



Wendell Berry at his farm in Henry County, Kentucky. Photograph by Tanya Amyx Berry.

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Real Homeland Security

by MARY BERRY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE BERRY CENTER

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*If a home land is to be secure, then it should be possible  
for its people to be fed from the home land.*

**E**VERYBODY IS TALKING about Homeland Security. What is it? What could it possibly mean to particular people in particular places in a country that tolerates dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico, the destruction of Appalachia for cheap fuel, and the near destruction of the place where I have lived and farmed and loved all of my life?

When I hear the term “home land” I think of the land between New Castle, where The Berry Center is, and Port Royal, where I lived until I went to college in 1976 and moved back to in 1981. It is the love of that particular place that brought me home, first, and then called me to take up my family’s work on its behalf. I know this place, however imperfectly, and its history right up until just a minute ago. Some of that knowledge is painful, because it has been of people and land badly used. Some of my own memories are painful. And every day I am confronted with my own implication in “the general sham,” as Thomas Merton said. I know what I have seen of it in my 62 years and I know something of what my family saw in the years before my birth. I thought that I remembered people who died long before I was born until, as people say around here, “I was a great big girl.” I have never questioned why much of my family stayed here or returned here. Imagine my surprise when I read this in my father’s novel *Jayber Crow*, upon Jayber’s return home after twelve years away and in the aftermath of the 1937 flood: “it seemed to me that even if everything had been changed, I would have recognized it by the look of the sky.” I thought then, “That’s how I feel.”

So, then, my interest in Homeland Security is in the security of my own home land because I love it.

Not because I don’t care what happens in other places, but because I don’t know what should be done in other places. Not much good has come from general solutions to particular problems. However, I know from my own experience what a good example can do.

The Burley Tobacco Program brought economic stability to small diversified farming in Kentucky by limiting production of a high-value crop to maintain a parity price. My grandfather John Berry, Sr. spent his life in service to the Program and the people it served. My father has said of him that he did the important work and that his sons took it up. The Berry Center has now taken it up. Once and for a while small farmers had an asking price for what they produced, and the resulting health of the farm country and the people who belonged to it was beautiful to see. The irony that this health was the result of the tobacco economy is not lost on me. But the tragedy that diversified agriculture, fairly common in my youth and supported by the Program, has been replaced by the toxic and erosive production of corn and soybeans isn’t lost on me, either. We have given farmers two choices in this country. They can be small and entrepreneurial or large and industrial, without much in the middle. The Burley Program put something between the farmer and the marketplace for the good of the farmer and so for the good of us all. My grandfather thought that the Program would work for anything a farmer could produce. I do, too.

The work of The Berry Center started with an inventory of what we had to work with. Our inventory includes: some good land, some good farmers, a well-watered landscape, the perennial farming of livestock



*John Edwards, farmer and co-owner of Trackside Butcher Shoppe, and son feeding cattle in Trimble County, Kentucky. Photo courtesy of Our Home Place Meat.*

production, a good local processor, access to urban markets, the history of a farm co-op that worked for small farmers for decades, remnants of an agrarian culture. The inventory showed us where to begin. We would start with our good livestock farmers. We would start where the culture of good farming was still strong. The availability of calves raised on grass and their mother's milk allowed us to go to work with the nine farm families invited to join Our Home Place Meat without any cost to them. They just needed to agree to our standards, which were mostly a list of what not to spend money on—antibiotics, hormones, and steroids. The farmers agreed to allow our staff to visit their farms a couple of times a year to see the cattle.

Most importantly, we are working with farmers who are able to use their own heads—their own history and what they know. They still have some ability to change what they are doing to make a living and to improve their farms. The farmers who are raising corn and soybeans are either increasing production by buying or leasing more acres and buying huge equipment, or they are out. Industrial

agriculture has taken over their minds, and then taken everything from them. Our Home Place Meat asks passionate farmers to work in collaboration with each other and with us to provide good food to people who want it. It asks the purchasers of the food to see that it is in their best interest to support good farming and thereby the fertility of particular places.

Organic Valley Dairy Co-op, Our Home Place Meat, the history of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, and others are good examples of giving a predictable, fair income to good farmers. It is unfortunate that our efforts are dependent on the economy we have now. But the more farmers that endure, and not just endure but prosper, the better off we are, and the more we have to work with.

