



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

Lecture 8: Convocation

Outline:

In this lesson, Dr. Jeffrey Bilbro explores the transformative journey of Burley Coulter, highlighting the contrast between the Disney-fueled myth of autonomy and the redemptive power of community membership.

Convocation as Vocation

- **Burley Coulter's Transformation**
 - Burley begins as a self-centered individual but becomes a vocal defender of the Port William membership.
 - His transformation is a result of **convocation**, the process of understanding oneself as part of an interconnected community.
 - Burley's statement: "The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us," highlights that membership is about recognizing interdependence, not individual autonomy.
- **Cultural Myths of Autonomy**
 - In contrast to Berry's view of convocation, modern culture, symbolized by Disney's narrative of "be whoever you want to be," glorifies the individual's pursuit of self-fulfillment, often at the expense of community.
 - This myth of autonomy can be harmful, leading to a paralyzing search for self-identity, as argued by William Cavanaugh. True identity, Berry and Cavanaugh argue, comes from **receiving one's identity from the community**, not inventing it in isolation.

Burley Coulter's Convocation



- **Independence vs. Interdependence**
 - Burley realizes his interdependence through his care for his nephews after his sister-in-law's death.
 - His early desire for freedom ("free as a bird") transforms as he discovers his responsibility and deep connection to his family and community.
 - His love for his nephews ties him to them, and through this service, Burley discovers a deeper, more fulfilling self.
- **Transformation of Desire Through Convocation**
 - Convocation changes Burley's desires from self-serving autonomy to community service, shaping him into a key figure in Port William.
 - He learns that belonging to others is more fulfilling than pursuing a detached, autonomous life.
 - Berry portrays this as **grace through community**, where true creativity and personal growth arise from faithfully attending to the needs of others.
- **Convocation of Port William**
 - The community of Port William functions as a living entity, convoking its members through shared stories, mutual support, and collective memory.
 - Burley is transformed not only by his actions but also by listening to and participating in the ongoing conversation of his community.

Practicing Convocation

- **Resisting the Industrial Narrative of Autonomy**
 - Attend to the stories we tell our students about our own sense of identity and purpose.
 - Convocation means receiving one's identity and vocation as a gift, shaped by the needs of others.
 - True vocation emerges from **responsive love and sacrifice**, not from a search for individual fulfillment.

