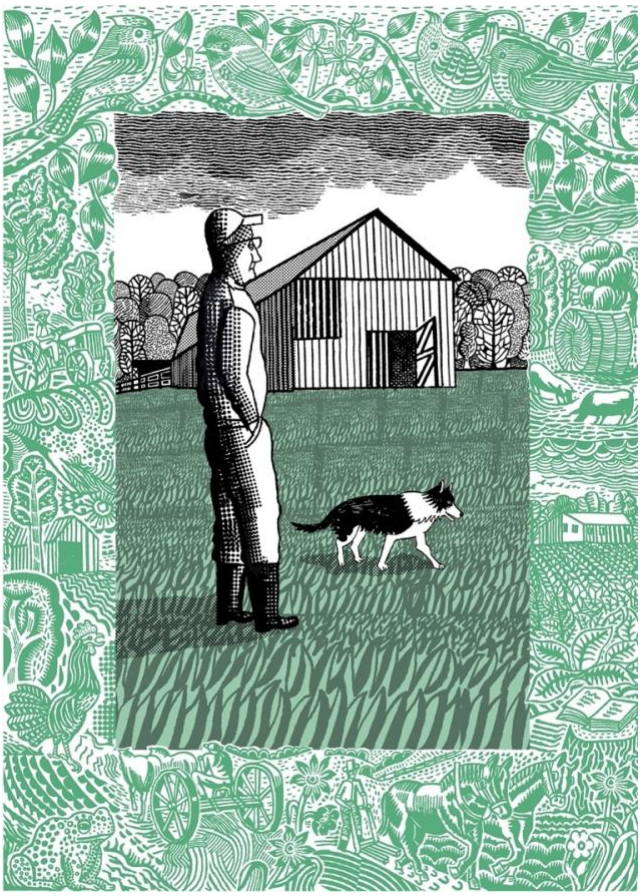
Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age

Sixty years after renouncing modernity, the writer is still contemplating a better way forward.

By Dorothy Wickenden

February 21, 2022



https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/02/28/wendell-berrys-advice-for-a-cataclysmic-age

Berry has found a kind of salvation—and a lifelong subject—in his stewardship of the land he farms in Kentucky.

Hidden in the woods on a slope above the Kentucky River, just south of the Ohio border, is a twelve-by-sixteen-foot cabin with a long front porch. If not for the concrete pilings that raise the building high off the ground, it would seem almost a living part of the forest. Readers around the world know the "long-legged house" as the place where Wendell Berry, as a twenty-nine-year-old married man with two young children, found his voice. As he explained in his essay by that name, he built the cabin in the summer of 1963—a place where he could write, read, and contemplate the legacies of his forebears, and what inheritance he might leave behind.

The cabin began as a log house built by Berry's great-great-great-grandfather Ben Perry, one of the area's first settlers, and it lived on as a multigenerational salvage operation. In the nineteen-twenties, with the original house in disrepair, Wendell's bachelor great-uncle Curran Mathews painstakingly took apart what remained and used the lumber to make a camp along the Kentucky River, where he could escape "the bounds of the accepted." Wendell, "a melancholic and rebellious boy," found peace in the tumbledown camp, even though it flooded every time the river overflowed. Eventually, it became uninhabitable, and he pried off some poplar and walnut boards to use in building his own cabin, on higher ground—a "satisfactory nutshell of a house," he wrote. Standing on its long legs, it had "a peering, aerial look, as though built under the influence of trees."

Berry, who is eighty-seven, has written fifty-two books there—essays, poetry, short stories, and novels—most of them while also running a farm, teaching English at the University of Kentucky, and engaging in political protests. This summer, he'll publish a sprawling nonfiction book, "The Need to Be Whole," followed by a short-story collection in the fall.

Last October, Berry showed me the camp, asking only that I not say where it is. Although he has laid bare his entire life in print, he tightly guards his privacy. The single room, containing an antique woodstove against the back wall and a neatly made cot in one corner, was dominated by his worktable, set before a forty-paned window—"the eye of the house"—that looks out onto the porch, the woods, and the river below.

The camp has no plumbing or electricity. Half a dozen well-sharpened pencils were lined up on the worktable, alongside small stacks of paper. On top of one stack was a note Berry had made, and crossed out, about Marianne Moore's poem "What Are Years?" Above a small safe, curling photographs were taped to a wall: Wallace Stegner, Ernest Gaines, Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon, Thomas Merton. Berry pointed out a youthful shot of his wife, Tanya, with cropped, wavy hair, striding along a hillside by their house. He had made a bird feeder and fastened it to the porch railing, so he could watch the comings and goings of chickadees, titmice, juncos, and jays. I remembered a line from "The Long-Legged House": "One bright warm day in November it was so quiet that I could hear the fallen leaves ticking, like a light rain, as they dried and contracted, scraping their points and edges against each other."

The place was so inviting, I wondered if anyone had ever broken in—seeking, perhaps, a little food and a furtive night's rest. "Yes, once," Berry said. He was pretty sure he knew the culprit. "Someone took out a few panes and tried to get into my safe. I wrote him a note—'Dear Thief, if you're in trouble, don't tear this place up. Come to the house, and I'll give you what you need.' "

In the "long-legged house," a remote cabin with no plumbing or electricity, Berry has written fifty-two books, during breaks from farmwork and teaching. Photograph by James Baker Hall

From this sliver of vanishing America, Berry cultivates the unfashionable virtues of neighborliness and compassion. He divides his time between writing and farmwork, continuing his vocation of championing sustainable agriculture in a country fuelled by industrial behemoths, while striving to insure that rural Americans—a mocked, despised, and ever-dwindling minority—do not perish altogether. Whenever the country struggles with a new man-made emergency, Berry is rediscovered. A Twitter feed called @WendellDaily recently circulated one of his maxims: "Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy."

Berry's admirers call him an Isaiah-like prophet. Michael Pollan and Alice Waters say that he changed their lives with five words: "Eating is an agricultural act." Pollan became a scourge of the meat industry, genetically modified food, and factory farms; Waters launched the farm-to-table movement. The cultural critic bell hooks, another Kentuckian, began reading Berry in college, finding his work "fundamentally radical and eclectic." Decades later, she visited him at his farm to talk about the importance of home and community and the complexities of America's racial divide.

