

Megan Pinney

Community: Relearning the Good in an Age of Globalization

Megan Pinney

Baylor University

Culture of Enterprise Essay Contest

Can Character and Community Survive in an Age of Globalization?

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Community is disintegrating in this age of globalization. I find Wendell Berry's definition of community useful when discussing this problem, and adapt it to my own understanding of the character of community; that is, people with responsibility to each other and with responsibility to the land. This sense of community is threatened by globalization, which is dangerous because it exalts the individual over community and exploits the land. First, I shall discuss Berry's romantic solution for the disintegration of community, the effectual end of globalization in the rise of local economy. But because I do not believe that the end of globalization is possible, I argue that the solution will not be economic but cultural. I investigate this by using marriage as an allegory for community. In conclusion, I intend to show how liberal education and the Christian imagination are the primary solution - the best preservative for community - in response to a global worldview. Liberal education shows us the good and Christian imagination compels us to embrace it.

With regard to the problem of globalization, Wendell Berry's definition of community is useful because it rightly includes both people and place. According to Berry, community is a "neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it."¹ It is indeed noteworthy that Berry uses the term *neighborhood* to describe a community, because neighborhoods imply the belonging – both to people and to place – of members who not only know each other, but depend upon each other. Virtues like cooperation and responsibility are vital to the common interests of neighbors; the community is not merely a matter of geographical proximity, but a participation in the act of neighboring itself. On an interpersonal level, this participation rewards communities

¹ Berry, Wendell. "Conservation and Local Economy" pg.14

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with “familiarity, mutual respect, mutual affection, and mutual help.”² Alexis DeToqueville notes that local freedom makes citizens responsible for their neighbors and draws them “to one another, despite the instincts that separate them, and force[s] them to aid each other.”³ Similarly, Berry thinks the mutual concerns unite people “in the public good, and make them see the need they constantly have⁴” to take responsibility for one another. This responsibility is sustained by the “common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion and forgiveness⁵” that accompany the biblical imperative of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.

Berry thinks that when communities act and live by common virtues, it follows that they will have “respect for nature and for the lives of wild things.”⁶ A true community is not singularly human, but includes creatures and the natural environment. Land use is a litmus test for the health of the neighborhood on the whole; insofar as the “place is well preserved, if its entire membership, natural and human, is present in it, and if the human economy is in practical harmony with the nature of the place,⁷” the community is well. John Milton depicts such harmony in his epic *Paradise Lost*, where Adam and Eve enjoy mutual community in the “native soil, happy walks and shades⁸” of Eden. Here they are “to pleasant task enjoined / to tend plant, herb and flow’r.”⁹ Harmony for the first humans is intimately connected with their responsibility to a place through the practice of neighborly dominion – that is, nurture, care, and protection – over creation. By their participation in the act of neighboring, the “image of their glorious

² Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” pg 150

³ *Ibid.* pg. 487

⁴ *ibid.* pg. 487

⁵ *ibid.* pg. 120

⁶ Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” pg. 133

⁷ Berry, Wendell. “Conservation and Local Economy,” pg. 14

⁸ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*, 11.270

⁹ *ibid.*, 9.207/205

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Maker shone,¹⁰” and the ultimate calling of humanity in relation to community was realized.

The present age of globalization poses many threats to this concept of community. The global worldview directly conflicts with the intimate and neighborly relationships of people to each other and to the land because it exalts the individual over the community. As Benjamin R. Barber notes in his article, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, those who subscribe to the global ideal no longer recognize community “as an organizing or regulative principle.¹¹” Instead, Berry notes, they “pursue self-aggrandizement, self-interest, self-fulfillment, [and] self-promotion.¹²” This pursuit – the quest of globalization – is the mantra of modernity. It is in elementary schools, where students learn grammar, arithmetic, and *self-esteem*. It is in the bookstores, where a display warns, “*Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office*.” It is university classrooms, where discussion sessions quagmire because “everybody’s opinion matters.” The global worldview does not make us empathetic to one another’s differences or ideas. It certainly doesn’t hold make us responsible for the nurture or protection of them. It makes us tolerant; we tolerate everything if we can just get what we want. This is the empty pursuit that Milton highlights in the Fall, when Eve, in order to “achieve what might lead to happier life,¹³” breaks communion with God, her husband, and creation.

