WENDELL BERRY ON HOW SCHOOLS REFLECT THE MISSING COMMUNITY

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In response to the events of September 11, 2001, Wendell Berry sent a message by Internet in which he drew some implications for education. He writes that "A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other(s)." He goes on, the first thing: is the need for a new economy, "founded on thrift and care, on saving and conserving, not on excess and waste." He adds that "An economy based on waste is inherently and hopelessly violent, and war is its inevitable by-product."

According to Berry, educating the young of America for peace rather than war necessitates a new economy, which he calls an economy of community as opposed to America's current public economy. Presumably he would have children learn in schools about the virtues of thrift, care, saving, conserving. They would learn that many of our current popular technologies waste environmental resources. They would be shown how the popular culture of our mass media demeans local communities and encourages young people to leave the local community to compete for places in a global economy.

But surely Berry realizes that such changes can't begin in schools for the young. Any society's schools reflect—often in stark fashion—the dominant values of the adult culture. Rather, Berry means to show his readers how America's schools become a prime instrument in the destruction of local communities. The schools provide him ample evidence in the massive, nation-wide attempt to reform public schools, with the reforms driven by standardized tests that attempt no distinction between what one community teaches and what others teach. Perhaps, Berry concludes, only private schools can preserve any sense of a link with values of the local community.

But why, you may ask, should schools prepare the young for life in their local community rather than for places in the national or global economy? Young people's more immediate task upon graduation from high school or college, may involve finding a place in the larger economy entailing that they leave the local community.

As noted, Berry believes the current American economy so wastes natural resources that it prevents this nation from living peacefully with people in other parts of the world whose societies lack the technological, political, and economic power wielded by America. His prime example concerns America's profligate use of oil, defense of which led to the Persian Gulf War of 1991, and now has led to further war with Iraq.

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But playing the war and peace card may distract from the more enduring effects of schools that downplay the significance of local communities in people's lives. People in a community enjoy the comfort of the familiar, the friends and kin with whom one has emotional ties and doesn't have to compete for recognition. To some extent parents send children to school to prepare them for what might otherwise be a rude transition from their home community to the larger society. Berry's recommendations can only come to schools when the adult society recognizes the deleterious effects priorities that favor the public economy over community have on their own lives as well as on their children's lives.

A chief culprit Berry identifies in the adult culture's excessive focus on the public world lies in the uncritical faith many Americans retain in the idea of progress. Progress formed the guiding ideal of legions of Americans in the early part of the 20th century, led by progressive politicians such as Teddy Roosevelt, and progressive educators such as John Dewey. The almost religious hope of many in that period assumed that science had replaced old fashioned ways of knowing, and that new technologies would gradually overcome scarcity and bring in abundance for all.

The contrast between Berry's views and those of John Dewey could prove instructive. Dewey became a leading civic intellectual in the peak period of American optimism at the turn of the previous century. Like Berry, Dewey valued communal efforts over those of political societies. Communal values flourish best in a political society that does not arbitrarily interfere in their communal and private lives. Americans today live in a political society that generally aspires to become a democracy, of the liberal rather than the utopian variety. Liberal democracies typically do not believe in the possibility of political solutions to evil. Their most important goal has become preservation of the freedom of conscience of their members, and their freedom to form communities on the basis of interests in common (i.e., the first amendment freedoms of religion and assembly). Unfortunately, wars present some degree of threat to those freedoms, and particularly a war against evil, with no foreseeable conclusion.

Abjuring political solutions to big evils does not foreclose pragmatic approaches to ameliorating little everyday evils. As Dewey articulated, people accomplish that more effectively through face-to-face inclusive communities that value the individual contributions of each member.[1] Much of Dewey's optimism reflected the influence of 19th century Vermont town meetings and Congregational churches. Dewey's faith in progress failed to anticipate what Ivan Illich calls the second watershed in the history of American technology, in which at least a few Americans began to note that technological "progress" did not necessarily contribute substantially to the alleviation of human problems.[2] Berry goes a step further to deny most claims to progress from technologies that

have often served to turn people away from the importance of their communal lives, in their striving to make their mark on the public life of political society.

