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The Culture of Agriculture

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On July 1, 1974 Wendell Berry spoke at the "Agriculture for a Small Planet" symposium in Spokane, which was one of a series of environmental conferences hosted as part of Expo 74. Wendell's speech that day, and his subsequent letter to members of the symposium staff, inspired the Tilth movement in the Pacific Northwest.

*Wendell had been invited to represent the "Labor Intensive Micro-Systems Viewpoint" on the panel and he was introduced by the moderator, Bob Stilger. Below is a transcript of Wendell's speech, followed by questions and answers. They were reprinted by permission of the author in the March and April, 1976 issues of "The Tilth Newsletter." It's significant to note that Wendell's talk, written in longhand on yellow legal pad, was the nucleus for his book, *The Unsettling of America*, published in 1977.*

When Bob first asked me to come out here I said I wouldn't have time to write a speech, but I largely underestimated the travel time between Kentucky and Spokane. The speech is not filled out. It sort of gives the structure of my thinking about the problems that I've observed in agriculture.

I was asked to talk about "Labor Intensive Micro-Systems Agriculture." That's not my language, and it's not the sort of language I wish to use. It's the way people speak when they don't want to be understood by most people. I'm not sure what to make of these particular phrases, but they seem to suggest a very methodological or technological approach to agriculture. Part of my purpose here is to suggest that any such approach will necessarily be too simple.

I should perhaps say something about my qualifications. I'm not a farm expert and I wasn't educated in an agricultural college. I do come from a farm community where my people have farmed for five or six generations before me and where I farm. I heard, from my father and others, a concern for what happens to farms and I want to speak mainly out of my experience.

In my boyhood, Henry County, Kentucky was not just a rural county, as it still is. It was almost entirely a farming county. The farms were generally small. They were farmed by families who lived not only upon them, but within and from them. These families grew gardens. They produced their own meat, milk and eggs. They were highly diversified. The main money crop was tobacco. But the farmers also grew corn, wheat, barley, and oats; sorghum and hay for forage. Cattle, hogs and sheep were all characteristically raised in association on the same farms. There were small dairies, the milking more often than not done by hand. Those were the farm products that might have been considered major. But there were also minor products, and one of the most important characteristics of that old economy was the existence of markets for those minor products.

In those days a farm family could easily market its surplus of cream, eggs, old hens, and frying chickens. The major motive power for field work was still furnished by horses and mules. There was still a prevalent pride in workmanship, and thrift was still a social ideal. The pride of most people was in their homes, and their homes looked like it.

This was by no means a perfect society. Its people had often been violent and wasteful in their use

of the land and of each other. Its present ills had already taken root in it. But I have spoken of its agricultural economy of a generation ago to suggest that there were also good qualities indigenous to it that might have been cultivated and built upon.

That they were not cultivated and built upon-that they were repudiated as the stuff of a hopelessly outmoded, unscientific way of life-is a tragic error on the part of the people themselves; and it is the work of monstrous ignorance and irresponsibility on the part of the experts and politicians who have prescribed, encouraged and applauded the disintegration of such farming communities all over the country into our allegedly miraculous "modern American agriculture."

In the decades since World War II the farms of Henry County have become increasingly mechanized. Though they are still comparatively diversified, they are less diversified than they used to be. The holdings are larger, the owners are fewer. The land is falling more and more into the hands of speculators and professional people from the cities who-in spite of all the scientific agricultural miracles-still have much more money than farmers. There are not nearly enough people on the farms to maintain them properly, and they are for the most part visibly deteriorating. The number of part-time farmers and ex-farmers increases every year. Our harvests depend more and more upon the labor of old men and little boys. The farm people live less and less upon their own produce, more and more from the grocery stores. The best of them are more worried about money and more overworked than ever before. Among the people as a whole, the focus of interest has largely shifted from the household to the automobile; the ideals of workmanship and thrift have been replaced by the goals of leisure, comfort and entertainment-for, as my friend, Maurice Telleen says, "this nation has created the world's first broad-based hedonism."

