

PLANET EARTH BE DAMNED!:

A PLEA FOR A RETURN TO COMMON SENSE

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Before I begin, I would like to express my profound gratitude for being invited to participate in this conversation. Here, I share some reflections, experiences, hopes and dreams, challenges and questions today with other kindred spirits --- equally concerned about regenerating our places, recovering our sense of places ... our commons, our senses ... our common sense.

I. ON HUBRIS AND HUMILITY

Even as I express my deep gratitude, I wish to explicitly acknowledge that I find this invitation to be exceedingly humbling. The humility I reiterate here is best understood in radical contrast to the increasingly disturbing and destructive hubris of THE EXPERTS.

Experts of every stripe ... Expert Educators, Expert Environmentalists, Environmental-Educators Globe-trotting through each and every continent, mapped and classified in their Global Manual for Saving Spaceship Earth.

With medicines for every disease attacking our "sick planet": 1. over-population (expertise decreeing there are too many "underdeveloped" people on this planet); 2. global warming; 3. growing ozone holes; 4. acid rain; 5. vanishing tropical rainforests, and others.

Thanks to all of these Experts, even six year olds can name the global problems that need Expert Solutions. And from grade school, every child is inculcated with ambitions for Professional Expertise. For therein lies social rank and status, power and privilege. With these, with education, the child can escape from the ordinariness of the ordinary life of common men and women. Of common communities.

Today, in this cyber-gathering, how do we avoid the hubris of professional expertise?

Today, how do we escape the temptation of the Educational Escape from Every Place on Earth?

Today, together in this "gathering," how do we come to stand under in order to understand and to practice that public virtue called humility ... that humility without which we cannot hope to recover or regenerate our commons ... our sense of place ... our common sense?

Once more, the Poet of Commons and Common Sense offers much in the way of a lifetime of practical experience ... of that virtue called Practical Wisdom which is nearly extinct in most places. Regenerating his tradition, Wendell Berry reminds us of the ruling folly of the educational and environmental experts of our millennium.

Our "poet of common sense" also directs our eyes and ears and noses in the direction of those humble peoples, neither expert, educated, nor literate, whose "dwelling" (reference to Orr's contrast to "resident") calls us to consider possibilities for our own recovery of place and common sense. Berry writes,

The question that must be addressed is not how to care for the planet, but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each of which is in some precious way different from all the others. Our understandable wish to preserve the planet must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence --- that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods. (Berry, 1990, p. 200)

Having underscored reduction, Berry answers the next practical question about how we can accomplish it. Without "overweening hope but with certainty nonetheless," he replies:

only love can do it. Only love can bring intelligence out of the institutions and organizations, where it aggrandizes itself, into the presence of the work that must be done. Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, 'the least of these my brethren.' Love is not, by its own desire, heroic. It is heroic only when compelled to be. It exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, and un-rewarded. The older love becomes, the more clearly it understands its involvement in partiality, imperfection, suffering, and mortality. Even so, it longs for incarnation. It can live no longer by thinking. And yet, to put on flesh and do the flesh's work, it must think. (Berry, 1990, p. 200)

While laboring to avoid the hubris of experts, I find myself doubly humbled today by the littleness of my own beginnings so far and the largeness of my own failings to engage in thinking that puts on flesh and does the fleshly work. Nourishing that love of place that is anonymous, humble, un-rewarded.

II. ON ESCAPING EDUCATION

I appreciate well that ancient wisdom which reminds me not to look a gift horse in the mouth. This includes the gift horse that afforded me here, yesterday and today, my medical, dental, and retirement plans every month.

The Education System. The College. The University.

Your "home"? My "home"?

We twist and distort ourselves, our language, our words when we call such spaces our home or our community.

Had I not studied Gandhi, Illich and Berry, the mockery of the words, "The Berea College Community," might well be lost on me.

Today, such words weigh heavy for me. The reality of the college, the university, the school, the classroom and the education they impart weigh heavier still.

These three bearers of common sense, Gandhi, Illich, and Berry, have ripped apart, torn for me the opacity that these institutions, like all modern institutions, create. Their common sense reveals to me the throwaway reality of plastic users who also spout "plastic words."

