomly in the air. “Modern knowledge is departmentalized,” H. J. Massingham wrote in 1943, “while the essence of culture is initiation into wholeness, so that all the divisions of knowledge are considered as the branches of one tree, the Tree of Life whose roots went deep into earth and whose top was in heaven.” (Berry, 1987, p. 82)

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<sup>7</sup>Harold John Massingham (1888–1952) “was a prolific British writer on ruralism, matters to do with the countryside and agriculture. He was also a published poet.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.\\_J.\\_Massingham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._J._Massingham))

Berry uses this long-standing comparison of knowledge to a tree to enhance his critique of contemporary culture and the challenges of modern education. The compromise in education as scholars and professors chose to settle for practical education, rather than liberal and practical education combined, is accompanied by additional trends that intensify negative outcomes. These trends include: the prevalence of focus on careers and advancement; the division of work and value; a preference for quantitative over qualitative inquiries and assessments; an unprecedented accumulation of information; and cultural disintegration. The shift to a focus on the most immediate and pragmatic benchmarks prompts Berry to write about knowledge with “no cultural depth or complexity whatever” (Berry, 1986a, p. 168) in an “artificially divided world of academic disciplines.” He takes his assessment of the resulting misguided academic goals and methodologies even further when he contrasts experience and experimental intelligence.

Experience, which is the basis of culture, tends always toward wholeness because it is interested in the *meaning* of what has happened; it is necessarily as interested in what does not work as in what does.... It is therefore not an “objective” voice, but at once personal and communal. The experimental intelligence, on the other hand, is only interested in what works; what doesn’t work is ruled out of consideration. This sort of intelligence tends to be shallow in that it tends to impose upon experience the metaphor of experiment. It invariably sees innovation, not as adding to, but as replacing what existed or was used before. Thus machine technology is seen as a *substitute* for human or animal labor, requiring the “old way” to be looked upon henceforth with contempt. In technology, as in genetics, the experimental intelligence tends toward radical oversimplification, reducing the number of possibilities....

And this intelligence protects itself from the disruptive memories and questions of experience by building around itself the compartmental structure of the modern university, in which effects and causes need never meet. The experimental intelligence is a tyrant that...lives at the center of a maze in which the bearers of bad news are lost before they can arrive. (Berry, 1986a, pp. 168-169)

One way to interpret Berry’s concern about discrete academic disciplines is to observe a pattern that often emerges linking the division of knowledge into separate

subjects with various negative results. Berry senses that separate academic disciplines are so prevalent in our approach to education that we often fail to see their limitations. Heavily implemented in most academic settings, separate disciplines impact how we think about the world. When our reliance on the boundaries between subjects goes unquestioned we are more prone to fragmentary rather than holistic thinking. The danger of overly narrowed frames of reference is that we are more likely to miss important connections that transcend subject disciplines and to fail to consider valuable related topics. Holistic thinking, by contrast, enables our perceptions to be more comprehensive and better suited to the complex realities human beings experience.

When asked in 1993 how he would improve education, Berry replies unhesitatingly that he would change the standard—from job and career preparation to the health of the community (Smith, 2007, p. 100). (The standard for education will be explored more fully in the last section of this chapter.) In his reply Berry sets forth his distress over our easy compliance with separate disciplines.

Once you begin to ask what would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing that we can do here for our community, you can't rule out any kind of knowledge. You need to know everything you possibly can know. So, once you raise the standard of the health of the community, all the departmental walls fall down, because you can no longer feel that it's safe not to know something. And then you begin to see that these supposedly discreet and separate disciplines, these "specializations," aren't separate at all, but are connected. And of course our mistakes, over and over again, show us what the connections are, or show us that connections exist. (Smith, 2007, p. 100)

Earlier in this discussion, Berry points toward the delicate link between how we learn, how knowledge is presented, and how we come to think. But first he calls attention to some of the shortcuts in thinking that have not served us well. As the discussion focuses on the extensive supply lines between producer and consumer, Berry underscores the importance of connections.

What I'm trying to talk against is the idea that a so-called environmental problem can *ever* be satisfactorily reduced to a simple moral choice. It's

always complex in its causes, and so its solutions will also have to be complex....

People have tried to simplify themselves by severing the connections. That doesn't work. Severing connections makes complication. These bogus attempts at simplification ignore or despise the real complexity of the world. And ignoring complexity makes complication—in other words, a mess. (Smith, 2007, p. 99)

The interviewer asks Berry if this complexity is not usually left out of “the accounting,” the fact sheet we are customarily given by those who do not want us to see the *real* costs of so-called “progress.” Berry agrees wholeheartedly that the complexity is left out of the accounting and identifies additional implications for how we come to think.

That's right. People think either that they'll die before the bill comes due or that somebody else will pay for it. But the world is complex, and if we are to make fit responses to the world, then our thinking—not our equipment, but our thoughts—will have to become complex also. Our thoughts can never become as complex as the world is—but, you can see, an uncanny thing is possible. It's possible to use the world well without understanding it in all of its complexity. People have done it. They've done it not by complicated technology, but by competent local adaptation, complex thought, sympathy, affection, local loyalties and fidelities, and so on. (Smith, 2007, p. 99)

These observations by Berry help us understand his concern about the division of knowledge into separate academic disciplines. He wants us to see that our learning is intricately tied up with how we come to think. And while Berry does not say we should do away completely with discrete disciplines, his sense of their value in effective teaching and learning is much more limited than that of many educators, as evidenced by the prevalence of this approach to knowledge in present-day teaching praxis.

It is a short step from Berry's analysis to troubling observations about how education plays out for many students. Proponents of practical education argue: who knows what young people will need tomorrow? Our limited ability to predict the future, then, is used to justify the teaching of most any topic the educator deems interesting (Berry, 1986a, p. 149). Paralleling this future-oriented focus is a troubling disregard for the past. Whether the study is about agriculture or great literature, the attitude toward

previous eras tends to be one of curiosity and sometimes bemusement about how people back then thought and worked (Berry, 1987, pp. 91-93). Left out is respect for the ways people in previous times and places faced major challenges and recognition of the fact that earlier discoveries are frequently still worthy of consideration.

This tendency toward division, separating out and often simplifying, has led to narrow foci in many educational endeavors. It contributes as well to the prevailing definitions of success that young people encounter as they grow up. Success is most often defined simplistically as doing better than one's parents. This often means moving away from the place where one grew up and striving for greater wealth and status than previous generations achieved (Berry, 1986a, p. 159). Success is evaluated quantitatively; qualitative measures, though often a better means for assessing true value, are omitted.

Our propensity to divide knowledge into separate and specialized academic disciplines and to approach learning in this arguably rigid manner impacts our way of looking at the world, and in ways we often fail to see. The blinders that come with compartmentalization make it easier to begin accepting proxies for basic life endeavors, farming out to others our fundamental responsibilities. Society justifies these costly compromises in the name of profit, leisure, the good life, progress, and achieving a higher standard of living. In the process we frequently fail to realize how valuable qualities are lost—our ability for holistic thinking and the capacity to resist “tunnel vision.” Erecting boundaries between academic disciplines is a custom so entrenched in our education system that our skill to address complex problems effectively, what I am calling holistic thinking, and to lead others to do so as well is seriously compromised. There is a link between holistic thinking and a sense of vocation or meaningful calling. This link is enhanced when educators recognize our overreliance on discrete academic disciplines and work to resist it, thereby decreasing our propensity for fragmentary thinking.

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Key Ideas in Berry's Work**

Berry's concern about education's division of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines and the negative results of rigid adherence to this practice, especially the isolation of specialists and scholars and the difficulty they have speaking intelligibly to specialists in other fields or to lay audiences, relates to several of the key ideas in his work—most especially the ideas about *connection*, *choice*, and “*the Great Economy*.”

**Discussion of key idea: The connectedness of the created world.** Berry's concern about our over-reliance on separate academic disciplines is inherently related to the key idea in his work about connectedness: *Everything is connected—everything we do matters—has consequences. There are no absolute vacuums.* (See pp. 251-252 for definition.) The key idea of **connectedness** elucidates the problem with discrete academic disciplines—something will be left out, and it could be significant. In 1993, an interviewer asks Berry how far he is willing to push the notion of connectedness. The interviewer confesses his skepticism about Berry's advocacy for a generalist approach to knowledge and scholarship. He does not understand how knowledge can expand if specialization is avoided altogether. Berry replies by identifying the most important task for educators.

Adding to knowledge is not the first necessity. The first necessity is to teach the young. If we teach the young what we already know, we would do outlandishly better than we're doing. Knowing is overrated, you know. There have been cultures that did far better than we do, knowing far less than we know. We need to see that knowledge is overrated, but also that knowledge is not at all the same thing as “information.” There's a world of difference...between that information to which we now presumably have access...great stockpiles of data, and that knowledge that people have in their bones by which they do good work and live good lives. The knowledge that a good farmer has, for instance, is a far different thing from the knowledge that most university experts have. For one thing, a farmer's knowledge is usable knowledge; a lot of it comes from experience, and a lot is inherited. The knowledge of most university experts is self-centered—committed to their own advancement in their careers and therefore, indifferent to the effects of the work they're doing or going to do. And they're usually not committed to any community. (Smith, 2007, p. 101)

In a 2006 interview, Berry praises the Amish community for limiting their education requirements and teaching themselves the practical skills needed for daily work. Berry is impressed that the Amish do not need to bring in a specialist “to solve their problems for them.”

You know the Amish don't educate their children formally past the eighth grade. But this doesn't keep the Amish from learning as much as they are capable of learning.... For instance, there are Amish factories that are run by eighth-grade-educated Amishmen who have taught themselves enough mathematics and physics to calculate gear ratios and to design complex manufacturing procedures. They are capable of mastering as much mechanical engineering as they need. They don't have to bring in a mechanical engineer to solve their problems for them. That to me is a kind of marker. That brings into question our now rather facile assumption that everybody needs to be at least a bachelor of arts. (Dalton, 2007, p. 195)

Berry exhibits a consistent respect for the inevitable limitations of our knowledge and awareness. He is ever on the alert for what we failed to anticipate. Given this key idea in his work, that there are no vacuums, it is understandable that Berry would be concerned about the division of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines, calling our attention to the dangers inherent in failing to encourage students to traverse the boundaries between disciplines. Returning to the analogy of knowledge to “the Tree of Life,” Berry examines this analogy as it has developed in Western tradition.

This Tree, for many hundreds of years, seems to have come almost naturally to mind when we have sought to describe the form of knowledge.... The form it gives us for all that we know is organic, unified, comprehensive, connective—and moral. The tree, at the beginning, was two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Later, in our understanding of them, the two trees seem to have become one, or each seems to stand for the other—for in the world after the Fall, how can the two be separated? (Berry, 1987, pp. 82-83)

He then links this traditional metaphor to the question of connectedness and separation in our understanding of knowledge or human intelligence and thereby clarifies his concern about our established reliance on separate disciplines.



To know life is to know good and evil; to prepare young people for life is to prepare them to know the difference between good and evil. If we represent knowledge as a tree, we know that things that are divided are yet connected. We know that to observe the divisions and ignore the connections is to destroy the tree. The history of modern education may be the history of the loss of this image, and of its replacement by the pattern of the industrial machine, which subsists upon division—and by industrial economics (“publish or perish”), which is meaningless apart from division. (Berry, 1987, p. 83)

In the 2006 interview just cited, Berry candidly admits that adults do not know enough to teach the young. Yet teach they must. And to do so includes making best guesses about *what* to teach.

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

Berry invites us to a sense of humility about the educating profession. When he argues for teaching “what we already know,” he is advocating for broad and far-reaching experience (Smith, 2007, p. 101). We should teach all we can about life. Imagine that goal for a moment; it is bigger than academic disciplines, career specialties, or scholarly expertise. The most important task for educators is to pass on to young people the wealth of knowledge we already have. This process includes an interdisciplinary focus.

There is no one to teach young people but older people, and so the older people must do it. That they do not know enough to do it, that they have never been smart enough or experienced enough or good enough to do it, does not matter. They must do it because there is no one else to do it. This is simply the elemental trial—some would say the elemental tragedy—of human life: the necessity to proceed on the basis merely of the knowledge that is available, the necessity to postpone until too late the question of the sufficiency and the truth of that knowledge. (Berry, 1987, p. 84)

When adults bring new lives into the world, as Berry sees it, they incur big responsibilities. “To have committed other people's lives to this world, as you have your

children's, is an extremely serious thing" (Dalton, 2007, p. 195). The responsibility to educate the young is one such responsibility. It is awesome and inescapable, and can be said to have a tragic side to it. Yet teaching can also be a unique and promising opportunity. Paul Theobald and Dale Snauwaert (1990) cite Berry's comparison of good teaching to good farming.

Concerning pedagogy, Berry writes: "Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of the mind in his community. The standard of his discipline is his community's health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, deserving of a life's work."... Ideally teachers should work after the model of the craftsmen of old. They should work as examples to their apprentices, leading them in the direction of the mastery that they themselves have attained. (pp. 14-15)

Theobald and Snauwaert then flesh out their understanding of Berry's educational theory.

This metaphor implies a pedagogy that is experiential, active, participatory, and conversational. But it is not student-centered; it is centered in the knowledge and mastery of the teacher who shapes the judgement of the student-apprentice, through experience and discourse, experimentation and conversation. It is a pedagogy diametrically opposed to what Paulo Freire refers to as the "banking" concept of education, wherein information is merely [transferred] to, deposited in, the mind of the student. Berry's pedagogy is mutually participatory, wherein both teacher and student are engaged together in a process of creation and development, the development of deeper understandings concerning life and its meaning. (p. 15)

Another example where Berry identifies his concern about divisions of knowledge, the importance of connections, and human beings' limitations for knowing is in a letter to his friend Wes Jackson. The 1982 letter continues a conversation they had had about randomness. Berry sets the focus of their exchange by identifying a question and quoting a brief excerpt from *The Soil Resource* about raindrops and their journey into and out of the soil. He then offers his navigation of several philosophical and practical issues.

My question is: Does "random" in this (or any) context describe a verifiable condition or a limit of perception?

My answer is: It describes a limit of perception. This is, of course, not a scientist's answer, but it may be that *anybody's* answer would be

unscientific. My answer is based on the belief that pattern is verifiable by limited information, whereas the information required to verify randomness is unlimited. As I think you said when we talked, what is perceived as random within a given limit may be seen as part of a pattern within a wider limit....

What impresses me about it, however, is the insistent practicality implicit in it. If we are up against mystery, then we dare act only on the most modest assumptions. The modern scientific program has held that we must act on the basis of knowledge, which, because its effects are so manifestly large, we have assumed to be ample. But if we are up against mystery, then knowledge is relatively small, and the ancient program is the right one: Act on the basis of ignorance. Acting on the basis of ignorance, paradoxically, requires one to know things, remember things—for instance, that failure is possible, that error is possible, that second chances are desirable (so don't risk everything on the first chance), and so on. (Berry, 1987, pp. 3-5)

This exchange between friends, long committed to the healing, health, and recovery of the earth and the human community, is an important reminder about the limitations of human knowledge. It has seemed easy in the age of facile information and the mushrooming of remarkable discoveries to focus solely on our knowledge—how impressive it is and how it is constantly growing. We need reminders that there will always be significant truths and considerations that we cannot factor in, because we either do not know them or have forgotten them and, at the moment, have no access to greater awareness. Hence, we always need to be vigilant about impediments to careful and comprehensive (holistic) thinking and the way knowledge is understood, envisioned, and presented in our education settings.

**Discussion of key idea: Human beings have choices.** A second key idea in Berry's work that relates to his educational concern about academic disciplines is the idea about human **choice**: *As human beings, though, we have choices. We can choose to farm a damaged acreage with care, using knowledge of the principles of agriculture and knowledge of the particular place (its unique composition and therefore its especial needs, strengths, and weaknesses) in such a way that healing may come about. We can, by what we choose to do, honor the place and its livelihood, its potential for restoration.*

*We can perhaps “bring it back” somewhat. And it matters—how we choose—what we decide to do. (See p. 262 for definition.)*

How obvious is it to American educators that they have, or should have, considerable freedom to choose how and what they teach? When Berry writes about his own teaching, the teaching of writing at the college level, he acknowledges the challenges as well as what students bring to the classroom. He writes about his experience with college administrations and notes the “useless work and waste paper” university administrations have made it their “major business” to produce (Berry, 1970, p. 17). He refers to the university “machine” and its focus on self-perpetuation and predictable outcomes (p. 18).

And so I have come to look upon the university as a machine that one must to a considerable extent work against in order to work within. The machine seeks an outcome that is altogether predictable: the student is to “learn” certain designated facts and procedures; the syllabus and the tests may all be written in advance.

But the teacher of writing is not concerned to transform the student into a finished product. He is concerned with possibility.... This intent to encourage and foster the unexpected, then, immediately sets the teacher of writing at odds with the machine. (Berry, 1970, p. 18)

In his essay “The Loss of the University,” Berry (1987) makes clear his frame of reference about the task of educators.

These two problems, how to make and how to judge, are the business of education. But education has tended increasingly to ignore the doubleness of its obligation. It has concerned itself more and more exclusively with the problem of how to make, narrowing the issue of judgment virtually to the terms of the made thing itself. But the thing made by education now is not a fully developed human being; it is a specialist, a careerist, a graduate....

This narrowing is justified by the improbable assumption that young students, before they know anything else, know what they need to learn. (p. 81)

Berry persistently outlines the obligations of quality education, even in the face of eroding trends and obstacles that work against the goals he identifies.

The need for broadly informed human judgment nevertheless remains, and this need requires inescapably an education that is broad and basic....

The work that should, and that can, unify a university is that of deciding what a student should be required to learn—what studies, that is, constitute the trunk of the tree of a person's education. (p. 83)

Berry believes that American educators too frequently relinquish much of the responsibility of deciding what students should learn. While states and districts may mandate learning objectives for younger students, Berry questions whether this responsibility is adequately addressed in higher education. Deciding what young people should learn is an all-important educational task. Students need and deserve guidance to navigate the maze of options. Berry continues to remind us of the important commitment educators, regardless of the age of their students, are called to fulfill.

The inescapable purpose of education must be to preserve and pass on the essential human means—the thoughts and words and works and ways and standards and hopes without which we are not human. To preserve these things and to pass them on is to prepare students for life. (pp. 88-89)

Through an exploration of the fate of literature in American public schools and universities, Berry builds his argument toward sobering conclusions about education, perhaps especially higher education, and its affinity with industrial images and realities.

The imagination is *in* the world, is at work in it, is necessary to it, and is correctable by it. This correcting of imagination by experience is inescapable, necessary, and endless, as is the correcting of experience by imagination. This is the great general work of criticism to which we all are called.... One of the most profound of human needs is for the truth of imagination to prove itself in every life and place in the world, and for the truth of the world's lives and places to be proved in imagination.

This need takes us as far as possible from the argument for works of imagination, human artifacts, as special cases, privileged somehow to offer themselves to the world on their own terms. It is this argument and the consequent abandonment of the general criticism that have permitted the universities to organize themselves on the industrial principle, as if faculties and students and all that they might teach and learn are no more than parts of a machine, the purpose of which they have, in general, not bothered to define, much less to question. And largely through the agency of the universities, this principle and this metaphor now dominate our relation to nature and to one another. (Berry, 1987, p. 96)

It is difficult to acknowledge how so many school administrations fail in genuinely supporting the work of teaching and learning. Yet it is a truth calling for acknowledgement and constructive change. Berry approaches the dilemma of the university “machine” by working within his class to circumnavigate it. He talks of friendship with students. He notes one of his primary objectives as a teacher of writing.

