

Wendell Berry's "Free" and the Separation of Church and State

Essay by Robert Shetterly, UU Church of Ellsworth, Maine, November 24, 2013

"For a time/ I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

In thinking about the idea of the separation of church & state, it is worth thinking about what Wendell Berry meant by that use of the word "free."

I'm sure you recognize it as the last from his well known poem *The Peace of Wild Things*:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

First, let's say what he is not talking about. He is not talking, at least apparently, about the kinds of political freedoms that we try to grant ourselves by virtue of our means of social, economic and legal organization. We make much of freedom of speech, equality, freedom to vote, freedom of the press and of religion. Without these freedoms how can we be free in society? We also talk about freedom from want and freedom from fear. And we make a huge deal out of the free market. And as we have seen in the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, there are those who think that the highest form of free speech is that which belongs to money. Giving it, essentially, the power to control all other freedoms. Or, to put it another way, in an era when capitalism has sought with great success to commercialize every human transaction, both material & immaterial, why not equate freedom with money? But Berry --- although we know he is concerned about these things because he is a social and environmental activist --- is discovering a different order of being free. This is a kind of *free* based in *separation* from human social structures.

He is free because he accepts his place in nature. He finds solace in nature's beauty, its community, its continuity, its lack of despair. The grace of nature is in the restorative power he finds by accepting that place. But why is that? Doesn't "free" mean no obligations, no restraints? Berry is leading us to what may be the most important understanding of our lives: our freedom is defined by our place in nature, not our separation or freedom from it. Or, our ability to tame or conquer or harvest it. Our fundamental reality is nature. It is not that we come from it, and go back to it. The point is that we are never separate from it. If we struggle to separate ourselves from nature's

laws, we diminish our freedom and increase our grief. We also diminish our chances of living healthy lives and being able to provide healthy lives for future generations. Which reminds me of Doris Haddock -- Granny D --- saying that if we lose control of our government we lose control of our ability to dispense justice. Similarly, if we lose our relationship to nature, we lose control of our ability to care for the future of our children.

There is also a connection between the freedoms of our political society and this freedom to be found in nature. If we don't honor our relationship to nature and try to live in harmony with it, our political freedoms lead us to despair. Political and economic freedoms that separate us from nature, that seek to exploit nature's resources, that allow the pursuit of happiness to mean the pursuit of profit at the expense of nature, are really then in the service of death, not life. Freedom to extract, exploit, pollute, degrade --- these freedoms are a death wish. All freedoms must begin with an acceptance of and a love for the biological system that gave us life. We like to think that we have evolved and instituted idealistic values in systems of freedom. But Berry is saying we don't find true freedom there unless we first find it by accepting our place in the system that made us. Evolution apart from nature, no matter how high minded & rewarding in the short term, is impossible.

We know from his other poems that Berry is filled with despair --- for himself and his children --- in a culture that desecrates nature while calling itself a land of free people. In fact, this condition causes fear, as he says, to grow in him. It's interesting that he has used the word "grow" which should be a healthy process. This growing despair is a perversity of nature. More like a tumor. Nature's cycle does not grow despair. And Berry's choice of words here is important:

"... in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be." He is not in fear for what may happen *to* them, how they may be victimized. He's in fear of what they may be complicit in, what social and economic systems that they are part of that create despair.

Free in nature means free to be part of its beauty, its necessary cycle of life and death. It means loving the future life that will be made possible by your death. It means being free of the arrogance of false realities, their destructiveness and hypocrisy.

Ours is the only species to have a conscious relationship to its own evolutionary survival. Thus our nobility, thus our despair. Is this consciousness a blessing or a curse? Both?

When Wendell Berry says that, "... For a time/ I rest in the grace of the world..." what does he mean? It means he is accepted. He is in some sense absolved. Perhaps absolved of human arrogance. He is part of a terrible beauty, a mystery that passeth all understanding, part of earth's time --- "the day-blind stars waiting with their light" --- a grand humility. And this grace means he is part of nature's justice which must be understood if we are to understand human justice and what it means to be free.

Earth's justice, its unalterable, basic contract, is that all life will die and immediately begin a re-cycling process into more life, beginning with tiny bacteria, the earth's brain cells. Could we ask anything more of justice than to never be excluded from the life

process? Nature's process is really not life to death, but life to life. This is justice with perpetual mercy. There is no 30 years to life, no death sentence, because no life form is ever excluded from life. No special privilege, no dogma, no necessary prayers, no entitlements of one religion's dogma over another.

No need for laws, lawyers, courts, clerks, cops, judge and jury to determine who is fit to be included, be considered equal, who cast into the outer dark. It all breaks down, it all comes back.

As Mary Oliver says, "You do not have to be good./ You do not have to walk on your knees/ for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting./ You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

Nature's grace creates no superfund sites, no plastics.

The justice is in its essential fairness. Every atom of every living thing will, given enough time, have the opportunity to participate in every living composition and re-composition. The grace and the justice is that you may be the wood drake resting in your beauty, the great heron feeding --- also the slug and the scorpion, the bluebird and the carpenter ant. The only ingredient that may not be transferable is ego. Who's to say about forms of consciousness?

But make no mistake, there is one iron law. Take too much, try to live for too long out of harmony with the earth's justice, and your species will be removed. Not your essential ingredients, your hydrogen and carbon and nitrogen and oxygen, those cannot be removed from nature's grace, but your species.

What we tend to proudly call *free* in our form of political organization is based on what we presume to call a philosophical reality: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, *etc.*" I think nature would agree with that. All of nature's created forms are equal. What nature did not create is profit. Nature did not create any idea of progress. Nature does not consider an amoeba inferior to a stegosaurus, a daisy inferior to a human, or, the other way around. Nor did it create a euphemism for destruction of nature called the development of resources. Nature takes no profit. It is based in the conservation of matter. Any realities that humans create that are not part of nature's reality will result in despair. For that reason, nature considers the Trump Tower, even the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, inferior to a white pine tree.

And if we want to promise ourselves life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it only makes sense as a philosophical ideal if it is promised to each succeeding generation. Who can pursue happiness on a poisoned planet?

This is what Berry means when he says he comes "... into the peace of wild things/ who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." He's not saying that animals are not conscious of the future bearing down on them and therefore they are free of worry and fear. Surely all animals fear. But they do not despair for a world disastrously skewed by their thoughtless behavior. They have no mantra like that of our corporations to "internalize the profit and externalize the cost." What the justice of nature knows, its

grace, is that profit and cost are not divisible. Separating them is an unnatural and therefore impossible exercise. Just as Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “the end is inherent in the means,” so too is the cost inherent in the profit. It may seem that you are getting a great bargain with a 99 cent burger, but the loss of rain forest, species extinction, feed lot pollution, a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, hormones and antibiotics, Monsanto’s genetically engineered corn and soy beans, pesticides & herbicides, all made possible by extravagant expense of fossil fuels, moral disregard for the mistreatment of animals, climate change..... the real price is astronomical, beyond measuring. If we have no forethought of the grief of this cost, it is only because we have evolved a fine sense of denial.

It’s important that Wendell Berry says he rests in the grace of the world and feels this sense of being free only “for a time.” He knows his sense of responsibility, his despair, will call him back. His sense of citizenship --- not to any nation state, but to nature, to his community, his family --- will call him back. It’s not about patriotism, but love of the earth, and ultimately for ourselves.

So we have to act, and act as boldly as we can. We must make sure that we do not separate our state from this church of nature, this breath of life, this cathedral of trees, this mystery that is beyond understanding, this congregation of all species, this temple of dirt, this mosque of seas, this meeting with our essential reality, our ultimate wisdom.