

Wendell Berry: What Are People For? by Wendell Berry

Excerpted from "What Are People For" a collection of essays by Wendell Berry

I

The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common.
In healing the scattered members come together.
In health the flesh is graced, the holy enters the world.

II

The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less.
A creature is not a creator, and cannot be. There is only one Creation, and we are its members.
To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.
The most creative works are all strategies of this health.
Works of pride, by self-called creators, with their premium on originality, reduce the Creation to novelty, the faint surprises of minds incapable of wonder.
Pursuing originality, the would-be creator works alone. In loneliness one assumes a responsibility for oneself that one cannot fulfill.
Novelty is a kind of loneliness.

III

There is the bad work of pride. There is also the bad work of despair, done poorly out of the failure of hope or vision.
Despair is the too-little of responsibility, as pride is the too-much.
The shoddy work of despair, the pointless work of pride, equally betray Creation. They are wastes of life.
For despair there is no forgiveness, and for pride none. Who in loneliness can forgive?

IV

Good work finds the way between pride and despair.
It graces with health. It heals with grace.
It preserves the given so that it remains a gift.
By it, we lose loneliness:
we clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us;

we enter the little circle of each other's arms,
and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance,
to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.

V

And by it we enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness.

Only discord can come of the attempt to share solitude.

True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation.

One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources. In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.

One returns from solitude laden with the gifts of circumstance.

VI

And there is no escaping that return.

From the order of nature we return to the order and the disorder of humanity.

From the larger circle we must go back to the smaller, the smaller within the larger and dependent on it.

One enters the larger circle by willingness to be a creature, the smaller by choosing to be a human.

And having returned from the woods, we remember with regret its restfulness. For all creatures there are in place, hence at rest.

In their most strenuous striving, sleeping and waking, dead and living, they are at rest.

In the circle of the human we are weary with striving, and are without rest.

VII

Order is the only possibility of rest.

The made order must seek the given order, and find its place in it.

The field must remember the forest, the town must remember the field, so that the wheel of life will turn, and the dying be met by the newborn.

The scattered members must be brought together.

Desire will always outreach the possible. But to fulfill the possible is to enlarge it.

The possible, fulfilled, is timely in the world, eternal in the mind.

Seeing the work that is to be done, who can help wanting to be the one to do it?

But one is afraid that there will be no rest until the work is finished and the house is in order, the farm is in order, the town is in order, and all loved ones are well.

But it is pride that lies awake in the night with its desire and its grief.

To work at this work alone is to fail. There is no help for it. Loneliness is its failure.

It is despair that sees the work failing in one's own failure.

This despair is the awkwardest pride of all.

VIII

There is finally the pride of thinking oneself without teachers.

The teachers are everywhere. What is wanted is a learner.

In ignorance is hope. If we had known the difficulty, we would not have learned even so little.

Rely on ignorance. It is ignorance that teachers will come to.

They are waiting, as they always have, beyond the edge of the light.

IX

The teachings of unsuspected teachers belong to the task, and are its hope.
The love and the work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health.
Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace.
Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night.
Order is the only possibility of rest.