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As a public service, Laucks Foundation calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification of issues affecting world peace, equity among peoples and environmental responsiblity.

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"So far, the moral landscape of the conservation movement has tended to be a landscape of extremes, which you can see pictured in any number of expensive books of what I suppose must be called 'conservation photography.' On the one hand we have the pristine and unpeopled wilderness, and on the other hand we have scenes of utter devastation -- strip mines, clear cuts, industrially polluted wastelands, and so on . . . What is wrong with the [conservationists'] picture of the world as either deserted landscape or desertified landscape is that it is too simple; it misrepresents both the world and humanity. If we are to have an accurate picture of the world, even in its present diseased condition, we must interpose between the unused landscape and the misused landscape a landscape that humans have used well."

-- **Wendell Berry**

This issue of **Reprint Mailing** is devoted to the essay *The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity* by Wendell Berry from Another Turn of the Crank, a new book of essays to be published this fall by Counterpoint Press, Washington, D.C. Other recent books by the author are Remembering, Home Economics, What Are People For? (All by North Point Press, San Francisco,) and Entries (Pantheon Books, New York and San Francisco.) [*The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity* is reprinted with the permission of the author]

The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity

by

Wendell Berry

In the fall of 1993 the production in Washington, D.C., and on Broadway of The Kentucky Cycle, by Robert Schenkkan, called forth an unprecedented outcry of objection from eastern Kentucky, which was the setting for Mr. Schenkkan's cycle of plays. The substance of the protest was that Mr. Schenkkan, like too many before him, had presented Kentucky mountaineers (with a few politically correct exceptions) as ignorant, vicious hillbillies, who in their thoughtless violence and greed had made for themselves exactly the fate that they deserved.

Perhaps the best clue to the nature of this controversy is in a long article about Mr. Schenkkan and The Kentucky Cycle that Ross Wetzsteon published in the Voice on November 9. Mr. Schenkkan is there quoted as saying that "what I'm trying to do in The Kentucky Cycle is show how and why the myths that once sustained us now fail us." The failure of these myths, which are the frontier myths of abundance and escape, has caused what Mr. Schenkkan calls "dissociation" -- "the lack of connection between people, the lack of connection between people and the land." And he says that "we need myths of preservation and responsibility," which he apparently believes still need to be invented.

At the heart of the Kentucky critics' argument against The Kentucky Cycle is Mr. Schenkkan's failure to see that this second "myth" also is alive in eastern Kentucky. There as elsewhere, but probably more there than in most places, it is a subordinate myth, for during most of this century, the dominant history in the region has been that of the exploitation of timber and coal and people. But the contrary impulse of preservation and responsibility has survived. It has survived in hundreds of dooryards, kitchen gardens, and small farms in valleys where the coal companies never came. It has survived in numerous local individuals and groups whose purpose has been, as one of them put it, "to save the land and the people." It has survived in the writings of Harry Caudill, James

Still, Gurney Norman, and others. It has survived in an indomitable local newspaper, The Mountain Eagle. It has survived in local institutions like Appalachian Science in the Public Interest and Appalshop. Strip mining, for example, has been opposed by local people, some of them heroes, from the moment it began. All of this Mr. Schenkkan, who spent only one day in eastern Kentucky, failed to understand.

The point, as I see it, is that if we want to oppose the forces of social and ecological irresponsibility, we do not need "new myths" invented by writers and intellectuals, for in the myth department -- if we are going to use Mr. Schenkkan's term -- we already have what we need. As Harlan Hubbard once said, "What we need is at hand." The myth exists, and some people -- though by no means enough -- have understood its moral implications.

The case of The Kentucky Cycle is of more than local interest because Mr. Schenkkan's plays are representative of a sort of one-eyed, politically correct criticism of American history and of western cultural tradition that is a danger both to understanding and to the possibility of improvement. Mr. Schenkkan is at fault in his play and what he has said about it, not because his history is wrong, for he is right about our inheritance of greed and destruction, but because it is incomplete.

I considered it a privilege to be able to turn from my thoughts about Robert Schenkkan and the Kentucky Mountains to thoughts about Wallace Stegner and the American West. For Wallace Stegner is not only the more complete historian by far, but often as a historian he has the authority of an autobiographer. He lived through, saw with his own eyes, and knew intimately much of the history that he wrote about.

