

Doing Good Work

BY JEFFREY BILBRO

Wendell Berry envisions good work—the sort of humble, faithful, and skillful work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation—as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation.

Caring for creation may seem like a daunting task in our globalized consumer economy. It is hard to imagine what good, caring work on behalf of the world might look like when reliance on electronics and labor-saving technologies obscures the Christian belief that God has given humans meaningful work to do, and instead encourages us to act as if humans are pleasure-seeking units of consumption.

Wendell Berry may be able to help. By asking “what are people for?” he clarifies the role God asks us to play in creation and offers practical ways to fulfill our calling: humans are fellow members and stewards of God’s beloved creation, and this status should lead us to the “inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities.”¹ Nurturing work is the appropriate way of participating in God’s love for particular people and places. Our current modes of life may make it difficult to practice faithful, loving work, but Berry suggests that even the simple step of planting a garden can lead to profound healing both in our local places and in our own minds and bodies.

Human work should serve the health of all God’s creation, Berry insists. He uses “the Kingdom of God” to refer to this healthful creation—the source of all real value; it is an economic order in which “the fall of every sparrow is a significant event” and an ecological process through which sunlight and soil make “life out of death.”² The Kingdom of God thus

includes not only what we typically think of as economic relationships, but also ecological relationships, indeed all the relationships that make up the order of the *oikos* or household of creation. These amazing relationships can never be fully understood; all we can know for sure is “we live within order and that this order is both greater and more intricate than we can know.”³



The Kingdom of God is thoroughly grounded in God’s love. “I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love,” Berry confesses. Because this “divine love” is “incarnate and indwelling in the world,”⁴ it is not a generic caring; rather it testifies to the particular value of each individual. Indeed, the “point of the Incarnation” is “Christ’s unfailing compassion for sufferers, whom He healed, one by one.”⁵ This particularity of Christ’s ministry, Berry explains, is reflected throughout Scripture in “alertness to the individuality of things”; its writers “delight in the variety and individuality of creatures” because each individual matters to a God who became incarnate in a particular place and time.⁶

The reference to Christ’s healing compassion for individuals testifies not only to the spiritual value of each one, but also to the responsibility to care for each one physically. Particular, placed actions demonstrate our commitment to honoring each life in the way that the Incarnation does. According to Berry, “the way of love” that Christ describes “is not just a feeling” but is “a practical love; it is to be practiced, here and now”; when we practice love, we treat each life as “infinitely holy,” recognizing that “all creatures live by participating in the life of God.”⁷

Paradoxically, then, we can only practice “an elaborate understanding of charity” that cares for all creatures if we act as humble stewards of our particular places. On the one hand, love “cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great inheritance on which his life depends.”⁸ Yet on the other hand, “love is never abstract” and so puts itself in “the presence of the work that must be done.”⁹ This particular context for our work helps us fulfill our responsibility as stewards of creation. While our responsibility to care for all creation could easily become paralyzing in action, Berry concludes that it demands from us humble, faithful, and skillful work where we are. This is because, regardless of our ignorance and inability to adequately care for the creation with which we have been entrusted, we must use the world in order to live: if “we cannot exempt ourselves from use, then we must deal with the issues raised by use.”¹⁰ Caring use of the world requires us to consider “the issue of life-long devotion and perseverance in unheroic tasks, and the issue of good workmanship or ‘right livelihood.’”¹¹

By forcing us to grapple with physical reality, work can reveal our misconceptions of our places. In Berry's novel *A Place on Earth* Virgil Feltner wants to grow crops on a steep Kentucky hillside, but when he attempts to work out this vision, heavy rains wash away the plowed soil and cause lasting damage to the land.¹² By revealing his failure to imagine his place's health, Virgil's work corrects his vision that was inadequate to the real needs of his place. These considerations underlie Berry's extensive writings on the character of good work, work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation. Berry envisions work, then, as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation.



We must use many places and processes in the world which we do not fully understand. It is in the context of this predicament that Berry discusses doing good and affectionate work within the bounds of certain cultural practices like farming and marriage. These contain the disciplines that develop key virtues in us such as fidelity and humility, and it is these virtues that ought to guide and delimit our work given our inevitable ignorance of the world whose members we are.

Because our vision of creation's health and understanding of the particular places that we use are so imperfect, imagination plays an important role in guiding work. Berry sees imagination as the capacity that allows us to envision and embrace a pattern that we cannot wholly comprehend and so make our work participate in creation's health. Love for the life and health of a holy world naturally leads us to imagine how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life. When it is disciplined by virtues like fidelity and humility, our work can contribute to the healing of both our damaged places and our insufficient imaginations; work thus cultivates a reciprocal relation between imagination and reality.

Berry, then, always depicts good work as occurring in the context of specific cultural practices that inculcate virtues suitable to our human finitude. In addition to marriage, farming, and poetry, he mentions worship, teaching, and medicine among other key practices. His descriptions of the complex interplay of love, imagination, and reality in the practice of farming can clarify how these practices inform our work. Farming implies limited scale, faithfulness, and community: farmers do not cultivate all of the earth but only one particular field; farmers do not move from field to field but remain in one place for many years so that they are responsible for the consequences of their work and can correct their mistakes over time; farmers do not work alone but with their families and neighbors. Farmers' local, faithful work has the potential to actually enact their love for a place because it can make their love responsible—able to respond—to the real needs of a place.

