
Membered and Remembered

BY BRENT LAYTHAM

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One of the themes that Wendell Berry has been standing by for many years is “membership.” In Berry’s fiction about “the Port William membership,” the grand Pauline theme of membership in Christ finds analog and overlap with a quotidian fellowship of farmers. What we too easily describe in ethereal theologies as mystical union in Christ or gift of the Holy Spirit, he renders narratively as a community woven together by the earthy realities of “kinship, friendship, history, memory, kindness, and affection” (*Place in Time*, p. 193).¹ From the stories of Port William characters’ membership, I draw lessons in church membership.

Berry’s first membership lesson may be the most difficult: membership is a given that includes everything in God’s kindly purposes. His character Burley once preached it this way, in the midst of their shared work: “Oh, my friends, there ain’t no nonmembers, living nor dead nor yet to come. Do you know it? Or do you don’t?” (*Hannah Coulter*, p. 97). Another time, he put it this way, “... we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t” (*That Distant Land*, p. 356).

The apparent difficulty with a claim like that is its universal horizon. If the sweep of membership is so encompassing, if everyone and everything is

membered, what possible work could the claim do, what significant difference does it make? Moreover, a church seeking membership lessons from Berry will stumble over this apparent transposition from ecclesiology to creation. Paul deployed the term to describe the inter relation of the Church in and to Christ; e.g. "we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25). Berry has very nearly placed these exact same words on Burley's lips. Yet, Paul's claim seems to be universalized and naturalized into a description of creatureliness itself.

That transposition is acceptable and true, precisely as it reminds us that finally membership in the Church is not about maintaining exclusions of unbelievers and non-human creatures from God's redeeming work, but about becoming a foretaste of the inclusive renewal in Christ of "All of us. Everything." Put theologically, membership in Christ presupposes our shared origin as members with all creatures of God's very good creation (John 1:3), which includes our shared destiny in the renewal of all things (Ephesians 1:10).

Berry recently essayed this most encompassing sense of membership in the line "Much happiness, much joy, can come to us from our membership in a kindness so comprehensive and original."² His gesture toward happiness and joy takes us into the most difficult part of universal membership, which is not the intellectual work of properly relating redemption to creation. It is the affectional and practical work of dwelling in divine kindness, of rejoicing in God's delights, of knowingly receiving, enacting, and celebrating a given membership that crucifies our pretensions of choosing and controlling our belonging. In reminding us that we are woven into a belonging that precedes and grounds us, that produces and guides us, that beckons and blesses us, Berry is inviting us to acknowledge, receive, embrace, enact, and cherish all things through our *knowing participation* in "a kindness so comprehensive." He is inviting us to share in Andy Catlett's transcendent vision that ends *Remembering*, of every creature singing their being as "one song, the song of the many members of one love" (*Three Short Novels*, p. 220). So the first lesson is that particular instantiations of membership, be they Berry's Port William farmers or your local church, should learn to rejoice in and sing with our given membership with everything in One who is comprehensive kindness and enduring, redeeming love.

Berry's second lesson is that membership is given before it is chosen, given because it cannot be earned. Let us begin with choice, the demigod of autonomous Western culture. Doesn't American Christianity mostly believe and practice church membership as something we choose? Modernity has infected us to value our own decisions and accomplishments too much and to value being given too little. Yet membership in Christ is given by the Spirit rather than earned or even chosen; receiving it involves working and choosing, but neither our decisions nor our determined effort could ever procure it. It is always gift.

Berry's fiction shows the subtle interactions of effort and gift, decision and grace, in the journey of outsiders into full membership. The novels *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* are first person remembrances of being given membership in the fellowship of shared work, knowledge, conversation, and pleasure. Several of the short stories display Mary and Elton Penn receiving membership that brings them educational, emotional, and economic benefit. While Mary's response is overwhelming gratitude, Elton's is to resent and resist receiving what he cannot earn or choose. In a poignant story of being bequeathed a farm he cannot afford, Elton struggles against receiving a belonging that he cannot earn. He tells Wheeler Catlett "I want to make it on my own. I don't want a soul to thank" (*That Distant Land*, p. 283). Wheeler shows Elton (and us) that because land and love and membership are realities we did not make, they "can't exist at all except as gifts" (p. 288). So membership cannot be earned, nor in a sense even chosen. But when the gift of membership chooses us, we can choose it in response. "The way you got in...was by being chosen. The way you stay in it is by choice" (p. 284).

Plenty of American Christians take membership vows in full awareness that they have not earned their place in the Church. Yet the pervasive voluntarism and consumerism that distort our culture inexorably press us toward imagining and thus living as if we chose our membership (voluntarism) and that choice made it ours (consumerism). Berry's Port William stories are a bracing reminder that membership comes to us as gift and chooses us by grace, eliciting and enabling our grateful choosing and giving as response.

