

Introduction to Wendell Berry

November 11, 1994

Woody Deryckx introduced Wendell Berry as the keynote speaker for Tilth's 20th Anniversary Conference on November 11, 1994, at Edgewood Manor near Troutdale, Oregon. In his introduction Woody spoke about his first meeting with Wendell in Spokane twenty years earlier and Wendell's role in inspiring the sustainable agriculture movement in the Pacific Northwest.

Below is an excerpt from Woody's introduction in which he talked about the significance of the word "Tilth" and how it was chosen as the name for the organization that would take up Wendell's call to bring together what he called the "constituency for a better kind of agriculture." Woody's introduction was followed by a few reflections from Wendell before giving the keynote address.

I take the measure of a great writer not only in the skill with which he crafts his words, not only in the clarity and depth with which he cultures his ideas and with which he communicates them, but with the ability to deepen understanding within me, the reader, and to catalyze action. I would never have lived the life I've lived if I hadn't of stumbled across and subjected myself to the beneficial influence of Wendell Berry.

Let me tell you a little bit about that; this is where I start to reminisce. I had decided at a turning point in my life to dedicate myself to environmentally better agriculture. I did that at a particular time in my life when I was very confused and upset about my situation in the world. I had been involved in a most terribly destructive and unjust war, and I just wanted something really different—really opposite.

In 1970 I heard about Earth Day about a week after I got out of uniform, and I said "this is what I'm going to be involved in. I'm going to be involved in environmental causes." Looking around for just exactly what kind of environmental causes, somebody put a bug in my ear by saying on the radio, if you want to find a real, true environmentalist, you look at an organic gardener or an organic farmer because these are the people who are living their doctrine. They're actually performing environmentally benign acts, recycling, making the ecological loops connect, and restraining from polluting and enslaving the environment as the recipient of destruction like some other kinds of farmers tended to do in their excesses in the industrialized model. So I hit the library studying this.

I'd already read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a teenager a couple of times straight through, so I was kind of set for that. And one of the things I discovered right off the bat was a delightful interview in *Farm Journal* in which the writer had visited Wendell at home and had asked to use the bathroom, to which he said, "No, you can't." Then he sent him out to the composting privy. And the rest of the article was all about how wonderful this composting privy was. Now, in the same issue of that *Farm Journal* there were articles about the exhaustive work that the United States Department of Agriculture scientists were doing to once again affirm that barnyard manure was not worth the cost of hauling it out to the fields to spread. So you can see that this was the

turning point in consciousness in a lot of ways. And it's the point at which I got involved and the beginning of my personal journey which has brought me here.

The next thing I found, of course, was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and Wendell Berry was in there with the most illuminating and succinct reviews of the important works to begin the study—the books of Sir Albert Howard, *Farmers of 40 Centuries* by King, and so forth. His reviews and recommendations were so compelling that I was launched; I was studying this night and day.

And of course, I ran to the local college library where they might have other works by a fellow like him, and in the card catalog I came up with *The Long-Legged House* and read that in a sitting, and I found that my life was being shaped by the logic and the penetrating, just downright rightness of this man's thinking.

So when I say the measure of a great writer is his ability to deepen the understanding of his readers and to catalyze action, I say that from a personal sense in that I experienced that change of direction in my life. And I also say it in a community sense, too, because Tilth as a community in the Northwest, and I think other people like us all over the nation, have been led by Wendell as a guiding light toward a more sustainable future.

I ran into Wendell through a strange group of circumstances, coincidences. I got invited to participate as a moderator in the "Agriculture for a Small Planet" symposium in Spokane, and Wendell was one of the speakers there. I went up there and I encountered him at the hotel. I'll never forget this image. It was early in the morning. He was sitting with his three-piece suit and a newspaper draped over his lap. He was sitting in this dark, lush hotel lobby leaning over in the light. He had his pocketknife out and he was picking away at his left hand. I introduced myself and he said, "You ever put up hay? These darn thistles are driving me crazy!" He was digging thistle stickers out of his hand, and I think several people here know how it feels about two days after you put up hay.

Wendell spoke so eloquently at that symposium about the unraveling of the society he had grown up in in Henry County, Kentucky, that it was saddening and disturbing—deeply disturbing. But I couldn't help but think as I sat there listening to the penetrating logic and the polished prose that was coming out of this great man's mouth (which later appeared in a slightly altered form in his wonderful book, *The Unsettling of America*), I couldn't help to think simultaneously that we needed to get right to work, and we had the opportunity to get right to work to start putting our society back together just as it was coming apart.

And so, when he wrote to ...I also had the opportunity to meet Mark, Gigi Coe and Skeeter. Along with my wife, Becky, we started putting together a new opportunity for a meeting in response to a letter that Wendell sent to us saying that he thought it would be a good idea to have a major convention that would give the "heretics and dissidents of agriculture" an opportunity to meet together without having to confront (which was the case of this earlier meeting), confront hostility from the establishment figures. And that's what we started to do. We started to put together this thing.

