

Radical restoration

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'Are there not indeed enough "signs of the times" to indicate that a new start is needed?' E.F. Schumacher [1].

Charles Pasternak's previous collection *What Makes Us Human?* garnered the following comment from an Amazon reviewer: 'Unifying our scientific and religious world views is possibly the most important action we can take in managing the challenges of population growth and global degradation that we now face.' [2] What better springboard for this chapter's scriptural perspective on access and excess with respect to land, food production and economics? When the majority of our fellow humans are suffering lack of access and many of the rest are struggling with the results of excess, perhaps it is timely to consider the pertinent wisdom found in Judeo-Christian literature and in the works of a few modern alternative thinkers who have appreciated the same resource.

Small is still beautiful

In his seminal work *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* [3], E.F. Schumacher wrote, 'If human vices such as greed and envy are systematically cultivated, the inevitable result is nothing less than a collapse of intelligence.' [4] Greed undergirds the pursuit of excess and denies access to the many. Schumacher made his remarks in response to comments made in 1930 by his mentor, John Maynard Keynes, as the world struggled under the Great Depression. Surprisingly, Keynes had indicated that he thought the day of universal prosperity was getting close. Schumacher quoted him as saying that nevertheless 'for at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to every one that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.' [5]

By the 1970s Schumacher had come to see that excess, or the relentless pursuit of materialism, destroys both men and women and their environment. The carrying capacity of the world cannot sustain limitless growth, and the related need for moral development cannot be ignored. Thus Schumacher continued with a reference to Jesus' words in response to temptation by humanity's great adversary: 'There is a revolutionary saying that "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God."' [6] Spiritual problems cannot be solved by physical means. As Einstein is believed to have said, 'No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.'

Schumacher did not begin his career as an alternative thinker. He was the son of a German political economics professor and in 1930 was a Rhodes scholar at New College, Oxford. He remained in the United Kingdom during the Nazi era, and for 20 years in the post-war period was Chief Economic Advisor to the National Coal Board.

By the time he wrote *Small Is Beautiful*, Schumacher's spiritual journey had taken him through Buddhism to Catholicism. Along the way he wrote 'Buddhist Economics'. In part, his paper addressed the access question at the local level and concluded, 'Production from local resources for local needs is the most rational way of economic life.'^[8] Schumacher also came to value the spiritual truths embodied in the New Testament's Gospels. He said, 'There could not be a more concise statement of . . . our situation, than the parable of the prodigal son. Strange to say, the Sermon on the Mount gives pretty precise instructions on how to construct an outlook that could lead to an Economics of Survival.'^[9] The story of the prodigal son is, of course, a salutary tale of waste (prodigality) and repentance/redemption, of physical excess and spiritual access. The wastrel son comes home to forgiveness and new life. And Jesus' great moral discourse on the mountain is about discovering the spiritual qualities essential to living this life in balance and measure, with respect for God and His creation, including fellow man.

Schumacher's untimely death in 1977 did not end the discussion. In the same year, Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* was published. It was equally concerned with the destructive effects of the modern obsession with growth and technological development. Three years later, some of Schumacher's friends and supporters collaborated to form the E.F. Schumacher Society for the purpose of furthering his work.

Culture and agriculture

Wendell Berry is first and foremost by his own description a Kentucky farmer, though he is also a renowned author of essays, poems and novels. The global cult of bigness and the disease that it causes is one of his passions. This is, of course, related to the development of technology for its own sake. While much of his writing addresses ecological concerns, he also discusses the broader human condition and the restoration of health and peace.

In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry shows that the demise of small-scale agriculture is indicative of the crumbling of culture itself. The machine has taken over from man, industrialized agriculture has won the day, and humans have been dislocated. Moreover, it is the *future* forms of our technology that enslave us. And it is not just on the farm that the pressure is felt:

All our implements – automobiles, tractors, kitchen utensils, etc. – have always been conceived by the modern mind as in a kind of progress or pilgrimage toward their future forms. The automobile-of-the-future, the kitchen-of-the-future, the classroom-of-the-future have long figured more actively in our imaginations, plans, and desires than whatever versions of these things we may currently have. We long ago gave up the wish to have things that were adequate or even excellent; we have preferred instead to have

things that were up-to-date. But to be up-to-date is an ambition with built-in panic: our possessions cannot be up-to-date more than momentarily unless we can stop time – or somehow get ahead of it. The only possibility of satisfaction is to be driving *now* in one's *future* automobile.[10]

Of course, the relentless economy powering such 'achievements' pays little or no attention to resource depletion, pollution, or the dislocated human being. It depends on the illusion of limitless quantities. To make this reality, Berry writes, 'we would have to debase both the finite and the infinite; we would have to sacrifice both flesh and spirit. It is an old story. Evil is offering us the world: "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."'[11] And we have only the old paradox for an answer: If we accept all on that condition, we lose all.'[12] Like Schumacher, Berry links the problem in its essence to the tempter of Christ, the arch-enemy of humanity.

