



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

Lecture 2: Attention

Outline:

In this lesson, Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro explores the impact of digital technologies on attention, the dangers of surveillance, and Berry's emphasis on the importance of sustained and loving attention.

Introduction to Attention

- **The Impact of Digital Technologies on Attention**
 - New technologies foster "continuous partial attention."
 - Distraction technologies reduce people to objects of desire and self-centered curation.
 - Instant gratification and convenience reinforce digital distraction and surveillance.

Distraction and Surveillance

- **Distraction**
 - Screens and digital content draw attention away from people and tasks.
 - The focus shifts to individual desires, akin to Narcissus' self-obsession.
 - The allure of amusement online distorts our ability to stay engaged with reality.
- **Surveillance**
 - Technology monitors users, replacing genuine attention.



- Examples: smart devices tracking food, health, and surroundings, eliminating personal awareness.
- In professions (farming, teaching, medicine), reliance on technology risks undermining human relationships and skills.

Loving Attention vs. Surveillance

- **Simone Weil's View of Attention**
 - Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.
 - Surveillance is the opposite of attention—detached and impersonal.
- **Berry's Example: Poem to the NSA**
 - Contrasts his loving attention to his place with the NSA's detached surveillance.
 - Emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between himself and his environment.

The Power of Being Witnessed

- **Attention as Reciprocity**
 - Derived from "to stretch toward," attention implies a mutual relationship.
 - Caring attention creates harmony between two beings; in attending deeply, we change and are changed.
- **Berry's Poems on Attention**
 - *The Book of Camp Branch*: Describes how attentiveness changes the poet, moving from an observer to one "seen" by the stream.
 - The act of attention reshapes the self, allowing deeper communion with the environment.

Cultivating Transformative Attention

- **Distraction vs. Deep Attention**
 - Distraction and surveillance are shallow, seeking control over the world.
 - True attention demands stretching towards others, which fosters personal and communal transformation.



- **Attention as a Practice in Berry's Work**
 - *How to Be a Poet*: Calls for silence, contemplation, and rejection of screens to foster attention.
 - Attention allows inspiration to come, reflecting a reciprocal relationship between observer and place.

Practical Implications of Attention

- **Litanies and Lists in Berry's Poetry**
 - Cataloging mundane, local details (e.g., in "The Satisfaction of the Mad Farmer") draws attention to everyday wonders.
 - Such attention honors the familiar, highlighting its infinite complexity and value.
- **Attention in Teaching**
 - Teachers must cultivate attention to students, fostering relationships and understanding.
 - The act of paying attention transforms both teachers and students, helping them grow beyond superficial engagement.

Concluding Thoughts

- **The Repetitive Nature of Attention**
 - Attention requires continual practice, especially in familiar settings.
 - Repetition, rather than leading to boredom, can foster deeper understanding and appreciation, much like Chesterton's "delight in monotony."
- **Surprise in the Familiar**
 - True attention reveals the surprising depth of familiar places and people, as Berry shows in his writing.
 - By staying attuned to the local and known, we open ourselves to transformative insights.