We have had, to begin with, no better student of the workings of our frontier irresponsibility. Wallace Stegner was born into the failed and still failing myth of easy wealth and easy escape -- the myth of the people he called "boomers" -- that motivated both the movement of the frontier and the industrialization that followed. He recognized the powerful influence of this myth in his father, who "wanted to make a killing and end up on Easy Street," but who was driven, first by hope and then by failure, from one money-making scheme to another, and finally to ruin. This, in American boomers, was actually less a myth than a mental condition that Wally described as "exaggerated, uninformed, unrealistic,

greedy expectation." In his own early experience this expectation led to the plowing of the prairie in southwestern Saskatchewan -- prairie that was "totally unsuited to be plowed up." Such expectation had established the white settlers' inhabitation of the American West, not on the basis of sound local knowledge, but on the basis of presumption and pipedream. He wrote that, in The Big Rock Candy Mountain, "I had been trying to paint a portrait of my father" -- not realizing until later that "my father was also a type." But even in that early novel, there is evidence that he already recognized the type as such and accurately understood its bias:

> Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there? The whole race was like the fir tree in the fairy tale which wanted to be cut down and dressed up with lights and bangles and colored paper, and see the world and be a Christmas tree.

In his later books, he gives much attention and no little grief to the results, human and natural, of the "feeding frenzy" that inevitably accompanied the entrance of an uninformed and limitless greed into a land that was both abundant and fragile.

But unlike many recent commentators on our history, Wallace Stegner knew also that, as a people, we had not been conditioned entirely by the inordinate desires and acts of the boomers. There was, virtually from the beginning, a counter-myth, the myth of settlement, which always implied the "myths of preservation and responsibility" that Mr. Schenkkan talks about. Wally was born into this myth also; he knew it in his mother, of whom he wrote in The Big Rock Candy Mountain:

> She wanted to be part of something, an essential atom in a street, a town, a state; she would have loved to get herself expressed in all the pleasant, secure details of a deeply-lived-in house.

Later, I think, he realized that his mother also was in this sense a type. Not all who came to American places came to plunder and run. Some came to stay, or came with the hope of staying. These Wally called "stickers" or "nesters." They were moved by an articulate hope, already ancient by the time of Columbus, of a settled, independent, frugal life on a small

freehold. We can find it in Hesiod, in the fourth of Virgil's Georgics, in the 128th Psalm. This was the vision that we finally came to call "Jeffersonian" -- a free nation of authentically and securely landed people. Wally knew that this vision, if it had been a secondary influence on our history, had nevertheless been a considerable one. It could not be left out of account. In a series of lectures delivered at the University of Michigan in 1986 and published the next year, The American West as Living Space, he said that to him "the most quintessential West" was "just such a little city as Missoula or Corvallis, some settlement that has managed against difficulty to make itself into a place and is likely to remain one." His preference for settlement, I think, explains his sustained and respectful interest in the Mormons. Of himself, he said, "I was at heart a nester, like my mother."

It is possible -- it is probably necessary -- to think of Wallace Stegner's work as taking form within the tensions between these historical opposites: boomer and sticker, exploitation and settlement, caring and not-caring, life adapted to available technology and personal desire and life adapted to a known place. It is important to understand that in laying out these synonymous or analogous pairs of opposites we are not simply defining a moral choice, though that is one thing we are doing, but we are also defining a historical and cultural split that characterizes us as Americans. And by "us" I mean all of us. I don't think this characterization can be successfully limited to any group, political, racial, sexual, or otherwise. All of us, I think, are in some manner torn between caring and not-caring, staying and going.

We are not merely or simply talking about moral choice because of this complicating involvement of history, culture, and character. Wallace Stegner obviously made the correct moral choice -- that is, he chose to be like his mother and not like his father -- but not in the sense that he ever finished making it. Having chosen one way, one is never free of the opposite way. A good deal of the power in Wally's work, for example, comes from his thorough understanding of his father, an understanding that involved sympathy -- that involved undoubtedly the recognition of himself in his father and of his father in himself. Such choices are not clean-cut and final, as in choosing one of two forks in a road, but they involve us in tension, in tendency. We must keep on choosing.

If enough of us were to choose caring over not-caring, staying over

going, then the culture would change, the myth of exploitation would become subordinate to the myth of settlement, and then the choice to be a sticker would become easier. The necessary examples would be more numerous and more available. The way would be clearer.

As we know, we are under increasing pressure to choose caring over not-caring. We know that caring will involve us in great effort and discomfort, and we dread to choose it, but we know too that the toils and miseries of not-caring are becoming greater by the day. Some day, presumably, it will become easier and less miserable to care than not to care -- if, by then, we still remember how to care, and if the choice is still possible.

Many of us, in fact, already have a conscious preference for care. Some of us, it may be, have been stickers all along: maybe we were born into the underclass of settlers. Anyhow, we have taken the side of care. We know that we need to live in a world that is cared for. The ubiquitous clichés about saving the planet and walking lightly on the earth testify to this. But I believe that all of us who prefer caring over not-caring are going to have to study very carefully the implications of our preference. For we not only need to think beyond our own clichés; we also need to make sure that we don't carry over into our efforts at conservation and preservation the moral assumptions and habits of thought of the culture of exploitation. So far, it seems to me, we have done just that: we have incorporated in our efforts to preserve the natural health and wealth of the world a number of the assumptions that have made such an effort necessary.