Speaking shamelessly of saving the planet's 6 billion with the knowledge stock of American think tanks and universities, Allan Goodman, President of CIES, speaks of "borderless knowledge in cyberspace."

I can only despair or smile as I hear such words about the Global Economy and the Global Classroom saving the 6 Billion of Planet Earth.

Why?

No longer can Berry be dismissed when he identifies four kinds of organizations and their role in dis-placing and uprooting people, young and old: schools, churches, governments and corporations. Focusing on the first of these and

the consequences for rooted, rural peoples, Berry writes: "We have had no school of our own for nearly thirty years. The school system takes our young people, prepares them for 'the world of tomorrow' --- which it does not expect to take place in any rural area --- and gives back 'expert' (that is, extremely generalized) ideas." (Berry, 1990, p. 199)

Berry's insights offer antidotes to Allen Goodman's and other champions of the Global Classroom preparing every member of the Global Village to enjoy the "fruits" of the Global Economy.

Unlike the Allen Goodmans of the academy, working in colleges and universities to save, redeem, or ransom, I place my hope not with academic or other committees, institutions, colleges, universities, or classrooms.

My hope lies with ordinary peoples ... and with their wit and courage (minus grants and institutional budgets), who look after their places; sharing with the young of their places, their commons ... their humor, friendship and common sense of commons.

III. ON CAMPUS/CLASSROOM vs. COMMONS/COMMON-SENSE

Berry's common sense reminds us of the love necessary "to put on flesh and to do the flesh's work." It is necessarily particular. And, it must think.

But this is far from that love, work, or thought celebrated or promoted in Hollywood. Far, too, is this love and this thinking from the university. From Academia. And, from the school.

In millions of classrooms, in campuses across the world, such love can only be noted by its absence. By the absence of the very conditions which can nourish it.

Why?

And, given the inordinate numbers of hours we spend in Campus or Classroom, the major on-going challenge of many years continues to be how to confront or overcome the workplace barriers to nourishing such love.

Love that is grounded. Enfleshed. Encarnated. Neither glamorous. Self-absorbed. Flighty. Nor Abstract. Down to earth. Resonant with and expressive of common sense.

To think, then, of nourishing this love, I cannot but embrace the challenge of nourishing common sense. But, can common sense be nourished in the absence of commons? Minus commons, can common sense be nourished in campus or classroom? What separates classrooms and campuses from the commons where the Berrys of the world engage in the good work born of common sense?

Like my students, I find it hard to see what differentiates the campus and its classrooms from the neon-strip that houses our WalMarts. Driving from one to the other --- an ever-lengthening expanse of posts, strips, and neon --- its parallel can be seen within the "information super-highway," an unending flow of indistinguishable, cold, bits, the bytes which similar to "indistinguishable morsels of population," regardless if pulsing or breathing, are residents of cold, un-feeling, un-loving space. Anti-theses of place, of senses, of soil.

How do we de-WalMartize our work as teachers, students, researchers? How do we join the humble work of humble and common people ... in the service of authentic community and in commons?

Once again, Berry answers with pointedness and clarity ...

In words and in deeds ...

Words of wisdom pertinent for us seeking to stand under, to understand and to discover common sense ... even in the campus classroom:

Change the standard ... make the standard that of community health rather than the career of the student. If

you make the standard the health of the community, that would change everything ... Once you raise that standard to the health of the community ... all the departmental walls fall down ...

There's a world of difference between that information to which we now presumably have access by way of computers, libraries and the great stockpiles of data, and that knowledge that people have in their bones by which they do good work and live good lives. Again, Berry's wisdom invites us to consider other possibilities for returning to common sense ... by way of a procession through time ... stemming the displacement of peoples and cultures:

Modern humans tend to believe that whatever is known can be recorded in books or on tapes or on computer discs and then again learned by those artificial means. But it is increasingly plain to me that the meaning, the cultural significance, even the practical value, of this sort of family procession across a landscape can be known but not told. These things, though they have a public value, do not have a public meaning; they are too specific to a particular small place and its history. This is exactly the tragedy in the modern displacement of people and cultures.