The third lesson grounds membership in shared soil and common place. Paul tells the Corinthians that spiritual gifts are given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). Berry reminds us that common good requires common ground; membership needs and belongs to a particular

place. This does not renew an "edifice complex"; Christ's Church is certainly not a building. Indeed, Laura Milby (the preacher's wife) notices the profound disconnect between what goes on in the church building and her town's daily life. "It was as though the building...contained...a solemnity that the people...could neither inflect with the tone of their daily preoccupations nor transpose into their daily lives" (*A Place in Time*, p. 54).

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Nonetheless, the body of Christ is a *placed* people, as indicated by the common New Testament custom of placing letters to the church in Corinth, the churches of Galatia, the saints in Ephesus, and so on. Thus, membership transpires on common ground, and the exercise of the various gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4) takes place in particular places. Modern mobility has trained us to be relatively indifferent to where we are, to treat places more like interchangeable widgets or consumer goods than like treasures to be cherished. This attitude infects church membership in a variety of ways, including churches that imagine themselves as essentially placeless and fail to care for the place where they are.

Berry's imaginative account of the membership of *Port William* offers to re-soil our souls and re-place our memories. He regularly reminds us how placed is our membership. Old Jack comes to belong to his farm "by the expenditure of history and work" (*Memory of Old Jack*, p. 164). Art Rowanberry's very "thoughts were placed and peopled" (*Place in Time*, p. 190). We live, work, converse, enjoy, suffer, and hope together in a particular place. Berry's vision of encompassing love invites us to see that the true requirement of membership is that such enactments transpire not only *in*, but *with* and *for* a particular place. His members do not just work *on* their farms; they work *for* and *with* them. Our church membership must learn to work *in*, *with*, and *for* its place.

The fourth lesson is that the gift of membership subsists in shared labors and loves. Hannah Coulter gets at this point when she says "Our life and our work were not the same thing maybe, but they were close" (*Hannah Coulter*, p. 89). Given the kind of work they shared – non-mechanized farming – conversation was not only possible but almost a necessary accompaniment. Past labors and co-laborers would be called into speech, making for "a sort of ritual of remembrance, too, when we speak of other years and remember younger selves and the absent and the dead – all those we have, as we say, 'gone down the row with'" (*That Distant Land*, pp. 313-314).

An obvious connection to the labors of the local church is seen when Mat Feltner led the cleaning of the cemetery each year (*Jayber Crow*, chapter 19). Church members who have shared the labor of cooking together, or building a Habitat house, will likely recognize having participated in similar "rituals of remembrance" as they worked, and Berry's fiction helps us to see the non-utilitarian value that attaches to such regular patterns of labor. But there is more even than that, glimpsed perhaps in Burley Coulter's narration of the same phenomenon: "It's a mystery how the voices gather. Our talk at row ends or in the barn or stripping room would call up the voices of the absent and the dead" (*A Place in Time*, p. 30). Church talk – around meals or service and especially in worship – is and ought to be a gathering up of voices in the mystery of God, so that their faith and hope is spoken again through us.

An even deeper lesson can be found in “rhymed labors,” as when Hannah Coulter finds herself “at work and thinking of a person you loved and love still who did that same work before you and who taught you to do it. It is a comfort ever and always, like hearing the rhyme come when you are singing a song” (*Hannah Coulter*, p. 107). In the Church, members regularly find themselves engaged in labors of love—the work of worship and the works of mercy. However, we do not consistently feel such rhymes, but occasionally we may, especially when place and practice coalesce. Perhaps in kneeling at an old altar rail, or singing an old and favorite hymn, or praying an ancient prayer, we may experience the rhyme that Hannah Coulter names: us doing now in the same place what those with whom we are membered together in love did here before us and taught us to do. Perhaps the most obvious ‘rhymes’ of our Christian labor and love are the practices of baptism and communion. In baptism, we name new members in the present moment with the same words and actions that named us, and have named every Christian, rhyming all the way back to Pentecost. In communion, we are repeating words and actions that were given for precisely such rhymings, thereby remembering how we have been membered to one another week by week and generation by generation right back to Easter.

The fifth lesson is that because membership is strengthened by the gift of remembrance, it requires the presence of gifted rememberers. Because Paul never claimed to offer a comprehensive list of every possible gift of the Spirit (and comparing his various lists shows that he did not try to offer one), I suggest that remembrance is not *like* a spiritual gift but *is* one. Healthy membership requires

that we have (and honor) rememberers, those who are gifted and trained to retain and retell our story, our history, our shared lives.

Berry’s stories regularly describe persons whose gift is remembering. “Uncle Isham Quail was a rememberer who had saved up in his mind everything he had seen and experienced and everything he had heard. In

his latter years he seemed to live in all the times of that small place...” (*A Place in Time*, pp. 218-219). As with the mantle of prophesy passed from Elijah to Elisha, so this mantle of rememberer is a spiritual gift that can be passed from one generation to another. The elder Art Rowanberry passed it to young Andy Catlett over the years of their long friendship, through “so many days, so many miles, so many reminders, so much remembering and

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telling" (p. 194). The result, visible when Andy had himself become "an old man, remembering an old man, once his elder and his teacher," was that Andy "has kept Art's mind alive in his own. Some of Art's memories Andy remembers" (p. 194).

