

Global Field Program
Discussion Topic Paper

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June 16th, 2009

Anti-Education

"[T]here is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."
Booker T. Washington (3, p. 134)

Community-based Conservation (CBC) has been characterized as an ill-defined concept (6, p. 7). Western and Wright attempt the following definition: "Community-based Conservation reverses top-down, center-driven conservation by focusing on the people who bear the costs of conservation. In the broadest sense, then, community-based conservation includes natural resources or biodiversity protection by, for, and with the local community." They go on to caution that to define CBC "... any more precisely would be futile and even counterproductive." In spite of that warning, we might focus our attention on the two nouns that constitute the phrase: *community*, and *conservation*. Western and Wright attempt an elucidation of the terms (6, p. 8), but ultimately decide that we can not pin them down too closely.

In terms of *community*, we may certainly argue that public and private educational systems are a fundamental element of a community. In what follows I want to focus on the role of modern education as a *negative* force for CBC. In terms of *conservation*, I assert that conservation applies to more than the preservation of the Ecosphere. After all, a conservative is one who preserves the *status quo* unless and until a method or system or idea is demonstrably better. A community might decide that it needs to preserve its language, its style of dress, its customs – and who better to make this decision than the members of the community for which these elements help define that community?

While this paper focuses on community, let it be noted that the term "conservative" has been perverted by its identification with the Republican Party in the United States. An American citizen today would probably identify conservatism with a slate of positions such as pro-industry, anti-abortion, anti-gay, pro-gun, pro-development, and so on. In particular (putting a pair of these positions together), we derive the standard "conservative" position that, as a general rule, big industrial development is positive. Ironically, however, many big industrial developments have put our planet's ecosystems at risk. Oddly enough, the one place where modern "conservatives" draw the line at "preserving the *status quo*" is the environment. While big industry has traditionally proclaimed that we can have our cake and eat it too, too often it seems that we can only have our oil if we are also willing to despoil pristine and ecologically sensitive areas from time to time, as in the case of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Another paper might focus on this change in our understanding of the word "conservative".

It was not the Inuit people who caused the Exxon oil spill, and if we proceed through a list of the top 50 known human-caused environmental disasters (e.g. Chernobyl, Bhopal) we are unlikely to find any that are the result of actions by aboriginal peoples. "The truth is that many things on which our future health and prosperity depend are in dire jeopardy: climate stability, the resilience and productivity of natural systems, the beauty of the natural world, and biological diversity. It is worth noting that this is not the work of ignorant people. Rather, it is largely the results of work by people with BAs, BSs, LLBs,

MBA's, and PhD's." (1, p. 7) Wendell Berry concurred with David Orr's quote, making a similar remark in his 2009 graduation address at Northern Kentucky University. The environmental crises that our world faces are not the work of the third-world peasants, but the work of the first-world pedants. Berry – author, farmer, and environmentalist – exhorted NKU graduates (and all those in academia) to turn universities from the mission of job-training in the service of the Economy, to "Homecoming" in the service of the Ecosphere.

How is it that our university-educated elites are leading us to the edge of a precipice rather than to a brighter future and to a better world? "...[H]ow to make and how to judge... are the business of education. But education has tended increasingly to ignore the doubleness of its obligation. It has concerned itself with the problems of how to make, narrowing the issue of judgment virtually to the terms of the made thing itself. But the thing made by education now is not a fully developed human being; it is a specialist, a careerist, a graduate. In industrial education, the thing *finally* made is of no concern to the makers." (2, "The Loss of the University", p. 81)

Because we can tear down a mountain, we tear it down; because we can build a nuclear power plant, we build a nuclear power plant. The focus on making has been isolated and detached from the focus on the necessity of judging the value the thing made (using a multi-faceted and necessarily complicated definition of the *value* of a thing).

