

SOUTHERN RELIGIOUS HUMANISM
WENDELL BERRY'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE
SEAN HAYDEN
SPRING 2012
MONDAY 1-4

Why This Course?

A farmer, poet, essayist, teacher and native Kentuckian, you won't find Wendell Berry on a list of leading theologians or religious scholars, even though many of them are familiar with his work. His writing stretches across several genres and ideological spectra, fitting into none too easily. I want to suggest that Berry can be of help to those of us busy thinking and living in the Christian tradition (of which he is surely a part) in three specific ways. First, he offers clear and practical engagement with often theologically neglected topics of ethical and political significance, especially land use, farming and local community. Second, by speaking and writing in this way on questions of the common good, he models a kind of public faith and religious speech that blurs the boundaries of 'secular' and 'Christian' at a time when many theologians want to separate the two in rather tidy fashion. Third, by combining such public concern with aesthetic modes of expression, Berry moves past the limits of traditional argumentation to a form of humanism that is both religious and distinctively southern. It is this attitude (southern religious humanism) I want to consider 1) as a buffer between liberals and evangelicals, rednecks and radicals, on issues of the common good in the South and beyond, 2) as one rich, unbroken pattern of piety and learning, and so finally 3) as a source of educational ideals and models.

We will approach these questions by organizing Berry's work around nine 'theological' themes: Vocation, Incarnation, Nature and Grace, Faith and Work(s), the Land, Community, Temporal Goods, Exile, and Home. In each section, his poems, fiction and essays will build up a perspective on the meaning of life with depth and coherence—a philosophy of life. Because learning with Berry involves 'thinking' differently than we're used to in the classroom setting, the assignments go somewhat afield from your usual requirements.

Assignments.

1. **Two technological sabbaticals and reflection essays (10% each)** It is a small demand of the course that, in the spirit of WB's philosophy, you briefly give up your addiction to technology. The first sabbatical will be three days, the second a full week. This means no internet or computers (other than for school use, if absolutely necessary), no TV, and no cell phones or similar devices. The primary goal of this exercise is for you to learn a simple lesson about *attention*—and how it gets ruined. Both sabbaticals conclude with a short reflection paper of 2-3 pages. Details, including dates, will be provided in class.
2. **A Day Retreat to Red River Gorge (or a similar KY locale).** It would be a pity to talk our way around the importance of nature and not spend some time in it. The second technological sabbatical is a bit of purification for a visit to Red River Gorge. We will read Berry's essay in preparation and use it as an occasion to discuss some of his claims about the relations between language, experience and understanding.

3. **Final Essay (60%).** The main requirement of the course is a final paper of 15-20 pages, and it can take one of two forms. 1) Your own ‘philosophy of life’ in dialogue with Berry or 2) an essay on Berry and a topic relevant to the course. Writing a philosophy of life is harder than it sounds, so don’t be tempted by the apparently easier road. The question is whether you can combine serious reflection on the gritty intellectual questions usually posed in seminary with a sense of the commonplace, that is, how everyday life can be lived with integrity, depth and simplicity without turning to oversimplifications. Whichever you choose, I will be looking for this same combination of simplicity and depth in your writing style. Effective communication is a central ‘good’ of the course, and a scarce one in our society. Saying what you mean (clarity) and meaning what you say (conviction) are essential to the pastor and the citizen alike. **ALL ASSIGNMENTS ARE TO BE HANDWRITTEN.** You will find it shocking what is lost in the process of thought and expression by breaking the link between your mind, your hand, and the ‘incarnation’ of that thought on the page (we can of course work out alternatives if for some reason this proves impossible).
4. **Weekly Reflection Paper/Participation (20%)** In order to facilitate discussion, the course also requires a weekly reflection ‘paper,’ although it is less formal than it sounds. In these very brief exercises (half a page or so), I’m looking for two things. First, a few intelligent thoughts on the reading. The reading loads are not especially heavy, and Berry’s writing is fluid, so I want to know that you are *thinking* about the reading. Second, try to make connections between the reading, the topic for the session, and the real sources of your judgment about life. In other words, very few if any of us really live out of ‘academic’ writing (thank God), but rather out of simple, aphoristic advice from parents or mentors, out of shared stories (familial or fictional), music, or poetry, out of practices of eating, sleeping, enjoying, learning. The real goal of the course is to make contact between what you do in the classroom and these usually unacknowledged and undervalued sources of insight. A thirty to forty-five minute small group session in the middle of each three hour class is devoted to digesting these raw materials into a conscious philosophy of life.