And nowhere that I know is there a market for a hen or a bucket of cream or a few dozen eggs. Those markets were done away with in the name of sanitation-but to the enormous enrichment of the large producers. Future historians will no doubt remark upon the inevitable association, with us, between sanitation and filthy lucre. It is, of course, one of the miracles of science that the germs that used to be in our food have been replaced by poisons.

In all of this few people whose testimony would have mattered have seen the connection between "modernization" of agricultural techniques and the disintegration of the culture and the communities of farming. What we have called agricultural progress has, in fact, involved the forcible displacement of millions of people.

I remember, during the fifties, the outrage with which certain of our leaders spoke for the force removal of the populations of villages in communist countries. I also remember that at that same time, in Washington, the word on farming was "Get big or get out"-a policy that is still in effect. The only difference here is in the method: the force used by the communists was military; with us it has been economic, a "free" market in which the freest were the richest. The attitudes were equally cruel, and I believe that in the long run the results will be equally damaging-not just to the concerns and values of the human spirit, but to the practical possibilities of survival.

And so those who could not get big got out-not just in my community but in farm communities all over the country. But bigness is a most amorphous and unstable category. As a social or economic goal it is totalitarian; it establishes an inevitable tendency toward the tyrannical one that will be the biggest of all. Many who got big to stay in are now being driven out by those who are still bigger. The aim of bigness implies not one social or cultural aim that is not noxious. Its influence on us may already have been disastrous, and we have not yet seen the worst.

And this community-killing agriculture, with its monomania of bigness, is not primarily the work of farmers, though it has burgeoned upon their weaknesses. It is the work of the institutions of agriculture: the experts and the agri-businessmen, who have promoted so-called efficiency at the expense of community, and quantity at the expense of quality.

In 1973 1,000 Kentucky dairies went out of business. They were the victims of policies by which we imported dairy products to compete with our own, and exported so much grain as to cause a drastic rise in the price of feed. Typically, an agricultural expert at the University of Kentucky, my colleague, was willing to applaud the failure of 1,000 dairymen, whose cause he supposedly being

paid-with their money-to serve. They were inefficient producers, he concluded, who needed to be eliminated.

He did not say-indeed, there was no indication that he had even considered-what might be the limits of his criterion or his logic. Does he propose to applaud this same process year after year until "biggest" and "most efficient" become synonymous with "only"? This sort of brainlessness is invariably justified by pointing to the enormous productivity of American agriculture. But any abundance, in any amount, is illusory if it does not safeguard its producers-and in American agriculture abundance has tended to destroy its producers.

Along with the rest of society, the established agriculture has shifted its emphasis-even its interest-from quality to quantity. And along with the rest of society it has failed to see that, in the long run, quantity is inseparable from quality. To pursue quantity alone is to destroy those disciplines in the producers that are the only assurance of quantity. The preserver of abundance is excellence.

What are the results of such thinking? The results are the drastic decline in farm population and political strength; the growth of a vast, uprooted, dependent and unhappy urban population. (Our rural and urban problems have largely caused each other.) The result is an unimaginable waste of land, of energy, of fertility, of human beings. The result is that the life of the land, which in its native processes is infinite, has been made totally dependent upon the finite, scarce and expensive products of industry. The result is the disuse of so-called marginal lands, potentially productive, but dependent upon intensive human care and long-term familiarity and affection. The result is the virtual destruction of the farm culture without which farming, in any but the exploitive and extractive sense, is impossible.

My point is that food is a cultural, not a technological, product. A culture is not a collection of relics and ornaments, but a practical necessity, and its destruction invokes calamity. A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, and aspiration. It would reveal the human necessities and the human limits. It would clarify our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It would assure that the necessary restraints be observed, that the necessary work be done, and that it be done well. A healthy farm culture can only be based upon familiarity; it can only grow among a people soundly established upon the land; it would nourish and protect a human intelligence of the land that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace. The growth of such a culture was once a strong possibility in the farm communities of this country. We now have only the sad remnants of those communities. If we allow another generation to pass without doing what is necessary to enhance and embolden that possibility, we will lose it altogether. And then we will not only invoke calamity-we will deserve it.