Berry's critics see him as a utopian or a crank, a Luddite who never met a technological innovation he admired. In "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer," an infamous 1987 essay that ran in *Harper's*, he announced, "I do not see that computers are bringing us one step nearer to anything that does matter to me: peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work." When indignant readers sent a blizzard of letters to the editor, Berry noted in reply that one man, who called him "a fool" and "doubly a fool," had "fortunately misspelled my name, leaving me a speck of hope that I am not the 'Wendell Barry' he was talking about."

Ifirst heard of Wendell Berry when I was ten years old. One evening in 1964, my father, Dan Wickenden, came home from his editorial office at Harcourt Brace, in midtown Manhattan, and described his new author: a lanky youth of thirty, who sat with his elbows on his knees, talking in a slow Kentucky cadence and gesturing with large, expressive hands. An image lodged in my mind—busy men in dark suits, their secretaries typing and taking dictation, while Berry told amusing stories in bluejeans and scuffed shoes. (Tanya disabused me of that part of the memory: "Khakis, maybe. Not bluejeans.")

I remembered this encounter not long ago when I pulled from a bookshelf "A Continuous Harmony," a collection of Berry's essays that my father edited in 1971. With its homely brown jacket and yellowing pages, it looked its age, yet it spoke urgently to our current compounding crises. One of the pieces,

"Think Little," announced, "Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life, is contributing *directly* to the ruin of this planet." Berry went on to say that he was "ashamed and deeply distressed that American government should have become the chief cause of disillusionment with American principles."

I was curious about Berry's evolution from a self-described "small writer" into an internationally acclaimed man of letters. After my father died, my mother xeroxed his correspondence with Berry and gave it to me—a pile of letters that covered the years they worked together, 1964 to 1977. The two were well matched. My family lived rather austerely in what Dan called "exurban" Connecticut, where he chopped wood for our fireplace and tended an organic vegetable garden. His father, Leonard Wickenden, a chemist, had been writing for decades about the dangers of fertilizers and pesticides. Dan and Wendell shared a love of the land, a droll wit, and a punctilious commitment to proper usage. Dan wrote to Wendell about a load of horse manure that had just been delivered for his garden. Wendell tutored Dan in the mating habits of toads: "Sometimes the male is found still clinging to the dead female who has perished in his embrace."

There were moments of tension, as there always are between writer and editor. In July, 1966, as Berry entered the seventh year of trying to tame his unwieldy novel "A Place on Earth," my father presented him with "extensive suggestions" for excision, notifying him that, "unless further and fairly drastic cuts are made, the book in print will be some 672 closely set pages." Wendell replied, "Let me make myself perfectly clear. I am damned doubtful that I'll cut anything like a hundred more pages out of this book." Yet, he added, "if I keep finding so much to agree with in your complaints I ought to get the MS back and rewrite it from one end to the other."

Thinking that the elderly Berry might like to reacquaint himself with the young Berry, I mailed a letter to introduce myself. He replied on the pages of a yellow legal pad: "Dear Dorothy, I'm hurrying to answer, and I hope you don't mind being written to with a pencil. I no longer have the courage to write if I can't erase." He recalled that his work on "A Place on Earth" had been "a long and awkward struggle, and so having Dan's help and encouragement at that time was wondrous good fortune." After more letters and phone calls, he and Tanya invited me to visit.

A few hours west of the decapitated mountains of Appalachia is the part of Kentucky known as the Bluegrass region. The Kentucky and Ohio Rivers wind through hills dotted with sheep, cows, horses, and handsome old tobacco barns. Lanes Landing Farm sits in this landscape, a white clapboard farmhouse on a hundred and seventeen acres. Wendell and Tanya share the house with their amiable sheepdog, Liz, who greeted me in a light rain as I climbed a set of steep stairs from the road. Wendell—rangy, with a slight writer's stoop—stood on the porch, holding the door open with a wide smile. Tanya, petite and cordial, led me into their kitchen, where I sat with Wendell at a round wooden table by a wall of books and a window overlooking a grapevine.

The Berrys live barely a mile from the town of Port Royal, which has not prospered over the years. It consists of about sixty residents, Parker Farm Supply and Restaurant, a Baptist church and a Methodist church, a fire station, and a post office, where Berry drops off and picks up his mail six days a week. On Sundays, he sometimes accompanies Tanya to the Port Royal Baptist Church ("not Southern Baptist"), where they worship with neighbors and four generations of Berrys. Tanya, who grew up in a bohemian, academic family in Lexington, is the pianist for the choir. "Never did I dream I would end up playing Baptist hymns in a Baptist church," she wrote to me. "But it has become such a pleasure."

When the time came to harvest tobacco, Berry and his neighbors swapped work, in what he called "a sort of agrarian passion." Photograph by James Baker Hall

In the early sixties, the Berrys seemed to be launched on a very different life. After Wendell received a Guggenheim Fellowship, they lived for a year in Tuscany and southern France, then moved with their children, Mary and Den, to New York, where Wendell taught at New York University. In 1964, he announced to his astonished colleagues that he had accepted a professorship at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington, and that he was going to take up farming near his family's "home place." That year, he and Tanya bought their house and their first twelve acres. His New York friends, imagining him surrounded by moonshine-swilling hillbillies and feuding clans, were sure he had consigned himself to intellectual death. He set out to prove them wrong, even as he admitted, "I seem to have been born with an aptitude for a way of life that was doomed."

He found a kind of salvation, and a subject, in stewardship of the land. With renunciative discipline, he tilled his fields as his father and grandfather had, using a team of horses and a plow. And he took up organic gardening. I'd learned from the letters that it was my father who introduced Berry to the practice, sending him Leonard's book "Gardening with Nature," and recommending the works of Sir Albert Howard. An early-twentieth-century English botanist, Howard had studied traditional farming methods in India and emerged as an evangelist for sustainable agriculture. In 1977, Berry quoted Howard, his defining guide on the topic, as "treating the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject."

