



Wendell Berry

People, Land, and

Community

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I would like to speak more precisely than I have before of the connections that join people, land, and community—to describe, for example, the best human use of a problematical hillside farm. In a healthy culture, these connections are complex. The industrial economy breaks them down by oversimplifying them and in the process raises obstacles that make it hard for us to see what the connections are or ought to be. These are mental obstacles, of course, and there appear to be two major ones: the assumption that knowledge (information) can be “sufficient,” and the assumption that time and work are short.

These assumptions will be found implicit in a whole set of contemporary beliefs: that the future can be studied and planned for; that limited supplies can be wasted without harm; that good intentions can safeguard the use of nuclear power. A recent American newspaper article says, for example, that “A congressionally mandated study of the Ogallala Aquifer is finding no great cause for alarm from *[[sic]]* its rapidly dropping levels. The director of the ... study ... says that even at current rates of pumping, the aquifer can supply the Plains with water for another 40 to 50 years. ... All six states participating in the study ... are forecasting increased farm yields based on improved technology.” Another article speaks of a different technology with the same optimism: “The nation has invested hundreds of billions of dollars in atomic weapons and at the same time has developed the most sophisticated strategies to fine tune their use to avoid a holocaust. Yet the system that is meant to activate them is the weakest link in the chain. ... Thus, some have suggested that what may be needed are warning systems for the warning systems.”

Always the assumption is that we can first set demons at large, and then, somehow, become smart enough to control them. This is not childishness. It is not even “human weakness.” It is

a kind of idiocy, but perhaps we will not cope with it and save ourselves until we regain the sense to call it evil.

The trouble, as in our conscious moments we all know, is that we are terrifyingly ignorant. The most learned of us are ignorant. The acquisition of knowledge always involves the revelation of ignorance — almost *is* the revelation of ignorance. Our knowledge of the world instructs us first of all that the world is greater than our knowledge of it. To those who rejoice in the abundance and intricacy of Creation, this is a source of joy, as it is to those who rejoice in freedom. (“*The future comes only by surprise,*” we say, “— *thank God!*”) To those would-be solvers of “the human problem,” who hope for knowledge equal to (capable of controlling) the world, it is a source of unremitting defeat and bewilderment. The evidence is overwhelming that knowledge does not solve “the human problem.” Indeed, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests — with Genesis — that knowledge *is* the problem. Or perhaps we should say instead that all our problems tend to gather under two questions about knowledge: having the ability and desire to know, how and what should we learn? And having learned, how and for what should we use what we know?

One thing we do know, that we dare not forget, is that better solutions than ours have at times been made by people with much less information than we have. We know too, from the study of agriculture, that the same information, tools, and techniques that in one farmer’s hands will ruin land, in another’s will save and improve it.

This is not a recommendation of ignorance. To know nothing, after all, is no more possible than to know enough. I am only proposing that knowledge, like anything else, has its place, and that we need urgently now to *put* it in its place. If we want to know and cannot help knowing, then let us learn as fully and accurately as we decently can. But let us at the same time abandon our superstitious beliefs about knowledge: that it is ever sufficient; that it can of itself solve problems; that it is intrinsically good; that it can be used objectively or disinterestedly. Let us acknowledge that the objective or disinterested researcher is always on the side that pays best. And let us give up our forlorn pursuit of the “informed decision.”

The “informed decision,” I suggest, is as fantastical a creature as the “disinterested third party” and the “objective observer.” Or it is if by “informed” we mean “supported by sufficient information.” A great deal of our public life, and certainly the most expensive part of it, rests on the assumed possibility of decisions so informed. Examination of private life, however, affords no comfort whatsoever to that assumption. It is simply true that we do not and cannot *know* enough to make any important decision.

Of this dilemma we can take marriage as an instance, for as a condition marriage reveals the insufficiency of knowledge, and as an institution it suggests the possibility that decisions can be informed in another way that *is* sufficient, or approximately so. I take it as an axiom that one cannot know enough to get married, any more than one can predict a surprise. The only people who possess information sufficient to their vows are widows and widowers — who do not know enough to *re*-marry.

