

Wendell Berry: The Work of Local Culture

From **WENDELL BERRY**

[E. F. Schumacher Society](#)

For many years my walks have taken me down an old fencerow in a wooded hollow on what was once my grandfather's farm. A battered galvanized bucket is hanging on a fence post near the head of the hollow, and I never go by it without stopping to look inside. For what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth. The old bucket has hung there through many autumns, and the leaves have fallen around it and some have fallen into it. Rain and snow have fallen into it, and the fallen leaves have held the moisture and so have rotted. Nuts have fallen into it, or been carried into it by squirrels; mice and squirrels have eaten the meat of the nuts and left the shells; they and other animals have left their droppings; insects have flown into the bucket and died and decayed; birds have scratched in it and left their droppings or perhaps a feather or two. This slow work of growth and death, gravity and decay, which is the chief work of the world, has by now produced in the bottom of the bucket several inches of black humus. I look into that bucket with fascination because I am a farmer of sorts and an artist of sorts, and I recognize there an artistry and a farming far superior to mine, or to that of any human. I have seen the same process at work on the tops of boulders in a forest, and it has been at work immemorially over most of the land-surface of the world. All creatures die into it, and they live by it.

The old bucket started out a far better one than you can buy now. I think it has been hanging on that post for something like fifty years. I think so because I remember hearing, when I was just a small boy, a story about a bucket that must have been this one. Several of my grandfather's black hired hands went out on an early spring day to burn a tobacco plantbed, and they took along some eggs to boil and eat with their dinner. When dinner came time and they look around for something to boil the eggs in, they could find only an old bucket that at one time had been filled with tar. The boiling water softened the residue of tar, and one of the eggs came out of the water black. The hands made much sport of seeing who would have to eat the black egg, welcoming their laughter in the midst of their days work. The man who had to eat the black egg was Floyd Scott, whom I remember well. Dry scales of tar still adhere to the inside of the bucket.

However small a landmark the old bucket is, it is not trivial. It is one of the signs by which I know my country and myself. And to me it is irresistibly suggestive in the way it collects leaves and other woodland sheddings as they fall through time. It collects stories too as they fall through time. It is irresistibly metaphorical. It is doing in a passive way what a human community must do actively and thoughtfully. A human community too must collect leaves and stories, and turn them into an account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself—in lore and story and song—which will be its culture. And these two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related.

In the woods, the bucket is no metaphor; it simply reveals what is always happening in the woods, if the woods is let alone. Of course, in most places in my part of the country, the human

community did not leave the woods alone. It felled the trees, and replaced them with pastures and crops. But this did not revoke the law of the woods, which is that the ground must be protected by a cover of vegetation, and that the growth of the years must return—or be returned—to the ground to rot and build soil. A good local culture, in one of its most important functions, is a collection of the memories, ways, and skills necessary for the observance, within the bounds of domesticity, of this natural law. If the local culture cannot preserve and improve the local soil, then, as both reason and history inform us, the local community will decay and perish, and the work of soil-building will be resumed by nature.

A human community, then, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place. Practically speaking, human society has no work more important than this. Once we have acknowledged this principle, we can only be alarmed at the extent to which it has been ignored. For though our present society does generate a centripetal force of great power, this is not a local force, but one centered almost exclusively in our great commercial and industrial cities, which have drawn irresistibly into themselves both the products of the countryside and the people and talents of the country communities.

There is, as one assumes there must be, a countervailing or centrifugal force that also operates in our society, but this returns to the countryside, not the residue of the land's growth to refertilize the fields, not the learning and experience of the greater world ready to go to work locally, and not, or not often, even a just monetary compensation. What are returned, instead, are overpriced manufactured goods, pollution in various forms, and garbage. A landfill on the edge of my own rural county in Kentucky, for example, daily receives about eighty truckloads of garbage. About fifty of these loads come from cities in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Thus, the end result of the phenomenal modern productivity of the countryside is a debased countryside, which becomes daily less pleasant, and which will inevitably become less productive.

