

Putting Down Roots: Why Universities Need Gardens

By Jack R. Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro

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In "The Loss of the University," Wendell Berry proposes that contemporary universities should return to a model of learning that envisions knowledge as a tree. Practicing such a rooted, interconnected form of education, however, is difficult in a culture of "boomers" (Berry's term for people who are always looking for a better place somewhere else) who value specialized, commodifiable knowledge rather than wisdom that leads to health and flourishing. These models of learning stem from different underlying desires: if we want to maximize profit, we will isolate and divide and specialize knowledge, but if we want to cultivate health, we will seek to draw together and integrate our knowledge. Thus our attempts to educate students in rooted wisdom begin with our own commitment to our place. Rather than trying to build impressive CVs so that we can move to "better" jobs elsewhere, we want to do good work where we are, even if such work does not bring professional prestige, even if the place is not exactly what we expected. In the following essay, then, we turn to Wendell Berry to work out reasons to hope for higher education even in our industrial, boomer culture. While he does not lay out his argument in quite the following way, we think it is helpful to understand Berry's hope for the recovery of the university as resting upon three requirements: an imagination guided by a unified organization of knowledge; a common, communal language; and responsible work. A university that embodies and unites these three principles might provide students with a rooted education, one that would form fully developed humans capable of serving their places. After offering a diagnosis of how universities came to embrace disintegrated and deracinated

Wendell Berry's agrarian vision challenges the disintegrated, industrial model of higher education that prevails in our culture. Berry's hope for the recovery of the university rests upon three requirements: an imagination guided by a unified organization of knowledge; a common, communal language; and responsible work. A university that embodies and unites these three principles might provide students with a rooted education, one that would form fully developed humans capable of serving their places. Working in a campus garden may seem unimportant, but **Jack R. Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro** argue that such simple practices can foster responsible connections to our place and educate students in unified forms of wisdom. Dr. Baker and Dr. Bilbro teach English at Spring Arbor University.

126 knowledge, we will sketch how a healthy imagination and precise language could restore unity. Then we will suggest one practice—gardening—that can foster more responsible connections to our place.¹

Boomers and Stickers

Currently, our universities tell stories about the need for “upward (and lateral) mobility” that come from the broader culture’s stories about progress and success.² A recent story in the satirical newspaper *The Onion* captures our culture’s dominant belief that mobility is an indicator of success.³ Titled, “Unambitious Loser With Happy, Fulfilling Life Still Lives In Hometown,” the article recounts a sad story: “Longtime acquaintances confirmed to reporters this week that local man Michael Husmer, an unambitious 29-year-old loser who leads an enjoyable and fulfilling life, still lives in his hometown and has no desire to leave.” As the reporter talks with Husmer’s more successful high school classmates, the dreary life he leads comes into focus:

Former high school classmates confirmed that Husmer has seemingly few aspirations in life, citing occasional depressing run-ins with the personally content townie during visits back home, as well as embarrassing Facebook photos in which the smiling dud appears alongside family members whom he sees regularly and appreciates and enjoys close, long-lasting relationships with. Additionally, pointing to the intimate, enduring connections he’s developed with his wife, parents, siblings, and neighbors, sources reported that Husmer’s life is “pretty humiliating” on multiple levels.

In particular, those familiar with the pitiful man, who is able to afford a comfortable lifestyle without going into debt, confirmed that he resides just two blocks from the home he grew up in, miles away from anything worthwhile, like high-priced bars and clubs. In fact, sources stated that the pathetic loafer has never had any interest in moving to even a nearby major city, despite the fact that he has nothing better to do than “sit around all day” being an involved member of his community and using his ample free time to follow pursuits that give him genuine pleasure.

Our laughter at this portrayal of a “loser” reveals our awareness that we do associate leaving home with having “made it,” even though the stress and anxiety of Husmer’s “successful” acquaintances calls into question the desirability of such a mobile life.

¹This essay is an abbreviated version of the first part of our forthcoming book with the University Press of Kentucky, *An Education in the Virtues of Place: Wendell Berry and the University*. The second part of our book considers how certain virtues are exemplified in Wendell Berry’s fiction and explores how these virtues—memory, gratitude, fidelity, and love—enable us to articulate and embody a healthful vision for higher education.

²Wendell Berry, “Bellarmino Commencement Address,” 2007, <http://christianstudycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/WendellBerry-BellarminoCommencement.pdf>.

³“Unambitious Loser With Happy, Fulfilling Life Still Lives In Hometown,” *The Onion*, July 24, 2013. <http://www.theonion.com/articles/unambitious-loser-with-happy-fulfilling-life-still,33233/>.