I have been told several times by people younger than I am that people of their age cannot make marriage like some people of

my age. I have always replied that I understood what they meant, avoiding — appropriately, I hope — an application of my general opinion to anyone's particular case. But I confess, in general, that what I understood them to mean has troubled me, for I think they can have meant one of only two things: that marriage is too good for them, and they were unwilling to bring it down to the level of their imperfections; or that they were too good for marriage, unwilling to limit themselves by the forswearings that marriage so unexceptionally imposes.

What is not so well understood now as perhaps it used to be is that marriage is made in an inescapable condition of loneliness and ignorance, to which it, or something like it, is the only possible answer. Perhaps this is so hard to understand now because now the most noted solutions are mechanical solutions, which are often exactly suited to mechanical problems. But we are humans — which means that we not only *have* problems, but *are* problems. Marriage is not as nicely trimmed to its purpose as a bottlecap; it is a not entirely possible solution to a not entirely soluble problem. And this is true of the other human connections. We can commit ourselves fully to anything — a place, a discipline, a life's work, a child, a family, a community, a faith, a friend — only in the same poverty of knowledge, the same ignorance of result, the same self-subordination, the same final forsaking of other possibilities. Marriage is an institution and requires vows *because* it can be made only in the eclipse of what we call information, and in the impossibility of what we call “informed decisions.”

All our commitments are like this. We do not know enough to make them, and whether or not we have made them publicly with vows, we know that they cannot be unmade without penalties. If we must make these so final commitments without sufficient information, then what *can* inform our decisions?

In spite of the obvious dangers of the word, we must say first that love can inform them. This, of course, though probably necessary, is not safe. What parent, faced with a child who is in love and going to get married, has not been filled with mistrust and fear — and justly so. We who were lovers before we were parents know what a fraudulent justifier love can be. We know that people stay married for different reasons than those for which they get married, and that the later reasons will have to be discovered. Which, of course, is not to say that the later reasons may not confirm the earlier ones, it is to say only that the earlier ones must wait for confirmation.

But our decisions can also be informed — our loves both limited and strengthened — by those patterns of value and restraint, principle and expectation, memory, familiarity, and understanding that, inwardly, add up to *character* and, outwardly, to *culture*. Because of these patterns, and only because of them, we are not alone in the bewilderments of the human condition and human love, but have the company and the comfort of the best of our kind, living and dead. These patterns constitute a knowledge far different from the kind I have been talking about. It is a kind of knowledge that includes information, but is never the same as information.

Indeed, if we study the paramount documents of our culture, we will see that this second kind of knowledge invariably implies, and often explicitly imposes, limits upon the first kind: some possibilities must not be explored; some things must not be learned. If we want to get safely home, there are certain seductive songs we must not turn aside for, some sacred things we must not meddle with:

*Great captain,
a fair wind and the honey lights of home
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;
the god who thunders on the land prepares it. . . .
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.*

This theme, of course, is dominant in Biblical tradition, but the theme itself and its modern inversion can be handily understood by a comparison of this speech of Tiresias to Odysseus in Homer with Tennyson's romantic Ulysses who proposes, like a genetic engineer or an atomic scientist,

*To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.*

Obviously unlike Homer's Odysseus, Tennyson's Ulysses is said to come from Dante, and he does resemble Dante's Ulysses pretty exactly — the critical difference being that Dante thought this Ulysses a madman and a fool, and brings down upon his Tennysonian speech to his sailors one of the swiftest anti-climaxes in literature. The real — the human — knowledge is understood as implying and imposing limits, much as marriage does, and these limits are understood to belong necessarily to the definition of a human being.

In all this talk about marriage I have not forgotten that I am supposed to be talking about agriculture. I am going to talk directly about agriculture in a minute, but I want to insist that I have been talking about it indirectly all along, for the analogy between marriage-making and farm-making, marriage-keeping and

farm-keeping, is nearly exact. I have talked about marriage as a way of talking about farming because marriage, as a human artifact, has been more carefully understood than farming. The analogy between them is so close, for one thing, because they join us to time in nearly the same way. In talking about time, I will begin to talk directly about farming, but as I do so, you will be aware, I hope, that I am talking indirectly about marriage.

