

Uncovering a New Narrative for Agriculture: Wendell Berry and Rudolf Steiner — Institute for Mindful Agriculture

The basis of this article is a workshop that the authors offered at the 2014 National Biodynamic Conference, which took place in Louisville, Kentucky.

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There is a case to be made that healthy agriculture is the firm basis upon which any further development of a nation or culture rests. Each individual must have access to healthy and nutritious food in order to be strong and vital for his or her life task. Agriculture is one primary way to connect to the natural world through meaningful work. It can provide the

foundation and underlying pattern for purpose and meaning to flourish within a culture or society. Cultural patterns of mutual respect and morality, celebration of life and death, must include recognition of the intertwining relationships between the individual and the whole cosmos. Celebration of cultural life has always been seasonal in its rhythms and most often framed by the agricultural year. Today's agriculture has seemingly lost this cultural relevance.

Perhaps a new narrative of and for agriculture can help us to regain the respect and needed gratitude for what it means to be alive on the beautifully blue and serenely floating globe of our home planet. The two visionary writers mentioned above, working nearly fifty years apart had such thoughts and penned them for us to consider as we attempt to discern this emerging narrative for a truly mindful agriculture. Their seminal works, *The Spiritual Foundations of Agriculture* (Steiner, 1924) and *The Unsettling of America* (Berry, 1977) were written in two quite different cultures. And yet in their visions and pleas to us from the past they not

only agree, but also become increasingly relevant as we look at the challenges of the present and envision the future.

In 1924 Rudolf Steiner gave 8 lectures on sound and regenerative agricultural practice at the agricultural estate of Count and Countess Keyserlink in what is now Poland. These lectures were in many ways the culmination of 30 years of work redefining the ontological and epistemological basis for a healthy and evolving relationship of the human being to the Earth. Steiner, in a comprehensive and coherent fashion, indicated how we as humans are directly related through our past evolution to our currently evolving planet, and how agriculture could become a gateway and lever for a healthy future. In earlier decades Steiner had written and lectured on the nature of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and had spent many years researching the physical-spiritual nature of the human being. The articulation of this research, which he called, “spiritual science” or “Anthroposophy”, (knowledge of the wisdom living within the human being) gave way to innovations not only in the field of agriculture, but also in

education, medicine, the arts, and in economic life.

Fifty years later Wendell Berry's work emerged from the "spiritual streams" of the Southern Agrarians— including Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson. Berry wrote in "The Land Magazine" published by the "Friends of the Land Association" with contributors such as Aldo Leopold, Louis Bromfield and Wallace Stegner. And of course, Wendell Berry, poet and visionary was always a farmer first. For Berry, "there is another way to live and think and it's called agrarianism. It is not so much a philosophy as a practice, an attitude, a loyalty, and a passion – all based in close connection with the land. It results in a sound local economy in which producers and consumers are neighbors and in which nature herself becomes the standard for work and production." Berry helped solve the deep American divide between nature and culture using the farm rather than wilderness as the text. He thus became a lifelong advocate for land-conserving economies; that is, locally adapted farm economies based on local nature, local

sunlight, local intelligence and local work. Berry contrasted the industrial agricultural system which features confinement, concentration, and separation, with diversity, balance, health, quality, and human scale.

For both men, slogans and abstract theories would never be able to move us forward as an earth community. Hard inner work, an acknowledgement of our interconnectedness and binding ties to our planet, along with a loving gesture towards one another and to our Earth are required to overcome the challenges we face today.

Comparisons

There are several distinct agricultural themes common to the writings of Wendell Berry and Rudolf Steiner that can serve as a springboard for comparing the thinking of both men. Our method will be to select significant quotes from each author as they relate to a theme and to use these quotes as a basis to further elaborate the thinking of each individual on the subject. While we will be just skimming the surface of the depth of thinking that both Berry and

Steiner have brought to each topic, this method is meant as a way to entice the reader to further investigations and to show how timely and even visionary their agricultural thinking remains.