This is where my hope lies, because I have seen the result. I grew up and started farming during the time of the Tobacco Program. And now I see what just a few years of Our Home Place Meat has brought about. It is too soon to claim any kind of victory for our work. But I will say that the conver-



*Den, Mary, and Wendell Berry, with Liz the border collie, visiting on the porch at Lane's Landing Farm in Henry County, Kentucky. Photograph by Ben Aguilar.*

sations that are going on among the farmers in our program are hopeful. I hear, or hear about, farmers talking to each other about the program and what it needs. They talk about the genetics of cattle, the health of pastures and hay crops (perennial agriculture), what the program should do next, and how to bring new members into membership. They have a good time together.

All of the farm families in our program are young—certainly young for farmers, whose average age in Kentucky is sixty-three. And with one exception, they are all working at other jobs for the right to farm, and so are all under some amount of financial stress. When we asked volunteers from the group to form a committee to work on how to bring new farmers in, I was amazed that there were

hands raised immediately. And I am moved to say that there has been no suggestion that we just let the existing membership increase production. Some of them could put more of their own cattle into the program and make for themselves up to four hundred dollars a head profit that the program pays over commodity price value. It seems that even in their own day-to-day struggles they see that we want to give back to our community the dignity of prosperity. That just as the Tobacco Program did, we want to spread out prosperity, not just scale up prosperity for a few. What accounts for this sort of grace? I can only say that with just a little care, people and land can begin to heal. I'm counting on it.



The Berry Center manages the business of the program and will until it can stand on its own. We have established the parity price and we manage supply and demand. Our staff works with the processor, the distributors, chefs, and other consumers to establish the market. And just lately, What Chefs Want, a Louisville-based distribution company, has started to work with us to plan, in their words, for the next twenty years. This is the kind of long-term thinking that could make all the difference. It takes into account the difficulty of starting something to supply local markets with a dependable supply of local meat. What makes it so rare is that the distributor would like to make sure that there is a steady supply of local meat because it is good for its business. And that certainly gives me more hope than the political solutions of politicians and the USDA's next Farm Bill.

The Covid 19 pandemic has shown us that our food system is too big and too rigid. There have been breaks in the industrial food system that led to farmers dumping milk and euthanizing animals because, under the rule of specialization, the food was raised for one market and one use. The farmer had no flexibility. This happened while grocers were having trouble filling shelves because they, too, have no flexibility. The aim has been to produce a partial result, in this case cheap food, without any fear of what might be the whole result.

Michael Pollan, in his essay “The Sickness in Our Food Supply,” tells us something about how we got here:

“The story begins early in the Reagan Administration, when the Justice Department rewrote the rules of antitrust enforcement: if a proposed merger promised to lead to greater marketplace “efficiency”—the watchword—and wouldn’t harm the consumer, i.e., didn’t raise prices, it would be approved. (It’s worth noting that the word “consumer” appears nowhere in the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, passed in 1890. The law sought to protect producers—including farmers—and our politics from undue concentrations of corporate

power.) The new policy, which subsequent administrations have left in place, propelled a wave of mergers and acquisitions in the food industry. As the industry has grown steadily more concentrated since the 1980s, it has also grown much more specialized, with a tiny number of large corporations dominating each link in the supply chain.”

And so, the home land has been destroyed by design. Those of us who live in rural places, and can see what has happened, live with the sorrow of it every day.

If a home land is to be secure, then it should be possible for its people to be fed from the home land. If the citizens of a home land expect to be fed for generations from the home land, then we need a population of people who know how to farm well and can afford to farm. If this is something “we the people” agree is desirable for generations to come, then we must become a culture that will support good farming. The Berry Center has been contacted by groups of people all over our country who would like to be a part of Our Home Place Meat. While I appreciate the good impulse, our answer must be, “We will share everything we have with you and in any way we can, help you to start your own program for the benefit of your own community.” The wonderful thing about such daunting problems is that we can all go to work on them right where we are, right now!

