

**INTRODUCIORY NOTE:** Wendell Berry is a novelist, poet, and essayist; he has taught at the University of Kentucky. The following passage is adapted from a college commencement address he delivered in June 1989.

## **THE FUTILITY OF GLOBAL THINKING**

The favorite adjective of the environmental movement now seems to be *planetary*. This word is used, properly enough, to refer to the interdependence of places, and to the recognition, which is desirable and growing, that no place on the earth can be completely healthy until all places are.

But the word *planetary* also refers to an abstract anxiety or an abstract passion that is desperate and useless exactly to the extent that is abstract. How, after all, can anybody--any particular body--do anything to heal a planet? Nobody can do anything to heal a planet. The suggestion that anybody could do so is preposterous. There are also no national, state, or county problems, and no national, state, or county solutions. That will-o'-the-wisp, the large scale solution to the large scale problem, which is so dear to governments, universities, and corporations, serves mostly to distract people from the small, private problems that they may, in fact, have the power to solve.

What we need, obviously, is a more intelligent--which is to say, a more accurate--description of the problem. The problems, if we describe them accurately, are all private and small. Or they are so initially.

The problems are our lives. In the "developed" countries, at least, the large problems occur because all of us are living either partly wrong or almost entirely wrong. It was not just the greed of corporate shareholders and the hubris of corporate executives that put the fate of Prince William Sound into one ship; it was also our demand that energy be cheap and plentiful. The economies of our communities and households are wrong. And the answers to the problems of economy are to be found in culture and in character. To fail to see this is to go on dividing the world falsely between guilty producers and innocent consumers.

In his essay on Kipling, George Orwell wrote: "All left-wing parties in the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy. They have internationalist aims, and at the same time they struggle to keep up a standard of life with which those aims are incompatible. We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are 'enlightened' all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our 'enlightenment,' demands that the robbery shall continue."

This statement of Orwell's is clearly applicable to our situation now; all we need to do is change a few nouns. The religion and the environmentalism of the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something

that they do not really wish to destroy. We all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue.

We must achieve the character and acquire the skills to live much poorer than we do. We must waste less. We must do more for ourselves and each other. It is either that or continue merely to think and talk about changes that we are inviting catastrophe not to make.

We must have the sense and the courage, for example, to see that the ability to transport food for hundreds or thousands of miles does not necessarily mean that we are well off. It means that the food supply is more vulnerable and more costly than a local food supply would be. It means that consumers do not control or influence the healthfulness of their food supply and that they are at the mercy of the people who have the control and influence. It means that, in eating, people are using large quantities of petroleum that other people in another time are almost certain to need.

Our so-called industrial accidents should be looked upon as revenges of Nature. We forget that Nature is necessarily party to all our enterprises and that she imposes conditions of her own. Now she is plainly saying to us: "If you put the fates of whole communities or cities or regions or ecosystems at risk in single ships or factories or power plants, then I will furnish the drunk or the fool or the imbecile who will make the necessary small mistake."

And so, graduates, my advice to you is simply my hope for us all:

Beware the justice of Nature.

Understand that there can be no successful human economy apart from Nature or in defiance of Nature.

Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale.

In making things always bigger and more centralized, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and more dangerous to everything else. Learn, therefore to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale~greed, crudity, and glamour.

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**TOPIC:** What does Berry see as the basic cause of our environmental problems-and as the fundamental solution to them? What do you think of his views? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading--including "The Futility of Global Thinking" itself.