That such things can be known but not told can be shown by answering a simple question: Who knows the meaning, the cultural significance, and the practical value of this rural family's generational procession across its native landscape? The answer is not so simple as the question: No one person ever will know all the answer. My grandson certainly does not know it. And my son does not, though he has positioned himself to learn some of it, should he be so blessed.

I am the one who (to some extent) knows, though I know also that I cannot tell it to anyone living. I am in the middle now between my grandfather and my father, who are alive in my memory, and my son and my grandson, who are alive in my sight.

If my son, after thirty more years have passed, has the good pleasure of seeing his own child and grandchild in that procession, then he will know something like what I now know. This living procession through time in a place is the record by which such knowledge survives and is conveyed. When the procession ends, so does the knowledge. (Berry, 2000, pp.152-153)

Berry also reminds us of the vast difference between thinking about problems and having problems. Where experts are thinking about problems, the people who have the problems are usually absent, are not even well represented. Berry writes, "The only way out of this is for the teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist, to make common cause with a community. They must commit themselves to a community in such a way that they share the fate of that community --- participate in its losses and trials and grief and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions, so that they don't have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers. Then they'd begin to learn something. New knowledge would come from that, and it would be better than 'information.'"

In contrast to campuses and corporations ... little things and little people.

IV. LITTLE THINGS, LITTLE PEOPLE

Little people. Little things. These are what give me hope. Little people doing little things make a mighty ocean, I learned as a child.

As a grown up kid, I easily forgot that common truism. Intellectual environmentalism cast a vast shadow on my mind. If I could not fill up the ozone hole and make legislation at an important

Earth Summit, surely what I had to do could not be important. Luckily, I got weaned from that academic/intellectual arrogance. Hubris.

When I start to follow in the footsteps of little people, I find myself enjoying entirely new autonomy that is forsaken every time I stay plugged in. In this autonomy, the fruits of toil and sweat become food through the loving labor of community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives ... through the work of those who compost their food and shit. In these there are people who make real food ... who make soil ... who care about my intestines as they care about their places.

What also helps is knowing that most people on earth are little people. Ahead of me in the game. All I have to do is to humble myself enough to learn from them. To learn about making soil rather than making waste.

The "little people" show me, in hundreds of distinct and humble ways, their common sense. Free from hubris, they quietly and humbly go about their work regenerating commons, beginning with the soil beneath their feet.

In contrast, the experts, confined by their hubris ... of discourses, methodologies, reforms, and schemes, fail to sense what is common --- what is common sense.

For them, "to persons hooked on public utilities and garaged in furnished cubicles, commons and homes are barely imaginable. Bread is mere foodstuff, if not calories or roughage. To speak of friendship, religion, and joint suffering as a style of conviviality --- after soil has been poisoned and cemented over --- appears like academic dreaming to people randomly scattered in vehicles, offices, prisons, and hotels." (Illich et al., 1991)

Yet, from the humility of the "little people," I am humbled to see that which is below my feet.

"From soil we come, and to the soil we bequeath our excrements and remains." From these, I recognize that soil making is the most natural, most organic, most humble business on earth ... if you choose to learn from nature rather than from your neighborhood specialists on "waste management" --- members of the garbage bureaucracy.

These experts and managers fail to see what is common. Though recognizing that in almost every place on earth where civilization reaches, soil is lost. Though recognizing the desert sprawl, they fail to see, they fail to look beneath their own feet. Trapped within "the ecological discourse about planet earth, global hunger, and threats to life," their senselessness stops them from looking "down at the soil, humbly." (Illich et al. , 1991)

Their hubris appoints "complex subsystem, sector, resource, problem, or 'farm,'" where I am learning to see and smell and feel again --- earthy soil. May system, resource, and earth be damned!

In humility, then, and with Berry's love, my hope is to repair the damage done when "we were torn from the bonds of soil --- the connections that limited action, making practical virtue possible --- when modernization insulated us from plain dirt, from toil, flesh, soil, and grave." (Illich et al., 1991)

With the little people, fully alive at the grassroots, humbled before their little actions, I offer my "No!" to all that is abstract and global ... "No!" to earth, environment, and sustainability which wagers the opaque and technological, the expensive and expansive, for limited, simple, humble, and little local actions.

