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Sustainable Community in Literature and Lancaster County: Finding a Way Forward on Small Farms

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Finding a Way Forward on Small Farms

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Picking Beans, Climbing Mountains; A Call for Imagination

There are very few things that will motivate a thirteen-year-old child who has grown up comfortably and surrounded by supermarkets to pick green beans and to pick them joyfully. Dusty bean plants covered in yellow beetle larvae and located beneath a glaring sun do not exactly inspire an adolescent (or any sane person, really) to caper and sing. Neither do interestingly mottled rashes on the forearms - which appear after extensive rummaging through bean leaves - encourage the picker to return readily to the task. When my parents bought the family farm from my grandparents, they had some idea (as I learned much later) of converting their four city-born teenage children into a posse of effective and willing farm hands. This pleasing vision, which was conceived with the best of intentions, failed to bear much fruit, and my parents, probably despairing of such machine-like family cohesion, contented themselves with occasionally asking us to pull miles of pickle vine out of the hay field or to pitchfork mounds of manure around the garden.

But I, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, having not many useful things to do on my own account and having, furthermore, a very punishing conscience, found myself going out to work with a zeal that was at first inspired by guilt, later by a noble (and deluded) sense of martyrdom, and finally by a (usually) joyful anticipation of the task ahead. This astonishing change, which I myself witnessed with some surprise, was brought about by the realization that, in spite of the bean beetles and rashes, there really are one or two charming things about picking green beans. The first might occur to anyone. To be picking one's own beans which one has planted oneself and which one expects to eat is very satisfying if one is, as I am, concerned about local food production, sustainable agriculture, and the world in general. However, as an (admittedly absent-

minded) adolescent I was not, as I should have been, quite so interested in sustainability. What appealed to me about picking beans was the fact that I could make them disappear.

Picking beans is, if the picker happens to be privileged enough to do it in a leisurely fashion, one of those delightfully monotonous tasks which require very little brain space and allow the worker to divorce herself entirely from the Earth. It really is wonderful to be picking beans with one's hands in the real world and to be simultaneously wandering with one's head through worlds which might contain neither beans nor hands. Thus, barricaded behind the bean rows, I felt rather as Thoreau must have felt after going to prison for choosing not to pay his taxes. "I could not but smile," Thoreau writes of his uncomprehending fellow townsmen, "to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance" (236). Beans and bars do not make prisons for the imagination; they merely make an undisturbed space for its exercise and provide an excellent excuse for thinking thoughts that might well be perfectly useless or that might well change the world. In either case, these meditations and imaginations, floating just as freely through stone as through dust, are, according to Thoreau, the really dangerous aspect of the man or woman who has a conscience and the courage to act on it.

We all know, perhaps without realizing it, that there is something deadly wrong with the way most of us live; there is no reason to dream worlds into being if the one you live in is already perfect. But before we even begin to try to change our surroundings, we must reclaim that part of ourselves which is perhaps our most powerful weapon against stagnation and disaster. We need to hang on with both hands (and feet if necessary) to our ability to create suddenly out of nothing. Our imaginations, which are essential to the sustainable restructuring of our communities, are being continually hemmed in and obstructed by a society based on blatant

consumerism and (if only we knew it) universal conformity. We are running our very real world off its legs, so it falls to us to, together, imagine a new society - which is very hard indeed - and then we must, together, bring it to life - which is even harder.

But the hard work need not be monotonous. My mother, who had (and continues to have) such wonderful visions for our small farm, says that imagination is “seeing in ordinary everyday things something bigger or deeper or more interesting.” It is the ability to see that something very ordinary - like picking beans - “can be a pathway into something extraordinary.” That “something extraordinary,” for my mother, is new life. She, like me, was not particularly enthused in her younger years by the idea of getting dirt under her fingernails, and she was, as she says, “made to garden against my will by my parents” on the very farm that she and my dad now own. What really inspired her (much later) was the sight of one of her friends growing basil on a fire escape in New York City. It is a strange and rather sad truth that we often do not see the true beauty and value of a thing until it is surrounded by desolation, and my mother - unaffected by the piece of verdant paradise she had grown up on - was launched into a life of growing by the sight of a small patch of green enclosed by wrought iron. Now, she says, “Wherever I end up, I have a desire to grow things.” From our tiny city backyard in Cincinnati to our Lancaster County farm, my mother has always had a garden and continues to be excited about the prospect of life in unlikely places. “If I can imagine something,” she says, “it gives me a goal to work for and makes me feel like I’m working toward something positive.” Imagination is always at the beginning of good work, but in today’s society, the imagination is often the hardest part.

The challenge to live sustainably is not made easier by the fact that we are more than halfway convinced already that the ways to do so are far beyond our ken. As a species, we do not usually undervalue ourselves except when we are tricked into doing so, and we in the United

States, by and large, have been fooled into believing that we are a simple, predictable folk who live in simple, predictable places. Nothing could be farther from the truth. “There is a tendency,” writes Marilynne Robinson in her essay “Freedom of Thought,” “to fit a tight and awkward carapace of definition over humankind, and to try to trim the living creature to fit the dead shell” (7). This tendency has reduced more than one imagination to mere innovation, but the truly fortunate thing about living creatures like human beings and their imaginations is that they may spring back to full life at any moment. Every person - even the somber, successful ones - is remarkable and capable of making remarkable things, though it may not seem necessary to say so in a society that already focuses so much on the individual.

But I am convinced that our remarkability needs to be shouted and screamed louder than ever, if only because our definition of an individual is so shockingly narrow. Wendell Berry, in his essay, “The Way of Ignorance,” notes that we are destroying our world “on the theory that it was never alive but is only an accidental concatenation of materials and mechanical processes” and, he continues, “We are killing one another and ourselves on the same theory. If life has no standing as mystery or miracle or gift, then what signifies the difference between it and death?” (62). Surely, if we possess anything that proves beyond a doubt that we are more than assemblages of material to be worked on by mechanical processes outside of our control, it is the power of imagination residing in each one of us, a power which is at once a mystery, a miracle, and a gift. We are alive because we can think and make for ourselves. We must be careful not to fall into the easy sleep proffered by American society in which all our questions are answered with the simple word “profit,” and our minds are untroubled by the necessarily horrific visions of a society governed by such an impersonal and all-powerful standard.

Beans become a vast deal more interesting when one imagines that American society may shortly be destined to collapse. If I wish to take my time picking beans, I imagine a world in which I am at liberty to explore a mountain (or to embark on some similarly gigantic quest), but if it is necessary that I should pick the beans rather quickly, I imagine that I reside in a world where my family's farm is our only source of sustenance and that every bean in the basket is, accordingly, another second of the winter survived. This fantasy used to seem ridiculous, even to me, but it seems less so now. I might hesitate to incur the label of alarmist if I did not think that alarm was exactly what was needed. I do not believe that much more evidence is required to prove the instability of our grotesquely large food industry, an industry which has been the downfall of our small farmers for decades and which has recently been very nearly the downfall of our entire nation. Wendell Berry writes very poignantly, and at great length, in defense of the small farmers who, in order not to be wiped from the face of the earth, must decrease their participation in the global economy and "increase their dependence on local nature and local intelligence" ("Farming and the Global Economy" 5). Berry has been imagining and writing about this alternate local society for years, so I assume there must be some problem in its execution, and the problem is not hard to find. It is not enough for one man to imagine a different world and to make it on his own. He must be part of a community of imaginers. He must be surrounded by daydreamers who are just as crazy, in the eyes of society, as he is.

