Wendell Berry: On the Natural Order of Things

World Ark, January/February 2008
Interview by Lauren Wilcox

PORT ROYAL, KY. To get to the writer Wendell Berry's farm, it is necessary to leave the interstate for a diminishing series of state highways and country roads. As the roads become smaller they become slower. The fields seem to shrink into large gardens; the trees grow taller and broader; buildings grow older and closer to the road, until the road is a shady street fronted with wood-frame houses. The houses have porches; old men on the porches raise a hand at passing cars. Back where the interstate meets the smaller roads, there is a sign listing things one must not drive onto the interstate, including "Farm Implements" and "Animals on Foot." It is as if the sign marks not only the intersection of two roads but the intersection of two worlds, and cautions one against trying to merge with the other.

Much of Berry's poetry, essays and fiction is concerned with this divide: between city and country, product and source, joy and grief, one person and the world. Berry is perhaps best known as a champion of agrarianism. He has empathy and a deep affection for small farmers, whose livelihood he has watched decline precipitously in his lifetime; his novels celebrate their work and mourn its slow erosion. But he is not a romanticist. His agrarian essays are intellectual and often maverick analyses that touch on every part of our lives: environment, culture, spirituality, government, relationships.

Mostly, I think, his writing is about relationships. He is concerned with sustainable and productive interactions, whether between two people or a people and their land. Any functional relationship will deal with the bad as well as the good, will include waste and death just as it includes birth and growth. This is the natural order of things, and it works as a system of checks and balances, to keep the cycle of life progressing at a sustainable pace, without more waste than we can handle. A road that prohibits "Animals on Foot," in other words, is a road on which traffic is moving too fast.

Wendell Berry knows this, but he also feels it. The way he renders the world in his poetry and his novels is not altogether happy and not altogether sad but a vivid, un-nameable combination of both, the way it feels to love something, to be fully committed to something, that is all the time growing and changing and vanishing. That work, says Berry, is the work of living.

World Ark: In both your fiction and your nonfiction you talk about community and its importance to healthy living. In your writing, this sense of community arises out of a connection to the land that generally comes from farming, from an agrarian lifestyle. I'm curious to know if you think that agrarianism is the only basis of a healthy community. I live in a big city, where there are great, old vibrant neighborhoods with a strong sense of community, but that isn't based even remotely on farming.

Wendell Berry: But it [that sense of community] is based, a good bit more than remotely, on eating. It's based as immediately on eating as it can be. And so we don't want to be led astray on labels. Agrarianism is a label, and you've always got to particularize it, but as those people in those neighborhoods become aware of all that's implied by their need to eat — and their supposable wish to continue eating — they will come to a kind of urban agrarianism.

Suppose they say, 'We want a dependable supply of good food, produced in a way we can be assured is sustainable.' If that kind of thinking gets loose in an urban neighborhood, you'll probably have a few people who will go looking for local produce at the local farmers market. The next natural step is to wonder where they can get a quarter of beef produced locally. And maybe they become aware then that they don't have a good local processing plant. So an agrarian awareness can spread in an urban neighborhood until its economy will be affected in elaborate and intelligent ways. The city, in that way, begins a collaboration, a cooperative relationship, with its own landscape.

WA: So a healthy community really must be connected to the land in some way.

WB: Well, I think so. It has to have a conscious and responsible connection to its sources, if its sources are going to be maintained. Phoenix, say, is a bad model. It can't hope to live from its desert landscape. It's a sort of suspended population. Everything has to come in by longdistance transportation. A better model, if we want to look for a historical one, would be the Greek cities. The Greek city, I've read, did not consist simply of the built-up urban center. It consisted of that center and its tributary landscape. So, as I understand it, the Greek cities were full of granaries and other storage places for local food.

It's silly to sit in a modern city in a kind of idiot complacency and depend on the hidden hand or God or luck to bring food and the other necessities. So the intelligence — and we have a suffi cient amount of intelligence at least to ask questions about what affects us most immediately — intelligence, if it's in working condition, begins to ask, "Where is this stuff coming from?" And then it asks, "How much do I need?" And then, "Where can I get that much? Do I want to raise my children here and never ask whether they can have a safe food supply or not?"

WA: You've been saying that for a long time, long before it became fashionable to say.

WB: [Laughs] I've got it memorized.

WA: Do you think that the main problem of industrialization is that it is isolating? That it removes people from the causes and effects of their actions, and contributes to neglect?

WB: No, the main problem is the permanent depletion of resources. We've burnt fossil fuels at an astonishing rate. I've lived through the burning of nearly all the petroleum that has been burned, and that's about half of it. And industry's use of the fossil fuels has sort of been the pattern for its use of everything else. We're using up topsoil as if it were not a

one-time supply, as if it were an inexhaustible resource. The industrial economy has made lots of estrangements and divorces. It has divorced people from the land because it needed to shift them around. It needed a labor supply, and it didn't believe it needed people on farms. So you had factory centers that drew people in by depreciating their economies at home and appreciating the economies somewhere else.