Berry describes a meeting that took place in Madison, Indiana, between the people threatened by a nuclear power plant at Marble Hill, and those charged with assuring the public safety: "The fears, objections, questions, and complaints of the local people were met with technical jargon and with bland assurances that the chance of a catastrophe was small.... A lady rose in the audience and asked the fifteen or twenty personages on the stage to tell us how many of them lived within the fifty-mile danger zone around Marble Hill. The question proved tactically brilliant, apparently shocking the personages on the stage, who were forced to give it the shortest, plainest answer of the evening: *Not one.*" (2, Higher Education and Home Defense, p. 49)

Who were those personages on the stage? "...[R]epresentatives of Public Service Indiana, the company that was building the power plant, and members of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, whose job it presumably was to protect ... from the acknowledged dangers of the use of nuclear power, as well as from the already recognized deceits and ineptitudes of Public Service Indiana.... Well-paid, **well-educated** [my emphasis], successful, important men", not one of whom need worry about the safety of their home or family because of any catastrophic mistakes on Marble Hill. Berry goes on to suggest that "...that meeting was not really a meeting at all but ... the enactment of a division ... between people who are trying to defend the health, the integrity, even the existence of places whose values they sum up in the words 'home' and 'community,' and people for whom those words signify no value at all." (2, p. 53)

How is it that the words "home" and "community" could have no value at all to those educated personages? Of course the people on the stage value those words, but their

communities and homes are not the same as the homes and communities threatened by the nuclear power plant: to despoil another's home is different from despoiling one's own. And Berry posits that the "education" the personages have been provided (leaving them "well-educated", in Berry's words) has enabled them to blandly dismiss the risks which they themselves would find unacceptable because they have "no skin in the game."

Berry suggests that "Some version of [this story] is now happening in this country virtually everywhere, virtually every day. Everywhere, every day, local life is being discomfited, disrupted, endangered, or destroyed by powerful people **who live**, or who are privileged to think that they live, **beyond the bad effects of their bad work** [my emphasis].... A powerful class of itinerant professional vandals is now pillaging the country and laying it waste. Their vandalism is not called by that name because of its enormous profitability (to some) and the grandeur of its scale. If one wrecks a private home, that is vandalism, but if, to build a nuclear power plant, one destroys good farmland, disrupts a local community, and jeopardizes lives, homes, and properties within an area of several thousand square miles, *that* is industrial progress." (2, p. 50)

If this is truly the work of our college graduates, how can this be? We who educate the children of this nation – can we really have failed so in our best efforts to produce professionals who will guide our nation to a better future? According to Berry, "...colleges and universities...had...a clear mandate to serve localities or regions – to receive the daughters and sons of their regions, educate them, and send them home again to serve and strengthen their communities.... [T]hey have generally betrayed this mandate, having worked instead to uproot the best brains and talents, to direct them **away from home** [my emphasis] into exploitive careers in one or another of the professions, and so to make them predators of communities and homelands, their own as well as other peoples?" (2, p. 51)

While Berry may be right that the colleges and universities have created "predators of communities" (other than their own); if so, certainly this is not a conspiracy, carried out by any long-range-planning of evil-doers, but rather it is the result of natural (albeit unfortunate) processes: for example, Berry postulates that the specialization occurring in the university constitutes a major threat. Some specialization is appropriate in life, as Berry concedes: for example, if you wish to have a stone fence such as one finds in the region of Berry's home, one would really like to have an experienced Irish stone mason do the work. But when specialization leads to a loss of knowledge of what is being made, or what is being done, then the specialization becomes improper. Berry asserts that the university has lost the knowledge of the thing they make: humanity, or human beings – in the fullest sense of those words. "The common denominator has to be larger than either career preparation or preparation for citizenship. Underlying the idea of a university – the bringing together [unifying] of all the disciplines – is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good – that is, a fully developed – human being." (2, p. 77) And good citizenship denies the wanton destruction of another's home for one's own profit.