Berry takes current educational institutions to task principally for promoting modernist theories of knowledge. These lay stress on science and progress, and deal largely in abstractions, disregarding the rootedness of knowledge in particular contexts, with specific emotional configurations. He attacks the copy theory of truth, noting that the pictures people create invariably involve selection by the viewer on the basis of pragmatic or aesthetic criteria.

The current popularity of the memoir illustrates how difficult it becomes to distinguish fact from fiction—even the reporting of facts involves the reporter in creating a story. Telling a story through the creation of mathematical formulae likewise involves appeals to the conventions of a genre. Berry would no doubt agree with Hubert Dreyfus that the use of abstractions yields considerable pragmatic power.[3] But educators have often done little to remind their students of the particular contexts in which stories occur. They have often encouraged the young to live in a world of abstractions taking these for the paramount reality, and giving scant attention to their immediate situation.

For Berry, the world of abstract knowledge presents a picture both impersonal and unemotional. To find a place in such a world, the young in schools receive encouragement to compete with their fellows in the production and use of such knowledge, without regard to its effects on the communities to which they belong. "Family"and "friendship" become abstractions requiring understanding apart from immediate experiences.

Berry illustrates these themes with his stories of his life in the community in which he grew up and still resides, and of the people he knows intimately as friends and kin. In summarizing his views, I fall back on abstractions. But that illustrates, I think, the problems educators face in trying to implement Berry's ideas.

An article in a *New York Times* op-ed page by Thomas Friedman argues that globalization has in recent years gained growing support in China and India, which together make up a third of the world's population. (September 22, 2002) Many Indians, because of their fluency with new electronic technologies, provide vital support systems for multinational corporations. In contrast, a recent program on NPR's "Morning Edition" highlighted an elite, private elementary school in Oregon that does not have students using computers. Parents have no fears that their children will fall behind, since they can acquire computer savvyness in many other places.

Public schools, however, would face grave criticisms if the children of the non-elite did not receive every aid in joining the computer-dominated future. A large share of school budgets now goes to providing up-to-date technology.

And surely most parents realize that their children may eventually find careers working for multinational corporations. I see no way to remove that emphasis from the schools.

Berry bemoans dualistic thinking, but perhaps his recommendations promote a form of it. At times he seems to offer a choice between living in a community and living in the public world. It seems clear to me that people do not have that choice; they must live in both worlds. Dualistic thinking often degenerates into the question: which side do you see yourself on? Do you side with the exploiters and technocrats or do you commit yourself to the cause of peace and ecology? Or conversely put, do you side with those opening trade and new technologies to the entire world? Or do you take up the causes of tree-huggers and Luddites?

Giving people that kind of option presents a no-win situation. Even if one side or the other triumphs for a time, it can't escape its rival. Both sides, in my view, become losers. If in actuality every issue had two sides, people would improve their lives by striving not to go to either.

But in actuality every situation has more than two sides. Indeed people with their subtle imaginations could probably exhaust themselves inventing new sides to an issue. To use our understanding to aid our actions, however, I suggest people stop looking for further sides at some number not far above two. Indeed, why not stop at three?

The genius of the Christian trinity and the American constitutional system of checks and balances result from the stability those triads provide. Nations have long had conflicts between executive and legislature. The creation of an independent judiciary proved a stroke of genius. Similarly, people have long divided over whether they should understand God as transcendent and beyond human ken or imminent, living among people. The recognition of how God functions in the meeting between people took the focus away from choosing sides.

Liberal democracy began with a difficult dualism between the public and private realms. Political issues today still often get debated as a quarrel between those who favor the private sphere and those who favor the public. (In Lexington, Kentucky, one issue concerns whether the water company should remain "private," in the face of its sale to a German conglomerate, or should be taken over by the city-county government).

