

(2022 October 10) Beyond Good and Evil - On Wendell Berry's Brave New Book - Lueders (Vox Populi)

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A book by the celebrated author, poet, and farmer that takes on racism, the Civil War, and his life's work.

Wendell Berry was warned. I was among the people who warned him. He recounts the collective advice in the pages of the new book that prompted it, *The Need to Be Made Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice*, about race relations, the Civil War, and a whole bunch of other things that Berry has been writing about for decades.

"In conversations with friends peripheral to the making of this book over several years, I have received a number of warnings of the retribution that will surely follow any interest that I may show in understanding the Confederate soldiers, or any revelation of any sympathy that I may feel for any of them, for any reason," he writes just shy of the book's halfway point. He says that "now that I am old"—Berry turned 88 on August 5—his friends feel "that I am at risk of some dire breach of political etiquette by feebleness of mind or some fit of ill-advised candor, and they would like me not to stir up trouble for myself."

Too late. By this point in the book, Berry has described Confederate General Robert E. Lee as "one of the great tragic figures of our history," who "more prominently than anyone else . . . affirmed, obeyed, and suffered the need to defend his homeland and his people." He's also noted that General "Stonewall" Jackson "thought slavery immoral [and] never owned a slave." And he is just about to delve deeper into the complexity of the Confederate cause.

"But I wonder," Berry continues in response to his friends' concerns, "if they have considered well enough what they have asked of me, which amounts to a radical revision of my calling. They are not asking me for my most careful thoughts about what I have learned or experienced. They are asking me to lay aside my old effort to tell the truth, as it is given to me by my own knowledge and judgment, in order to take up another art, which is that of public relations."

While Berry says the reaction so far to *The Need to Be Whole*, out Oct. 4, as opposed to the blowback he got from early readers, has actually been mostly positive, the book is decidedly not an exercise in public relations. Berry decries slavery while arguing that the motivations of the South were not all malevolent, just as those of the North were not all noble. (To wit: Lincoln's 1862 admission: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery.") He posits that the term "slavery" is equally applicable to the life circumstance of some people today, including "highly paid professionals who cannot escape work they consider demeaning or destructive."

Berry stakes out these positions defiantly and with conviction, shrugging off the possibility of a hostile, maybe even legacy-damaging response. As he remarked when my wife, Linda, and I

visited Wendell and his wife, Tanya, on their Kentucky farm last fall, "It's too late for it to ruin my entire life." He gave Tanya credit for this witticism.

My own counsel to him at that time, having heard his reports of a hostile early reaction but not seen the book, was that white people like us don't get to say that slavery was not all bad. In an earlier letter, I also argued that it's hard not to consider Robert E. Lee a villain: "He may have fought out of love for his homeland but he also fought to keep slaves in the fields; it's hard for me to see how he, or really anyone who leads others to fight and kill, is heroic. But I will read what you have to say, and perhaps be persuaded."

I did and I have been, with the caveat that Berry never actually describes Lee as heroic; his argument is much more nuanced: "He was an imperfect human being something like me and something like his enemies then and now." It's a fair point, though one that takes a great deal of chutzpah to make.

At 528 pages, *The Need to Be Whole* is the longest of Berry's more than 50 books (aside from the Library of America's three-volume set of his collected work), and it ranks alongside *The Unsettling of America*, his seminal 1977 work on the destruction of the family farm and the rural communities that depended on them, as his most important. It is a brave book, one that brings new insight to the discussion of race in America as well as being an urgent appeal for recognizing each other as complex creatures, embodying both good and evil.

The Need to Be Whole elaborates on themes Berry explored in his 1970 book on race, *The Hidden Wound*. Both argue that racism has a damaging effect on both white people and black people, and that injustices to both races have a deeper cause. He likens the "decline of a small black community in Chicago" to "the decline of the now nearly all-white small towns in my rural county." If both these things are occurring, he says, "then the problem cannot be race prejudice, or only that, but a prejudice of another kind."

He counts Martin Luther King Jr. as an ally in this analysis, saying the civil rights leader's own impulse toward wholeness moved him "from concern for black people to concern for poor people to concern at last for all people, their land and culture." Berry also pulls in the perspectives of others, including writer Ernest J. Gaines, whom Berry knew well, and bell hooks, who visited him at his farm. And while making his definitive life statement on the issue of race, he also explores all of the other issues—including the importance of community, localism, and physical labor—that run constantly through his work. ("Tanya," he relates in the introduction to his 2017 essay collection, *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings*, "says my principal asset as a writer has been my knack for repeating myself.")

