Home Economics

FOURTEEN ESSAYS BY

Wendell Berry

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tined to be wasted. Once the values of things refer only to their future usefulness, then an infinite withdrawal of value from the living present has begun. Nothing (and nobody) can then exist that is not theoretically replaceable by something (or somebody) more valuable. The country that we (or some of us) had thought to make our home becomes instead "a nation rich in natural resources"; the good bounty of the land begins its mechanical metamorphosis into junk, garbage, silt, poison, and other forms of "waste."

The inevitable result of such an economy is that no farm or any other usable property can safely be regarded by anyone as a home, no home is ultimately worthy of our loyalty, nothing is ultimately worth doing, and no place or task or person is worth a lifetime's devotion. "Waste," in such an economy, must eventually include several categories of humans—the unborn, the old, "disinvested" farmers, the unemployed, the "unemployable." Indeed, once our homeland, our source, is regarded as a resource, we are all sliding downward toward the ashheap or the dump.

Preserving Wildness

1985

The argument over the proper relation of humanity to nature is becoming, as the sixties used to say, polarized. And the result, as before, is bad talk on both sides. At one extreme are those who sound as if they are entirely in favor of nature; they assume that there is no necessary disjuncture or difference between the human estate and the estate of nature, that human good is in some simple way the same as natural good. They believe, at least in principle, that the biosphere is an egalitarian system, in which all creatures, including humans, are equal in value and have an equal right to live and flourish. These people tend to stand aloof from the issue of the proper human use of nature. Indeed, they have begun to use "stewardship" (meaning the responsible use of nature) as a term of denigration.

At the other extreme are the nature conquerors, who have no patience with an old-fashioned outdoor farm, let alone a wilderness. These people divide all reality into two parts: human good, which they define as profit, comfort, and security; and everything else, which they understand as a stockpile of "natural resources" or "raw materials," which will sooner or later be trans-

formed into human good. The aims of these militant tinkerers invariably manage to be at once unimpeachable and suspect. They wish earnestly, for example, to solve what they call "the problem of hunger"—if it can be done glamorously, comfortably, and profitably. They believe that the ability to do something is the reason to do it. According to a recent press release from the University of Illinois College of Agriculture, researchers there are looking forward to "food production without either farmers or farms." (This is perhaps the first explicit acknowledgment of the program that has been implicit in the work of the land-grant universities for forty or fifty years.)

If I had to choose, I would join the nature extremists against the technology extremists, but this choice seems poor, even assuming that it is possible. I would prefer to stay in the middle, not to avoid taking sides, but because I think the middle *is* a side, as well as the real location of the problem.

The middle, of course, is always rather roomy and bewildering territory, and so I should state plainly the assumptions that define the ground on which I intend to stand:

1. We live in a wilderness, in which we and our works occupy a tiny space and play a tiny part. We exist under its dispensation and by its tolerance.
2. This wilderness, the universe, is *somewhat* hospitable to us, but it is also absolutely dangerous to us (it is going to kill us, sooner or later), and we are absolutely dependent upon it.
3. That we depend upon what we are endangered by is a problem not solvable by "problem solving." It does not have what the nature romantic or the technocrat would regard as a solution. We are not going back to the Garden of Eden, nor are we going to manufacture an Industrial Paradise.
4. There does exist a possibility that we can live more or less in harmony with our native wilderness; I am betting my life that such a harmony is possible. But I do not believe that it can be achieved simply or easily or that it can ever be perfect, and I am certain that it can never be made, once and for all, but is the forever unfinished lifework of our species.
5. It is not possible (at least, not for very long) for humans to intend their own good specifically or exclusively. We cannot intend our good, in the long run, without intending the good of our place—which means, ultimately, the good of the world.
6. To use or not to use nature is not a choice that is available to us; we can live only at the expense of other lives. Our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use. This is not a choice that can be decided satisfactorily in principle or in theory; it is a choice intransigently impractical. That is, it must be worked out in local practice because, by necessity, the practice will vary somewhat from one locality to another. There is, thus, no *practical* way that we can intend the good of the world; practice can only be local.
7. If there is no escape from the human use of nature, then human good cannot be simply synonymous with natural good.