Several years ago I argued with a friend of mine that we might make money by going ahead and marketing some inferior lambs. My friend thought for a minute, and then he said, "I'm in the business of producing good lambs, and I'm not going to sell any other kind." He also said that he kept the weeds out of his crops for the same reason as he washed his face. Surely no one would question that the human race has survived by that attitude. It still survives by that attitude, though now it can hardly be said to know it, much less acknowledge it.

But this attitude does not come from technique or technology. It does not come from education; in more than two decades in universities I have rarely seen it. It does not even come from principle. It comes from a passion that is culturally prepared-a passion for excellence and order that is handed down to young people by older people whom they respect and love. When we destroy the possibility of that succession we will have gone far toward destroying ourselves.

Farming, A Dialogue

Below is a transcript of the dialogue that followed the speakers' presentations. The participants were Bob Stilger, moderator, Herbert Waters, President of the American Freedom from Hunger Foundation, and Wendell Berry, with questions from the audience.

MODERATOR: Mr Waters, is your perspective in terms of the need to combat world hunger inconsistent with the methodology that Wendell Berry has suggested?

MR WATERS: I don't think so. I think one of the points I was trying to make is that no simple answer is going to solve the problem. What I did try to make clear is that without concern for the people who produce food, you are not going to get adequate production. We are talking about social systems as well as we are talking about technological advancement in agriculture.

MR BERRY: I agree with Mr Waters. There is no contradiction, fundamental or otherwise, between his aims and mine. Or there need not be. I'm saying that there's not only the plow, there's the head of the man who runs the plow. It's a question of what the framework of the intelligence is. If it's the machine, then damage happens. If it's the place that the machine is being used on, then there is the possibility of a disciplined and controlled and benign use.

I went to a farm machinery show several years ago and noticed that one of the plows that was on display was called a "sod blaster." We've been blasting sod in this country for generations now, and that's the mentality that is machine-oriented. It is the mentality that plows out the waterways because it is easier to do that than it is to raise the plow. I was traveling in Iowa and Pennsylvania this spring and I was alarmed at the way the Secretary of Agriculture's plea for more production had been obeyed. Lands that ought to have been left in permanent pasture had been plowed, and they plowed straight across the waterways and clear through the fields out to the road. You can't separate that loss from the mentality that produced it, is what I'm saying.

I also met the most prosperous family farmer that I'd ever run into who owned 175 acres of not the best Iowa farmland, and 50 acres of it he had in permanent pasture. I asked him what he thought of the Secretary's plea for more production and he said that he felt the smart farmers always found out what the Secretary of Agriculture wanted to do and then didn't do it. He was one of the ones who was told to get big or get out and he took his wife to Spain last year on a holiday...that's on 175 acres. And when I asked him about his methods, he justified them because he said that the other methods polluted our rivers and streams. I had a great impulse to hug him.

AUDIENCE: I agree with what Mr Berry said earlier about the disappearance of the family farm, and I don't have an answer to the problem....In the United States one farmer feeds about fifty people. Isn't this what we are attempting to do to solve the immediate problem-feed more people with our farming technology?

MR BERRY: The goal is to feed more people, not fewer people. There is an old adage that has already been quoted about putting all your eggs in one basket. If I were one of those fifty people who was being fed by only one farmer, I'd be more worried than if there were four or five-or ten. Suppose the one farmer dies?

Two and a half percent of the population is feeding all the rest. That is very small. And as far as I can see, nobody is worrying about where the cutoff point is. There is always a bottom half. We are always concerned about eliminating the bottom half because we say they're inefficient. I think that our doctrine of efficiency is suspect anyway because it only applies to major quantities. We waste stuff at our place all the time because we can't sell it. It's too little to sell. You can't give it away unless you cook it for somebody.

How small do you let the percentage of farmers get before you are in danger? We have no alternative energy source on the farm now. When one farmer's feeding fifty people he is absolutely dependent on petroleum. When the economy shifts to reflect the realities of energy, it may be too expensive to produce some of this food; certainly at current prices.

AUDIENCE: My family was from Tennessee and they farmed the soil instead of mining it....I wonder what the possibilities are of reversing the trend to that agribusiness which has no concern whatever for the future of the soils.

MR BERRY: I suppose it could be done. There's plenty of land and agricultural potential now in the hands of the people that are playing tax games with it. That ought to be stopped. And it can be stopped. You can have tax breaks for ordinary people, and they ought to be given some.