I base nearly everything I attempt on one assumption: that every person’s experience is in some way different from anybody else’s. Hence, everybody has something to tell me that I would be interested to know. The student’s task is to find out what it is and to write it well. (Berry, 1970, p. 19)

Berry makes a lot of choices about how he approaches his own teaching. It is true that teaching advanced composition may render Berry freer than many other teachers to approach his teaching as he thinks best. A public middle school teacher teaching math, science, or less fact- or formula-based subjects, such as history or English, for instance, may be required to adhere to the directives of others considerably more than Berry. Yet I believe teachers have some degree of latitude in how they approach their teaching, and where they find that latitude unreasonably limited, I would hope they find ways to negotiate for greater freedom.<sup>8</sup> In any case, it seems clear that schools that encourage inter- or cross-disciplinary studies will be implementing measures that Berry favors.

**Discussion of key idea: The Great Economy.** Berry’s concern about the division of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines and the problems that often result relates to a third key idea in his work, **the Great Economy**: *Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to live in a society that embraces an economy based on cooperation and preservation rather than competition, greed, destructiveness, and violence. Berry offers a*

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<sup>8</sup>The sense of freedom teachers have or perceive themselves to have varies widely and is a function of multiple variables including teaching experience, administrations, demographics of the student body, state and national mandates, education standards in place at given times, the subject matter, and the teaching skill of one leading a group of learners.

*name for it, “the Great Economy.” Whatever we name it, it is much more encompassing than the human economy (i.e., it includes the human economy) and stands in stark contrast to our postindustrial, technological, and quasi-totalitarian economy where a few are very well off and powerful, many struggle to manage the basics, and too many are simply hurting. Creating a human economy in harmony with the Great Economy is not impossible, according to Berry. We could do it.*

• *The Great Economy*: One of the boldest, most inviting concepts for which we are indebted to Berry is his concept of “the Great Economy.” Berry gives this name to an economy predicated on a number of elements missing in our current economy in its scramble for a place at the top in what has come to be known as “the global economy.” Components of a human economy that would be in harmony with “the Great Economy” include:

1. A respect for natural resources and a search for farming methods that encourage the healing of land, water, and forests;
2. A focus on local cooperation that supports independence from mega-corporations;
3. The absence of absentee-landlords;
4. The significant shortening of food supply chains so that produce is produced and sold locally, thereby greatly reducing the number of middle positions that now occupy our extended supply chains;
5. Respect for farmers and all human labor necessary for food production and an economy that enables them to earn an acceptable standard of living (not having to sell their hard-earned produce at a loss and then also purchase needed staples at unaffordable costs); and
6. A fair and balanced accounting ledger—one that factors in losses: lost jobs, farm-ownerships, damage to topsoil, and more. In other words, an accounting that does not present a rosy “fact sheet,” glossing over the true costs of

mining, mega farms, and other deficits, failing to include injury to resources, people, and communities.

Berry uses the term “the Great Economy” to name the kind of economy he would like to see implemented. He has in mind something much more comprehensive than our current human economy, which he characterizes as the “industrial economy” or “the total economy,” referred to now by the popular descriptor, “the global economy.” The Great Economy, by contrast, offers a fairer balance sheet; it recognizes the losses that human beings and the natural world are suffering in the journey from prehistoric to post-modern times. One of Berry’s most pointed criticisms of the “pitches” of various academic, government, and corporate experts is their failure to factor in these losses, which he considers significant and most often, unsalvageable.

What does the Great Economy offer besides a more comprehensive accounting of gains and losses in Berry’s view? Berry’s vision of an economy fairer than the one that now dominates the globe is one that enables people to make a living, a decent and acceptable standard of living, in the places where they live. Berry is a constant advocate for viable local economies. This means in part the caring for and nurturing of the land and the forests, the implementation of healthy farming on a manageable scale, and in such a way as to preserve topsoil and allow the land to benefit from crop rotation and periods of rest. This means farming practices that make farming a viable occupation, worthy of respect. It includes healthy small communities, rural communities, close to the land. It includes urban areas purchasing food from nearby farms. It means shortening the lines of transmission from farm to table. And perhaps most of all, it means the dismantling of the dominance of people and resources by corporate entities. Berry believes that the major corporations now rule the world; they have co-opted national governments and are “the real imperialist power...in charge of the global economy” (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 212). There seems to be no limit to their ability and willingness to exact profits at any cost, “to make too cheap and sell too high” (Berry, 2003, p. 66).



The postindustrial economy is based on competition, destruction, and violence, while the Great Economy nurtures and values cooperation, preservation, and restoration. It recognizes that everything cannot be accounted for quantitatively. There is a place in the Great Economy for neighbors helping neighbors. There is a place for letting a field lie fallow for a season. There is a place for determining what acreage constitutes a manageable farm.

How does Berry's key idea about the Great Economy relate to his concern about the division of knowledge into academic disciplines and the kind of thinking that consistent adherence to this educational practice can produce? Again, one way to link these abstract notions is by looking at Berry's fiction. We revisit Old Jack Beechum's work ethic, his lifelong love of his farm.

Jack Beechum's work ethic includes giving all he has for the farm from before sunrise to beyond sunset for years. Beechum's work ethic is a fitting example of the Great Economy as Berry envisions it. Beechum is knowledgeable about farming; he learns from those who came before him, and what he does not know, he learns from experience. This is a man who pays attention to what works and what fails. He does not make the same mistake twice. For instance, when Ruth urges that they purchase more land, in her desire for them to move up socially, Beechum tries it. He takes on more acreage. And he learns some hard lessons in the process. He spends years working to clear the financial obligation he incurs. He also discovers that he has more land than he can work himself. He must hire a helper; this works well at first, but in time it fails. Beechum learns how much he can manage. He discovers the cost of extending himself beyond his limit and the unfairness of expecting sustained and committed work from one who does not share with him an ownership investment. It is clear that Beechum produces much of what the family of three consumes. He goes into town on occasion to purchase pantry staples, but most of their meat, vegetables, and fruit is produced on their land. One of the saddest parts of the Beechum story is the awkwardness that results when their

daughter Clara, years after she has grown up and left home, and her husband Gladston come to visit. Ruth and Jack try to load them up with food from the farm before they leave. Clara and Gladston accept these offerings more with condescension than gratitude. They have plenty of money to buy what they need. In addition, as Old Jack and those close to him must finally acknowledge, Clara and Gladston do not respect the work required to produce the meat, vegetables, and fruit her parents offer so generously. This lack of gratitude for the bounty of the farm, produced by strenuous, disciplined work and freely shared, points as well to the differences between Clara and her father. Their worlds and values do not intersect.

One can argue that Jack and Ruth Beechum and most of the Port William membership live in the Great Economy. They are not running constantly to the store to buy everything they need and more. They produce as much of what they need as they can. They minimize purchasing what they do not need. In addition, they and their neighbors work together during harvest seasons. The community comes together to help harvest Mat Feltner's crop, or Jack Beechum's, or Elton Penn's. They are there for their neighbors, as their neighbors will be for them. In contrast to Jack and Ruth, Clara and Gladston Pettit live in a world we might describe as socially elitist and governed by an increasingly consumerist economy. In fact, they seem embarrassed by Clara's parents' livelihood. Once Ruth and Jack are deceased, Clara's focus is selling the farm and investing the profit. She and Gladston are eager, as Wheeler Catlett comes to understand, to put Clara's roots in the world of Port William and the Beechum farm behind them. Connecting with the Beechum place, tending it and keeping it productive as the next heirs, as Jack lets himself keep hoping they might one day undertake, in spite of the evidence that Clara and Gladston's lives are elsewhere, is the last thing the Pettits want to do. Before he dies, Old Jack is forced to admit that he and they live worlds apart.

How does this focus on the Great Economy relate to academic disciplines? Why would dividing knowledge into separate disciplines be a development that undercuts the

Great Economy? Have separate academic disciplines and the fragmented thinking that may result led to a postindustrial, global economy? On the surface the connection may not be readily apparent. However, I believe a verifiable link joins this pedagogical tradition and these economic realities. When we can compartmentalize the vast territory of human learning into small chunks, narrowing our frames of reference, even if we acknowledge pragmatic reasons for doing so at times, does it not become easier to overspecialize with the result that we are less likely to see the larger picture and, therefore, less able to understand how things are connected one to another? In this sense, then, there is a parallel between academic specializations and Berry's idea of the Great Economy, and our shortsighted planning is one of the undesirable outcomes.

If we stop and consider this process, I think we can recognize the ways in which some disciplines, especially those that call for scientific inquiry and quantitative analysis, invite us implicitly to step back, assess, analyze, and gauge what lies before us. These processes can be a short step from manipulations of one sort or another. Over and over, Berry makes the case that our corporate-dominated world rests on untenable assumptions which we are not invited to examine and which, should we be so bold as to consider and question, will be refuted promptly by those with vested interests. One example of an untenable assumption is the belief in an unlimited supply of cheap fossil fuel (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 205). This tendency to discount what does not support one's immediate interest is demonstrated not just by our government and corporate executives, but by our academicians as well.<sup>9</sup> Again, focusing on agricultural education, Berry makes cogent

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<sup>9</sup>A fitting example is the story of Rachel Carson and her call to America to eliminate the widespread dissemination of DDT, a toxic chemical. (See the PBS *American Masters* documentary, aired January 24, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/rachel-carson/>) Carson carried out extensive research to alert the United States that while DDT was an effective eradicator of harmful pests, it was wrongly assumed that DDT did not harm humans because exposure for humans did not lead to the same immediate and disabling effects as it did for insects. Rather, the impact for humans came well *after* exposure, though the results were just as devastating. Carson believed that science was missing important factors in the picture. She

observations about this educational practice and its significant costs. His observations are generalizable to other fields of study.

That the colleges of agriculture should have become colleges of “agribusiness”—working, in effect, *against* the interests of the small farmers, the farm communities, and the farmland—can only be explained by the isolation of specialization....

The result is an absurd “independence” which has produced genetic research “without attention to nutritional values,” which has undertaken the so-called Green Revolution without concern for its genetic oversimplification or its social, political, and cultural dangers, and which keeps agriculture in a separate “field” from ecology. (Berry, 1986a, p. 154)<sup>10</sup>

Berry believes that education plays a role in reducing the focus of young people on meaningful vocations. Their attention is directed to careers and jobs, to well-paying positions, but these are not the same as vocation. For Berry, a vocation is a calling, work that one is especially well suited for and that elicits quality performance and integrity. Vocation includes resisting both the impulse to outsource the job and the trend toward pigeon-holing, which invariably diminishes the person by accepting and accentuating some of his or her gifts while discounting the rest of the person.

When Berry reflects on the changes he believes are needed in education, his eye is not far from the balance sheet, totaling up our gains and losses. Our tendency to narrow academic inquiries to precise, even simple questions, ruling out factors that could shift

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waged a relentless campaign to shed light on the issue. In time, Carson was vindicated. Initially, however, she was completely discounted, especially by those whose vested interests were challenged by her work and ability to voice her findings.

As my dissertation committee second reader, Dr. J. Philip Smith, notes, “This discussion exemplifies Berry’s point about the complexity and interdependence of things. Some agriculturalists, we note, have argued that banning DDT caused considerable unnecessary suffering in, for instance, parts of Africa. The documentary about Carson underscores Berry’s belief that we can never fully anticipate or adequately control for the emergence of unanticipated consequences. We live in a world of mystery, as Berry sees it. The only constant will be our continuing experience of surprise” (J. P. Smith, personal communication, November 2017).

<sup>10</sup>The terms and phrases Berry quotes here are taken from “Agriculture, the Island Empire,” an article by André Mayer and Jean Mayer in *Daedalus*, summer 1974, which Berry identifies in text.

the findings in a different direction, thereby generating results that prove valuable from the perspective of legitimate stakeholders—who may be other than academicians, government officials, or corporate executives—proves costly in ways we seldom recognize. When this approach to knowledge is combined with our increasing willingness to surrender important tasks in our lives to others, the costs continue to increase even as they remain hidden. In a 2000 essay, Berry identifies what he calls “the total economy.” As previously noted, he states its underlying mandate: “To make too cheap and sell too high has always been the program of industrial capitalism” (Berry, 2003, p. 66). For Berry this unquestioned mandate constitutes a “moral and economic absurdity” (p. 66). The price we are paying for the total economy is made even clearer by his additional observations. “In a total economy, significant and sometimes critical choices that once belonged to individuals or communities become the property of corporations” (p. 72). Linking us back to basic issues about education are Berry’s observations about vocation in the total economy.

Among the many costs of the total economy, the loss of the principle of vocation is probably the most symptomatic and, from a cultural standpoint, the most critical. It is by the replacement of vocation with economic determinism that the exterior workings of a total economy destroy human character and culture also from the inside. (Berry, 2003, p. 72)

Some who hear Berry speak or write about the Great Economy may be inclined to dismiss him, claiming offhandedly that he is not living in the modern age. He needs to surrender his old-fashioned sentiments, more suitable to earlier eras, and wake up to the realities of today’s world, obviously progressive and inventive times, these critics may claim. But I would counter such remarks by asserting that Berry is *more* aware of current realities, economic, biologic, sociological, and theological than many of his critics. Few people currently surveying the world’s challenges—especially the issues of climate change, topsoil depletion, the receding knowledge of sound farming practices, the breakdown of cohesive communities rural and urban, the multiple and complex diseases

of body, mind, and spirit exhibited by many in postindustrial societies, and the loss of incentives for young people to discern and pursue their true vocations by the ravages of a market-driven, competitive economy that highlights lucrative careers as the mark of success—have so comprehensive an understanding of the complexity of our troubles, their multiple and interrelated causes, and practical, doable solutions that, if implemented comprehensively and without delay, would do much to change the direction of our self-defeating path, as Berry. This is not to say that Berry has all the answers. It is to say that he has studied great thinkers, contemporary and historical, and that the solution he embraces, the one he hopes for and has increasing confidence in—the expansion of “stable, locally adapted communities in America”—deserves our keenest attention (Smith, 2007, p. 102). Berry focuses on local solutions to local problems. He does not naively claim that every issue can be handled this way, that there is no need for national legislation or mandates for certain initiatives. Healthcare, for example, is an issue that must be addressed on a broader scale. But he opens our eyes to the power of independent, self-sustaining, local economies and the difference for the good, he believes they can make.

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Themes in Berry’s Fiction**

Berry’s concern about specialization and the division of knowledge into separate academic disciplines is related to the three themes this study explored in his fiction. With respect to *land and place*, it is important to pay careful attention to any given farm or tract of land and to study the ecosystem, the needs of specific terrains, and the livelihoods they support. At the same time, we cannot realistically view any tract of land as separate from its surrounding land and the larger ecosystem of which it is a part. The water that flows downstream will bring fresh, clean water that serves the land and its inhabitants or it will bring pollutants that do not support the ecosystem. The rain that falls will bring fresh or unclean water. Weather currents active in nearby or even distant areas will affect

the health and viability of individual land tracts. These concepts may seem simplistic, but they are not. The ecosystem is a unified, organic whole. While it is important to assess carefully the needs of any given piece of land and consider how best to use it for crops or livestock, one cannot produce an accurate and complete assessment without attending to additional factors that impact the particular piece of land. Narrowing one's vision, siphoning out what *seems* unrelated, can prove costly. Significant factors will be left out and often are, according to Berry.

A similar argument can be made with regard to *community*. (See pp. 81-82 for definition.) It is important to look carefully at each individual community, to identify its eco-features, explore its history, study the basis of its economy, and identify what nurtures and holds people there or drives them away. Yet if the focus is simply on the community itself without consideration of related influences, pertinent elements will be overlooked. This is a concern that underlies Berry's educational critique—that requisite factors are missed when ranges of vision are narrowed in order to carry out scientifically respected studies. Factors are manipulated and analyzed to lead to generalizations about patterns of behavior, correlation and causation, and the probability of particular outcomes. Berry does not say there is no place for such research. He does claim, however, that this is not the only kind of worthy investigation to undertake.

Communities, for Berry, are complex—like individuals and tracts of land. They are also extremely valuable, and they have strengths and vulnerabilities. To be nurtured, repaired, and made viable for their inhabitants, community members must bring their most positive and perceptive visions to bear in the daily work of shaping and re-shaping the place they call home. This envisioning and working out calls for astute thinking and includes resisting the culture's tendencies toward oversimplification, severing connections, and the actions that often follow limited and circumscribed analyses and ways of seeing.

Finally, how does Berry's concern about academic specialization, as a consequence of our reliance on discrete academic disciplines, and the kind of thinking that often results, intersect with the study of *character* in his fiction? (See pp. 127-128 for definition.) As I have tried to show, Berry demonstrates in his writing a profound respect and appreciation for the created world. His fictional characters, the residents of Port William, are not simple, one-dimensional people. Even if they do not carry a major role or appear from one novel to another, they make important contributions. Berry's characters exemplify depth and breadth of vision.

One example of the difference in ways of thinking that I am exploring and how these differences may relate to education can be found in Berry's story "It Wasn't Me," the story of the auction of Jack Beechum's farm. This story includes the provocative conversation between Wheeler Catlett, Beechum's friend and lawyer, and Elton Penn who, despite his desire to become the new owner of the Beechum place, is visibly distressed over the fact that, because of the auction's outcome, the farm now will cost more than expected. Elton faces debts now that he is unsure he can meet and a troubling awareness that he did not "make it on my own" (Berry, 1986b, p. 67). Wheeler's response to Elton is nuanced and eloquent. In addition, it relates closely to what I have been exploring about the Great Economy, holistic thinking, and how we learn. Elton is beginning to see what Wheeler wants him to grasp. In the following passage Wheeler concludes his measured, gently laid out argument, which includes a recognition of our lack of complete independence. We all stand on others' shoulders; everyone is indebted.

Elton draws a long breath, and holds it, looking out the window, and then breathes it out and looks at Wheeler. "I can't repay him [Jack Beechum], Wheeler. And now you've helped me, and I can't repay you."

"Well, that's the rest of it," Wheeler says. "It's not accountable. If the place was its price, or you thought it was, maybe you could consider such debts payable—but then some of those debts you wouldn't have contracted, and the rest you wouldn't recognize as debts. Your debt to Jack Beechum *is* a debt, and it's *not* payable—not to him, anyhow. Your debt to me is smaller



than your debt to him, not much at all, and it may or may not be payable to me. This is only human friendship. I could need a friend too, you know. I could get sick or die too.”

Elton says, “Well, I—”

But Wheeler raises a hand, and goes on. (Berry, 1986b, p. 72)

The argument Wheeler delivers here is central to Berry’s concepts of community membership and health of the local community. This is a place, in addition to Burley Coulter’s definition of community membership in “The Wild Birds,” where core ideas in Berry’s philosophy are reflected in the dialogue of his fictional characters.

“It’s not accountable, because we’re dealing in goods and services that we didn’t make, that can’t exist at all except as gifts. Everything about a place that’s different from its price is a gift. Everything about a man or woman that’s different from their price is a gift. The life of a neighborhood is a gift. I know that if you bought a calf from Nathan Coulter you’d pay him for it, and that’s right. But aside from that, you’re friends and neighbors, you work together, and so there’s lots of giving and taking without a price—some that you don’t remember, some that you never knew about. You don’t send a bill. You don’t, if you can help it, keep an account. Once the account is kept and the bill presented, the friendship ends, the neighborhood is finished, and you’re back to where you started. The starting place doesn’t have anybody in it but you.”...