What these assumptions describe, of course, is the human predicament. It is a spiritual predicament, for it requires us to be properly humble and grateful; time and again, it asks us to be still and wait. But it is also a practical problem, for it requires us to *do* things.

In going to work on this problem it is a mistake to proceed on the basis of an assumed division or divisibility between nature and humanity, or wildness and domesticity. But it is also a mistake to assume that there is no difference between the natural and the human. If these things could be divided, our life would be far simpler and easier than it is, just as it would be if they were not different. Our problem, exactly, is that the human and the natural are indivisible, and yet are different.

The indivisibility of wildness and domesticity, even within the fabric of human life itself, is easy enough to demonstrate. Our bodily life, to begin at the nearest place, is half wild. Perhaps it is

more than half wild, for it is dependent upon reflexes, instincts, and appetites that we do not cause or intend and that we cannot, or had better not, stop. We live, partly, because we are domestic creatures—that is, we participate in our human economy to the extent that we "make a living"; we are able, with variable success, to discipline our appetites and instincts in order to produce this artifact, this human living. And yet it is equally true that we breathe and our hearts beat and we survive as a species because we are wild.

The same is true of a healthy human economy as it branches upward out of the soil. The topsoil, to the extent that it is fertile, is wild; it is a dark wilderness, ultimately unknowable, teeming with wildlife. A forest or a crop, no matter how intentionally husbanded by human foresters or farmers, will be found to be healthy precisely to the extent that it is wild—able to collaborate with earth, air, light, and water in the way common to plants before humans walked the earth. We know from experience that we can increase our domestic demands upon plants so far that we force them into kinds of failure that wild plants do not experience.

Breeders of domestic animals, likewise, know that, when a breeding program is too much governed by human intention, by economic considerations, or by fashion, uselessness is the result. Size or productivity, for instance, will be gained at the cost of health, vigor, or reproductive ability. In other words, so-called domestic animals must remain half wild, or more than half, because they are creatures of nature. Humans are intelligent enough to select for a type of creature; they are not intelligent enough to *make* a creature. Their efforts to make an entirely domestic animal, like their efforts to make an entirely domestic human, are doomed to failure because they do not have and undoubtedly are never going to have the full set of production standards for the making of creatures. From a human point of view, then, creature making is wild. The effort to make plants, animals, and humans ever more governable by human intentions is continuing with more determination and more violence than

ever, but that does not mean that it is nearer to success. It means only that we are increasing the violence and the magnitude of the expectable reactions.

To be divided against nature, against wildness, then, is a human disaster because it is to be divided against ourselves. It confines our identity as creatures entirely within the bounds of our own understanding, which is invariably a mistake because it is invariably reductive. It reduces our largeness, our mystery, to a petty and sickly comprehensibility.

But to say that we are not divided and not dividable from nature is not to say that there is no difference between us and the other creatures. Human nature partakes of nature, participates in it, is dependent on it, and yet is different from it. We feel the difference as discomfort or difficulty or danger. Nature is not easy to live with. It is hard to have rain on your cut hay, or floodwater over your cropland, or coyotes in your sheep; it is hard when nature does not respect your intentions, and she never does exactly respect them. Moreover, such problems belong to all of us, to the human lot. Humans who do not experience them are exempt only because they are paying (or underpaying) other humans such as farmers to deal with nature on their behalf. Further, it is not just agriculture-dependent humanity that has had to put up with natural dangers and frustrations; these have been the lot of hunting and gathering societies also, and the wild creatures do not always live comfortably or easily with nature either.