I don't know about other sections of the country, but in my section of the country people are

working themselves to death on the farms. And I tell you, some of these overcapitalized hill farms in my part of the country are going to damage the soil more than any agriculture that's ever existed.

You get two or three hundred thousand dollars in debt on 500 acres of steep land and put it all in Holstein cows-great, big, heavy beasts that all congregate and walk the same paths twice a day to be milked, and they're trampling it off into the hollows. And people are failing in those places, too.

Butz is now saying that the concept of the individual ownership of land is passé. What you want to do is pay interest on it all your life. Inheritance taxes could be lightened up. We need to make a distinction between a fortune and a livelihood.

MODERATOR: I noticed in the audience some grain growers from around here, some agribusiness people and equipment manufacturers. I'd like to know if any of you have comments or questions to raise about what has been said?

AUDIENCE: I'm one of those broke family farmers and now I'm involved in a corporate farm....In the business I'm in today, we haven't got the time to fuss over that back corner. We are after high volume production at a-let's use the word "cheap"-figure because farming has been a cheap business since I've been in it. We are in the business of developing new land, and I'd say that land development is not compatible with ecology because we will go out and break out some desert and the next thing you know, the wind blows and the sand is down the road someplace due to that fact that we don't know enough about how to farm it.

MR BERRY: In plains or flat lands, the big farming methods may work. I think their working may be illusory in the long run, but they do all right. In my part of the country we have some ridge land and some river bottom land which is not subject to erosion. But in general erosion is built into our agricultural economy. It's inescapable.

I mentioned marginal land in my remarks: I own fifty acres of marginal land. I own fifty acres of land that was written off, written clear out of consideration, by the agricultural establishment. I've got eight acres of pasture that's as good as anybody's. I just cut the bushes off of it winter before last. I didn't bulldoze them off; I cut them off with a chain saw. The productivity of that land is tremendous. It responds very quickly and bountifully to good treatment, even after four or five generations of abuse. The grazing capacity of that land is about a head to an acre. You can't maintain that in big units.

The way you maintain it is to break it into small pastures, and get your stock off of it before they begin to wear paths up and down the hillsides and before they overgraze it. If you permit it to be overgrazed, it's ruined. If you permit it to erode, it's ruined. It calls for the kind of attention that will bring a man out with an axe to cut a thorn bush and throw it across the path when the stock are coming down the hill in the same place all the time. That land can be farmed and it can be amazingly productive.

The land I have is about what they have in Tuscany. The land of Tuscany has had about 2,000 years of good care. And it looked like it when I was there in 1960. The sight of that changed my whole mind about what was possible in land use. On this poor land, my family and I can grow easily much more than we can use, and the capacity of it for feeding more people than ourselves is very large.

A corporate farm bought a farm of equivalent terrain-about 600 or 800 acres-down the road from me, and virtually destroyed it in about two years. They hired some nincompoops to build badly built fences all over it and filled it full of Charolais cattle. They left them on in the winter time and they ate the grass right down to the crowns of the roots and trampled it. These owners also bulldozed steep banks and put the cattle on them. That's because nobody cared. Now I say that long association with a piece of land through family and community descent is a check against that kind of treatment.

It seems to me that what we are really talking about is what ought to be our concept of the human business in this world and what our appropriate dignity is. A great deal of the trouble that we are

talking about is based on our assumption that we are completely in charge of the universe and that fundamental work is beneath our dignity.

I come from a part of the country that once turned a part of the people into niggers. And I submit to you that, although we have supposedly raised these people into Negroes and then to Blacks and first class citizens, the concept of nigger is very much alive among us and we're spreading it abroad. What we want is to put something else to work so that we won't have to work ourselves. Typically, we've made niggers out of the earth, out of the air and out of the ocean. We've made niggers out of essential metals, and we're suffering from it.

I'm not a religious fanatic, but it says in the Bible that "by the sweat of your face shall you eat bread." I don't think that describes a rule or a curse. I think that just describes the condition we are in. And the more sweat we escape the worse off we are going to be.

And I don't think sweat is demeaning. And I don't think that we are necessarily dignified by having a mechanical any more than a human nigger or a natural nigger do our fetching and carrying.