When people speak with confidence of the longevity of diminishing agricultural sources — as when they speak of their good intentions about nuclear power — they are probably not just being gullible or thoughtless; they are likely to be speaking from belief in several tenets of industrial optimism: that life is long, but time and work are short; that every problem will be solved by a “technological breakthrough” before it enlarges to catastrophe; that *any* problem can be solved in a hurry by large applications of urgent emotion, information and money. It is regrettable that these assumptions should risk correction by disaster when they could be cheaply and safely overturned by the study of any agriculture that has proved durable.

To the farmer, Emerson said, “*The landscape is an armory of powers. . .*” As he meant it, the statement may be true, but the metaphor is ill-chosen, for the powers of a landscape are available to human use in nothing like so simple a way as are the powers of an armory. Or let us say, anyhow, that the preparations needed for the taking up of agricultural powers are more extensive and complex than those usually thought necessary for the taking up of arms. And let us add that the motives are, or ought to be, significantly different.

Arms are taken up in hate, but it has not been uncharacteristic for a farmer's connection to a farm to begin in love.

This has not always been so ignorant a love as it sometimes is now; but always, no matter what one's agricultural experience may have been, one's connection to a newly-bought farm will begin in love that is more or less ignorant. One loves the place because present appearances recommend it, and because they suggest possibilities irresistibly imaginable. One's head, like a lover's, grows full of visions. One walks over the premises, saying, "*If this were mine, I'd make a permanent pasture here; here is where I'd plant an orchard; here is where I'd dig a pond.*" These visions are the usual stuff of unfulfilled love, and induce wakefulness at night.

When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. Truth begins to intrude with its matter-of-fact. 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. Correct discipline, given enough time, gradually removes one's self from one's line of sight. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has; and one's knowledge can cause respect for what one knows.

"Correct discipline" and "enough time" are inseparable notions. Correct discipline cannot be hurried, for it is both the knowledge of what ought to be done, and the willingness to do it

— *all* of it, properly. The good worker will not suppose that good work can be made properly answerable to haste, urgency, or even emergency. But the good worker knows too, that after it is done, work requires yet more time to prove its worth. One must stay to experience and study and understand the consequences — and must understand them by living with them, and then correct them, if necessary, by longer living and more work. It won't do to correct mistakes made in one place by moving to another place, as has been the common fashion in America, or by adding on another place, as is the fashion in any sort of "growth economy." Seen this way, questions about farming become inseparable from questions about propriety of scale. A farm can be too big for a farmer to husband properly or pay proper attention to. Distraction is inimical to correct discipline, and enough time is beyond the reach of anyone who has too much to do. But we must go farther and see that propriety of scale is invariably associated with propriety of another kind: an understanding and acceptance of the human place in the order of Creation — a proper humility. There are some things the arrogant mind does not see; it is blinded by its vision of what it desires. It does not see what is already there; it never sees the forest that precedes the farm, or the farm that precedes the shopping center; it will never understand that America was "discovered" by the Indians. It is the properly humbled mind in its proper place that sees truly, because — to give only one reason — it sees details.

And the good farmer understands that further limits are imposed upon haste by nature which, except for an occasional storm or earthquake, is in no hurry either. In the processes of most concern to agriculture — the building and preserving of fertility — nature is never in a hurry. During the last eighteen years, for example, I have been working at the restoration of a once exhausted hillside. Its scars are now healed over, though still visible, and this

year it has provided abundant pasture, more than in any year since we have owned it. But to make it as good as it is now has taken eighteen years. If I had been a millionaire or if my family had been starving, it would still have taken eighteen years. It can be better than it now is, but that will take longer. For it to live fully in its own possibility, as it did before bad use ran it down, may take hundreds of years.