The global worldview also offers the empty promise of achieving personal happiness by material means. Economically speaking, the modern drive for ever-expanding transnational markets, within which, according to Barber, “trade is free,

¹⁰ *ibid*, 4.292

¹¹ Barber, Benjamin R. “Jihad vs. McWorld” *The Atlantic Online*, 1992. www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/199203/barber. Pg. 2

¹² Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” p. 149

¹³ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*, 9. 697

currencies are convertible, access to banking is open, and contracts are enforceable under law,¹⁴” has proven detrimental for local markets. The global quest prioritizes utility over responsibility to those nearest us. Because of the distance over which we transact, relationships become abstract and impersonal, emphasizing corporate efficiency and convenience in place of the mutual help, nurture, and intimacy of communities. Globalization, Barber says, focuses “on the administration of things – with people, however, among the chief things to be administered.¹⁵” This worldview reduces the dignity of citizens, the importance of their moral responsibilities, and the degree of freedom they enjoy. As Barber points out, an effective free market only requires that “consumers be free to vote their dollars on competing goods, not that citizens be free to vote their values and beliefs.¹⁶” In this way, distinct moral agents become mere homogenous consumers; liberated from our freedom to fulfill the human calling of provision, nurture and protection, we now have the individual freedom to *call today and get twenty percent off!* Religion, community, and culture are reduced to a few “marginal elements in a working identity,¹⁷” and people are reduced to commodities that outsource human worth and connection for very little return. In a community, transactions take place between persons who are responsible to provide for, care, and protect each other, so the partners have a vested interest in doing business with integrity. But “predictability is of more value than justice¹⁸” in the abstract and utilitarian transactions of global trade; the virtues of justice and integrity are lost to the global market. As a result, the government plays an increasing role in market operations, replacing the moral contracts

¹⁴ Barber, Benjamin R. pg. 2

¹⁵ *ibid* pg. 6

¹⁶ *ibid* pg 4

¹⁷ *ibid* pg. 2

¹⁸ *ibid*, pg.4

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of communities with public laws— which “vary, sometimes radically, according to forms of government.¹⁹” Implementing a foreign standard of morality destroys the Berryian requirement of freedom “from outside pressure or coercion²⁰” that is crucial to the survival of community.

The impact of globalization on the environment is also devastating to community. Businesses that have no communal tie to resources supply them liberally according to increased global demand. While the world rushes to participate in the twentieth-century global market, Barber notes the land has become so depleted that “even the wealthiest societies [are] ever more resource-dependent and many other nations [are] in permanently desperate straits.²¹” Profit and progress blind global eyes to the inherent virtue of the land and our inherent connection to it. No wonder G.M Hopkins mourned, “O if we but knew what we do, When we delve or hew – Hack and rack the growing green!” We seem to think the land inexhaustible, but the global imperative to live comfortably and consume freely is not sustainable. The global market survives by a principle of competition that devastates the land. Berry points out that the “fittest” in this system is hardly the “best caretaker;²²” the concerns of the modern global network are production and consumption, not the growth or even the preservation of community. Community cannot survive in an age of globalization.

Wendell Berry seeks to solve the problem of globalization and save community by promoting a local economy. For him, economy *is* community. In *Conservation and Local Economy*, Berry asserts that “the health of nature is our primary ground for

¹⁹ Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” pg. 147

²⁰ *ibid*, pg. 150

²¹ Barber, pg.3

²² Berry, Wendell. “The Problem of Tobacco” pg. 61

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hope,²³” because he equates seriously diseased communities with a seriously diseased earth. He says we must adopt “stable rural economies and communities²⁴” in order to preserve the nature of our place. He equates economy and community, saying that community is “a complex connection not only among human beings or between humans and their homeland but also between the human economy and nature.²⁵” Because Berry sees the foundation of hope for the survival of community in the latter, his solution for the disintegration of community in an age of globalization is decidedly economic. The solution, a local economy, promotes community for two principle reasons. Namely, it engenders responsibility towards other people, and it engenders responsibility towards the land. For example, a farmer gleans his livelihood from the land he works, and is tied to the welfare of that land. The local person who buys food from the farmer also has a vested interest in the protection of that land, because he knows where his food comes from. The two interact with integrity out of respect for mutual responsibility and dependence, and because they interact on a regular basis they have an interest in the welfare of the other.