Course Objectives

1. Students will gain familiarity with the basic shape of Berry’s thought on several key topics.
2. Students will be able to describe those features of Berry’s work belonging to a wider tradition of intellectual and spiritual reflection known as ‘southern religious humanism,’ a task facilitated primarily by the brief situating ‘lectures’ offered at the beginning of each session.
3. Students will learn to distinguish the elements and execution of three genres in Berry’s corpus: the essay, poetry, and the short story. Within the tradition of southern regional fiction and nature writing, these have specific and noteworthy dimensions.
4. Students will draw connections between the ‘everyday’ and often concealed sources of their judgment about life and Berry’s meditations on the mundane. The intent here is to discover and amplify the wisdom of the everyday.

Required Texts.

Because Berry tends to write short collections of essays and poems, the book list is extensive. Most of them can be purchased for a few dollars on www.abebooks.com or similar sites. All will be available on reserve in the LPTS library. You might also consider sharing resources.

Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems*.

_____. *The Unsettling of America*.

_____. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*.

_____. *The Hidden Wound*.

_____. *What Are People For?*

_____. *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997*.

Recommended Texts

_____. *Standing By Words*.

_____. *The Way of Ignorance*.

_____. *Life is a Miracle*.

_____. *Home Economics*

_____. *A Continuous Harmony*

_____. *Fidelity*.

Academic Honesty:

All work turned in to the instructor is expected to be the work of the student whose name appears on the assignment. Any borrowing of the ideas or the words of others must be acknowledged by quotation marks (where appropriate) and by citation of author and source. Students unfamiliar with issues relating to academic honesty can find help from the staff in the Academic Support Center and should make use of the available resources at an early date, since violations of seminary policy on academic honesty can lead to a failing grade for the course.

Special Accommodations:

Students requiring accommodation for a learning disability should be in contact with Kathy Mapes in the ASC Center (kmapes@lpts.edu) as soon as possible and should speak with the instructor to arrange appropriate adjustments.

Inclusive Language:

The use of inclusive language in course work is a policy of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Direct quotations from theological texts and translations of the Bible do not have to be altered to conform to this policy. In your own writing, however, avoid language for people that leaves out part of the population or perpetuates stereotypes. Do not assume masculine gender when the gender of the person is unknown. When referring to God, you are encouraged to use a variety of images and metaphors. See http://www.lpts.edu/Academic_Resources/ASC/avoidinggenderbiasinlanguage.asp.

Schedule

VOCATION

Session 1. The Meaning of (One) Life.

First Half. “The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front” (CP, 151), “Amendment” (CP, 153), “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer” (CP, 121), “A Secular Pilgrimage” (CH, 1-35)

Second Half. “Life Forgives Its Depredations” (TC, 78) “The Burden of the Gospels” (WI, 127-140), “Rugged Individualism” (WI, 9-13), “What are people for?” (WPF, 123-126).

INCARNATION

Session 2 On Being Local

First Half. “The seed is in the ground,” (TC, 131) “Word and Flesh,” (WPF, 197-204), “The Work of Local Culture,” (WPF 153-170),, “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer,” (WPF, 170-178),

Second Half. “Contempt for Small Places,” (WI, 7-9), “Local Knowledge in the Age of Information, (WI, 113-127), , “The Broken Ground,” (CP, 25).

Counterpoint: Flannery O’Conner, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” in *Mystery and Manners* (on reserve) or “The Temple of the Holy Spirit.”

NATURE AND GRACE

Session 3: Where is Wisdom to Be Found? Remembering, Speaking, Asking, Knowing.

First Half: “Nature as Measure,” (WPF, 204- 210), “Estranged by distance, he relearns,” (TC, 69), “Not again in the flesh will I see,” (TC, 73), “Now, as a man learning,” (TC, 214), “Loving you has taught me the infinite,” (TC, 149).

