Caring and working: An agrarian perspective: Lessons in creatureliness

by Norman Wirzba in the September 22, 1999 issue

It is hard to know which was more difficult for Noah: to build the ark when there was no sign of rain, or to be in the ark with the animals for an entire year. As rabbinic tradition has it, during those 12 months Noah was so busy tending to the needs of all those animals that he had no time to sleep. The ark represents much more than an escape vessel. It is a laboratory of sorts, a messy, exhausting and illuminating experiment in which Noah learns the lessons of care and compassion, attention and responsibility.

Can you imagine the labor and foresight involved in providing and serving a menu for such an assortment of mute guests for an entire year? No wonder, then, that the midrash Tanhuma refers to the Righteous One as one who knows the needs of others, even the needs of animals. Noah emerged from the ark, say the rabbis, as a sustainer of life because the ark served as the crucible within which the wisdom of sympathy and nurture could develop.

There is some room for speculation on the particulars that caused God's wrath and thus also the flood. One rabbinic tradition has it that the people of the time were guilty of robbery, callous disregard for others and a rapacious sexuality that led to cohabitation between humans and semidivine beings. We are told in Genesis 6 that these people, the Nephilim, came to be renowned as mighty, but in God's view they were wicked because they refused to acknowledge and live within the bounds of creation. Rather than accepting the limits and dependencies of creatureliness, they aspired to become gods and thus creators of their own worlds. God's judgment was swift and decisive. A deluge would turn this fragile mixture of dust and divine breath into mud.

Noah's building of the ark and his care of the life teeming within it are of crucial significance for our own time. In many respects we have become as the Nephilim, denying our creaturely status and playing the role of gods. We'd rather have a world of our own making and within our own control than acknowledge God's ownership and control of creation. What we have not made we simply take and claim. We think of the world's mineral and biological resources as possessions that we can use against others. We ignore the divine injunction, uttered first to Adam and later more fully realized in the ark, to take care of the earth and its creatures.

The practice of caring for the earth has traditionally fallen upon farmers. In the past the vast majority of people were directly or indirectly involved in agriculture; but in the past few centuries farms have been transformed into agribusinesses, becoming a branch of the ever-growing industrial-technological economy. Fewer and fewer people have any direct experience of food production.

How can Christians be responsible caretakers of the earth if they are not familiar with farming practices? Farming is not simply about food production. Farming is a way of being, a concrete practice in which the lessons of creatureliness can be learned. In taking care of the life that God has given us, we enter Noah's theological-agricultural laboratory.

In thinking about farming there are at least two revolutions that need to be considered: the revolution of agriculture, and the more recent industrial revolution within agriculture. Wes Jackson, founder and director of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, says that the plow may well be the most significant and far-reaching artifact in human history. While we often think of the plow as a tool of peace and prosperity, few other instruments compare in their ability to put the long-term survival of life forms at risk. The reason is simple: tillage agriculture tears open and makes vulnerable the soil membrane that supports all life. Soil loss due to erosion (it is estimated that we lose 25 billion tons of topsoil every year, an amount that greatly outstrips nature's ability to replenish it), as well as water loss due to runoff (with cultivation the root structures that hold and absorb water are destroyed), lead to the eventual transformation of fertile ground into desert. This has been the pattern throughout history. In hardly any cultures has tillage agriculture been sustainable in the long term. Such cultures eventually deplete the soil and water and start relying on imported foods.

The second agricultural revolution was the shift to using costly machinery and chemicals in farming. Because of this new approach, the energy required to grow food has risen dramatically. Some foods, it is estimated, require ten calories of fossil fuel energy (in the forms of petroleum, fertilizer and pesticide production, manufacturing, transport, and meal preparation) to produce one calorie of nutrition.

Moreover, the transformation of farming into an agribusiness has brought with it a host of environmental problems, including ground water depletion and contamination, soil toxification, and contamination of food supplies. These facts surprise many of us, especially since we see the abundance of food in the supermarkets created by agribusiness. But this abundance comes at a very high cost and with a skewed accounting system. Agribusiness depends on cheap oil and an unlimited supply of water and soil. These conditions cannot last. We are transferring to future generations the problems of coping with an exhausted soil and contaminated water supply. The sins of the fathers will be visited on the children.

This brief review of farming practices suggests that we have a long way to go toward becoming responsible creatures. We have only partially succeeded or outright failed at many of our efforts at taking care of creation. Had we been in the ark instead of Noah, many species might have perished through ignorance, neglect or outright destruction. How, then, are we to honor the creator and the creation?