The cities, which have imposed this inversion of forces upon the countryside, have been unable to preserve themselves from it. The typical modern city is surrounded by a circle of affluent suburbs, eating its way outward, like ringworm, leaving the so-called "inner city" desolate, filthy, ugly, and dangerous.

My walks in the hills and hollows around my home have inevitably produced in my mind the awareness that I live in a diminished country. The country has been and is being reduced by the great centralizing process that is our national economy. As I walk, I am always reminded of the slow, patient building of soil in the woods. And I am reminded of the events and companions of my life—for my walks, after so long, are cultural events. But under the trees and in the fields I see also the gullies and scars, healed or healing or fresh, left by careless logging and bad farming. I see the crumbling stone walls, and the wire fences that have been rusting out ever since the 1930's. In the returning woods growth out of the hollows, I see the sagging and the fallen barns, the empty and ruining houses, the houseless chimneys and foundations. As I look at this evidence of human life poorly founded, played out, and gone, I try to recover some understanding, some vision, of what this country was at the beginning: the great oaks and beeches and hickories, walnuts and maples, lindens and ashes, tulip poplars, standing in beauty and dignity now unimaginable, lying deep at their feet—an incalculable birthright sold for

money, most of which we do not receive. Most of the money made on the products of this place has gone to fill the pockets of people in distant cities who did not produce the products.

If my walks take me along the roads and streams, I see also the trash and the junk, carelessly manufactured and carelessly thrown away, the glass and the broken glass and the plastic and the aluminum that will lie here longer than the lifetime of the trees—longer than the lifetime of our species, perhaps. And I know that this also is what we have to show for our participation in the American economy, for most of the money made on these things too has been made elsewhere.

It would be somewhat more pleasant for country people if they could blame all this on city people. But the old opposition of country versus city—though still true, and truer than ever economically, for the country is more than ever the colony of the city—is far too simple to explain our problem. For country people more and more live like city people, and so connive in their own ruin. More and more country people, like city people, allow their economic and social standards to be set by television and salesmen and outside experts. Our garbage mingles with New Jersey garbage in our local landfill, and it would be hard to tell which is which.

As local community decays along with local economy, a vast amnesia settles over the countryside. As the exposed and disregarded soil departs with the rains, so local knowledge and local memory move away to the cities, or are forgotten under the influence of homogenized salestalk, entertainment, and education. This loss of local knowledge and local memory—that is, of local culture—has been ignored, or written off as one of the cheaper “prices of progress”, or made the business of folklorists. Nevertheless, local culture has a value, and part of its value is economic. This can be demonstrated readily enough.

For example, when a community loses its memory, its members no longer know each other. How can they know each other if they have forgotten or have never learned each other’s stories? If they do not know each other’s stories, how can they know whether or not to trust each other? People who do not trust each other do not help each other, and moreover they fear each other. And this is our predicament now. Because of a general distrust and suspicion, we not only lose one another’s help and companionship, but we are all now living in jeopardy of being sued.

We don’t trust our “public servants” because we know that they don’t respect us. They don’t respect us, as we understand, because they don’t know us; they don’t know our stories. They expect us to sue them if they make mistakes, and so they must insure themselves, at great expense to them and to us. Doctors in a country community must send their patients to specialists in the city, not necessarily because they believe that they are wrong in their diagnoses, but because they know that they are not infallible, and they must protect themselves against lawsuits, at great expense to us.

The government of my home county, which has a population of about 10,000 people, pays an annual liability insurance premium of about \$34,000. Add to this the liability premiums that are paid by every professional person who is “at risk” in the county, and you get some idea of the load we are carrying. Many decent family livelihoods are annually paid out of the county to insurance companies for a service that is only negative and provisional.

All of this money is lost to us by the failure of the community. A good community, as we know, insures itself by trust, by good faith and good will, by mutual help. A good community, in other words, is a good local economy. It depends upon itself for many of its essential needs and is thus shaped, so to speak, from the inside—unlike most modern populations that depend upon distant purchases for almost everything, and are thus shaped from the outside by the purposes and the influence of salesmen.