In a 1981 work, *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry explores the tragedy of 'progress' via dislocation by reflecting on a visit to Peru. There peasants from the uplands who grew a huge variety of potatoes, using small-scale techniques and organic methods, gave up their ancestral lands and became dislocated by voluntarily moving to the slums of Lima, where they could watch American entertainment on television.

Decades after these works, Berry is still vexed by many of the same concerns and the issues arising from the global 'order'. The difference is that the natural world is now in far worse condition. What has not changed are the spiritual precepts that undergird his prescription for healing. He writes, 'Most of the important laws for the conduct of human life probably are religious in origin – laws such as these: Be merciful, be forgiving, love your neighbors, be hospitable to strangers, be kind to other creatures, take care of the helpless, love your enemies. We must, in short, love and care for one another and the other creatures. We are allowed to make no exceptions. Every person's obligation toward the Creation is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15: "Keep it".'[13] It is intriguing that he understands spiritual law to be the basis of right use.

Another of Berry's related concerns is that American Christianity has not lived up to its founding documents. Because it has focused on saving souls *in* the land to the exclusion of practicing religion *on* the land, it has failed to recognize the sanctity of creation and the laws that support it. In this context Berry quotes Professor Ellen Davis, who writes: 'Sound agricultural practice depends upon knowledge that is at one and the same time chemical and biological, economic, cultural, philosophical, and (following the understanding of most farmers in most places and times) religious. Agriculture involves questions of value and therefore of moral choice, whether or not we care to admit it.'[14]

It is to scriptural values that we now turn in detail.

Hebrew codes

The beautiful and enduring Hebrew story of Ruth the Moabite takes place in an ancient agrarian setting far removed from our urbanized world. It speaks to the values essential to community, family and individual responsibilities. The young widow Ruth's appeal to Naomi, her widowed mother-in-law, 'Entreat me not to leave you', guarantees the older woman's access to care until death: 'Wherever you go, I

will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.'[15]

That same God had arranged, through law code, that provision for the disadvantaged should be part of the communal system. One of Ruth's first acts was to support her mother-in-law by gleaning grain. This was possible because the Hebrew law required that 'when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.'[16]

This passage is found in the section of the book of Leviticus (chapters 17–26) that relates to the holy living required of the community of Israel. Because their God is holy, the people chosen by Him are to take on characteristics that sanctify them, or set them apart; they are to become holy. Found here are many basic principles of right relationships: care and respect for parents, concern for fellowman equal to love for self, respect for the property of others, fairness, truthfulness, and compassion for the less fortunate. The specific instructions applied in the book of Ruth, allowing gleaners free access to the remnants of the harvest, is part of a set of 'decrees [that] undercut the strong human temptation to greed in the presence of plenty'.[17] In this kind of economy, access to excess benefits the farmer, who incurs no labor costs, and it affords dignity to the poor, who labor for their own needs. According to one commentary, 'this was the earliest law for the benefit of the poor that we read of in the code of any people'.[18]

Two specific regulations found within this lengthy section relate to the Land Sabbath [19] and the Jubilee. These two unusual institutions provided for rejuvenation of land and canceling of debt every seventh year in a 50-year cycle, and for the restitution of land, further forgiveness of debt, and release of indentured servants after seven such sabbatical years, or every 50th year. In the background is the fact that land is understood to be a gift from God, and more than that, a sacred trust. 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me'; [20] it is 'the land that I give you'.[21] This concept of God as owner of land and His people as tenants and stewards is the basis of resting land at His command, returning it to those gifted with it (when they have been dispossessed for various reasons), and forgiving debt.

During the Land Sabbath, regular reaping was not allowed, though the owner could gather what he, his household and his animals needed. A feature of the law was that obedience to it would guarantee sufficient food for the seventh and eighth years and until the produce of the ninth year had come in.[22]

Redemption, or buying back of open land, had to be allowed throughout the 50-year cycle.[23] When there was insufficient to buy back such land, either by the original tenant or by his relatives, it had to be returned nevertheless to the dispossessed family at the beginning of the Jubilee year. There also were rules against taking unfair advantage of the economically challenged original tenants of open land.[24] Further, no interest was to be charged on loans.

