



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

Lecture 3: Gratitude

Outline:

In this lecture, Dr. Bilbro explores the contrast between modern culture's self-centered autonomy and Wendell Berry's view of life as a gift. Gratitude, as modeled in Berry's poetry, frees individuals from the burden of self-sufficiency, allowing them to participate in creation's sustaining work with humility and joy.

Introduction to Gratitude

- **Digital Distraction and Self-Centeredness**
 - Digital environments foster self-centered behavior and the illusion that solving problems depends solely on individual effort.
 - This creates pressure to act, often for personal credit, leading to frantic busyness or apathetic resignation.

Gratitude as a Third Way

- **Restful Gratitude in Berry's Poetry**
 - Berry's works emphasize receiving life as a gift rather than seeking credit for actions.
 - Gratitude allows for a posture of participation in the "gift economy," where life is nurtured through humble, grateful work.
- **Sabbath Practices and the Gift Economy**
 - Berry contrasts the busyness of industrial culture with sabbath rest, reflecting the Creator's goodness.



- His "timbered choir" metaphor models how trees receive light, flourish, and enrich the soil—demonstrating the cyclical, selfless giving in creation.

Organizing Subject vs. Grateful Recipient

- **Autonomy and Dependency**
 - Modern culture promotes the idea of the self as an independent, autonomous subject.
 - In reality, life is received as a gift, and humans depend on others (e.g., parents, nature, teachers) for survival and understanding.
- **Impact on Relationships**
 - The illusion of self-sufficiency turns relationships into transactions.
 - Berry encourages deep, self-giving relationships, rejecting the commodification of human interactions.

Critique of Frenzied Activism

- **The Violence of Busyness**
 - Activist culture often promotes frenzied, ineffective efforts rooted in a flawed view of the self.
 - Merton and Brueggemann critique the modern rush to "do more," which divides attention and undermines true transformation.
- **Gratitude Frees Us for Sustainable Work**
 - Work grounded in gratitude acknowledges the limits of human efforts and participates in a larger, given world.
 - Berry's sabbath poems reflect this restful yet active participation in creation's sustaining work.

Participating in the Gift of Life

- **Tree Metaphor for Grateful Work**
 - Berry likens his work to that of a tree—receiving light and giving back to the community.
 - His poetry, like tree leaves, nourishes the soil of culture, passing on life-giving inspiration even after the poet is forgotten.
- **Sabbath Work**
 - True, sustainable work involves personal care, attention, and tasks that may go unnoticed or unacknowledged.
 - This "sabbath work" emphasizes the ongoing, vigilant maintenance of life, even when results are not immediate.



Gratitude and Freedom

- **Freedom through Obligation**
 - True freedom is found in accepting the obligations of life's gifts, not in isolating oneself from them.
 - Gratitude allows individuals to participate in community and love, rather than striving for unattainable autonomy.
 - **Practicing Gratitude in Teaching**
 - Teachers depend on past generations and their students to foster learning.
 - Peer collaboration and gratitude for mutual dependence can enrich the educational experience for both students and teachers.
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