I was walking one Sunday afternoon several years ago with an older friend. We went by the ruining log house that had belonged to his grandparents and great-grandparents. The house stirred my friend's memory, and he told how the oldtime people used to visit each other in the evenings, especially in the long evenings of winter. There used to be a sort of institution in our part of the country known as "sitting till bedtime." After supper, when they weren't too tired, neighbors would walk across the fields to visit each other. They popped corn, my friend said, and ate apples and talked. They told each other stories. They told each other stories, as I knew myself, that they had all heard before. Sometimes they told stories about each other, about themselves, living again in their own memories, and thus keeping their memories alive. Among the hearers of these stories were always the children. When bedtime came, the visitors lit their lanterns and went home. My friend talked about this, and thought about it, and then he said, "They had everything but money."

They were poor, as country people often have been, but they had each other, they had their local economy in which they helped each other, they had each other's comfort when they needed it, and they had their stories, their history together in that place. To have everything but money is to have much. And most people of the present can only marvel to think of neighbors entertaining themselves for a whole evening without a single imported pleasure and without listening to a single minute of salestalk.

Most of the descendants of those people have now moved away, partly because of the cultural and economic failures that I mentioned earlier, and most of them no longer sit in the evenings and talk to anyone. Most of them now sit until bedtime, watching TV, submitting every few minutes to a salestalk. The message of both the TV programs and the salestalks is that the watchers should spend whatever is necessary to be like everybody else.

By television and other public means, we are encouraged to imagine that we are far advanced beyond sitting till bedtime with the neighbors on a Kentucky ridgetop, and indeed beyond anything we ever were before. But if, for example, there should occur a forty-eight hour power failure, we would find ourselves in much more backward circumstances than our ancestors. What, for starters, would we do for entertainment? Tell each other stories? But most of us no longer talk with each other, much less tell each other stories. We tell our stories now mostly to doctors or lawyers or psychiatrists or insurance adjusters or the police, not to our neighbors for their (and our) entertainment. The stories that now entertain us are made up for us in New York or Los Angeles or other centers of such commerce.

But a forty-eight hour power failure would involve almost unimaginable deprivations. It would be difficult to travel, especially in cities. Most of the essential work could not be done. Our windowless modern schools and other such buildings that depend on air conditioning could not be used. Refrigeration would be impossible; food would spoil. It would be difficult or impossible

to prepare meals. If it was winter, heating systems would fail. At the end of forty-eight hours many of us would be hungry.

Such a calamity—and it is a modest one among those that our time has made possible—would thus reveal how far most of us are now living from our cultural and economic sources, and how extensively we have destroyed the foundations of local life. It would show us how far we have strayed from the locally centered life of such neighborhoods as the one my friend described—a life based to considerable extent upon what we now call solar energy, which is decentralized, democratic, clean and free. If we note that much of the difference we are talking about can be accounted for as an increasing dependence upon energy sources that are centralized, undemocratic, filthy and expensive, we will have completed a sort of historical parable.

How has this happened? There are many reasons for it. One of the chief reasons is that everywhere in our country the local succession of the generations has been broken. We can trace this change through a series of stories that we may think of as cultural landmarks.

Throughout most of our literature the normal thing was for the generations to succeed one another in place. The memorable stories occurred when this succession became difficult or was threatened in one way or another. The norm is given in Psalm 128, in which succession is seen as one of the rewards of righteousness: “thou shalt see thy children’s children, and peace upon Israel.”

The longing for this result seems to have been universal. It presides also over *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus’ desire to return home is certainly regarded as normal. And this story is much concerned with the psychology of family succession. Telemachus, Odysseus’ son, comes of age in preparing for the return of his long-absent father. And it seems almost that Odysseus is enabled to return home by his son’s achievement of enough manhood to go in search of him. Long after the return of both father and son, Odysseus’ life will complete itself, as we know from Teiresias’ prophecy in Book XI, much in the spirit of Psalm 128:

a seaborne death
soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are wearied out with sick old age,
your country folk in blessed peace around you.

