



Wendell Berry's Virtues of Renewal: Teaching the Forms that Sustain Life and Community with Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro

Lecture I: Virtues of
Renewal

Outline:

In this lecture, Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro introduces the concept of two economies: the industrial economy, which prioritizes efficiency and individual success, and the creational economy, which focuses on community health and virtues of renewal. In his writings, Wendell Berry inspires us to cultivate the virtues that sustain our life and community.

Introduction to the Course

- **Key Questions**
 - Which economy are we educating students to succeed in?
 - How do we judge their success?
- **Berry's Challenge to Educators**
 - Redefine “economy” from GDP and individual success to its original association with the Greek term *oikos* (household).
 - Aim for the health of the whole community (or membership), not just individual affluence.

Educational Vision: Industrial vs. Creational Economy

- **Industrial Economy**
 - Education focused on specialization, competition, efficiency.
 - Characterized by techniques of control, productivity, and mobility.
 - Prioritizes individual success over communal well-being.
- **Creational Economy (Kingdom of God)**
 - Focuses on community health and membership.



- Virtues of renewal: attention, gratitude, humility, hope, memory, fidelity, and convocation.
- Opposes industrial habits of distraction, surveillance, and busyness.
- **Virtues of Renewal**
 - The moral habits and excellences that enable people to serve the health of their memberships.
 - The specific virtues include attention, gratitude, humility, hope, memory, fidelity, convocation (vocation).
 - As teachers, we need to model these virtues if we want to cultivate them in our students.

Wendell Berry's Life and Influence

- **Biography**
 - Born in 1934, Kentucky; writer and farmer.
 - Returned to Kentucky after a brief academic career in New York.
 - Focuses on sustainable living, community health, and creation care.
- **Influence on Education**
 - Encourages moral formation and the common good in students.
 - Emphasizes the need for education to form students in virtues that sustain communities.

Impact of Industrialism

- **Characteristics of Industrialism**
 - Specialization and division weaken relationships and community.
 - Schools and industries promote efficiency over human connection.
 - The information economy thrives on isolated facts, removed from context and community.
- **Impact of Technology on Virtue**
 - Technology replaces virtues, making skills like farming or temperance obsolete.
 - Industrial solutions prioritize efficiency over moral development, leading to skill-less and virtue-less individuals.

Re-imagining the Tree of Knowledge

- **Education in the Kingdom of God**



- Berry suggests knowledge should be cohesive, interconnected like the branches of a tree.
- Modern education's fragmentation leads to disconnection and individualism.
- **Rooted Learning**
 - Education should be accountable to the health of the world, not just individual success.
 - Focus on *Great Economy* or *Kingdom of God*, which values the health of creation and the common good.

Standards for Judging Value

- **Assessing Inherent Quality (Internal Standards)**
 - Teach students to determine if an object is "good as such":
 - Is a poem good by the internal standards of poetry?
 - Is a computer program elegant and efficient?
 - Is a philosophical argument logically valid?
 - Internal disciplinary questions provide necessary but incomplete evaluations.
- **Evaluating Broader Impact (External Standards)**
 - Students should also assess broader, external effects:
 - Does a poem foster community?
 - How does a program influence lives and economies?
 - Are the premises of an argument true and beneficial?
 - This evaluation requires **specialization** and **broadly-formed knowledge** to balance individual quality with communal impact.

The Doubleness of Educational Obligations

- **The University's Duty**
 - Beyond internal truth and technical proficiency, education must consider the real-world application and ethical impact.
 - As Berry notes, education must be interested in the **state and uses** of knowledge, examining graduates' societal roles.
- **Limitations of Over-Specialization**
 - Modern education often focuses narrowly on technical proficiency, ignoring broader judgment.
 - Specialization can avoid uncomfortable ethical conflicts between informed, general judgment and specific career outcomes.

Imagination and the Common Good



- **Forming Rooted Imaginations**
 - Education for the common good requires "rooted imaginations" capable of connecting specialized knowledge to broader community health.
 - Teachers must cultivate **virtues of renewal** (e.g., humility, attentiveness, community orientation) in students for meaningful societal contributions.

Literature as a Model for Formal Intelligence

- **Studying Literary Forms**
 - Examining poetry, essays, and fiction helps cultivate "formal intelligence":
 - Literature trains students to recognize interdependencies, fostering imaginative judgment.
 - Poetry, for instance, embodies a harmony that can guide students in understanding other complex forms.
- **Berry's Multi Genre Approach**
 - Each genre serves distinct virtues:
 - **Poetry** evokes attentiveness and gratitude.
 - **Essays** encourage humility and clear thinking amidst confusion.
 - **Fiction** helps students remember and cherish community voices.

Ecological and Cultural Cycles of Health

- **Sustainability and the Cycle of Life**
 - Sustainable health follows cycles of birth, growth, decay, and renewal.
 - Humans must actively participate in these cycles, which require affection, care, and continuity.
- **Health as Wholeness**
 - True health is marked by interconnected forms and relationships, involving a holistic view that sustains community and ecological integrity.

The Importance of Virtues of Renewal

- **Sustaining Life Through Virtues**
 - Virtues like humility, gratitude, and fidelity are essential for maintaining societal and ecological health.



- Sustainable practices require both virtues (moral qualities) and **virtuosities** (practical skills) specific to each vocation (e.g., farmer, teacher, doctor).
- **Developing Both Virtues and Virtuosities**
 - Successful education combines moral virtues with technical competence:
 - Technical skills must be grounded in virtues that prioritize community and ecological well-being over mere productivity.

Cultivating Imaginative Judgment

- **The Goal of Education**
 - Education's ultimate purpose is to foster a **love for complex realities** and train students to contribute to the health of their memberships.
 - Literature and other arts offer healing and cultivate imagination, preparing students to make wise, compassionate decisions that support the common good.
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