To address our ruinous industrial agriculture and food system we must change the standards from cheap and efficient to long-term health and well-being. This is not work for “experts” to lead. This work must be taken up by citizens who have affection for particular places, who have, in fact, a home land, the ground under their feet. The work itself will tell us where the experts and politicians might be helpful, because what works locally is likely to work elsewhere, whereas a global solution that won’t work locally is a waste of time. ■



Tobacco growers posing in a Kentucky warehouse on March 3, 1914, probably in Owen or Franklin County. The tobacco is displayed in baskets, which took skill to arrange and showed off the leaf to good advantage. The photograph is a gift of Trigga Johns, daughter of tobacco grower Oren Ransdall.

## *A Brake Against 'Unbridled Economic Forces'*

JOHN M. BERRY, SR.

*From an address given by John M. Berry, Sr. at a joint meeting of farmers, bankers and the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, date unknown.*

WE CAN PRODUCE for plenty, or we can produce for poverty. Farmers, tobacco farmers in particular, know the difference. They know that production control is sensible production behavior that is in accord with, rather than contrary to, the law of supply and demand. They know that it is as senseless to offend against this economic law as to violate some criminal statute. And they know from experience that the penalty is bankruptcy.

Production control is employed by other industries and is provided for by law. Is there a tighter control of any American product than of labor[?] What else shall we call a 5 day week and an 8 hour day,

with time and half pay for over time, pegged by a minimum wage[?] Some would junk, or debunk, production control for agriculture, but I have not heard any of the debunkers suggesting that a man should be allowed to work in industry as many hours in a day, and as many days in a week as he wants to. And I don't expect to hear such.

But reverting to the subject of today's program let me say in conclusion that the end result all of us would achieve is not a better crop, or a finer pasture, with two blades of grass where only one had previously grown, but finer and better—and I mean better—men and women peopling Kentucky, and the land that we love. ■

*Soon after the beginning of tobacco culture there was an unprotected excess  
and Lord Culpeper said “our thriving has worked our undoing.”*



*From a speech Mr. Berry gave December 21, 1981, probably at an event for the Kentucky congressional delegation sponsored by the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association.*

*John M. Berry, Sr. is discussing an attempt by U.S. Rep. Robert Shamansky, Democrat from Ohio, to add an amendment to the 1981 Farm Bill that would have eliminated the Burley Tobacco Program by the trick of cutting the word “tobacco” out of the legislation. That amendment was defeated, but the Burley Program was then required to operate at “no net cost” to the federal government.*

[Mr. Shamansky] propose[s] to repeal by striking “tobacco” and thus “very succinctly eliminates the tobacco allotment program and price support program.”

He inserts a portion of a speech by Mr. Murray Weidenbaum, President of the President’s Council of Economic Advisors in which appears the sentence “In contrast, promoting the concept of free enterprise requires that no favored treatment be given to any specific interest group or industry.” If that philosophy had been strictly adhered to there would never have been a protective tariff and never an 8 hr. day, a 40 hr. week, a minimum wage and 1½ pay for overtime. The sweat shops would be running and every one could work as long per day as he chose. To be consistent all such would be repealed. But don’t fear, the specific interest group “labor” has the votes and no one dares, even such as Mr. [Elliot] Richardson whom I heard say “I’m against all price supports.” He would not deny them to labor, a special interest group.

In so far as the farmer is concerned he would allow unbridled economic forces to operate to his ruin. Tobacco farmers were the victims of those forces for 325 years. Soon after the beginning of tobacco culture there was an unprotected excess and Lord Culpeper said “our thriving has worked our undoing.” They tried to organize but failed.

The organization of which you are guests tonite was brought into being in 1922... Not until the 1938 act, encompassing all growers, was there protection against those previously unbridled forces.

John Jones, Frank C. Taylor and I started this program Jan. 1, 1941 and for 40 years Burley has had protection against the unbridled economic forces and respectable living has come to growers and their communities and added revenue by millions to their government.

Is not the proper and becoming function of government to protect the weak against the overreaching strong? ■

From “*In Extremis: Poems About My Father*” by WENDELL BERRY

## XII

What did I learn from him?  
He taught the difference  
Between good work and sham  
Between nonsense and sense.

He taught me sentences,  
Outspoken fact for fact,  
In swift coherences  
Discriminate and exact.

He served with mind and hand  
What we were hoping for:  
The small house on the land,  
The shade tree by the door,

Garden, smokehouse, and cellar,  
Granary, crib, and loft  
Abounding, and no year  
Lived at the next year’s cost.