I asked my father once if he thought we could survive a winter solely on the produce of our farm, and his first response was to ask, "Would we still have our neighbors?" I said "no," and he said that we'd probably starve then. I changed my answer to "yes," and he smiled and said, "now that would be different." It has been one of my favorite pastimes, ever since, to imagine my southern Lancaster County community as a sustainable island of small farmers and

small businesses. It is worth noting that this sort of imagination has very little to do with innovation. It would be the height of folly to exhaust oneself in pursuit of a system that has never existed before when, in fact, a self-sustaining community of small farmers and small businesses is exactly what southern Lancaster County used to be. It is frightening to think how far and how easily we have been removed from that world. As a result of the national agenda of competition and big business, Berry writes, “millions of country people have been liberated from farming, land ownership, self-employment, and other idiocies of rural life” (“Conserving Communities” 9). These “idiocies of rural life” may be exactly what is needed to maintain that freedom of thought which we have so unconsciously lost. Desiring to turn back the clock is never wise (nor possible), but imagination is at its most powerful when it is informed by both the past and the present, when it throws even time out the window and creates worlds where there is no “old” and “new” but only the best of both.

The necessity of imagination in community is implicit in the fact that the small farmers in my area already survive only because of their neighbors. When we moved to Lancaster, my father drove the minivan back and forth to Ohio twice, once to transport the children and once to transport two hives of honeybees (more or less sedated). At the time, hives were something of a novelty in the neighborhood, and my father has since gifted several hives in exchange for the use of equipment and he now has several friends with whom he can trade ideas, stories, and labor. This past summer, one of his friends splurged on a new honey extractor, and my father borrowed it twice before its owner had used it once. In this way, and countless others, my father and his fellow farmers demonstrate the interconnectedness necessary to the implementation of any imagined society and also the helplessness and narrowness of the man who works and dreams on his own and does so only for himself.

This lonely individualism is exactly what is encouraged by America's capitalist society. A man without a community is just as easily controlled as a man without an imagination, and a man who does not use his imagination is not likely to understand why he should care enough for his fellow creatures to implement a new society anyway. "As we withdraw from one another," Robinson writes, in her very fitting essay "Imagination in Community," "we withdraw from the world... The shrinking of imaginative identification which allows such things as shared humanity to be forgotten always begins at home" (31). Unless, I would add, one's home is inseparable from their community, in which case it is almost impossible to withdraw from one's neighbors without surrendering a great deal of agency to the society at large. And society at large wants nothing to do with the worlds you have imagined; it only asks you to maintain the status quo without bringing bright, unsettling ideas into existence. Now, it is very possible that these new ideas may be very bad; history has proven time and again that not all imagination ends in a desire to grow things.

But it is an everlasting shame that the fruits of most imaginations are quashed before they ever see the light of day. This happens not only in marketplaces and corporate boardrooms, but also in high school classrooms and the halls of higher learning. Marilynne Robinson, who teaches writing at the University of Iowa feels the need to remind her students that "The human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe," which makes the human being simultaneously "the most interesting entity known to exist in the universe" ("The Human Spirit and the Good Society" 144). She gives this reminder because her students have been told that they have grown too old for imagination and tend to undervalue their own imaginative gifts and the characters and worlds they create with them. "By means direct and indirect," Robinson writes, "this problem has been educated into them" ("The Human Spirit and the Good Society")

144). Students learn early on that the sole value in the action of bean picking is quantified by the number of beans picked and the amount of profit to be gained by them. A daydreaming bean-picker (such as I) would get the axe early on for not being efficient enough or for engaging in useless mental extravagances. But no one ever changed the world for the better by bean counting. If we want to see our society transform - which any reasonable person should - we must allow imagination to flourish in our young people who are, just now, looking down a long, hard, and meager road toward an end that is fuzzy but undoubtedly unpleasant. In response to this lamentable predestination presided over by corporate powers, Robinson gives this advice, "forget definition, forget assumption, watch" ("Freedom of Thought" 7). And when we watch with the naive eye of the daydreamer, we begin to see things that we would like to change, and then we begin to imagine worlds in which they *are* changed. And then perhaps we may change *this* world.

Imagination, in the mental sphere, is only as limited as the person who wields it believes it to be. It need not be constrained by time; it need not fight to stay one step ahead of the society it was born into; we may transcend the society of our feet with one upward leap, and we may destroy that society with a single thought. Imagination need not conform to the surroundings it sees in the sunlight, for we may remove the very sun from the sky and craft our own lights out of materials that have never existed. But imagination, which is perhaps one of our only truly divine gifts, does not make us omnipotent in this real world of rocks and rivers, of people and monsters. My mother sees a vista of endless opportunity for life on our small farm, but though the possibilities may be infinite, her endurance is not. So, we (who do not have the mounds of money needed to *create*) may *imagine* worlds in which everything bends to our will, but here, with our feet on the ground, we are bound into fragile bodies with finite strength. Here, the spine

of a thirteen-year-old girl who climbs mountains and crosses oceans as she moves down a bean row still aches when she straightens up to wipe the sweat off her face. Here, we must have limits, and that is a very good thing.

“A Plea for Humility;” Accepting Limits and Benefitting Thereby

A tree of heaven in isolation is a rare occurrence at best, and the much more common sight of a dozen or so of them clumped closely together sometimes makes me want to cry, especially when travelling on highways where they cast great shadows over the ill-kempt shoulders for miles on end. But my opinion of Pennsylvania’s highways in general is that they are very ugly, and it is at home that the tree of heaven hurts the most, not least because my parents’ small farm is - to me - one of the most beautiful places in the world, and I suffer from its disfigurement accordingly. When, therefore, I pull up seventy or eighty ailanthus saplings in the space of two hours, I imagine that I am exacting some sort of revenge for the oaks and maples they have choked out of existence. And when I return to that same spot five days later and find seventy or eighty smaller, but still living ailanthus saplings, now covered in black spotted lanternfly nymphs, I feel like tearing my hair out. The nymphs will grow. As adults, they will climb into the canopy, clustering in grotesque gray masses on the tree trunks, eating everything in reach. When walking through our woods - parts of which are now thoroughly infested - it is advisable to wear a hat because the waste from the grown lanternflies comes down like a veritable rain, and the flies themselves hop about by the thousand in a truly repulsive manner. I was relieved when I left home for school. Lying in bed at home, I could almost hear them chewing on my trees in the darkness, and it is no overstatement to say that I felt it like a pain in my own body.

If you are considering the purchase of a small farm, you would do well to consider first the state of your soul and whether or not you have at least half of it to spare. And if you are planning to foster life (either animal or vegetable) on the aforementioned farm, you would do

well to examine your heart and consider whether or not it will stand some breaking. Failure is to be expected, especially in this era of invasive species and turbulent weather. Small farming is hard. In this age of corporate agribusiness, it's certainly not lucrative, though the purchase and maintenance of land generally falls to the economically comfortable anyway. But if your vision of small farming is an idyllic homestead where the cows take themselves out to pasture and don't complain about the grass, you need to think again. Comfort, at least in the way that American society conceives it, is not a byproduct of small farming. My parents, for example, cannot transplant themselves when the going gets suddenly tough (as it more than frequently does), but neither, I am convinced, would they particularly want to. They do not, as do certain fanciful persons who wish to colonize Mars, believe that their responsibility to a place ceases when it has become unendurable. Neither do they believe in some ultimate, grand technological solution to their problems. When confronted with overwhelming trouble, the farmer looks down at his hands with humility because he knows they may be insufficient to the task ahead, but they have done good work before and may well do good work again within his small domain. This narrowness of focus, this extreme consciousness of capability (or the lack thereof), this devotion to a specific piece of land, are what will allow the farmer to succeed. He is not likely to rid the entire state of ailanthus and lantern flies, but he might remove them from his farm, and that is a good place to start. Any person who desires to effect change without becoming overwhelmed would do well to follow the small farmer's example even if it seems wildly inadequate in the grand scheme of things. Starting small is better, though it seems quite radical to say so.