"Yes!" ... to the common sense born of soil.

My experience reminds me that soil making is one of the most meditative, relaxing, regenerating past-times in the modern context. It is the simplest way of slowing down. It demands slowing down.

Instead of making garbage, I seek to make soil. Instead of zipping to WalMart to get plastic bags-cum-state-of-the-art-leaf-blower to transport leaves to far away places, I will use my arms, legs and hands. Remaining decidedly low-tech, I hang on to a decade old handy dandy leaf rake ... while listening to the Fall sonata of leaves ... watched through all the seasons.

Gazing at the leaves crumbling into soil for the new season's crop, I derive comfort in knowing that most people on earth ... free of the "WalMart syndrome" and its addiction and needs, do exactly this.

In other words, one is not alone, but in terrifically good and humble company. Good companions ... those who turn their potato and onion peels into next season's crop, rather than give business to the hawler of garbage, the landfill pimp ... jangling the nerves of NIMBYS. Instead, in the serenity of daily life, joining in the song of the seasons ... rather than waste, they make soil.

From them, I am learning "to search below (my) feet" ... to find again my "grounding in both soil and virtue." Defining virtue Illich writes,

that shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor; we mean practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture that enhances the memories of a place. Traditionally found in labor, craft, dwelling and suffering, (this virtue is supported) by the particular soil these very actions have enriched with their traces. (Illich et al., 1991)

Virtue ... common sense ... these urge me to take care of my own shit ... metaphorically as well as non-metaphorically. Physically, with my own hands ... to do away with sewage ... to de-link my intestines from large-scale, opaque, centralized, expert-driven and managed, technologically complicated and therefore opaque technologies ... favoring instead tools that are convivial.

From the people at the grassroots, I have seen the common sense that begins with soil. The common sense and the soil which make possible the growth of commons. And virtue. From them, I learn that living is barely imaginable without community, without a commons, without a social fabric rooted in a place, a physical and cultural place ... their soil. In their humility, they show me that convivial living which thinks again of water and shit ... not as commodities or resources, but as soil and as commons. Shit and water and urine and food scraps ... the bearers of new relationships of people to each other, to our bodies, and to our places. This is their common sense.

V. REGENERATING OUR PLACES ... AT THE GRASSROOTS

Humbled, still, do I find myself as I find myself, again and again by the deeds of a man who shows us in the flesh, the art of living well in a place. His life and work make carnate his words on the printed page. Each of his measured words shines light on local pathways leading away from the highways of dis-placement and uprootedness; away from the "communication" of senses and sensuality lost ... like our minds, in cyberspace; away from the spaceways that make possible our heady escape to other planets, once we ruin the one inherited from our Ancient Ones.

Berry arouses within me old memories and new visions ... of actions rooted, of actions fully sensed, of actions in commons, of actions at the root, the grassroots ... the soil.

With Berry, I have learned from those that have not suffered dis-placement and uprooting. I am, with others and in humility, listening to those who still have commons and common sense.

My own search and pilgrimage has taken me beyond the boundaries of colleges and universities. To those who are not educated. To those not a,b,c literate. Those who, like Berry, know well the art of living well, by loving that exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, un-rewarded.

Recognizing how "primitive," how miniscule are my own and others' steps in living well in our own places ... of loving them, husbanding them ... dwelling in them ... regenerating them.

Recognizing the bewilderment of our time, recognizing our predicament ... absent place, absent commons. Hoping still for the possibility of regenerating places, commons, and common sense

My hope, grounded, sense-able, from the ground and up, is the hope of regenerating soil.

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people
we changing each other's despair
into hope?
You yourself must change it.
What would it feel like to know
your country was changing?
You yourself must change it. Adrienne Rich

The things we can change, without waiting for the world, the global economy, the country, the government, the corporations, the neighbors ... change.

What we put in our mouths...
Where we place what leaves from our orifices, our bodies, our selves..
What we consume / use /reuse /throw away/ waste.

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