I confessed that I'd never read Howard. Berry, turning professorial, retrieved "An Agricultural Testament" and read aloud, enunciating each word: " 'Mother Earth never attempts to farm without livestock; she always raises mixed crops; great pains are taken to preserve the soil and to prevent erosion; the mixed vegetable and animal wastes are converted into humus; there is no waste.' " Berry closed the book. "That's it," he said. "That's the pinch of the hourglass."

Two years ago, in The New York Review of Books, Verlyn Klinkenborg complained about Berry's habit of pointing out our "hollow lives, our degenerate bodies, our feelings of dislocation and spiritual bankruptcy." True enough. Berry made his name with "The Unsettling of America," a furious polemic published in 1977. The immediate villain was President Nixon's Agriculture Secretary, Earl Butz, who warned small farmers to "adapt or die." But Berry had a bigger target, which he came to call "technological fundamentalism": "If we have built towering cities, we have raised even higher the cloud of megadeath. If people are as grass before God, they are as nothing before their machines."

When I told a friend, a dedicated organic gardener, that I was writing about Wendell Berry, she replied, "I wonder if your father ever asked Berry to lighten up." Readers of his fiction and poetry might find that line of inquiry puzzling. The novelist Colum McCann told The Atlantic in 2017 that Berry's poems

“have a real twinkle in their eyes in the face of a dark world.” He recited “The Mad Farmer’s Love Song,” which features one of his favorite figures in the canon:

> O when the world’s at peace
> and every man is free
> then will I go down unto my love.
> O and I may go down
> several times before that.

Bobbie Ann Mason, a Kentucky novelist who has known Berry for decades, e-mailed with me about his fictional universe of Port William. Like Port Royal, it is a vest-pocket farm town on the west side of the Kentucky River. From the Civil War to the present, Port William has been home to a dozen families and to an entertaining supporting cast. Mason cited Miss Minnie and Ptolemy Proudfoot, a couple she found particularly endearing. Miss Minnie is a neat, ninety-pound schoolteacher. Ptolemy, known as Tol, is a tall, dishevelled, three-hundred-pound farmer. Minnie adores him—even though, as Berry writes, “The only time Tol’s clothes looked good was before he put them on.”

I asked Mason how Berry managed to be funny about his characters without patronizing them. She replied, “In a small community, humorous banter has to affirm energy and purpose. It can’t be hostile, or gossipy.” She suggested that Berry’s storytelling grew naturally from long hours of working with other farmers: “Stripping tobacco, for instance, is hard, tedious labor, and a group gets through it by telling jokes and stories.”

When Wendell and his three siblings were young, Henry County was famous for a light-leafed, unusually fragrant crop known as burley tobacco. The small farmers of the “burley belt”—including parts of Kentucky, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia—saw themselves as part of a centuries-old culture that produced the most labor-intensive agricultural product in the world. In “Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy,” a book of photographs that Berry’s college friend James Baker Hall took in 1973 at a neighbor’s farm, Berry writes about the cultivation of tobacco as “a sort of agrarian passion, because of its beauty at nearly every stage of production and because of the artistry required to produce it.” At harvest time, neighbors “swapped work,” as they did when putting up hay or killing hogs, undertakings that took days and required intense collective labor. In one story, Andy Catlett, Wendell’s fictional counterpart, tells a young helper, “If you don’t have people, a lot of people, whose hands can make order of whatever they pick up, you’re going to be shit out of luck.”

I had always associated tobacco with lung cancer. Seeing that I needed help understanding it as a cultural touchstone, Berry said, “I’d better tell you about my daddy.” His father, John Marshall Berry, had a searing early experience that shaped his life, as well as the lives of his children and grandchildren. In January, 1907, when John was six, he woke up in what he called “the black of midnight” to the sound of his father’s horse on the gravel driveway. He was heading for the annual tobacco auction, in Louisville. The family had sat around the fire earlier, speculating about how much he would get for the year’s crop, and how they would use the money to pay down their debts. Instead, he returned empty-handed. The American Tobacco Company, a trust run by the tycoon James B. Duke, had forced the price of tobacco below the cost of production and transport. Wendell said, “My dad saw grown men leaving the warehouses crying.”

Berry's children sometimes struggled with the rigors of raising their own food, but they both stayed in the area and involved in farming. Photograph courtesy Tanya Amyx Berry

John Berry became an attorney, married Virginia Erdman Perry, from Port Royal, and established himself as a prominent citizen of Henry County. According to Tom Grissom, who is writing a book about the local history of tobacco, Berry was a member of his town's bank board, a trustee of his college, and a Sunday-school teacher at the Baptist church. He was also a fervent advocate of a new organization, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. It enabled farmers to free themselves from the grip of the trust by establishing production controls and parity prices, and by selling their tobacco directly to manufacturers.

In 1933, as prices plummeted during the Great Depression, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act, to save farmers from ruin. The act introduced production controls in return for price supports—a federal version of the regional Burley Association. John Berry served as the association's president from 1957 until 1975, and insisted that the programs were not handouts but the equivalent of a minimum wage. Wendell maintained that the purpose of the Burley Association was to "achieve fair prices, fairly determined, and with minimal help from the government."

Berry often writes of trying to nurture a "human economy"—the antithesis of America's "total economy," run by latter-day robber barons and the politicians who count on their donations. By his definition, a corporation is "a pile of money to which a number of persons have sold their moral allegiance." Objecting to Supreme Court rulings that treat corporations as persons, Berry argues that "the limitless destructiveness of this economy comes about precisely because a corporation is not a person." In other words, "It can experience no personal hope or remorse, no change of heart. It cannot humble itself. It goes about its business as if it were immortal, with the single purpose of becoming a bigger pile of money."

When the rain let up, Berry and I drove south from Port Royal toward New Castle, to see his "native land," where he and his brother, John, rambled as boys. We drove along a creek called Cane Run, through a forest of sycamores, hickories, and maples, in shades of gold and rust. He stopped where the woods by the creek gave way to an open field and a tobacco barn. The land was part of a fifty-acre tract that Wendell's maternal grandfather sold in 1931, to a man Wendell referred to as Mr. Arthur Ford and his sons Melvin and Marvin. Wendell and Tanya bought the tract after Melvin died, in 1984.