Farming these days is a fool's endeavor unless the farm is large enough and streamlined enough to resemble a factory, in which case it is no longer either a fool's endeavor or farming; it is something bigger, but it is not something better. "If you have eyes to see," writes Wendell

Berry in his essay “Conserving Communities,” “you can see that there is a limit beyond which machines and chemicals cannot replace people; there is a limit beyond which mechanical or economic efficiency cannot replace care” (11). These limits are exactly what our capitalist society likes to transgress or deny. There is not, as capitalism inherently assumes, an infinite amount of profit to be extracted from this finite world, and the longer we persist in acting as if there is, the larger our problems with the natural world become.

And as our crises grow ever greater, our proposed solutions grow ever more fantastical. It is our hubris that allows us to imagine without laughing at ourselves that we can continue on our current destructive trajectory by, as Scott Russell Sanders writes, “dumping powdered limestone in the oceans to counter acidification, by covering deserts and glaciers with reflective plastic sheets, by orbiting giant mirrors to reflect the sun’s rays, by mining asteroids or colonizing Mars” (“Conscience and Resistance”). These massive technological solutions are a long way away from the care that Berry advocates. Instead, they look awfully like attempts at control - and their orchestrators seem rather like those perpetually drunken persons who avoid the hangover by drinking still more. Applied generally, without the precision or foresight of the small farmer who knows every inch of his land, these solutions are likely to end in disaster, too gigantic to be more than pipe dreams.

For the past two years or so, my older brother has worked in the Lancaster USDA field office in charge of combatting the spotted lanternfly. There are not many effective ways in which to do this, as they have learned over the years, much to their discouragement. One of the only ways to reduce an infestation of lanternflies is to reduce the amount of tree of heaven in the area. The tree is not essential to the growth of the fly, but it is their favorite, and where there are large concentrations of ailanthus, there also are swarms of lanternflies. Unfortunately, the tree of

heaven is absurdly resilient. It reproduces by dropping seeds, but it also reproduces along its own root system. A single tree, once it has reached a certain age, might put out twenty or thirty saplings, and the worst thing you can do is cut one down. Like the many-headed hydra, if you cut off one of its shoots, it puts up two more, and if the main tree is cut down, the ground around the stump erupts in dozens of saplings. The tree's main energy is in its root system, so you might kill it by digging up the entire tree (which is impossible) or by making deep, angular cuts in the trunk and then pouring as much herbicide down them as will fit (which sometimes works). And you might imagine the time and expense such processes demand. On our farm alone, which is comparatively small, there are hundreds of mature ailanthus trees.

Underfunded, and faced with a problem of genuinely mind-boggling proportions, the USDA has moved away from trying to root out the trees and has decided (somewhat idiotically) that it would be less expensive to kill the bugs en masse. Their new approach involves a fleet of specialized trucks capable of shooting pesticides eighty feet into the air (though they generally only achieve twenty) for sustained intervals. They work, obviously, but the amount of collateral damage is appalling, and the amount of pesticides thus introduced into the environment is horrifying. My brother has since obtained a post elsewhere; he could not continue to do something so obviously destructive and discouragingly ineffective. The trucks might kill thousands, but spotted lanternflies are counted by the million, not the thousand. "Our great modern powers of science, technology, and industry," Berry writes, "are always offering themselves to us with the suggestion that we know enough to use them well, that we are intelligent enough to act without limit in our own behalf. But," he continues - as the USDA has so aptly demonstrated - "the evidence is now rapidly mounting against us. By living as we do, in our ignorance and our pride, we are diminishing our world and the possibility of life" (125). We

do more than diminish the possibility of life. We extinguish it. We must do away with our love of the grand gesture. We must cease to trust so blindly in the saving nature of our machines or in the vague promise of future progress. We humans, though it pains us to admit it, are as limited as our world. We cannot destroy everything and survive. Neither can we fix everything, nor should we try. But we can, like the small farmer, attempt to rectify what is within reach of our own two hands, and we can do that small work well. Pull up the ailanthus saplings on your own property; do not imagine that you can rid the whole county of them. That would require asking your entire community for help. “This,” writes Berry, “is a plea for humility.” We are not gods.

But we like to think we are. Humility is not exactly the trademark trait of our nation’s most “successful” people. But then, it is not exactly advisable to follow in the footsteps of those people which a dying society considers to be its best representatives; they are more likely to be embodiments of exactly what’s wrong with it. We ought to cast aside this prevailing notion that to have lots of education and lots of money and lots of things is to be a model of intellect and achievement. We are not nearly as smart as we think we are. “We can’t go on too much longer, maybe,” writes Berry, “without considering the likelihood that we humans are not intelligent enough to work on the scale to which we have been tempted by our technological abilities” (15). The scale of our projects combined with the arrogance that conceived them is what defeats us. We set out to save the world, comfortable in the strict science and complicated mathematics of our plans, only to discover that this magnificently varied world conforms very poorly to our calculations. We say that it is hopeless and return home exhausted. But returning home is perhaps the best thing that can happen to us in these times. We are much more likely to understand the places we grew up in or have some lasting attachment to, and understanding our limits and the place where we find ourselves is the first step to a workable solution.

We do not all live on small farms, but we do all have small worlds that dictate our daily functioning. These worlds are not contemptible, and they are much more easily changed than the world at large, which no single person understands entirely. In his essay, “The Way of Ignorance,” Wendell Berry admits that small-scale solutions to global catastrophe and humility as a response to terribly destructive corporate pride might not suit the sensibilities of everyone. “Some will find it an insult to their sense of proportion,” he writes, “others to their sense of drama. I am offended by it myself,” he admits, “and I wish I could do better” (66). But grand solutions having been tried and seen to fail, it might be time to consider the fact that it takes more courage to come to terms with our limits than to continue to exhaust ourselves in pursuit of a god-like control that will never be ours.

Paul Kingsnorth, in his essay “Dark Ecology,” has much to say in praise of scything, a fading art that requires great skill and great attention to the land. Accepting his smallness in the grand scheme of things, he is determined to do his part in a manner well-suited to his abilities. “I am going to walk ahead,” he writes of scything, “following the ground, emptying my head, managing the land, not like a god but like a tenant” (Kingsnorth). Really, that is all we are - tenants with a responsibility to the land we walk over every day. And after all, many tenants together make a community, and many united communities make a nation, and nations together might make a world of tenants - in which everyone is humble enough to care for his or her own small space, rather than a world of gods - in which everyone believes that they can and ought to control the entire Earth. Much better to be a band of foolish small farmers than a nation of deluded and destructive would-be gods.

My father, who I would consider to be one of those foolish small farmers, sometimes has trouble sleeping at night thinking about all that must be done to maintain his small, beautiful, and

suffering farm. He knows he cannot solve all his problems with a snap of his fingers, but he does not believe - as many leading members of our society seem to - that limitations make one powerless or incapable of achieving great things. In small-farm life (as in any other type of life) knowing and accepting the points beyond which it is inadvisable to go is actually - my dad says - what allows the farmer to move forward. He cannot do all twenty things on his to-do list at once without exhausting himself, so he tries to focus on just one, and - having set his mind on a single task - he does it to its end, and he does it well.