“So. There is to be no repayment. Because there is to be no bill. Do you see what I mean?” (Berry, 1986b, pp. 72-73)

While references to school and formal learning experiences are not part of this story, we can conclude that Wheeler’s understanding has emerged from a life of careful observations, dedicated work in a small town law office, commitment to the agrarian livelihoods of his family and neighbors, and learning both in and out of school.

Another example of different ways of thinking and how they can be traced in part to experiences young people have in school is found in the character of Jayber Crow. In Berry’s novel named for the character, we are privileged to hear many of Crow’s thoughts and reflections, and these include his views about education.

When Crow travels from the orphanage to the seminary, and then to the university, and later out of the university and back to the land of his origins, he is paying close

attention not only to messages in his culture and the influence of his teachers, he is listening to his heart as well. He is trying to find a place and a livelihood that feels right to him, that fosters his sense of wholeness. He is not willing to settle for situations in which important parts of himself are left out.

Jayber says that he felt the university, like all the educational institutions he had attended, was “hard at work trying to be a world unto itself” (Berry, 2000a, p. 70). Furthermore the university held itself to be superior to the world outside itself. He hears disturbing messages from his culture—that becoming somebody requires leaving where you come from and working to achieve certain socially accepted marks of success. Striving to make sense of these messages in his youth and young adulthood, Jayber reaches a low point dominated by overwhelming loneliness. This trouble forces careful thinking. Jayber realizes that part of the culture’s message, transmitted in many ways including through the schools, is that until he reaches this hypothetical plateau of success, he is, by the standards of his society, considered a nobody. And his place of origin is of no account. This conclusion is at odds with much that he learned from Aunt Cordie, who showed him unconditional love. These realizations, painstakingly achieved, become a turning point for Jayber Crow. They lead him ultimately to a meaningful life.

I do not claim that separate academic disciplines cause Jayber Crow to go astray or struggle and falter. Nor do I claim that he got nothing from his experience in school. I do believe, however, that he is a person with intellectual gifts who, by choice and partly by accident, ends up in academic settings, none of which prove able, truly, to hold and engage him. He never loses his curiosity about life and people, about meaning and human community, and he prizes his extensive library. With regard to the schools though, we can assume that the curriculum is likely organized in discrete academic disciplines, and we note that they fail to nurture and guide Jayber to meaningful life and vocation. It is not that other social institutions, family and religious organizations for example, have no role in this process for young people. Social organizations, in addition to the schools, are

significant. For Jayber, however, when it comes to the big questions of identity and direction, to pulling together his education and life experience to make strategic choices, he is for the most part on his own. Helping influences, particularly in the schools, are not to be found. Fortunately for Jayber, he is equal to the challenge. He can think deeply and holistically about his life, the community members with whom he shares Port William, the world and the changes he observes in it, and the impact of that world on his small corner of it. But, as a young person, trying to find his way, to grow into adulthood, he has only his memories of a few loving family members to fall back on. The schools Jayber attends provide neither paths forward nor mentors to emulate. What Jayber receives from the schools is, more often, awareness of the distance between the classroom and the world of his experience and observations.

I do not claim that schools never foster holistic thinking or play a positive role in the discernment that most young people must face at some time or another. I am saying, however, that schools could do more—to help young people navigate these developmental challenges, to modify the definitions of success held up to the young, and to encourage the kind of thinking that will prepare them for life's responsibilities. If Jayber Crow had been a different kind of thinker, if he had settled for simplistic explanations and solutions, I believe his life would have turned out differently. I suspect it would have been less meaningful and less of a contribution to his community. He might not have developed his rather remarkable understanding, had he not had the love and teachings of Aunt Cordie who instilled in him a sense of value about himself and his place of origin. In the short time she cares for him, Aunt Cordie cultivates in Jayber a confidence in himself and his convictions that lasts a lifetime. Is it unreasonable to think that schools, which have such extensive influence on young people, for both good and ill, could play a more constructive role in this type of care and nurturing?

For Jayber as well as other Port William residents, fragmentary thinking would have proven inadequate. Berry's characters frequently demonstrate the strength of

holistic perception and the value of actions that emerge from such awareness and understanding. Berry believes that if we can think more holistically, our assessments and hence our plans and projects, our solutions to complex challenges and our ability to communicate with one another, will prove more constructive, healing, and viable.

The concern about fragmented thinking or oversimplification is expressed often in Berry's work. He calls us to notice its prevalence in our society. He wants us to consider what we may be missing in the process of simplifying and severing connections. He helps us see that we are paying a price for our narrowed frames of reference and over-reliance on discrete academic disciplines. He calls out those who are invested in these practices—scholars and academicians focused on status, wealth, and power but who remain surprisingly disconnected from the consequences of their work and the issues facing their local communities. Berry challenges his listeners, claiming that we have no idea how many significant factors are being left out, not just now and then, but continually.

### **Changing the Standard for Education**

Berry's educational concerns are intrinsically related. I have drawn some quasi-artificial lines in order to identify his most valuable insights for educators and chosen three of his concerns for closer examination. The number is not exhaustive, and the concerns are not entirely discrete objectives. The third educational concern focuses on Berry's views about the standard for education. *Berry believes that changing the standard for education from the prevailing emphasis on success and career paths to the health of the community would lead to marked improvement in education as well as the health of the planet and the human community.* First I note working definitions for *standard* and *the health of the community*.

- *Standard.* (See p. 236 for definition.)

• *Health of the community.* As a working definition for this study, I defined *community* as a group of people situated in a particular place and associated with one another along cultural, social, historic, ecological, and economic dimensions. I noted that Berry is nearly always focused on people who live to a degree in close proximity.

When we discuss *the health of the community* we introduce value judgments that are not part of our definition of community. We note that communities are diverse; they differ one to another along various dimensions. Some communities, for example, have thriving economies while others face significant economic struggle. Some have robust social organizations that help residents feel connected and engaged; these could be religious, civic, professional, or social and recreational organizations. Others have fewer such opportunities. And so on.

When Berry talks about *the health of the community*, he does not set forth a checklist by which a given community can assess its position on a scale of community health. He does, however, offer portraits and seeks to identify qualities of healthy communities as he envisions this largely unrealized, yet essential goal for human beings. In these working definitions and the initial discussion in the summary of this educational concern, I draw on Berry's statements to introduce the two concepts, the standard of education and the health of the community, and to establish the foundation for a broader discussion about education's primary objective as Berry perceives it. The latter part of the summary will enumerate more specific benchmarks by which we can recognize a healthy community.

In his 1993 interview with *Bluegrass* magazine, Berry refutes several prevalent understandings of community, noting that, "There's a lot of sentimentality about community now" (Brown, 2007, p. 106). He observes, "A community is not something you love all that simply. A community is going to present you with problems, and some of them are going to be big" (Brown, 2007, p. 106). He notes the use of metaphorical references such as "the community of business leaders" and asserts that "network" is

the more appropriate term. Berry identifies several large components of community, including economy and inclusivity.

And if you have a community but no economy...then your community is seriously impaired.... And you can't exclude any members from a community. If a community becomes false, it becomes artificial, and is in danger the way all false things are. A community can't exclude the nonhuman creatures, for instance, if it hopes to last. It can't exclude the streams and rivers and other bodies of water. It can't exclude its climate. It can't exclude the air. All these, in a real community, are members. So if you are careful enough in defining a community, you see that it's a pattern of practical relationships. It's also...a pattern of loyalties and.... It's a cultural pattern. It's a known thing. It depends on being commonly known by its members. (Brown, 2007, p. 106)

As already noted, Berry has thought “over a good many years” about community and “what it is to be a member of a community” (Brown, 2007, p. 107). The definition of community he gives includes clues about his understanding of the health of the community.

It seems to me that we belong to each other and to God. If that's accepted, there are many practical things that you are committed to do. You see that nobody gets hungry, for instance. You see that nobody sleeps in the street. You see that children are taught—not just enough to get them a job or get them a diploma—but taught enough to function as responsible, affectionate members of that community. (Brown, 2007, p. 107)

Berry believes that education plays a key role in fostering healthy communities.

They'd be taught the community's history. They'd be taught the ecological limits of the local countryside. It would be a matter of great importance that children should know what their grandparents and great-grandparents did. They would be taught what has gone wrong. They would be taught what's worked. All that in addition to the larger cultural inheritance that they're going to need. It's a complex commitment.

And I think the educational system, whatever it would be, should take into consideration the complexity of that local commitment. Of course, our educational system has failed completely to do that. We're educating kids to live anywhere, not somewhere in particular. (Brown, 2007, p. 107)

While Berry never advances a detailed curriculum for the goals he would like educators to address, he nevertheless identifies the primary objective and related

components on which any educational endeavor striving to insure or enhance the health of the community should focus.

### **Summary of Educational Concern**

Wherever Berry goes, when he agrees to take questions, he is asked in one form or another: How do we fix it? How do we facilitate honoring commitments? Why not develop far-reaching survival plans? What is wrong with our society? How do we educate our children? Do you have hope that forces so long destructive of small places can be converted to caring, restorative entities? (Pennington, Smith, Brown, Dalton, and Muller & Vogt, 2007, pp. 44, 92, 103, 195, & 212).

People ask Berry for answers to their toughest challenges. On some level they believe he has the answer. And customarily Berry issues a perceptive, carefully honed reply that respects the question, enlightens his listeners about the problem's complexity, and aims for a realistic response, neither flippant nor magnanimous but manageable on a human scale. These replies often are not what the questioner expects to hear, and frequently they are delivered with a subtle but unmistakable degree of humility. When asked how to make education better, Berry replies,

My approach to education would be like my approach to everything else. I'd change the standard. I would make the standard that of community health rather than the career of the student. You see, if you make the standard the health of the community, that would change everything. Once you begin to ask what would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing that we can do here for our community, you can't rule out any kind of knowledge. You need to know everything you possibly can know. So, once you raise the standard of the health of the community, all the departmental walls fall down, because you can no longer feel that it's safe not to know something. And then you begin to see that these supposedly discreet and separate disciplines, these "specializations," aren't separate at all, but are connected. And of course our mistakes, over and over again, show us what the connections are, or show us that connections exist. (Smith, 2007, p. 100)

The concern Berry has about the standard for education calls to mind his careful analysis of the need for both practical and liberal education. As noted in the previous discussion about academic disciplines and in Chapter V, Berry argues for keeping the two educational strands together, capitalizing on their respective merits and the ways they complement one another. As Berry observes, the authors of the land-grant college legislation recognized the benefits of this two-fold philosophical approach to education and sought to insure its provision for the citizens of America's small, rural, agrarian communities. While we do not need to recap Berry's disappointment in the legacy of the land-grant colleges, aspects of Berry's account relate to his argument for changing the standard of education. For example, in the interview just cited, Berry explains why knowledge of the past is important.

Well, if you didn't know any of the past, you literally wouldn't know anything. You'd have no language, no history, and so the first result would be a kind of personal incompleteness.

But practicalities are involved also. If you had a settled, a really settled, thriving, locally adapted community, which we don't have anywhere, you wouldn't just be remembering the dead. You'd remember what they did and whether it worked or not. And so you'd have a kind of lexicon of possibilities that would tell you what you could do, what you could get away with, and what penalty to expect from what you couldn't get away with.

So the memory that a community has of its dead, and of the pasts of the living would be a precious sort of manual—a kind of handbook, a kind of operator's manual for the use of the immediate place. That's the only kind of operator's manual for the world that we're going to have. (Smith, 2007, p. 89)

In addition he identifies the purpose for his groundbreaking work, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. First published in 1977, this achievement launched Berry's presence on the national scene as a serious critic of American culture.

But these definitions [of practical and liberal education], based on division and opposition, are too simple. It is easy, accepting the viewpoint of either side, to find fault with the other. But the wrong is on neither side; it is in their division. One of the purposes of this book is to *show how the practical, divorced from the discipline of value, tends to be defined by the*



*immediate interests of the practitioner* [emphasis added], and so becomes destructive of value, practical and otherwise. But it must not be forgotten that, divorced from the practical, the liberal disciplines lose their sense of use and influence and become attenuated and aimless. (Berry, 1986a, pp. 157-158)

Berry observes that, “The standard of practicality, as used, is inherently a degenerative standard” (Berry, 1986a, p. 157). He links this degenerative standard with society’s definition of success and the dominant place-less-ness of American culture.

I am suggesting that our university-based structures of success, as they have come to be formed upon quantitative measures, virtually require the degeneration of qualitative measures and the disintegration of culture. The university accumulates information at a rate that is literally inconceivable, yet its structure and its self-esteem institutionalize the likelihood that not much of this information will ever be taken *home*. We do not work where we live, and if we are to hold up our heads in the presence of our teachers and classmates, we must not live where we come from. (p. 160)

In light of these complex dynamics and his own observations, Berry chooses the health of the community as the standard, the primary objective, for education. He invites educators to search for ways to re-unite liberal and practical education. Asked in 1993 what is wrong with our society, Berry replies, “The fundamental thing that’s disturbing, I think, is that we’ve lost the sense of connection between ourselves and the natural world” (Brown, 2007, p. 103). He describes, as implications of this loss, how “far removed [we are] from the economic sources of our lives” and how unsustainable the global economy is (p. 104). Transferring food and goods such lengthy distances is dependent upon cheap fossil fuel. It will not last, Berry claims. Our supply chains are vulnerable to multiple disrupting influences. An education that balances value, tradition, and cultural inheritance with practical agendas is essential for the resolution of such issues.

Berry is careful not to offer big solutions. Rather he makes more modest proposals.

I’m not ever, in anything I’ve written, trying to say exactly how anything ought to be done. I mean, I don’t have a program. My argument is that if you change the standards of your work, you’ll finally change your work. If you’re a teacher and you’re trying to teach to the career needs of every individual student or you’re trying to teach to the presumed career needs of a conglomeration of young people, then you’re not going to do

well. If you're a teacher and you make the health of the community the standard of your work, then you're going to teach better. If you teach with the good health of your community in mind, you're going to try to make every one of your students the best possible member of the community. You're going to fail a lot, but you're going to change the way you teach and maybe you'll succeed some, too. (Brown, 2007, p. 111)

This change to a focus on the health of the community can transform the quality of education.

In a follow-up question in the conversation just cited the interviewer asks, "Can individual change really make a difference on the grand scale?" (Brown, 2007, p. 111).

Berry replies,

It doesn't have to make a difference on a grand scale. It has to make a difference on the individual or local scale. You don't have any obligation to save the world.... I think that changing yourself—by doing the best work you can—is of major importance. (p. 111)

Berry believes that society is educating young people to live anywhere (Brown, 2007, p. 107) and that this is a great mistake. He says that the myth that you can always move somewhere else if you are not happy where you are has been extremely damaging. Replying to a question about his decision to move back to Kentucky to farm family land, Berry says there is no place now without problems. Every place faces complex challenges and is in need of people who will confront and resist the dominance and destructiveness of the major corporations now controlling the global economy.

In 2006, an interviewing team asks Berry about his statement that the destruction of our country "is not inevitable, except that by our submissiveness we make it so" (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 212). Citing the downward spiral beginning with the Industrial Revolution and culminating in "an imperialist global economy," Berry identifies only one viable alternative,

The development of local economies.... The paramount question is not whether or not it [the global economy] can be sustained, for it cannot be, but how much and how many will be destroyed by its failures.

In opposition, efforts to develop and defend local economies are now under way all over the world. These efforts are being made because people everywhere are in fact becoming less submissive to the global economy and its political servants. And so, yes, I do have hope, and my purpose in everything I do is to serve that hope. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 212)

In an earlier interview, in 1993, Berry makes clear that the kind of community he envisions is not a relic from the past awaiting revival.

*So your vision is not, as a shallow reading of your work might make somebody think, regressive, a kind of nostalgic longing for a rural nineteenth-century ideal with horse-drawn equipment? But in fact, the kind of community you envision hasn't existed yet. Is that right?*

That's right—at least it hasn't existed in America yet—but there's no way to defend yourself against a shallow reader. If your work includes a criticism of history, which mine certainly does, you can't be accused of wanting to go back to something, because you're saying that what we were wasn't good enough. There is no time in history, since white occupation began in America, that any sane and thoughtful person would want to go back to, because that history so far has been unsatisfactory. It has been unsatisfactory for the simple reason that we haven't produced stable communities well adapted to their places.

What I'm talking about in my work is the hope that it might be possible to produce stable, locally adapted communities in America, even though we haven't done it. The idea of a healthy community is an indispensable measure, just as the idea of a healthy child, if you're a parent, is an indispensable measure. You can't operate without it. (Smith, 2007, p. 102)

Efforts toward such economies, Berry says, are now emerging. When people begin doing locally sustainable things, assessing what can be done in given locales to nurture the natural world and meet human needs, the tide will turn toward survivability.

And survivability is what is on the line. Berry believes that education plays a crucial role in this process of awareness and restoration. "The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education" (Berry, 2003, p. 21). Education's purpose should be substantially elevated above the goals and objectives of industry. "Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible" (p. 21).

Berry calls on educators to discard the current, regressive standard in exchange for one that not only supports a healthier world through more vibrant neighborhoods and local communities, but also calls forth the best in teachers and students. If students are called on to become better, and if teachers are working to create a community where they themselves would like to live, with former students as their neighbors, then it becomes possible to envision vibrant, healthy, local communities. Seeing locally adapted economies develop in America and around the world sustains Berry and gives him hope.

Having established the concepts of the standard of education and the health of the community and examined elements in Berry's cultural critique that support and clarify each, such as his tracing of liberal and practical education to the land-grant college legislation, I examine more specifically now particular aspects of healthy communities. I pose the question: What do healthy communities look like? How would we know one when we see it? While Berry resists giving specific directions for implementing the values he advocates, nevertheless, this study seeks to interpret his work appropriately. This effort includes identifying components of healthy, local communities and their related ecospheres, values Berry consistently endorses. To this end of identifying integral components of healthy communities—since Berry sees such communities as the primary objective of good education—I examine additional primary texts in order to specify as clearly as we can those qualities that Berry links to his vision of healthy communities.

One component is *inclusivity*. I have noted already the breadth of Berry's definition of community—how he claims we must include the climate, soil, air, wildlife, forests, flora, and fauna of every locale in addition to human inhabitants. But what would this great inclusivity look like? At one point Berry says we must welcome enemies, strangers, and those unlike ourselves. But, how? He says, by imagining them and demonstrating empathy. Recognizing our connectedness and seeing the possibility that their troubles could become our own, or those of someone we love. Berry calls us to welcome everyone; this is a radical call, surely echoing the Christian injunction to “Love

your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44, New King James Version). It echoes mandates of other major faith traditions as well.

I believe that one place where Berry makes this level of inclusivity remarkably clear is in *The Hidden Wound* (1989). Berry explains in the “Afterword” that he wrote the book originally in 1968-1969, “conceived and written under the influence of the civil rights agitation of the time as I was experiencing it around me at Stanford” (Berry, 1989, p. 109). The text is a compelling account of the author’s journey and struggle to recognize, accept, and, however possible, grow beyond his complicity in the unfairness that America’s history of racism implies for those willing to do the work of examining it. In a provocative sense, Berry’s memories and reflections in *The Hidden Wound* call on his readers to join him in the struggle for awareness, greater understanding, and personal commitment toward healing and transformative change.

