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Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place

Baker, J. and Bilbro, J., 2017
Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky
Reviewed by Ben Goller, MA

“Expect the end of the world” (Berry, 2013, p. 174). Such a phrase in a current book about higher education might be taken to refer to the existential enrollment crunch faced by many institutions as they navigate changing demographics and new expectations from employers and students. But Kentucky’s most read farmer-poet, Wendell Berry, uses it in a poem in which he exhorts his readers to invest in the millennium and plant sequoias. This long-range view of growth and change is what authors Jack Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro harness as they explore various principles and philosophies expressed by Berry through his poems, novels, and essays and how they apply to higher education today.

Few non-fiction books are as experientially immersive as this one. Baker and Bilbro are both faculty in the English department at Spring Arbor University and it shows: The book features meticulously constructed chapters that start with an introduction based on one of Berry’s fiction works followed by practical suggestions for higher education practitioners and finally wrapping up with a meditative dip into Berry’s poetry. The authors explore Berry’s writing to build an argument that loving one’s home in a certain type of “rooted education” is central to an education that focuses on developing full human beings rather than simply cogs

in the corporate machine. It is an ardent defense of the liberal arts that focuses on what New York Times columnist David Brooks calls "eulogy virtues" rather than the "resume virtues" for which many universities are currently known (Brooks, 2016).

The first part of the book establishes the authors' case that universities often seek after knowledge in the wrong way: by over-connecting it to job viability and by sterilizing our relationship to our work with jargon. The divorce of education from meaning has led to a dangerous set of outcomes than can include anything from decaying small towns to industrial disasters. Berry (through his character Jack Beacham) shows that physical work "enacts our love for particular places and people" (p. 70). It is when one is down in the weeds that one feels responsibility for the work being done, and "...work becomes degraded when the worker loses responsibility for the thing being made" (p. 74). They posit that universities have a responsibility to teach the whole person which includes the view of oneself in relation to one's educational material. Baker and Bilbro offer a way forward by combining the liberal and practical arts to help people stay rooted in the outcomes of their work. Drawing from short stories by Berry, they show how his characters are brought to similar conclusions. Berry's fiction acts as a spotlight that shows that another way of viewing and designing student formation is possible.

In the second part of the book, Baker and Bilbro highlight key virtues that universities should focus on cultivating in order to move away from a deracinated form of liberal arts education. Memory of tradition and local culture is held up to show the reader that information without form or place is useless. Drawing on T.S. Eliot's poem "The Rock," the authors acknowledge that there is a gap between information and knowledge as well as between knowledge and wisdom. This gap, they claim, can be filled by the memory of people and places which helps students and educators understand the significance of issues and the people they touch upon. Instead of being ivory towers that encourage outsiders to come in and make changes without consideration to what has been, universities can teach rooted memory not only by talking with local long-standing members of the community but also by changing how we view our accumulation of knowledge. Reducing technological reliance (which encourages "uploading" our memories to something external) and memorizing poetry or Scripture are some practical strategies the authors offer as universities seek to root our minds in a local place.

Furthermore, memory helps students know where limits are and to pay homage to the giants on whose shoulders they stand. Humility and gratitude are virtues that teach responsible inquiry, drive ethics, and help researchers find the boundary between what they are able to do and what they should do. Universities have an ethical mandate to help engineers, biologists, chemists, and all students in areas of inquiry to know that an understanding of consequences formed by humility is tantamount to the search for new knowledge. This gratitude and humility is formed by knowing history, people, and places pertinent to one's area of study.

The authors have made it clear that they believe place matters in education, and the point is bolstered by Berry's short story *The Wild Birds* in which Burley Coulter recounts his life, including moving away from home and coming back and how he found that his fidelity to his place formed him into a man who truly knew and cared for those around him. Baker and Bilbro springboard from this to show how universities can enrich their curriculum by drawing from local culture and knowledge. They exhort universities to teach students to love their local town because local knowledge matters in a way that globalized cosmopolitanism does not, because it is grounded in known people.

Grounding knowledge in real human beings is truly the crux of why rooted education matters. Baker and Bilbro finish the book by showing how community and "learning to love the membership" are the ultimate goals of fully developed humans and therefore of rooted education. Using Jayber Crow as an example of one who learns to selflessly care for his community, the authors argue that knowledge can be a loving participation rather than exploitative control. They ask universities to consider focusing on attentive study in which knowledge is sought for selfless reasons and in which questions guide inquiry rather than hoped-for answers.

Baker and Bilbro use Berry's written works to craft a vision of universities that seek the long-term holistic development of their students. Their method of interacting with his fiction and poetry helps the reader steep in the ideas rather than merely giving intellectual assent and moving on. This in-depth approach is a masterful acting out of the principles they espouse; it is an embodied interaction as the reader wrestles with the information beyond the mind. This then allows the information a chance to move toward knowledge and be applied as wisdom. The only drawback of this method is that if a reader is completely unfamiliar with

Berry's fiction, it is possible to get lost in new names of characters. But an attentive reader who is unfamiliar Berry will be able to glean the relevant details from their introduction sufficiently to follow along.

It can be difficult, however, as universities look for ways to keep their doors open to not “love the quick profit,” an inclination that Berry derides. Some of the suggestions and hopes for universities put forward in this book may seem too idealistic for institutions fighting to stay afloat. But perhaps the quick profit is sneered at because its quickness is not only in the coming but also in the going. Baker and Bilbro would assert that sequoias give great returns and so will students who are well rooted. Higher education practitioners have only a few years in the lives of their students in which to invest so they can truly say along with Wendell Berry “...that (their) main crop is the forest that (they) did not plant, that (they) will not live to harvest” (Berry, 2013, p. 174).

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