

Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 9

2014

Amateurs and Professionals: The Writing of Wendell Berry and Its Implications for Volunteerism

Francis E. Kazemek Dr.

St. Cloud State--Emeritus, kazemek@bwig.net

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Recommended Citation

Kazemek, Francis E. Dr. (2014) "Amateurs and Professionals: The Writing of Wendell Berry and Its Implications for Volunteerism," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol1/iss1/9

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Cover Page Footnote

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**Amateurs and Professionals:
The Writing of Wendell Berry and Its Implications for Volunteerism**

Francis E. Kazemek

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
 vacation with pay. Want more
 of everything ready made. Be afraid
 to know your neighbor and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery
 any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
 and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something
 they will call you. When they want you
 to die for profit they will let you know.
 So, friends, every day do something
 that won't compute. Love the Lord.
 Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all that you have and be poor.
 Love someone who does not deserve it. . . .
 (Berry, 1973, p. 16)*

The opening lines of Wendell Berry's well-known poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, highlight three central ideas in all of his work as a poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, cultural critic, and practicing farmer, and they are: community; resistance to abstraction and specialization that underpin power, be it corporate, governmental, or religious; and the role of the imagination in determining how we see others, the world, and God. For more than a half-century he has been exploring these ideas, and I believe that his writing offers us a lens through which to examine the topic of volunteerism and philanthropy. This lens might help us see clearer and it might help us see more. That is all I'm proposing in this paper; I have no certain answers to hand. Let's begin by looking at the idea of community.

Community, Berry argues, is not a sociological abstraction. "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" (1993, p. 168). Community celebrates the fact that we are connected to others and that our "life inescapably affects

other lives, which inescapably affect our life” (2000b, p.13). These connections are not abstract because love, Berry contends, is never abstract (1990, p. 200). We can love our neighbor, or someone who does not deserve it, or the robins that return to our yards in the springtime, or the God to whom we pray, but it’s impossible, if not meaningless, to say that we love humanity, or the planet, or any of the other abstractions we hear from well-meaning people.

In another of his Mad Farmer poems Berry particularizes this community. The Mad Farmer:

*. . . He goes to the care of neighbors,
he goes into the care of neighbors. . .*

*Come into the dance of the community, joined
in a circle, hand in hand, the dance of the eternal
love of women and men for one another
and of neighbors and friends for one another.
(Berry, 1997, pp. 39-40)*

In contrast to this localized dance, Berry describes in another poem what loss of community life looks like:

*“We don’t bother nobody,
and we don’t want nobody
to bother us,” the old woman
declared fiercely
over the fence. She stood
in a strange paradise:
a shack built in the blast
of sun on the riverbank,
a place under threat of flood,
bought ignorantly, not
to be bothered. And that
is what has come of it,
“the frontier spirit,” lost
in the cities, returning now
to be lost in the country,
obscure desire floating
like a cloud upon vision:
to be free of labor,*

*the predicament of other lives,
not to be bothered.
(Berry, 1985, p. 181)*

Obscure desire floating like a cloud across vision, the abstraction of individualism free from the often complex and difficult relationships in a particular community.

“Abstraction is the enemy *wherever* it is found. . . You *can't* act locally by thinking globally” (Berry, 1993, p. 23).

If we accept Berry's contention concerning the grounded, local community, then I think we have to consider in our discussion the separation of volunteerism from philanthropy. Volunteerism, whether it be Mother Teresa tending the dying, Dorothy Day and Catholic Worker volunteers sheltering the homeless and outcast, Doctors without Borders medical personnel working in Haiti, or hospice volunteers sitting at the bedsides of failing patients, by its very nature is local and a face-to-face dance between and among people. It's the Mad Farmer going to the care of his neighbors and going into the care of his neighbors. Berry (2005a) says it's Jesus responding to the question of who is my neighbor by telling the story of the Samaritan. And the Good Samaritan story reminds me of one of Berry's little Sabbath poems, *1997, VII* (1998, p. 216):

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

Philanthropy, on the other hand, “resulting in the widespread distribution of necessary resources” is by its very nature almost always global and abstract: hundreds of millions of dollars to fight this or that sickness in Africa, build schools in Afghanistan, help disaster victims in Haiti, and so forth. Obviously, philanthropy is necessary.