One especially moving account in *The Hidden Wound* is Berry’s story about a birthday party his grandmother gives for him when he is 9 or 10. Family and neighbors are invited. Berry himself invites Nick Watkins, whom he introduces to the reader as follows, “When I was three years old Nick Watkins, a black man, came to work for my Grandfather Berry. I don’t remember when he came, which is to say that I don’t remember not knowing him” (Berry, 1989, p. 22). Prior to the story about the birthday party, Berry has shared various accounts of how he and Nick “had known each other since way back” (p. 22). The story of the party is told with care including Berry’s acknowledgment that “I had scratched the wound of racism, and all of us, our heads beclouded in the social dream that all was well, were feeling the pain,” and that his grandmother, “to her credit, allowed me to follow my instincts in dealing with the situation” (p. 53). An additional acknowledgment encapsulates the dilemma faced by the young Berry and those around him. “It was suddenly evident to me that Nick neither would nor could come into the house and be a member of the party” (p. 53).

And then we learn how, in 1943 or '44, the 9- or 10-year-old in the border state of Kentucky followed his instincts.

I went out and spent the time of the party sitting on the cellar wall with Nick.

It was obviously the only decent thing I could have done; if I had thought of it in moral terms I would have had to see it as my duty. But I didn't. I didn't think of it in moral terms at all. I did simply what I *preferred* to do. If Nick had no place at my party, then I would have no place there either; my place would be where he was. The cellar wall became the place of a definitive enactment of our friendship, in which by the grace of a child's honesty and a man's simple-hearted generosity, we transcended our appointed roles. I like the thought of the two of us sitting out there in the sunny afternoon, eating ice cream and cake, with all my family and my presents in there in the house without me. I was full of a sense of loyalty and love that clarified me to myself as nothing ever had before. It was a time I would like to live again. (Berry, 1989, p. 53)

A healthy community will embrace and encourage “the grace of a child's honesty and a man's simple-hearted generosity.” It will help us all find ways to “transcend our appointed roles.” It will imagine and do the difficult work of implementing radical inclusivity.

I cite two additional observations from *The Hidden Wound*. The first makes abundantly clear the significance of education for our health and well-being. To inclusivity, we add *a good place for the children*, as a component of healthy community. Berry states,

There can be no greater blow to the integrity of a community than the loss of its school or loss of control of its school—which always means loss of control of its children. The breakdown of discipline and academic standards in the schools can only originate in, and can only cause, the breakdown of community life. (Berry, 1989, p. 134)

And to underscore the significance of community, especially healthy ones, I cite Berry's reflection on safety, for in discussing freedom and community and our country's painful history of racism, he draws numerous elements of value together in one cogent observation.

Our place of safety can only be the community, and not just one community, but many of them everywhere. Upon that depends all that we still claim to value: freedom, dignity, health, mutual help and affection, undestructive pleasure, and the rest. Human life, as most of us still would like to define it, is community life. (p. 129)

And so we add *safety* to the list of qualities of healthy communities, along with other values embraced by humankind since the first seven days.

Additional components of healthy communities include: (1) faith in the value of one's good work even, or perhaps especially, when the results of that work are not immediately evident; (2) practices or disciplines that reflect envisioning a healthy, vibrant world for future generations; (3) adults taking responsibility for teaching responsibility—in other words “being there” for young people (as teachers, leaders in the community, and relatives have occasion to be)—while not necessarily having opportunity to observe the impact of their presence and care on the young; and (4) adults practicing (and hence modeling) “the golden rule”—reflecting on what helped them grow up or get through a tough time and offering that same kind of support to the young people they know.

These components of healthy communities as defined by Berry emerge for me in reflecting on his essay “Discipline and Hope,” written almost a half century ago.

In this extended essay, first published in 1970, Berry examines our “state of general cultural disorder” (Berry, 1972, p. 86) with especial focus on “a failure of those disciplines, both private and public, by which desired ends might be reached, or by which the proper means to a desired end might be determined” (p. 86). Nearly eighty pages later, Berry declares with eloquence and precision his core finding: “What I have been preparing at such length to say is that there is only one value: the life and health of the world” (p. 164). And with that statement, though he may not have known it at the time, Berry foreshadows his forthcoming *Our Only World: Ten Essays*, published in 2015.

In section VI, “Discipline and Hope, Means as Ends,” Berry calls attention to life in our cities and rural communities as “evidence that those disciplines by which we manipulate *things* are inadequate disciplines” (Berry, 1972, p. 133).

The rural community—that is, the land and the people—is being degraded...by the specialists' tendency to regard the land as a factory and the people as spare parts. Or, to put it another way, the rural community is being degraded by the fashionable premise that the exclusive function of the farmer is production and that his major discipline is economics. On the contrary, both the function and the discipline of the farmer have to do with provision: he must provide, he must look ahead. He must look ahead, however, not in the economic-mechanistic sense of anticipating a need and fulfilling it, but in the sense of using methods that preserve the source.... It is in thinking of the whole citizenry as factory workers—as readily interchangeable parts of an entirely mechanistic and economic order—that we have reduced our people to the most abject and aimless of nomads, and displaced and fragmented our communities. (Berry, 1972, pp. 133-134)

Berry (1972) describes farmers who feel secure in their work, who feel supported by a humane economic order, informed by realistic means, ends, and benchmarks, and a vision that exceeds the immediate harvest season and profit opportunity. He then makes the following claim.

An index of the health of a rural community—and, of course, of the urban community, its blood kin—might be found in the relative acreages of field crops and tree crops. By tree crops I mean not just those orchard trees of comparatively early bearing and short life, but also the fruit and nut and timber trees that bear late and live long. (p. 134)

In contrast to tree crops, field crops are relatively short-term. They fit “within economic and biological cycles that are complete in one year” (Berry, 1972, p. 134). And there are noteworthy characteristics of those who customarily, or exclusively, plant field crops.

It is characteristic of an unsettled and anxious farm population—a population that feels itself, because of economic threat or the degradation of cultural value, to be ephemeral—that it farms almost exclusively with field crops, within economic and biological cycles that are complete in one year. This has been the dominant pattern of American agriculture. (p. 134)

Following these observations, Berry (1972) talks about the planting of trees. He says, “Established farm populations have always been planters of trees” (p. 134). While we know that Berry grieves the astonishing decline of “established farm populations” in



America throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he unrelentingly calls our attention to their especial qualities.

Stable, settled populations, assured both of an economic sufficiency in return for their work and of the cultural value of their work, tend to have methods and attitudes of a much longer range [than the “unsettled and anxious farm population”]. Though they have generally also farmed with field crops, established farm populations have always been planters of trees. (p. 134)

Berry cites J. Russell Smith’s *Tree Crops* about sections of Europe where “steep hillsides were covered with orchards of chestnut trees, which were kept and maintained with great care by the farmers” (p. 135). He further describes the context that supports such a practice.

Here is an agricultural discipline that could develop only among farmers who felt secure—as individuals and also as families and communities—in their connection to their land. Such a discipline depends not just on the younger men in the prime of their workdays but also on the old men, the keepers of tradition. The model figure of this agriculture is an old man planting a young tree that will live longer than a man, and that he himself may not live to see in its first bearing. And he is planting, moreover, a tree whose worth lies beyond any conceivable market prediction. (p. 135)

Then Berry (1972) draws a thought-provoking analogy, one especially significant for my study.

An urban discipline that in good health is closely analogous to healthy agriculture is teaching. Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of the mind in his community. The ultimate and defining standard of his discipline is his community’s health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, deserving of a life’s work. We have allowed it to degenerate into careerism and specialization. In education as in agriculture we have discarded the large and enlarging disciplines of community and place, and taken up in their stead the narrow and shallow discipline of economics. (pp. 135-136)

Even as he continues to describe the costly decline he sees in agriculture and education, Berry (1972) resiliently holds before us his vision of excellence, his understanding of how both endeavors—education and agriculture—essential for any human community, could be different.

Good teaching is an investment in the minds of the young, as obscure in result, as remote from immediate proof as planting a chestnut seedling. But we have come to prefer ends that are entirely foreseeable, even though that requires us to foreshorten our vision. Education is coming to be, not a long-term investment in young minds and in the life of the community, but a short-term investment in the economy. We want to be able to tell how many dollars an education is worth and how soon it will begin to pay. (p. 136)

Berry (1972) follows this layered set of observations and his careful analysis with additional statements that demonstrate his respect for the possibilities of education—what he believes could be accomplished if the disciplines of education were carried out in contexts resembling those of established farms—tended by farmers, supported by their families, communities, and economic and government policies, and “secure ... in their connection to their land” (p. 135).

That teaching is a long-term service, that a teacher’s best work may be published in the children or grandchildren of his students, cannot be considered, for the modern educator, like his “practical” brethren in business and industry, will honor nothing that he cannot see....

Look at the *state* of Kentucky, and it is clear that, more than any publication of books and articles, or any research, we need an annual increment of several hundred competently literate *graduates* who have some critical awareness of their inheritance and a sense of their obligation to it, and who know the use of books.

That, and that only, is the disciplining ideal of education, and the methods must be derived accordingly. It has nothing to do with number or size. It would be impossible to value economically. (pp. 137-138)

In concluding this section of “Discipline and Hope,” Berry (1972) restates his understanding of the misdirection driving our inadequate disciplines and hence many of our educational agendas. And he offers a succinct summary of this apt analogy.

It is the obsession with immediate ends that is degrading, that destroys our disciplines, and that drives us to our inflexible concentration upon number and price and size. I believe that the closer we come to correct discipline, the less concerned we are with ends, and with questions of futurity in general. Correct discipline brings us into alignment with natural process, which has no explicit or deliberate concern for the future. We do not eat, for instance, because we want to live until tomorrow, but because we are hungry today and it *satisfies* us to eat. Similarly, a good farmer plants, not

because of the abstractions of demand or market or his financial condition, but because it is planting time and the ground is ready—that is, he plants in response to his discipline and to his place. And the real teacher does not teach with reference to the prospective job market or some program or plan for the society's future; he teaches because he has something to teach and because he has students. (p. 138)

I would claim that in Berry's prolific work, which includes many observations about education and healthy communities, there may be no more compelling a statement about what he believes when it comes to education and the role of good teaching in society.

There is one additional quality of healthy communities that we should be sure to include: the understanding among those who reside in the community that when their neighbors have a need, they will offer whatever help they can. This is a reciprocal understanding of course; community members can be confident that when they have a need, they will be able to count on community members to offer assistance. This quality, which I will designate as *blessed assurance*, is something that community residents themselves would understand, feel, and acknowledge. And, friendly observers of the community, not themselves members of the particular community, would also be able to recognize this quality of health in a given community.

There are groups, of course, whose members are primarily focused on violence, who have organized themselves for the purpose of war or war-like activity, and who may also demonstrate a significant sense of solidarity. They too may have a code of ethics about helping one another as needs arise. However, I doubt that friendly and unbiased observers would be "taken in" by such groups. They would, I believe, be unlikely to mistake destruction-focused communities as in fact healthy, for they would assess the community with regard to the other qualities we have identified, such as inclusivity, safety, and commitment to good work that does not necessarily yield immediate and tangible results. I would not expect, for example, that friendly or unbiased, and skilled observers would mistake a Ku Klux Klan community for Port William.

Berry gives prescient voice to this quality of caring for one another, this blessed assurance, in his latest essay collection *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings* (2017). I briefly set the context for the statements I will highlight. In the chapter, “The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age,” Berry examines the monumental changes that have taken place in his lifetime alone with regard to our economy, the foundation and base of our livelihood. He tracks, in part, the ease, eagerness, and swiftness with which we are delivering ourselves from both agricultural and factory work. He observes, for example, that raising tobacco has not been defensible since the 1964 Surgeon General’s Report, establishing the health hazard of tobacco consumption. And Berry refutes the apparent assumption of a number of his readers and the public at large that he himself has been a raiser of tobacco. More importantly, however, he makes a persuasive argument about the history of the tobacco program in that it modeled principles of fair production and compensation. By various policy mandates, the program facilitated the implementation of an “asking price” for farmers, so that they did not have simply to accept whatever a given buyer was willing to pay. Berry (2017) writes, “By ‘asking price’ I mean a fair price, as determined for example by ‘parity,’ which would enable farmers to prosper ‘on a par with’ their urban counterparts: a fair price, then, supported by bargaining power” (p. 29). He calls our attention, that is, to the possibility, exemplified in the tobacco program, that people who do the labor—of construction, production, or bringing in the harvest—can be fairly compensated for their work.

Both the people and the land benefitted from it. By the combination of price supports with production control, limiting supply to anticipated demand, the program maintained the livelihoods of the small farms, and so maintained the livelihoods of shops and stores in towns. It gave the same protection on the market to the small producer as to the large. (p. 28)

Berry (2017) notes the escalating willingness of citizens throughout multiple sectors of society, including those in positions of power, to settle, as he sees it, for so much less—less quality, less fairness, less sustainability. Then he says this about the

tobacco program, “Most important, it supported the traditional family and social structure of the region and its culture of husbandry” (p. 28).

Berry (2017) offers several paragraphs that should sound alarm bells for every conscientious citizen, especially those responsible for decisions affecting the livelihoods of others and those whose work and understanding of success is so driven by aggressive, economic, and self-serving attitudes and practices that they habitually turn blind eyes to the question of equitable policies and standards of living.

As long as the diverse economy of our small farms lasted, our communities were filled with people who needed one another and knew that they did. They needed one another’s help in their work, and from that they needed one another’s companionship. Most essentially, the grownups and the elders needed the help of the children, who thus learned the family’s and the community’s work and the entailed duties, pleasures, and loyalties. When that work disappears, when parents leave farm and household for town jobs, when the upbringing of the young is left largely to the schools, then the children, like their parents, live as individuals, particles, loved perhaps but not needed for any usefulness they may have or any help they might give. As the local influences weaken, the outside influences grow stronger. (p. 30)

Berry (2017) calls attention to the consequences of the tidal wave of change he has just described, consequences that we recognize all too readily.

And so the drugs and the screens are with us. The day is long past when most school-age children benefitted from work and instruction that gave them in turn a practical assurance of their worth. They have now mostly disappeared from the countryside and from the streets and houseyards of the towns. In this new absence and silence of the children, parents, teachers, church people, and public officials hold meetings to wonder what to do about the drug problem. The screen problem receives less attention, but it may be the worst of the two because it wears the aura of technological progress and social approval. (p. 30)

Berry (2017) says more about the painful consequences of a run-away economy, the train that left the station long before those who might have redirected it were consulted.

The old complex life, at once economic and social, was fairly coherent and self-sustaining because each community was focused upon its own local countryside and upon its own people, their needs, and their work. That life

is now almost entirely gone. It has been replaced by the dispersed lives of dispersed individuals, commuting and consuming, scattering in every direction every morning, returning at night only to their screens and carryout meals. Meanwhile, in a country everywhere distressed and taxed by homelessness, once-used good farm buildings, built by local thrift and skill, rot to the ground. Good houses, that once sheltered respectable lives, stare out through sashless windows or have disappeared. (pp. 30-31)

And then, Berry (2017) offers once again an enticing element of his vision for education, implying that part of our hope must be tied to the investment we have made and continue to make in the way we educate our young people. Echoing in the back of my mind is Berry's promise that if we change ourselves—if we forge deeper ties with the local community and integrate those commitments with our teaching, if we draw on our local history and the possibility of viable, local, economic enterprises, indeed, if we believe in the merits of a different kind of economy, one focused on cooperation and preservation—then we ourselves will be different, better able to cultivate healthy places and livelihoods. We would still make mistakes, but some things would get better, and we would teach better as well. And ultimately it would make a difference, where it needs to—on the local scale—and, it would be “significant.”

I have described briefly and I am sure inadequately my home country, a place dauntingly complex both in its natural history and in its human history, offering much that is good, much good also that is unappreciated or unrecognized. Outsiders passing through, unaware of its problems, are apt to think it very beautiful, which partly it still is. To me, and to others known to me, it is also a very needy place. When I am wishing, as I often do, I wish its children might be taught thoroughly and honestly its own history, and its history as a part of American history. I wish every one of its schools had enough biologists and ecologists to lead the students outdoors, to show them where they are in relation to drainages, soils, plants, and animals. I wish we had an economy wisely kind to the land and the people. (p. 31)

I cannot for a moment believe that Berry is the only one wishing. Indeed, I am encouraged by my knowledge that he is not.

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Key Ideas in Berry's Work**

Berry's concern that we should reconstruct the standard of education from a focus on students' careers in an unpredictable future to the health of the community relates to several key ideas in his work: the *Great Economy*; *violence* in American culture; and the *connectedness* of the created world.

**Discussion of key idea: The Great Economy.** A key idea in Berry's work that relates to his belief that education would be vastly improved if we change the standard, the big objective, from career and job preparation to the health of the community is his concept of **the Great Economy**. *Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to live in a society that embraces an economy based on cooperation and preservation rather than competition, greed, destructiveness, and violence. Berry offers a name for it, "the Great Economy." Whatever we name it, it is much more encompassing than the human economy (i.e., it includes the human economy) and stands in stark contrast to our postindustrial, technological, and quasi-totalitarian economy where a few are very well off and powerful, many struggle to manage the basics, and too many are simply hurting. Creating a human economy in harmony with the Great Economy is not impossible, according to Berry. We could do it. (See pp. 293-294 for definition.)*

As noted before, Berry's ability to identify what is going wrong, what is unfair, shortsighted, and injurious to people and natural resources is balanced by a genuine hopefulness, a vision for what could replace the all too frequent dismal pictures he outlines in sufficient detail. Berry does not leave us with a long list of problem sets even as he illuminates the complexity of our biggest challenges. He has a vision. He is motivated by a robust hope, even though he fully grasps how difficult authentic transformation is. A consistent component of this vision for Berry, his penchant for balancing difficult realities with markers for a way forward, is his hope, shared in a 1993 interview, for "stable, locally adapted communities in America" (Smith, 2007, p. 102). Berry admits we have never done this. But he believes it is possible, and moreover he

believes that creating such communities throughout the country will significantly enhance our livelihoods. In addition, it will increase our longevity on the planet. Creating such communities is not the only thing we need to do, but I believe it is accurate to say that Berry cannot envision either our survivability or improved living conditions for all our “members” without the creation of such communities.

To explore Berry’s hopeful vision further as well as the values and actions needed to link healthy communities with supportive economies, I cite Berry’s reply to a thoughtful question in a 2006 interview.

*Hannah [Coulter] noted, “This membership had an economic purpose and it had an economic result, but the purpose and the result were a lot more than economic [...] work was freely given for work freely given. There was no bookkeeping, no accounting, no settling up. What you owed was considered paid when you had done what needed doing.” Does a genuine membership always have to have some economic purpose, some armature of regularly exchanged work done by people who live near one another?*

The answer, I believe, is yes. To have a viable community, or as you say a “genuine membership,” its members must need one another’s help and must be practically useful to one another. (Muller & Vogt, 2007, p. 207)

This exchange about community membership echoes observations Berry makes in a 1993 interview. The discussion focuses on affiliation with particular regions and the tensions that result between “respect [for] other people’s sovereignty” and the entitlement some feel to “destroy what is in their charge,” even in defiance of international agreements. Berry first elaborates his view about responsibility and then identifies several “superstition[s] of the modern era” (Smith, 2007, p. 97).

You can’t defend everything, even though everybody has an obligation to be as aware as possible, and as effective as possible, in preserving the things that need to be preserved *everywhere*. But I’ve argued over and over again that the fullest responsibility has to be exercised at home, where you have some chance to come to a competent and just understanding of what’s involved, and where you have some chance of being really effective.