But to think of the human use of a piece of land as continuing through hundreds of years, we must greatly complicate our understanding of agriculture. Let us start a job of farming on a given place — say an initially fertile hillside in the Kentucky River Valley — and construe it through time:

I. To begin using this hillside for agricultural production — pasture or crop — it is a matter of a year's work. This is work in the present tense, adequately comprehended by conscious intention and by the first sort of knowledge I talked about — information available to the farmer's memory and built into his methods, tools, and crop and livestock species. Understood in its present tense, the work does not reveal its value except insofar as the superficial marks of craftsmanship may be seen and judged. But excellent workmanship, as with a breaking plow, may prove as damaging as bad workmanship. The work has not revealed its connections to the place or to the worker. These connections are revealed in time.

II. To live on the hillside and use it for a lifetime gives the annual job of work a past and a future. To live on the hillside and use it without diminishing its fertility or wasting it by erosion still requires conscious intention and information, but now we must say *good* intention and *good* (that is, correct) information, resulting in *good* work. And to these we must now add *character*: the sort of knowledge that might properly be called familiarity, and the

affections, habits, values, and virtues (conscious and unconscious) that would preserve good care and good work through hard times.

III. For human life to continue on the hillside through successive generations requires good use, good work, all along. For in any agricultural place that will waste or erode — and all will — bad work does not permit “muddling through”; sooner or later it ends human life. Human continuity is virtually synonymous with good farming, and good farming obviously must outlast the life of any good farmer. For it to do this, in addition to the preceding requirements, we must have *community*. Without community, the good work of a single farmer or a single family will not mean much or last long. For good farming to last, it must occur in a good farming community — that is, a neighborhood of people who know each other, who understand their mutual dependencies, and who place a proper value on good farming. In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in *ways*. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality.

People are joined to the land by work. Land, work, people, and community are all comprehended in the idea of culture. These connections cannot be understood or described by information — so many resources to be transformed by so many workers into so many products for so many consumers — because they are not quantitative. We can understand them only after we acknowledge that they should be harmonious — that a society must be either shapely and saving or shapeless and destructive. To presume to

describe land, work, people, and community by information, by quantities, seems invariably to throw them into competition with one another. Work is understood to exploit the land, the people to exploit their work, the community to exploit its people. And then instead of land, work, people, and community, we have the industrial categories of resources, labor, management, consumers, and government. We have exchanged harmony for an interminable fuss, and the work of culture for the timed and harried labor of an industrial economy.

But let me bring these notions to the trial of a more particular example. Wes Jackson and Marty Bender of the Land Institute have recently worked out a comparison between the energy economy of a farm using draft horses for most of its field work with that of an identical farm using tractors. This is a project a generation overdue, of the greatest interest and importance — in short, necessary. And the results will be shocking to those who assume a direct proportion between fossil fuel combustion and human happiness.

These results, however, have not fully explained one fact that Wes and Marty had before them at the start of their analysis and that was still running ahead of them at the end: that in the last twenty-five or thirty years, the Old Order Amish, who use horses for farmwork, doubled their population and stayed in farming, whereas in the same period millions of mechanized farmers were driven out. The reason that this is not adequately explained by analysis of the two energy economies, I believe, is that the problem is by its nature beyond the reach of analysis of any kind. The real or whole reason must be impossibly complicated, having to do with nature, culture, religion, family and community life, as well as with agricultural methodology and economies. What I think we are up

against is an unresolvable difference between thought and action, thought and life.

What works *poorly* in agriculture — monoculture, for instance, or annual accounting — can be pretty fully explained, because what works poorly is invariably some oversimplifying *thought* that subjugates nature, people, and culture. What works well defies explanation because it involves an order which in both magnitude and complexity is ultimately incomprehensible.

Here, then, is a prime example of the futility of a dependence on information. We cannot contain what contains us, or comprehend what comprehends us. Yeats said that “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” The part, that is, cannot comprehend the whole, though it can stand for it (and by it). Synecdoche is possible, and its possibility implies the possibility of harmony between part and whole. If we cannot work on the basis of sufficient information, then we have to work on the basis of an understanding of harmony. That, I take it, is what Sir Albert Howard and Wes Jackson mean when they tell us that we must study and emulate on our farms the natural integrities that precede and support agriculture.