He kept in mind, alive,  
The idea of the dead:  
“A steer should graze and thrive  
Wherever he lowers his head.”

He said his father’s saying.  
We were standing on the hill  
To watch the cattle grazing  
As the gray evening fell.

“Look. See that this is good,  
And then you won’t forget.”  
I saw it as he said,  
And I have not forgot.



Dr. Leah Bayens of the Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College opens the livestock barn on The Berry Center farm. Photo by Abigail Bobo.

## *The Security in Scaling Down*

by JASON PETERS

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*Homes and land and the people in and on them are not secure if they do not take on the responsibilities of neighborliness—which they cannot do without love.*

IN AN AGE of highly reticulated transport and the crippling complexities that paradoxically follow from oversimplification—think aging and vulnerable electrical grids; think Covid-stricken meatpacking plants—“Love thy neighbor” means “favor large centralized programs that make easy work of a difficult ethic.” It means “let the Government-Industrial Complex do it. I’ll cast the necessary vote.”

But it won’t do. It never has and it never will.

The distant down-and-out are not your neighbors. Neighbors are people who inhabit the same neighborhood. We would all do well to follow Aldo

Leopold here and include as neighbors the flora, fauna, and topsoil—the whole biota of a given place.

I speak no ill of international relief efforts or of surplus exports, which obviously have their place. I’m talking about love and neighbors and I’m saying something about how there is little to be gained by applauding the sticky-fingered pickpockets at the national treasury, who are keen that a mere program funded at our expense should execute the ministry that is meant for actual men and women to perform, being, as they are, actual moral agents, and as such far more capable than programs of answering to the second greatest commandment. When asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus implied that there are obli-



Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College students Katie Pauly and Ashland Tann yoke draft oxen Bright and Lion. Photo by Ben Aguilar.

gations more difficult and more immediate than the organized distribution of chicken noodle soup.

The goodness and mercy of the Samaritan are marked by place and circumstance. If they “scale,” they scale downward toward a point, and that point is a particular man in a bad way. If you can imagine a poor man in a ditch being discovered by an agency and, after a “preliminary screening,” being “entered into the system,” you get my meaning.

But what does this have to do with Homeland Security—or, rather, with true security in your home land?

That depends on what you mean by “security”; it depends on whether you have land and a home

worth securing. I’m with Wendell Berry in saying that security begins with our ability to feed ourselves locally and that doing so means, in turn, keeping the home land in place, which is to say (1) keeping the ground covered and (2) safeguarding the land’s capacity for self-renewal. One of the elegant and yet simple insights of *The Unsettling of America* is that when the people left the land after World War II, the land also left the land. If machines displace people, the number of eyes keeping watch over the land necessarily decreases, and then the place itself slips away. Make no mistake: eternal vigilance is the price of topsoil.

I mentioned our aging grids, which we are supposed to believe will be able to take on the added burden of an all-electric automobile fleet. That won’t hap-

pen, nor is “security” the first word that comes to mind in that word-association game. Ditto for the four meatpacking plants that 80 percent of the meat consumed in America issues from. The simplification that underlies such central planning, especially the simplistic doctrine of economic efficiency at its heart, has, as I said, the paradoxical effect of mushrooming into complexities of an eye-crossing magnitude. It wouldn’t take much in the way of nefarious activity to darken the eastern seaboard; it would take something far greater than the twelve labors of Hercules to light it back up, by which time a lot of hungry people will have a lot of spoiled food to get rid of and few options for setting their Fruit Loops afloat at breakfast the next morning. That will be a good time to have a root cellar and a few skills. That will be a good time to be Amish, who are pretty good at securing their home and lands and families and community members, especially if municipalities can leave them alone. I know of an Amish community near me consisting of not more than a dozen or so residences. The people there have been told that they must get rid of their privies and put in septic systems. They’ve been told this by the same municipality that allowed a CAFO to move into the same neighborhood, atop the same watershed.

Exactly who has a home land here? Exactly who is securing it?

