

*This homily was given at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast on January 24, 2010, by Robert Shetterly. Originally Rob titled his talk “What Now?” which he said he probably regretted, because he does not have the answer.*

*Rob opened the service with an announcement that he will donate the entire collection of Americans Who Tell the Truth portraits to the UU Service Committee, whose headquarters are in Cambridge, Mass.*

*We thank Rob for his generosity in letting us post his homily here.  
Lane Fisher  
for the Services Committee*

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

I have sometimes suggested to teachers that they ask their students to explore what Wendell Berry might mean by the use of the word “free” in the line above.

I’m sure you recognize that line 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.*

I have blithely offered that as an exercise, but I have not taken the time to really explore it myself. So, I ask myself, just how is Wendell Berry “free” when he rests in the grace of the world?

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 and economic 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 this week’s Supreme Court 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. 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. 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.

But 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.

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.

It might be helpful to further examine Berry's meaning by reading Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese* which we might consider a companion poem to *The Peace of Wild Things*.

### ***Wild Geese***

*You don 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.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting ---  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Mary Oliver says we can tell each other about our despair, but meanwhile the world is going on. It is as though it broadcasts a homing signal, a flashing beacon, "...over and over announcing your place/ in the family of things." That reminds me of Yeats in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* saying, "I will arise and go now, for always night and day/ I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore."

It's the same signal. The same message for everyone. Yeats says,

*While I stand in the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep, heart's core.*

It's a message that sounds so gentle, so loving, so unconditional, the voice of the perfect mother.

But there is a hammer. A set of rules. An exclusion policy. A pitiless reshuffling of the evolutionary deck. 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/ he rests 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, awe, patience, 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? 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 prayers, no entitlements of one religion 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."

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

What's just about it is 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 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. 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 building, even St John the Divine, inferior to white pine tree.

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, moral disregard for the mistreatment of animals, climate change..... the real price is astronomical. 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 --- probably not to any nation state, but to nature, to his community, his family. 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.

I suspect that Wendell Berry would agree with this statement from Alice Walker:

*"I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act. Every time we decide to believe the world can be better. Every time we decide to trust others to be as noble as we think they are. And that there might be years during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope. The alternative, however, not to act, and therefore to miss experiencing other people at their best, reaching toward their fullness, has never appealed to me."*

Or, we should let Mr. Berry say it himself:

From Wendell Berry, Sabbaths 2003

### III Look Out

Come to the window, look out and see  
the valley turning green in remembrance  
of all the springs past and to come, the woods  
perfecting the immortal patience  
the leaves that are the work of all time,  
the sycamore whose white limbs shed  
the history of a man's life with their old bark,  
the river under the morning's breath quivering  
like the touched skin of a horse, and you will see  
also the shadow cast upon it by fire, the war  
that lights its way by burning the earth.

Come to your windows, people of the world,  
look out at whatever you see wherever you are,  
and you will see dancing upon it that shadow.  
You will see that your place, wherever it is,  
your house, your garden, your shop, your forest, your  
farm,  
bears the shadow of its destruction by war  
which is the economy of greed which is plunder  
which is the economy of wrath which is fire.  
The Lords of War sell the earth to buy fire,  
they sell the water and the air of life to buy fire.  
They are little men grown great by willingness  
to drive whatever exists into its perfect absence.  
Their intention to destroy any place is solidly  
founded  
upon their willingness to destroy every place.

Every household of the world is at their mercy,  
the households of the farmer and the otter and the owl

are at their mercy. They have no mercy.  
Having hate, they can have no mercy.  
Their greed is the hatred of mercy.  
Their pockets jingle with the small change of the  
poor.  
Their power is their willingness to destroy  
everything for knowledge which is money  
which is power which is victory  
which is ashes sown by the wind.

Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,  
go out into the streets, go into the fields, go into  
the woods  
and along the streams. Go together, go alone.  
Say no to the Lords of War which is Money  
which is Fire. Say no by saying yes  
to the air, to the earth, to the trees,  
yes to the grasses, to the rivers, to the birds  
and the animals and every living thing, yes  
to the small houses, yes to the children. Yes.