I think Americans have generally misunderstood the meaning of "private," since it hides two quite distinct domains, the communal and the personal. Berry addresses the distinction in his essay, "Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community."[4] Berry writes:

> The indispensable form that can intervene between public and private interests is that of community. The concerns of public and private, republic and citizen, necessary as they are, are not adequate for the shaping of life. Community alone, as principle and as fact, can raise the standards of local health (ecological, economic, social, and spiritual) without which the other two interests will destroy one another. (p. 119)

Berry adds that "private life and public life, without the disciplines of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and exploitation." (p. 122) Berry observes that in the private sphere people seek freedom from public obligations. This becomes dangerous when people speak and think of economic corporations as persons. He writes, "we treat corporations as 'persons' – an abuse of metaphor if ever there was one! – and allow them the same liberation from community obligations that we allow to individuals." (p. 151)

Awareness of these three dimensions of human lives has important implications for schooling. Berry despairs that "education has become increasingly useless as it has become increasingly public. Real education is determined by community needs, not by public tests." (p. 123) Berry believes that teachers, as citizens of a democratic society, should have the freedom to decide what books they will teach and what they will say about them. He notes, however, that

> The families of the community surely must be allowed an equal freedom to determine the education of their children. How free are the parents who have no choice but to turn their children over to the influence of whatever the public will prescribe or tolerate? …The only solution is trust between a community and its teachers, who will therefore teach as members of the community – a trust that in time of community disintegration is perhaps not possible.

Berry does not mention it here, but his sense of community disintegration in the relation to schools reflect the inroads that consolidation and busing to achieve racial balance have made on the relationship between schools and their communities.

Busing proved a bad idea to solve a serious problem: overcoming the vestiges of racial segregation in American society. It should astound us today that conscientious people prescribed it seemingly without any thought of its impact on the relationship between schools and communities.

Schools necessarily attempt to prepare the young for life in the public world, with its globalization and ever-new technologies. Americans have come dangerously close, however, to allowing the public world to take precedence

over their communal lives. The emotions people experience in the communal world contains pain and disappointment as well as love and friendship. But without those emotional experiences I submit that life becomes dull and meaningless (a lesson Dickens' *Christmas Carol* meant to teach us long ago). Schools, public, private, or parochial have a major task to restore the links to community.

I fear that interpreters of Berry will leap to embrace one horn of a dualism I don't think Berry intends. I'm wary of a tendency to proclaim Berry an advocate of retreat into communal forms of living, asking people to turn their backs on the public, political world, with its emphasis on expanding global markets and imposing an economic world order by a kind of pax Americana enforced by American military might. I would give Berry credit for realizing that counseling such a response can lead only to eventual despair, when self-isolated communitarians suffer from decisions taken in the public world. The price of freedom remains eternal vigilance to political actions, particularly in times of war, which invariably shrink the freedoms that support individual conscience and formation of communities.

Berry's vivid stories illustrate for me the importance of the communal dimension of people's lives that they may be inclined to overlook in the business of competing for status in the public world. That's why I interpret his meaning primarily as a call for restoration of balance among the public, communal, and personal dimensions of life. Schools now receive their primary support on the assumption that they play a vital role in preparing the young to compete for status in the public world. But we can find numerous instances in which schools have contributed significantly to the life of local communities; Elliot Wigginton's "Foxfire" project provides an example. Unfortunately such "shining moments" generally give way before the pressures from adults to emphasize concerns from the public world over the interests of community or of personal integrity. Wendell Berry calls for efforts to restore balance among the different domains of people's lives, so that young people realize the value the adult society places on the communal aspects of their lives as well as on the struggle for status in the public world.

Notes

1. For educators, Dewey's clearest statement of the link between liberal democracies and classrooms as problem-addressing communities remains *Democracy and Education*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1916.

2. Illich explains technology's first and second watersheds in his *Tools for Conviviality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973

3. Hubert Dreyfus, "Knowledge and Human Values: A Genealogy of Nihilism," *Teachers College Record, 82*(3) (Spring 1981), pp. 507-520.

4. Wendell Berry, "Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community" in a book of essays with the same title, Pantheon Books, 1993, Ch. 8, pp. 117-173.

5. Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment*, New York: Anchor, 1986.