Patrick Henry once said, “He is the greatest patriot who stops the most gullies.” That remark, if it “scales,” also scales downward toward a point. It should remind us that loyalty to this piece of land here, this plot that I can have some salutary influence on, should take precedence over loyalty to an abstraction; it should take precedence over loyalty to “American soil,” for example, which denotes no gully or field or hillside in particular but, rather, what the bellicose think of when they think of “country”: the military or the party or the empire. When we lack the capacity—indeed, when so many disenfranchised people lack the capacity because they lack the *opportunity*—to care for the particular, their otherwise good impulses to care for *something*, for *anything*, will alight upon the abstract.

But care that is not directed toward the particular will lead to all kinds of things best not thought of. When the question “Who is my neighbor?” does not direct our gaze to the man in the ditch before us, when the question “What is my home land?” does not direct our gaze to the ground under us, we may be sure that we have prepared for ourselves the blasphemies that always attend large-scale bureaucratic remedies, which, as experience tells us, tend to take a solution and divide it into several problems.

For evidence of this we might wait upon a hundred-year pandemic to come along so we can witness dairy farmers dumping millions of gallons of milk because the restrictive systems of bringing milk to market give them no other option. We can likewise witness meat counters bare of bacon and roasts in a land oinking with hogs and mooing with cattle. It is clear that in the principal business of feeding ourselves we have secured neither the home nor the land nor ourselves, only the corporations. We have preferred the simple but vulnerable option of abdication to the difficult but secure option of small-scale cooperation and the love of neighbor it relies on.

And then we have the impertinence to be surprised by how expensive and cumbersome it is to make “unavoidable” adjustments to expensive and cumbersome systems. Tyson, to cite but one example, spent over \$500 million in adaptations to its meatpacking operations last year, and not just in temperature scanners, work-station dividers, and (anti)social-distancing monitors; it also had to add medical personnel to the payroll.

For apparently only the homeopathic will do. I mean “homeopathic” in the sense that John Crowe Ransom used it, when he noted that the cure for industrialism, according to the industrialists, is more industrialism. When trouble visits a big-is-better system, only big-is-better solutions have any purchase. Ask all the kindergartners who, already imprisoned in our public schools, found themselves confined to individual Plexiglas cells within those schools.



Draft oxen Bright, Lion, North, and Star at rest on draft animal educator, farrier, and woodsman Rick Thomas's farm near Lacie, Kentucky.  
Photo by Rick Thomas, Wendell Berry Farming Program faculty member.

Love thy neighbor, but frighten the hell out of his children.

Only place-specific food systems and diversified farms and local responsibility and accountability in food production, distribution, *and consumption* can answer to the complex business of feeding people at a scale small enough to be safe—safe because scaled for being looked after and cared for. Homes and land and the people in and on them are not secure if they do not take on the responsibilities of neighborliness—which they cannot do without love—and if they cannot feed themselves without relying on the centralized, bureaucratized and oversimplified systems that conceal irremediable complexities—complexities that, in times of crisis, reveal a dangerous and far-reaching insecurity.

For, finally, not even the monopolies are secure. Goliath himself is vulnerable. He excused himself from the economy of the five smooth stones—that is, from the *land economy*—and then one of the stones toppled him. *All* of us, even technocratic giants, live from the land.

Among those things we might profitably do is stop lying to our children by telling them that they must all go to college to be initiated into the manifold

confusions of the age. We suffer from a paucity of men and women in useful trades, great but ordinary citizens capable of living great and ordinary lives of usefulness to one another and to their communities. My own county and those adjacent to it, for example, could benefit not only from more carpenters, electricians, and plumbers but also from butcher shops and small dairies, if only state and local ordinances were favorable to such operations and if only the pathways between producers and consumers weren't burdened by unnecessary regulations that discourage such arrangements. Those of us raising livestock on a small scale could also benefit from more of these small-scale operations.

It falls to the adults to recognize the fragility of the large and indifferent and then to say plainly to the young that there is both honor and contentment in rescaling, localizing, and restoring to economic life the goods and services that the experts have said we may legitimately do without—advice that the previous year has shown to be a dangerous lie.■

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*Wendell Berry at lunch in Rick's Farm Center (now Parker's Farm Supply) in Port Royal, Kentucky. Photograph by Ethan Payne for the Bitter Southerner.*

## *'We've got to start here'*

### AN INTERVIEW WITH WENDELL BERRY



*Wendell Berry sat down with Katherine Dalton Boyer at The Berry Center offices in April to talk about economics, parity, co-ops and more. Kate is a writer, editor and Berry Center board member.*

**KDB.** The pandemic has been a crisis. And a crisis is an opportunity. Do you see any way we've taken advantage of this crisis to improve matters for farming and farm economies?