Another superstition of the modern era is that if you don’t have it here, you can safely get it from somewhere else. A corollary superstition is that it’s permissible to ruin one place for the benefit of another. So you can



wreck eastern Kentucky in order to supply coal to the industrial cities of the Northeast, or you can contaminate a nuclear waste site in order to supply power to some other place.

Those two superstitions lie behind this willingness of any community to destroy the basis of its economic life. (p. 97)

Then Berry replies to a question with a bit of humor as well as his customary poignancy.

*But that superstition you are talking about goes so far back that all of our enterprises seem to be built upon it.... How do you expect to root out something so ancient and fundamental to Western culture as this superstition you are talking about?*

Yes, Rome destroyed itself by undervaluing the country people, too. I guess we should leave open the possibility that we'll be too stupid to change. Other civilizations have been. But at least it's more obvious now that this superstition is a superstition, because now there's no place else to go. The "other places" are gone. If we use up the possibility of life here, there's no other place to go, and so the old notion is bankrupt, though it still underlies most destructive practice....

But what if people gave up that idea or began to move away from it, and began to ask, "What can we do here?" and "What that we need can we produce here?" and "What that we need can we do for each other here?" In the first place, there would be less incentive for those people to over-fish their fisheries because we'd be promoting local consumption of local food right here. I mean it's not just enough to find out which tuna fisheries are killing the dolphins. If you really want to get radical, the question is what have we got here that we can eat instead of tuna fish? (Smith, 2007, pp. 97-98)

Many components, then, must work effectively and cooperatively together to create "the Great Economy." And surely education is one such component. Indeed, we ask: how would "stable, locally adapted communities in America" and something resembling "the Great Economy" come about without education? A closely related question is: what kind of education is most likely to enable these resilient visions to become realities? Is it our current education model? Well, parts of our education system may indirectly facilitate the growth of such communities. But we can hardly argue that our present-day education is nurturing the development of the kinds of communities Berry has in mind. Indeed, Berry claims quite the opposite in many of his observations. In his recent book, *Our Only*

*World*, economics, vocation, and education, all come under the spotlight in the essay “Our Deserted Country.”

Replacement of workers by machines becomes more serious when it is enabled by the degradation of work. We have ignored the limits of compatibility between labor-saving and good work. And we have degraded almost all work by reducing the generously qualitative idea of “vocation” or “calling” to the merely quantitative integer, “a job.” The purpose of education now is to make everybody eligible for “a job.” A primary function of politics is “job creation.” Persons deprived of work that they have loved and enjoyed and performed with pride are to consider their loss well-remedied by some form of “welfare” or “another job.” (Berry, 2015, p. 149)

Making an argument for the value of quality in work, Berry outlines a connection between the erosion of good work and education’s preoccupation with careers, success, and status. He links good work to other values, arguing that the quality of work is reflected in the health of the community.

The idea of vocation attaches to work a cluster of other ideas, including devotion, skill, pride, pleasure, the good stewardship of means and materials. Here we have returned to intangibles of economic value. When they are subtracted, what remains is “a job,” always implying that work is something good only to escape: “Thank God it’s Friday.” “A job” pretty much equals bad work, which can be performed as well or better by a machine. Once the scale and speed of farmwork have overridden any care for the health of the land community and any pride in the beauty of the farm, then we can talk, as we now are talking, of farming by remote control. (Berry, 2015, pp. 149-150)

Yet we operate within a matrix of limits, whether or not we recognize this reality, and our livelihoods depend upon the well-being of the natural world.

If such substitutions appear to work, we must consider the likelihood that they work only temporarily or according to criteria that are too simple or false. And we must acknowledge that some do not work at all: A “service economy” is immediately a falsehood when it is staffed by phone-answering robots.... Somewhere along the line of industrial substitutions, it appears certain that we will find ourselves again confined within, and sharing the fate of, the natural, naturally-limited, industrially-depleted world that we have thought to transcend by more and more engineering. And then we will know, needing no experts to tell us, that our world, like our bodies, cannot survive [unstanchd] bleeding and repeated doses of poison. (Berry, 2015, p. 150)

And so, we ought not to be surprised that one concerned about the quality of the human community, the integrity of work, the usefulness of knowledge, the influence of education, and the health of the natural world, after all the basis of our food supply, would advocate for changing the standard of education to the health of the community. Berry consistently advocates this revamping of the standard of education, though he disavows advancing a particular program or set of specifics for how to implement the change. His faith in the value of this proposal is revealed in his 1993 interview with *Bluegrass* magazine.

*Do you think that strengthening the sense of community within each individual can possibly help strengthen the quality of education? Or is it entirely up to the community?*

You can't make it work the way you think it ought to work. I mean, the first rule of education is that it's not going to work the way you think it's going to work. You can set up an ideal system; you think, "Well, I know how to do it this time," and the first thing you know you have to quit fooling yourself. It's not going to work ideally. A lot of things you do are not even going to work pretty well. I'm not ever, in anything I've written, trying to say exactly how anything ought to be done. I mean, I don't have a program. My argument is that if you change the standards of your work, you'll finally change your work. If you're a teacher and you're trying to teach to the career needs of every individual student or you're trying to teach to the presumed career needs of a conglomeration of young people, then you're not going to do well. If you're a teacher and you make the health of the community the standard of your work, then you're going to teach better. (Brown, 2007, pp. 110-111)

Berry asks teachers to envision for themselves a healthy local community, one in which their students become life-long members. It is not what we are accustomed to. Yet Berry outlines this possibility.

If you teach with the good health of your community in mind, you're going to try to make every one of your students the best possible member of the community. You're going to fail a lot, but you're going to change the way you teach and maybe you'll succeed some, too. If you suppose to yourself, "Well, when these kids graduate, that's probably the last I'm going to see of them," you're going to teach differently than you would teach if you assume that you're going to spend the rest of your life with these people. These kids are going to grow up. They're going to take their place in the

community you live in. They're going to be your fellow citizens, your fellow members. (Brown, 2007, p. 111)

And he cautions us that quick fixes are not to be found.

Considering Berry's hope for "stable, locally adapted communities in America" and his vision of the possibility of the Great Economy, both of which, arguably, depend upon young people returning to their home communities to a degree considerably greater than current numbers support, we pose the question: What should educators say to young people about moving away or returning home? If educators encourage youth to broaden their horizons, it is difficult to claim they should not do this. Yet how can we avoid pushing young people to move away? Perhaps we are not asking the right question. If education helps young people recognize the value of local community and begin to prepare for responsible roles in vibrant, healthy communities, and if education helps youth begin to imagine a different economy, one based on cooperation and preservation rather than competition and destruction—then education would be doing what Berry favors. Yet we admit that the outcomes we are envisioning are not the primary result of contemporary American education.

To elucidate these several abstract concepts, I conclude this discussion of the Great Economy and the standard of education by a return to Berry's fiction. I recall Andy Catlett again, to consider how his story offers additional insights. Andy Catlett, as we noted, navigates several developmental stages, as we meet him in the Port William fiction. Our knowledge about Andy's education is limited, though we assume it was typical of small town elementary and secondary education in the 1940s, and undergraduate education in the early '50s. We have, however, seen Andy more in the context of his family and community: visiting grandparents as a young boy; struggling as a 10-year-old to make sense of the inexplicable murder of Uncle Andrew; hearing the story from his grandmother about how his granddad chooses a path toward peace and reconciliation following a community tragedy; breaking with the editor he worked for

when asked to compromise his values; returning to his community of origin; and more. Andy becomes the kind of person who can choose new adventures and also return to his roots—not, perhaps, because of any experience in the schools he attends, but because of the influence of key people in his life. From his father and mother, his grandparents, his association with Elton Penn who becomes a kind of adopted uncle, his good marriage, and his exposure to Old Jack Beechum, Andy learns to be a contributing member of a healthy community. We can assume, I believe, that Andy experiences a “stable, locally adapted community,” that the family and community members he knows well as a young person sow the seeds of vision and possibility for him. But it is not a quick infusion of awareness. It takes time and energy, work and growth, and a willingness to move through tough experiences. Yet Andy exemplifies all of that. He receives love and nurturing and opportunities. And he faces life’s challenges and comes through with new understanding, lessons he can apply later on. Andy Catlett makes use of his learning, however it comes to him. He thus has the courage to stand up to a boss who makes an unreasonable demand. He tells an agribusiness conference audience what he honestly thinks of their meaningless discourse, totally unrelated to the world of farming and life in small communities close to the land. Andy is an eloquent mouthpiece for Berry’s most passionate positions. It follows that his stories help us connect “the Great Economy” and the need for a change in the standard of education. We learn a great deal from Andy Catlett.

Some readers may discount the evidence offered in a story or a piece of fiction. However, I note what Berry says about fiction. In 2006 an interviewer asks him why he writes fiction “in addition to essays and poetry” (Dalton, 2007, p. 187). In his reply, Berry talks about the “impulse toward wholeness.” He says he likes to tell stories and describes hearing many stories as a young boy. Then he relates wholeness and story-telling.

I've been thinking about this for a long time, because the reason for writing what we call fiction seems to be the desire to tell a *whole* story. And to stick strictly to the truth, what we call nonfictional truth—to tell the story that really happened—is invariably to have an incomplete story. Nobody ever knows all the facts. Time passes, gaps come into memories, and so on. The impulse is an artistic one, the impulse toward wholeness. You may be dealing with your experience, with things that you remember, but they may come scrambled...and you can put them into a story and give them a coherence that they don't have in factual reality...

And yet memory and imagination can be put together in a kind of coherence, and the two points of view give dimension that it wouldn't otherwise have. Again, it's that impulse toward wholeness—not that art can ever satisfy that impulse, not that it will ever be completely whole, but fiction gives scope to the purpose of wholeness that nonfiction doesn't allow. You have to qualify nonfiction all the time by saying things like, “Well, as best I remember,” or, “I don't remember what happened in the next few minutes, but[...].” To make an imagined thing is to place it in a landscape where wholeness seems in reach.

The other thing you're trying for is meaning, of course, which is not separate from storytelling in the quest for wholeness. But ultimately too for pleasure. (Dalton, 2007, p. 188)

I cite this reflection of Berry on writing fiction to help us keep in mind that art can serve as evidence or validation, much as quantifiable data can, though in a different way and perhaps more adequately in certain instances. We have become so accustomed to focusing on scientific proof and information compressed into quantifiable units, that it is well to remember that other kinds of inquiry can lead to valuable truths. Berry's reference to the “impulse for wholeness” in the writing of fiction is helpful. I believe an impulse for wholeness also lies behind his argument for a change in the standard of education.

**Discussion of key idea: The violence in American culture.** As I consider how Berry's proposal to change the standard of education, from the current focus on career paths to a focus on the health of the community, relates to the key idea about violence in his work, I first describe the idea and then offer a working definition of this concept. *Our nation's history includes a troubling litany of violence and destruction. Much of this destruction is permanent and cannot be redeemed. We cannot, for example, undo the*

*damage we did to Native Americans in the Trail of Tears and other confrontations. Nor can we erase the stain of slavery or the blight of racism that continues to this day. We cannot recover lives lost or property and resources destroyed in any of our armed conflicts, even though we may argue that some conflicts were more justified than others. Nor can we build back a forest quickly when it has been subjected to aggressive logging for profit. There are differing forms of violence, yet the list of grievances is long.*

- *Violence.* Why should we include *violence* in a short list of key ideas that emerge repeatedly in Berry's work? And how should we understand his view of violence? Berry's writing for years in multiple genres has addressed many topics, literary figures, and chapters in our nation's history. The subject he maintains center front, however, is our natural world, how it is faring and what quality of life, including human life, is sustained in relationship with it. One of the discoveries Berry has made through his experience working the land and his extensive reading, writing, teaching, and selected political activism is the considerable harm done to our natural world and the quality of life it can support.

The sources of harm are numerous. But they can be classified roughly in two categories: so-called *natural disasters* (events in the biological world that result in the destruction of living things) and *human-induced injury*, whether from negligence, ignorance, or accident (such as the release of toxins from a nuclear power plant) or from intentionally aggressive actions such as wide-scale logging or mining, or the impact of armed conflict and the use of ever-increasingly powerful weapons by one group against another. [Note: even these categories reveal our inadequate understanding since natural disaster can at times be traced to nature's response to human action.] Whatever the cause, Berry is a keen observer of these injuries. These accidents, flukes of nature, or intentional human exploits have far-ranging consequences. Things Berry values—healthy land, sustainable crops, nutritious food, thriving human communities, healthy wildlife, natural resources, the accumulated wisdom of humankind, peace, and stable, just

economies—all have been impacted by the harm. People and resources have paid incalculable prices for catastrophic events. This is true whether the injury is intentional (carried out to take something deemed valuable from nature or to inflict injury on perceived enemies) or otherwise (the result of inadequate knowledge and forethought or unexpected events in nature that we do not comprehend, accurately predict, or know how to meet).

The violence is not always war-related or malevolent shooting and killing. It is not necessarily sudden, dramatic, and loud. It can also be the slow, continuous, and corrosive effect of creating a system of use followed by misuse and supported by policies motivated more by greed than knowledge, integrity, or farsighted visions of fairness and sustainable well-being. An example would be the failure of the land-grant colleges in America to live up to their mandate, discussed earlier. This failure which escalated after WWII has, over time, yielded untold devastation to America's land and farming communities. Loss of topsoil, depletion of minerals, foreclosure of farms, and the demise of America's once-viable rural communities—all comprise the price we have paid but been reluctant to acknowledge.

What we have, then, are differing forms of violence. We should note that Berry is equally dismayed by the ravages of war and the proliferation of weapons among civilians. He states, "We have come to depend obsessively on an enormous capability of violence—for security, for national self-esteem, even for economic stability. As a consequence we have become blind to the alternatives to violence" (Berry, 2012b, p. 79-80). In his 1968 speech, "A Statement against the War in Vietnam," Berry disavows association with organizations or institutions as influencing his views. He reflects, however, on his membership in the human race, a group "having a vast and ever-increasing effect on the world" (p. 76). Noting no "reasonable alternative to membership" and vowing his commitment to whatever improvements he can effect, Berry observes,



I will not be optimistic, for its history is full of ugliness and cruelty and violence and waste; it has inflicted terrible damage on itself and on the world. But I will be steadfastly hopeful, for as a member of the human race I am also in the company of men, though comparatively few, who through all the sad destructive centuries of our history have kept alive the vision of peace and kindness and generosity and humility and freedom—the sense of how comely and satisfying men’s lives would be if they were all free and at peace, and if they cared enough for the world and for each other. It is in behalf of that vision that I wish to speak. *I wish to be a spokesman of the doubt that the great difficulties of our time can be solved by violence* [emphasis added]. I wish to be a spokesman of the belief that the human intelligence that could invent the apocalyptic weapons of modern war could invent as well the means of peace. (Berry, 2012b, p. 77)

Our history is not unlike that of other countries; it is marked by both great achievements and horrific atrocities. Berry is to be credited for not selling out, if you will, to the notion of America’s alleged superiority and indestructability. That narrative simply is not the whole story.

It is important to examine Berry’s views about violence in its multiple forms and include such consideration in a study of his cultural critique, for there is evidence that Berry has thought carefully about violence. I call attention to Berry’s essay, “The Commerce of Violence,” in his recent book, *Our Only World: Ten Essays*. He begins by noting the convergence, on the same day in 2013, of the Boston marathon bombing and an article in *The New York Times* about an inmate “at Guantanamo for more than eleven years, uncharged and of course untried” (Berry, 2015, p. 15).

The occurrence of these two events on the same day was a coincidence, but that does not mean that they are unrelated.

What connects them is our devaluation, and when convenient our disvaluation, of human life as well as the earthly life of which human life is a dependent part. This cheapening of life, and the violence that inevitably accompanies it, is surely the dominant theme of our time. The ease and quickness with which we resort to violence would be astounding if it were not conventional. (pp. 15-16)

Berry speaks about the destructiveness of coal mining in Appalachia as well as the killing of enemies and “our enemies’ children, by remote control” (Berry, 2015, p. 16) in

the same paragraph. He returns to the Boston tragedy and observes how his sense of our penchant for violence has escalated.

Like most people, I was not there and I don't know anybody who was, but I was grieved and frightened by the news. This fearful grief has grown familiar to me since I first felt it at the start of World War II, but at each of its returns it is worse. Each new resort to violence enlarges the argument against our species, and the task of hope becomes harder. (p. 16)

Berry speaks of his sympathy for those directly affected. Then he states what he is not in sympathy with.

What I am less and less in sympathy with is the rhetoric and the tone of official indignation. Public officials cry out for justice against the perpetrators. I too wish them caught and punished. But I am unwilling to have my wish spoken for me in a tone of surprise and outraged innocence. (pp. 16-17)

Berry links the 2013 tragedy in Boston explicitly with America's history.

The event in Boston is not unique or rare or surprising or in any way new. It is only another transaction in the commerce of violence: the unending, the not foreseeably endable, exchange of an eye for an eye, with customary justifications on every side, in which we fully participate; and beyond that, it is our willingness to destroy anything, any place, or anybody standing between us and whatever we are "manifestly destined" to have. (p. 17)

This short essay, prompted by the news events of one day, reveals how Berry has been thinking about violence, especially in America, for some time. He makes further poignant observations.

Nobody who knows our history from the "Indian wars" to our contemporary foreign wars of "homeland defense," should find anything unusual in the massacre of civilians and their children.

It is not possible for us to reduce the value of life, including human life, to nothing *only* to suit our own convenience or our own perceived need. By making this reduction for ourselves, we make it for everybody and anybody, even for our enemies, even for the maniacs whose enemies are schoolchildren or spectators at a marathon. (Berry, 2015, p. 17)

This assessment echoes one Berry makes in a 1999 interview in which he draws a direct link between the violence in our society and "the loss of the sacred," to use the

interviewer's words. Berry notes, "I don't think you can be selective in your violence. If you are thoughtlessly violent against some designated group, you can't keep that from spilling over" (Burleigh, 2007, p. 144).

As if he knew we might be working to craft a definition of violence large enough to encompass armed conflict as well as the less dramatic, but no less devastatingly harmful, progression of violence to the created world, Berry draws the connection neatly for us.

We forget also that violence is so securely founded among us—in war, in forms of land use, in various methods of economic "growth" and "development"—because it is immensely profitable. People do not become wealthy by treating one another or the world kindly and with respect. Do we not need to remember this? Do we have a single eminent leader who would dare to remind us? (Berry, 2015, pp. 17-18)

Berry takes *The New York Times* journalist, Thomas L. Friedman, to task for advocating a seeming whitewash of the event. Quoting Friedman, Berry claims that the journalist seems to view the tragic event as the expected downside of "living in an open society" (Berry, 2015, p. 18). We note that Friedman's point echoes the view of others in our culture, that being, if we appear to give in to terrorists or to be disabled successfully by their actions then we have, arguably, allowed them in a sense to "win." We might call this view a defense by denial or by management of appearances. Berry punctures such a defense, however, when he asks, "How would he [Friedman] wipe away the traces of a bombed village or a strip mine or a gullied field or a wrecked forest?" (p. 18). And responding to observations made in the media and by political officials that so many moved immediately to help, Berry sounds a more sobering note.

But we have got to acknowledge that the help that comes after the violence has been done, though it undeniably helps, is not a solution to violence.

The solution, many times more complex and difficult, would be to go beyond our ideas, obviously insane, of war as the way to peace and of permanent damage to the ecosphere as the way to wealth. (pp. 18-19)

I note Berry's moving conclusion.

