



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

Lecture 6: Memory

Outline:

In this lesson, Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro explores Wendell Berry's conception of time in industrial versus agrarian cultures, emphasizing the importance of memory and narrative in understanding our place within a community.

Industrial Time vs. Cyclical Time

- **Industrial Time**
 - Time in industrial culture is viewed as a series of undifferentiated units (*chronos*), where every moment is meant to be used efficiently.
 - Technological advancements drive this mindset, pushing for faster work, travel, and communication.
 - These efficiency-driven systems disconnect us from natural cycles (circadian, lunar, or seasonal), replacing meaningful time with consumer-driven markers like Black Friday or Super Bowl Sunday.
- **Cyclical Time**
 - In contrast, Berry's characters inhabit **cyclical time**, aligning their lives with natural, agricultural, and religious rhythms.
 - Cyclical time provides a sense of belonging and continuity, fostering connection to a broader, divine narrative expressed as the "fullness of time" (*kairos*).

Impact on Memory

- **Flattened Memory in Industrial Society**



- Industrial culture treats memory like computer storage—merely a retrieval system for isolated bits of data.
- This leads to a fragmented sense of self, where individuals can easily "swipe away" parts of their past, leading to a shallow and transient identity.
- This modern, malleable self is vulnerable to being shaped by commercial or political narratives.
- **Memory in Cyclical Time**
 - Memory, in Berry's view, is a key to understanding our place within a community and ecological system.
 - It connects us to our past, ensuring that we view ourselves as part of a larger whole rather than isolated, self-directed individuals.
 - This kind of memory fosters wholeness and health—both for individuals and for communities.

Berry's Characters and Redemptive Memory

- **Characters Rooted in Memory**
 - Characters in Berry's fiction, like Andy Catlett from "Pray Without Ceasing," use memory to piece together their lives and understand their place within a communal and divine narrative.
 - Memory allows them to reflect on past events and make sense of their lives in relation to their family, community, and God.
- **Theological Roots of Memory**
 - Berry draws on Saint Augustine's view that memory (*memoria*) is not just a recall function but a means of connecting with divine truth.
 - Augustine sees memory as essential for self-knowledge and for understanding our relationship with God and creation.
 - Memory makes restoration (redemption) possible.

Restoration Through Memory

- **Forgiveness and Healing**
 - Memory plays a crucial role in reconciliation and forgiveness. By remembering past wrongs and placing them in a larger context, individuals can find healing.
 - In "Pray Without Ceasing," memory enables Andy Catlett to understand the tragedy of his great-grandfather's murder and find peace in the actions of his family, especially through acts of forgiveness.



- **Communal Memory**
 - Memory is not just personal; it is communal. Communities retain collective memories that shape their values and actions over generations, connecting individuals to a larger narrative of restoration and redemption.
 - In Berry's story, Andy finally makes his grandmother Margaret's memory his own, learning that forgiveness and concern for others liberates us from wrong desires.

Practical Applications in Education

- **Teaching Through Memory**
 - Educators can cultivate redemptive memory by helping students view themselves as members of a larger story, who are responsible for their learning and participation in it.
 - Memory should be integrated into the learning process, encouraging students to see how their disciplines (even mathematics or science) fit into a broader human and historical context.
 - Schools can foster this by celebrating traditions, creating community events, and encouraging relationships across generations.
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