**WB.** The people I see benefiting from the crisis are the manufacturers of face masks, respirators, vaccines, and the like. Things you buy. We're bidden to suppose that there will be another crisis like this one—which itself proves the possibility of more to come—but I don't see people looking down the road and asking what we're going to do. It's astonishing how the essential things are left out. If we were serious about preparing for future pandemics, we would be doing everything possible to return our land and our people to health, and we would be reducing as much as possible our dependence on global trade and travel.

I've been talking to a man from the Army who's making a study of this sort of thing. What would we do if the flow of goods suddenly had to be routed off the interstates? The great parable that we've got now is the big ship that was stuck in the Suez Canal. It was a perfect lesson, a godsend—but nobody said, Wait a minute, what about the interstates? What about the power lines?

I wonder if the Pentagon wonders how you defend a country that can't make its own shoes. What if it's our enemy who makes our shoes? So our time is loaded with absurdities and potential absurdities. People starving somewhere while elsewhere the food is being piled up or thrown out, as it already has been during this pandemic.

*There is a lot of that testimony from such self-sufficient people who lived in the twenties and thirties. Out of their own wherewithal—their traditional skills and the ground underfoot—they made what they needed.*



*KDB.* We do grow a lot of our own food here in the United States, 80% or so, but the transportation lines are so long.

*WB.* Michael Pollan wrote an article for the *New York Review of Books* several months ago that was very good. He said it is now obvious that our food distribution system is so centralized, specialized, standardized, and rigid that it can't change or adapt in a time of crisis. He asks us to remember when we had "tens of thousands" of farmers and "hundreds" of processors. Of course, I remember when food production was even more local and diverse. The thing maybe we need to notice is how suddenly this drastic change has taken place.

We need to consider the testimony of people who came through the hard times of the thirties. John Lewis, in his book *Walking with the Wind*, confesses to having no affection at all for farm work—he didn't like it, which we shouldn't hold against him—but we have to admire his very generous tribute to his mother, who believed that such work was a good and a holy thing. As a result of that work, his family was never hungry. There is a lot of that testimony from such self-sufficient people who lived in the twenties and thirties: "We were poor but we were never hungry," or, "We were poor but we didn't know it." Out of their own wherewithal—their traditional skills and the ground underfoot—they made what they needed. In my reading and correspondence, even in my memory, that testimony comes again and again.

*KDB.* I remember Paula Sanker [Wendell's cousin and Port Royal neighbor] telling me her mother had two years' worth of canning in the basement, in case she had a bad summer.

*WB.* Yes! Owen Flood remembered that in one of those awful dry years in the thirties, they didn't make any garden at all. His mother—he always spoke of her as a manager—made one trip to town, bought the canned goods that they would need until the garden came in the next year, and never went back. Just think of the knowledge that those women had. And it's simple at that level. Now it's grown complicated and rigid, really disastrously unified, like a huge machine. It's "efficient" only because so far we're allowed to discount many actual costs: eroded topsoil, polluted air. Nobody now has a right to breathe clean air, as a matter of fact, because there is no clean air. We may tell ourselves that we have a right to eat, but that right only exists when food is available.

*KDB.* Where do you think we need to start—with an inventory of what we've got?

*WB.* We've got to start *here*, where we know, or can easily find out, what we've got. I'm grateful for the Our Home Place Meat program. Mary told me Sunday afternoon about three or four of those farmers, sitting at this table, thinking and making notes about how they could get more farmers into the program. She said that not one of them ever said, "If we let more people in, it might reduce my share."

As I see it, a program like this is something that's necessary for farmers. The Tobacco Program ended in 2004. So that's nearly two decades when they've had no asking price for tobacco, plus all the generations when they've had no asking price for anything else. This encourages a kind of passivity—a disposition, for example, to follow expert advice in place of their own thought. But these farmers in the Home Place program have begun to think about what they can do for themselves.