Our themes will include:

- The relationship of culture to agriculture
- The farm seen as a living entity and as an ecological individuality
- Agriculture and the economy
- The interdependence of all beings of creation

The Relationship of Culture to Agriculture

“There is practically no field of human endeavor that does not relate to agriculture in some way. Seen from whatever perspective you choose, agriculture touches on every single aspect of human life, as you will see from the course itself.Knowing these things brings agriculture into intimate relationship with society in an objective way. And this is what is so important, that agriculture be related to the whole of social life.” (Steiner, 1924)

"A culture is not a collection of relics or ornaments, but a practical necessity, and its corruption invokes calamity. A healthy

culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, and aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well. A healthy farm culture can be based only upon familiarity and can grow only among a people soundly established upon the land. It nourishes and safeguards a human intelligence of the earth that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace." (Berry, 1977)

Agriculture and culture are intimately linked. Both men tie our agricultural methods to our wisdom toward the earth and with expressions of our cultural lives. In fact, the word “**culture**” is derived from, ‘the tilling of land,’ from Middle French culture and directly from Latin **cultura** ‘a cultivating, agriculture,’ figuratively ‘care, culture, an honoring,’ from past participle stem of **colere** ‘tend, guard, cultivate, till’ (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=culture>). Steiner and Berry are pointing to the fact that agriculture must

be seen in a much broader context than as a set of farming techniques and that it is rather multi-faceted in its scope—encompassing the social-moral, artistic, economic and even the religious aspects of our lives insofar as agriculture and the natural world are related. Such agriculture can only spring from deeper sources of connection that we feel towards one another and towards our earth. Clearly industrial agriculture breaks all these ties. And as a result both our physical and spiritual health suffers. Here again is Wendell Berry:

"If we conceive of a culture as one body which it is, we see that all of its disciplines are everybody's business, and that the proper university product is therefore not the whittled down, isolated mentality of expertise but a mind competent in all of its concerns. To such a mind it would be clear that there are agricultural disciplines that have nothing to do with crop production, just as there are agricultural obligations that belong to people who are not farmers."

The Farm Seen as a Living Entity and as an Ecological Individuality

“Now a farm comes closest to its essence when it can be conceived of as a kind of independent individuality, a self-contained entity. In reality, every farm ought to aspire to this state of being a self-contained individuality. This state cannot be achieved completely, but it needs to be approached. This means that within our farms, we should attempt to have everything we need for agricultural production, including, of course, the appropriate amount of livestock.” (Steiner, 1924)

"The attempt to-remake agriculture as a science and an industry has excluded from it the age old husbandry which was central and essential to it. Two paramount accomplishments of husbandry to which I think we will have to pay more deliberate attention in our present circumstances are local adaption and local coherence of form. True husbandry as its first strategy of survival has always striven to fit the farming to the farm and to the field, to the needs and abilities of the farm's family, and to the local economy. Local adaption involves consideration of the individuality

of every farm and every field." (Berry, 1977)

Rudolf Steiner's unique contribution to the future of agriculture was that he developed the concept of "farm as an individuality". This concept recognizes the living and integrated nature of a farm. It acknowledges that farms are healthiest when they are self-sufficient and locally adapted, with diverse enterprises that synergize one another and create complex, interdependent relationships – comparable to the organ systems of our own bodies. Moreover, this concept includes the idea that a farm has a biography over time and that if the farmers can come to cultivate and "listen" to what is being asked of them as they steward the land and farm, then an individual farm 'being' will result from such efforts. We can compare this concept to the wording of Wendell Berry's quote. He speaks of "coherence of form.... Adapting farm to field and considering the individuality of every farm and every field."

