

## Fostering Renewal

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We are inhabitants of the Earth and part of it.

The atoms that make up our physical bodies, the water that transmits the electrical impulses of thought, the precise embodiment of ourselves: these bits and pieces *all* were once the soil, the grass, the trees, the flaming sun.

We are inhabitants of the Earth and part of it, and one day we will return to the earth and our physical bodies will nourish it in an unending cycle of the renewal of life.

But we need not wait till death to nourish and renew the Earth.

Let each of us picture in our mind's eye a special place on this beautiful planet, a natural setting we love and visit now, or perhaps a place we loved in childhood, a place of natural beauty that brought us serenity and peace.

I remember the tree on the east side of my family home, a great spruce with its reaching branches and in summer the warm sticky scent of pine; the shade it gave, the shape of its solid base, the needles that made the ground beneath a fragrant and soft resting-place.

I remember how my mother wept when it was cut down by mistake, how I, seeing for the first time the vacancy where it had once stood, wept also. We were *bereft*, mourning the old gracious being, arms around each other and remembering its beauty as we gazed at the place where it had stood.

The Earth is “so tender,” that we humans, “even where we mean to mend her we end her” and “after-comers cannot guess the beauty been.”<sup>1</sup>

In a book of essays called *Art of the Commonplace*, the poet Wendell Berry tells a story of some of the first European settlers to come to his fertile river valley in what we now call Kentucky, a place along the Kentucky River.<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans had lived in this valley for five thousand years, not as settlers but as companions of the earth. When the Europeans arrived there were no roads through the old-growth forest, only paths a little wider than deer tracks. The native people moved through the wooded hills taking only what they needed from the land, and they did not need much.

To them the Earth was a mother who takes off her own coat to wrap it around the shoulders of her children. The deer-hide that made clothing and protected the feet was a gift from the great mother, received in gratitude, used and shared until, thin with wear, it returned to the Earth.

These people native to Wendell Berry's Kentucky River valley were not so much stewards of the land as part of the land itself.

Then Europeans came to the trackless American wilderness, a place of such abundance that they could not fully understand it.

There is an account of the first road created in Wendell Berry's valley. It was written by a clergyman traveling for safety with the crew of road-builders. He describes the crew's wild, destructive energy as they cut and hewed their way through the forest, sometimes vying with each other to pull up saplings by the roots, engaging in mock battles with burning sticks from the campfire, fighting and yelling until they ignited their own anger, beating each other, burning each other, setting fire to the trees.

Berry imagines the life story of these workers: immigrants perhaps by force, indentured servants, criminals, unlanded people with little choice displaced suddenly to a place of beauty and abundance. Uneducated, kept in ignorance of so much by the brutal system that cast them upon America's shores, they did not have the learning or the understanding or the time to comprehend what they could be to the land or what the land could be to them.

Instead, assigned that task civilization calls road-building, they embraced it with destructive force, with no regard for the thousands of years humans and the forest had lived in harmony.

They were, the poet says, not *connected* to the land but *passing through* it.

I started reading Berry's essay in a tent in the wilderness of northern Minnesota, where the land is still the way it has been for thousands of years and the only roads are the lakes and the narrow tracks that link one to the other. I finished reading it one evening in Ohio after a day on Interstate 90, not many miles from the Kentucky River valley.

In one place I had been part of the Earth, resting gently on a bed of pine needles and inhaling air scented with Life. To arrive at the other I had rushed through the landscape without touching it, closed into my car and breathing air that passed through its mechanical systems.

I understand what the poet says about the difference between knowing the land and just passing through it—just *using* it as the shortest distance between two points. In Minnesota, and here in Nantucket, I feel my relationship with the land. I feel the seasons as they pass; the weather as it changes.

My skin is a barometer telling me the relative humidity, and my sense of smell identifies the salt of sea air and the pine-and-bayberry of a sunny day on Altar Rock. I take visitors to my special places, hoping they, too, will feel a connection to the Earth. We watch the

waves roll in at Cisco and later in the fog we stand on the bluff at Sankaty lighthouse. The wind and waves combine in the hollow roaring that speaks to me of cliff-edge and ocean.

I cherish the Earth, and long to foster its renewal.