To learn to meet our needs without continuous violence against one another and our only world would require an immense intellectual and practical effort, requiring the help of every human being perhaps to the end of human time.

This would be work worthy of the name “human.” It would be fascinating and lovely. (Berry, 2015, p. 19)

There is a reason, as noted earlier, why Terry Tempest Williams calls Wendell Berry “our nation’s conscience” (Williams, 1991, p. 67).

And so, it is appropriate in a study of Berry’s cultural critique of America and the value of his philosophy for our schools and educators to acknowledge the balance he achieves in his carefully worked out conclusions. Dale Snauwaert and Paul Theobald (1990) state the importance of such a balanced perspective for education in their 1990 position paper “The Educational Philosophy of Wendell Berry.”

To be an effective component in the production of an ecologically sound social and economic order, then, public education, if we interpret Berry correctly, would have to promote a critical “literacy” that allows a [perons] to see issues [form] more than one point of view. The cost of comfort, for instance, must be measured in more than just economic terms. Berry writes in poetic form of his efforts to restore his eroded pasture and fields:

I work to renew a ruined place  
that no life be hostage of my comfort....

Berry likely would suggest that public education should be intimately connected to life on earth. It should engender more respect for the expectations of the earth itself than for the expectations of those who are currently ruining the earth. *Schools must allow students to see and understand the legacy of exploitation that has been the single most pervasive theme in American history* [emphasis added]. With the exploitation of the earth has come the exploitation of people. (pp. 9-10)

I believe we cannot read Berry and fully appreciate his carefully worked out philosophy if we do not consider the question of whether and how education contributes to our nation’s legacy of violence and destruction. Berry refers more than once to the education “machine” and the education “industry.” These are not complimentary references. To a degree, I believe he is linking aspects of our education system to

America's military-industrial complex, questionable political agendas, and the greed-driven mega-corporations he says now rule the global economy. Berry credits all of these entities with decades of abuse and destruction to the natural world and those whose livelihoods depend upon it. We cannot read Berry attentively and not conclude that an important part of the conversation he invites us to participate in is this question about violence and whether, and how, it connects with our approach to education.

To consider how violence is related to the health of the community, I turn to the story "Pray Without Ceasing," in *Fidelity: Five Stories*. "Pray Without Ceasing" is the difficult but wondrously told story of Andy Catlett's great grandfather's murder. In the summer of 1912, Ben Feltner is shot at close range by Thad Coulter, a distraught man in a terrible crisis. When Ben, a noteworthy Port William member, asks that Coulter first go home and sober up, then they can talk, Coulter takes it personally and sets himself on a tragic path. Andy asks for this story, recognizing that his understanding of the event is limited, and his grandmother, Margaret Feltner, offers it in detail. Andy is thirty at the time and his grandfather, Mat Feltner, is living his final days. We can assume that "Pray Without Ceasing" is, like "Fidelity," "a story that's informed by an idea of community... what it is to be a member of a community," as Berry describes the latter (Brown, 2007, p. 107).

This event in Port William can be looked at from different angles. We might argue that the murder of so beloved a resident reveals a lack of health, or the absence of enough love, in the community. Certainly it makes clear that Port William is not heaven; rather it is like communities that we know—tragic events happen. But that interpretation fails to include integral parts of the story. Indeed, we can also argue that Thad Coulter is surrounded by positive influences in Port William—the love of family, friendship, and forgiveness, to name the most obvious.

The narrative provides important context about this tragedy. Thad Coulter has helped his son Abner set up business for himself in nearby Hargrave, securing the son's

banknote with his own farm. When Abner's business fails and he disappears, Thad is held to account with the bank and is in danger of losing the farm. As the story states, "He had in effect given his life and its entire effort as hostage to the possibility that Abner, his only son, could be made a merchant in a better place than Port William" (Berry, 1992, p. 12).

The story also points toward events well beyond Port William which have direct bearing on the story's events.

In Port William, as everywhere else, it was already the second decade of the twentieth century. And in some of the people of the town and the community surrounding it, one of the characteristic diseases of the twentieth century was making its way: the suspicion that they would be greatly improved if they were someplace else. This disease had entered into Thad Coulter and into Abner. In Thad it was fast coming to crisis. (Berry, 1992, pp. 19-20)

To make clearer the meaning of the threat of dispossession for Thad, I cite a description of the Coulter farm.

It had long been, to Thad's eye, a pretty farm—a hundred or so acres of slope and ridge on the west side of the little valley, the lower, gentler slopes divided from the ridge land by a ledgy bluff that was wooded, the log house and other buildings occupying a shelf above the creek bottom. Through all his years of paying for it, he had aspired toward it as toward a Promised Land. To have it, he had worked hard and long and deprived himself, and Rachel, his wife, had deprived herself. (Berry, 1992, p. 22)

We are also told that Thad and Rachel's son was "too smart, as Thad and Rachel agreed, without ever much talking about it, to spend his life farming a hillside. Something would have to be done to start him on his way to something better" (Berry, 1992, p. 22). And then the specter of the present trouble becomes clear.

Although he had thought the farm not good enough for Abner, Thad was divided in his mind; for himself he loved it. It was what he had transformed his life into. And now, even in the morning light, it lay under the shadow of his failure, and he could not bear to look at it. It was his life, and he was no longer in it. Somebody else, some other thing that did not even know it, stood ready to take possession of it. He was ashamed in its presence. (p. 22)

We have evidence, then, that the tragedy of July 1912 in Port William can be traced in part to powerful external influences rather than inadequacies in the Port William community. These include the lack of attractive and viable options for young people, the myth of things better elsewhere, the difficulty of the young man to execute a stable business venture or to face his failed attempt to do so, and the arguably harsh financial and legal constraints surrounding unfortunate turns in the road for many small farm owners. These realities make it difficult to link the tragedy of Ben Feltner's murder solely to missed opportunities for love and healing in Port William.

The most significant event in "Pray Without Ceasing" is that a potential cycle of violence is broken. Due to the actions of several characters in the story, a genuine healing takes place over time. The first to break the potential cycle of violence is Jack Beechum, Ben's brother-in-law, who intercedes directly and dramatically, physically stopping Mat, Ben's son, from the rage that engulfs him when he discovers that the gunshot heard in town that Saturday has taken his father's life. Beechum catches Mat, breaking his nephew's run, and holds him until the grief and initial rage can subside, making way for other thoughts, feelings, and actions. Jack's role in the events of this fateful day is pivotal.

All afternoon Jack did not sit down because Mat did not. Sometimes there were things to do, and they were busy. Space for the coffin had to be made in the living room. Furniture had to be moved. When the time came, the laden coffin had to be moved into place. But, busy or not, Mat was almost constantly moving, as if seeking his place in a world newly made that day, a world still shaking and doubtful underfoot. And Jack both moved with him and stayed apart from him, watching. When they spoke again, they would speak on different terms. (Berry, 1992, p. 53)

And so, Jack Beechum's actions, whether impulsive, consciously chosen, or a combination of the two, are instrumental in breaking the cycle of violence.

In addition, the story is brilliantly framed in the awareness and understanding that comes to Andy through his grandmother's account. Surely a fundamental message of the

story is the way in which actions speak and are carried forth, to future generations. Also, the reader learns what happened along with Andy. And the reader is given opportunity to understand the meaning of the story's events from multiple perspectives. Here is the initial framing of the story as Andy tells it. He sets the context for his recollection, as a middle-aged man, of his grandmother's detailed account.

Mat Feltner was my grandfather on my mother's side. Saying it thus, I force myself to reckon again with the strangeness of that verb *was*. The man of whom I once was pleased to say, "He is my grandfather," has become the dead man who was my grandfather. He was, and is no more. And this is a part of the great mystery we call time. (Berry, 1992, p. 3)

Andy places himself within the story that is unfolding, elaborating on "the great mystery we call time," and giving testimony to the significance of formative relationships in our lives.

But the past is present also. And this, I think, is a part of the greater mystery we call eternity. Though Mat Feltner has been dead for twenty-five years, and I am now older than he was when I was born and have grandchildren of my own, I know his hands, their way of holding a hammer or a hoe or a set of checklines, as well as I know my own. I know his way of talking, his way of cocking his head when he began a story, the smoking pipe stem held an inch from his lips. I have in my mind, not just as a memory but as a consolation, his welcome to me when I returned home from the university and, later, from jobs in distant cities. When I sat down beside him, his hand would clap lightly onto my leg above the knee; my absence might have lasted many months, but he would say as though we had been together the day before, "Hello, Andy." The shape of his hand is printed on the flesh of my thigh as vividly as a birthmark. This man who was my grandfather is present in me, as I felt always his father to be present in him. His father was Ben. The known history of the Feltners in Port William begins with Ben. (Berry, 1992, pp. 3-4)

Andy completes this beginning frame of the story, introducing further understanding of place in multiple dimensions.

But even the unknown past is present in us, its silence as persistent as a ringing in the ears. When I stand in the road that passes through Port William, I am standing on the strata of my history that go down through the known past into the unknown: the blacktop rests on state gravel, which rests on county gravel, which rests on the creek rock and cinders laid down by the



town when it was still mostly beyond the reach of the county; and under the creek rock and cinders is the dirt track of the town's beginning, the buffalo trace that was the way we came. You work your way down, or not so much down as within, into the interior of the present, until finally you come to that beginning in which all things, the world and the light itself, at a word welled up into being out of their absence. And nothing is here that we are beyond the reach of merely because we do not know about it. It is always the first morning of Creation and always the last day, always the now that is in time and the Now that is not, that has filled time with reminders of Itself. (Berry, 1992, pp. 4-5)

Thus we are launched on this difficult, yet profound story. As already noted, Jack Beechum interrupts the real possibility that violence will be met with more violence. He stops Mat from pursuing and likely killing Thad. The story makes clear how this decision or impulse, or perhaps both, on the part of Beechum turns Mat in a different direction. When a crowd from the community assembles and arrives at the Feltner home, offering ““as your daddy’s friends”” to go in pursuit of Thad and ““put justice beyond question”” (Berry, 1992, p. 56), Mat fully absorbs the proposition, considers it, and then chooses not to follow violence with more violence. He resists the ‘eye for an eye’ mentality that allows violence to spread like a cancer, even as the new world he inhabits literally “[shakes] under his feet” (p. 57).

The crowd grew quiet again, and again they could hear the swifts chittering in the air. Jack’s right hand ached to reach out to Mat. It seemed to him again that he felt the earth shaking under his feet, as Mat felt it. But though it shook and though they felt it, Mat now stood resolved and calm upon it. Looking at the back of his head, Jack could still see the boy in him, but the head was up. The voice, when it came, was steady:

“No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it.”

And Jack, who had not sat down since morning, stepped back and sat down.

Nancy, under whose feet the earth was not shaking, if it ever had, stepped up beside her son and took his arm.

She said to the crowd, “I know you are my husband’s friends. I thank you. I, too, must ask you not to do as you propose. Mat has asked you; I have asked you; if Ben could, he would ask you. Let us make what peace is left for us to make. (p. 57)

And then we have Andy's closing frame—helping readers see the meaning of the story from the grandson's perspective. First he reveals how his grandfather lived with the tragedy. Then, again, he places himself within the momentous events.

Mat Feltner dealt with Ben's murder by not talking about it and thus keeping it in the past. In his last years, I liked to get him to tell me about the violent old times of the town, the hard drinking and the fighting. And he would oblige me up to a point, enjoying the outrageous old stories himself, I think. But always there would come a time in the midst of the telling when he would become silent, shake his head, lift one hand and let it fall; and I would know—I know better now than I did then—that he had remembered his father's death.

Though Coulters still abound in Port William, no Feltner of the name is left. But the Feltner line continues, joined to the Coulter line, in me, and I am here. I am blood kin to both sides of that moment when Ben Feltner turned to face Thad Coulter in the road and Thad pulled the trigger. The two families, sundered in the ruin of a friendship, were united again first in new friendship and then in marriage. My grandfather made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness. (Berry, 1992, pp. 58-59)

There is no neat summing up of a story such as this with so many themes and dimensions. But I have used it to explore important yet abstract concepts in Berry's work—especially the concepts of violence and health of the community. I believe my exploration of the story helps us see that Port William does exemplify the possibility of character, community, responsibility, long-range vision, forgiveness, and what might be called faith, or the wisdom that recognizes how the true victims of violence are the perpetrators themselves. Killing Thad Coulter would not have brought back the father, the husband, or the brother-in-law. They choose, in the midst of their fresh and deep pain and loss, "their better angels." They choose to honor their beloved's life.

We need not identify the many examples of violence in the world and our country to see the significance of this story about love, loss, violence, forgiveness, and choice. Many influences impact how a young person grows up—what kind of person he or she becomes. Surely major roles are played by parents, close relatives, friends in the

community, public figures, leaders of civic and religious groups, and teachers. In a heavily schooled environment teachers are undoubtedly among those with much influence. They will impact their students in major ways, and perhaps in ways of which they may never be fully aware. Surely aspects of personal behavior, curriculum content, learning methods, and classroom process will be remembered and will influence future learning outcomes.

**Discussion of key idea: The connectedness of the created world.** Berry's concern about the standard of education, his claim that we need to aim higher than career focus and job preparation and set our sights on the health of the community, is closely related to the key idea of **connectedness** in his work. *Everything is connected—everything we do matters—has consequences. There are no absolute vacuums.* (See pp. 251-252 for definition.)

For Berry, missing the connections that inform our world is a big part of our trouble. He points out the shortcuts we have taken to simplify matters and observes how the shortcuts too often break important connections and bring about unexpected and unwelcome consequences.

People have tried to simplify themselves by severing the connections. That doesn't work. Severing connections makes complication. These bogus attempts at simplification ignore or despise the real complexity of the world....

Once you begin to ask what would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing that we can do here for our community....once you raise that standard of the health of the community....you begin to see that these supposedly discreet and separate disciplines, these "specializations," aren't separate at all, but are connected. And of course our mistakes, over and over again, show us what the connections are, or show us that connections exist....

We're teaching as if the purpose of knowledge is to help people have careers, or to make themselves better employees, and that's a great and tragic mistake. (Smith, 2007, pp. 99-101)

As Berry shines a light on the broken connections, he also illuminates ineffectual responses to our mistakes on the part of many entrepreneurs, government officials, and academicians. In the essay “Discipline and Hope” he outlines the customary approach of “the specialist mentality.”

The bureaucrat who has formulated a plan, the specialist who has discovered a new fact or process, and the student who has espoused a social vision or ideal, all are of a kind in the sense that they all tend to think that they are at the end of a complete disciplinary process when in fact they have little more than reached the beginning of one....

Having produced or espoused an abstraction, they next seek to put it to use by means of another abstraction—that is, an organization. But there is a sense in which organization is not a means of implementation, but rather a way of clinging to the clear premises and the neat logic of abstraction. The specialist mentality, unable by the terms of its narrow discipline to relinquish the secure order of abstraction, is prevented by a sort of Zeno’s law from ever reaching the real ground of proof in the human community or in the world; it never *meets* the need it purports to answer. (Berry, 1972, pp. 124-125)

Berry makes explicit the sense in which the specialist’s frame of reference disconnects him or her from reality.

Demanding that each step toward the world be an orderly one, the specialist is by that very token not moving in the direction of the world at all, but on a course parallel to it. He can reach the world, not by any orderly process, but only by a reverse leap of faith from the ideal realm of the laboratory or theoretical argument onto the obscure and clumsifying ground of experience, where other and larger disciplines are required. (Berry, 1972, p. 125)

This observation holds important implications for our efforts as educators. We may have long believed that education strives to address the most pressing challenges we face. Berry is not saying education *never* addresses our real-world issues. He is, however, observing and calling our attention to the fact that educators, these specialists, more often than we want to admit, are de-railing rather than facilitating the creative and effective problem-solving we so greatly need.

Berry repeatedly advances his argument that research and education are missing the mark.

The man who must actually put the specialist's abstraction to use and live with its effects is never a part of the specialist organization.... The farmer is not a part of the college of agriculture and the extension service; he is, rather, their object. The impoverished family is not a part of the welfare structure, but its object. The abstraction handed to these object-people is either true only in theory or it has been tried only under ideal (laboratory) conditions. For the bureaucrat, social planning replaces social behavior; for the agricultural scientist, chemistry and economics replace culture and ecology; for the political specialist (student or politician), theory replaces life, or tries to. Thus we institutionalize an impasse between the theoretical or ideal and the real, between the abstract and the particular; the specialist maintains a sort of esthetic distance between himself and the ground of proof and responsibility; and we delude ourselves that precept can have life and useful force without example. (Berry, 1972, pp. 125-126)

He often underscores the value of use when assessing the meaning of facts, knowledge, and information.

Abstractions move toward completion only in the particularity of enactment or of use. Their completion is only in that mysterious whole that Sir Albert Howard and others have called the wheel of life. A vision or a principle or a discovery or a plan is therefore only *half* a discipline, and, practically speaking, it is the least important half. (Berry, 1972, p. 126)

Berry has much to say about use.

The difference of which both men [Black Elk and William Carlos Williams] spoke is that between knowledge and the *use* of knowledge. Similarly, one may speak of the difference between the production of an idea or a thing and its use. The disciplines of production are always small and specialized. The disciplines of use and continuity are both different and large. A man who produces a fact or an idea has not completed his responsibility to it until he sees that it is well used in the world. (Berry, 1972, pp. 126-127)

Berry calls attention to our customary failure adequately to identify the difference between discovery and use. And he makes clear his view of the often unwelcome and unanticipated result of our inattention, our bungling mismatch between the two.

If the culture fails to provide highly articulate connections between the abstract and the particular, the organizational and the personal, knowledge

and behavior, production and use, the ideal and the world—that is, if it fails to bring the small disciplines of each man’s work within the purview of those larger disciplines implied by the conditions of our life in the world—then the result is a profound disorder in which men release into their community and dwelling place powerful forces the consequences of which are unknown. New knowledge, political ideas, technological innovations, all are injected into society merely on the ground that to the specialists who produce them they appear to be good in themselves. (Berry, 1972, p. 127)

Berry links the “profound disorder” he is describing with the decline in our language and lifts up once more the selective bookkeeping that accompanies our many profit-focused, industry-driven practices.

A “laborsaving” device that does the work it was intended to do is thought by its developers to be a success: in terms of their discipline and point of view it *works*, it is operational. That, in working, it considerably lowers the quality of a product and makes obsolete a considerable number of human beings is, to the specialists, merely an opportunity for other specialists.

If this attitude were restricted to the elite of government and university it would be bad enough; but it has also been popularized by their propaganda and example to the extent that the general public is willing to attribute to declarations, promises, mere words, the force of behavior. We have allowed and even encouraged a radical disconnection between our words and our deeds. Our speech has drifted out of the world into a realm of fantasy in which whatever we say is true. (pp. 127-128)

It is not unsurprising that one who challenges our bulwarks of innovation and discovery and finds more to criticize than celebrate in our education system (however it may be considered by many the envy of the world), argues passionately for a change in the principal goal of education.

For Berry, education’s objective must be closely related to use, results, and concrete consequences in the world, in the experience of human beings. And so, he calls for changing the standard of education to the health of the community. The benchmark for Berry in assessing education’s success or failure, the goal he believes should inform and motivate all the effort and resources expended for education is: what does this research project, discovery, new theory, or alternative curriculum mean with regard to the

community? How does it impact the health and vibrancy of this local community? For every intervention and innovation, we should ask: will it bring health and healing or disease and destruction? If it makes our communities stronger, more secure, more economically self-sustaining—then it should be considered worthy; it should be welcomed and implemented. And conversely, if it drains people away, if it robs the natural world of topsoil or minerals or pollutes life-saving water and other resources—it should be rejected. Berry interjects a challenging test for education: its success or failure hinges on its impact on our well-being, our livelihoods, and our local communities.