The Bible makes much of what it sees as the normal succession—in such stories as those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, David and Solomon—in which the son completes the work or the destiny of the father. The parable of the Prodigal Son is prepared for by such Old Testament stories as that of Jacob, who errs, wanders, returns, is forgiven, and takes his place in the family lineage.

Shakespeare was concerned throughout his working life with the theme of the separation and rejoining of parents and children. It is there at the beginning in *The Comedy of Errors*, and he is still thinking about it when he gets to *King Lear* and *Pericles* and *The Tempest*. When Lear walks onstage with Cordelia dead in his arms, the theme of return is fulfilled, only this time in the way of tragedy.

Wordsworth's poem, "Michael," written in 1800, is in the same line of descent. It is the story of a prodigal son, and return is still understood as the norm; before the boy's departure, he and his father make a "covenant" that he will return home and carry on his father's life as a shepherd on their ancestral pastures. But the ancient theme here has two significant differences; the son leaves home for an economic reason, and he does not return. Old Michael, the father, was long ago "bound/ In surety for his brother's son." This nephew has failed in his business, and Michael is "summoned to discharge the forfeiture." Rather than do this by selling a portion of their patrimony, the aged parents decide that they must send their son to work for another kinsman in the city in order to earn the necessary money. The country people all are poor; there is no money to be earned at home. When the son has cleared the debt from the land, he will return to it to "possess it, free as the wind/ That passes over it." But the son goes to the city, is corrupted by it, eventually commits a crime, and is forced "To seek a hiding place beyond the seas."

"Michael" is a sort of cultural watershed. It carries on the theme of return that goes back to the beginnings of Western culture, but that return now is only a desire and a memory; in the poem it fails to happen. Because of that failure, we see in "Michael," not just a local story of the Lake District in England, which it is, but the story of rural families in the industrial nations from Wordsworth's time until today. The children go to the cities, for reasons imposed by the external economy, and they do not return; eventually the parents die and the family land, like Michael's, is sold to a stranger. By now it has happened millions of times.

And by now the transformation of the ancient story is nearly complete. Our society, on the whole, has forgot or repudiated the theme of return. Young people still grow up in rural families, and go off to the cities, not to return. But now it is felt that this is what they should do. Now the norm is to leave and not return. And this applies as much to urban families as to rural ones. In the present urban economy the parent-child succession is possible only among the economically privileged. The children of industrial underlings are not likely to succeed their parents at work, and there is not reason for them to wish to do so. We are not going to have an industrial "Michael" in which it is perceived as tragic that a son fails to succeed his father on an assembly line.

According to the new norm, the child's destiny is not to succeed the parents, but to outmode them; succession has given way to supersession. And this norm is institutionalized, not in great communal stories, but in the education system. The schools are no longer oriented to a cultural inheritance which it is their duty to pass on unimpaired, but to the career, which is to the future, of the child. The orientation is thus necessarily theoretical, speculative, and central. The child is not educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to leave home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community. And parents with children in school are likely to find themselves immediately separated from their children, and made useless to them, by the intervention of new educational techniques, technologies, methods and languages. School systems innovate as compulsively and eagerly as factories. It is no wonder that, under these circumstances, "educators" tend to look upon the parents as a bad influence, and wish to take the children away from home as early as possible. And many parents, in truth, are now finding their children an encumbrance at home – where there is no useful work for them to do – and are glad enough to turn them over to the state

for the use of the future. The extent to which this order of things is now dominant is suggested by a recent magazine article on the discovery of what purports to be a new idea:

The idea that a parent can be a teacher at home has caught the attention of educators... Parents don't have to be graduates of Harvard or Yale to help their kids learn and achieve...

Thus the home as a place where a child can learn has become an idea of the professional "educator," who retains control of the idea. The home, as the article makes clear, is not to be a place where children may learn on their own, but a place where they are taught by parents according to the instructions of professional "educators." In fact, "The Home and School Institute, Inc., of Washington, D.C." (known, of course, as "The HSI") has been "founded to show... how to involve families in their kids' educations."