For both men, our current industrial system is a profound violation of both

the cultural and ecological principles that these quotes imply. The very abstractness of our current agricultural methods imply a “one size fits all” mentality that is resulting in disastrous economic and ecological implications for the global South as well as within our own Western cultures. Our inability to “listen” to the land in our care is resulting in catastrophes of global proportions. And both authors imply that such conversations are highly personal between farmer and farm. Such relationships must surely require more mindful attention to the land and therefore as prerequisite a more self-reflective capacity on the part of the farmer. Here is one more quote from Berry:

"The idea of "kindly use" in agriculture is a concept that of necessity broadens, becoming more complex and diverse, as it approaches action. The land is too various in its kinds, climates, conditions, declivities, aspects and histories to conform to any generalized understanding or to prosper under generalized treatment. The use of land cannot be both general and kindly. To

treat every field, or every part of every field with the same consideration is not farming but industry...The best farming requires a farmer - a husbander, a nurturer - not a technician or businessman. A technician or a businessman, given the necessary abilities and ambitions can be made in a little while by training. A good farmer, on the other hand is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future."

Agriculture and the Economy

"In a community of human beings working together, the well-being of the community will be the greater, the less individuals claim for themselves the proceeds of the work they themselves have; that is the more of these proceeds they give over to their fellow-workers, and the more their own requirements are satisfied, not by the results of their own

work but the by the work done by others...
genuine social progress is only possible
if I do my work in the service of all and
the totality of the community gives me
what I need. ...The work of the
community must be so organized that
the proceeds of labor belong to society
and so that the means of subsistence are
created not as the reward for the labor,
but through the structure of society....”
(Steiner, 1924)

"Once, of course, the idea of a farm
included the idea of a household: an
integral and major part of a farm's
economy was the economy of its own
household; the family that owned and
worked the farm lived from it. But the
farm also helped to feed other
households in towns and cities. These
households were dependent on the
farms, but not passively so, for their
dependence was limited in two ways. For
one thing, the town or city household was
itself often a producer of food: at one
time town and city lots routinely included
garden space and often included pens
and buildings to accommodate milk
cows, fattening hogs and flocks of
poultry. For another thing the urban

household carefully selected and prepared the food that it bought; the neighborhood shops were suppliers of kitchen raw material to local households, of whose needs and tastes the shopkeepers had personal knowledge. The shopkeepers were under the direct influence and discipline of their customers' wants which they had to supply honestly if they hoped to prosper. The household was therefore not merely a unit in the economy of food production but its members practiced essential productive skills. The consumers of food were also producers or processors of food or both." (Berry, 1977)

Perhaps one of the most be-devilling challenges facing us as a human community today has to do with how we choose to produce and distribute the necessary goods and services that each of us needs in order to have a basic, healthy and sound quality of life. We already know that we produce enough food to feed all the inhabitants of our globe and yet almost a billion of us live in hunger while 30% of the food produced globally goes to waste. Agriculture is unique from the economic

perspective of Rudolf Steiner in that it has one foot in the cultural realm and one foot in the economic realm. Steiner states that a farmer who is providing for his or her own household is not yet truly part of the economy and that thought is supported by the opening sentences of Wendell Berry's statement above. It is only when a person provides goods and services to others, that the economic processes take hold. And here it is very clear that the how and why of these relationships becomes crucial.

Wendell Berry provides us with a beautiful picture of an agricultural economy that has sadly faded from view in the United States. It is clear from his picture that producers, processors and consumers of food existed in both rural and urban areas and that their interactions were respectful, collaborative and integrated (Note: Jane Jacobs in *Cities* and *The Wealth of Nations* tells this story in a quite an illuminating way). In a semi-conscious, dream-like fashion rural-urban economies practiced economic relationships that benefited the whole

community and were highly personal and synergistic.

