

## Wendell Berry On How To Be A Poet And A Complete Human Being by Maria Popova

“When power corrupts, poetry cleanses,” John F. Kennedy proclaimed in his touching tribute to Robert Frost, celebrating poetry as “the means of saving power from itself.” And although poetry itself exerts a singular power over the human spirit, as one of the greatest poets of all time observed, it is hardly a power that comes easily to the poet: “Writing poetry is an unnatural act,” Elizabeth Bishop wrote when she was only twenty-three. So how, then, does one come to master this unnatural power — how does one become a Poet?

That’s what the wise and wonderful Wendell Berry (b. August 5, 1934) — a man of great wisdom on solitude, love, and our “rugged individualism” — explores in a marvelous poem titled “How to Be a Poet (to remind myself),” found in his *New Collected Poems* (public library).

Wendell Berry (Photograph: Guy Mendes)

In this recording from the consistently transcendent *On Being*, Berry brings his beautifully aged voice to the poem — which is in many ways not only about how to be a poet, but also about how to be an artist of any kind. With its insistence on the vitalizing power of silence and stillness and self-refinement, it is perhaps, above all, about how to be a complete human being.

### HOW TO BE A POET (to remind myself)

Make a place to sit down.  
Sit down. Be quiet.  
You must depend upon  
affection, reading, knowledge,  
skill — more of each  
than you have — inspiration,  
work, growing older, patience,  
for patience joins time  
to eternity. Any readers  
who like your poems,  
doubt their judgment.

Breathe with unconditional breath  
the unconditioned air.  
Shun electric wire.

Communicate slowly. Live  
a three-dimensioned life;  
stay away from screens.  
Stay away from anything  
that obscures the place it is in.  
There are no unsacred places;  
there are only sacred places  
and desecrated places.

Accept what comes from silence.  
Make the best you can of it.  
Of the little words that come  
out of the silence, like prayers  
prayed back to the one who prays,  
make a poem that does not disturb  
the silence from which it came.

For more of Berry's enduring wisdom, see his meditations on the two great enemies of creative work and what poetic form reveals about the secret of marriage, then treat yourself to Derek Walcott's stirring ode to being at home in ourselves and subscribe to [On Being here](#).