This program, like every other marketing scheme in the country, is dependent on the economy, which is a very shoddy creature. It is continuously inflating, for instance. It doesn't stabilize itself by the value of goods. The Home Place Meat program is dependent on the ability of the national economy to produce some incomes that are capable of paying a just price for a good product. You don't know what will happen to the program if the economy gets difficult or fails. But the program still has put these people among us who have started to think for themselves about how to protect themselves. So the program is a resource, and so are its farmers.

We began this conversation by wondering what anybody was doing to get ready for the next pandemic. And you have to wonder how much money has been put into futurology. If you had a figure for how much has been spent on predicting the future, and then for how much has been spent in dealing with this unforeseen pandemic, that would be interesting to see.

*KDB.* It's impossible to predict the future, but it's not impossible—and this gets back to your Army friend—to see where your vulnerabilities lie. That's where the effort needs to go. I'm interested in anybody I hear about who's doing that.

*WB.* We need to have real thought. For example, [likely U.S. Senate candidate] Charles Booker's "Hood to the Holler" project amounts to thought, because it confronts a reality and leads to further thought. It throws off the ready-made assumption that people in Louisville are poor only because they're black. If they're poor only because they're black, how come those people in Owsley County are poor? You see, from there you can get to questions that might lead to real thought about poverty: How does it happen? Who does it benefit?

If you've got neighbors who are sending their calves to the market and passively taking whatever's offered, is there any way to help that? Real thought involves details. It's not just a manipulation of clichés. I called Mary Monday morning to say again how important I think inventories are. What have we got? And only then: What do we need?

The Our Home Place Meat program can be a model. It might not work someplace else, but then that calls for more local thought elsewhere, by other people. Mary says people all over the country are contacting The Berry Center now, wanting to get in the Home Place Meat program. But this program has limits on how big it can get and still be managed right. It needs to be properly scaled. However, there need be no limit on replicating it elsewhere. Come see what we're doing and take it home. Adapt it to your own local conditions and needs. Not wants. Needs.

*KDB.* Wendell, do you think the Burley Tobacco Program would have survived if the crop hadn't been tobacco?

*WB.* I don't think it could have survived *with* tobacco. Too much was working against it. Tom [Grissom, who is at work on a history of the Tobacco Program] understands this very well. He tells how the trustees would come together to confront all the problems that they had piled up against them. The health problem was big, and not really solvable. Another big problem was imported tobacco. The companies were going around the program by way of the global economy.

The program depended on having a marketable product of high quality that couldn't be produced anywhere but here. As soon as they reduced the standards of quality—and cigarette filters did that—the writing was on the wall. My father once gave me a passionate lecture on this issue of quality. He said that what our farmers had in their favor was their ability to produce a product of distinctive quality from our local soil. That was it. That was all. The technological shortcuts—the synthetic leaf, baling, the use of more chemicals—that's what beat the program. That's what would beat any such program if it didn't preserve the quality of the product, which means controlling the volume at the same time. You start going all-out to produce quantity, then quality ceases to count.

My brother, John, and some other fellows sort of got kidnapped into a trip to China—back in the nineteen-eighties, it must have been. He was the head of the Burley Association then. The Chinese nearly wore them out. They were trying to get their guests to tell our secret for flavoring tobacco. John said you could go into one of their curing barns and it would be full of beautiful tobacco, faultless, and it didn't have a smell. No flavor. The difference was no secret. It was the ground, primarily, that gave the flavor.

We had the ground, and we had the art. The making of an excellent crop of burley tobacco was authentically an art. That to me flies in the face of the people who think that only a few are gifted. Many are gifted. There were a lot of good tobacco growers, who had the talent, the traditional knowledge, and the discipline. There were people in every one of these little communities who had attained the stature and authority of Tobacco Men—we didn't throw that term around. They were appreciated, they were paid well for the high quality of their product, and so, for a little while, a boy like me could live his childhood and coming of age in a culture of artists.

But your question was about crops *other* than tobacco. Pardon my digression.

*KDB.* It seems to me that replicating the Tobacco Program for another crop on a national level now would be almost impossible. But we can replicate its features the way the Organic Valley co-op has, or Our Home Place Meat.

