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Reconsidering an Agricultural Childhood

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Reconsidering an Agricultural Childhood

Abstract
In an interview titled, "Field Observations," the environmentalist and writer, Wendell Berry, spoke about long-range decisions he was making for his farmland in the Kentucky River Valley. "What I'm going to do here," he explained to the interviewer as they walked Berry's upland pastures, "is grow an old-growth forest. It will take about 200 years, and I won't live to see it."

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In an interview titled, "Field Observations," the environmentalist and writer, Wendell Berry, spoke about long-range decisions he was making for his farmland in the Kentucky River Valley. "What I'm going to do here," he explained to the interviewer as they walked Berry's upland pastures, "is grow an old-growth forest. It will take about 200 years, and I won't live to see it."

Later in the interview, Berry admits to the difficulties of envisioning a 200-year plan for family land: "In the first place, to try to imagine people who aren't born yet is inevitably sentimental... I love my little granddaughters, but to try to sit here and imagine the people they'll grow up to be... would be sentimentalizing. It would be a form of oppression."
I came upon that passage a few years ago while writing my memoir, “The Horizontal World,” about growing up on a multigenerational wheat farm near Napoleon, in south-central North Dakota. In the book, I was puzzling out the reasons why I had nursed what I’ve always called “a low-grade feud” against the place where I grew up. “For many years,” I wrote in the memoir, “I felt an aversion from home, an overpowering flight impulse upon which I believed my very survival depended.”

I left home at 17, one week after my high school graduation. Over the decades that followed, I went to college then dropped out and joined a rock band, traveling around the country and performing. Later, I went back to school, became a writer, then a college professor—all the while returning to Napoleon for only the most necessary and solemn occasions.

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” the poet Robert Frost wrote. As an adult, I tried never to test the theory. I aimed my eyes forward and concentrated only on flight. “For a long time, it seemed to me,” I wrote, “North Dakota looked best only when glanced at briefly while adjusting the rear view mirror.”

Yet, wherever in the world I roamed, home pulled at me—even when I traveled in my work to places like France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia. Sitting in my writing studio in Molyvos, Greece, on the island of Lesvos, where I had gone on sabbatical to research and write a novel about olive groves, the panoramic view from my window included a blue scrap of the Aegean Sea and the snowcapped peak of Mount Lepetynmos. Across a watery channel, I could see the ghostly outline of the chalky hills rimming the western coast of Turkey. Surely, this was the most beautiful place on earth, yet all I could do was think and write about North Dakota.

What was wrong with me? These were places I had dreamt about, escaping to as a kid. Our parents, it seemed to us growing up on the farm, were hopeless dullards. We had no vacations, no road trips to monumental sights. We went to Bismarck two times a year to shop, and only on days when the weather was too miserable to work. In addition to wheat, we grew flax, oats, barley and alfalfa. We had chickens and eggs, sold cream and raised livestock for slaughter. We had a vegetable garden larger than the hobby farm acreages of most of my adult friends, and we were dairy farmers, milking up to 75 Holsteins at one time.

Sitting in the milk house, running the De Laval cream separator, I would read books about all the exotic places in the outside world. As I shoed the frantic tongues and paws of cats away from the golden spout of cream being separated from the milk, I fantasized that I, too, would someday be separated from this place that I had not chosen—that had been chosen for me as home. When I grew up, I thought, I would seek out other destinations.

“My parents were consummate observers of landscape. What were the hundreds of things they knew about this place that I could not see—drainage patterns, the knowledge of crops that would thrive here, signs of erosion, names of wildflowers, grasses, and trees? ... After a long alienation from this place, I wanted to see it again as my parents did, as a variegated, complex thing, a place to spend one’s whole life studying and loving.”

—Debra Marquart,
“Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere”

“You can’t get there from here,” my father used to say when I spoke too long or enthusiastically about the cities I planned to someday run away to. I had consulted maps; I thought I knew otherwise. Did he mean to imply that the gravel road outside our farm was not connected to other roads, and that those freeways had not been paved and multi-laned in preparation for my flight?

But in Greece, in the midst of all that ageless beauty, I realized that I was homesick—that, in fact, I’d spent my adult life in a chronic state of homesickness. The Greeks have a word for it, nostos, which translates into “journey home.” The English word, nostalgia—nostos (return home) and algia (ache)—means “the ache to return home.” My father had been right (surprise, surprise); I found myself in my mid-40s suspended in a netherworld between there and here, not really settled or at home in either place. The only thing to do was write my way through it.

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The journey home

Writing "The Horizontal World" was a long, complicated journey that included many trips home, with hours of meditating on and sifting through the minutiae of childhood. I scrutinized things large and small, especially things I had taken so thoroughly for granted that they had seemed invisible—like the rock piles in the northeast corner of the field where we dumped stones and small boulders when we cleared the land each year. I realized that we were following a pattern established 75 years earlier when my great-great-grandfather had homesteaded and my grandfather had inherited. My mother had felt confident, marrying my father, that she'd never spend another day of her life on a farm.

Yet, one day in 1956, my father came home from the hardware store and announced to my mother that they would be moving back to Napoleon to take over the farm. This decision was made without my mother's consult and according to some reasoning forever unknown to her. What followed, my mother told me, was the worst fight of their married lives—my mother's sober and pragmatic protestations about how much work and hardship would be involved, against the sheer brightness of my father's romantic (and somewhat theoretical, at that point) notions about the importance of keeping the land in the family.

They were both right, of course. Fortunately for us all, my father won. Or, rather, my mother surrendered and threw herself immediately into the job of being a farmer's wife. She was pregnant with me at the time, so I like to think I was privy to the whole conversation. I imagine myself in the womb that night as the decision was being debated—listening in with my ear against the uterine wall, weighing the options, leaning left, leaning right, then kicking my feet to get out, just so that I could learn to talk and report the entire episode.

Debra Marquart is an associate professor of English and the coordinator of the creative writing program at Iowa State University. Her books include two poetry collections—"Everything's a Verb" and "From Sweetness"—and a short story collection, "The Hunger Bone: Rock & Roll Stories," which draws on her experiences as a traveling road musician in the 1970s and '80s. Her most recent book, "The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere," a memoir about growing up a rebellious farmer's daughter on a North Dakota wheat farm, was published by Counterpoint Books in 2006. She's currently at work on a novel, "The Olive Harvest." Web site: www.debramarquart.com.

The children of North Dakota are programmed for flight. We populate the cities of this country, living as expatriate small-town Midwesterners. We grew up wild in the middle of nowhere with the nagging suspicion that life was certainly elsewhere. Even our parents encouraged us to flee in search of better opportunities. When grown, we scattered in a kind of diaspora, a phenomenon known as outmigration. ... But we, the surviving generations who were raised on the slim margins of the Great Plains, have been forged into a hardy breed, requiring little, expecting less, able to survive anywhere. And no matter how far from that uncompromising land we drift, a long, sinewy taproot summons us, always, home.”

—Debra Marquart,
"The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere"