

Holding Every Thing in Common

By Tom Small



QUAKER
EARTHCARE
WITNESS

"Have nothing in your houses
that you do not know to be
useful, or believe to be
beautiful."

—William Morris

Burley Coulter is, to me, one of the most memorable characters in Wendell Berry's novels and stories. What most endears him to me is his sense of the community of Port William, where most of Berry's stories take place: "The way we are," Burley offers, "we are members of each other. All of us. Everything."

Berry, commenting on Burley's "Everything," suggests that "Burley improved on St. Paul by telling a more comprehensive truth" (cf. Romans 12.5). Membership includes not just a faith community but "everything." Comprehensively.

Everything? Including the river that runs through Port William? The land; creatures, both domestic and wild; tobacco crops and grain crops; oak trees, wild lupine; Elton Penn's chicken coop; Jayber Crow's barber chair; the tattered Franklin Roosevelt campaign poster nailed to Old Jack's barn wall; Hannah Coulter's cast iron skillet; all the numberless "things" that make mere space into a "home place." All are "members of each other"? The "all of us" membership?

Suppose we begin with trusting Burley and Wendell to mean what they say. What then are the implications of this "comprehensive truth"? And how shall we extend such a truth beyond Berry's fictional community to our own places and times? Do we, most of us, actually have a "place" of the sort Burley would understand and, despite his restless nature, be at home with? A place that is our own? And things that truly

belong? Not possessions. Belongings. Relations.

It is now a commonplace to refer to us non-indigenous people as "settlers." But to Wendell Berry—and I suspect to Burley as well—we are "unsettlers." In his 1977 essay, "The Unsettling of America," Berry argues that the predominant motive in America is one of unsettlement, a continual "haste and anxiety to displace ourselves," beginning from displacement of the Native Americans, proceeding through successive frontiers and horizons, from farmstead to city tenement to suburban "starter home," and onwards, an unrelenting migration of seekers for yet another place to begin, again. Discarding, beside the toilsome trail, our inheritance.

As we progressed, we displaced or decimated species and entire ecosystems: buffalo, wetlands, prairie dogs, grassland, bumblebees, beaver, passenger pigeons, mountain tops, forests. Over a loose network of tribal territories and commons, we superimposed a gridwork of parcel, property, and pavement. Land became a fungible commodity, a possession endlessly exchangeable for something else, elsewhere. In the process of taking possession, we became dispossessed. Temporary occupiers of a platted, fenced-off lot in the geography of Nowhere. But even as we shake the dust of the past from our feet, we seek to take possession of the future. A plot of land; an unending recession of marketed things.

The rationale is always improvement: better location, "higher" land use, or the "latest thing." It is necessary, "manifest

destiny," to replace whatever is outmoded, unmanageable, provincial, inefficient, primitive. Whatever we encounter, wild or cultivated, is subject to commodification, replacement, and "improvement."

There have always, however, been voices of protest and celebration of all that is lost in the race to improvement: the pastoral Arcadia of Theocritus, Virgil, and countless poets and artists ever since, from Shakespeare to Robert Frost; peasant rebellions against enclosure of traditional common lands; the Romantic Movement's idealization of wild land, rural cottagers, and Noble Savage—these are recurring, subversive voices against accumulation and "improvement."

Lately, we begin to recognize that the rebels and resisters were on the right side. Perhaps, had they not been brutally suppressed or co-opted, we would not be systematically destroying the commons—earth, water, air, and fire.

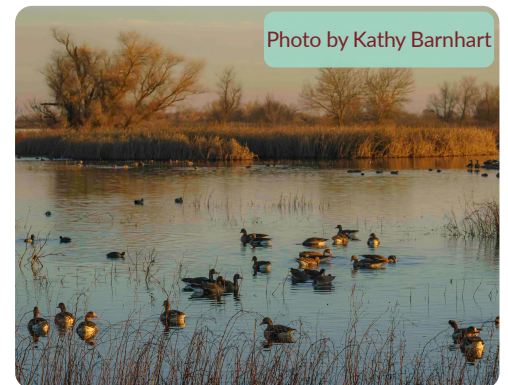


Photo by Kathy Barnhart

Contemporary commoners, regenerative farmers, and indigenous peoples harken back to those earlier countercultural rebels. What most of us still consider primitive, they see as the primal source of recovery. Traditional commoners and indigenous peoples still "belong

to the land” and, like their revered ancestors, regard “things” as persons, deserving of the same respect, rights, and care as we accord to family members.