In addition to specialization, "...the modern university has grown, not according to any unifying principle, like an expanding universe, but according to the principle of miscellaneous accretion, like a furniture business." (2, p. 76) Each discipline outgrows its previous shell, like a hermit crab, and yet feels compelled to pass the new and heavier and larger shell on to the next little hermit crab that comes along. We who teach mathematics at NKU have made this observation about the teaching of calculus: we teach calculus by accretion, adding more and more topics and facets of topics without ever daring to remove anything. Everything ever contained in the curriculum is sacrosanct, but the more modern material is slathered on too, to weight down the book, pad the curriculum, and lead to a course which I call, for lack of a better phrase, "Racing through Calculus." But since time is a limited resource, we can only teach more quantity by giving it shorter shrift. What happens is that we must make tough choices, and important topics (such as environmental ethics) are quick to fall through the cracks.

In terms of higher-education, Berry has already made his case that these institutions should serve "the Home": "to receive the daughters and sons of their regions, educate them, and send them home again to serve and strengthen their communities" (as previously quoted). Certainly, however, this is not solely the charge of the colleges and universities: for some time now I have been reflecting on the state of education, in America and elsewhere around the world. While Berry's focus is primarily on the American higher-educational system, my personal experiences with secondary schools in Haiti and in Togo echo his reflections. And to Berry's postulates I add the following indictment: most of what we call "education" is utterly detached from those being educated. For example, the *reason* for teaching calculus, a judgment about the value of learning calculus, is nearly completely missing at NKU. I presume that the same thing could be said about any number of other courses spread across the curriculum of my university, my graduate institution, my high school, and around the world.

I spent three years teaching students mathematics in a French-style lycee (advanced high school) as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo. For three years I pounded a proscribed program into my students' heads, so that they could succeed at their year-end, high-stakes exams, and so go on to the university. Some of my students did go on; others failed out. In many cases, those students who graduated found that no jobs existed for them in Togo. Failing to find work, they either returned home, but too big for their britches to take to the fields ever again; or they stayed in the capital of Lome, unemployed, while pleading for their families to send precious resources from the village fields down to the capital for their support. I and other Peace Corps Volunteers joked (in black humor) that we were "educating our students to the point of uselessness" – no job requiring the things they'd learned, and no willingness to work with their hands anymore, alongside their parents, brothers, and sisters back home. Thomas Merton is quoted echoing that, saying that our educational systems have resulted in the "mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade." (1, p. 11)

Thus the Togolese educational system provided no (or rather little) local value to the community, but merely testified to the "progress" of the Togolese people in the eyes of Togolese government and perhaps, by implication, in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Their system, a step-child of the French educational system, was based on the works of Voltaire and Rousseau: how could it fail the Togolese? Except that Voltaire and Rousseau had never been to Togo – had no idea of the problems of the Togolese – and so discussed problems and prescribed solutions more attuned to the needs of Parisians than to those of an oppressed former colony which has been run for a majority of its post-colonial years by a despotic military dictator.

Twenty years later I lived and taught in Haiti for ten months while on sabbatical. This quote describes their educational system well: "Those that have had an opportunity to go to school are taught by rote and repetition. They aren't taught problem solving and how to think about the bigger picture." (5) For example, our (would-be adopted Haitian) daughter, Rosemanie, was studying her geography book, which reported that the world population was four billion. I told her that her text was quite out of date, and that the world's population now surpassed six billion. But woe to her if she should learn this fact, rather than the "fact" printed in her (1980 era) textbook: she could be beaten for such a misstep. Another example: the mathematics materials which I was given to teach from were exactly the same French materials that I'd used in Togo twenty years earlier....

The answer to part of Haiti's educational problems seemed plain enough to me: Haiti has a huge need for skilled labor. What was needed was a technical school, rather than the traditional French lycee. I proposed to the powers that be that the educational system should bear on local needs and issues. I wrote letters and made plaintive appeals (for naught). However I discovered that there was a historical precedent for my failure: "[President] Geffrard also tried to introduce... vocational training; but this proved to be another uphill battle, one that has lasted throughout Haitian history. Because by definition no member of the elite works with his hands, the idea affronted perceptions of education as strongly held in Haiti of the 1860s as a century later, and therefore failed." (4, p. 207) Reading on, I found further evidence for both my observations, and for my failed attempts at a solution: in the late 1800s, "...the government recruited a cadre of French teachers...[who] brought with them not only the classical standards of French public education but also its rigidities. Their influence was destined to carry over into the next century the dead hand of a system too inflexible and pedantic for even the mother country." (4, p. 258)