But humans differ most from other creatures in the extent to which they must be *made* what they are—that is, in the extent to which they are artifacts of their culture. It is true that what we might as well call culture does go into the making of some birds and animals, but this teaching is so much less than the teaching that makes a human as to be almost a different thing. To take a creature who is biologically a human and to make him or her fully human is a task that requires many years (some of us sometimes fear that it requires more than a lifetime), and this long effort of human making is necessary, I think, because of our

power. In the hierarchy of power among the earth's creatures, we are at the top, and we have been growing stronger for a long time. We are now, to ourselves, incomprehensibly powerful, capable of doing more damage than floods, storms, volcanoes, and earthquakes. And so it is more important than ever that we should have cultures capable of making us into humans—creatures capable of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, and the other virtues. For our history reveals that, stripped of the restraints, disciplines, and ameliorations of culture, humans are not "natural," not "thinking animals" or "naked apes," but monsters—indiscriminate and insatiable killers and destroyers. We differ from other creatures, partly, in our susceptibility to monstrosity. It is perhaps for this reason that, in the wake of the great wars of our century, we have seen poets such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and David Jones making an effort to reweave the tattered garment of culture and to reestablish the cultural tasks, which are, as Pound put it, "To know the histories / to know good from evil / And know whom to trust." And we see, if we follow Pound a little further, that the recovery of culture involves, leads to, or is the recovery of nature:

> the trees rise
> and there is a wide sward between them
> . . . myrrh and olibanum on the altar stone
> giving perfume,
> and where was nothing
> now is furry assemblage
> and in the boughs now are voices . . .

In the recovery of culture *and* nature is the knowledge of how to farm well, how to preserve, harvest, and replenish the forests, how to make, build, and use, return and restore. In this *double* recovery, which is the recovery of our humanity, is the hope that the domestic and the wild can exist together in lasting harmony.

This doubleness of allegiance and responsibility, difficult as it always is, confusing as it sometimes is, apparently is inescapable.

A culture that does not measure itself by nature, by an understanding of its debts to nature, becomes destructive of nature and thus of itself. A culture that does not measure itself by its own best work and the best work of other cultures (the determination of which is its unending task) becomes destructive of itself and thus of nature.

Harmony is one phase, the good phase, of the inescapable dialogue between culture and nature. In this phase, humans consciously and conscientiously ask of their work: Is this good for us? Is this good for our place? And the questioning and answering in this phase is minutely particular: It can occur only with reference to particular artifacts, events, places, ecosystems, and neighborhoods. When the cultural side of the dialogue becomes too theoretical or abstract, the other phase, the bad one, begins. Then the conscious, responsible questions are not asked; acts begin to be committed and things to be made on their own terms for their own sakes, culture deteriorates, and nature retaliates.

The awareness that we are slowly growing into now is that the earthly wildness that we are so complexly dependent upon is at our mercy. It has become, in a sense, our artifact because it can only survive by a human understanding and forbearance that we now must make. The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity.

To me, this means simply that we are not safe in assuming that we can preserve wildness by making wilderness preserves. Those of us who see that wildness and wilderness need to be preserved are going to have to understand the dependence of these things upon our domestic economy and our domestic behavior. If we do not have an economy capable of valuing in particular terms the durable good of localities and communities, then we are not going to be able to preserve anything. We are going to have to see that, if we want our forests to last, then we must make wood products that last, for our forests are more threatened by shoddy workmanship than by clear-cutting or by fire. Good workman-

ship—that is, careful, considerate, and loving work—requires us to think considerately of the whole process, natural and cultural, involved in the making of wooden artifacts, because the good worker does not share the industrial contempt for "raw material." The good worker loves the board before it becomes a table, loves the tree before it yields the board, loves the forest before it gives up the tree. The good worker understands that a badly made artifact is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source. We could say, then, that good forestry begins with the respectful husbanding of the forest that we call stewardship and ends with well-made tables and chairs and houses, just as good agriculture begins with stewardship of the fields and ends with good meals.