Second Half: “Getting Along With Nature,” (HE, 6-21), “Higher Education and Home Defense,” (HE 49-54), “The Loss of the University,” (HE, 76-98), “Style and Grace,” (WPF, 64-71), “The Intellect, so ravenous to know,” (TC, 30),

Counterpoint: Flannery O’Conner, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*. On reserve.

Session 4: Seeing Ain’t Believing: On Poetry and Science.

First Half: *Life is a Miracle*, 3-13, 23-30, 38-55, 129-143.

Second Half: *Standing By Words*, 24-64

Counterpoint: Langston Hughes, selections from *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics and Culture*. 91, 97, 200-204, 207, 212, 216. On reserve

FAITH AND WORK

Session 5: Technology, Trust and Work.

First Half: “The world of machines is running,” (TC, 100), “He thought to keep himself from Hell,” (TC, 108), “Discipline and Hope,” (CH, 86-169, selections)

Second Half: “Conservation Is Good Work,” (SEFC, 27-45), “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” (SEFC, 93-116). “The Necessity of Faith” and “To the Holy Spirit,” (CP, 208-9)

Counterpoint: Walker Percy, “Notes for a Novel About the End of the World,” in *Message in a Bottle* (on reserve), or chapter 3 from *Love in the Ruins*. On reserve

THE LAND

Session 7: Land as Promise

First Half: “The Gift of Good Land,” (GGL), “People, Land, Community,” (SBW, 64-80), “Preserving Wildness,” (HE, 137-152),

Second Half: “The Want of Peace,” “The Peace of Wild Things” and “Grace,” (CP, 68-69), “The Landscaping of Hell,” (handout), “People, Land, and Community,” (SBW, 64-79)

Counterpoint: Blake Hurst, “The Omnivore’s Delusion: Against the Agri-Intellectuals.” <http://www.american.com/archive/2009/july/the-omnivore2019s-delusion-against-the-agri-intellectuals>

COMMUNITY

Session 8: What People Are For

First Half: “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse,” (SEFC, 19-27), “God and Country,” (WPF, 95-103), “Property, Patriotism, National Defense,” (HE, 98-112), “The Purpose of a Coherent Community,” (WI, 69-81),

Second Half: From *A Place On Earth*, (TBA).

Counterpoint: Flannery O’Conner, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or “Good Country People.” On reserve.

TEMPORAL GOODS

Session 9 : Simplicity, Scarcity and Security

First Half: “To long for what can be fulfilled in time,” (TC, 19), “To long for what eternity fulfills,” (TC, 21) “The Joy of Sales Resistance,” (SEFC, xi-xxii), “The Pleasures of Eating,” (WPF, 145-153), “The Problem of Tobacco,” (SEFC, 53-68), “Prayer After Eating,” (CP, 148) Larry McGehee, from *Southern Seen*, “Hog Killing” (reserve)

Second Half: “Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community,” (SEFC, excerpts), “The Plan,” (CP, 22), “The Guest,” (CP, 23-4). “Marriage,” (CP, 70). “Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer,” (CP, 129).

Counterpoint: Elizabeth Bahnson, “The Pill is Like...DDT? An Agrarian Perspective on Pharmaceutical Birth Control” in *Heaven’s Earthly Life*.

EXILES

Session 10 The Desecrating Sacrilege

First Half: *The Unsettling of America*

Second Half: *The Unsettling of America*

Counterpoint: Amartya Sen, Ch. 5 or 9 ,*Development as Freedom* (on reserve)

Session 11: Confession

First Half: *The Hidden Wound*

Second Half: *The Hidden Wound*

Counterpoint: Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (selections, on reserve).

HOME

Session 12: The Circle Unbroken

First Half “Damage and Healing” (WPF, 2-17), “A Poem of Difficult Hope,” (WPF, 58-64), “I too am not at home,” (TC, 157), “we have kept to the way we chose,” (TC, 162), “Design of a House,” (CP, 29-35).

Second Half: “Making it Home,” (in *Fidelity*)

Counterpoint: Toni Morrison, from *Beloved*. (on reserve)