Education is no longer for "the mother country", in the sense of "Home": education is for the creation of an elite, whose primary objective is to garner a job, and perhaps a fortune, possibly far from home. The elite should never dirty their hands (meaning farming and environmental conservation are not suitable subjects for education). What then becomes of education when, upon completion of formal education, there is no job, no fortune, at the end of the line? One imagines a conveyer belt, delivering corn high into the air only to be dumped back onto the ground for lack of a silo....

Any paper outlining problems should at least make an attempt at solutions, unless all hope is lost. This paper's focus is on the problems, whereas another may perhaps bear some solutions. I might, however, point in a direction from which my hopes spring. Booker T. Washington created the Tuskegee Institute from the ground up, with little but

some good men and women, and much sweat and toil (as described in his autobiography "Up from Slavery" (3)): "I made the first humble effort at Tuskegee, in a broken-down shanty and an old hen-house, without owning a dollar's worth of property, and with but one teacher and thirty students." (3, p. 187) I believe that Washington provides a textbook for development, and, while Washington did not focus on conservation *per se*, many of his lessons apply to conservation issues specifically. At the same time as Geffard was failing to convince Haitians to introduce technical training, Washington was convincing his black students to build the brick yards for the construction of their own buildings, and to farm their fields as part of their advanced education; and at the same time as Haitians were adopting the educational system of their former colonial oppressor, Booker T. Washington was creating an institute based on perceptions of education in which the value of the labor of one's hands is recognized, the needs of the community are evaluated and met, and even the lowly toothbrush becomes part of a systematic approach to education: "In all my teaching I have watched carefully the influence of the toothbrush, and I am convinced that there are few single agencies of civilization that are more far-reaching." (3, p. 53) Washington understood Orr's assertion that "the worth of education must ... be measured against the standards of decency and human survival...." (1, p. 8). In answer to Orr's assertion that "... we are becoming more ignorant of the things we must know to live well and sustainably on the earth"(1, p. 11), he replied that any school should teach the "dignity of labor" (3, p. 52). Washington understood that "...most students graduate without any broad, integrated sense of the unity of things" (1, p. 11), and ensured that his graduates were not among them.

Washington's prescription is far less dramatic than that of Orr, who suggests that "...no student should graduate from any educational institution without a basic comprehension of things like... the laws of thermodynamics, the basic principles of ecology,... sustainable agriculture and forestry, steady-state economics, and environmental ethics." (1, p. 14) Washington took a more pragmatic view, as evidenced by the following quote: "My plan was to have [the students], while [erecting their own buildings], taught the latest and best methods of labour, so that the school would not only get the benefit of their efforts, but the students themselves would be taught to see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity; would be taught, in fact, how to lift labour up from mere drudgery and toil, and would learn to love work for its own sake. My plan was not to teach them to work in the old way, but to show them how to make the forces of nature—air, water, steam, electricity, horsepower— assist them in their labour." (3, p. 94). Yet Washington would have us study those subjects dear to Orr, too: let thermodynamics help us understand and address climate change; let better methods of tillage help us prevent topsoil loss.

In Washington's famous "Atlanta Exposition Address" he proclaims that you should "Cast down your bucket where you are." By this he means that education must be local, and tied to your community. Washington posits that "... we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful." (3, p. 134) And the common occupations of life are those of the community "where you are."

Three Questions:

1. Why do we permit the "banality of evil" of non-Community-based decision making, which has led us to watch idly as our mountains are torn down before our eyes, or as coal-fired power plants are built in our backyards?
2. What does the university have to do to reclaim its traditional role as described by Berry?
3. How might you counsel a mathematics professor to work within the university system to fight those who wreck our lands in the name of "progress"?

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