

I have been re-reading some of Wendell Berry's fiction. We often base our praise of his writing on his essays about environmental and social issues, but his fiction is, in its own way, even more evocative of ethical principles and ways of living. And strewn through these stories and novels are these little gems of wisdom, of humor, of principles by which to live one's life that make Berry's fiction worth re-reading over and over.

One of my favorite characters in Wendell Berry's fiction is Burley Coulter. He seems to represent an independence and self-reliance that did not isolate him from "community," but, instead, drew him even closer to those in Berry's fictional Port William. I wish I could remember all of Burley's sayings, for they would prove to be very useful on occasion. But, I did jot down a couple of his observations after going through some of the short stories again. In one narrative, someone comes along as several men are sitting by a fire after a long trek through woods and hills. When asked what they were doing, maybe hunting, Burley replied, "Just sitting here improving." That struck me as a remarkably appropriate response.

In another story, Burley was reflecting on his own life. He claimed that he had never been much interested in thinking until recently, but that now he can take a good thought and pretty much "wear the hair off it between supper and bedtime." He has learned to like to think, and a few good thoughts consume a lot of time in the evenings. I like this notion, that one could select from among one's own thoughts, and "think it" to some kind of conclusion or resolution, or maybe, just to savor its entertaining quality.

Ptolemy Proudfoot is another of Wendell Berry's fascinating characters. Tol, as he was called, was a big man, usually disheveled, as if his clothes and hat had lives of their own and were bent on separating themselves from him. Tol was remarkably good-natured, and some of that quality lay in his letting disturbing happenings go by for a time until he was able to laugh at them. When the cow lifted her manure-covered foot and planted it in Tol's milk pail, he didn't laugh. As he poured the spoiled milk into the pigs' trough, he didn't even feel like smiling. But, a few months later, he told the story himself, chuckling at the audacity of Blanche, the cow. Most of us have had this kind of experience. Some minor difficulty that caused us to grumble and whine becomes, in time, a staple of our standard humor.

People often ask each other: "What are you doing?" My answer now, unless I am doing something that is obvious, will be, "I am just sitting here improving." And if I can grab a good thought out of the myriad that zip through my mind most of the time, and just concentrate on that, maybe I actually will be sitting here "improving." And, if not, I can laugh about it later.