This is what is undoubtedly good in limitation; it allows us to do things well. The big corporations and believers in ultimate technological salvation have imagined solutions, but (according to their natures) they have imagined them without limits, and they will fail. It is the *individual* who must ask himself - as my father does every day - "Given who I am in my limitations, how can I figure this out?" That is the question with which any imaginative process seeking real change ought to begin. The fact that change is indeed a process means that time is one of the biggest constraints with which we have to deal, and time is fast running out. "On the farm change takes a long time because it's never immediate," my dad says, "it's not math." It's something infinitely more complicated - it's life. Crops fail, weeds grow, animals die, and a thousand other things happen that equations cannot predict and fix-alls can never entirely account for. Only the farmer in his small way can confront these challenges in a manner personal enough to be effective. But the farmer is himself a restraint, and his body limits him just as much, if not more, than the number of hours in a day. When I asked my dad - intending to get an abstract answer - how he discovers his limits, he answered immediately that on the farm "it has mostly to do with weight. If I can't pull it, if I can't lift it, that's my limit." And when he cannot lift something, he asks for help, which is an exercise in humility and demonstrates the fact that

while the responsibility for change falls on the individual, it does not fall on just *one* individual; it falls on all of them. No one can farm alone.

We may hack diagonal gashes in our ailanthus trees and pour herbicide down them until we are blue in the face, but if our neighbors do not also hack at the ailanthus trees in their woods, all our efforts will be in vain. Working together is as close to infinity as we humans are likely to get, and for those of us who do not have mounds of material wealth, working together is probably our only earthly hope. Fortunately, our species has had lots of experience with limits from which it would be advisable to learn. “Since we’re humans,” my dad says, “we have this imagination that allows us to make meaning, purpose and sustainable life out of very little.” When my dad surveys his small world, he sees many troubles, and he also feels them like pain in his body. But he has no plans to resettle on Mars. He has a vision for *this* world, and he intends to work at it, one small step at a time.

“At the Beginning of Learning;” Envisioning a Way Forward on Small Farms

I once had a professor who told my class that when she becomes overwhelmed by her busy suburban professional life, she throws her hands into the air and exclaims, “That’s it! We’re moving to a dairy farm in Vermont!” as if by doing so, she and her family could relieve themselves of most of their cares. I was so struck by this remark that I immediately wrote it in the margin of my notebook, and to this day, if I feel the need to marvel again at the variety of perspectives held by humanity, I return to that page and stare at it for a while. Wendell Berry, when he made the decision with his wife to move from New York City to his native Kentucky with the intention of taking on a small farm, encountered many similar remarks from his friends and coworkers. They were convinced that he was giving up the hustle and bustle of urban life for a carefree life of simplicity in the country. But Berry himself asserts that he actually gave up the “simple life” when he left New York and has since taken on one of endless complexity. The gigantic grids and tight schedules found in the upper-class districts of American cities may be frequently overwhelming to those who operate within their perfect squares and straight lines, but they comprise a pattern which, if not at all times easy to follow, is laid out with wonderful clarity. The suburbs, divided by highways and great stretches of sorry woodland from these beating centers of activity are even more neatly laid out, if only because their streets are not constantly obscured by humanity.

There are certainly ways to forge a unique path through city or suburban life - many people have done so, but there is no more effective way to cast oneself adrift from all societal patterns than to acquire a piece of land and attempt to live on it. Henry David Thoreau, who took exception even to the calloused hands of farmers which, “from excessive toil,” were too clumsy

to pluck the “finer fruits of life”, would perhaps not agree with me that farming frees the mind (3). But even Thoreau planted a bean field to sustain his sojourn by Walden Pond, and his chief objection to a life devoted to the land seems to have been the immense amount of work and worry that came with it, a dual burden that those naive believers in the simple country life do not remember. Thoreau points out that most of the farmers he knew did not own their farms and labored under heavy debt, desperately trying to preserve the inheritance of their fathers and seeing great value in doing so. “But,” writes Thoreau, “men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost” (3). I am willing to admit that becoming compost does not sound like a very pleasing prospect, but, contrary to Thoreau’s clear disgust with the idea, I believe that - especially now - there are many arguments in favor of it. Thoreau would have us be noble wanderers, free to do as we pleased, free to consider the heavens and the earth with equal care. But in this age and society, in which neither the heavens nor the earth are paid much attention (with disastrous effect), it may be wise to reassess the relation of the American man to his land. Better to be humble compost for the land, I think, than to be a haughty lord of it.

As for the work of farming, Thoreau is right to call it gruelling, and if the farmer ever feels that it becomes mind-numbing, he ought to give it up with all possible speed. Working the land is not in itself capable of freeing a man, for work of any kind can be degrading or unfulfilling. It is the vision that motivates the endeavor which may truly liberate the mind, and it is vision which is often so hard to conjure up, particularly in a society that makes the work of such conjuring seem quite unnecessary. We might, if we are so inclined (or if we do not know any different), insert ourselves into that system of grids and schedules which produces efficient

and “successful” citizens who embody the proverbial cog in the wheel by being unthinking consumers and inordinate money-makers.

Or we may take the burden of foresight upon ourselves, and seeing nothing good ahead, may seek out a different style of life for which there are no step-by-step instructions but which, though it ends in private disaster, will at least not compromise the entire human race. “We, each of us severally,” writes Berry, “can remove our minds from the corporate ignorance and arrogance that is leading the world to destruction; we can honestly confront our ignorance and our need” (63). Our ignorance consists in our subscription to a vision that is not our own. Worse, it is a vision dreamed up for us by impersonal institutions and by persons so remote from us in terms of wealth and experience that they may as well be living on a different planet (would that they really were!). We know so little about their motivations, and yet we accept them as our own, too bombarded by the propaganda of the Market to contemplate seriously the effects of our subjugation and too content in the easy patterns of consumerism to remedy them. “When we consider what,” writes Thoreau, “is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears to us as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other,” because they “honestly think that there is no choice left” (5). This is our need; to reinvision the “common mode of living” and to make it our own. We must, if we wish to live in communities that endure, have - each of us severally - a fixed vision towards which it is a joy to work and which does not precipitate environmental disaster. These visions can and should look very different from person to person, but all of them will be immensely difficult to achieve. Anything that flies in the face of society is likely to meet strong resistance. And one of the hardest flights is perhaps that undertaken by the new generation of

small farmers who see the mistreatment of the land at the root of many injustices and who seek, in necessarily small ways, to make good soil from which good things might grow.

I hesitate to undermine my professor's faith in her hypothetical Vermont getaway where, perhaps, she imagines milking the cows every evening in the comfort of a warm barn and being met every morning by a charming pastoral scene. The extemporaneous purchase of a dairy farm could not possibly be more than an exhausting mistake unless the purchase was motivated by a strong vision of the future backed up by deep wells of endurance, and even these must be expected to run nearly dry at times.

Several years ago, my friend Frances and her husband decided to buy a derelict farm with the laudable intention of turning it into a micro-dairy. Having an understandable distaste for industrial milking practices, they were determined to own a herd of cows small enough to be kept up by just the two of them. In order to make a dairy work, however, without selling your soul to the corporations, you must be able to process your own milk, and you must be able to make something with it that you can sell on your own terms. Accordingly, Frances and her husband decided to make yogurt and to market it locally. The vision and motivation were all there. Frances, who had grown up in Kenya where the "shadowy side of Capitalism" had been represented to her throughout childhood, was committed to finding a way forward that was not dictated by a society that counted only the monetary costs of its proceedings. Her husband had cared for cattle before and fallen in love with the daily rhythm of milking. Excited by the prospect of a life of collaboration, they took on the large mortgage and, as Frances told me, "proceeded to get dragged around by this wild horse of an adventure."