Children and adults in, say, Africa would not be getting inoculated against various diseases without the money provided by Bill Gates and others. Berry, I think, would argue that it is necessary but not sufficient. Philanthropic endeavors such as Gates' offer big solutions, typically determined by specialists of one sort or another—the heads of large organizations, committees of experts, NGOs, and the like. He contends:

“Professionalism aspires to *big* answers that will make headlines, money, and promotions. . . [T]he institutions of government, education, and religion are now all too likely to measure their success in terms of size and number” (Berry, 2000b, pp. 14-15).

Professionalism, specialization, and big solutions to problems highlight the second strand that I find in Berry's work relevant to our discussion today, and that is his call for resistance to abstract power—what he has called “arrogant ignorance” (Berry, 2005c, p. 54)—be it governmental, educational, or religious. All of these large institutions of specialization demand that we do things that “compute”; they tell us to put ourselves in their hands and we will be safe, secure, blessed with information, and saved for some future otherworldly reward. We don't have to worry about wrestling intellectually and morally with complex issues; others who know more will do so for us. Berry argues that the “disease of the modern character is specialization” (1977, p. 19). It's not that Berry is arguing against the notion of specialization itself. It's a particular kind of specialization that is harmful he contends:

You have got to have specialization if you are to have vocation. People are differently talented and differently called to kinds of work. So specialization is going to happen. What you have to regret is the isolation of the specialists so that they're at liberty to judge their work by professional standards to the exclusion of any other kind. (Berry, cited in Burleigh, 2000)

The danger of putting ourselves into the hands of abstract power and specialists is that it can foster a passive acceptance of others' analyses and solutions to problems and a willful ignorance of the role that we often play in helping to create such problems. It is easy for us in the USA, for example, to wring our hands and write checks to help this or that group in Central America or Haiti or elsewhere without examining how our actions or those of our government or economic policies might contribute to the suffering in those places:

There are also no national, state, or county problems, and no national, state, or county solutions. That will-o'-the-wisp, the large-scale solution to a large-scale problem, which is so dear to governments, universities, and corporations, serves mostly to distract people from the small, private problems that they may, in fact, have the power to solve. (Berry, 2005d)

Berry cites our “slovenly willingness” to use our technological capability as the reference point and standard of our economic life without regard to the damage it does to ourselves and other creatures (Berry, 2000b, p. 54).

Professionals and specialists tout their expertise to address world problems, for example, “world hunger,” with what Berry calls “industrial heroism.” Such efforts are salutary, he says, but world hunger can’t be solved “until it is understood and dealt with by local people as a multitude of local problems of ecology, agriculture, and culture” (1981, pp. 279-280). And directly related to our topic at hand of volunteerism and philanthropy, Berry contends:

To use knowledge and tools in a particular place with good long-term results is not heroic. It is not grand action visible for a long distance or a long time. It is a small action, but more complex and difficult, more skillful and responsible, more whole and enduring, than most grand actions. It comes of a willingness to devote oneself to work perhaps only the eye of Heaven will see in its full intricacy and excellence. Perhaps the real work, like real prayer and real charity, must be done in secret. (Berry, 1981, pp. 280-281)

Thus, in his poem, "The Future," he admonishes us:

*For God's sake, be done
with this jabber of "a better world."
What blasphemy! No "futuristic"
twit or child thereof ever
in embodied light will see
a better world than this, though they
foretell inevitably a worse.
Do something! Go cut the weeds
beside the oblivious road. Pick up
the cans and bottles, old tires,
and dead predictions. No future
can be stuffed into this presence
except by being dead. The day is
clear and bright, and overhead
the sun not yet half finished
with his daily praise.
(2005b, p.27)*

The third governing idea in all of Berry's writing, whether poetry, fiction, or expository prose, that is central to our discussion today is the role of the imagination. By imagination Berry cites and argues from the same perspective as that of his poetic forebears, William Blake and William Carlos Williams (Berry, 2011). He says that for Blake the Imagination is a "particularizing and a local force, native to the ground underfoot. . . It does so by placing the world and its creatures within a context of sanctity in which their worth is absolute and incalculable" (Berry, 2010a, p. 32). Imagination allows us to see all things in their eternal aspect. Blake says, "For every thing that lives is Holy" (Blake, 1988, p. 45).