In other words, conservation is going to prove increasingly futile and increasingly meaningless if its proscriptions are not answered positively by an economy that rewards and enforces good use. I would call this a loving economy, for it would strive to place a proper value on all the materials of the world, in all their metamorphoses from soil and water, air and light to the finished goods of our towns and households, and I think that the only effective motive for this would be a particularizing love for local things, rising out of local knowledge and local allegiance.

Our present economy, by contrast, does not account for affection at all, which is to say that it does not account for value. It is simply a description of the career of money as it preys upon both nature and human society. Apparently because our age is so manifestly unconcerned for the life of the spirit, many people conclude that it places an undue value on material things. But that cannot be so, for people who valued material things would take care of them and would care for the sources of them. We could argue that an age that *properly* valued and cared for material things would be an age properly spiritual. In my part of the country, the Shakers, "unworldly" as they were, were the true materialists, for they truly valued materials. And they valued them in the only way that such things *can* be valued in practice:

by good workmanship, both elegant and sound. The so-called materialism of our own time is, by contrast, at once indifferent to spiritual concerns and insatiably destructive of the material world. And I would call our economy, not materialistic, but abstract, intent upon the subversion of both spirit and matter by abstractions of value and of power. In such an economy, it is impossible to value anything that one *has*. What one has (house or job, spouse or car) is only valuable insofar as it can be exchanged for what one believes that one wants—a limitless economic process based upon boundless dissatisfaction.

Now that the practical processes of industrial civilization have become so threatening to humanity and to nature, it is easy for us, or for some of us, to see that practicality needs to be made subject to spiritual values and spiritual measures. But we must not forget that it is also necessary for spirituality to be responsive to practical questions. For human beings the spiritual and the practical are, and should be, inseparable. Alone, practicality becomes dangerous; spirituality, alone, becomes feeble and pointless. Alone, either becomes dull. Each is the other's discipline, in a sense, and in good work the two are joined.

"The dignity of toil is undermined when its necessity is gone," Kathleen Raine says, and she is right. It is an insight that we dare not ignore, and I would emphasize that it applies to *all* toil. What is not needed is frivolous. Everything depends on our right relation to necessity—and therefore on our right definition of necessity. In defining our necessity, we must be careful to discount the subsidies, the unrepaid borrowings, from nature that have so far sustained industrial civilization: the "cheap" fossil fuels and ores; the forests that have been cut down and not replanted; the virgin soils of much of the world, whose fertility has not been replenished.

And so, though I am trying to unspecialize the idea and the job of preserving wildness, I am not against wilderness preservation. I am only pointing out, as the Reagan administration has done,

that the wildernesses we are trying to preserve are standing squarely in the way of our present economy, and that the wildernesses cannot survive if our economy does not change.

The reason to preserve wilderness is that we need it. We need wilderness of all kinds, large and small, public and private. We need to go now and again into places where our work is disallowed, where our hopes and plans have no standing. We need to come into the presence of the unqualified and mysterious formality of Creation. And I would agree with Edward Abbey that we need as well some tracts of what he calls "absolute wilderness," which "through general agreement none of us enters at all."

We need wilderness also because wildness—nature—is one of our indispensable studies. We need to understand it as our source and preserver, as an essential measure of our history and behavior, and as the ultimate definer of our possibilities. There are, I think, three questions that must be asked with respect to a human economy in any given place:

1. What is here?
2. What will nature permit us to do here?
3. What will nature help us to do here?

The second and third questions are obviously the ones that would define agendas of practical research and of work. If we do not work with and within natural tolerances, then we will not be permitted to work for long. It is plain enough, for example, that if we use soil fertility faster than nature can replenish it, we are proposing an end that we do not desire. And to ignore the possibility of help from nature makes farming, for example, too expensive for farmers—as we are seeing. It may make life too expensive for humans.