The most persistent and the most dangerous of these is the assumption that some parts of the world can be preserved while others are exploited. As necessary as it obviously is, the effort of "wilderness preservation," has too often implied that it is enough to save a series of islands of pristine and uninhabited wilderness in an otherwise exploited, damaged, and polluted land. And, further, that the pristine wilderness is the only alternative to exploitation and abuse. So far, the moral landscape of the conservation movement has tended to be a landscape of extremes, which you can see pictured in any number of expensive books of what I suppose must be called "conservation photography." On the one hand we have the pristine and unpeopled wilderness, and on the other hand we have scenes of utter devastation -- strip mines, clear cuts, industrially

polluted wastelands, and so on. We wish, says the conservationists' program, to have more of the one, and less of the other. To which, of course, one must say amen. But it must be a qualified amen nevertheless, for the program is embarrassingly incomplete. What is wrong with its picture of the world as either deserted landscape or desertified landscape is that it is too simple; it misrepresents both the world and humanity. If we are to have an accurate picture of the world, even in its present diseased condition, we must interpose between the unused landscape and the misused landscape a landscape that humans have used well.

That there have been and are well-used landscapes we know, and to leave these landscapes out of account is to leave out humanity at it best -- humanity as some of us have been, and as more of us might be. It is certainly necessary to keep before ourselves the image of the human being as parasite and wrecker -- what e. e. cummings called "this busy monster manunkind" -- for it is dangerous not to know this possibility in ourselves. And certainly we must preserve some places unchanged; there should be places, and times too, in which we do nothing. But we must also include ourselves as makers, as economic creatures with livings to make, who have the ability, if we will use it, to work in ways that are stewardly and kind toward all that we must use. That is, we must include ourselves as human beings in the fullest sense of the term, understanding ourselves in the amplitude of our cultural inheritance and our legitimate hopes.

We must include ourselves because, whether we choose to do so or not, we are included. We who are now alive are living in this world; we are not dead, nor do we have another world to live in. There are, then, two laws that we had better take to be absolute.

The first is that, as we cannot exempt ourselves from living in this world, if we wish to live, so we cannot exempt ourselves from using the world. Even the most scrupulous vegetarians must use the world -- that is, they must kill creatures, substitute one species for another, and eat food that otherwise would be eaten by other creatures. And so, by the standard of absolute harmlessness, the two available parties are those, not of vegetarian and meat-eaters, but rather of eaters and non-eaters. Us eaters have got 'em greatly outnumbered.

If we cannot exempt ourselves from use, then we must deal with the issues raised by use. And so the second law is that, if we want to

continue living, we cannot exempt use from care.

A third law, perhaps not absolute, but virtually so, is that, if we want to use the world with care, we cannot exempt ourselves from our cultural inheritance, our tradition. This is a delicate subject at present because our cultural tradition happens to be Western, and at present there is a fashion of disfavor toward the Western tradition. But most of us are in the Western tradition somewhat as we are in the world: we are in it because we were born in it. We can't get out of it because it made us what we are; we are, to some extent, what it is. And perhaps we would not like to get out of it by giving up, as we would have to do, our language and its literature, our hereditary belief that all people matter individually, our heritage of democracy, liberty, civic responsibility, stewardship, and so on. We have to see, of course, that this tradition involves errors and mistakes, damages and tragedies. But that only means that the tradition too must be used with care. It is properly subject to critical intelligence, and is just as properly subject to helps and influences from other traditions. But criticize and qualify it as we may, we cannot get along without it, for we have no other way to learn care; and in fact care is a subject about which our tradition has much to teach.

And so I am proposing that, in order to preserve the health of nature, we must preserve ourselves as human beings -- as creatures who possess humanity, not just as a collection of physical attributes, but also as the cultural enablement to be caretakers, good neighbors to one another and to other creatures.

Whether we consider it from a religious point of view, or from the point of view of our merely practical wish to continue to live, our presence in this varied and fertile world is our perpetual crisis. It forces upon us constantly a virtual curriculum of urgent questions: Can we adapt our work and our pleasure to our places so as to live in them without destroying them? That is, can we make adequately practical and pleasing local cultures? Are we Americans capable of an authentic (which is to say a land-based) multiculturalism? Can we limit our work and our economies to a scale appropriate to our places, to our place in the order of things, and to our intelligence? Can we understand ourselves as creatures of limited and modest intelligence? Can we control ourselves? Can we get beyond the assumption that it is possible to live inhumanely and yet "save the planet" by a series of last-minute preservations of things

perceived at the last minute to be endangered and, because endangered, precious?