As we climbed a steep rise, Wendell talked about how the Fords had felled trees and extracted rocks, so that the hill could be plowed for tobacco. Before the advent of commercial fertilizers, hill farmers needed the highly fertile fresh-cleared soil. The Fords used a team of horses or mules to pull a jumper plow, with a vertical blade called a coulter. "If you came to a root or a rock," Wendell said, "the coulter

would raise the plow. You need a very settled team, because when it rose up, if you didn't look out, it would break your leg—or your neck."

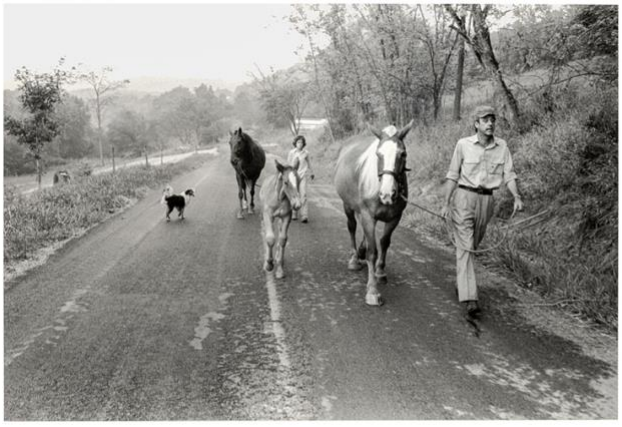
When Wendell was a boy, he became close to Melvin and Marvin, contemporaries of his father whom everyone called Meb and Mob. The brothers stopped going to school after the eighth grade, but Wendell considers them among his most knowledgeable teachers. He especially loved Meb, who on Sunday afternoons took him through the countryside, on foot and horseback, teaching him about the wildlife and telling him stories about his parents and grandparents, who'd lived entirely off the land.

Mr. Arthur Ford was famous for his feats of strength. Once, Meb told Wendell, his father "carried in a sack on his back fifty rabbits and a big possum" up the slope we were climbing, and across the ridge to the road to Port Royal, where he sold the animals at the farm store. Meb recalled, "It was the tiredest my daddy ever got."

School held little interest for Wendell. "I didn't like confinement," he said. Second-grade teachers gave boys knives for perfect attendance, but he spurned the bribe, and by the eighth grade was earning F's in conduct. When he was fourteen, his parents, determined to see their bright children buckle down, sent him and John to Millersburg Military Institute; their younger sisters, Mary Jo and Markie, later went to a private school in Virginia.

Millersburg had an effect on Wendell, but not the one his parents had intended. "The highest aim of the school was to produce a perfectly obedient, militarist, puritanical moron who could play football," Berry writes in "The Long-Legged House." His greatest lesson from those years: "Take a simpleton and give him power and confront him with intelligence—and you have a tyrant." Each year, when school let out for the summer, Wendell headed to his great-uncle Curran's camp with an axe and a scythe, to mow the wild grass and horseweed. "It was some instinctive love of wilderness that would always bring me back here," he wrote, "but it was by the instincts of a farmer that I established myself."

He turned himself around at the University of Kentucky, where he earned undergraduate and master's degrees in English. He studied creative writing with Robert Hazel, a charismatic poet and novelist with a gift for shaping raw talents, including Ed McClanahan, James Baker Hall, Gurney Norman, and Bobbie Ann Mason. Wendell recalled, "He did me the great service of never allowing me to be satisfied with any work I showed him."



When Berry moved to the country with his wife, Tanya, he gave her a privy that "never aspired so high as to have a door." Photograph by James Baker Hall

Among the students at the university was Tanya Amyx, the daughter of an art professor and a textile artist, who was studying French and music. Wendell spotted her standing beside the newel post of a staircase in Miller Hall. When he learned afterward that the building was being remodelled, he told a workman, “Look, when you tear that post out, I want it.” Wendell and Tanya were married a year and a half later, and they spent their first summer together at the camp. “For me, that was a happy return,” Wendell wrote. For Tanya, it meant “hardships she could not have expected.” His gift to his bride was a new privy, “which never aspired so high as to have a door, but did sport a real toilet seat.” In a letter to me, Tanya dismissed the talk of hardships: “We had helpful family (of Wendell’s) close around who offered a bathtub if necessary.”

She became her husband’s first reader and best critic. She was also, in mechanical terms, his typist, a fact that outraged feminists when Berry mentioned it in his Harper’s essay. (Tanya looks back on the controversy with amusement: “Did I tell you several women have greeted me with ‘Oh, you’re the one who types!’ ”) Berry responded that he preferred his admittedly old-fashioned view of marriage—“a state of mutual help”—to the popular idea of “two successful careerists in the same bed,” and “a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended.”

In 1958, Berry was awarded a Wallace Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford. He and Tanya packed their things and three-month-old Mary in their Plymouth and drove across the country. Berry prized his seminars with Stegner, whom he considers the West’s foremost “storyteller, historian, critic, conservator and loyal citizen.” In a Jefferson Lecture in 2012, he quoted Stegner’s description of Americans as one of two basic types, “boomers” and “stickers.” Boomers are “those who pillage and run,” who “make a killing and end up on Easy Street.” Stickers are “those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in.” They are “placed people,” in Berry’s term—forever attached to the look of the sky, the smell of native plants, and the vernacular of home.

At Stanford, Berry attended seminars with Ken Kesey, and, improbably, they became lasting friends. He grew particularly close to Ernest Gaines, another Stegner Fellow. Gaines was one of twelve children from a sharecropping family who lived in former slave quarters on a sugar plantation in Louisiana. Berry was descended from slaveholders on both sides of his family. But, as he puts it in “The Need to Be Whole,” he and Gaines had “a shared sense of origin in the talk of old people and our loyalty to the places and communities that nurtured us.” bell hooks liked to quote a line of Berry’s about Gaines: “He has shown that the local, fully imagined, becomes universal.” She saw the same gift in Berry.