One of the most important lessons Noah had to learn was to be attentive to the creatures in the ark. He carefully noted the needs of each living thing. Had he done otherwise—had he tried to impose his own needs on the others, or had he viewed the inhabitants of the ark as a resource to be exploited—the experiment would have been a disaster. In other words, Noah learned what it is to be a creature in relation to other creatures in a network of care, in a creation dependent upon God. This is the lesson that the Nephilim refused and that we are in dire need of learning today.

The context for Noah's education was harsh—a confining ark in the midst of a world-destroying flood. An equally shocking and harsh program of education will also be called for in our own time. Once humans set themselves up as gods, they don't want to settle for less. How will we be able to convince people that they cannot have every comfort they desire, or possess or consume whatever delights their eyes? How will they become willing to limit their goals to more modest levels? At issue is a reorientation of our most basic vision and a transformation of our most fundamental practices. Is there a way to think and act beyond the paradigm of human

exploitation?

The work of recent agrarians like Jackson and Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet, essayist and farmer, suggests that the problems we face are systemic and must be handled in a systematic way. For starters we need to question the modern faith that teaches us to view the world as a problem to be solved through scientific knowledge and technological innovation. This idea came into its own in the modern period, when Bacon declared the world the arena for human satisfaction and flourishing, and thus brought a missionary zeal to the program of scientific experimentation and technological innovation. But its roots extend to the ancient Greek notion of techne, the idea that the world can be remade or fashioned according to a human plan.

According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, one can read the history of Western thought as the gradual unfolding of a technological mind-set. According to this way of thinking, the world cannot merely be. Nor can we simply attend to it as it is (a posture Heidegger called Gelassenheit, or "letting-be"). Rather, creation must be changed and modified, made to fit a rational plan, and thus eventually turned into a standing reserve that will furnish the raw materials for our every whim.

What makes modernity so striking is our sudden acquisition of the mechanical means for a rapid transformation of the earth. We no longer merely tinker with the world as the ancients did. We now are able to destroy the world and to transform the basic genetic structures that govern life. The chemical corporation Monsanto has turned this potential into huge profits by patenting seed stock that is compatible with its own pesticide, Roundup, and manufacturing sterile "terminator" seed that requires farmers to buy each year's planting seed from the company.

Agrarianism has not been adequately considered by philosophers, theologians or scientists. For example, the land-grant universities that were established to promote agriculture quickly left farmers behind, and even as they advanced research programs in the service of science and technology they contributed to the demise of farming as a way of life. The reason for agrarianism's marginalization is simple: agrarianism represents a fundamental challenge to the technological/ind-ustrial/capitalist worldview or ethos. Whereas techne is about making and controlling a world in our own image, agrarianism is about tending to or taking care of a world already given.

Obviously, this contrast is starkly and perhaps too simply drawn, since agrarians would not want to dispense with technology altogether. The contrast turns on the overriding ethos that governs thought and action. Is our main objective to care for the earth or to care for ourselves? The biblical view clearly mandates the first alternative (because when it is correctly carried out, the second is understood in its proper light), and repeatedly describes the second as the primary temptation that needs to be overcome. Perhaps the most significant challenge facing Christians today is determining how to resist an economy that thwarts or disfigures Christian care. Agrarians represent one important, though often neglected, voice in this task.

The work of Berry and Jackson has at its core the twin concepts of attention and responsibility. In their view the trends of our economic, social and political life lead to inattention and irresponsibility. Individuals and groups often do not have to live with the consequences of their actions. For instance, corporate decision-makers frequently devise plans that damage or devastate human and nonhuman communities, without themselves having to live with the results. They do not have to help the people they lay off. Nor do they have to live and work in places where pollution and safety are perennial concerns.

One of the most remarkable features of our current economy is that it allows its participants to gain rich rewards without having to pay the true (often concealed) costs. Personal and corporate wealth are built on practices that ruin the land or take no account of the welfare of workers or jade the judgment of consumers. No one accepts responsibility for a depressed or anxious work force, a useless or poorly made product, or Superfund toxic sites that will cost millions of dollars to clean up. We are raising a generation of children who are trained to see this inexcusable practice as the norm.