We have been so afraid of traditionalism, we have become so addicted to advertisement's incessant trumpeting of the next new thing, that our sense of membership has become infected with a kind of 'gnosticism of the now,' a belief that the Church is nothing more than its instantiation at the present moment. We need rememberers exercising the gift of remembrance to "quote [the dead] in their own voices at appropriate times...[and] to call the absent into presence" (*Place in Time*, p. 231). We need gifted rememberers to keep alive in their minds the minds of our saints. Where this gift of *remembrance* has been rightly exercised, we too might feel the *re-remembering*, feel "that a current of love traveled among [us], and joined [us] to one another, to those who were absent" – indeed to all that great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 11) stretching from here to Ur of the Chaldees, from now back to Genesis 12.

The final lesson from Berry is that this full scope of membership that we can experience in hopeful remembering is already real, apart from our mentality. "If the dead had been alive only in this world, you would forget them, looks like, as soon as they die. But you remember them, because they always were living in the other, bigger world while they lived in this little one, and this one and the other one are the same" (*A Place in Time*, p. 110). The connection of the body of Christ through time is more than an historical fact, more even than our capacity to keep previous members 'alive' in our memories. What truly connects us, what makes this temporally extended membership truly real, is Christ's remembering – "the care of a longer love than any...have ever imagined" (*Three Short Novels*, p. 221). Whether we remember it or not (remember Burley's "Do you know it? Or do you don't?"), Christ remembers and so we are membered through time into a timeless love. We can take as paradigmatic Christ's answer to the dying thief's plea, "Lord, remember me," which evoked the promise "Today you will be with me in Paradise." So we live each day in "that company of immortals" (*Three Short Novels*, p. 326) because of God's faithfulness in Christ.

That said, this reality can be *realized* by us in and through our hopeful remembering. Several of Berry's characters experience transcendent visions that re-member the remembered, perfected and whole. Once, after a day working in the cemetery and remembering the dead there, Jayber saw "the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time.... I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness as it is said we may be perfected by grace" (*Jayber Crow*, p. 205). Hannah Coulter, at the end of her long life of love and loss, tells and retells with restrained hope the story of "the whole

membership, living and dead" (*Hannah Coulter*, p. 158). Her mind becomes a sort of "room of love where the absent are present, the dead are alive, time is eternal, and all the creatures prosperous" (p. 158).

At the end of *A World Lost*, Andy Catlett remembers members who have died, seeing them "waking, dazed, into a shadowless light in which they know themselves altogether for the first time" (*Three Short Novels*, p. 326). The light is transformative, and "in it they are loved completely, even as they have been, and so are changed into what they could not have been but what, if they could have imagined it, they would have wished to be" (p. 326). Notice that Andy's remembering is not of a nostalgic past. It is clear-eyed about how much of our story is inextricably bound up with heartache, suffering, sorrow, and sin, mistakes made and evils chosen. In *A Place in Time* we learn that Elton Penn believed that "all apologies come too late...that apologies can't undo mistakes..." (p. 230). Andy reflected on that in light of learning that Elton's mother-in-law "years too late,...had been sorry, had repented of the hurt she had given and wished to take it back..." (*A Place in Time*, p. 236). From our perspective, this is "... all too late. 'Too late,' Andy could again hear Elton saying with the blunt finality of the world's mere truth" (p. 236). And with Andy we realize that our human history is an accumulation of "a limitlessness of heartache: of second thoughts too late, of the despair of undoing what had been done, of some forlorn hope, even, that could not be undone by despair or numbed by time" (p. 236). For Andy, "it seemed...almost a proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrow" (p. 236). And so "... he was thinking of heavenly pity, heavenly forgiveness, and his thought was a confession of need. It was a prayer" (p. 237).

Berry's final lesson for us is of a remembering love that includes us in its forgiveness, of "a light that includes our darkness" (*Jayber Crow*, p. 357; cf. John 1:5), of a love

that "overflows the allowance of the world" (*Jayber Crow*, p. 204) so that we will finally be "corrected and clarified" (*Three Short Novels*, p. 221). This lesson should come as no surprise to Christians, given our remembering Table prepared in the presence of enmity (Psalm 23), celebrated in the aftermath of betrayal and abandonment, sharing a body broken by our sin yet re-membered by "the care of a longer love" (*Three Short Novels*,

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p. 221). In our practice of communion, whether high church or low, we share in that same transcendent vision of Jayber, Hannah, and Andy, that every dis-memberment is finally re-membered by that longest and original love, so abundant that it drowns our hells in its Heaven (*Jayber Crow*, p. 354). Membered together in this remembering meal, we dare to believe that such forgiveness is possible because in this moment, we actually receive it.

NOTES

1 In this essay I will make parenthetical references to the following works of fiction by Wendell Berry: *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2013), *Hannah Coulter* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), *Three Short Novels: Nathan Coulter, Remembering, A World Lost* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2002), *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2000), and *The Memory of Old Jack* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 1999).

2 Wendell Berry, "Caught in the Middle on Abortion and Homosexuality," *Christian Century* 130.7 (April 10, 2013), 22-27 and 29-31, here citing 31.



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