Although Berry is enviably prolific, he doesn’t find writing easy. When I asked about his process, he replied with a parable. On a bitterly cold winter day, he had to leave the comfort of the house: his livestock was out, and a fence had to be mended. His gloves made his fingers clumsy, so he took them off, freezing his hands as he twisted the wire. “What’s curious to me is that, once started, you’re interested, you’re into it, you’re doing your work, and you’re happy,” he said. “That applies to writing. Sometimes I don’t believe I can stand it another day, but then I’m working at problems I know how to deal with, to an extent.”

In 1960, as he embarked on “A Place on Earth,” he felt lost. “I didn’t know anything, you see,” he told me. He wanted to write an ambitious regional novel, but he was “just stuck and depressed.” At one point, Tanya suggested, “Maybe you need to mature a bit.” But his cussedness prevailed, and year by year the novel grew. He’d long since forgotten his prickly response to my father’s insistence that he cut those final hundred pages. I read the exchange to him, and he listened thoughtfully. Then he said, “Your father must have known what an ass I was making of myself.”

When it came time to design the book’s jacket, Berry refused anything that might be construed as self-promotion. He wrote to Dan that he’d like to forgo an author photo, and asked that the flap copy, “if

there must be any at all, be kept to a description of the book, objective as possible." As for author interviews: "Why, before I have come to any coherent understanding myself of what I'm doing here, should I admit some journalist to render it all in the obvious clichés?" He finally relented about the photo, after Dan pleaded, "Perhaps absurdly, it can help to persuade people to read the book it adorns, and we do want people to read your book, and I dare say even you won't mind too much if people read your book."

In those days, the best-seller lists were filled with novels by Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, and Saul Bellow—not to mention Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins—and it wasn't clear that Berry would ever find an audience. The sales figures were grim. Wendell wrote to Dan in June, 1969, about "The Long-Legged House": "I'm glad you told me the book hasn't yet sold 2,000 copies. The particularity of that saves me a lot of trouble trying to imagine how poorly it must be doing."

Almost despite himself, Berry built a following. Most readers first discovered his fiction and poetry, then his essays, where they found a lyrically rendered view of a peril-stricken world. In 1972, after spending two days flying over the coalfields of Kentucky, he wrote, "The damage has no human scale. It is a geologic upheaval." Entire mountaintops were "torn off and cast into the valleys," he added. "It is a scene from the Book of Revelation. It is a domestic Vietnam." My father, responding to an essay about war and ecological degradation, asked, "Hasn't 'civilized' man almost always been out of tune with the natural world, a parasite and a destroyer of his planet?" Berry replied, "Thomas Merton says man went wrong when he left the Stone Age."

In 1977, as my father was being ushered into retirement, Berry was told that it was time to find a new publisher. Two years later, he said, North Point Press "adopted me." North Point was a new venture in Berkeley, co-founded by Jack Shoemaker, a thirty-three-year-old former bookseller. Shoemaker, who now edits Berry at Counterpoint Press, told me that his books were popular with environmentalists, hippies, and civil-rights advocates: "Wendell was a hero to those people, saying the unsayable out loud." His ideas about the virtues of agrarian societies had sweeping implications—to solve the problems of the modern world required thoroughly reconceiving how we live. Wallace Stegner once wrote to him, "Your books seem conservative. They are actually profoundly revolutionary."

Berry distrusts political movements, which, he writes, "soon decline from any possibility of reasonable discourse to slogans, shouts, and a merely hateful contention in the capitols and streets." Still, he is a lifelong protester. In 1967, he helped lead the Sierra Club's successful effort to block the Red River Gorge Dam, in east-central Kentucky. The following year, he marched against the Vietnam War in Lexington, where he told the crowd that, as a member of the human race, he was "in the worst possible company: communists, fascists and totalitarians of all sorts, militarists and tyrants, exploiters, vandals, gluttons, ignoramuses, murderers." But, he insisted, he was given hope by people "who through all the sad destructive centuries of our history have kept alive the vision of peace and kindness and generosity and humility and freedom."

On Valentine's Day weekend, 2011, Berry joined a small group of activists to occupy Governor Steve Beshear's office in Frankfort, as hundreds more marched outside with "I Love Mountains" placards. They aimed to convince the Governor to withdraw from a lawsuit that the Kentucky Coal Association had filed against the E.P.A. for its efforts to clean up waters polluted by toxic mining runoff. Beshear agreed to visit a few particularly afflicted towns. In Hueysville, a resident named Ricky Handshoe took him to Raccoon Creek, which had turned a fluorescent orange. Aghast, Beshear asked, "But you're on city water, aren't you?" Handshoe said recently that the Governor meant well, but was no match for the coal lobby: "After he left, nothing much happened."

Berry puts his faith in citizens who are committed to restoring their communities. One of the people at the sit-in was his friend Herb E. Smith, from a family of miners in Whitesburg. In 1969, at the age of seventeen, Smith and seven other young people founded a film workshop, called Appalshop, to produce stories about eastern Kentucky that countered the conventional narrative about benighted Appalachians. Smith told me that in the past half century, as coal jobs have disappeared, Appalshop has grown. With support from government agencies and foundations, it runs a radio station, a theatre program, an art gallery, a filmmaking institute, and a record label. Another nonprofit in town provides health care to the uninsured. A bakery up the road employs recovering opioid addicts. Addressing political disagreements in a solidly red state, Smith said, "These are people with deep concerns about community survival, even in places thought of as full of reactionaries. In reality, people accommodate each other."

Berry hailed the concentration of talent, work, and courage in Whitesburg, citing its most famous resident, Harry Caudill, whose history of Appalachia, "Night Comes to the Cumberlands," came out in 1963 and "brought the war on poverty to eastern Kentucky." He also talked about a married couple, Tom and Pat Gish, who in 1956 bought the local newspaper, the Mountain Eagle, and ran it for fifty-two years. Their first decision was to replace its anodyne motto, "A Friendly Non-Partisan Weekly Newspaper," with "It Screams." Not everyone welcomed the paper's candor about the hazards of mining and the misdeeds of corrupt officials. In 1974, someone threw a firebomb into its offices. The Gishes moved the paper's operations to their house and got out the next issue. Chuckling, Berry noted that the only thing they changed was the slogan: "It Still Screams." He added, "That story has been worth a lot to me. And so much has gathered there and kept on right in the presence of the permanent destruction of the world."

