



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

Lecture 4: Humility

Outline:

In this lesson, Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro explores the limitations of bureaucratic systems and codes in addressing the complexity of human life and emphasizes the importance of humble, neighborly love as articulated by Wendell Berry.

Bureaucracy in Education

- **Reliance on Codes:**
 - Schools and universities use codes to manage behavior and create order.
 - Codes can simplify complex realities and foster a false sense of control.
- **Example of Yale Controversy:**
 - 2015 incident involving guidance on Halloween costumes.
 - Emailed response questioning administrative control led to protests.
 - Key takeaway: Bureaucratic codes are often a substitute for difficult dialogue.

Codes vs. Humble Love

- **Berry's Critique of Codes:**
 - Codes impose an artificial order on complex human realities.
 - They can foreclose opportunities for understanding and limit freedom.
- **Humble Love:**



- Influenced by Charles Taylor and Ivan Illich, Berry advocates for neighborly love over rigid systems.
- Love requires adapting to specific circumstances rather than adhering to strict rules.

Ignorance and Action

- **Ignorance as a Human Condition:**
 - Despite the vast increase in knowledge, Berry asserts that human ignorance remains constant.
 - We act based on incomplete knowledge, which requires humility.
- **The Way of Ignorance:**
 - Berry's concept of "the way of ignorance" involves acknowledging limits and acting with humility.
 - This way encourages careful, thoughtful actions driven by neighborly love.

Critique of Code-Fixation

- **Charles Taylor's View:**
 - Codes fail because they are too rigid and cannot account for the complexity of situations.
 - No single formula can balance competing goods.
- **Romantic Rebellion Against Codes:**
 - Some reject all rules, seeking freedom. However, Berry and Charles Taylor advocate for humility to navigate between these extremes.

The Good Samaritan Parable

- **Ivan Illich's Interpretation:**
 - The parable critiques the institutionalization of love.
 - The Samaritan's love transcends codes, showing that love cannot be systematized.
 - Jesus's lesson: Love is not a set of rules but an action that adapts to individual needs.

Berry's Essay Approach

- **Ad Hoc Essays:**



- Berry's essays are non-systematic, aiming to address specific concerns without imposing a comprehensive system.
- The essay is an attempt to understand reality, much like the Samaritan's spontaneous act of compassion.
- **Fragmentary and Humble:**
 - His writing reflects the complexity of life, resisting the temptation to reduce it to simple rules.

Industrial Codes vs. Loving Forms

- **Critique of the Industrial Economy:**
 - Berry contrasts the industrial economy's reductive approach with the Kingdom of God's expansive, mysterious order.
 - The industrial mindset destroys what it cannot understand, while love seeks harmony and understanding.
- **Loving Forms:**
 - Moral decisions should be guided by "loving forms" rather than industrial codes.
 - These forms are flexible, allowing for love and complexity to flourish.

Berry's Binaries

- **Binary Contrasts:**
 - Berry uses binaries (e.g., industrial economy vs. the Kingdom of God) to highlight moral decisions.
 - These binaries break down simplistic categories and encourage thoughtful, loving actions.
- **Prophetic Speech:**
 - Like biblical prophets, Berry uses stark contrasts to challenge readers' assumptions and prompt moral action.

Imagination and Proportion

- **The Role of Imagination:**
 - Imagination is essential for understanding complex patterns and relationships.
 - Imaginative formal standards, such as health or ripeness, resonate with our bodies, guiding us toward love and good action.
- **Proportionality:**



- Understanding and acting with humility requires sensing proportionality in life's complexities.
- This contrasts with reductive standards like productivity or efficiency.

Teaching with Humility

- **Humility in Education:**
 - Teachers do not need to have all the answers. Modeling humility allows students to engage in the complexities of life.
 - **Fostering Compassion:**
 - Encourage students to internalize images of a good life (e.g., the Kingdom of God, the Good Samaritan) rather than following strict intellectual or moral codes.
 - **Interdisciplinary Learning:**
 - Embrace the complexity of knowledge by crossing disciplinary boundaries and encouraging exploration.
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