

Reading: Session 8

Care for the earth is a local call. Jack Jezreel interviews Wendell Berry

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Poet, essayist, novelist, social and environmental critic, and farmer Wendell Berry has been called the "prophet of rural America." Berry pursues what he calls "an ethic and way of life based upon devotion to a place and devotion to the land." After stints of teaching at universities, he returned decades ago to live and work on his family's farm in Port Royal, Kentucky. Berry doesn't claim to have all the answers to resolve the contradictions of modern living, but he is committed to a simple lifestyle and continues to question the dominant, profit- and technology-driven economy and culture. On his farm he plows his land with draft horses, and in one of his essays he explains "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer"

In his more than 30 books--novels as well as collections of short stories, poems, and essays--Berry explores people's relationships with God's creation, with the land, with their communities, and with each other. He calls on Christians to become more seriously involved in analyzing, challenging, and renewing our economy.

Across the country, local churches have begun to link faith and care for the environment. How do you understand the biblical view of creation and our responsibility to be about its care?

I understand it to mean that we have the privilege of using creation to stay alive and we have an absolute responsibility to take care of what we use. In other words: We are stewards, and, as I understand the concept, we are to be held accountable for the quality of our stewardship. What we're expected to do is to hand back this earth unimpaired, and we're not doing it. So a lot depends on what we mean by care.

So what do we mean by care?

Well, I know that some churches and a lot of Christians have begun to talk about what this care should entail. I'd like to see the issue pressed so that when we say care, we mean the economy.

The economy?

Yes. The way we live, the way we take our living from the world. So it doesn't just mean having a feeling of care or having a concern, it means doing something. It's like care of the sick--something has to be done. This means to me that people who are interested in caring for creation or caring for the world have to be interested in changing the economy.

No small task.

No, and most of us now--and I include myself--can't account for our economy. We're using by proxy a lot more than we can care for or account for.

How has the Christian community contributed to this problem over the last century?

Many Christians apparently assume that they can adequately or even fully practice their faith and at the same time participate fully in the industrial economy. To me, these two things are contradictory.

That doesn't mean that I know how to resolve the contradiction in my own life or anybody else's. I don't think anybody has the answer--except maybe a personal withdrawal from the economy, which most people are either unwilling or unable to do.

Would you consider the Amish a significant example of Christian withdrawal from a destructive economy?

The Amish, to my mind, are probably the most trustworthy example we have; they are the body of Christians who have tried to make their way of life--their economy--embody their religious beliefs. And they've done very well.

But they haven't been completely independent of the larger society, and, in fact, in many ways they are dependent on it. The Amish point the way, but there are certain questions that I don't think they've answered, which is inevitable. The Amish alone have tried to control their economy in the interest of their community.

Building upon this example of the Amish, how do we broaden our thinking about the economy from concern with the self-interest of the local community to the common good of the larger society?

The common good, of course, is a lively enough concept, and we can use it. Still, we have to define what the common good is, and how long a term we're using to determine it.

There is such a thing as a short-term common good, which could be defined merely as "job creation"--just keeping everybody employed. But then we also must ask: Employed at what, how well, and for how long? So in a way it's a matter of deciding on a standard.

What standard might you propose?

I think we have to accept the health of nature as an economic standard. We have to find ways of including nature in the community, and, of course, we have some help in thinking that way.

Interest in situating ourselves properly within nature goes way back in the cultural traditions of the West and of the East. And in our century several people have tried to set that instruction on a scientific footing. So I think you can get a certain distance with common good if you're willing to include nature in the community.

As we include nature as one of the members of the community to be considered, how are we to re-create an economy that would be just, that would be respectful of nature?

We have to abandon the old standard of mere profitability, productivity, or efficiency and realize that--in the terms of the grant to us of the use of the world--we have other standards to meet. Christians have radical ethical standards for our treatment of our fellow humans, and we have also in our tradition the idea that we must treat other creatures and, in fact, the inanimate creation with respect. We have the right to use--but not use up--the things that we need and are dependent upon.

Practically, what are the kinds of questions a local church might begin to consider as it faces the task of acting to influence the economy and thus the environment?

What people in concerned churches and neighborhoods should ask is: What can we do for each other that we're paying outsiders to do?

This doesn't come from any prejudice against outsiders, but from a prejudice in favor of the complete

community, a community that is in full possession of its rightful powers to do for itself. What can we do for one another free or at little cost that we're paying too dearly to have done for us by outsiders?

That's an economic question, and it is, as far as I can see, a question perfectly consistent with the gospel.

Make the connection for me in terms of environmental responsibility.

If the community really concerns itself with its ability to help itself, then it realizes that this ability is limited, that it finally has to depend upon others beyond itself.