In the kitchen at Lanes Landing Farm, I heard a tap at the door and saw a dark-haired young woman with a blond toddler in her arms: the Berrys' granddaughter Virginia and her daughter Lucinda. Lucie, already full of the Berry hospitality, let me hold her stuffed bunny as Virginia conferred with her grandmother about who would host Thanksgiving, and about friends in the church who hadn't been well. (After they departed, Tanya told me that Lucie had asked excitedly to "say goodbye to Dorothy." I was charmed, until she said, "Our donkey is named Dorothy.")

Wendell explained that Lucie was named for his great-grandmother Lucinda Bowen Berry, the heroine of stories he told his children and grandchildren. Lucinda, a tall, lean, no-nonsense woman married to John J. Berry, was a young mother during the Civil War. Kentucky was a border state, and civilians were subject to routine acts of lawlessness by bands of soldiers, Confederate and Union. On a summer night near the end of the war, Lucinda saw men in uniform making off with her husband on horseback, and set out behind them on foot, in her nightgown. Finding their camp, she reached for John's hand and took him home. I recognized the story, which he included in a piece of fiction in a recent issue of The Threepenny Review.

Despite Berry's veneration of his ancestors, he can be unsparing about their sins. "I am forever being crept up on and newly startled by the realization that my people established themselves here by killing or driving out the original possessors, by the awareness that people were once bought and sold here by my people, by the sense of the violence they have done to their own kind and to each other and to the earth," he wrote in his 1968 essay "A Native Hill." He saw the rapacious practices of modern agribusiness, Big Coal, the military-industrial complex, and Wall Street as the perpetuation of "some intransigent destructiveness" that drove the European settlers in America.

That year, Berry began writing "The Hidden Wound," a book that examines racism as "an emotional dynamics which has disordered both the heart of the society as a whole and of every person in the society." The title refers to an ugly story handed down through generations of Berrys, in which John J.

Berry sold a slave who, the story went, was “too defiant and rebellious to do anything with.” Although it showed the “innate violence of the slave system,” it was relayed “as a bit of interesting history.” Berry admitted, “I have told it that way many times myself. And so the wound has lived beneath the skin.”

The hero of the book is Nick Watkins, a Black man who worked for Wendell’s grandfather and lived in a two-room house on the Berry property. As a boy, Wendell tagged along with Nick on his daily rounds, talking about Nick’s old foxhound Waxy, about how to judge a good saddle horse, and about the prospect of camping together in the mountains. This idyll was shattered on his ninth or tenth birthday, when his grandmother threw him a party, inviting the family and some of the neighbors. Wendell invited Nick. Writing about the tense reaction of his elders, he observed, “I had scratched the wound of racism.” Nick knew that Wendell would be stricken if he did not attend, so he came and sat on the cellar wall behind the house. Wendell spent the party with him, bringing out ice cream and cake to share.

hooks, who taught “The Hidden Wound” at Berea College, told Berry how moved she was by the image of a little boy intervening in a scene “charged with the hidden violence of racism.” Berry, though, wrote almost twenty years later that he considered it perhaps the least satisfying book he’d ever written—he’d barely begun to make sense of the subject. Now he has tried again. In “The Need to Be Whole,” he argues that the problem of race is inextricable from the violent abuse of our natural resources, and that “white people’s part in slavery and all the other outcomes of race prejudice, so damaging to its victims,” has also been “gravely damaging to white people.” The book’s subtitle is “Patriotism and the History of Prejudice.”

Before sending me the manuscript, Berry wrote that he belongs to “a tiny side but no party.” Indeed, this “pondering and ponderous book,” as he calls it, contains something to offend almost everyone. “A properly educated conservative, who has neither approved of abortion nor supported a tax or a regulation, can destroy a mountain or poison a river and sleep like a baby,” he writes. “A well-instructed liberal, who has behaved with the prescribed delicacy toward women and people of color, can consent to the plunder of the land and people of rural America and sleep like a conservative.”

Thomas Friedman, of the Times, is scolded for a preening column in which he calls himself a “green capitalist” and blames Congress for not cracking down on coal, oil, and gas producers. Berry observes, “The deal we are being offered appears to be that we can change the world without changing ourselves.” This kind of thinking enables us to continue using too much energy “of whatever color,” hoping that “fields of solar panels and ranks of gigantic wind machines” will absolve us of guilt as consumers. Which is not to say that Berry renounces the use of green energy. He posed for a photograph several years ago in front of the solar panels by his house, grinning and flashing a peace sign.

Berry summons writers, from Homer to Twain, who extended “understanding and sympathy to enemies, sinners, and outcasts: sometimes to people who happen to be on the other side or the wrong side, sometimes to people who have done really terrible things.” In this spirit, he offers an assessment of Robert E. Lee, whom he calls “one of the great tragic figures of our history.” He presents Lee as a white supremacist and a slaveholder, but also as a reluctant soldier who opposed secession and was forced to choose between conflicting loyalties: his country and his people. “Lee said, ‘I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children,’ ” Berry writes. “For him, the words ‘birthplace’ and ‘home’ and even ‘children’ had a complexity and vibrance of meaning that at present most of us have lost.”

Berry wants readers to hate Lee’s sins but love the sinner, or at least understand his motives. War, he suggests, begins in a failure of acceptance. He writes of exchanging friendly talk with Trump voters at Port Royal’s farm-supply store, a kind of tolerance that is necessary in a small town: “If two neighbors know that they may seriously disagree, but that either of them, given even a small change of

circumstances, may desperately need the other, should they not keep between them a sort of pre-paid forgiveness? They ought to keep it ready to hand, like a fire extinguisher." Without this, we risk conflagration: "A society with an absurdly attenuated sense of sin starts talking then of civil war or holy war."