Industrialism also separated utility and beauty. If a thing was functional, it didn't make any difference how it looked, and I think you can go only so far with that. If a thing is ugly, I think we need to ask questions about it. How did it get that way? What else is wrong? We know that a great ugliness has accompanied industrialization. I've read that the mill towns in England were beautiful as long as they were water-powered because the mill owners lived in the towns. And so for their own pleasure, they saw that the towns looked good, with shade trees and fl owers and that sort of thing. When they started running on steam, using coal, the coal smoke blackened everything and ruined the air. The owners moved away. And that removed any effective motive to make the towns beautiful. The owners' living circumstances then were separated from the workers' circumstances. Another disastrous divorce. Industrialization functioned as a way to siphon the wealth of the countryside into the pockets of owners and investors as quickly and cheaply as possible. Caretaking has not been a part of the deal at all.

We've reconciled ourselves to this destructiveness and adapted our lives to it, so that now we're utterly dependent on destruction and the services and amenities have declined. My great-grandfather had better public transportation than I do, and better mail service.

WA: Which was what?

WB: The train, just a few miles away, and the river. He could walk down here from Port Royal, get on a boat, and go anywhere in the world. Never set foot on a vehicle he owned himself. The train station was a short buggy ride away.

WA: You and your wife lived in New York City for a while before moving back here. Do you think your way of thinking about all this would have evolved in the same way if you hadn't come back?

WB: Coming back here has certainly made me aware of what is going on in a way that I couldn't have been anywhere else. I know the history here pretty well. I know the local life has declined. Port Royal probably never had more than a hundred people. There were 16 economic enterprises in Port Royal when my mother was a girl and 12 when I was a boy. There were two grocery stores, and my grandparents divided their patronage of those stores to the penny. Now there's only the bank and a store and the post office. If the store went, the bank and the post office would probably go, too. So we would go down like some other little villages around here. In a hundred years, we would go from a sort of self-suffi cient village that was the center of its own attention, that did most things for itself, to a vending machine. Or less.

WA: Many of our readers have connections to farming themselves, so could you tell us a little about your own farm?

WB: As long as our children were at home we had a fairly elaborate subsistence economy here. Had two milk cows, fi nished a couple of meat hogs a year, raised our own poultry. We're older now, the children are gone, so we're just raising sheep — 32 ewes at present. We have a team of work horses to do the work we have to do, and a pretty good garden. The garden gets three or four big loads of manure every year.

WA: Which really helps with the productivity of the land, right? That's one of the things that Heifer teaches to its project partners.

WB: That's observing what Sir Albert Howard calls the Law of Return. And it is a law. What you take you've got to give back, or else what Howard called the Wheel of Life won't turn. The wheel turns through birth, growth, maturity, death, decay and back to birth. Round and round. If you don't keep that wheel turning, you finally exhaust the land.

WA: Today, so much of the effect that our consumption has on the world happens without us knowing. Is it important for us to actually see our personal give-and-take with our environment, our effect on the world?

WB: It's important at least that we understand our economic relation to the world, the way we live from it, the way we do or don't take care of it. I think the conservation movement unwittingly helped to drive a wedge between us and our land by implying that we could live most of our lives in circumstances that don't quite suit us — doing work that doesn't suit us, work that makes us say, Thank God it's Friday — and then somehow, on vacation, go to a national park and reconnect with the natural world. But of course that's not a connection.

WA: It's a way of thinking that treats the natural world as a precious object, not a part of everyday life.

WB: These people get in their cars and go west across Kansas, which feeds them, and they never look at it, because their chins are on the dashboard looking for the Rocky Mountains. Wes Jackson has watched them doing that. No snowy peaks in Kansas. My own testimony about this is that I know we can connect to nature in a better way. You don't have to go to the Rocky Mountains to confront nature, to learn from it and ask the necessary questions. If you go to a good farm that has been properly and gracefully fi tted into a place, then you can see that real questions about the terms on which we live have been asked, and answered.

Suppose a family in Louisville is connected with a CSA [community-supported agriculture program] out here. We don't have any great stands of old-growth timber around here, no great wilderness, no high waterfall, no snowcapped peak, but say that this family would come out, by invitation of their farmer, and have a picnic in the woods on

her good farm. And they would see where the food is coming from while they're there. They would see that you can have a nice outing even in such ordinary countryside as that. They would see how you can live in a place like that, and that living there requires respectable intelligence. And it seems to me that in their minds the breach between the city and the country would begin to heal.