In such ways as this, the nuclei of home and community have been invaded by the organizations, just as have the nuclei of cells and atoms. And we must be careful to see that the old cultural centers of home and community were made vulnerable to this invasion by their failure as economies. If there is no household or community economy, then family members and neighbors are no longer useful to each other. When people are no longer useful to each other, then the centripetal force of family and community fails, and people fall into dependence upon exterior economies and organizations. The hegemony of professionals and professionalism erects itself upon local failure. And from then on the locality exists merely as a market for consumer goods as a source of "raw material," human and natural. The local schools no longer serve the local community; they serve the government's economy and the economy's government. Unlike the local community, the government and the economy cannot be served with affection, but only with professional zeal or professional boredom. Professionalism means more interest in salary and less interest in what used to be known as disciplines. And so we arrive at the idea, endlessly reiterated in the news media, that education can be improved by bigger salaries for teachers – which may be true, but not, as the proponents too often imply, by bigger salaries alone. There must also be love of learning and of the cultural tradition and of excellence. And this love cannot exist, because it makes no sense, apart from the love of a place and community. Without this love, education is only the importation into a local community of centrally prescribed "career preparation" designed to facilitate the export of young careerists.

Our children are educated, then, to leave home, not to stay home, and the costs of this have been far too little acknowledged. One of the costs is psychological, and the other is at once cultural and ecological.

The natural or normal course of human growing-up must begin with some sort of rebellion against one's parents, for it is clearly impossible to grow up if one remains a child. But the child, in the process of rebellion and of achieving the emotional and economic independence that rebellion ought to lead to, finally comes to understand the parents as fellow humans and fellow sufferers, and in some manner returns to them as their friend, forgiven and forgiving the inevitable wrongs of family life. That is the old norm, of which the story of the Prodigal son is an example.

The new norm, according to which the child leaves home as a student and never lives at home again, interrupts the old course of coming of age at the point of rebellion, so that the child is apt

to remain stalled in adolescence, never achieving any kind of reconciliation or friendship with the parents. Of course, such a return and reconciliation cannot be achieved without the recognition of mutual practical need. However, in the present economy where individual dependences are so much exterior to both household and community, family members often have no practical need or use for one another. Hence, the frequent futility of attempts at a purely psychological or emotional reconciliation.

And this interposition of rebellion and then of geographical and occupational distance between parents and children may account for the peculiar emotional intensity that our society attaches to innovation. We appear to hate whatever went before, very much as an adolescent hates parental rule, and to look upon its obsolescence as a kind of vengeance. Thus we may explain industry's obsessive emphasis upon "this year's model," or the preoccupation of the professional "educators" with theoretical and methodological innovation. And thus, in modern literature we have had for many years an emphasis upon "originality" and the "anxiety of influence" (an adolescent critical theory), as opposed, say, to Spenser's filial admiration for Chaucer, or Dante's for Virgil.

But if the norm interrupts the development of the relation between children and parents, that same interruption, ramifying through a community, destroys the continuity and so the integrity of local life. As the children depart, generation after generation, the place loses its memory of itself, which is its history and its culture. And the local history, if it survives at all, loses its place. It does no good for historians, folklorists, and anthropologists to collect the songs and the stories and the lore that comprise local culture and store them in books and archives. They cannot collect and store, because they cannot know, the pattern of reminding that can survive only in the living human community in its place. It is this pattern that is the life of the local culture, and that brings it usefully or pleasurably to mind. Apart from its local landmarks and occasions, the local culture may be the subject of curiosity or of study, but it is also dead.

The loss of local cultures is, in part, a practical loss and an economic one. For one thing, such a culture contains, and conveys to succeeding generations, the history of the use of the place and the knowledge of how the place may be lived in and used. For another, the pattern of reminding implies affection for the place and respect for it, and so, finally, the local culture will carry the knowledge of how the place may be well and lovingly used, and moreover the implicit command to use it only well and lovingly. The only true and effective "operator's manual for spaceship earth" is not a book that any human will ever write; it is hundreds of thousands of local cultures.

