

Rural Communities and the Virtues

There have been several articles in the papers recently about local ranches being converted to subdivisions. This is of course part of a very long trend in America. Ranching and farming communities across the country are being abandoned or replaced by sprawling subdivisions. In 1820, 90% of Americans lived in rural communities, and 70% of those lived on small farms. In 1990, just 25% of Americans lived in rural communities, and a mere 2% of those lived on farms.

Along with the transformation of America from a rural to an urban society, there has been a transformation of America's moral economy. That is, the rural agrarian life that once shaped most people's character is nearly gone. However, it is important to think about what is being lost. Are we losing something valuable that we should attempt to preserve? As Wendell Berry puts it, "What does the death of a local community cost its members? And what does it cost the country?"

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to examine Wendell Berry's writings. Berry is a remarkable person. He is farmer, poet, philosopher, essayist and novelist. He is good at all these things. For decades he has been the defender of the moral economy of rural farm life. For Berry, rural community life produces good farmers who "are loyal citizens, hard workers, reliable neighbors, and loving parents to their children, in addition to being good stewards of the land." How does Berry think farming communities produce such people?

Berry's agrarian ethic is in direct opposition to that of contemporary urban America. The agrarian moral economy is all about thriving within the limits that family, farm and community place upon the individual. He writes, "In our relationship with the land, we are ruled by a number of terms and limits set not by anyone's preferences but by nature and by human nature." Berry defends subordinating personal desires to the needs of the community and the land. In contrast, the popular ethics of contemporary America focus on autonomy, the removing of limits to personal preferences, and subordinating the needs of the local community to those of the global economy. For Berry, it is our responsibilities to kin, community and the land that help us become virtuous people. Moreover, if we fail to respect the limits that come with these responsibilities, we create a culture of carelessness and greed that leads to economic and cultural brutality. Berry writes, "Private life and public life, without the discipline of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and exploitation."

The important thing for Wendell Berry is that life must be lived on the local level. He writes, "The idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities." Humanity and the global economy are abstractions; one's neighbors and the local economy are real. As a character in one of Dostoyevsky's novels remarks, anyone can love humanity, but "it is precisely the neighbor whom we cannot love." I don't know if we cannot love our neighbor, but it can sometimes be a challenge. It is by responding to the challenge of day-in, day-out long-term relationships that we become better people. Berry writes, "A community identifies itself by an

understood mutuality of interests, but lives and acts by the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness.” People being what they are, for a local community to hold together, the moral economy requires the virtues on Berry’s list.

However, we know local communities are far from perfect. I can identify with Berry’s agrarian ethic because my grandparents were just the kind of people Berry talks about. My grandfather and grandmother worked a small farm in central Arkansas, and they both possessed all the virtues on Berry’s list. They were good people. However, when I was very young, I remember seeing on the local laundry mat in Star City, Arkansas a sign reading: “White Only.” This didn’t mean that you only washed your T-shirts and linens there. This small town produced people with many virtues, but at the same time it perpetuated the evils of segregation. Local communities are often resistant to change, and they can sometimes conserve the bad as well as the good. The limits and demands of the local community can sometimes be oppressive.

So where does this leave us? The demands of the local community can help us be better people, but they can go too far. A philosopher, Blaise Pascal, once said that unity without plurality is tyranny and plurality without unity is chaos. Small communities can demand conformity to the point of being tyrannical. However, moral chaos is destructive to both community life and the lives of individuals. The challenge is to somehow balance the tension between the outward thrust of individuality and the inward pull of community.

KUFM Radio Commentary

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March 8, 2006