If it's a community with Christian concerns, it has to see that it owes something to the people who are supplying its needs. It owes them a decent living. It owes them decent living conditions. It owes those people and those people's places respect.

Then follows a whole catalog of questions: Where do our automobiles come from and all the pieces and parts thereof? What is the real cost--that is the economic plus the human plus the ecological cost--of this piece of equipment? These are questions that branch out from the impulse of charity, and they branch directly into accounting, into economic questions of costs and benefits and responsibilities.

You have said that one of the things local communities, including church communities, can do is to ask where their food comes from.

Yes, my faith is in the questions. It's certainly not enough to ask, "Where does this food come from?" and then answer piously, "Oh, it comes from God." That has been done too much. We have to ask: "Who got it after God gave it, and how much money did they make on it, and what did they do to the earthly source and to other people in the process of putting it on your table?"

So if a community asks itself, for example, "What is the real cost of our food?" or "Where does it come from?", then the inevitable next development is that those people will realize that they have given proxies to farmers for years, maybe for generations, to provide them with food. This is a proxy not just for food production but for land stewardship or soil husbandry.

Then, if they reflect on our political tradition, they will understand that to give a proxy that you don't supervise is wrong. So if they look at the history of whatever cabbage or chicken or sausage they eat, they will realize that their proxy, given long ago, is in serious need of their supervision.

So this would repudiate the global economy/absentee landlord phenomena.

Yes, it's to repudiate the idea that the economy works with everybody's highest interest in mind. It doesn't.

If you give up the idea that there's some kind of benevolence inherent in industrial capitalism, then that means you look around with new eyes and, I would think, a new excitement in learning and a new excitement about taking back responsibilities and powers that you've given up.

In your book *What Are People For?* (North Point Press, 1990), you say that we all also probably need to live poorer than we do.

We would live poorer only in some respects. There's a difference between living poorer in a material sense and living in poverty. We know that some societies that have had much less in the way of wealth and comfort than we do nevertheless have had a greater abundance of other things.

So again, it's a question of shifting standards. Do we want unlimited wealth, luxury, and comfort at any

cost? Or do we want health, neighborliness, a reasonable degree of self-sufficiency? Do we want the pleasure of few well-made things, as opposed to the pleasure of too many badly made things?

John Millington Synge, in his writings on the [Aran](#) Aran (ā`rǎn), in the Bible, descendant of Seir the Horite. Islands about 100 years ago, made the remark that the islanders were poor people, but in the whole course of their daily lives they didn't touch anything that wasn't beautiful.

It would suit me fine to put beauty as one of the primary standards of our life and economy.

It would also suit me if cheapness in the best sense of the term made its way to the top of people's lists of criteria. Why should we pay exorbitantly for something ugly that we can do cheaply and beautifully for ourselves?

Grassroots groups like the Community Farm Alliance here in Kentucky organize to protect small family farmers and their community. How can they significantly influence the destiny and future of a local community when their agribusiness adversaries have such overwhelming power?

I do think the Community Farm Alliance has made a difference. It has helped to change the conversation in Kentucky about farming, about the survival of farming. So it has had an influence and has served a good purpose.

We just have a very hard time, we modern humans, in defining ourselves as a community--a group of people in a place, more or less accidentally together, who have, for that reason, a common interest in keeping the water pure and the air clear and the children safe and so on. If the community did understand itself as such and agreed to protect itself as such, then it would have a political position. It would have the power to protect itself.

When you have an overwhelming adversary, you have to find out on what terms that adversary is effective, and then change your terms. Again, I can't give a general prescription, but we can talk about what's suggestive.

No farmer can compete with the great food corporations head-on. You can't, as an individual, beat Philip Morris or RJR Nabisco. You can't do it. But what you do notice is that it's awfully hard for those corporations to have a presence in all the places you, as an individual producer, can go.

So one thing you can do is start a farmers' market. There are farmers' markets sprouting up all over the country now. They are sprouting up beyond the reach of the corporate food economy. There's just really nothing the corporate food economy can do about this.

A number of things have been demonstrated at these farmers' markets. One is that farmers can do well in selling their produce to local customers. A second thing is that in a farmers' market the food economy recovers an old conviviality that the great corporations lost a long time ago. They separated conviviality from economics. The farmers' market restores the old connection. So what happens is that the people from the country come to town with their produce, and the town people come and buy it, and they're glad to have it, eager to have it, and conversation takes place.

People begin to have pleasure in one another. They enjoy seeing each other and talking and so on. To me, that's not "The Answer" with a capital T and a capital A, but it suggests a way to work. It's having an effect and there's nothing its enemies can do to thwart it. It has begun a movement in the direction of a saner economy.

And saner inevitably means more local?