The study of Amish agriculture, like the study of *any* durable agriculture, suggests that we live in sequences of patterns that are formally analogous. These sequences are probably hierarchical, at least in the sense that some patterns are more comprehensive than others; they tend to arrange themselves like interesting bowls — though any attempt to represent their order visually will oversimplify it.

And so we must suspect that Amish horse-powered farms work well, not because — or not *just* because — horses are energy-efficient, but because they are living creatures, and therefore fit

harmoniously into a pattern of relationships that are necessarily biological, and that rhyme analogically from ecosystem to crop, from field to farmer. In other words, ecosystem, farm, field, crop, horse, farmer, family, and community are in certain critical ways *like* each other. They are, for instance, all related to health and fertility or reproductivity in about the same way. The health and fertility of each involves and is involved in the health and fertility of all.

It goes without saying that tools can be introduced into this agricultural and ecological order without jeopardizing it — but only up to a certain kind, scale, and power. To introduce a tractor into it, as the historical record now seems virtually to prove, is to begin its destruction. The tractor has been so destructive, I think, because it is *unlike* anything else in the agricultural order, and so it breaks the essential harmony. With the tractor comes dependence on an energy supply that lies not only off the farm, but outside agriculture and outside biological cycles and integrities. With the tractor, both farm and farmer become “resources” of the industrial economy, which always exploits its resources.

We would be wrong, of course, to say that anyone who farms with a tractor is a bad farmer. That is not true. What we must say, however, is that once a tractor is introduced into the pattern of a farm, certain necessary restraints and practices, once implicit in technology, must now reside in the character and consciousness of the farmer — at the same time that the economic pressure to cast off restraint and good practice has been greatly increased.

In a society addicted to facts and figures, anyone trying to speak for agricultural *harmony* is inviting trouble. The first trouble is in trying to say what harmony is. It cannot be reduced to facts and figures — though the lack of it can. It is not very visibly a function. Perhaps we can only say what it may be like. It may, for

instance, be like sympathetic vibration: “The A string of a violin ... is designed to vibrate most readily at about 440 vibrations per second: the note A. If that same note is played loudly not on the violin but near it, the violin A string may hum in sympathy.” This may have a practical exemplification in the craft of the mud daubers which, as they trowel mud into their nest walls, hum to it, or at it, communicating a vibration that makes it easier to work, thus mastering their material by a kind of song. Perhaps the hum of the mud dauber only activates that anciently-perceived likeness between all creatures and the earth of which they are made. For as common wisdom holds, like *speaks* to like. And harmony always involves such specificities of form as in the mud dauber’s song and its nest, whereas information accumulates indiscriminately, like noise.

Of course, in the order of creatures, humanity is a special case. Humans are not involved in harmony naturally, like mud daubers. For humans, harmony is always a human product, an artifact, and if they do not know how to make it and choose to make it, then they do not have it. And so I suggest that, for humans, the harmony I am talking about may bear an inescapable likeness to what we know as moral law — or that, for humans, moral law is a significant part of the notation of ecological and agricultural harmony. A great many people seem to have voted for information as a safe substitute for virtue, but this ignores — among much else — the need to prepare humans to live short lives in the face of long work and long time.

Perhaps it is only when we focus our minds on our machines that time seems short. Time is always running out for machines. They shorten our work, in a sense popularly approved, by simplifying it and speeding it up, but our work perishes quickly in them too as they wear out and are discarded. For the living

Creation, on the other hand, time is always coming. It is running out for the farm built on the industrial pattern; the industrial farm burns fertility as it burns fuel. For the farm built into the pattern of living things, as an analogue of forest or prairie, time is a bringer of gifts. These gifts may be welcomed and cared for. To some extent they may be expected. Only within strict limits are they the result of human intention and knowledge. They cannot in the usual sense be made. Only in the short term of industrial accounting can they be thought simply earnable. Over the real length of human time, to be earned they must be deserved.