Those of us who invest in a vision for which our society has not set out a pattern must expect to be dragged around a bit, especially if our life plans return us very little for the amount

of ourselves that we put into them. “It is a fool’s life,” writes Thoreau of the work-worn farmers of Concord, “as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before” (3). A farmer who ends his life with nothing to show for his work but a pair of disfigured hands might reasonably feel that he has not been very sensible, but if he has done nothing more than preserve a living piece of land for his children, he has already done more in the way of good than the most monetarily and intellectually successful members of modern society. Almost all parents these days will hand their sons and daughters a world more damaged than the one they themselves were born into. For this reason, some people choose the adventure of farming not for the material or spiritual advancement it offers but for the sake of those who come after. “Good foresters,” writes Berry, “must always look forward to harvests that they will not live to reap” (44). But the corporate vision, to which we are all more or less tied, does not allow for future generations. It encourages maximum consumption in the moment and denies any responsibility for those who might struggle to survive tomorrow because of the excesses of today.

Certainly, our visions must extend beyond, as G.K. Chesterton might say, that “small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about,” even if it means sacrificing - as many of our immigrant ancestors did before - a good portion of our own worldly comfort. For Frances and her husband, difficulties were expected long before they started arriving; these intrepid farmers cherished no illusions about the “simple life.” Starting with limited resources and attempting to supply their needs entirely from the produce of their new farm made precious little fiscal sense. My own parents both work full-time away from our small farm, and its eventual conversion into the sole family sustainer is a rosy imagining at best. As both Thoreau and Frances eloquently suggest (though perhaps with different intent), “Most small farmers work their butts off and barely make it.” But if the end goal is more than the creation of a lucrative

business, the hard work can be rewarding in itself. Getting to know a place well enough to bring life out of it is a wonderful process. Thoreau knew this well. He wandered all over Massachsettes, delighting in every bog and bird he came across. So it seems rather contradictory that he believes the farmer to be beyond the reach of beauty and intellectual growth. "I'll probably always feel like I'm at the beginning of learning," says Frances, "and that's a good thing." It would never do to believe that we had plumbed the depths of our environment. When we believe we understand a thing completely, we begin to have a contempt for it, and we end by divorcing ourselves from it. One of Frances' most joyful tasks on the farm is the instruction of her two sons in the ways of the land and the fostering of a deep sense of connection between them and fields and woods they daily explore. There is no abundance of material luxury in their lives, but, says Frances, "I feel like the richness is all around us." It is not the shiny, clinking richness of a capitalist vision, but of a vision entirely unique to the place and time she finds herself in. It is a vision that has, as all visions that deal accurately with the earth ought to, changed many times, but the motivation has remained the same.

When she talks about her farm, the most common word Frances uses is "regeneration." She wants to create regenerative systems to replace the systems that take without returning. She wants her children to grow strong surrounded by life that, carefully husbanded by work-worn human hands, regenerates itself every year. But the farmer must also be somehow regenerated if he is to avoid Thoreau's stricture that "he has no time to be anything but a machine" (3). A vision cannot be entirely of work; it must include a plan for rest, or the farmer will not long survive his own lofty ambitions, laudable though they be. And surely one of the best ways to keep a farmer moving forward is to ensure that he is not moving forward alone. "In this economy, whose business is to set in contention things that belong together," writes Berry, "you

can do nothing more divisive than to assert the claims of community” (78). Communities are vastly more dangerous to the status quo than solitary individuals, if only because they are not so easily exhausted. When it is not necessary to depend solely on oneself, one need not always be efficient. “How vigilant we are!” Thoreau exclaims, “Determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties” (7). Constant alertness and endless uncertainty are the hallmarks of any life typified by isolation, and it is rather unfortunate that we have lost those bonds of shared experience on which were built the small farming communities of a century ago.

The small farmer of today is more often than not left to his own devices. He is cast adrift from the larger society and is frequently an outsider in his geographical community of small, professional property owners. “If you’re doing a lot of work for something that other people don’t do any work for,” Frances tells me, “people will see you as backward.” But if, like the Amish, you are a member of a community made up entirely of people who, by many modern standards, are “backward,” it is not so hard to face the uncertainties of your counter-cultural vision. If your wells of endurance run dry, as they are very likely to do, you may fall back upon the united strength of your fellow visionaries. A community offers more than solidarity, however. It offers an environment in which you need not always be fighting to prove the efficacy of your dreams. Frances admires the Amish community because they work so well together but also because, as she says, “they know how to rest.” Sometimes, in our haste to regenerate the land, we forget that our minds have also suffered from the stresses of consumerism and that withdrawal from a damaging society is just as much an effort to restore our maltreated spirits as it is an endeavor to renew the aching earth.

Frances and her family continue to face innumerable challenges, as would anyone with a similarly nonsensical vision for the future. They, like Thoreau, are seeking that balance between rest and work which will allow them to revel in their journey rather than worry continuously about its ends. But theirs is not the reveling of lords who have carved out a domain and intend to feast on its proceeds. They are much more comfortable, I imagine, leaving parts of themselves behind in the soil where they work (call it compost if you will), because at least in that way they may attend equally to the nourishment of the land and to the maintenance of their selves.

American society, governed by the principle of Profit, seeks everyday to impose its own vision on our lives, and it is unimaginably difficult to extricate oneself from a system that has grown up over decades and inveigled itself into every corner of existence. It is certainly easier to tread the well-worn paths within society's narrow confines. "This is the only way, we say; but," Thoreau reminds us, "there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre" (7). One must only have the courage to envision them.

“A Spiritual Heritage;” Regarding the Stewardship of Small Farmers

My sister says that she has two homes. One is her uniquely decorated apartment in the middle of Lancaster City, and the other is our family’s farm, which she moved away from four years ago. She tells me she is attached to her apartment because it is her “space.” It has been changed to fit her personality and to reflect her own life experiences. But she feels a stronger connection to our farm, where, ironically, she no longer technically has a “space.” Her old bedroom has since been converted into a guest room; you would never know that my sister, who is messy and loves modern art, had lived eight years of her life in that neat, quiet room which now boasts a consistently made bed and delicate floral wall-paper. At first, she felt awkward about coming back to the farm because she didn’t have her own spot anymore. “But I realized that wasn’t true,” she says, “The whole place is my spot.” And this, even more than location and size, is what distinguishes the two home places of my sister’s life. “I could walk out of my apartment forever,” she says, “and not be mad,” but the idea of never coming back to the farm would be different. And it’s hard to explain exactly why that is, especially if our idea of a home consists only of four walls and a roof. There is something mystical and fundamental at play here that is not given much consideration, if any, in the ever-increasing rush of buying and business and information that comprises American life today.