Berry has been describing this cultural obsession with restless mobility for decades now, arguing that it causes extensive damage to our land and our character. For as he explains, "Upward mobility, as we now are seeing, implies downward mobility, just as it has always implied lateral mobility. It implies, in fact, social instability, ecological oblivion, and economic insecurity."⁴ Elsewhere, Berry uses the term "boomers" to describe those who are always on the lookout for better career opportunities in better places. Berry derives this term, and its opposite, "sticker," from Wallace Stegner's description of the two contrasting types of pioneers who settled the West. Stegner, a twentieth-century author who writes about the Western landscape in which he was raised, identifies boomers as those who came to the West looking to get rich; they were willing to damage the land and its existing communities for a quick profit. Once they had extracted all they could easily get from a place, whether a mine, a forest, or a farm, they moved on to a more abundant place. But, as Berry explains, "Not all who came to American places came to plunder and run. Some came to stay, or came with the hope of staying. These Stegner called 'stickers' or 'nesters.'"⁵ These stickers came to the West looking to transplant themselves into a new home. In another essay, Berry describes such people as "nurturers," those whose "goal is health," the health of the land, the community, and the country.⁶

The root difference between boomers and stickers is not simply that one group is mobile and one group is stationary; rather, they are defined by their contrasting narratives, motivations, and affections. As Berry explains in his recent Jefferson lecture, "It All Turns on Affection," "The boomer is motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power."⁷ Berry's title indicates that his emphasis in this distinction is on one's affections, and this clarifies a common, but misguided, criticism of his thought. Berry does not say everyone who leaves home is a greedy, selfish boomer. Rather, he simply reiterates that our affections are never without consequences. Thus, the individual motivated by "greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power," is not necessarily the individual who moves to the only state where she can find gainful employment, leaving loved ones half a nation away. Nor is the boomer the individual who leaves his small town where his entire family lives because he has suffered abuse at their hands. Instead, the boomer is the individual who is guided by wrongheaded affections—affections for power, for wealth at whatever cost, for personal success. We must be clear that "boomer" names a story—a way of imagining success that leads to a way of living

⁴Wendell Berry, "Major in Homecoming: For Commencement, Northern Kentucky University," in Berry, *What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2010), 33.

⁵Wendell Berry, "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," in Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 68–69.

⁶Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*, revised ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 7.

⁷Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 11.

characterized by disinterest in place, limits, and externalized consequences—not a person who leaves a place. So perhaps an important distinction is that a sticker may be forced to leave a place but will nest in a new place; a boomer wants to leave a place and is willing to leave again should a better opportunity arise elsewhere.⁸

Currently, “boomerism” pervades our educational culture to such an extent that nearly all departments in nearly all universities are infected by it. As Wes Jackson claims, “upward mobility” is now the only major that universities offer: “Little attention is paid to educating the young to return home, or to go some other place, and dig in. There is no such thing as a ‘homecoming’ major.”⁹ Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh extend Jackson’s argument in their essay, “Education for Homelessness or Homemaking? The Christian College in a Postmodern Culture,” claiming, “Colleges and universities—small or large, public or private, Christian or secular—tend to educate for upward mobility, to alienate people from their local habitation, and to encourage the vandalization of the earth.”¹⁰ What such an education forgets is the need for a vocation that subsumes these techniques under a higher purpose: the restoration of health and the flourishing of one’s community. As Berry trenchantly observes in “Higher Education and Home Defense,”

Education in the true sense, of course, is an enablement to *serve*—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit. To educate is, literally, to “bring up,” to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures. ... And if this education is to be used well, it is obvious that it must be used some *where*; it must be used where one lives, where one intends to continue to live; it must be brought home.¹¹

Graduates cannot serve their communities, they cannot take care of them, if they do not settle somewhere and bring their education home.

An education for health, one that forms students to serve their homes, will have to begin by reforming students’ imaginations so that they begin to ask better questions. For, as Berry explains, their differently oriented affections lead boomers and stickers to ask different kinds of questions and to operate in different

⁸Our argument here has been clarified by conversation with some of Berry’s sympathetic critics. For the context of this online discussion, see Jeffrey Bilbro, “Place Isn’t Just Geographical,” *Front Porch Republic* (May 2013), <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2013/05/place-isnt-just-geographical/>.

⁹Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996), 3.

¹⁰Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh, “Education for Homelessness or Homemaking? The Christian College in a Postmodern Culture,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 32 no. 3 (2003): 281–282. Mark Mitchell describes the problem in similar terms: “liberal education too often amounts to little more than an overpriced means of creating cosmopolitans of the worst sort: people who have little interest in or concern for local communities, customs, stories, or places.” See Mark T. Mitchell, *The Politics of Gratitude: Scale, Place & Community in a Global Age* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books Inc., 2012), 173.