Berry has lived in Henry County, Kentucky, for almost all his life. It's where his father, John, was a small-town lawyer who helped create a price-support program for tobacco growers. His two children and their families live nearby. In 2011, daughter Mary Berry launched the Berry Center in New Castle, the county seat, to help promote his ideas and teach young farmers what they need to know to give it a go. A small staff runs the center and an adjacent bookstore. Wendell writes in a small shack on stilts overlooking the Kentucky River that he built more than fifty years ago

with help from others, as recounted in his essay "The Long-Legged House," part of a 1969 collection of the same name. (The recent flooding that ravaged eastern Kentucky "caused us no problem, Berry wrote me recently, in response to my inquiry. "Here the river raised considerably but stayed in its banks.")

I first met Berry in the fall of 2019, when I traveled from Wisconsin with a colleague to teach a seminar at the University of Louisville, not far from where the Berry's live. That enjoyable visit began an exchange of dozens of letters, some that could be fairly described as contentious, about politics, books, language, ideas, and ways of living. I consider Berry a friend, as he has always identified himself to me in his letters. At the end of my second visit last fall, he grasped my hand and said, "I've called you my friend and now I've made you my friend."

Wendell Berry, I know, has many such friends. I don't.

For all of his genuine dismay at the condition of the world, Berry is an undeniably happy person. He embraces others with his company, enjoying every moment of connection. When he laughs—say, over some anecdote that he has told a thousand times—his whole body shakes, from ankles to shoulders.

While Berry has often drawn controversy, it would be incorrect to say that he has courted it. He is just doggedly determined to stake out positions that he believes are right, even if they offend others. As *The Nation* examined in a 2019 retrospective on Berry, this includes his view that abortion takes a life (although he does not believe the government should make it illegal).

In my letters to Berry, I have argued, without his explicit agreement or dissent, that much of his work comes down to "the identification of error." He is forever pointing out what has gone wrong, and what must be done to fix it. I noted in one letter how, struck by this insight, I cracked open a copy of his 1992 book, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, more or less at random, and came across this line in the essay "Conservation and Local Economy": "We must give up . . . our superstitious conviction that we can contrive technological solutions to all our problems."

Berry has often mined the past with an eye toward identifying and correcting historical wrongs. In "A Native Hill," his 1968 essay about the land that he calls home, Berry writes:

"I am forever being crept up on and newly startled by the realization that my people established themselves here by killing or driving out the original possessors, by the awareness that people were once bought and sold here by my people, by the sense of the violence they have done to their own kind and to each other and to the earth, by the evidence of their persistent failure to serve either the place or their own community in it."

In *The Need to Be Whole*, Berry argues that it is not just black descendants of slaves who are entitled to reparations but also to Native Americans and poor rural whites who have been the victims of similar mistreatment. He even finds a reason to sympathize with the plight of their oppressors, saying "The ruling class of the South, by their prejudice against enslaved black people and against the 'degrading' work assigned to them, denied themselves the direct

experience of their land and the knowledge of its best use and care."

Berry, himself the descendant of slave owners, says slavery, while morally indefensible, might in its time have been "understood, and experienced by the white and black people involved, as less a merely legal and economic means of exploiting a captive labor force, and more an everyday human relationship." He dares to take this even further, saying a slave on a farm would exist not as an "abstraction of market value" but as "a known person [and] a member of the farm's community of humans and other creatures."

Berry is determined to present people on both sides of the Civil War, as neither all good nor all bad. He rejects the characterization of the Civil War, or any war, as a battle of good vs. evil. He blasts the assertion of historian Jon Meacham, in his book *The Soul of America*, that the Civil War "was only a chapter in the perennial contest between right and wrong in the nation's soul," as obviously false:

"People of some experience and self-knowledge know that the contest between right and wrong is perennial in the soul of every human, and that right and wrong cannot be geographically divided. People who are somewhat rational are apt to discern also that Southern racism is not categorically worse than Northern racism. During the Civil War, in fact, some people were living in the South who were opposed to slavery and secession, and some people were living in the North who sympathized with the South."

Why is Berry splitting these hairs? To be a contrarian, as usual? Well, yes, but mostly because he thinks that it is his job to reject the simplistic generalizations that allow northerners to dismiss the South as a haven for bigotry while ignoring their own contribution to the problem. He has long pushed back at what he sees as bigotry against Southern people and the agrarian way of life.