But the second and third questions are ruled by the first. They cannot be answered—they cannot intelligently be asked—until the first has been answered. And yet the first question has not been answered, or asked, so far as I know, in the whole history of the American economy. All the great changes, from the Indian wars and the opening of agricultural frontiers to the inauguration of genetic engineering, have been made without a backward look and in ignorance of whereabouts. Our response to the forest and the prairie that covered our present fields was to get them out of the way as soon as possible. And the obstructive human populations of Indians and "inefficient" or small farmers have been dealt with in the same spirit. We have never known what we were doing because we have never known what we were *un*doing. We cannot know what we are doing until we know what nature would be doing if we were doing nothing. And that is why we need small native wildernesses widely dispersed over the countryside as well as large ones in spectacular places.

However, to say that wilderness and wildness are indispensable to us, indivisible from us, is not to say that we can find sufficient standards for our life and work in nature. To suggest that, for humans, there is a simple equation between "natural" and "good" is to fall prey immediately to the cynics who love to point out that, after all, "everything is natural." They are, of course, correct. Nature provides bountifully for her children, but, as we would now say, she is also extremely permissive. If her children want to destroy one another entirely or to commit suicide, that is all right with her. There is nothing, after all, more natural than the extinction of species; the extinction of *all* species, we must assume, would also be perfectly natural.

Clearly, if we want to argue for the existence of the world as we know it, we will have to find some way of qualifying and supplementing this relentless criterion of "natural." Perhaps we can do so only by a reaffirmation of a lesser kind of naturalness—that of self-interest. Certainly human self-interest has much wickedness to answer for, and we are living in just fear of it; nevertheless, we must take care not to condemn it absolutely. After all, we value this passing work of nature that we call "the natural world," with its graceful plenty of animals and plants, precisely because *we* need it and love it and want it for a home.

We are creatures obviously subordinate to nature, dependent upon a wild world that we did not make. And yet we are joined

to that larger nature by our own nature, a part of which is our self-interest. A common complaint nowadays is that humans think the world is "anthropocentric," or human-centered. I understand the complaint; the assumptions of so-called anthropocentrism often result in gross and dangerous insubordination. And yet I don't know how the human species can avoid some version of self-centeredness; I don't know how any species can. An earthworm, I think, is living in an earthworm-centered world; the thrush who eats the earthworm is living in a thrush-centered world; the hawk who eats the thrush is living in a hawk-centered world. Each creature, that is, does what is necessary in its own behalf, and is domestic in its own *domus* or home.

Humans differ from earthworms, thrushes, and hawks in their capacity to do more—in modern times, a great deal more—in their own behalf than is necessary. Moreover, the vast majority of humans in the industrial nations are guilty of this extravagance. One of the oldest human arguments is over the question of how much is necessary. How much must humans do in their own behalf in order to be fully human? The number and variety of the answers ought to notify us that we never have known for sure, and yet we have the disquieting suspicion that, almost always, the honest answer has been "less."

We have no way to work at this question, it seems to me, except by perceiving that, in order to have the world, we must share it, both with each other and with other creatures, which is immediately complicated by the further perception that, in order to live in the world, we must use it somewhat at the expense of other creatures. We must acknowledge both the centrality and the limits of our self-interest. One can hardly imagine a tougher situation.

But in the recognition of the difficulty of our situation is a kind of relief, for it makes us give up the hope that a solution can be found in a simple preference for humanity over nature or nature over humanity. The only solutions we have ahead of us will need

to be worked for and worked out. They will have to be practical solutions, resulting in good local practice. There is work to do that can be done.

As we undertake this work, perhaps the greatest immediate danger lies in our dislike of ourselves as a species. This is an understandable dislike—we are justly afraid of ourselves—but we are nevertheless obliged to think and act out of a proper self-interest and a genuine self-respect as human beings. Otherwise, we will allow our dislike and fear of ourselves to justify further abuses of one another and the world. We must come to terms with the fact that it is not natural to be disloyal to one's own kind.