¹¹Wendell Berry, “Higher Education and Home Defense,” in Berry, *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1987), 52.

economies. The boomer or "exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer [or sticker] asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it?)."¹² Berry expresses this contrast even more simply in his recent interview with Bill Moyers: "The answers will come not from walking up to your farm and saying this is what I want and this is what I expect from you. You walk up and you say 'What do you need?'"¹³ These different questions stem from differently oriented desires—one desires quick profit and the other health—and the different complexities of their accounting—one values only profit and externalizes costs and damages, and the other seeks to give an account for all things. These distinctions mark the contrast that Berry draws in "Two Economies" between our industrial economy, which "tends to destroy what it does not comprehend," and the "Great Economy" or the "Kingdom of God," which "includes everything" in its comprehensive "pattern or order."¹⁴

This fundamental difference between teaching students to get what they want from their places and teaching them to ask "what do you need?" marks not only the difference between boomers and stickers, but also the difference between a more medieval way of organizing knowledge like a tree and the organization (or lack thereof) in modern universities. Asking "what do I want?" simply leads to education in techniques of extraction for personal appetite, but the question "what do you need?" leads to an education in charity and health. C. S. Lewis describes this difference in terms of the contrast between medieval learning and the mere technical training increasingly offered today:

For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For...applied science... the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique.¹⁵

The work of conforming our souls to reality via knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue is long and arduous, but if we desire to be responsible members of our places, this is the work we will have to take up.

The contrast between boomers and stickers—the different desires they have, the different stories they tell, the different questions they ask, the different econo-

¹²Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 7. Berry also expands on this line of questioning in his two recent commencement addresses, urging graduates to ask questions about where they are and how they can serve these places. See Berry, "Bellarmine"; and Berry, "Major in Homecoming," 34–35.

¹³Wendell Berry, "Wendell Berry on His Hopes for Humanity," interview by Bill Moyers. Television, November 29, 2013, <http://billmoyers.com/segment/wendell-berry-on-his-hopes-for-humanity/>.

¹⁴Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in Berry, *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 54–55.

¹⁵C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, Or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 83.

mies they participate in, and the contrasting models of the university that they propose—should now be clear: the boomer wants to isolate knowledge from its origins in order to maximize its utility and profitability, but the sticker values a medieval, rooted kind of learning whose branches connect as much as possible. Thus, the way we organize and order knowledge stems from the kinds of questions we ask, which in turn rise from the orientation of our desires.

Because such questions involve complex interconnections, they do not often lead to simple answers. As professors, we believe that we are called to model for our students ways of living with such questions and working them out slowly and patiently. In *Jayber Crow*, one of Berry's novels, Jayber is attending seminary with the view to becoming a preacher. But his studies lead him to ask many questions about the core of the Christian faith, how prayer works, and how it might be possible to love our enemies. So one day he goes to a professor's office and musters the courage to ask these questions. The professor listens patiently until Jayber gets through his list, and then simply says to the confused young man, "You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."¹⁶ Jayber is shaken; he leaves seminary, eventually returns to his hometown, and does not pray again for many years. Yet by honestly sticking with his questions, he finally comes to a place where he is again able to pray, not with the vending machine mentality of his childhood faith, but with a sober, terrifying awareness that Jesus' own most fervent prayer in Gethsemane was not answered.

Rooting Ourselves

Professors who feel compelled to look for better jobs elsewhere, though, find it hard to model this patient process of living out answers to difficult questions. One of the reasons that students look for simple, actionable answers is likely that professors, as a whole, often fail to stick with difficult questions and situations. Instead, it often seems that our profession has largely acquiesced to the promiscuous temptations of boomerism: we look to pad our CVs with impressive accolades so that we can negotiate light teaching loads and high salaries and shop around for the best research fellowships. In other words, we are much like the opportunistic pioneers Stegner writes about or the exploitative strip-miners that Berry criticizes, always on the lookout for more profitable pastures.¹⁷ And yet when we seek better opportunities elsewhere, we fail to stick it out where we are and live with our questions until we find ways to make the place in which

¹⁶Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 54.

¹⁷Eric Zencey describes this academic culture well in his essay "Rootless Professors." While professors may be more stationary now than when this essay was first published in 1986, much of this can be attributed to the terrible academic job market that makes it harder to move up the professional ladder. See Eric Zencey, "Rootless Professors," in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, eds. William Vitek and Wes Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

we already abide healthier.

In our own lives, we have worked out such vocational challenges in different ways, and these differences may be instructive in that they indicate that seeking the health of one's place is a process that can take many different forms. I (Jeff) grew up in Washington State, near Seattle, and developed a deep affection for the mountains, forests, rivers, and people of my home. Most of my extended family still live in the area, and my wife's family is also in the Northwest. When we left to go to graduate school in Texas, we told ourselves that this would be a five- or six-year adventure and that then we would return home. But the academic job market being what it is, my interviews with schools in the Northwest did not result in job offers, and we had to choose between jobs in Tennessee and Michigan.

The economic reasons that led us to Michigan are well respected in our boomer culture. But my parents' story made me know that staying away from home for the sake of a job was not the only option. My parents moved to Connecticut for my dad to go to graduate school, and when he earned his master's degree, they turned down a job back East in order to return to Seattle, without a home, with no job prospects, and with an infant daughter. The economics of their situation were different, I know, and my dad was able to find a good job within a few weeks, but I am still impressed by the courage they demonstrated in moving home without the assurance of a job to support their young family.