For Berry, the only thing that can save community is this local economy – an effectual end of globalization. This is largely because, for Berry, economy *is* community. But globalization is here to stay, barring nuclear holocaust. I am now concerned with how communities can resist the disintegrating forces of globalization, and how the elements of community – responsibility to people and place – can be preserved. I am not convinced that the problem facing the survival of community is one that warrants a solely economic solution; rather, two preservatives of such responsibility are liberal education

²³ Berry, Wendell. “Conservation and Local Economy” pg 11

²⁴ *ibid*, pg. 11

²⁵ *ibid*, pg. 14

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and the Christian imagination. It seems to me that because we are ignorant of our higher dignity and calling as humans capable of community, we confuse the good of a neighborhood with the lie that individual profits, convenience and satisfaction, we make us happiest. In *Paradise Lost*, this lie comes directly from the mouth of Satan himself. Globalization – which pursues a superficial and disconnected good – is an appropriate manifestation of our fundamental ignorance of, or perhaps even willful blindness to, the true good life. I suggest that community will only survive or be revived in this present age if citizens learn what is actually valuable in light of the:

“Power and rule

Conferred upon us, and dominion giv’n

Over all other creatures that possess

Earth, air and sea.²⁶”

We deny our responsibility to people and to the land. We have toppled Plato’s ordered soul and proclaimed each part of it equal. Reason, Spirit and Appetite guide us as they will, but Appetite is easiest to follow. This is a cultural problem, and changing the economy alone will not suffice to reorder a disordered worldview. We must have a cultural solution that will change minds. The task at hand is pedagogical; people must relearn the meaning of “good,” and consequently, the significance of community and character. It seems to me that this task falls to liberal education, and especially, to the Christian imagination.

People have lost sight of the dignity and calling of community: the nurture, protection and responsibility to each other and to creation. This loss is most clearly illustrated, for me, by the modern approach to the community of marriage, which has

²⁶ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, ln. 444-445

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fallen prey to the confused virtues of globalization: self-gratification and utility. This is important because, as Berry says, “the other bonds [of community] will not hold²⁷” without the fundamental community of marriage. I have already shown how the pursuit of self-gratification leads to rampant consumerism, and especially in Eve’s case, to an expulsion from community. These same effects are evidenced in marriage, as John Wall illustrates in his essay, “Marriage Today: Sacramental or Utilitarian?” He calls marriages “progressive and egalitarian social institutions²⁸” which “promise better sex, more money, longer lives and improved physical and emotional health.²⁹” These promises appropriate a legalized institution in which utility – not love, or generosity – rules supreme. Berry says that marriages and households are the foundational blocks of community; if this is true, and utility is the highest good in marriage, then it is not difficult to see how today’s moral conscience bows to abortion, pornography, homosexuality, radical feminism, and fierce power struggles between the sexes. The harmony and health of community are absolutely in peril as long as we blindly exalt personal utility in place of communal good. Marriage is the origin of human community, the institution that gives rise to a people who belong to a place, the institution that informs our understanding of responsibility to one another. If husband and wife are disconnected, the foundation of community is on shaky ground. In the bookstores, Dr. Phil smiles from rows of glossy book covers: “*Find the One You Want, Fix the One You’ve Got!*” Marriage has become another global gimmick to satisfy personal desires by “fixing” someone else to meet personal needs. In obedience to the globalized standard of happiness, marriage, by exalting the individual instead of the community, becomes a

²⁷ Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community.” Pg. 125

²⁸ Wall, John. “Marriage Today: Sacramental or Utilitarian?” Christian Century 117:1120, 1120

²⁹ *ibid.* 1120

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contract of mutual exploitation. This is an exploitation that we mimic in our dealings with the land.

It seems the way we relate to the community of marriage parallels the way we relate to our relationship with the land. In the article, “Is There Such a Thing as Christian Sex?” John M. Berez illustrates the destructiveness of males who “use and colonize a woman’s body for purposes of power.³⁰” This awful picture recalls Berry’s complaint against our use of the environment, which we colonize for purposes of profit. The relationships that are most closely connected for Berry, community and economy, are those same relationships that a global worldview has effectively destroyed. The manner in which nations ravage and dishonor the precious soil that sustains them is similar to the manner in which spouses have come to utilize each other. We use our resources until we have run them dry, decide that life could be better if we simply move on or spend more money, and divorce ourselves from the remains. This system of abusing our place and each other flows from our cultural ignorance of the good: our true happiness, our responsibility to one another and to the land.

So how are liberal education and the Christian imagination a solution to the disintegration of community, especially in marriages and in relation to the land? First, liberal education teaches us what to value, and makes us capable of empathy. It is, as Leo Straus put it, “education in culture or towards culture.³¹” Culture – derived from agricultural - means the “cultivation of the mind,³²” and is the very thing that distinguishes between *mass* culture and the intellectual qualities in true community.