Shifting from the theoretical to consider one way these ideas may play out in human life, in local communities, I note one of Hannah Coulter's observations. When Coulter reflects back over her life and ponders the choices and directions of her three children, in conversation with Andy Catlett, she echoes, I believe, many of Berry's concerns about loss, destruction, waste, and shortsightedness in American culture. She has already described her misgivings about the children's education, how she believes, in the end, education led their children away from home, and sometimes away from their most fundamental interests and passions, to livelihoods elsewhere, with the often-cited focus on "a better place." Here she talks about employment in America and the fate of human beings in the work world. She poses a central question about community, its meaning and value, and challenges the forces in society that work against it.

One of the attractions of moving away into the life of employment, I think, is being disconnected and free, unbothered by membership. It is a life of beginnings without memories, but it a life too that ends without being remembered. The life of membership with all its cumbers is traded away for the life of employment that makes itself free by forgetting you clean as a whistle when you are not of any more use. When they get to retirement age, Margaret and Mattie and Caleb will be cast out of place and out of mind like worn-out replaceable parts, to be alone at the last maybe and soon forgotten.

"But the membership," Andy said, "keeps the memories even of horses and mules and milk cows and dogs." (Berry, 2004, pp. 133-134)

We pause to consider: when and how did education come to be so centered on careers and encouraging young people to move away from home and not return? How did education get so focused on success in the future, as measured by status, income and power? I believe these “severed connections” occurred when American education began dividing liberal and practical education, with practical education gaining dominance. With this transition, schools began to focus on careers, measuring their effectiveness by simplistic indices (test scores and graduates’ incomes). Along with these preoccupations came a subtle, and perhaps at times overt, encouragement to move away from home, especially from smaller, rural places to larger, urban settings. Urging students to focus on success in a future no one can predict, educators, however well-intended or unintentionally, contributed to the downturn of the health of local communities. For Berry, much has been lost. Part of any hope for achieving different results includes reviving education, starting by changing its primary objective to a committed focus on the community. For every plan, innovation, or curriculum design, ask first: what will be the impact on *this* community?

In closing this consideration of connectedness and the health of the community, I note that Berry calls us to think about our young people in a new way. He observes the disadvantages of trial and error learning.

And if the things that need to be remembered are forgotten, then the learning becomes more costly than it ought to be.... Neither the world nor the community can afford a trial-and-error education in these practical things every generation.... You have to remember what you tried and you have to remember whether it worked or not. (Brown, 2007, p. 109)

And repeatedly Berry reminds us of education’s role.

But the reason for education, its constant effort and discipline, is surely to reduce the young person’s dependence on trial and error as far as possible. For it *can* be reduced. One should not have to learn everything, or the basic things, by trial and error.... A student should not have to learn the penalties of illiteracy by being illiterate or the value of a good education by the “object lesson” of a poor one. (Berry, 1987, p. 84)



We should pass down, from older to younger, all of value that has already been learned. This is the responsibility of educators—to view young people as a precious resource and understand our responsibilities for them. As teachers, parents, and community “members,” we must reconstruct education to build up and not fragment, the something precious in our young people, now too often being lost.

### **The Educational Concern Relates to Themes in Berry’s Fiction**

The proposal that Berry makes, to reconstruct the standard for education from a focus on careers to a focus on the health of the community, relates to the three themes this study examines in Berry’s fiction. Clearly there is a link to *the theme of land and place*. Repeatedly we see Port William farmers getting up in years or widows like Hannah Coulter worrying over what will become of the farms they loved, cared for, and worked for so many years. Who will work this land after me? They cannot know. Jack Beechum must first establish that no family member is going to follow him and care for his farm. Fortunately, he is able, with Wheeler Catlett’s help, to find tenants he likes, Elton and Mary Penn. Beechum is able to make his wishes known, sharing with Wheeler what he envisions. Still, there is no guarantee how the auction of the Beechum place will work out. Beechum’s daughter Clara is determined to get all she can from the sale of the farm. The wishes of her deceased father are not to be considered. It is, undeniably, a close call.

In Hannah and Nathen Coulter’s son, Caleb, we see a young man who grows up loving farm work but who chooses, nevertheless, as a young adult to move away from farming and become an academic specialist. He elects a path that leads away from the farm he knows well and the people he loves and who love him. As Hannah views it, Caleb sets aside much of what he cares about most. Berry is pointing out a long-standing pattern in American culture, claiming that we educate our young people “for export” (Berry, 2003, p. 82). He believes this ill-chosen priority in education, fueled by the heavy

emphasis on jobs and careers, is unsustainable, a destructive approach to raising society's young, and one often pervaded by loss and heartbreak. Furthermore, the land and those close to it are most heavily impacted.

Berry makes the additional point that we all depend on the well-being of the land whether we live in rural, small town, or urban communities. Had the education of Clara Beechum and Caleb Coulter, for example, been different—had it connected them with their local community engagingly and celebrated the livelihoods of their families, lifting up the health of the community and nurturing the skills and values of responsible community membership, including care for the natural world—perhaps Clara and Caleb would have chosen differently as young adults. I cannot prove that their choices would have been different had their education been better focused on the local community. However, I believe the question deserves consideration.

Berry's educational concern about changing the standard of education to the health of the community clearly relates to *the theme of community* in his fiction. (See pp. 81-82 for definition.) One example of community membership in Port William is the help that comes readily to Ida Crop after the tragic flood that kills their daughter and drives Gideon away indefinitely. Mat Feltner, Burley and Jarrat Coulter, Ernest Finley, and others rally to work on the water-ravaged buildings and help with the crops. This is the kind of work-swapping that Nathan Coulter appreciates and respects, the alternative he sees to being employed and having to answer to or supervise others, an arrangement he finds full of disadvantages. I cannot claim, however, that Mat, Burley, Ernest, or Jarrat step up to support Ida because of experiences they had in school. Nothing documents a connection between their schooling and their willingness to help Port William be the kind of community Berry values. Nevertheless, we can pose the question: can education not address community needs, health, and opportunities more consistently and effectively? Are educators not in a position to help enable students to graduate with the skills, inclinations, and commitment needed to become facilitators of their local communities?

As educators, I believe we hold an especial responsibility. We need to wrestle with these questions and identify ways to implement qualitative improvements.

And third, Berry's argument that the health of the community should supplant the focus on careers as education's fundamental objective relates to *the theme of character* in his fiction. (See pp. 127-128 for definition.) Several examples of Port William members with qualities of character come readily to mind. There is Jack Beechum and the marvelous story we have of his long, full life as a successful farmer though also a man who faces recurring losses and setbacks. There is Andy Catlett, whose development through many years we are given opportunity to observe, and his discovery of his own strengths, especially when asked to compromise his values on the job or faced with a tragic personal injury. There is Jayber Crow's journey from orphanhood to a fulfilling adult life that does not feel artificial, imposed, or shallow. All three achieve a level of wisdom particular to their individual circumstances and identities. They also demonstrate an acceptance of life's troubles and a wholeness that comes only from years of experience, engagement with others in the life of the community, and the willingness to be there for others as a community "member." Of the three, Jayber Crow's life offers the most apparent connection between his education and his life choices as an adult. That connection, however, is arguably indirect. School does not so much help Jayber see the life he would like to have, or shape him into a responsible community "member," as it shows him what he does *not* want, and thereby helps him identify what he *does* want.

Another example of a link between Berry's educational concern about the standard for education and *the theme of character* in his fiction can be found in Hannah Coulter's story. Hannah is an admirable figure. She withstands tragic losses—her mother's death when she is young and Virgil's death in the war after they are married. In the novel named for her, she faces another compelling loss—with Nathan gone, she lives alone except for the community. Port William is where her life has been, and in Port William it

will end. Her children though, are not there. Except for occasional and frequently awkward visits, they are busy with their own lives in other places.

The question for education remains: Do we need a radical shift in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America? Do we need schools and educators who care about their local communities, who make its health and well-being the big objective in their teaching, and who inspire young people, by teaching and example, to become caring, responsible community “members”? Berry believes we do.

Hannah Coulter exemplifies the health of the community, I argue, in part through her hard work of loving and raising a family, caring for neighbors, and, not only surviving but coming to a level of acceptance, understanding, and peace in the face of her losses. And all that she says about education deserves our attentive listening and response.

## Chapter VII

### CONCLUSION

#### **Description of the Study**

This study developed out of years of reading and reflecting upon Wendell Berry's work, especially his fiction and essays, and my growing conviction that he has a salient message for contemporary educators. The study attempts to address the question: What are the implications of Berry's cultural critique, set forth in multiple genres over nearly six decades, for American educators?

Believing that Berry's fiction supplements his essays and longer nonfiction works in significant ways, I examine three themes in the fiction: land and place, community, and character. For each theme I focus on selected novels to explore Berry's rich portrait of life in the imaginary town of Port William, a microcosm of small town America. The fiction, of course, is multivalent and open to multiple interpretations. I believe it tells us much about Berry's values and beliefs. In addition, the fiction helps us better understand the abstract concepts Berry explores in his non-fiction. For example, in considering the significance of land and place, I revisit *The Memory of Old Jack* and other accounts of Jack Beechum to identify the depth of this character's life work, his love for and commitment to the land, his many long days working in the fields of his farm, and the care and deliberation he expends over the future of this land. Berry offers a realistic and thought-provoking portrait in the character of Jack Beechum. Seeing Beechum's affection for his "place on earth" gives us pause, for we cannot help but be sobered by the

discrepancy between Beechum's commitment to quality work on the land and the penchant in postindustrial America for destroying, pillaging, and laying waste so many natural resources. Berry's fiction is filled with vivid pictures that reveal the author's values and call into question our most taken-for-granted assumptions in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

Berry's work, of course, is not confined to his fiction. His essays offer probing assessments of America's greatest challenges as well as Berry's outlines for moving forward in ways that can heal, restore, and perhaps sustain health and vibrancy in our natural and human worlds. Berry discusses at length the meaning of human community, the essential component of economics in local communities, and how the means of livelihood reveal basic assumptions and values of community members and the society at large. He writes about love, responsibility, and community membership. He calls out the forces in our society that are destructive of community well-being and the health of the natural world.

In *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, Berry analyzes American culture from his vantage point a half century ago and gives particular attention to our land-grant colleges, examining the reasons they were created and observing, with profound sobriety, how these institutions have, in his view, defaulted on their primary purpose as envisioned by those who crafted the original legislation. Berry's essays are passionately worded treatises, as relevant today as they were when first published, if not more so.

Supplementing the fiction and essays are interviews, many of which appear in *Conversations with Wendell Berry*. The interviews are valuable because in spite of Berry's eloquence in fiction, prose, and poetry, there is something about a face-to-face conversation that often enables yet a fresh take on a subject. No doubt the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee facilitates the condensing of complex issues into

sharply focused, easy-to-grasp statements. Berry resisted requests for interviews for a number of years. But in time he began granting them, and we are fortunate that he did.

Together the essays and interviews, along with the more extended argument in *The Unsettling of America*, formed the bases for the chapter “How Wendell Berry Views Education.” Here I examine what Berry has said about education. While his fiction offers imaginative portraits and particular scenarios that I believe often reveal Berry’s thoughts about education, they are nevertheless components in complex narratives and as such must be interpreted. Berry’s nonfiction and interviews, on the other hand, help to make his cultural critique more accessible and . Both the fiction and the nonfiction make valuable contributions to our understanding of Berry’s philosophy. They work in different ways and, arguably, complement one another, due in part to Berry’s skill as an author and to the consistency and depth of his carefully crafted, provocative, and persuasive world view.

In the chapter entitled “Integration: Educational Concerns, Key Ideas, and Themes in the Fiction,” I weave differing parts of the study into a more unified whole. Working with selected concerns about education that Berry consistently presents, I give a summary of the concern and include definitions of related terms for the purpose of the study. Following the summary, I relate the concern to several of the key ideas I identify in Berry’s work. In concluding my consideration of each educational concern, I examine how it relates to the themes I explored in Berry’s fiction. I create thereby an exercise that enables me to make connections and discoveries I might not otherwise have made.

For example, in considering Berry’s concern about the lack of connection between education and the local community, I relate this concern to the key idea in Berry’s work about the sacredness of creation. This key idea is stated as follows: *The created world is sacred—places are sacred; people are sacred; creatures are sacred; and resources are sacred. All are invaluable and irreplaceable. We must pay much closer attention.* In thinking about Berry’s concern that education and the local community are not vitally

linked and this key idea, I observe how one's belief that all creation is sacred ushers in a new perspective on what takes place in the classroom. Educators who view the natural world as sacred will have especial appreciation and respect for all of creation—people, places, resources, wildlife, all the components of the natural world. They will introduce this reverence and enthusiasm, if you will, into their classrooms. They will be motivated to help their students be engaged in the local community, and they will seek ways to facilitate this essential connection. They will help students value the created world and, through engagement in the local community, begin to cultivate the attitudes and skills that support community membership. In other words, these teachers will resist the tendency often present in education settings to accept the artificial divide between classroom and local community. I believe they will teach differently from many of their colleagues. In addition, we can expect these complimentary attitudes and approaches to pedagogy, in response to one's valuing the sacredness of creation, to be present in diverse education settings, in rural, urban, and suburban locations.

The study offers qualitative data (selected passages from Berry's work) and uses literary and textual analysis as the primary method of assessment. This design is supplemented by philosophic, cultural, and social inquiry. Secondary sources, particularly those that explore Berry's work as it relates to education, also inform this inquiry.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

The study yielded several major findings. Perhaps the most striking was the discovery of how much Berry links our education practices with society's biggest challenges. From my early reading of Berry, I understood how he was critical of agribusiness, most mega-corporations, and much that he observes in politics, the government, and the military-industrial complex. However, not until I embarked on this



study did I realize how misguided Berry believes much of our education system is. Berry identifies various “superstitions” that we hold about education—that education is good; that education will solve our biggest problems; that the more education one acquires, the better; and that we can access the information we need to reverse our mistakes *before* calamitous outcomes result (Smith, 2007, p. 93).

Berry expresses genuine dismay and disappointment when he assesses America’s land-grant colleges and examines the legislation that created them. Using both philosophy and historic analysis, he traces the roots of the land-grant colleges to the country’s early legislators. He cites their desire to insure the health and viability of the land, those who work it, and the small communities close to the land. These visionaries wanted rural America, America’s farming communities, to be on equal footing with industry and urban centers. They poured valuable resources into this network of educational institutions and their supporting agencies. But for Berry, examining the contributions of these institutions reveals a tragic dereliction. The land-grant colleges were created to help solve the problems of rural America. They were mandated to have a sharp local focus, commitment, and investment. But the schools got sidetracked. Forces that should have held “practical” and “liberal” education together, offering both in the curriculum, let the goals of a growing society dictate otherwise, and soon the practical educational strand came to dominate, edging out liberal education, with its appreciation for the past and its sense of education as a bequest, bearing responsibilities along with it. The domination of practical education ushered in simplified and quantifiable goals and reduced education’s meaning, as Berry sees it. Diplomas ceased to signify the achievement of a broad-based education and began to resemble certificates, redeemable in the future for status, careers, income, and power. Berry believes that the land-grant colleges came to *rely on* the problems of farmers, rather than working with farmers to solve those problems. The colleges came to depend upon the farmers’ challenges, in fact, as central to their own livelihoods (Berry, 1986a, p. 148).

Berry succinctly summarizes this complex, arguably disastrous phenomenon, which evolved over less than a century in our young country, when he states the following.

As self-interest, laziness, and lack of conviction augment the general confusion about what an education is or ought to be, and as standards of excellence are replaced by sliding scales of adequacy, these schools begin to depend upon, and so to institutionalize, the local problems that they were founded to solve. They begin to need, and so to promote, the mobility, careerism, and moral confusion that are victimizing the local population and destroying the local communities. The stock in trade of the “man of learning” comes to be ignorance. (p. 148)

Another key finding is the degree to which Berry connects the development of young people into caring and responsible citizens, or to use his term, *community members*, able and willing to take on the work that supports healthy communities—insuring that all have food and shelter, tending those with special needs, and educating the next generation—to quality education. At one point Berry observes the essential connection between caring and knowledge. “And of course, one of the responsibilities of a culture is to see that people know enough to care. And our educational system doesn’t deal with that problem. Really, as a system, it hasn’t heard of that problem” (Brown, 2007, p. 104). As education is a primary vehicle for learning and transmitting the necessary knowledge, teaching these fundamental skills becomes a crucial role for educators.

Berry draws his views from his tradition of western culture and the Christian faith. And he looks to society’s institutions to see how they support these values. He looks to education to see what it contributes to community, especially the local community—how it helps the young people who come through its doors to become community members. Unfortunately Berry is often troubled by what he sees in education.

In addition to his dismay over the land-grant colleges, Berry sees education, across the board, encouraging young people to move away from home, permanently—in search

of the well-paying, comfortable, and secure career niche. While some may claim that Berry overreacts on this issue, asserting that educators should encourage students to explore the world and broaden their horizons and noting that many students settle within a 50-mile radius of their most recent school enrollment, others agree with Berry that schools focus too much on careers and success, as defined and measured by quantitative indices. The latter believe with Berry that many educators urge young people to strive to exceed their forebears in terms of income, status, and prestige, and that these motivations almost guarantee that young people will consider returning home as a last option. Berry finds the exodus of young people from the places they grew up to be prevalent, long-standing, and detrimental to the health of local communities. This migration away from communities of origin, of course, is also closely tied to the pervasive mobility in American culture.

Berry speaks about his own experience and observations. And while he has lived in New York City, Stanford, California, and Europe, he chose to return to his community of origin and family land as a relatively young adult. In the small town of Port Royal, Kentucky, Berry has raised a family, farmed a steep tract of land, and produced a prolific body of work over a half century. His choice of location appears to be permanent. Hence Berry speaks from his vantage point in small town America and from within a community of people who work the land. This trend of young people leaving home for good is perhaps especially costly for rural America, though the migration of young people away from home holds implications for urban communities as well. Furthermore, given Berry's keen sense of the connectedness of our lives, what impacts rural America will in time also impact urban communities in one way or another.

For the agriculture community the trend of young people leaving home is linked to another significant concern for Berry—the erosion of the fund of knowledge and experience needed for successful agriculture, in other words for productive crop yields as well as the care and replenishment of the soil and other natural resources. In Berry's

lifetime, the decline of the farm population in the United States has been close to a wipe-out, a phenomenon Berry traces to misguided government policy, the corporate executives of companies that profit from agribusiness, the unfortunate “betrayal of trust” exhibited by agriculture schools, land-grant colleges, and their supporting agencies, as well as the definitions of success proffered by educators more generally. This migration of farmers and the rural population off the land in the sellout to the mega-farm industry has meant that those with authentically expert knowledge about good farming practices, knowledge most often passed down from one generation to another, have taken up alternative “callings” with one result being the loss of this important knowledge. Perhaps many of the young people who move away become teachers, researchers, corporate executives, government officials, or information technology specialists, as did Hannah and Nathan Coulter’s son Mattie. For Berry, they were forced to choose other lines of work by severe economic realities, nearly always put in place by people much less vulnerable than they to these harsh, rural, economic realities.