Yet even though we did not return home, we are working to make a home in this place. We attend church, subscribe to the local paper, shop at the farmer's market, pick and preserve local fruit, and visit local cultural venues. We have bought a neglected house, worked hard to repair and restore it, and planted a garden. We have built a shared mailbox with several neighbors and taken Christmas cookies around the neighborhood. We have learned the history of the neighborhood over coffee in others' homes and exchange greetings as we work in our yard or take walks. This is not an intergenerational, economically interdependent community. This is not the rich membership that Berry describes in his fiction, but we are trying to deepen the forms of neighborliness and community that are available to us in our suburban place. We are trying to knit ourselves into the fabric of this place.

I (Jack) grew up in Shelby, a small town in West Michigan. With a population of just over 2,000, it is easy to miss as tourists travel U.S. 31 on the shoreline toward golden beaches and crystal blue waters at Silver Lake or the Charles Mears State Park in Pentwater. Like many small towns in America, Shelby used to be a thriving community—surviving on tourism, robust fruit farms, and local processing and canning factories. I love my hometown. I miss it dearly. But most of all, I mourn for it. My parents still reside in my childhood home—a craftsman foursquare built in 1907 by the original owner of the Rankin Hardware store in town. The town is dying. Jobs have disappeared, homes have lost considerable value, and culture has quickly petrified.

Before I left home for college, I could already sense what was happening to my hometown, which only further encouraged my affections to leave home for

good. I saw college as the opportunity to make something of myself, something living and not dying; and Shelby stood for everything stagnant—for lost health and wholeness. Of course, my affections in some ways were misguided. But I was persuaded, like so many others, that leaving Shelby was good for me, that I should turn away from home in hopes of finding a better life elsewhere. And how many found that life? How many began their journey as itinerants, never to settle down long enough in a place to really be a part of it? Well, I was one of those itinerants throughout my higher education, and it was not until my wife and I left Michigan for graduate studies in Indiana that I began to feel the deep connection I had to my home state and hometown.

When we would drive back to Shelby to visit my family during this period, I was struck by the deep longing I had to be a part of the landscape with which I was so accustomed. On weekend visits with family, I waxed poetic about how much I desired to return to my home state. Until I lived elsewhere, I never knew how connected to Michigan I was in a very real spiritual way. It was what I knew, where I had lived all but a few years of my life, and I could not shake the overwhelming sense of loss I had at the prospect of not returning there for a job at a university. Of course, in humility we rejoice that we were able to return to work in Michigan; and while we now live in the South-Central region of the state, we are directly between both sets of parents, working to make Spring Arbor our home. And it is here that I am continuing the process of reshaping my affections for a different place, thinking often about how I ought to live in order to care for the health of Spring Arbor, as well as the health of my students—to be committed to a sticker mentality in a boomer profession. To echo Jayber Crow once again, we simply cannot have any hope of this place being home if we have no prospect of staying here. And so in some ways, Spring Arbor has become my Shelby—my new hometown—and I will work to cultivate the right affections in my own heart, in the hearts of my children, in the hearts of my students.

We are not alone in our desire to articulate the stories of our places as significant toward encouraging the sticker mentality. In fact, our stories are part of a protean genre that is often featured on the *Front Porch Republic*, a website whose authors follow Wendell Berry in valuing place, limits, and liberty. One poster, Mark Signorelli, recently argued for a more nuanced understanding of

[the] arch-typical narrative that has become quite popular here at FPR, and in some sense, emblematic of its defense of place and home. It is the "Going Home" story, the story of someone rejecting the allures of wealth and status in the big-city, and returning to the fixed traditions of his or her hometown.¹⁸

Signorelli offered his own autobiography of growing up in a nowhere suburb as evidence that not everyone has a home to return to, and yet such people can still find a place to plant themselves. So while some Porchers, like Jeff Polet and Conor

¹⁸Mark A. Signorelli, "Going Home Again? Not Likely," *Front Porch Republic*. Accessed June 1, 2013, <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2013/03/going-home-again-not-likely/>.

Dugan, have been able to find good jobs in their hometowns and thus enact the more typical "Going Home" narrative, others work to make a home in the place their vocation has taken them.¹⁹

The protagonists in these "Going Home" stories offer an alternative to the boomer narrative that undergirds much of our culture and is particularly prevalent in higher education. We live in a society that values the peripatetic ladder climber whose success is in large part attributable to his ability to cut and run as soon as the getting is better elsewhere. We have made leaving a place the great indicator of one's success in the world. If you seek an education, leave home, it is somewhere else. If you seek a good-paying job, leave home, it is somewhere else. If you seek to make something meaningful of your life, leave home, it is somewhere else.

One of Wendell Berry's characters, Hannah Coulter, lives her life in opposition to such a narrative, and when she sends her children to college, she mourns the way their education shapes them to become boomers:

The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are, because you want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on.²⁰

This "big idea" is what we must change if we hope to form our students to be caring sticklers. For while we may not all be able to return to the street on which we grew up or the town in which we were raised, and some of us may not even be able to return to our natal state, all of us can and should set about deliberately rooting ourselves in our place and finding ways to make it a better place. Such roots teach us about the complex interdependencies on which health depends, they teach us how to desire this health more fully, and they teach us what kinds of questions might lead to a greater understanding of how we can serve this health.