Trees, rivers, ecosystems, soil, a cradle, the threshold, the fire in the hearth—these are alive, with their own languages and intelligence. To the ear of the imagination, they speak. They embody, as William Wordsworth envisions, “A motion and a spirit that impels All thinking things, all objects of all thought, And rolls through all things.” All. Burley’s “Everything.”

Persons—human or otherwise—cannot be fungible property. We cannot “own” them. We share with them, as with Burley’s “members of each other.” Land is heritage, a gift from ancestors and all the more-than-human relations who pass among us, regardless of borders and fences. Gifts must be freely passed along, lest they cease being gift and become mere property.

Increasingly, we “unsettlers” begin our ceremonies and meetings by “acknowledging” natives who flourished here for thousands of years, caring for this land we now occupy—before we displaced them. Do we likewise acknowledge and honor our own ancestors, whose sweat still lingers in the soil and whose breath still mingles with ours—whose wanderings and perseverance enabled us to be here? Do we also acknowledge all the creatures of earth, air, and water whom we are displacing or extinguishing but who still belong to the land? The Haudenosaunee do, in their “Thanksgiving Address,” the “words which come before all else.” They also acknowledge the

future, “the next seven generations.”

Do we, as William Morris asks of us, have nothing in our households that we “do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful”? Are the implements and ornaments in our houses real presences, responsive to touch and imagination? Do they, like the living elements of which they partake—air, earth, fire, water, wood, space—do they breathe, each according to a personal rhythm? Familiar, yet strange. Like the hand-carved African spoon I use to measure out my morning tea. Like the vividly patterned wool cushion on my dining room chair, from a shop in Arachova, on the road to Delphi. Like my grandmother’s heavy bronze bookends—robed figures of “Knowledge” and “Wisdom”—which still evoke, for me, the darkling bookshelves of my childhood home and their magical books that spoke, silently, of past and future. Do you hold such “things” in the light?

The Romantic visionary poet and artist William Blake saw everything in the clear light of imagination:

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite.”

Every thing. Infinite. The great founder of The Religious Society of Friends, George Fox, asks that we “Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.” Perhaps, with help from Burley and Wendell and Blake, we can improve upon Fox: “answering that of God in Everything.” Answering. Responding. In the Spirit. Dialogue, with all things. The messengers.

If you want to make small changes, change the way you do things. If you want to make major changes, change the way you see things.

—Gabe Brown, *Dirt Into Soil*

George Washington Carver offers further help: “If you love it enough, any thing will talk with you.” Any thing. Every thing. Suppose we trust Carver to mean exactly what he says. Walk cheerfully through your house, your land. “Look about you,” as Carver asks of us; “Take hold of the things that are here. Let them talk to you. You learn to talk to them.” The prophets, ancient and modern, show us the way. The way of imagination. The way of love.

We need not free ourselves of possessions. We own nothing, including ourselves. Ancestors, indigenous peoples, seven generations yet to come, Everything—they all hold us in common, members of each other.

Seek only to clear away “mere things” which have not become responsive members of the commune—the commons of use and beauty—your infinitely extended family.

Resources

- Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (1977).
- Jim Corbett, *Goatwalking: A Guide to Wildland Living, The Quest for the Peaceable Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (2023).
- Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983).
- Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2008).
- The Mohawk Thanksgiving Address: <https://akwesasne.travel/our-stories/thanksgiving-address/>
- QEW pamphlet on “The Commons and Enclosure: Their Nature, History, and Future” (forthcoming, 2026)