Lacking an authentic local culture, a place is open to exploitation, and ultimately destruction, from the center. Recently, for example, I heard the dean of a prominent college of agriculture interviewed on the radio. What have we learned, he was asked, from last summer's drouth? And he replied that "we" need to breed more drouth resistance into plants, and that "we" need a government "safety net" for farmers. He might have said that farmers need to reexamine their farms and their circumstances in light of the drouth, and to think again on such subjects as diversification, scale, and the mutual helpfulness of neighbors. But he did not say that. To him, the drouth was merely an opportunity for agribusiness corporations and the government, by which the farmers and rural communities could only become more dependent on the economy that is destroying them. This is as good an example as any of the centralized thinking of a

centralized economy—to which the only effective answer that I know is a strong local economy and a strong local culture.

For a long time now, the prevailing assumption has been that if the nation is all right, then all the localities within it will be all right also. I see little reason to believe that this is true. At present, in fact, both the nation and the local economy are living at the expense of localities and local communities—as all small town and country people have reason to know. In rural America, which is in many ways a colony of what the government and the corporations think of as a nation, most of us have experienced the losses that I have been talking about; the departure of young people, of soil and other so-called natural resources, and of local memory. We feel ourselves crowded more and more into a dimensionless present, in which the past is forgotten, and the future, even in our most optimistic “projections,” is forbidding and fearful. Who can desire a future that is determined entirely by the purposes of the most wealthy and the most powerful, and by the capacities of machines?

Two questions, then, remain: Is a change for the better possible? And who has the power to make such a change? I still believe that a change for the better is possible, but I confess that my belief is partly hope and partly faith. No one who hopes for improvement should fail to see and respect the signs that we may be approaching some sort of historical waterfall, past which we will not, by changing our minds, be able to change anything else. We know that at any time an ecological or a technological or a political event that we will have allowed may remove from us the power to make change and leave us with the mere necessity to submit to it. Beyond that, the two questions are one: the possibility of change depends upon the existence of people who have the power to change.

Does this power reside at present in the national government? That seems to me extremely doubtful. To anyone who has read the papers during the recent presidential campaign, it must be clear that at the highest level of government there is, properly speaking, no political discussion. Are the corporations likely to help us? We know, from long experience, that the corporations will assume no responsibility that is not forcibly imposed upon them by government. The record of the corporations is written too plainly in verifiable damage to permit us to expect much from them. May we look for help to the universities? Well, the universities are more and more the servants of government and the corporations.

Most urban people evidently assume that all is well. They live too far from the exploited and endangered sources of their economy to need to assume otherwise. Some urban people are becoming disturbed about the contamination of air, water, and food and that is promising, but there are not enough of them yet to make much difference. There is enough trouble in the “inner cities” to make them likely places of change, and evidently change is in them, but it is desperate and destructive change. As if to perfect their exploitation by other people, the people of the “inner cities” are destroying both themselves and their places.

My feeling is that, if improvement is going to begin anywhere, it will have to begin out in the country and in the country towns. This is not because of any intrinsic virtue that can be ascribed to country people, but because of their circumstances. Rural people are living, and have lived for a long time, at the site of the trouble. They see all around them, every day, the marks and scars of an exploitive national economy. They have much reason, by now, to know how little real help is

to be expected from somewhere else. They still have, moreover, the remnants of local memory and local community. And in rural communities there are still farms and small businesses that can be changed according to the will and the desire of individual people.

In this difficult time of failed public expectations, when thoughtful people wonder where to look for hope, I keep returning in my own mind to the thought of the renewal of the rural communities. I know that one resurrected rural community would be more convincing and more encouraging than all the government and university programs of the last fifty years, and I think that it could be the beginning of the renewal of our country, for the renewal of rural communities ultimately implies the renewal of urban ones. But to be authentic, a true encouragement and a true beginning, this would have to be a resurrection accomplished mainly by the community itself. It would have to be done, not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be at home.

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