The well-intended enticements, examples, and advice of teachers and professors also no doubt played a role in the migration of the young off the farm and away from the small, rural communities. Berry believes that the erosion of this valuable knowledge about how to farm well—how to raise and harvest nutritious food while at the same time replenishing the land, water, and nutrients so essential to the process, so that the cycle can be replicated again and again—bears potentially catastrophic consequences. While he does not express his concerns in a disaster-ridden vernacular, one cannot hear his analysis and discern its meaning without feeling deeply concerned about our current misdirections and their all-but-certain outcomes—*unless* radical changes in values, lifestyles, food production, and care of land and resources are implemented. As Mark Bittman (2012) observes in a *New York Times* opinion piece, “If you read or listen to Wendell and aren’t filled with admiration and respect, it’s hard to believe that you might admire and respect

the land or nature, or even humanity”

(<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/24/wendell-berry-american-hero/>).

Running through the findings already discussed and in a sense overarching them all is Berry’s belief that education has a primary responsibility for vibrant connection with the local community. This is not simply a belief that schools should pay more attention to their respective local communities, i.e., notice unique features and plan units of study and field trips that increase focus on aspects of the particular community—though in the absence of a vibrant connection between most schools and the local community, Berry would welcome such efforts as constructive first steps.

Berry’s cultural critique calls for a radical reworking of the relationship between education and the local community. He wants educators, researchers, artists, and administrators to transcend their too frequently limited realms of awareness and become invested in the local community. To implement this overhaul of education effectively will require in part a scaling back of references to global agendas, significance, and scale, and our deeply established penchant for dividing knowledge into discrete academic disciplines. Berry says that educators, researchers, and artists need to feel deeply and personally, in their own lives, the losses, injuries, and insults, as well as the victories, achievements, and celebrations of their local communities. He means that people of learning, specialists respected for their intellectual gifts and accomplishments, and those in whom education has been invested should not simply take notice, observe, and perhaps conduct a study or write an article—they need to “get their hands dirty” as it were. They need to participate in local food co-ops, tackle a local challenge and find solutions, join others in cooperative efforts as community members to improve some aspect of life for those who live there. The list of possibilities is endless.

Berry believes that the transformative potential for this movement, that is, for a change in focus, effort, and priorities on the part of American educators, is greater than we can imagine. While he has said repeatedly that he is not advancing a particular

“program,” nor trying to tell his listeners how things should be done, there is no question that Berry feels the pervasive disruption many Americans now experience, whether they are aware of it or not, between themselves and the places where they live, between their work lives and their places of residence, and perhaps also between the expenditure of their life energy and the things they care most deeply about. This lack of wholeness is at the heart of our disease, our cultural disease, as a society. It has theoretical, political, theological, social, cultural, and practical levels and implications. The solutions will not be simple, obvious, or easily implemented. But the solutions are discoverable, according to Berry. They are our only valid bases for a realistic and justifiable hope about the future health and well-being of our communities and the planet.

For educators the implication of all of this might be summed up concisely in Berry’s proposal for the change most needed in American education. Asked over and over how we could make education better, more suited to our needs and challenges, Berry says he would change education as he would change anything else: he would change the standard—from a focus on careers and success to the health of the community (Smith, 2007, p. 100). If we begin to ask of *every* policy proposal, curriculum design, and administrative decision: what will be the impact on the local community?—it would radically alter the education enterprise.

For me, Berry is saying that we need to get clearer, more focused, and realistic about our realms of influence. On the surface this may sound easy enough. But to discern Berry’s meaning, we must go deeper. Berry would not, as I understand him, embrace the goals of John Culberson, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, who is eager to advance NASA’s program and expand space exploration. Culberson is especially focused on Jupiter’s moon Europa because he believes it has valuable water.<sup>1</sup> Berry would likely

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<sup>1</sup>See the PBS Newshour broadcast, *What do the stars hold for the Trump administration? Here’s how NASA’s mission could change*, aired April 12, 2017.

argue that the expenditures for space exploration could be put to better use in restoring soil health and combatting the ravages of climate change, the reality of which is increasingly impossible to deny. Berry is an advocate for accurately discerning the scope of our influence. He does not use the term “scope of influence” as a key concept. But this is one of his essential messages. And this interpretation parallels his message about farms, especially mega-farms in contrast with small, family farms. Berry is saying that there is a direct relationship between the accurate gauge of the scope of one’s work—assessing what is manageable in any endeavor given the resources available—and the quality and effectiveness of the work produced.

Berry is also saying, in part: we are a society in serious overdrive. The faster we move, the more territory we cover, the *less* we are going to see, or see clearly. And herein lies a clue to our prevailing disease as individuals and as a culture. Berry is not saying we cannot have significant influence. But he is saying that due to our lack of humility about what we know (our difficulty acknowledging mystery, our mistakes, and the limits of our knowledge) and our inflated needs and desires, we have torn asunder and destroyed our natural world and human communities. Far too much of what we have thoughtlessly let go cannot be brought back, cannot be redeemed. Recently, for example, thousands marched in Washington, D.C. to bring attention to climate change and what we need to do immediately to address it. Marchers took time from work and weekend activities to make a public statement. Some traveled hundreds of miles. Others marched in Seattle or Chicago. Bill McKibben<sup>2</sup> said the march was planned to coincide with the first one hundred days of the new president’s administration. This administration’s position on

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Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/stars-hold-trump-administration-heres-nasas-mission-change>

<sup>2</sup>William Ernest "Bill" McKibben is an American environmentalist, author, and journalist. He has written extensively on the impact of global warming and is leader of the anti-carbon campaign 350.org. At Middlebury College he is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\\_McKibben](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_McKibben))

climate change, we note, ignores the issue's urgency, disheartening for those who accept the scientific evidence and strive to implement constructive responses.<sup>3</sup>

Berry poses the questions we need to ask: What do we need? What can we do here that simplifies our existence or helps a neighbor? Or insures that something of quality will be here for those who come after us? Is setting our sites on other planets going to help us with the devastation of climate change here on Earth?

How might schools and the local community unite in collaborative partnership? How might the health of the local community become our standard for education? This is the question Berry would have us wrestle with and put our best energy behind. No longer is it hyperbole to assert that everything hinges on wrestling with this question and hazarding some answers. As McKibben says, "Wendell Berry is our finest living writer, and so it is always good to see people working out the meaning of his various writings" (Wiebe, 2017, back cover).

### **Frequently Voiced Critiques of Berry's Philosophy**

To round out this study I include several of the more frequent critiques of Berry, not so much to resolve them as to acknowledge them and offer my understanding of the challenge Berry at times poses for interpreters of his work. I should note as well, I have no intention in this discussion to speak for Mr. Berry.

One assessment is that *by his choice to return to Kentucky and take up farming on family land, Berry has intentionally escaped the modern challenges and complexities of urban life*, urban centers being increasingly the residence of more and more Americans.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See "A March for the Future: People's Climate Change Mobilization" by Bill McKibben, *The Nation*, pp. 12-14, May 8/15, 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Critiques: When critiques of Berry's work are introduced in the following discussion, they are italicized.



This claim is somewhat puzzling and perhaps a little biased. It implies that any knowledgeable person with a real choice in the matter would choose urban residence and livelihood over a small town or a rural community close to the land. While there is no denying that many American cities offer attractive opportunities, both for employment and cultural enrichment, it is, nevertheless, presumptuous to assume that everyone would select urban over smaller settings in which to establish homes and livelihoods.

This is a complex topic, and I cannot address all its angles in a few paragraphs. However, I include an additional observation and several suggestions about Berry's presumed response to this issue. The observation is that various factors in our society can be said to combine and collude in creating not insignificant prejudice and misconceptions about rural or small-town life. The notion is unfortunately too widespread that young people in small towns or farming communities should be encouraged to go away from home for advanced education and to "broaden their horizons," which nearly always means to keep going, toward larger urban areas in the pursuit of lucrative work, stimulating social opportunities, and success as defined by society's generally simplistic benchmarks.

Berry's likely response to this allegation, that he has somehow ducked out of living where life is forward-looking and includes both valuable opportunities and real-world challenges, is to point out that there are no places free of problems anymore. The human community and the natural world face significant obstacles in every location. He calls attention to a long-standing myth in American culture—that if you are not happy in one place you can always pick up and move somewhere else, can roll the dice so to speak and bank on a better place (Smith, 2007, p. 98). This is not to say that a given place may not be a better fit for one of us, or one of our neighbors, than another. But it is to emphasize the reality that Berry perceives: all places are now threatened by forces that work against healthy natural resources, sustainable food production, and humane communities that

nurture residents and contribute to the healing of the Earth. Every place now yields multiple opportunities for enriching our natural world and all who reside within it.

Another critique sometimes advanced about Berry's work is the idea that *small communities with pronounced local loyalties may have a greater likelihood of becoming closed, elitist, and narrow-minded, marked by an "us-them" mentality, than places with larger populations, more likely to have greater population diversity*. One interviewer cites mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century ethnic struggles in Eastern Europe when expressing this concern (Smith, 2007, p. 102). This is a valid claim, and I cite Berry's response. He asserts that larger populated areas can, like smaller ones, develop into closed, narrow, reactionary communities where those who differ are misunderstood, mistreated, and excluded (Smith, 2007, p. 102). He consistently invites us to recognize that we share more with our neighbors than we realize. He argues for an understanding of community membership based on the belief "that we belong to each other and to God" (Brown, 2007, p. 107). The logical conclusion from this premise is that what happens to one affects others, and so conditions that impact one's neighbors also impact oneself, and vice versa. Berry argues for a broad, wide-ranging, and inclusive understanding of community and a recognition of the practical, concrete responsibilities that follow.

A third appraisal sometimes presented is that *Berry's cultural critique is inadequate when it comes to recognizing America's cultural diversity and the related struggles for racial and social equality that mark our history and continue to play out today*. For example, Kimberly Smith cites several feminist theorists who claim that Berry fails to recognize the gender inequities experienced by women in rural settings where traditional masculine and sexist images and expectations still prevail. This view that Berry's failure to recognize America's cultural diversity and the related ongoing human rights struggles is difficult to address; it gives us pause. And every reader or reviewer must respond from his or her interpretation of Berry's work. As I read his work, I hear a knowledgeable, profoundly reflective voice, deeply aware of the damage and destruction

in our history. While Berry's focus is squarely on the demise of the natural world through agribusiness and numerous cultural, political, social, and economic practices, it also includes racial division, the dominance of the military-industrial complex, issues of gender inequity, and the co-opting of human livelihood and resources on multiple levels by the mega-corporations. This sobering list constitutes a history Berry himself has documented and lamented for decades with moving eloquence. Berry believes that national governments are now owned by mega-corporations with global reach. He lays out with clarity the economic realities and disparities that these conditions produce. He has also written insightfully about America's racism, speaking from his own experience, struggles, and observations. In *The Hidden Wound* Berry makes clear the way in which our failure to achieve justice and equality for all Americans impacts all Americans. And with regard to gender equity, Kimberly Smith advances a convincing argument that Berry's philosophy supports many aspects of feminist theory and has potential to further constructive dialogue. Smith is especially compelling in her observation that Berry frequently adapts traditional values and cultural practices to accommodate the needs and challenges of the present context. In exploring the revisionist elements in Berry's political philosophy, she claims that this ability to re-contextualize traditional values for a different historical moment is a worthy contribution. Smith shows, for instance, how Berry argues for both independence and interdependence within the agrarian tradition while he also claims that the agrarian culture is a more promising milieu for a healthy and fulfilling livelihood than industrial capitalism. For Smith, Berry's philosophy persuasively engages the concerns and arguments for progressive change advanced by many feminist theorists. Berry's work, in my view, examines a set of distinct problems in our culture that complement, rather than oppose, others' work on diversity.

A fourth critique of Berry is that *in both his fiction and essays he seems to harken back to an idyllic past to which he longs to return and exhorts his readers to do likewise.* This criticism is also challenging to appraise partly because Berry's work does cause

many readers to revisit their communities of origin, often smaller than their current places of residence, and to discover how things of value have been lost. The community I grew up in, while not a farming community, nevertheless included three generations of my family and was an area inhabited by ancestors for generations back. I grew from birth to mid-teens while we lived there, and my memories are generally positive and focused around family, school, neighborhood, and church. In the summer, aunts, uncles and cousins would visit from three different locations, all of which were larger than this, my first hometown. I am grateful for the chance I had to grow up knowing and living close to beloved grandparents. Berry's scenes of big meals around a table, focused on farm families coming together during a harvest season, with the women cooking and serving the men and sometimes joining them afterwards in the fields, do not closely resemble the family meals I recall. However, these scenes in Port William bring my positive family memories to mind. And the stories of Andy Catlett visiting grandparents as a young boy bring to mind my own such visits, though my grandparents did not own a farm. The adults in my family were for decades active in the local community, and we knew many of our neighbors. And so, I cannot claim that no element of nostalgia impacts my experience of Berry's work. In fact, his work calls to mind good experiences not now replicable and which seem increasingly rare. Consequently there is a sense in which I believe Berry calls us to consider the possibility that in our evolution to a postindustrial society, we have allowed valuable experiences, relationships, and ways of living to disappear. If these experiences or customs were present at an earlier time and deemed valuable, would not one who calls them to mind and encourages us to rekindle them be making an important contribution? Should we not look for ways to revive customs and social practices that were once nurturing and positive? Perhaps the customs may change and take new shapes, and as such they too should be welcomed, reconstructed in a new light.

Berry's own response to this assertion is helpful. He says that, in writing about America's culture, he has observed and been critical of our history. He states in fact that there is no time in our past that we should long to return to. Even the times we look back upon with fondness and warm recollections were perhaps deficient in ways we have been slow to recognize. Indeed, we have never achieved the health and wholeness that Berry envisions and works to bring about. His vision constitutes a goal, something to aspire to, if we agree with him that the vision has merit. In addition, Berry calls us to the work of avoiding viewing past, present, or future through tinted lenses.

Last I consider the view that *Berry's thoughts about education are more appropriate for rural rather than urban schools*. While this claim is understandable, it warrants examination. Berry writes about his own experience, drawing from observations throughout his life. He grew up in a small Kentucky community of land-working people. His own family members worked the land. And after stints away at school and time in California, New York, and Europe, he returned to the same community where he and his wife Tanya have worked their farm and raised their family. His fiction is set in a small community of people who work the land. Direct references to education in the fiction are few. There is Jayber Crow's enjoyment of the sounds of children leaving school at the end of the day and his account of the void left when the school is closed and the students are bused to a consolidated school in Hargrave. We picture him making these observations firsthand, stepping out of his nearby barbershop and seeing and hearing the coming and going of the children and young people. We hear the quiet that settles audibly upon the little town every afternoon once the school is closed. The most detailed fictional references to education come in *Jayber Crow* as we travel with Jayber through three schooling experiences, seeing along the way the messages he receives from different educators and how he struggles to discern their meaning for his life.

There is no argument that Berry's views, his cultural critique and its significance for education, hold especial relevance for similar settings—rural and small-town

communities where people work the land. Rather the question here is, do Berry's views hold relevance for educational settings other than rural America? I believe the answer is yes. Just because community members in urban areas are not likely to be working the land does not mean that, for them, there are no local issues to be addressed. The meaning of human community is complex, evolving, and particular in every local setting. And everywhere there will be questions and challenges about safe and responsible food production. Furthermore, young people in rural as well as urban settings need to learn about their communities, their relatives, and the lives of parents and grandparents. They need to identify issues confronting their communities and experiment with finding workable solutions. They also need to imagine themselves as responsible community participants and begin to see what taking up such a role would include. Why would we not expect schools to play an important role in this agenda, wherever the work of preparing the young for adulthood is underway?

Berry does not say that his recommendation about changing the standard of education from a focus on careers and success as defined by society to a focus on the health of the community is applicable *only* to rural or small-town schools. He talks about education missteps and failures across the board. The only time he narrows his focus slightly about education in America is: (1) when he offers his detailed account and criticism of land-grant colleges and their related branches in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, and (2) when he observes that knowledge of healthy and sustainable agricultural practice is dropping precipitously, constituting a costly education deficit for populations near the land (Berry, 2003, p. 82). This latter instance has potentially catastrophic implications for urban as well as rural populations, as Berry makes clear. We have set up these artificial barriers and divides, drastically simplifying our perceptions about the complexities of human life, and we have done so to our detriment. Human life and a healthy ecosystem are much more intricately connected, Berry tells us. This is a real concern, the issue of healthy farming, replenishing natural

resources, and producing quality food for burgeoning populations. And so, we narrow the conversation unproductively, using fragmentary thinking, when we limit our application of Berry's insights to selected locales based on a misunderstanding of the depth and breadth of his critique and the generalizability of his recommendations and assessments.

These are a few of the criticisms most frequently brought to bear on Berry's work. As stated, I bring them up not so much to resolve them as to acknowledge them and offer the results of my research to the discussion.

If I were to conclude this study with a few of my own unanswered questions about Berry's work, I would suggest the following as ways to keep the conversation going.

1. *What is the single element I believe is most responsible for education's failure in America? In other words, based on this study, what is the first thing we should do to make American education better?* Here we need to work with Berry's claim that the standard for education should be revitalized to encompass the health of the community. This is what Berry identifies as the first step. And we would use this vision, our understanding of what it means to be a healthy, whole community, as a springboard to open discussions and work toward concrete plans for implementing that vision within local communities. We would likely put in place a series of experiments or trial and error balloons, practicing innovations that hold promise on the local level for addressing and embracing the health of the community. These experiments would advance specific changes in curriculum as well as school organization, methods of assessment, and avenues for insuring accountability. Efforts would be made to create healthy communities within the schools themselves as well. And careful attention would be given to the results. What works? What does not work? How do we keep the vision moving forward?

2. *If we have a hunch that Andy Catlett is a character for whom Berry may have especial affection, or with whom he particularly identifies, and we note his appearance in multiple novels, some of which focus primarily on him, how are we to understand this epiphany he experiences at the end of Remembering?* As stated earlier, the transformation

that Andy experiences at the end of *Remembering* is a complex process which can be interpreted many different ways including as a death and rebirth of sorts. He struggles in the novel to heal from a tragic farming accident that upends his life. And something about the agriculture conferences he attends in California, the presentations he hears which have nothing to do with the real world of life on a farm, and his decision to let a conference audience witness his emotional rebuttal, all have combined to help Andy make a critical turning in his life. He comes to see that he has good things to live for. He sees that the accident, while taking his hand, did not take his life, unless, however, he surrenders that as well. It is a moving story of healing, restoration, and renewal.

And so, I suggest that so moving, deep, and radical a transformation is what Berry longs for in American culture. Though it is not something he can simply describe in an essay, however much he uses essays to explore, analyze, and critique our many problems. It is something that can only be pointed to through an imaginative, creative work. And so Berry has done that in this story. He has given us a story of profound healing. And this, and nothing less, is what he calls us to strive for in our own living. This is perhaps a picture of what Berry believes may still be possible for America if we can transform our gaze and bring into sharp focus the problems we have the ability to address, those things we can make better—on the local level, working with others. This is the hope that keeps this author tending his land and writing his essays and stories. This vision—of what might be possible—is what keeps Wendell Berry from despair even though his awareness of our failures, our irrecoverable losses, and our frightening vulnerabilities is no doubt much greater than that of most of the rest of us. Berry's readers, however, strive to learn from his wisdom and to bring it to bear in our own lives and realms of influence.

I hope this study of Wendell Berry's extensive critique of American culture will serve to illustrate the depth and breadth of his work and demonstrate the possibilities before us for engaging conversation, reflection, and work for a healthier world, including but not limited to ways we can better educate our young people.



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