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Firmly Rooted in One's Place

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Wendell Berry, *A World Lost: A Novel* (Counterpoint, 2008).

I rolled my eyes at Wendell Berry's *A World Lost*—before I read it. It was 2005, I was 23, I had only heard bits and pieces about Berry, and a friend sent a copy to my wife, Liz—the kind of friend who would send the kind of books that elicit eye-rolling. She read it and said I really should. I reluctantly did. And I loved it. In the next year, I greedily devoured every bit of fiction Berry had ever published, sometimes at stop lights while driving. At the time, I was a conventional Protestant, suburban-raised 23-year-old, just married, and just graduated from UVA. Like many recent grads, I was wringing my hands about the weighty decision facing me: What should I do with my life? Berry played a critical part in my vocational decision. I am now the farmer and owner of Whiffletree Farm where we raise and sell chickens, eggs, turkey, pork, and beef in my hometown of Warrenton, Virginia—all raised on fresh pasture, non-GMO feed, no antibiotics, no chemicals, no hormones, no chemical wormers, and our beef is 100% grass-fed. Liz and I, who both came into the Catholic Church in 2009, have 5 kids under 8 and farming is our only livelihood. A story worthy of some eye-rolling!

What was it about *A World Lost* that so affected my undisposed, 23-year-old self? The story is told from the perspective of 9-year-old Andy Catlett. The immediate focal point of the story is the tragic loss of Andy's beloved and bedeviled and winsome Uncle Andrew, his namesake and hero. Alongside this loss is the parallel theme of Andrew's struggle to come to know *the whole*, his love for *the whole*, and his suffering for *the whole*. What I mean by this is that Andy has been born into an integrated life—a life that is unusual and under attack in our contemporary context. His was a life rooted in his rural, agricultural hometown, with extended family, family friends, worked land, animals, farm, home, neighbors, and future all integrated into one comingling *whole*. This is in dramatic contrast to the structure of modern life which disintegrates these elements. With an ever-more-transient workforce, people are rootless, separated from family and place. Home has become a shell of its true self. Rather than a place for the production of good and beautiful things, it is merely a place where the family returns to consume, indulge, and sleep. School is outsourced, children are outsourced, almost all of true “homemaking” is outsourced. Families, extended families, family friends, and people and their hometowns are separated from each other. Coming of age before these developments have taken hold, Andy comes to know and more fully appreciate the *wholeness* of his life, while he is also coming to know the forces that might pull it apart. His is a beautiful, integrated world (though with its inherent flaws, like un-ignorable family members who are destroying themselves), that is under attack by these modern forces that fragment the most important parts of lives like his. “I saw how beautiful the field was, how beautiful our work was. And it came to me all in a feeling how everything fitted together, the place and ourselves and the animals and the tools, and how the sky held us” (139).

Why did this so resonate with me? Well, of course, I was a hand-wringing idealist—again, worthy of a hearty eye roll. And in being so, I longed for this integrated life, even if I could not articulate it very well at the time. I knew I did not just want to endure an unsatisfying job to pay the bills, with shallow connections to the people and places that constituted my every day. I had been raised well enough to know that God had made the world for love and He had made it whole—where all its parts had a fundamental intimacy. Essentially, nothing was disposable; all was made by God and had its existence by His love. And, thankfully, my upbringing protected me from a cynical despair of participating in that intimacy. I had been given the knowledge that I should find my happiness in a life of love and intimate connection with God and His world. Therefore, I wanted to do some good in the world appropriate to my context, gifts, and privileges. And I wanted all the parts of my life to so overlap that they—much like Andy Catlett’s—all became an *intermingled whole*. Not school over here, work over there, church over here, children over there, home over here, wife over there, hometown back there, extended family over there, family friends back there, neighbors over there, old people over there, young people in there, etc. Historically, geographically, socially, necessarily—all intermingled and inherently concerned with each other!

So you see, Berry spoke about the things for which I longed. The characters of *A World Lost desperately care about this life I wanted*—their anti-modern, small town, rural, rooted life of theirs. They enjoy it. They work hard for it. They pass it down for it to live on. They suffer dearly for its losses and tragedies. And in my reading, their enjoyment is utterly unassailable and their work is compellingly noble and their suffering is admirably honorable. Berry spoke of a dream I found worthy to dream. Berry’s Wheeler Catlett (Andy’s father) had a “dream bound to sustain damage and to cause pain, and yet he never gave it up, and he passed it on. He dreamed, simply, of a world intact, the family together, the place cared for, and all well” (67).

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Keep reading! Click [here for a review of Joel Salatin’s *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs*](#).