It is the particularizing power of the imagination that makes us more human and more godlike. Blake, for example, tells us "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour" (Blake, 1988, p. 490). For Williams, the pediatrician-poet, Berry contends, ". . . the

imagination was by definition embodied. What lies ‘among the words’ is ‘a Baby/new born!’ To the eye of the old baby doctor its life, in the midst of all the talk about it, is most vividly made flesh” (Berry, 2011a, p. 51).

Jesus preached the same particularizing power during his ministry. Whenever he was challenged with abstract questions or asked to respond to generalizations, he would offer concrete particulars. Think, for example, of his answer to the query of who is one’s neighbor, or remember his response in John’s gospel to the Pharisees who demanded that an adulterous woman be stoned to death according to the law, according to a set of generalizations.

Seeing the world and others through the power of the embodied imagination is explored, for example, in Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* (2000a). This gentle and luminous novel rooted in his deep understanding of community and place is a paean to this world and this life however fleeting and unfulfilled they may be. It reminds us that for all of its horrors (and there are many) “this world had been made by God Himself. . . [and] that it is beautiful, and that some of the greatest beauties are the briefest” (Berry, 2000a, pp. 160). The novel is a first-person retelling of one man’s life from his childhood, pre-ministerial studies, life’s work as a small town barber and community gravedigger, and, finally, as an old man loving the world with understanding and forgiveness: “It is not a terrible thing to love the world, knowing that the world is always passing and irrecoverable, to be known only in loss. To love anything good, at any cost, is a bargain” (Berry, 2000a, p. 329).

It is the imaginative visioning and re-visioning of the world that Berry offers us in his work as a creative artist that can help us wrestle with such issues as volunteerism and

philanthropy. The poet, he says, “affirms and collaborates in the formality of the Creation,” and this is “a matter of supreme, and mostly unacknowledged, importance” (Berry, 1990, p. 89). Poetry, he argues is “amateur work, lover’s work,” and as such is anathema to professionalism (1990, p. 90).

I am not saying that there is no role for institutions, religious organizations, wealthy philanthropists, sociologists, economists, and other specialists in addressing the ills of the world; obviously, there is. Professionals have something to offer. However, without the creative force of the volunteer, the amateur, the poet, the imaginative and particular lover who joins the dance of the community, such efforts might be, as they too often have proven to be, of little long-term impact. We only have to look at Haiti as a current example.

A *Washington Post* article (Booth, 2011) noted that Haitian officials speak of being overrun by an invasion of NGOs, an invasion that the actor Sean Penn, who has one of the most successful relief projects in Haiti, recently railed against by saying, “Sustainability! It’s the ultimate cliché — and the ultimate excuse for N.G.O.’s that just want to move on to the next trendy, fundable job” (Zeller, 2011). Similarly, a *New York Times* article discussed the lack of sustainability and waste of aid money in Afghanistan due to international development agencies that equate success with how much and how quickly money is spent—what is called the “burn rate”—and how quickly they can “check a project off their list.” The key to sustainability, the author noted, was real involvement of the community members (Adams, 2011).

In conclusion, I’d like to return to the first idea I highlighted in Berry’s work, that is, the importance of local community. Responsible community membership, I believe, is

amateur work, lover's work that is the essence of volunteerism. It acknowledges the fact that we are not alone, and that our lives affect others and their lives affect ours. But more, we have to act. Echoing Williams who decried "special interests/that perpetuate the stasis and make it/profitable," but also noted that "Others are also at fault because/they do nothing" (Williams, 1958, p. 34), Berry recently said that "you can't be a critic by simply being a griper and collecting instances of things that seem to demand griping about. One has also to be a proper critic to search out the examples of good work, good land use, and of simple goodness that can give you some kind of standard of judgment along with the ecological health that is also an inescapable standard of judgment" (Berry, 2011b). Without a grounding in community membership that resists abstract power, finds examples of good work, and fosters imaginative connections with our fellow humans and the rest of creation, philanthropy too often results in an endless round of money following abstract goals that are seldom reached.

As a parting poem, I'll share with you the last stanza to one of Berry's Sabbath poems, 2007, VI (2010, p. 93):

*No place at last is better than the world. The world
is no better than its places. Its places at last
are no better than their people while their people
continue in them. When the people make
dark the light within them, the world darkens.*

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