We do not think too much these days about the mystical side of life (which is the side of life that is not mathematically, materially, or scientifically explainable), presumably because such conversations would have little practical value. But we lose something very valuable indeed when we reduce our living spaces to stop-overs. It is probably passé to say so, but home should be more than a space; it should be a spiritual connection to a specific place. We forget that when

we treat our homes as mere extensions of modern American society, we are giving up our lifelines to worlds that might not be defined by supply and demand. When our houses become only walls to paint with our favorite colors or rooms to furnish with our best idea of style, we have essentially sold them over to the mundaneness of materialism. “Inside the home (they say) is dead decorum and routine,” writes G.K. Chesterton, “outside is adventure and variety.” But, he continues, “This is indeed a rich man’s opinion,” and because most prevailing thought these days is controlled by the wealthy, “we have almost forgotten what a home really means to the overwhelming millions of mankind.” For the super-wealthy, the home - where all their needs are met without the slightest effort on their part - is merely a place to exist. They find life in expensive art exhibits and jumping out of airplanes. But to the middle-class or poor population, which must - at the very least - cook and clean, home is a sort of life-giving liberty in itself, if only because the work is done according to their own design. And the more work we must do to maintain our homes, the more they become embedded in our souls - the more they make us want to stay. And, of course, if we are planning to stay, we must be good stewards.

It would not seem, however, that very many of us are planning to stay. We have lost the spiritual connection to our homes that ought to make us desperate to preserve them. We have been convinced that a temporal home is valuable only because it will shelter us while we work beyond its walls in order to purchase a bigger and better one. So we pass from home to home without a thought for the land they stand on, which suffers accordingly. The trouble with many members of American society is not that they are actively and intentionally destroying the land, it is that they are dangerously indifferent to it. And indifference is worse than thought-out devastation because, so far from causing us to think only of ourselves, we think nothing at all. Self-interest, at least, might prompt us to think of the effects of the coming economic and

environmental storm on our own lives, and we might try to salvage a refuge accordingly. Every millionaire has a getaway. But we, floating freely above the precipice on the necessarily ephemeral and already fractured structure of modern American society, will fall very far indeed when it gives way if we do not first anchor ourselves somewhere. And the task will be a spiritual one - that is, one that cannot be accomplished merely by throwing money at it. The good stewardship required to build up and maintain a lasting home has to do with more than ways and means. It demands the recollection that we are responsible for the land on which we reside. It demands the slow sinking of ourselves into a specific place so that, after a while (generations perhaps), we cannot separate ourselves from it, and - like my sister - regard it as home, even when we have left it, and could never think of losing it. Such places do exist, but barely, and the great oversight of our society is that it makes it devilishly difficult to be a good steward and also survive.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the case of small farmers who frequently embody that mysterious, home-creating connection between family and land, and who are daily disappearing from the face of the earth. Wendell Berry, who has written in defense of the small farmer for decades, believes these modest landholders are often the best examples left to us of good stewardship - provided, of course, "that the property holders are secure, legally and economically, in the properties" ("Private Property and the Common Wealth" 49). They are not. A small scale farm might be optimal for good stewardship, but it is rarely economically viable - particularly in today's hyper-competitive, global economy. "The markets are more volatile," says Joe, a wonderful friend of the family who has spent most of his life dairy farming in southern Lancaster County, "the larger farmers have a little more ownership in the market, so they have a little more economic voice. Producing in volume and buying in volume gives you a better price

advantage.” But in our community, very few farms can support herds large enough to compete with the behemoths out west which maintain tens of thousands of cows in ways that almost certainly have nothing to do with stewardship or a spiritual connection to the land. “You cannot,” writes Berry, “solve economic problems just by increasing scale,” instead, he continues, “increasing scale is almost certain to cause other problems - ecological, social, and cultural” (“Conserving Communities” 15). It is hard to imagine how these massive undertakings - these food factories in the desert - would not tumble headlong over the precipice at the least jostling of the super-structure. Indeed, it is not necessary to imagine. Think of the general failure of our food distribution system as a result of the pandemic, and you will have a pretty good idea of what awaits us. Certainly, these gigantic farms, many of which are owned by overseas investors, could have precious little to do with any attempt on our part to establish a home that will ride out almost any storm, if only because its foundations are undergirded by something more enduring than brittle concrete. It is almost absurd, then, that these unstable giants are allowed to shut down the rather pathetic competition of their much smaller (but much wiser) counterparts. Something has gone miserably wrong here, and its ramifications are far more than just economic.

The trouble cannot be purely material. If it were, we might reasonably expect our innumerable forays into the realm of technological solutions to save us at any moment. But the very idea of such an eventuality is laughable. We have taken countless scientific steps forward, and twice as many steps back. But neither, I think, can we blame the general malaise of humanity. We are not an aged gentleman fading irresistibly into death, we are a vigorous youth who is actively killing himself, and we are missing such a vital connection somewhere that we do not know it. When driving through our community, Joe tells me, he often sees properties that look uncared for, and he - himself a careful steward of the land God has gifted him - cannot help

but wonder what could have happened to the owner that caused him to neglect his responsibility. “And you begin to raise a judgement against that,” he says - perhaps you form a negative opinion of whoever is supposed to be tending that land. But, God reminds him, ““that’s not something you judge, there’s a spiritual tragedy there. Something happened that now they’re no longer taking care of the land that I gave them to take care of.”” The idea of a spiritual tragedy in relation to the fact that our natural world has never been more abused by our indifference and neglect seems very plausible in a society where spirituality is discouraged beyond church doors and sounds strange in sentences that are not sermons or jokes. How many of us feel a sacred connection to the soil under our feet? How many of us see something divine in the door we walk out of in the morning and return through every evening? Precious few, I think, and our farming families who still work their own fields are among them. “As farming families dwindle away,” writes Berry, “we lose not just essential and perhaps irreplaceable knowledge but also an old appreciation and affection that may be even more valuable” (“Private Property and the Common Wealth” 53). It is this sometimes incomprehensible appreciation and affection for the places we have devoted our lives to that we miss the most just now. If we have no appreciation for a home beyond the shelter it provides, there is nothing to stop us from packing up our personalized decorations and moving with them to a house of the exact same proportions five hundred miles away - unless, like my sister, we are anchored to a particular area by a home that is ours as much in spirit as in place.

But these anchors do not form themselves overnight, and the longer they are forged, the deeper they sink. Joe bought a farm from his parents that had been in his family (more or less directly) for two hundred years. His children are the eighth generation to have lived on it, and he has family ties to the area that out-date even the proprietorship of the farm. His ancestors were

among the very first Europeans to settle in Pennsylvania. But more came down through the centuries to Joe than a farm. “My father always had a huge perspective of being a steward of the land, and that’s a very spiritual thing,” he says, “and over the years, growing up on the farm, it became more of a spiritual heritage, I think, even than a piece of land heritage.” This spiritual heritage is what makes Joe’s home, and the homes of many other farmers, so immovable - *almost* indestructible. Generations have taught him to care for one particular piece of land, and the dedicated care of one family is the greatest protection a piece of land can get. We do not need “new myths invented by writers and intellectuals” to tell us how we need to live in order to survive, writes Berry, “we already have what we need... The myth of preservation and responsibility exists, and some people - though by no means enough - have understood its implications” (“The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity” 66). We are not, as we sometimes like to suppose, a collection of all the best ideas history has to offer. We have left behind much that is good, and we have forgotten much that should have been remembered. We must claim, along with Chesterton, our choice “of all the tools in the universe,” and we must deny the popular idea that “any of them are blunted merely because they have been used.” Humanity has known for millennia that it is good practice to care unfalteringly for the land we have been brought into and that it is good to teach our children to do the same. This instinct for stewardship, which has been so baffled and blinded by the fogs of consumerism, runs ages deep in many of those who live in my community, and in consequence, their now frequent uprooting as a result of economic pressures is staggeringly painful and disorienting.