This kind of economic relationship has been deeply threatened by our global economy. And while we cannot reconstruct a past that is gone, Rudolf Steiner is pointing us towards a redemptive economic future by insisting that the healthy economic life will be found not out of self-interest through competition as proposed by Adam Smith, but by interest in the other and through collaboration. He makes it clear in his economic writings that we are already interdependent through the principle of the division of labor, and that neither our religious or moral principles, nor our cultural systems have attended to this fact. Our hope lies in conscious collaborative economic action. To achieve this, we will need to learn to associate in local, regional and national groupings in ways that consider the needs of others and allow the groups to consider our own needs.

The Community Supported Agriculture movement provides a small example for future agricultural economic models. The

building of strong local and regional “food sheds” takes this thought a step further. The international “fair trade” movement is a logical and much needed further step along this path on a global scale. In all these situations economy is built on trusting relationships – the kind of relationships that was a normal part of the economic picture presented to us by Wendell Berry but has been in large measure lost in our current global economic system. Much of the political upheaval we are now experiencing globally has its roots in this mistrust and we must again look at ourselves and this huge blind spot in our current way of thinking if we are ever going to move forward in a more equitable and socially just manner.

The Interdependence of all Beings of Creation

“Nowadays we tend to look at the beings of nature – the minerals, plants, and animals (we’ll leave out human beings for the moment) – as if they stood there in isolation. We’re in the habit of looking at a plant all by itself; then we go on to look at a plant species all by itself, and then at another species next to it. Everything

we're supposed to know about these things is neatly pigeonholed into separate species and genera. But that is not how things are in nature. In nature, and actually throughout the universe, everything is in mutual interaction with everything else..."

"In contrast, what spiritual science has to say on the subject is rooted in the whole household of nature. It is always conceived out of the totality, and for this reason the individual measures are also decisive for the totality. If we farm like this [following Steiner's principles], the result can be nothing other than what is best for human beings and also for [our farms]. In spiritual science, human beings are our standard and our starting point. All our practical suggestions serve the purpose of sustaining the whole human being in the best way possible."
(Steiner, 1924)

"For some time now ecologists have been documenting the principle 'you can't do one thing' - which means that in a natural system whatever affects one thing ultimately affects everything. Everything in the Creation is related to

everything else and dependent of everything else. The Creation is one; it is a uni-verse, a whole, the parts of which are all 'turned into one.' "...The definitive relationships in the universe are thus not competitive but interdependent. And from the human point of view they are analogical. We can build one system only with another. **We can have agriculture only within nature and culture only within agriculture. At certain critical points these systems have to conform to one another or destroy one another.**" (Berry, 1977)

Conclusion

Perhaps in these last two quotes the message rings out most clearly to us from 1924 all the way through the 1970's and to our current situation. We can no longer continue to turn away from this call for interconnectedness. The message is simple and clear, "we are "one uni-verse", all of creation is one and while we are also individual and diverse, each individual action affects the whole and we as humans are the one species who can reflect on this fact. But herein lies a tremendous mystery and apparent paradox. Only through the complete

expression of true individuality (which can only emerge in community) and the thus resulting tremendous diversity will the “uni-verse” reveal itself. The philosopher Thomas Nagel expresses this beautifully in his book “Mind and Cosmos”(pg.85): “Each of our lives is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up and becoming aware of itself.” How we treat our Earth, our fellow humans and ourselves as individuals has enormous implications for future evolution. In fact we (the authors) argue that at the center of a new agricultural narrative lives the emerging recognition of the need to embrace the reality of **co-evolution**. We are invited to become active contributors to the future and not see ourselves simply as participants. That our ecological, economic and cultural relationships are nested within one another is now clear. That agriculture has a crucial role to play in articulating these relationships with strong potential for societal renewal becomes apparent. To develop this new narrative for agriculture is a task that belongs to each of us as farmers, eaters and members of our world community. Sharing that

collectively held narrative in such a way that it challenges and transforms current dominant assumptions, perceptions, behaviors, and actions is the work that is critically needed. In uncovering this narrative we will likely uncover our own humanity. The time is now.