"Disparagements of farmers, of small towns, of anything identifiable as 'provincial' can be found everywhere: in comic strips, TV shows, newspaper editorials, literary magazines, and so on," Berry wrote in a 2002 essay, "The Prejudice Against Country People," published in *The Progressive*. After giving some examples of this disparagement, including a 1986 article in *The New Republic* called "The Idiocy of Rural Life," Berry steps back and says:

"Am I trying to argue that all small farmers are superior or that they are all good farmers or that they live the 'idyllic life'? I certainly am not. And that is my point. The sentimental stereotype is just as damaging as the negative one. The image of the farmer as the salt of the earth, independent son of the soil, and child of nature is a sort of lantern slide projected over the image of the farmer as simpleton, hick, or redneck. Both images serve to obliterate any concept of farming as an ancient, useful, honorable vocation, requiring admirable intelligence and skill, a complex local culture, great patience and endurance, and moral responsibilities of the gravest kind."

This is the essential wisdom of Wendell Berry: Things are complicated. Dividing the world into a simplistic dichotomy of good and evil, he cautions in *The Need to Be Whole*, "forbids actual thought or discourse about moral issues, as it forbids self-knowledge, humor, and forgiveness."

Indeed, the concept of forgiveness is central to Berry's book, as embodied in literary and historic examples. These include the mercy shown by Achilles to Priam, father of the slain Hector, in *The Iliad*. Not content with simply killing Hector for killing his best friend, Achilles vents his rage by dragging Hector's body through the streets of Troy until Priam kneels before him to beg for his son's remains. The greatest beneficiary of this kindness is not Priam but Achilles. "It is Priam who makes Achilles, his enemy, whole," Berry reflects.

This is the same mercy that Berry seeks for the soldiers of the Confederacy. Yes, the war and the reasons for it were shameful. But so was the war in Vietnam, where the "opprobrium" attached to the U.S. soldiers who fought it was equally unjust. "I cannot think of any good reason," Berry writes, "why right-thinking and peace-loving people cannot oppose the bad policies of one side of a bad war and yet regard with compassion and respect the young soldiers of both sides whose only lives were expended in suffering and death."

On the issue of war, Berry, a detester of absolutes, stakes out an absolutist position: War is never just, and it is always a bad idea. Even if the Civil War were "probably the only way" to stop slavery and reunite the nation, which he disputes, he would not condone it. The consequences in terms of ongoing resentments and prejudices, which Berry argues continue into the present day, have been too great.

Berry brings the same fierce iconoclasm to a range of other issues, always eager to take a poke at those caught up in the orthodoxies of the moment. He lampoons the "so-called liberals" who consider themselves as lovers of nature and protectors of the environment and yet have never objected to "the abandonment and ruin of rural America, or to the plunder and waste of natural resources." They object to burning fossil fuels because of climate change, but also "wish to be air-conditioned and overheated, overfed and underworked, and above all . . . driving their cars."

In his recent letter to me, Berry noted that the flooding in eastern Kentucky had been attributed, "over and over," to global warming, rather than the state-sanctioned surface mining that made the conditions for flooding worse. "Climate change is an irresistible convenience, for it can be blamed on nobody in particular, and this spares official Kentucky the burden of its complicity in the larger-scale ruin of the land of our poor state."

Berry sees the destruction of land as the greatest of evils, one that "cannot be corrected solely by power or politics or technology or money," concepts that are "as fragmented and scattered as ourselves. I believe that the correction must be love, and I mean the practical love-until-death of neighbors and country. Such love and nothing else could reverse the industrial 'process' of separating everything from everything. Such love, even before it accomplished very much, could make us whole and free."

Such is the cause to which Wendell Berry has devoted his life, and intends to keep doing so. While it is difficult not to conclude, given the realities of the human condition, that this will be his last big book, his sights remain set on the future, and on the prospect, however dim, of salvation. As he writes at one point:

"I suppose that, as long as life enough is in me, I will continue to oppose the great harms that have come to the land and people of this country, which of course includes the cities that have so much depended on it and so little cared for it. And I will continue to advocate, and to point out, better ways. If that requires repeating myself, as I often have done, so be it. But as I repeat myself, maybe I will continue to learn a little more and then a little more about what is wrong and what would be right."

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Author, poet, and farmer Wendell Berry on the banks of the Kentucky River. (Photo: Guy Mendes)