It has to. The local economy gives consumers a kind of influence and control over producers--local quality--that they couldn't possibly have over the corporate food economy. It gives them a local connection with the local landscape that they couldn't have any other way. It gives them a friendly connection with their economic providers that they couldn't have any other way.

So the neighborhood principle is active only locally. The neighborhood principle means local trade, local socializing.

Proponents of environmental justice have documented the larger society's inclination to pollute the backyards of the poor. What do you see here in Kentucky, one of the poorest states in the country, that needs to be addressed?

I believe that we need to develop a dispersed system of small-scale, nonpolluting economic enterprises. It is the big centralized corporate version of manufacturing and trade that makes inevitable those injustices you're talking about.

I don't think that a system of small-scale, locally owned enterprises would necessarily make everybody wealthy. In fact, I think they would be an effective limitation on the accumulation of wealth. What we in Kentucky are going to have to think about is how to make the very best use of our natural gifts.

Coal, which was once abundant here, has mostly been removed, at great expense to the people and to the landscape. So that leaves us with our forests and farmland. If we can use those resources on a scale that won't destroy the landscape, and if we can make the local farm and forest economies as integrated and self-sustaining as possible, we could assure work to the maximum number of people. We could establish local caretaking and local standards of care for the local resources.

For the best of reasons people wouldn't want to exhaust the possibility of life in their own communities. You would assure that money that came into the community would circulate as much as possible before it left. As it is now, most people simply sell their timber or their farm products into the global economy. That's no good. That leads to exploitation of several kinds.

What strikes me is that our conversation concerning our responsibility toward the environment has been necessarily about economics. Yet, in the course of the average month at the local Catholic parish, the discussions about economics happen rarely, if at all. How is it that the local church community has become disinterested in matters economic?

I don't know. It seems to me a great tragedy that institutional Christianity has divorced itself from economic issues. But the conservation movement has done the same thing. It's very hard to get conservationists or Christians to talk about how we live, which really means to study the economy. In my experience, the churches have been saying, "Our concern is with the soul," meaning the disembodied soul and its salvation. "Let other people worry about the economy."

What this means is that there is no practice of Christianity other than going to church. The preachers of the Protestant denominations that I was familiar with growing up used to talk about "full-time Christian service," by which they meant being a minister or a missionary, which effectively removed from everybody else the possibility of being a "full-time Christian."

If you can't be a Christian and serve God and your neighbors by pursuing your vocation, then the situation is just hopeless. So that seems to me to be a problem--even the worst problem conceivable--for religious people. It just invalidates the religious enterprise. If you have a religion that can't be practiced except by participating in certain ritual observances on designated days, you don't have a religion.

Thus a person who aspires to be a plumber isn't trained or encouraged to consider what it means to be a "just plumber," what it means to do plumbing in a good way that doesn't contribute to environmental degradation or the diminishment of others.

Absolutely. As you state it, it sounds preposterous and simply invites a big laugh and questions about how a plumber could be "just" and a steward and why a plumber should even be a steward. So we have a long way to go. We Christians seem to be rather foolishly caught in a kind of fecklessness and uselessness.

What then can a parish or church do to begin to address the environmental crisis before us and to stir the imaginations of others? Can you offer some concrete ideas that you have seen in your own experience that help people begin to take the next step?

My wife, Tanya, and I were just in Massachusetts visiting with a friend of ours, Rachel Fletcher, who had organized some of her neighbors in her town to make a "riverwalk."

A little river runs right through the middle of her town. For maybe generations people had looked at the river the way we Americans have learned to look at rivers--as something to carry things away that we don't want. The town had just tumbled whatever they didn't want down among the trees on the river bank.

Rachel began to persuade people to allow a riverwalk to be built across their back lots. She organized cleanups, and people would come and bring their children. They picked up all the trash and cleared the river bank and built their walk, and they made a beautiful thing.

Any walk through the woods gives one a lot to look at, especially a walk along a riverbank. People made donations to put in seats in memory of loved ones who had died and so on. That was how it started.

The next thing that happened was that people who had property on the other side of the river, who weren't organized into this effort at all, began to clean up their lots.

So here you've got a neighborhood institution that is minimally organized. So far as I know, it has no trust fund. But it's cherishing something local that everybody can have in common, and to me a thing like that can't go wrong. It's just a little narrow walkway, scaled right, but it's an enormously suggestive thing.

It was a way for people in the neighborhood to give days of their labor to one another, to give one another shares in their mutual place, to make a place where they would meet each other without agenda or schedule. And as the cleanup across the river would indicate, it has an influence.

So that's the way my instinct says to work. If you believe in goodness, if you believe that goodness has a power, then why not act on your faith and do something good and see if it won't call forth more goodness?

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