

Berry's Philosophy from Prakash's Reflections

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This article is a review of Wendell Berry's philosophy on education, ecology and culture. Basically, what Professor Prakash is saying is that Berry recommends returning to our roots: our homes, our land, and the simpler way of life. The first problem we are confronted with is that Wendell Berry's educational thought is not accepted in professional education circles. One reason is that his solutions do not require anything "high-tech," but rather going back to being interdependent within a community. Another problem is that his ideas are considered "radical," that is, they challenge modern mainstream institutions and will require changing our attitudes about education, ecology and culture.

"Berry teaches us how to live and learn on the human scale as communal beings, virtuous and ecologically literate because of our closeness to the land, without the alienation we suffer because of being 'educated' to work for inhuman modern institutions and technologies." (p.136)

This essay is divided into three sections: a brief account of Berry's critiques, Berry's proposals for postmodern human communities, and Berry's reflections. In the first section, the words of Berry: "The cities have forgot the earth and they will rot at heart till they remember it again...." Are at the core of Berry's critiques, that we have lost touch with the soil and in the name of progress have freed ourselves from the

rhythms of nature. Modern education ignores the need for contact with the soil and the growing and rest cycles of the earth. In so doing, we have lost touch with ourselves and one another.

Our children are schooled like machines: they live according to school schedules, exam times and everything unrelated to earth's clock. This "prepares" them for going to a steel building every day without fresh air, without gardens, and often far from their places of birth., all in the interest of succeeding and taking their places in modern, industrial society, both as producers and consumers. Berry believes that this educational philosophy destroys nature and culture and brings on an ecological crisis.

Berry's recommendations have the growing and cooking of food at its core. Cultivating our own food, preparing it in our own kitchens, and sharing it communally is crucial to getting back to basic living from the land. Again, educators criticize the growing or cooking of food for each family as not one of the "finer things" that humans are meant to do. Berry calls this long-distance kind of eating food grown hundreds of miles away and prepared by others as "industrial eating." Country people are seduced away from the land into the cities, where they lose all contact with their "roots," both literally and figuratively. He also is against the concept of global education and ecology being managed through conferences, courses, and political discourses because he believes treat only the symptoms.

Our daily (industrial) style of life is the problem. Instead, he recommends "home economics" defined from its Greek base of *oikos*, meaning home. "It invites us to return home in order to deal with our local communities predicaments." Prakash talks about Berry's book *Remembering*, an autobiographical account of a young man who leaves his

“hick community” for the big city of Chicago, only to learn that he has placed himself into a modern hell. He returns from “exile” to his native home remembering, recollecting, and returning to a place of natural healing.

Berry’s solutions and reflections are that we need to “bring back to life the economy of the household, neighborhood, and local community.”(p. 154). In his writings he speaks from his own personal experiences; therefore his reflections are based mainly on his own life as a university professor, journalist, ecologist, activist, and farmer. In other words, he doesn’t just recommend going back to the earth. He himself works the land, so his recommendations and reflections ring true. He reflects that in order to heal the world we must work and live on a responsible scale in our own locales.

The depths of his despair about the state of the earth are against a backdrop of hope that we can restore the ecological balance and practice “home economics” as he defines it. In the poem entitled “On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam” by Hayden Carruth and reviewed by Berry in *What are People For?*, Berry comments that silence is one of the characteristics of absolute despair. However, so long as the person does not give up hope, there is a chance of renewal. Put in the context of ecology, economy and culture, what Berry is saying is that those of us who protest against the modern machine mentality may not win the battle of restoring the earth to its former pristine nature.

However, by giving in to the “status quo,” we are not being true to our hearts and spirits that long for a simpler life built around community. Just as Carruth’s protest poem preserves the wholeness of his heart in the face of his despair, so too, do Berry’s protests ring a bell in the face of the despair he feels about the human condition. This offer us an

opportunity to look within our own lives to see if we want to join Berry in this despair/hope struggle in order to make the world a safer, cleaner place for everyone.

Prakash herself was reluctant to bring Berry's books into the classroom because of their radical nature. However, since then she sees hopeful changes both in the Penn State community and in her field of education. She believes that education is moving closer to being linked with ecology, although it is a difficult challenge. More people are reading and understanding Berry's "simplistic" philosophy and is showing us how to reeducate ourselves (ecologically), "to start walking on our own feet, to begin celebrating 'good work' in our own local landscapes, natural and cultural." (p. 157). Prakash's own despair has channeled her teaching into the study and dissemination of Berry's philosophy, perhaps because his philosophy rekindles her own hopes for a better world.