My own experience tells me that hard manual labor is not demeaning. I've done a lot of it. I have fifty acres that are extremely difficult to farm and are in an extreme state of neglect and abuse because of my predecessors. I do a great deal of hard physical labor and I don't feel that I've been demeaned by it. I feel I've been enlivened by it. And I think if we can get over this effort to search out something else to spare us a few ounces of sweat we will be better off. The fact about sweat is that once it flows you don't mind it so much any more. It's the dread of it before you break it that causes the trouble.

It is certainly true that there are risks in the human adventure and that it has been up to human beings to take the risks. The discrimination I would like to make is that we don't have the right to take risks for each other, and I'm very upset about other people's willingness to take risks and to risk other people to technological innovations in my behalf. I don't like the government to do it; I don't like scientists to do it.

Also I'd like to say that the thrust of technological innovation is always, in my lifetime and I think for a good while before, been in the direction of glamour and power. What we really want to do is to climb up on some big machine, some bigger machine than we have ever climbed up on before, to show that we've got balls, and to drive out on the land and do some kind of significant and conspicuous damage to it. I don't think that the world can put up with it very much longer.

Technologies that we have supposedly outmoded are still to some extent useful. The fact that we have a plow called a sod blaster doesn't mean that a hoe is a useless instrument. It doesn't mean that the discipline that it takes to use a hoe is a useless discipline. If a man can use a hoe very well, there's a chance that he will use a plow much better. What I wish to speak for here is the discipline in the human character that makes man able to forebear and restrain himself from doing obvious damage to other people.

It doesn't make any difference whether farming is using more of its share of fuel or not. We don't know what its share of fuel is. My own impression is that we are probably using more fuel for recreation right now than we are for farming. The point is that we are using it up. It's a limited quantity. And we better be thinking about what we are going to do when it's gone.

One of the possibilities is that we may be able to resurrect some of the technologies that we inherited and that we would be wrong to keep running headlong into the direction of more and more risky technologies that we are going to invent and that we don't know the consequences of any more than we've known ahead of time the consequences of the technology we've already got.

MODERATOR: Would you say that it is possible for technology to provide tools that can be used in agriculture that aren't harmful to the planet; that are more in tune with nature?

MR BERRY: There is such a thing as a better hoe. There is always a better possibility of a better hoe. There is always a possibility of a better potato. I hope there is always a possibility of a better

man. There is a whole frontier for science to discover harmless uses for itself and to foresee harmless consequences of its activities.

Somebody wrote me a while back about what might happen to horse technology if we started using some of the alloys we've invented for space flight. I don't believe in space flight, but I'd certainly be interested in what that might turn up.

MODERATOR: Horse technology?

MR BERRY: Horse equipment. What could you do to get more efficient use out of a horse? I'm interested in horses myself. I don't care how far out or how far back either it sounds. Horses are something we've got. I'd rather take my chances on something I've got than something I haven't got, myself. That's where I'm putting my eggs.

The more we diversify, the better off we are. There is no reason why we should limit technology always to the most advanced, most sophisticated and glamorous and powerful. We ought to have those things if they occur to us and we can produce them, but why should the new always replace the old? Why, having replaced the old with the new, should we invariably congratulate ourselves on having become richer? We haven't.

There was a mentality that farmed in this country that was a rich, tough mentality. Those farmers who to into the cities to get jobs, those small farmers, become foremen right quick. What are we going to do when we haven't got them any more? Why should we simplify that mentality by teaching it how to reduce itself to some tiny little mechanical job? And why should we teach it to lie to itself then, by saying that by demeaning itself in that way, it is serving some kind of a great cause that has never been adequately defined by anybody?

If what we call the modern world is inescapable, I think we're doomed. I'll be honest with you. I don't think that there is a chance.

Do you know what Thoreau said? Thoreau saw the railroad coming and it gave him the shakes. Not many people had the shakes at that time; plenty of them have got them now, because what we've done is just an extension of the railroad that went past Walden Pond. Thoreau said, "They think they're going to go on with this business of stocks and spades until everybody will ride. But when the whistle blows and the smoke clears away, it will be found that a few are riding and the rest run over."