Affections and the Organization of Knowledge

If we want an education that forms students to serve their places and local communities, universities will have to stop genuflecting before the industrial economy and the motives of personal success and affluence that it rewards. It may seem trivial to state this, but we seem to forget that the only value the money economy recognizes is money; it justifies any technique that brings in more money. Techniques of division and specialization have been the most lucrative methods employed by modernity, and universities have adopted them in their quest for economic profit. Yet if we commodify education, dividing it from other sources of value, Berry argues that we will turn it into a weapon that will be wielded to

¹⁹Jeffrey Polet, "Education and the Way Home," *Front Porch Republic*. Accessed June 1, 2013, <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2012/01/21097/>; and Conor Dugan, "The Journey Home," *Front Porch Republic*. Accessed June 1, 2013, <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2013/03/the-journey-home/>.

²⁰Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2005), 112.

When educational institutions educate people to *leave* home, then they have redefined education as "career preparation." In doing so, they have made it a commodity—something to be *bought* in order to make money. The great wrong in this is that it obscures the fact that education—real education—is free. I am necessarily well aware that schools and books have a cost that must be paid, but I am sure nevertheless that what is taught and learned is free....To make a commodity of it is to work its ruin, for, when we put a price on it, we both reduce its value and blind the recipient to the obligations that always accompany good gifts: namely, to use them well and to hand them on unimpaired. To make a commodity of education, then, is inevitably to make a kind of weapon of it because, when it is disassociated from the sense of obligation, it can be put directly at the service of greed.²¹

Berry's claim about the ultimate freedom of education implies that whenever education is made to serve the industrial economy, it will become an education in the service of greed rather than of the health of our homes.

The connection between greed and the modern fragmentation of knowledge in the multiversity may not be immediately apparent, but the two are directly related. The desire to use knowledge for power and money contributes to the fragmentation of the disciplines. To shift metaphors, if we want to control and manipulate reality, we will organize knowledge into a map, but if we want to conform our souls to reality, we will understand knowledge as taking us on a pilgrimage. As Paul Griffiths argues in *Intellectual Appetite*,

There is a direct genealogical link between the seventeenth-century aspiration toward a *mathesis universalis*—of, that is, mapping all knowledge onto a manipulable grid and providing clear principles of method that would permit the attainment of certainty about any topic—and the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century hope for institutions of higher education free of commitments to value.²²

This "*mathesis universalis*," or universal knowledge, causes the strict departmental divisions within modern universities, divisions that Berry decries as arbitrary and opposed to our understanding of the true interconnections between all knowledge. But knowledge that has been divided into discrete bits and arranged in a scheme is much easier to use, so if all we care about is knowledge that we can use, knowledge that gives us power, then we will tend to organize our universities in such fragmented ways.²³

²¹Berry, "Higher Education and Home Defense," 52.

²²Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 16.

²³Schreck also notes the broader cultural divisions that Berry sees contributing to the divisions within universities: "[Berry] argues that higher education represents disconnection itself: institutions disconnected from their communities, disciplines disconnected from each other, research disconnected from its consequences, teaching disconnected from emotions or values, and curricula disconnected from possibility. Often the result is that higher education works to disconnect students from home." See Jane Margaret Hedahl Schreck, *Wendell Berry's Philosophy of Education: Lessons from Port William* (Grand Forks, ND: The University of North Dakota, 2013), 350.

Indeed, the same desires that contribute to the fragmentation and specialization of knowledge in universities have a similar effect in other areas of modern life: diverse, healthy neighborhoods with residences, businesses, and stores are replaced by segregated zones that isolate each function;²⁴ complex farming patterns with polycrops and integrated animals are replaced by monocultures and factory farming; family doctors who know their patients are replaced by specialists who each treat only one particular disease; jobs requiring diverse skills are replaced by assembly-line jobs where each person fulfills only one function. Division enables control, and so we divide madly: "The first principle of the exploitive mind is to divide and conquer."²⁵ With the mounting ecological and social costs, however, it seems more and more clear that the "divide and conquer" mantra leads only to pyrrhic victories. As we have already seen, this greedy desire for control characterizes, as Lewis argues, applied science, not those who want to conform their souls to a reality that is, in fact, interconnected in endlessly complicated and interesting ways. Yet if we demand that our places provide what we want, then we will organize and divide knowledge as we have done in our modern research universities. If, on the other hand, we are to learn how to ask of our places, "What do you need?," we will seek to organize knowledge differently.

The Tree of Wisdom

In his essay "The Loss of the University," Berry proposes that we might recover a true university by remembering that the task of the university should be to form good human beings: "Underlying the idea of a university—the bringing together, the combining into one, of all the disciplines—is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good—that is, a fully developed—human being."²⁶ Berry explores some of his ideas regarding what such a unified education would look like in the rest of this essay. In essence, his ideas rest upon cultivating healthy imaginations—which as we have seen begins with fostering affection for our places rather than seeking to extract what we can from them—and a common language, and then keeping both of these responsible to their place through local work.

If we desire to serve the health of our places, Berry argues, we should return to the ancient understanding of knowledge as a tree. Re-imagining knowledge

²⁴Eric O. Jacobsen, *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 33–54.