In the last twenty-five or thirty years, the Old Order Amish, who use horses for farmwork, doubled their population and stayed in farming, whereas in the same period millions of mechanized farmers were driven out.

From this rather wandering excursion I arrive at two conclusions. The first is that the modern prototype of an intelligent person is probably wrong. The prototypical modern intelligence seems to be that of the Quiz Kid — a human shape barely discernible in fluff of facts. It is understood that everything must be justified by facts, and facts are offered in justification of *everything*. If it is a fact that soil erosion is now a critical problem in American agriculture, then more facts will indicate that it is not as bad as it *could* be and that Iowa will continue to have topsoil for as long as seventy more years. If facts show that some people are undernourished in America, further facts reveal that we should all be glad we do not live in India. This, of course, is machine thought.

To think better, to think like the best humans, we are probably going to have to learn again to judge a person's intelligence, not by the ability to recite facts, but by the good order or harmoniousness of his or her surroundings. We must

suspect that any statistical justification of ugliness and violence is a revelation of stupidity. As an earlier student of agriculture put it: "*The intelligent man, however unlearned, may be known by his surroundings, and by the care of his horse, if he is fortunate enough to own one.*"

My second conclusion is that any public program to preserve land or produce food is hopeless if it does not tend to right the balance between numbers of people and acres of land, and to encourage long-term, stable connections between families and small farms. It could be argued that our nation has never made an effort in this direction that was knowledgeable enough or serious enough. It is certain that no such effort, in America, has ever succeeded. The typical American farm is probably sold and remade — often as part of a larger farm — at least every generation. Farms that have been passed to the second generation of the same family are unusual. Farms that have passed to the third generation are rare. But our crying need is for an agriculture in which the typical farm would be farmed by the third generation of the same family. It would be wrong to try to say exactly what kind of agriculture that would be, but it may be allowable to suggest that certain good possibilities would be enhanced.

The most important of those possibilities would be the lengthening of memory. Previous mistakes, failures, and successes would be remembered. The land would not have to pay the cost of a trial-and-error education for every new owner. A half century or more of the farm's history would be living memory, and its present health could be measured against its own past — something exceedingly difficult *outside* of living memory.

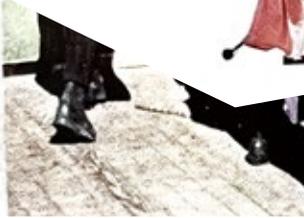
A second possibility is that the land would not be overworked to pay for itself at full value with every new owner.

A third possibility would be that, having some confidence in family continuity in place, present owners would have future owners not only in supposition but *in sight*, and so would take good care of the land, not for the sake of something so abstract as “the future” or “posterity” but out of particular love for living children and grandchildren.

A fourth possibility is that having the past so immediately in memory, and the future so tangibly in prospect, the human establishment on the land would grow more permanent by the practice of better carpentry and masonry. People who remembered long and well would see the folly of rebuilding their barns every generation or two and of building new fences every twenty years.

A fifth possibility would be the development of the concept of *enough*. Only long memory can answer, for a given farm or locality, How much land is enough? How much work is enough? How much livestock and crop production is enough? How much power is enough?

A sixth possibility is that of local culture. Who could say what that would be? As members of a society based on the exploitation of its own temporariness, we probably should not venture a guess. But we can perhaps speak with a little competence of how it would begin. It would not be imported from critically approved cultures elsewhere. It would not come from watching certified classics on TV. It would begin in work and love. People at work in communities three generations old would know that their bodies renewed time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved, in the same shops, houses, and fields. That, of course, is a description of any kind of community dance. And such a dance is perhaps the best way we have to describe harmony.



F. BRITTON

where Governor Spotswood delighted to welcome
thousands of visitors each year. They admire
the colonial architecture, stroll the gardens, inspect
the old-fashioned ironworks, and enjoy the view
of the river and the surrounding hills.



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