These are large, complicated problems, and neither Berry nor Jackson suggests a simple solution. A clear beginning, however, is to be found in the building of local communities—communities that extend beyond people to include the natural environment. Communal life is crucial because it is there that accountability and responsibility can be learned. Where face-to-face encounters are frequent and long-term, people learn to live with the effects of what they do. They learn to see that in damaging one thing they damage much else, including themselves. Perhaps most important, people learn who they are in relation to others—they see their limits, but also their connectedness and interdependence with others.

Farmers have rarely been interested in "seeing the world." Their focus, if it is to be successful, must be on the local, on the needs and requirements of the specific places where they live. Would our economies better serve us if they focused more on local and less on international markets? Evidence suggests that this is the case, at least if human and environmental health, rather than corporate profits, are the issues. Increased attention to the local, combined with care and responsibility, will contribute to the growth of well-cared-for communities.

Agrarians make it clear that the scope of our care must extend beyond fellow humans to include all of creation. Unless one is prepared to call God a careless creator, one has to argue that there is no part of creation that is useless or superfluous. Here agrarians join hands with the ecologists who have shown us that interdependence, even if its nature is not fully understood, is the law of life. We live not from ourselves but from a natural world that sustains us. We simply do not know all the effects of what we do. In our haste to assign value to the world of nature so as to maximally exploit it (chemists have reckoned that the material value of a person amounts to approximately $12), we have foolishly ignored the fact that what we are up against is mystery, God's grace at work. Would we not be wiser to act out of an acknowledgment of our ignorance, as Berry has suggested, rather than out of hubris, as we too long have done?

The agrarian program urges us to learn from and live within the limits of creation, to take nature as our guide. To learn from creation we must stop our frenetic planning and begin the slow process of attending to the places where we live. The personal lives of Jackson and Berry illustrate this practice. Both men gave up promising academic careers in order to learn the practical lessons of land stewardship. Jackson returned to Kansas, where during the past 30 or so years he has worked to develop an agriculture modeled on the prairie ecosystem and based on perennial polycultures rather than the prevalent annual monocultures. This model drastically curtails the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, while protecting the soil and water base. Jackson's work at the Land Institute has the potential to revolutionize farming practices in the direction of long-term sustainability.

As for Berry, he has authored this century's most authentic and cogent agrarian statement, a statement steeped in his own life as a farmer. His now 30 volumes of poetry, fiction and essays represent an alternative to the dominant paradigms of our time. Jackson and Berry are not suggesting that we all need to become farmers, much less farm with horses as Berry does. Rather, they promote an alternative

worldview, one that can be adopted equally by urbanites (who can take the time to garden, or learn to shop more responsibly) and by farmers. They are concerned with the ethos that guides our thought and action.

Christians can learn from an agrarian vision to cultivate the faith. To do so is to indicate our preparedness to trust the goodness of God's creation, and to see in our lives and in all other lives a gift from God. We will, in other words, learn to become caretakers of the earth. As Jackson puts it, our preoccupation with nature as a resource needs to be supplanted by a desire to love and value the sources of life. When we do so, we understand that the source of value resides not in ourselves but in a creation and creator much greater than ourselves. The catastrophic mistake of modern economies has been to think that humans are the creators of value. Value is already in the world. We can work from that value, we can perhaps modify it, but we cannot increase it or create it on our own. If we learn to understand our creatureliness, we will also learn to develop lives governed by trust, thankfulness and generosity.

I grew up in a family of farmers where it was clear that no unnecessary work was to be done on the Sabbath. This may not sound like a big deal until one realizes that the Sabbath also comes around in the midst of harvest season, when the loss of one day's work can mean the loss of thousands of dollars. I look back in astonishment at my forefathers' practice. Why not work and secure one's livelihood as best one can? Why give generously in the midst of hard economic times?

The Sabbath is a compact expression of the virtue of caretaking. The Sabbath invites us to enjoy the grace everywhere at work in creation. It calls us, as Berry observes, to rest in a keeping that is not our own, and to "live the given life, and not the planned." "We live by mercy if we live./ To that we have no fit reply/ But working well and giving thanks,/ Loving God, loving one another,/ To keep Creation's neighborhood" (*A Timbered Choir*).

Noah had the crucible experience of the ark. What sort of experience will prompt us to learn the lessons of care and responsibility for creation? It is not at all clear that one experience will do the job. So far neither the threat of nuclear catastrophe, the starvation of millions nor the destruction of vast habitats has done it. Perhaps what is required is the sustained, growing voice of agrarian-minded people committed to challenging the economic order and refusing to take part in it.