Joe lost his farm last year. An effort to modernize it at the turn of the century in order to keep up with the changing economy required the family to borrow on the equity of the farm, which - at that time - was completely unencumbered. They used the loan to build a new barn and

install robotic milking machines, and for a little while, things looked up. But then milk prices plummeted in the recession of 2008, and because profits must keep coming in order to support a loan, the family lost entirely whatever advantage the new set up had given them. “We never did get to fully recover,” says Joe, “so that created a lot of broken dreams.” He had intended to leave a flourishing dairy operation in the hands of his son, whose dream had been to make his living and raise his young family on the farm. For the next ten years, the family tried to keep their heads above water. The local bank through which their loan was financed failed and was eaten up by a larger one, which was so hostile to the family’s situation that, “at one point,” Joe remembers, “it felt like we were going to lose everything, even our own houses that we lived in.” But another bank took them on after Joe transferred the farm to his son, “who was hoping he could make it then with another loan set up.” And for a few more years, the dairy stumbled on, but the constant struggle of economic insecurity finally became too much for the family, and they put the farm up for auction.

In a way, Joe says, the sale was a mixed blessing. He and his wife retained a small corner of the farm on which their house was built; the farm was purchased by another farming family (not developers, thankfully); and they could enjoy their life as a family again - free from the looming shadow of debt. These types of economic stressors, Joe says, “rob families of the joy that comes from tending the land,” and, “take the energy away that’s needed to persevere in the stewardship of the land.” The loss of joy in the work of home is a tragedy indeed, and one that must be guarded against at all costs. But we cannot address the loss of joy until we address the greater tragedy of a society that is actively taking away the few homes in which that joy still exists.

Neither is this tragedy unique to my small corner of the world. Joe tells a story about a native american who visited the farm to pray a blessing over the land centuries after his own ancestors had been forcibly removed from it. Today, we live in a world of crisis, with tens of millions of refugees fleeing from forces beyond their control, giving up homes and lands that were every bit as deeply embedded in their souls as Joe's farm was embedded in his. These people, their anchors mercilessly uprooted and their ships cast adrift, are the first to suffer the ill-effects of any global calamity. Here in our bubble, floating over the precipice, we shamefully underestimate the value of a stake in the ground, and our indifference to the integrity of our foundations is a disgrace to the future. "We are under increasing pressure," Berry writes, "to choose caring over not caring. We know that caring will involve us in great effort and discomfort, and we dread to choose it, but we know too that the toils and miseries of not caring are becoming greater day by day" ("The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity" 71). Or, at least, some of us know it. A great many people have yet to learn it, and we must, along with Berry, hope they learn it while it is still possible to choose.

Choosing to establish a home that tethers you spiritually as well as geographically is not the same as renouncing the rest of the world - it is a desperate attempt to save it. I am not advocating a mass return to parochialism; it is possible to be educated and decent without striding from country to country. Neither is it necessary (or advisable, really) to immediately purchase a small farm. Homes can be made on whatever land and in whatever type of structure. If you do not, as my sister does, have a home that is more than a "space," make one. If your security or economic situation prevents you from staying in one place long enough to make one, model one. Model one in every house you enter, so that your children, who may one day out-do you, will have a spiritual precedent to follow. Do not lead them away from that instinct for home

which has guided humanity for centuries and the loss of which has brought us nearer to destruction than ever before. “Man has always lost his way,” Chesterton writes, “He has been a tramp ever since Eden; but he always knew, or thought he knew, what he was looking for. Every man has a house somewhere in the elaborate cosmos.” Let each man find his place in the cosmos and stick to it. Let him protect it with all his might and main. Let him have but a deeply-delved, firm foothold in a field somewhere and he will not fall with the rest of his fleeting constructions into the chasm.

“From the Outside;” Seeking a Hope Beyond Ourselves

This is a strange time to be writing about hope. We are divided, displaced, and probably dying (as a society - though this is less metaphorical now than it should be). Needless to say, in general, things are not looking up. But this does not mean that we should be looking down; we should not hang our heads in despair just yet. It is just when the man is plunging over the cliff that he must look up with all his might for a handhold, even if he is unlikely to find one. “For practical purposes,” writes G.K. Chesterton, “it is at the hopeless moment that we require the hopeful man. Exactly at the instant when hope ceases to be reasonable,” he continues, “it begins to be useful” (158). Chesterton is not talking here about the kind of hope which belongs to “bright prospects and the morning,” which, however, is also sadly lacking these days; he is talking about that hope which “is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate” and which “exists only in earthquake and eclipse” (157). It has been a good while since we had a life-threatening eclipse, but the ground does constantly seem to be shaking under our feet, and we certainly have a rather gaping fissure in our society. On the whole, it is not hard to imagine why people do not feel inclined to smile at what sometimes seems like a gathering gloom.

When I asked a good pastor-friend of ours what he thought was the biggest danger facing our Southern Lancaster County community today, he pointed to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and by the socio-political climate. “For most people,” he notes, “There are a lot of unknowns right now,” and, he continues, “when you’re living in the arena of the unknown that doesn’t have answers, that creates unrest.” This unrest is what concerns him most about our community today. It comes, he says, “from having shaky foundations.” It comes from

foundations built on things like economics and politics. These are perhaps the two least stable structures in modern American society, and they are certainly the most divisive. In some ways, holding on to things like political identity, which give the illusion of firmness because they are so polarizing, makes people feel as if they are rooted in something that will not tremble every time the wind blows. Some people mask their uncertainty, my pastor-friend says, “by getting on a bandwagon politically, but” he notes, “that’s not going to solve all the problems. I don’t care what party you’re getting on, it’s not going to solve all the issues.” In fact, blind adherence to these faulty foundations is exactly what makes the future appear so dismal. If we cannot find common ground in the face of the various crises that confront us, they will continue to grow uninterrupted out of control as we shout obliviously at each other from opposite sides of a chasm. But it is counterproductive to preach only problems. “So long a complaint,” writes Berry in one of his essays, “accumulates a debt to hope.” If we want to move forward, we must point out the way. The chasm and the gloom cannot be the whole picture.

The trouble is that hope is hard work. One of my least favorite platitudes - which actually gets bandied about in my family quite a lot - is that meaningless and eminently unhelpful saying: “It is what it is.” As if it could not possibly be any better. One of the most wonderful things about being human is that we have the power of imagination and, consequently, the capacity for change. We are not the captives of “what it is.” We are (or should be, anyway) the creators of “what it could be.” In a society that encourages us to focus only on ourselves and only on the present moment, it is easy to forget how miraculous we have been and how miraculous we can still be. “We live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself,” writes Marilynne Robinson, “We can and do make small and tedious lives as we sail through the cosmos on our uncannily lovely little planet, and this is surely remarkable. But,” she continues,

“we do so much else besides” (“Imagination in Community” 21). Or, we *could* do so much else besides. First, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is, in fact, more work to be done and that we can, in the face of fearsome odds, accomplish it. This is the definition of hope.

But if our faith in political or economic systems has demonstrated anything, it is that this hope is unlikely to come from any institution governed and corrupted by man. We *have* been miraculous, but not on our own. And we *have* been able to transcend our “small and tedious lives” at times, but only because we had some consciousness of an existence beyond them. We have lost sight of that great “beyond” which at one time might have placed all the tools of the universe at our disposal and allowed us to hope on a truly massive scale. Now, if we are able to smile at the future at all, it is because we are, like Harvard professor Steven Pinker - who trusts without question in the saving advance of technology - desperately optimistic about our own small ability. “We survey the past and present, extrapolate about what is likely to happen in the future, and,” writes Theologian Miroslav Volf, “if the prospects are good, become optimistic” (56). But optimism is too often a sedative. If we are, as Pinker suggests, bound by our inner nature to improve, there is no reason to work at self-improvement. “Hope, on the other hand,” Volf writes, “has to do with good things in the future that come to us from ‘outside,’” from beyond the self (56). The work that remains to be done is the work of capturing the vision of that outside hope and implementing it in our lives. Of course, when Volf refers to hope “from the outside,” he is talking about his faith - about the hope that comes “from God” (56). Volf sees so much potential in a hope based on the divine precisely because it is not limited to the narrowness and small capabilities of self. It lifts us off the shaking foundations we have built for ourselves, and places our feet on an infinite stretch of solid ground that (when envisioned correctly, anyway) has nothing whatever to do with national politics or global economic forces.