If readers were incredulous about Berry's claim that a pencil was a better tool than a computer, it's not hard to imagine how many will react to his plea that we extend sympathy to a general whose army fought to perpetuate slavery in America. Several of Berry's friends urged him to abandon the book, anticipating Twitter eruptions and withering reviews. He writes, "My friends, I think, were afraid, now that I am old, that I am at risk of some dire breach of political etiquette by feebleness of mind or some fit of ill-advised candor." He listened, and fretted, but kept going. "They are asking me to lay aside my old effort to tell the truth, as it is given to me by my own knowledge and judgment, in order to take up another art, which is that of public relations." In a letter, he told me that he didn't want to offend "against truth or goodness," although the book "at times certainly does offend, I think necessarily, against political correctness." Tanya crisply told him, "It's too late for it to ruin your whole life."

When the Berrys' children were growing up, the family had two milk cows, two hogs, chickens, a vegetable garden, and a team of draft horses. These days, Den, a master woodworker, raises cattle and hay with his wife, Billie, at their farm nearby. He also helps Wendell at Lanes Landing, and grazes some of his cattle on his parents' land. Mary and her husband, Steve Smith, own a steep, heavily wooded three-hundred-acre farm in Trimble County. But for the past decade Mary has spent most of her time as the executive director of the Berry Center, a nonprofit in New Castle, which promotes "prosperous, well-tended farms serving and supporting healthy local communities." Next door, Mary's daughter Virginia runs the Agrarian Culture Center and Bookstore, and a literary league that sponsors a county-wide reading program.

The headquarters of the Berry Center occupy a capacious white brick Federal-style house on South Main Street. In the center's library, Mary said that the project began a decade ago, when she went to talk with her father about how the local-food movement, so popular among urbanites, wasn't doing enough to support small farmers in their region. Mary told Wendell that she imagined a liberal-arts program that would teach students how to raise livestock and grow diversified crops, and encourage them to pursue farming as a life's work. Wendell said to her, "It sounds like you're starting a center." Mary had no idea how to run a nonprofit, but, she told me, "I had what was left of a pretty good farm culture and a well-watered landscape."

She admits that growing up on her parents' farm wasn't easy: the outdoor composting privy, the absence of vacations, the mandatory chores that pulled her out of bed each morning before dawn. "It was a subsistence farm," she said. "Mom and Dad were producing eighty to eighty-five per cent of what we were eating." She thought that they were poor: "We didn't live in a ranch house, drink Coke, or have a TV." A friend, taking pity on her, got on the phone each week to offer a running narration of popular shows. Mary complained to her father, "Why do we always have to do things the hardest way?" But she never considered moving away.

The Berry Center, with a staff of eight and a board of ten, attracts visitors from around the world who share many Americans' sense of deracination. "They want to know how to belong to a place," Mary told me. When they express alarm about climate change, she tells them, "You can't throw up your hands in despair. You're not responsible for solving the whole problem—you just do what you can do."

Four years ago, the Berry Center and Sterling College, an "experiential learning" school in Craftsbury, Vermont, started the Wendell Berry Farming Program, which provides twelve students tuition-free study on Henry County farms. Leah Bayens, the program's dean, told me that the students spend much

of their time working outside. “Ultimately, we’re using the curriculum as a way for farmers to make decisions informed by poetry, history, and literature, as well as the hard sciences.”

It sounded impossibly idealistic, given the number of family-farm foreclosures. According to a study by the University of Iowa, the suicide rate for farmers is three and a half times that for the general population. Bayens said that everyone in the program worried about the risks: “We are in a terrible situation. Most U.S. farmers, regardless of scale, receive off-farm income”—working other jobs to stay afloat. The tobacco program launched under the Agricultural Adjustment Act collapsed in 2004, and the Burley Association soon followed, done in by sustained assaults from cigarette manufacturers, health advocates, and globalization. Today, some eighty per cent of U.S. government subsidies go to farms with revenues of more than a million dollars a year.

Ashland Tann, a 2021 graduate of the farming program, who is Black, is clear-eyed about the difficulties. Black farmers contend with structural inequities that date back to Reconstruction. There were a million of them in 1920; today, there are fewer than fifty thousand. Tann plans eventually to open an agrarian-science center—a “farm-to-table Wonka factory,” where he’ll serve locally sourced meals and proselytize about diversified farming. In the meantime, he works in a Louisville restaurant, North of Bourbon, and volunteers with the nonprofit Feed Louisville.

Tann said that his studies in New Castle were transformative, but he was sometimes made to feel out of place. He grew up in Baltimore, surrounded by Black “market owners, Morgan State graduates, mayors, murals, and Maya Angelou poems.” Henry County is ninety-four per cent white. As he drove into Kentucky for the first time, he said, “I felt like the air pressure changed.” Taking a walk one day with his foxhound, he was stopped by a white man: “He gives me the third degree—‘Who are you? Why are you here?’ ” Ashland replied, “Actually, sir, I’m a member of the Wendell Berry Farming Program.”

In 2017, Mary started Our Home Place Meat, a beef program inspired by the Burley Association. Currently, a dozen farming families participate. When the cows reach weight, Home Place arranges for the meat to be butchered and sold. Mary admits that progress has been slow: “That’s where the nonprofit work comes in. Philanthropy gives us time to work out the problems.” Tom Grissom, the tobacco historian, is affiliated with the center, but he doesn’t think that Home Place is comparable to the Burley Association: “Price supports and parity worked with tobacco because the product was addictive.”

Mary put me in touch with two members of the program, Abbie and Joseph Monroe, a couple in their thirties with two young children and another expected this April. Seven years ago, the Monroes moved onto a hundred and sixteen acres, about ten miles from Port Royal, which they named Valley Spirit Farm. I drove slowly along a rutted, muddy lane, to avoid hitting a party of ducks. As I got out of the car, three dogs bounded up, followed by Abbie and Joseph. The ducks, I learned, belong to their partners, Caleb and Kelly Fiechter, who live across the road. The Fiechters sell the duck eggs, along with pigs and mushrooms that they raise.