And in the beginning, as they say, there was the word, right, and the word was “tilth.” Because people kept asking us, “Well who are you, putting this conference on?” And we said, “Well, gee....”

We sat around on the porch one day...and I’ve got to admit I had learned the word “tilth” and the concept tilth from Wendell and the great guides that he directed me to. As you know, it’s a magnificent concept—such a complex and mysterious product of an incredibly complex biological system guided by a vast storehouse of information encoded in the genetic material of microorganisms, many of which have not even been named and discovered yet, that exist in every teaspoon of healthy agricultural soil.

It never occurred to me that you could take a word like that.... I was celebrating that word every day. I just loved that word. My wife and I talked about it; I would go on and on about this word and what it meant. It never occurred to me that we could use that word other than what it was for.

We were trying figure out, well, let’s call the organization the “Northwest Farmers’ Coalition for a Better Future,” and what is that going to spell? Another one was, how about “Northwest Certified Organic Farmers”? Or, how about “Institute for Alternative Agriculture”...somebody got that one later.

We ended up, my wife was a bit a word crafter and she said, “Well, how about Tilth?” It never occurred to us...to me anyway... that you could take that word, but instantly it made such good sense because in the biological, soil sense, tilth has such a great meaning. And in the social sense it also has the same meaning.

Think about it a minute. The cohesion of the soil particles, the mineral particles, is a product of all that cooperative biological activity.

And the cohesion among us people—after 20 years this room is full of good people with the same ideals and the same goals who have put in—many of you—20 years more or less, of excellent good work and we all know we’re just getting started. We have a lot of cohesion in this group, in this community. We have a lot of Tilth here.

The vast information involved in the miracle of the biology of a teaspoon of good, fertile, healthy agricultural soil—information that is ancient in its trial-and-error pursuit of survival under all kinds of conditions. Tailor made for every condition where a different species predominates. Tailor made for different seasons of the year—the ability to fluctuate from one season to another. To be able to pull back from damage. To be able to accommodate the annual input of organic matter and transform it into stable humus. To be able to take the energy of the organic matter input of the seasons and perform vital work with it. To be able to create a structure of soil.

We know, too, that there’s a tremendous amount of information that we seek and that we have to pass on. The information that I got, personally, that put me in a career in agriculture primarily came from before World War II. Primarily came from before herbicides and synthetic insecticides, and even before the total dominance of traction horsepower internal combustion engines that dominated agriculture and put us into an industrial situation.

We are using that information and we're passing that information on. And the most important thing is we're passing it on in a cultural sense, from one person to another in a structure. We are taking a society which truly is coming undone...and the society in Henry County, Kentucky, where Wendell was a boy is truly becoming undone. But, in a sense, we're gluing the pieces back together. We're creating, I hope, a set of water stable soil aggregates in a cultural sense—in a community sense—that is going to be replacing the ruin that we have to leave behind.

So, Wendell, I'm going to reverse things a little bit. I'm going to tell you that you are very, very welcome here and you're very honored here. And probably every single person in this room has been deeply affected and influenced and led by you. Rather than present you to this audience, I'm going to present this audience to you. I give you a room full of dedicated people working together for a better future, largely under your influence. I give you Tilth.

Wendell Berry's response to Woody's introduction:

Well, Woody. You certainly were a lot nicer to me than I told you to be. I'm a modest person and I don't know how I'm going to be able to stagger on under the burden of all this praise...but I can assure you that Tanya agrees with you down the line.

I, too, remember that meeting in Spokane. The spring of 1974 had been a sad time in my life. That June I started out to come out to Spokane, and I stopped off in Iowa and I met for the first time my friend Maury Teleen. And then I came out here to the world's fair, which I don't remember at all, thank you. But I remember those conversations.

I remember perfectly the conversation that Woody just described. And I remember talking with Mark and Gigi Coe and her friend Wilson Clark, a wonderful profane, profound man.

I had at that time been setting before myself the idea that I would write the book that became *The Unsettling of America*, and I wrote the first sentences of it on that airplane flying out from Waterloo to Spokane to use as my speech.

The point is that I came back from that trip with my rather solitary sense of my own conviction at that time considerably enhanced by the sense of having company. And I haven't lost it. I've been aware of Tilth ever since. It's meant a lot to me to know that it's persisted. It's meant a lot to me to hear you people talk.

I listened to Woody with great interest this morning, admiring what a good student of our subject he's become.

Though, like a lot of you, I need solitude for my work....it hasn't got to the point yet that I can job paragraphs off to anybody. And I farm on too small a scale to use very much help. But I don't ever feel that I'm working alone. I know that the work I've done couldn't

have been done by me alone. I often think of the poem by Robert Frost that ends by saying:

We work together...

Whether we work together or apart.

You lovely people have been coming up to me today and thanking me for coming or for something I've written. And I'm always embarrassed to receive these thanks because I feel like I'm receiving installments on a paid account. I need this meeting and the long work and the many efforts that it represents a lot more than it needs me. And so, I begin by thanking you in acknowledgement of a large and growing debt.