²⁵Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 11. Berry expands on his diagnosis throughout *The Unsettling of America*, and his critique centers on these divisions and the unhealthy level of specialization they lead to. As he states, "The disease of the modern character is specialization." *Ibid.*, 19. See also Alasdair MacIntyre's essay "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good" where he claims that "the forms of compartmentalization characteristic of advanced modernity are inimical to the flourishing of local community." Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 248.

²⁶Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the University," in *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1987), 77.

136 through this metaphor reminds us to pay attention to the ways that knowledge coheres, a particularly important reminder in our highly specialized age:

This Tree, for many hundreds of years, seems to have come almost naturally to mind when we have sought to describe the form of knowledge. In Western tradition, it is at least as old as Genesis, and the form it gives us for all that we know is organic, unified, comprehensive, connective—and moral.... If we represent knowledge as a tree, we know that things that are divided are yet connected. We know that to observe the divisions and ignore the connections is to destroy the tree. The history of modern education may be the history of the loss of this image, and of its replacement by the pattern of the industrial machine, which subsists upon division—and by industrial economics ("publish or perish"), which is meaningless apart from division.²⁷

If the history of modern education, and the loss of the university, is a story of the loss of this image, then the recovery of the university should begin with reestablishing this metaphor of knowledge as a tree.

The image of a tree cultivates in us a fidelity to both people and the earth, calling us to consider how such an image might shape the form and content of the work universities do. If knowledge is like a tree, each discipline needs to work out its relationship both to the trunk of truth and to the land in which the truth is rooted. Universities must, first of all, provide their students with a coherent trunk of knowledge, a clear sense of the way that various disciplines cohere. Hence Berry maintains that the "need for broadly informed human judgment...requires inescapably an education that is broad and basic." Such an education would begin by leading students up the trunk of this tree, and only once they have grasped the trunk would it guide them into more specialized knowledge. As Berry explains, "The work that should, and that can, unify a university is that of deciding what a student should be required to learn—what studies, that is, constitute the trunk of the tree of a person's education." Berry acknowledges that determining what constitutes this trunk, or core curriculum, is a difficult matter, but our current practice of leaving it up to the student is an avoidance of responsibility. How can we expect an eighteen-year-old freshman to know what they need to know if their professors cannot even agree on the necessary common knowledge?

Berry suggests that our conversations about what should form this trunk begin with the classic understanding of the liberal arts:

It cannot be denied, to begin with, that all the disciplines rest on the knowledge of letters and the knowledge of numbers.... From there, one can proceed confidently to say that history, literature, philosophy, and foreign languages rest principally on the knowledge of letters and carry it forward, and that biology, chemistry, and physics rest on the knowledge of numbers and carry it forward.²⁸

He thinks that further definition of this foundational knowledge should be provided by the local faculty, but what he particularly decries is our current refusal to define a trunk at all. For "although it may be possible to begin with a branch and

²⁷*Ibid.*, 82–83.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

develop a trunk, that is neither so probable nor so promising."²⁹ Thus universities have a responsibility to define for their students a common curriculum that anchors their further studies. If a university community is not rooted in a common narrative and common understanding of its community, then it will wither. And if a university is not unified in its reaching toward a shared vision of the good, of the light of the sun, then it will sprawl in confusion.

Learning how language ought to make meaning within a community is essential for practicing this rooted learning, and it is for this reason that a liberal arts education begins with the *Trivium*, or the study of language. The *Trivium*, or the "Three Ways," consists of grammar, the art of order, or questions about the structure of language; logic or dialectic, the art of thinking with language, or questions about truth; and rhetoric, the art of soul leading, or questions about how to use language to persuade others of truth.³⁰ The classical liberal arts also included the *Quadrivium*, and while these mathematical arts of order are also important, the *Trivium* is particularly foundational for any institution of higher education because it investigates the connective human faculties of order, sound thought, and wisdom through persuasion. The fruit of these arts is a liberated thinker and doer who wields a precise language with which to assign value to people, places, and problems.

An education founded in the liberal arts necessarily and somewhat paradoxically frees humans to be accountable. While our culture tends to think of freedom in negative terms—we want to be free *from* all restraints—the liberty offered by the liberal arts is a positive freedom—we are free *for* generous service. Indeed, the etymological link between liberty and liberality points to the traditional belief that generosity and concern for others was the proper posture of a free person.³¹ In other words, a liberally educated person is responsible to exercise her freedom in a way that serves the health of her place and community.³² Learning how language ought to make meaning within a community is essential for practicing this responsibility.

The liberal arts, then, teach students how language orders our thoughts and lives, thereby freeing them from the oppression of the unimportant things that so often preoccupy their time. This is why Berry argues that the proper task of

²⁹Ibid., 82.

³⁰For a thorough introduction to the *Trivium*, see Sister Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric: Understanding the Nature and Function of Language*, ed. Marguerite McGlinn (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2002). We have also been influenced by Stratford Caldecott's efforts to "translate" the *Trivium* in Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012).