For these reasons, there is great danger in the perception that "there are too many people," whatever truth may be in it, for this is a premise from which it is too likely that somebody, sooner or later, will proceed to a determination of *who* are the surplus. If we conclude that there are too many, it is hard to avoid the further conclusion that there are some we do not need. But how many do we need, and which ones? Which ones, now apparently unnecessary, may turn out later to be indispensable? We do not know; it is a part of our mystery, our wildness, that we do not know.

I would argue that, at least for us in the United States, the conclusion that "there are too many people" is premature, not because I know that there are *not* too many people, but because I do not think we are prepared to come to such a conclusion. I grant that questions about population size need to be asked, but they are not the *first* questions that need to be asked.

The "population problem," initially, should be examined as a problem, not of quantity, but of pattern. Before we conclude that we have too many people, we must ask if we have people who are misused, people who are misplaced, or people who are abusing the places they have. The facts of most immediate importance may be, not how many we are, but where we are and what we are doing. At any rate, the attempt to solve our problems by reducing

our numbers may be a distraction from the overriding population statistic of our time: that *one* human with a nuclear bomb and the will to use it is 100 percent too many. I would argue that it is not human fecundity that is overcrowding the world so much as technological multipliers of the power of individual humans. The worst disease of the world now is probably the ideology of technological heroism, according to which more and more people willingly cause large-scale effects that they do not foresee and that they cannot control. This is the ideology of the professional class of the industrial nations—a class whose allegiance to communities and places has been dissolved by their economic motives and by their educations. These are people who will go anywhere and jeopardize anything in order to assure the success of their careers.

We may or may not have room for more people, but it is certain that we do not have more room for technological heroics. We do not need any more thousand-dollar solutions to ten-dollar problems or million-dollar solutions to thousand-dollar problems—or multibillion-dollar solutions where there was never a problem at all. We have no way to compute the inhabitability of our places; we cannot weigh or measure the pleasures we take in them; we cannot say how many dollars domestic tranquillity is worth. And yet we must now learn to bear in mind the memory of communities destroyed, disfigured, or made desolate by technological events, as well as the memory of families dispossessed, displaced, and impoverished by "labor-saving" machines. The issue of human obsolescence may be more urgent for us now than the issue of human population.

The population issue thus leads directly to the issue of proportion and scale. What is the proper amount of power for a human to use? What are the proper limits of human enterprise? How may these proprieties be determined? Such questions may seem inordinately difficult, but that is because we have gone too long without asking them. One of the fundamental assumptions of

industrial economics has been that such questions are outmoded and that we need never ask them again. The failure of that assumption now requires us to reconsider the claims of wildness and to renew our understanding of the old ideas of propriety and harmony.

When we propose that humans should learn to behave properly with respect to nature so as to place their domestic economy harmoniously upon and within the sustaining and surrounding wilderness, then we make possible a sort of landscape criticism. Then we can see that it is not primarily the number of people inhabiting a landscape that determines the propriety of the ratio and the relation between human domesticity and wildness, but it is the way the people divide the landscape and use it. We can see that it is the landscape of monoculture in which both nature and humanity are most at risk. We feel the human fragility of the huge one-class housing development, just as we feel the natural fragility of the huge one-crop field.

Looking at the monocultures of industrial civilization, we yearn with a kind of homesickness for the humanness and the naturalness of a highly diversified, multipurpose landscape, democratically divided, with many margins. The margins are of the utmost importance. They are the divisions between holdings, as well as between kinds of work and kinds of land. These margins—lanes, streamsides, wooded fencerows, and the like—are always freeholds of wildness, where limits are set on human intention. Such places are hospitable to the wild lives of plants and animals and to the wild play of human children. They enact, within the bounds of human domesticity itself, a human courtesy toward the wild that is one of the best safeguards of designated tracts of true wilderness. This is the landscape of harmony, safer far for life of all kinds than the landscape of monoculture. And we should not neglect to notice that, whereas the monocultural landscape is totalitarian in tendency, the landscape of harmony is democratic and free.