*WB.* Organic Valley and Home Place Meat are working, which is a big encouragement. Both of them are using the right principles. And each one has rightly limited the scale of its work to its own need and capability. You can't do this, locally or nationally, unless you can control production and quality. If

you can control production, you can support prices, and you can begin improving the quality both of production and of products. Overproduction destroys farmers and farmland. It works beautifully for the agribusiness people, because in order to produce the surplus you have to buy a surplus of seed, fertilizer, fuel, and the rest of it. Then the surplus production drives down the price, cheapening the produce of the farms for its corporate buyers. And the farmers' situation is such that they have two motives for overproduction: greed and want. If the market was good last year, they're tempted to grow more to earn more. If the market was bad last year, they're tempted to grow more "to make it up on quantity"—which you can't do. As Daddy said, you can't plow your way out of debt. Either way, they lose, and more and more of them have been driven out of farming.

As the Burley Program showed, production control is not complicated. You figure out how much of a commodity is needed, and then you add a little, in case of a bad year. You've got to be careful and flexible because you're up against the weather. So obvious and natural a way of thought appears to be unthinkable by the presently-living experts and politicians.

I used to think we had to pray for a small catastrophe. But even a pretty big one seems to be teaching us very little. Maybe we have to go back to the local level and open our ears. Our remaining store in Port Royal sold more garden seed last year than it had sold in many years. And a friend who works there told me that people are now talking a lot about the difference between needs and wants. The slaughterhouse over in Campbellsburg is booked up a year or more ahead. So at least the country people are thinking more about self-sufficiency. Maybe they won't all stick with it, but some of them will.

*KDB.* So that's where our hopeful sign is, in individuals changing how they act.

*WB.* Where's the conversation going to change? I don't think it can change at the top—not in the capitals. That's why I feel partyless. But if it changes at the bottom, so that enough people start talking about the difference between needs and wants, that would be a big deal. If they really got serious and planted those seeds, and then took care of the garden after it got hot, and if they met their appointment at the slaughterhouse with their own home-fed hog or calf or lamb, that would be a bigger deal—the start of real change for the better.

*KDB.* Tell me how you and your father would define "parity price."

*WB.* I think that we need to reduce it to the idea of economic balance or equality, between what a farmer could expect to earn from farming, and what a person could expect to earn from an equally necessary job in a city. (I hate the word "job," but we're stuck with it now because nobody's talking about "vocation.") Parity, in that sense, would mean that the seller could not be put at a disadvantage by the buyer. It would mean that the market could not be used by the buyer to destroy the producer. I've never understood why the buyers don't see that by using the market to destroy the producers of needed supplies, they'll finally have no supplies. But I don't understand our present economy very well. A great deal of it is usury, obviously, making money grow from money. If you think about that long enough, it takes away your confidence in the global or the national economy.

So, yes, let's think about what might be the ethics and the practice of a rooted local economy. When I gave a talk at Ohio Wesleyan University some years ago, a man came up to me afterwards and said he was a Kentuckian. I asked, "Where are you from?" "Oh, a little place you've never heard of. North Middletown." I said, "My daddy's great friend John Willie Jones was from North Middletown." He said, "John Willie Jones was my uncle."



*Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College student Grace Desrochers holding the traces of draft horses Felix and Jed on Den Berry's farm near Lacie, Kentucky.*  
Photo by Ben Aguilar.

As both of us knew, Mr. Jones was for many years president of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. As I had not known until then, he had also been president of the North Middletown bank. His nephew said, "Uncle John gave a loan to every graduate of North Middletown school who wanted to go to college." That, the nephew told me, was all those graduates had to do to qualify for the loan. He said the bank examiners would have fits, but his uncle John never lost a dime. That speaks loads to me. *He*, with his trust in them, was their collateral. They wouldn't have let him down. They would have died first. And I imagine everybody in North Middletown knew everything about every one of those loans.

To most people now that story probably would seem a puzzle. But in Mr. Jones's day it was a pattern, or it belonged to a pattern, the many pieces of which fitted together almost perfectly. The community was present and effective in almost a mystical way.

And now we've got to put that sort of thing back together, and we'll have to do it where we are, locally, in small towns, small communities, urban neighborhoods. That's why you can't put hope too far up in the power structure. What have you done at home? That would be a daunting question, and not just to Kentucky's reigning Republicans. It would be a daunting question to these Democrats, too. ■

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*"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't who is a member and who is not, but in who knows and who don't." —BURLEY COULTER, from "The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership," by Wendell Berry. (North Point Press, 1968.)*



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