³¹C. S. Lewis traces this development in the meaning of the words "free" and "liberty" in C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

³²William Cronon makes a similar argument in his excellent essay on liberal arts education. "Only Connect...: The Goals of a Liberal Education," *The American Scholar* 67.4 (1998): 79. See also Joseph A. Henderson and David W. Hursh, "Economics and Education for Human Flourishing: Wendell Berry and the Oikonomic Alternative to Neoliberalism," *Educational Studies* 50 no. 2 (March 1, 2014): 178–179.

138 contemporary education is to teach students how to order their lives responsibly:

The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by industry-subsidized research. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible. This cannot be done by gathering or "accessing" what we now call "information"—which is to say facts without context and therefore without priority. A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first.³³

In order to learn "what things are more important than other things," we must cultivate a responsible, common language—a particularly necessary task at a time when the role of language in universities is understood as just one more piece in the puzzle of a student's education.

If we imagine a concerned student who has been trained in the *Trivium* present at a township meeting along with other citizens, all from various socio-economic and educational backgrounds, we can begin to see the responsibility this student has to these people and their place. She feels a moral obligation to share her concerns for the sanitation policy and is unafraid to do so. She knows that if her thoughts are unordered, or she argues unsoundly or articulates herself poorly, she will likely fail to communicate adequately the truth in her concerns. In other words, she will struggle to imagine how to persuade the township board responsibly if she has not practiced the arts of the *Trivium*. We hope that her university community has not failed her and that it has instead prepared her—through the order of grammar, the soundness of logic, and the persuasive force of rhetoric—to stand by her words and to foster a healthy language that responds clearly and wisely to the problem at hand.

Incorporating the *Trivium* more deeply into higher education could take different forms at different institutions. Revising the general education curriculum to require students to take a foreign language might be one way, and indeed Berry advocated for this requirement at the University of Kentucky.³⁴ But even without such curricular revisions, faculty and students can find more immediate ways to practice a caring, responsible language. For instance, when Berry taught at the University of Kentucky in the late 1980s, he posed a question from the day's reading at the beginning of each class. He then gave students 20 minutes to write their response to this question. The catch was that they had to do so in a single sentence. As one of Berry's students recounts, this assignment was quite challenging:

The first quiz was a disaster for most of the class, including me, mainly because we were not accustomed to writing, much less thinking, so directly and precisely. His quizzes demanded

³³Wendell Berry, "Thoughts in the Presence of Fear," in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 21.

³⁴Wendell Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, Literary Conversations Series, ed. Morris Allen Grubbs (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 11.

archer like strength and accuracy, and we had to get in shape and practice. Focusing our minds to make every sentence and every word matter, we tried our best to rise to our teacher's challenge. Some of our sentences even came close to the mark. Of all of the skills I practiced as a graduate student, this skill of achieving directness and accuracy—this astonishingly practical but difficult skill—is the single most valuable one to me as a writer and a teacher.³⁵

This sort of simple assignment may not seem very significant, but it clearly made a difference in the life of one student, and it represents the kind of small steps that faculty and students can take toward cultivating responsible language.

Thus an education unified by a common trunk of knowledge and a responsible language forms students' imaginations to perceive the connections between seemingly disparate fields; in this way they can keep their specialized knowledge faithful to the whole tree. Yet while such a liberal arts curriculum is undoubtedly important, it is not sufficient to form healthy imaginations, imaginations capable of judging whether or not our knowledge and work are serving the health of our places. For the standard by which we need to judge all our learning and work is found outside of the university, in the ground in which the tree of knowledge is rooted. This rootedness is not only metaphorical but also literal; as Berry explains, the standard to which we must ultimately remain faithful is "the life and health of the world."³⁶ Elsewhere, Berry calls this external standard against which we should judge all our work the "Great Economy" or the "Kingdom of God."³⁷ This Great Economy is much more comprehensive than the market economy—in fact, it "includes everything."³⁸ Of course the task of making our knowledge and work faithful and responsible to everything is a task that is never complete. It requires the ongoing work of judging and correcting our visions, and it ultimately requires a healthy imagination, one that sees the complex needs of its community. Difficult though this task may be, it is a necessary one, for if the learning that universities foster fails to stem from and contribute to the health of the "Kingdom of God," then the university and the communities it exists to serve will wither and die.

Growing a Garden

Imagining knowledge as a rooted tree, teaching the liberal arts, and being imperfect exemplars of rooted living are not sufficient to form our students to desire to be stickers who seek the health of their homes, particularly when the broader culture continues to foster boomer values. So while we work to shape

³⁵Morris Allen Grubbs, "A Practical Education: Wendell Berry the Professor," in *Wendell Berry Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 140.

³⁶Wendell Berry, "Discipline and Hope," in *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1972), 164.

³⁷Berry, "Two Economies," 54–56.