This is undoubtedly the sort of foundation that my pastor friend wants for our community members. “The foundations that the people need right now are certainly spiritual and need to be founded on the Lord,” he says, “separate from any kind of grounding that we’re trying to build for ourselves socio-politically-wise.” But he is also conscious of the fact that this firm and hope-giving reliance on spiritual rather than worldly forces is something we have either already lost or are losing rapidly. Joe, a friend who recently lost his dairy farm to economic pressures, notes that the reason small farming is so hard these days has to do with more than a lack of economic viability. “It could be,” he remarks, “that the spirituality of it might be losing traction too.” He tells a story about going to a breakfast hosted by a local company for the farming community, and recalls that they didn’t say a prayer before the meal. “Well, this is different,” he remembers thinking, “This company had always had someone give an invocation, and it wasn’t happening anymore... And I’m not sure why that is,” he says, “except that there’s more emphasis on business.” There is more significance in this modern emphasis on business (to the exclusion of all else) than many of us realize.

We should not accept with such oblivious equanimity the normalization of supreme faith in the works of man. Volf sees this normalization as an effect of new humanism and its “anthropocentric shift,” which is characterized by “the gradual redirection of interest from the transcendent God to human beings and their mundane affairs” (59). It is a sad truth that our “mundane affairs” almost always have something to do with money, and this shift of human dependence on faith to the worship of fiscal security has been happening gradually over centuries. In many ways, we have never been free of it. Thoreau saw it in the bleeding conscience of America whose citizens, he argues, could not find it in themselves to stand up to tyranny and slavery for fear of losing their possessions. For the individual, the cost of this willing

violation of conscience - according to Thoreau - is agency (226). When we give up on our allegiance to a power that transcends the world, we are not freeing ourselves; we are surrendering our wills to the thousands of meaner and more ephemeral deities that rush in to fill the void. And the depreciation of hope is the inevitable result. There is no comparison between the scope of hope offered by what Volf calls “the vast expanse of the infinite God” and the narrow scope of hope offered by the “single self” balancing tremulously on its mortal constructions (61). We may derive more hope from the “vast expanse” of faith not only because it is eternal, but because it has (or ought to have) space for everyone, regardless of political affiliation or economic class.

We have already noted that our society is currently arrayed evenly along two sides of a chasm. We are not likely to bridge this gap any time soon if we remain atop our personal pedestals of political affiliation (or any other such comfortable and polarizing echo chamber), to which we cling with our compatriots because we are convinced there is nothing else to stand on. But faith, Joe says, “has to do with relationships.” And relationships across all man-made boundaries are essential to the work of hope. We cannot bring the “outside” hope into reality if half the population is actively and even violently excluded on an ideological basis from participating in it. Our own desires are characterized by exclusivity and self-service. God’s vision demands something much more challenging from us. It demands the work of coming together in spite of difference, and it asks us to live with the fact that we ought not to destroy this variety of perspectives and values, even if coexisting with it sometimes makes us uncomfortable. The hope of our faith is that the foundation we stand on runs deeper and lasts longer than the most vitriolic of our differences.

It is this unification on a spiritual level that our communities miss most today because, in many ways, it is the only thing that might keep them together in this age of difference. “We tended to the relationships that are in the farming community,” Joe says, “because we saw ourselves connected relationally and even spiritually with those around us. It was just who we were... It’s how we shared equipment sometimes, or how we honored and respected one another.” Perhaps Joe and his fellow small farmers, not all of whom were Christians, were able to maintain this sustaining system of mutual aid and respect because faith, which does not require universal conversion to have influence, holds us accountable to all our neighbors. “I remember that one time we practiced something on the farm that offended a neighbor,” Joe recalls, “so I remember going to them and apologizing because we knew it affected them.” In the spirit of that mutual aid which used to define the farming community more than it does now, Joe and his neighbor were helping each other to bring in their harvests before it rained. The neighbor’s harvest was brought out of the field on time, but when Sunday dawned, much of Joe’s harvest was still out in the open. Faced with considerable financial loss if it got rained on, Joe asked his neighbor to help finish the job despite the fact that it was the Sabbath. They finished on time, but later, Joe reflects, “it seemed offensive to the community” - and not just to the Christian members of it. As people of faith, the eyes of the world are always on us. “There were a couple other farmers in the community that weren’t Christians that did stuff like that on Sunday’s anyhow, but they knew who we were, so looking back,” Joe says, “we should have stopped and just suffered the consequences... and had more faith.” He felt, perhaps, a little of that bleeding conscience which Thoreau points to as the unavoidable result of valuing security over conviction. But there is great hope in the act of apologizing, of admitting the violation and striving to do better by God’s infinite vision. Would that we were all so inclined.

Let us not pretend that all Christians are founded solely and firmly on the divine. Confirmed secularist Anthony Kronman in his book *Education's End*, which laments the death of life exploration in universities, writes that, "if one wants organized assistance in answering the question of life's meaning, and not just the love of family and friends, it is to the churches that one must turn" (65). One is forced to question whether or not this is still true. Indeed, one is forced to rather doubt it. Many of our churches, like microcosms of American society, have their own fissures up the middle. And those churches that are not internally divided have taken up positions on either side of the larger American chasm and scream desperately across it to drown out their own cognitive dissonance. Having lost sight of the "vast expanse of the infinite God," too many of us commit the unthinkable travesty of reformatting the hope of God into a tool small enough to serve our own meager hopes and desires. "By constructing a picture of God so as to fit already given notions of human flourishing," Volf writes, "we would be enacting one of the most troubling malfunctions of faith - divesting faith of its own integrity and making it simply an instrument of our own interests and purposes" (70). It is important to recognize that these reformations are indeed *malfunctions* and not *effects* of faith. Our hope is laid on a foundation that will outlast this turmoil and will remain true at the core in the face of any abuse. The most fundamental challenge for Christians today, Volf concludes, is "To *really mean* that the presence and activity of the God of love, who can make us love our neighbors as ourselves, is our hope and the hope of the world - that this God is the secret of our flourishing as persons, cultures, and interdependent inhabitants of a single globe" (74). We do indeed have just this unimaginably precious "single globe." We do not, as Berry urges throughout his writings, "have another world to live in," and until we learn to live in it together without destruction (which is not likely to

happen any time soon), we must reach up with all our might for the steady handhold which is the hope of faith - the hope of something beyond ourselves.

This is indeed a strange time to be writing about hope. My generation in particular, which is leaving the church in droves and is faced with a great host of seemingly insurmountable challenges, is grasping at increasingly fragile straws. "I think you need to be bold," my pastor tells me, "you need to be courageous; you need to be willing to shake the status quo a little bit because you feel like this is what God is saying right now." But, of course, one cannot be bold or courageous or revolutionary if he is balancing on ruins. We need to listen for the voice above the clamor of the political, economic, social, and environmental chaos that makes our situation appear so irremediable. We need to reach up and out for hope, and we need to work tirelessly to make it real.

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