This whole section of the Torah reflects the Deity's desire to prevent continuous decline of people into a position of lack of access to land, food and economic

freedom. When abundance is needed, He provides it, as in the provision of extra food before, during and following the sabbatical year. When financial assistance is needed, the near family has the duty to provide. When all else fails, the leveling effect of Jubilee debt forgiveness, release from indenture, and return to family land accomplishes economic and social recovery. The aim is a debt-free and poverty-free society.[26]

The local setting provided the best arena for the resolution of local problems. Small was beautiful back then.

Back to today

Today giantism has the upper hand. Fifty years ago there were 6 million farmers in the United States. Today, 400 000 grow 94 percent of the nation's food. This is a response to the clarion call of agribusiness: 'Get big or get out'.[27] The 1.6 million farmers producing the remaining 6 percent are surely under pressure.

The pursuit of excess in global meat consumption has led to 'half the world's wheat, most of its corn . . . and almost all of its soybeans' being fed to beef cattle.[28] One only has to drive through California's Central Valley to witness the end-result of excessive meat production in the mountains of manure surrounding intensive livestock operations, with no green pasture in sight. According to Ellen Davis, in the same valley 1600 dairies produce more waste than a city of 21 million.[29]

But the cult of bigness has not delivered. 'In every country for which data [are] available, smaller farms are shown to be 200 to 1000 percent more productive per unit area.'[30] This is true in part because smaller farming encourages quality and quantity of care. It often involves organic principles. This is part of the accumulated wisdom of the ages. As Schumacher pointed out, what is needed is an 'economics of permanence'.[31] This would focus on being content with less, not seeking to make the luxuries of previous times the necessities of today. He wrote, 'Small-scale operations, no matter how numerous, are always less likely to be harmful to the natural environment than large-scale ones, simply because their individual force is small in relation to the recuperative forces of nature.'[32]

The world of excess prompts us more every day to ask what we will do about it. Schumacher was asked the same question many times. Not surprisingly, he answered that small steps in the direction of personal change would begin the process. Grow a few vegetables, connect with nature, and support those who are sounding the alarm and providing solutions. Convinced that the answer is religious at root, he cites the four cardinal virtues of *prudentia*, *justitia*, *fortitudo* and *temperantia* as worthy of adoption. *Prudentia* speaks to realistic assessment and *temperantia* to balance, knowing the limits, not going to excess. Truth and goodness complete the picture.

Wendell Berry's early work, *The Unsettling of America*, is unsettling still. As to remedial steps to take, he observes: 'Once our personal connection to what is wrong becomes clear, then we have to choose: we can go on as before, recognizing our dishonesty and living with it the best we can, or we can begin the effort to change the way we think and live.'[33] Like the parable of the prodigal son, this points us only in the direction of spiritual access to resolve our destructive pursuit of excess.

Do the ancient truths that defined daily life for the Hebrews have any relevance

millennia later? It is hard to imagine the combined effect of overcoming greed and envy, simplifying our lives, thinking and behaving locally, respecting land and fellowman, and seeking spiritual satisfaction ahead of physical luxuries. Yet these are the very values that our current condition demands.

References

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3. Twenty years after its 1973 publication, *Small Is Beautiful* was listed by the London Times Literary Supplement as one of the 100 most influential books in the post–World War II period.
4. E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 31.
5. *Ibid.*, 24.
6. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 32 (quoting from Matthew 4:4).
7. The quotation is widely attributed to Einstein, though a search has yielded no original source.
8. E.F. Schumacher, *Buddhist Economics*, the E.F. Schumacher Society, http://www.smallisbeautiful.org/buddhist_economics/english.html (accessed April 2, 2010).
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20. Leviticus 25:23 (ESV).
21. *Ibid.*, verse 2.
22. *Ibid.*, verses 21-22.
23. Different rules applied to land within cities; see Leviticus 25:29-30.
24. Leviticus 25:13-17, 25-28.
25. *Ibid.*, verses 35-38.
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27. Voiced first by Ezra Taft Benson, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture under Dwight Eisenhower.
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30. Ibid., 104.
31. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 33.
32. Ibid., 36.
33. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 19.

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