³⁸Herman Daly compares these two contrasting economies to Aristotle's *oikonomia* and *chrematistics*. See Herman Daly, "Forward," in Wendell Berry, *What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), x. See also Henderson and Hursh, "Economics and Education for Human Flourishing," 180–182.

our curriculum in ways that will bring questions of place into the heart of our classroom conversations, such a curricular shift is not adequately formative. Thus, inspired by Wendell Berry and the philosopher James Smith, we have worked here at Spring Arbor University with other members of our community to start a campus garden. Is growing a garden sufficient to root students' learning? Probably not, but our hope is that the practice of gardening together will shape our students' imaginations, their affections, and their questions.

Smith, in his *Cultural Liturgies* series, draws on an Augustinian anthropology to argue that we humans are liturgical animals, by which he means desiring, imaginative creatures whose affections are shaped by our practices and shared stories. What this means for the university is that "the mission of the Christian university should be conceived not just in terms of dissemination of information but also, and more fundamentally, as an exercise in *formation*."³⁹ Practices that form students in rooted living are difficult to imagine in institutions where students only live for four or five years and then set off to follow their careers wherever they may lead. It is even harder to implement such practices in a 15-week class, although the contributors to *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* display remarkable creativity in adapting to this context practices that form students in other ways.⁴⁰ Our hope, though, is that the practice of gardening as a community might shape students to care more deeply about their connections to their place, to desire a more vigorous health, and to adopt a posture of gratitude.

Gardening places us in our time and location; it reminds us of our limits as placed creatures and fosters a language accountable to such limits. Plants grow in particular places from the soil and nutrients and light available to them there. We cannot grow bananas or mangoes in Michigan. We have to learn which plants will thrive here, and which will thrive in our particular conditions. We learn to accommodate our appetites to these plants, and to the seasons in which they bear fruit. Such learning clarifies and roots our language. Now when we say the word "tomato," our associations include not merely the pale red slices on a McDonald's hamburger, but also the rich red globes hanging from the deep green foliage on a summer afternoon we spent weeding with our friends in the garden. Gardening also sharpens our language because it forces us to, as Berry says, stand by our words; we have to test the language we use against the reality of the things we are talking about, the seeds, soil, bugs, work, sun, and water that foster or inhibit life. With this more accountable language, we become able to respond to the conditions and needs of our place. We thus begin to live within the limits of what our place can allow and become more able to lead lives of reciprocity and responsibility.

This reflects the complex health and beauty that a garden can embody. Our culture's vision of a healthy life is about as simplistic as its vision of a healthy

³⁹James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies: Volume 2): How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 4.

⁴⁰David Smith and James K. A. Smith, eds. *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

lawn: 1.5 children, a nice house in the suburbs with a three-car garage, and a good career indicate the monocultural, impoverished cultural imagination we have. It is this imagination that leads us to flatten the space around our houses and buildings and dump chemicals on it until it looks evenly green. But when we trade this relationship with our environment for one in which we cultivate different kinds of plants and carefully tend their growth, we begin to enrich our imaginations. As Berry writes in "Think Little" about the way that gardening can transform our thinking, when we apply our "minds directly and competently to the needs of the earth, then we will have begun to make fundamental and necessary changes in our minds."⁴¹ These changes in our minds will expand our imaginations as we participate in the economy of the soil, where water and sun and organic nutrients, brought together with human care, grow good food. Faculty, staff, and students may then be better able to envision how this healthy pattern might be cultivated in our marriages, our churches, and our communities. This formation in an aesthetic of health can help us all to be better participants in the Kingdom of God rather than simply accommodating ourselves to the simplistic, boomer economy of consumerism.

Finally, gardening can cultivate the gratitude that should characterize our posture as placed creatures. When all of our food comes from the grocery store, we begin to treat food, as we already treat most everything else, as a commodity that we deserve. This sense of entitlement, as we have already argued, infects our attitude toward education as well. But gardening can remind us of the proper gratitude we should have for our food. When some vegetables actually survive the vicissitudes of weather, bugs, disease, and deer, we recognize more deeply the true miracle that life is, and our gratitude for this gift springs almost unbidden. Our affections and imaginations have begun to be oriented toward our place, and while this can seem insignificant, this orientation may have far-reaching consequences, changing the questions we ask, the life choices that we make, and the economy in which we participate.

Gardening is no panacea for the ills that infect our deracinated culture and universities. What we are urging is that particular communities in particular institutions begin imagining ways that they can actively root themselves in their places. Gardening is one way to do this, but such formation will look different in different places. One of our friends at University of Mobile has begun a regular "Foxfire Evening" where students and professors gather to learn handicrafts. Other schools, like St. Catherine's College and Berea, incorporate the physical work of caring for their place much more comprehensively. Our hope is that local curricula, committed faculty, small reading groups, long-term involvement with the surrounding community, and a shared sense of institutional purpose can

⁴¹Wendell Berry, "Think Little," in *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1972), 84. See also Wendell Berry, "The Reactor and the Garden," in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), 161–170.

142 all contribute to offering students an education that will root them and prepare them for the work of restoration. Such an education can perhaps form us and our graduates not to desire a better place somewhere else, but, as Hannah Coulter longs for, "a better place where [we] are, because [we] want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better."⁴²

⁴²Berry, *Hannah Coulter*.