To cherish and nourish what we love is one of humanity's best traits. It is because we can love and cooperate and share that we humans emerged to sentience, rose to technology. Another survival trait is our fierce competitiveness, our *territoriality*, a trait that helped our ancestors protect their young and expand from tribe into civilization. Yet this trait endangers us now; endangers the Earth.

Those wild, displaced settlers who hacked and burned through the Kentucky forest were directed and guided by knowledgeable and well-educated captains of industry, captains of *trade*, who understood that a road from here-to-there would make it easier to bring hides and fur from the continent's interior to the seaports and sailing ships that would take them to Europe and its lucrative markets. With their minds and money (rather than hands and muscles) these merchant princes also hacked out a road, a road of commerce that led them to wealth.

The trade routes bringing goods out of the woods and into the marketplace in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Interstate of their time. The merchants created a road from wilderness to civilization, from America to Europe, rushing treasure along the shortest distance between two points and passing through the landscape without becoming a part of it.

These road-builders in their various ways lacked a relationship to the land. And today many people in our society also lack a relationship to the land. They are displaced, treading upon pavement, rolling machines across asphalt, breathing air that has been stripped of its native scent. Even the vast farmlands have been given over to agribusiness, which itself is a kind of Interstate that demands the Earth's riches and shunts them into the maw of commerce, a beast that grows hungrier for corn as the price of oil rises.

This way of life is distant from the way of a humanity that receives with gratitude the gifts of the Earth, children grateful for the warmth of their mother's coat.

*Both* impulses are present in the life of our society. There are still children of children of children of farmers who years ago found a connection to the Earth and to their place upon it. There are still people who, restless in cities, find their way to renewal in the land. And there are many people who long to be part of the landscape, to be more during their time on Earth than travelers from one point to another on trade-routes. They may not understand this longing, but they feel it: an impulse linking them to the Earth.

It is this impulse to be *connected* rather than unconnected, to be *placed* rather than *displaced*, that gives me hope. In my way of loving the Earth, of cherishing it, of

fostering its renewal, it is only by encouraging and nurturing humanity's impulse of *place* that we can limit and perhaps one day end the destruction of greed and *displacement*.

“We join our work to Heaven's gift, / our hope to what is left, / that field and woods at last agree / to an economy / of widest worth....Imagine Paradise.”<sup>3</sup>

We are born of the Earth, and one day we return to it: “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”<sup>4</sup> In the light that shines graciously upon us, may we find “fidelity of sight and stroke,” of vision and work, as we love the Earth, and cherish it, and foster its renewal.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Binsey Poplars* (Felled 1879). This sermon presents the ideas in one of Wendell Berry's essays, so I hesitated to introduce another poet, but couldn't resist quoting Hopkins here.

I am struck by the resonances between the poetry of Hopkins and Wendell Berry, whose essay provides the title for this sermon. In addition to the religious basis of their poetry, Berry's rhythms and word choices bear similarities to Hopkins's jazzy rhythms and syncopated rhymes. Manley's *Binsey Poplars* and Berry's *Sabbath VII*, quoted in note 3, are good examples for comparison. Of course Hopkins influenced much of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry: he was a forerunner of innovative meter and word use. But Hopkins and Berry resonate beyond the more general influence to be expected from Hopkins. A wonderful essay compares their sentiments of “Christian Ecology,” Gamon L. Bennett, Sr., “Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wendell Berry on Planet Earth,” Lecture, April 22, 2003, available at <http://www.christianecology.org/PlanetEarth.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, “Unsettling America” from *Art of the Commonplace* (Norman Wirzba, ed.) (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 2003). The sermon title is from this essay: “The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing, responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, “Sabbath Poem VII “(1982) (“The clearing rests in song and shade...”) from *Sabbaths* (1987); also published in *A Timbered Choir* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 1999):

The clearing rests in song and shade.  
It is a creature made  
By old light held in soil and leaf,  
By human joy and grief,  
By human work,  
Fidelity of sight and stroke,  
By rain, by water on  
The parent stone.

We join our work to Heaven's gift,  
Our hope to what is left,  
That field and woods at last agree  
In an economy  
Of widest worth.  
High Heaven's Kingdom come on earth.  
Imagine Paradise.  
O Dust, arise!

<sup>4</sup> Book of Common Prayer (American Anglican version), Burial Rites 1 and 2 (pages 485 and 501), based on Genesis 3:19.