Mass culture can “be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and

³⁰ Berez, John M. “Is There Such a Thing as Christian Sex?” pg. 141

³¹ Straus, Leo. “What is Liberal Education?” 1959. pg. 1

³² *ibid*, pg. 1

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moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price.³³” Straus’ diagnosis fits the global worldview perfectly. But liberal education counter-acts the effects of global culture by awakening knowledge of the “true ground of the dignity of man and there with of the goodness of the world.³⁴” Where globalization levels distinctions and reduces people, liberal education teaches us to notice and appreciate the beautiful particulars. So doing, we will cherish the people in our communities, and also Hopkins’s “aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun³⁵” which once seemed so expendable. Aristotle teaches us to pursue the contemplative life. Augustine shows us the value of “a great and natural good, the power of friendship.³⁶” Plato orders our appetites appropriately under reason. Jane Austen teaches us to forego prejudice and embrace love, and Frederick Douglas gives us empathy for human suffering. Calculus teaches reason, Physics teaches focus, and Philosophy teaches deliberation. Real education, “determined by community needs,³⁷” expands our faculties for virtue, virtues that play out in the preservation of community.

But this intellectual reorienting is not enough for cultural change; people must desire and pursue what is good for virtue – nurture, protection, responsibility - once they have the capacity to recognize it. Christian imagination provides the context that assigns meaning to relationships and ultimately stimulates change: in community, in marriage, and in our care of the land. The Christian story explains the root of our confusion and disconnect from the good in the biblical fall from grace; it also shows us our place in the world, our responsibility to it, and where our hope truly lies – not in the health of nature,

³³ Straus, Leo. “What is Liberal Education?” 1959. pg. 3

³⁴ *ibid*, pg. 6

³⁵ Hopkins, G.M. “Binsley Poplars.”

³⁶ Augustine, “On The Good of Love and Marriage,” pg. 514

³⁷ Berry, Wendell. “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” pg. 123

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but in the love of God for the world. If we understand this love correctly, and recognize, as Berry says later, that “we and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate³⁸” because we live by the affections of a holy God, then our desires will be ordered under that love. I mean to say, our love for ourselves will no longer rule our desires; instead we will treat each other and the land with the dignity of something loved by God.

The perspective from Christian imagination has a great impact on marriage; the example of Christ inspires husband and wife to a love that would lay down its life. Because marriage refers to the relationship of Christ and the church, and Christ gave himself up for the church, it is through the Christian imagination that “we cross over the differences between ourselves and other beings and thus learn compassion, forbearance, mercy, forgiveness, sympathy, and love – the virtues without which neither we nor the world can live.³⁹” Only in this context can husband and wife imagine the good in taking responsibility for the happiness and protection of another by abandoning personal utility. For C.S. Lewis, this is the essence of Christian marriage: in “some mysterious but indisputable fashion the lover desires the Beloved herself, not the pleasure she can give.⁴⁰” The Christian worldview does not allow spouses to operate as individual consumers, but demands selflessness – in fact, a losing of the self – that will effectively nurture, provide and protect a marriage. These are the virtues that sustain all community. In place of the man who uses a woman for his personal power, we have a picture of a

³⁸ Berry, Wendell. “Christianity and the Survival of Creation.” pg.98

³⁹ *ibid* pg. 96

⁴⁰ Lewis, C.S. The Four Loves: A Much Beloved Exploration of the Nature of Love. Harcourt, Inc., New York. 1960. pg. 94

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husband who “loves his wife as [his] own body,⁴¹” or as Charles William said it, “Love you? I *am* you.” In the same way, our relationship to the land becomes more intimate and sacred within the Christian imagination. If all of creation is a tangible expression of God’s love, then Berry is right: our “destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, it is the most horrid blasphemy.⁴²” Biblically, God ordains humans to rule over the earth; this rule is not the hungry dominion of globalization, but rather a protection of the holistic community. If society comes to terms with this, they have the appropriate motive to respect, nurture, and protect the land that they belong to.

In conclusion, I have shown that the problem threatening community in this age of globalization is not entirely economic, as Berry proposes, but cultural, and results from an ignorance of our calling as humans to be responsible for each other and for the land we belong to. Economic change is futile without cultural change. I propose that the solution, then, is liberal education and the Christian imagination. Through these things our understanding of community and more specifically, of our marriages and relationships to the land, will be better ordered to the good. The task falls then, to teachers – to reorient the intellect to recognize the good of community – and especially to the church – to provide the ultimate context that gives dignity and meaning to human life and inspires a desire for the good. Community will only survive in an age of globalization if people are taught how to value it and why to strive for it.

⁴¹ Ephesians, English Standard Version, 5:28

⁴² Berry, Wendell. “Christianity and the Survival of Creation.” Pg. 98

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