In his essay “People, Land, and Community,” Berry offers a cohesive vision of how love leads a farmer to imagine the health of his land and then to correct his imagination by hard, faithful work, which ultimately serves the health of his place. “A farmer’s connection to a farm...begin[s] in love,” he observes. “One loves the place because present appearances recommend it, and because they suggest possibilities irresistibly imaginable.”¹³ These imagined possibilities may not be realistic given the actual conditions of the farm, but like a young lover, the farmer’s affection blinds him to the blemishes of his new farm:

When one buys a farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts.... One’s work may be defined in part by one’s visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one’s first vision of one’s place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one’s sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life – *all* have changed by mutual correction.... One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is.¹⁴

Through faithful work, the farmer contributes over time to the place’s health; through the problems and realities of the place and the adjustments to work these difficulties

require, the farmer is changed and comes to participate more fully in the good life of the place. This same pattern of love being proved and corrected through faithful work applies equally to the other cultural practices Berry commends; the lover’s initial love for the spouse, or the worshiper’s love for

God is naïve and fails to be adequate, but through “daily life, work, and problems,” innocent, naïve love can be shaped, corrected, and made more adequate to the value truly inherent in the one loved.

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This sort of morally good work may seem difficult, if not impossible, to do. As Berry himself points out, work and pleasure, fidelity and love have

been divorced in our industrialized and consumer-driven culture. Our economy depends on workers who mass-produce often shoddy objects for people with whom they have no connection and who live in far-flung, disparate places. In this economy, workers are abstracted from the objects and recipients of their work, so workers never have to correct an imagined vision of health because they have no faithful bond to the communities their work

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either benefits or harms.

These same conditions increasingly exist in human relationships: if spouses find their loves are not easily worked out, they are more likely to look for new relationships than to attempt to correct their loves in the work of faithful marriage. The same unfaithful, counterfeit love is evident in American religious life and indeed nearly every aspect of contemporary culture.

Berry clearly recognizes

how far American culture has moved from the disciplines he upholds, but he argues that our culture cannot simply dismiss the moral framework these traditional practices preserve.

A better possibility is that we will begin finding ways to do good work where we are. In an early essay titled "Think Little," Berry answers those who feel as if they have no opportunities for doing good work and so are tempted either to ignore their responsibility to care for creation or to assuage their consciences by becoming part of the green "fad." He proposes that, as insignificant as it may seem, growing a garden will enable us to begin doing good, healing work. Growing a garden has many physical benefits: it improves a piece of the world, makes us active producers of our own food, and reduces our dependence on the agribusiness industry, on the oil needed to transport food, and on the landfill where food packaging ends up. As gardeners, then, we can practice a love for all creation by caring for a particular part of it. In addition, as gardeners we are "enlarging, for [ourselves], the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating," for by applying our "minds directly and competently to the needs of the earth...we will have begun to make fundamental and necessary changes in our minds."¹⁵ Our imaginations will be expanded as we participate in the healthy economy of the soil, where water and sun and organic nutrients, brought together with human care, grow good food. We will then be better able to imagine how this healthy pattern of the Kingdom of God might be cultivated in our mar-

riages, churches, and communities.

By making the health of creation the standard by which human work is judged, Berry makes our work responsible to a host of difficult questions. To paraphrase the questions he asks in “Going to Work”: How might I help my spouse and household to live in a healthier way? How might my relations with my community be made more harmonious? How might I contribute to the health of my place and the land around me?¹⁶ These questions may be quite difficult to work out in the situations in which we find ourselves, and while Berry grapples with these difficulties, he continues to place his confidence in “the willingness of good people to do the right thing now...[for] good work, faithfulness, willingness to serve, honesty, peaceableness, and lovingkindness will support hope.”¹⁷ As long as individuals find ways to work out affectionate visions under the disciplines of humility and fidelity – through practices as simple as growing a garden – Berry finds reason to hope. For when people work within faithfully-kept promises, their work becomes accountable not only to its immediate effects, but also to the health it contributes to or damages.

To adapt the conclusion from Berry’s essay about how we use language to bind ourselves to one another in relationship: “When we promise in love and awe and fear, there is a certain kind of mobility we give up. We give up the romanticism of progress.... We are [working] where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have [worked].”¹⁸ And if our work is done with love, humility, and fidelity, we will be standing in a healthier place.

NOTES

1 Wendell Berry, “What are People For?” in *What Are People For?: Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 123-125, here citing 125.

2 Wendell Berry, “Two Economies” in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 54-75, here citing 55, 61, and 62.

3 *Ibid.*, 55.

4 Wendell Berry, “Health is Membership” in *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995), 86-109, here citing 89.

5 Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 101.

6 *Ibid.*, 102.

7 Wendell Berry, “The Burden of the Gospels” in *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006), 127-137, here citing 134 and 136.

8 Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land” in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), 267-281, here citing 273.

9 Wendell Berry, “Word and Flesh” in *What Are People For?*, 197-203, here citing 200.

10 Wendell Berry, “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity,” in *Another Turn of the Crank*, 64-85, here citing 73.

11 Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” 277.

12 Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 180.

13 Wendell Berry, “People, Land, and Community,” in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 64-79, here citing 69.

14 *Ibid.*, 70.

15 Wendell Berry, "Think Little" in *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1972), 71-85, here citing 82 and 84.

16 See Wendell Berry, "'Going to Work'" in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 33-41.

17 Wendell Berry, "Hunting for Reasons to Hope: A Conversation with Wendell Berry," interview with Harold K. Bush, *Christianity and Literature* 56.2 (2007), 215-234, here citing 223.

18 Wendell Berry, "Standing by Words" in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 24-63, here citing 62.



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