Joseph grew up in Dupont, Indiana (population three hundred and forty), where his parents ran two small farms and his father worked full time for the Department of Natural Resources. After the town’s school closed, along with its bank and its grocery store, Joseph was bused to school in Madison, fifteen miles away; he met Abbie in junior high. At first, he wanted to become a pastor, but his father asked him, “You want to live off the plate, and be dependent on others’ hard work?” Joseph and Abbie decided that he was right about the value of producing something on your own. They put a down payment on the farm, using money that Joseph’s grandparents had left him.

We walked through a greenhouse and their five-acre vegetable garden—asparagus, squash, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, garlic, onions, potatoes, celery, and lettuce—and on to the Fiechters' pigs, a five-way cross between Red Wattle, Duroc, wild boar, Wessex Saddleback, and Meishan. The Monroes' cattle were grazing on seventy acres that they lease from a neighbor. The two couples sell the vegetables and much of the pork and beef at Louisville's two farmers' markets, to the local Community Supported Agriculture organization, and to a recently opened restaurant, the New Castle Tavern. Our Home Place Meat markets and sells the rest of the beef.

Nothing went to waste at Valley Spirit Farm—Sir Albert Howard would have approved. Joseph said they'd use the hay bales in the far field as winter feed for the animals, spreading it around their cropland to make sure that the manure was evenly distributed, enriching the topsoil. Produce that can't go to market—bolted lettuce, oversized zucchini, frostbitten Brussels sprouts—becomes more food for the livestock, and for the family. Walking me to my car, Joseph leaned down and pulled up a fat, misshapen carrot, which he washed under a spigot and presented to me as a parting gift.

I called Abbie after I got back to New York. She was outside, and one of the roosters was crowing raucously. I said I'd thought they crowed only at dawn. "They do get excited early in the morning," she replied. "But often it's just to check in on the hens—like I call for the kids." She admitted that farmwork is gruelling and filled with uncertainty. "At times, we haven't felt all that optimistic. I think what gives us the most hope is collaborating with others. C.S.A. and Home Place take so much of the burden off a small farmer. We see a lot of young farmers with the dream and the drive, but without the starter money." She went on, "It's about expectations—knowing not to expect a super-glamorous life, and being willing to appreciate what you do have. Like when the cats leave you a dead mouse on the doorstep." It upsets her daughter, but, she said, "I kind of love it when they do that. It means the mouse isn't in my pantry."

Back at Lanes Landing Farm, Berry said that it was time to feed the sheep, so we set out in his battered pickup. Liz jumped onto the cargo bed. I sat in the passenger seat, resting my feet on a chainsaw, one of Berry's few labor-saving devices. It was "dangerous and a polluter," he acknowledged, but also "handy and fast." On the dashboard were two lengths of wood, sharpened at one end, which he identified as tobacco sticks. Back when the harvest was performed by hand, the sticks were made by using a maul to drive a froe into a log until it was split to the proper size. The sticks were "jobbed upright into the ground" at even intervals in "stickrows" between rows of tobacco. The tobacco stalks were cut down with a hatchet, pierced with a spear, then slid onto a stick, before being hung in a tobacco barn to dry.

As Liz ran into the pasture, Wendell and I went into the barn. Pouring feed for the animals, he shouted, "Liz, bring 'em on!" She quickly rounded up a flock of thirty—white-faced, bare-legged, their torsos wrapped in shaggy fleece. Wendell explained that they were Cheviot sheep, a breed from the border of England and Scotland. They were known for the quality of their wool, but he'd found it too costly to have them shorn. In the early winter, he takes some ewes to the steep lots near the house, where they serve as lawnmowers, then brings them back to the barn for lambing.

Berry's writing, like the seasons, has a cyclical quality, returning again and again to the same ideas. Tanya once told him that his knack for repeating himself is his principal asset as a writer. He noted a few years ago, "That insight has instructed and amused me very much, because she is right and so forthrightly right." In his new book, he has a characteristically bittersweet message: "Because the age of global search and discovery now is ending—because by now we have so thoroughly ransacked, appropriated, and diminished the globe's original wealth—we can see how generous and abounding is the commonwealth of life." But he has never suggested that everyone flee the city and the suburbs and take up farming. "I am suggesting," he once wrote, "that most people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and that this is potentially catastrophic."

I asked him if he retains any of his youthful hope that humanity can avoid a cataclysm. He replied that he's become more careful in his use of the word "hope": "Jesus said, 'Take no thought for the morrow,' which I take to mean that if we do the right things today, we'll have done all we really can for tomorrow. OK. So I hope to do the right things today."

At the old Ford acreage, he showed me where the tobacco was taken after the harvest. He opened the barn doors onto a cavernous space, where light filtered through the siding boards. Craning my neck, I could imagine how the tobacco sticks, laden with heavy leaves, were once hung on the rafters to dry. It was a perilous undertaking called "housing tobacco"—each man supporting a sheaf of leaves larger than he was, balancing on a beam like a circus performer as he set the stick in place.

Wendell picked up a maul, which Meb had made from a hickory tree. It had a smooth handle and a bulbous head, squared off at the end. "With it," he told me, "you can deliver a blow of tremendous force to a stake or a splitting wedge." Thinking about a modern sledgehammer, I asked how the handle was inserted into the head. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "No, no, honey," then hastily explained himself: "That's our way of taking the sting out of it, you see, when we correct someone." He showed me the swirling grain of the maul's head, chopped from the roots of a tree, and swung it over his shoulder to demonstrate how it becomes a natural extension of the body.

When I was back home, he sent me a diagram and explained how the strength of the wood came from the tree's immersion in the soil: "The growth of roots makes the grain gnarly, gnurly, snurly: unsplittable." After you cut the tree, you square off the root end. Then, above the roots, where the grain isn't snurly, you saw inward a little at a time, "splitting off long, straight splinters to reduce the log to the diameter of a handle comfortable to hold. And so you've made your maul. It is all one piece, impossible for the strongest man (or of course woman) to break." He scrawled at the bottom of the page, "There is a kind of genius in that maul, that belongs to a placed people: to make of what is at hand a fine, durable tool at the cost only of skill and work."

***

Published in the print edition of the February 28, 2022, issue, with the headline "Late Harvest." *Dorothy Wickenden has been the executive editor of The New Yorker since 1996.*