When we include ourselves as parts or belongings of the world we are trying to preserve, then obviously we can no longer think of the world as "the environment" -- something out there around us. We can see that our relation to the world surpasses mere connection and verges toward identity. And we can see that our right to live in this world whose parts we are is a right that is strictly conditioned. We come face to face with the law I mentioned a while ago; if we want to become "stickers," even if we want to live, we cannot exempt use from care. There is simply nothing in Creation that does not matter. Our tradition instructs us that this is so, and it is being proved to be so, every day, by our experience. We cannot be improved, we cannot help but be damaged, by our useless or greedy or merely ignorant destruction of anything.

Once we have understood that we cannot exempt from our care anything at all that we have the power to damage -- which now means everything in the world -- then we face yet another startling realization: we have reclaimed and revalidated the ground of our moral and religious tradition. We now can see that what we have traditionally called "sins" are wrong, not because they are forbidden, but because they divide us from our neighbors, from the world, and ultimately from God. They deny care and are dangerous to creatures. Sin is opposite to atonement (at-one-ment) as the character of the boomer is opposite to the character of the sticker, as caring is opposite to not-caring.

As an example, I would offer Philip Sherrard's definition of avarice in his invaluable book, Human Image: World Image. Avarice, he says, "is a disposition of our soul which refuses to acknowledge and share in the destiny common to all things and which desires to possess and use all things for itself . . . . Through this seeming act of self-aggrandizement we actually debase the whole of our existence, perverting and even destroying the natural harmony of our being as well as that of everything with which we come into contact." Avarice, then, is a sin for very practical reasons: it makes division within unity, disorder within order, and discord within harmony. This is exactly Ezra Pound's understanding of the related sin of vanity -- and notice here again the appeal to harmony with the natural or created order:

Pull down thy vanity, it is not man
Made courage, or made order, or made grace,
Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.
Learn of the green world what can be thy place,
In scaled invention or true artistry. . .

Pound was not always sane, but in those lines he is sane as few modern people have been.

What we have traditionally called "virtues," on the other hand, are good, not because they have been highly recommended, but because they are necessary; they make for unity and harmony. Faith, to speak only of the highest of the traditional virtues, is the soul's instinctive leap toward its origin, the motion by which we acknowledge the order and harmony to which we belong. To deny this is not to destroy faith, but only to reduce and misdirect it, for faith of some kind is apparently necessary also in the sense that we cannot escape it; we have to have some version of it. Our instinct for faith is like a well-bred Border Collie, who, lacking cattle or sheep, will herd children or chickens or cats. If we don't direct our faith toward God or into some authentic "way" of the spirit, then we direct it toward progress or science or weaponry or education or nature or human nature or doctors or gurus or genetic engineers or computers or NASA. And as we reduce the objects of our faith and so reduce our faith, we inevitably reduce ourselves. We are by nature creatures of faith, as perhaps all creatures are; we all live by counting on things that cannot be proved. As creatures of faith, we must choose either to be religious or to be superstitious. The present age is an age of superstition, and some of our shallowest superstitions have the authorization of our hardest-headed rationalists and realists. The modern ambition to control nature, for instance, is an ambition based foursquare on a superstition: the idea that what we take nature to be is what nature is, or that nature is that to which it can be reduced. If nature is to be controlled, then it has to be reduced to that which is theoretically controllable. It must be understood as a machine, or as the sum of its known, separable, and decipherable parts.

Care, on the contrary, rests upon genuine religion. Care allows creatures to escape our explanations into their actual presence and their essential mystery. In taking care of fellow creatures, we acknowledge that they are not ours; we acknowledge that they belong to an order and a

harmony of which we ourselves are parts. And so in answer to the perpetual crisis of our presence in this abounding and dangerous world, we have only the perpetual obligation of care.

The idea that we cannot exempt anything from care is of course difficult. As creatures of modest intelligence, we ought perhaps to fear that it is impossible. And yet it is this very difficulty that is the key to our place and role as human beings. To be fully human, we must accept the burden of the likelihood that several or even many things may at the same time be of ultimate importance. That should at least save us from the folly of trying to solve "environmental" problems one at a time. It should inform us that we are dealing with the issue of health in its largest and also its most literal sense: creaturely orders and communities that are whole. And so we see that we must be whole ourselves, for the good solutions must come from our wholeness, our affection and reverence, not from our sense of duty, much less from desperation.

We have tried on a large scale the experiment of preferring ourselves before all other creatures, with results that are manifestly disastrous. And now, conscious of those results, we are tempted to correct them by denigrating ourselves, by wishing somehow to efface ourselves. But that is only the opposite kind of self-indulgence, utterly worthless as an answer to any problem. Misanthropy is not the remedy for "anthropocentrism." Finally we must see that we can be made kind toward our fellow creatures only by the same qualities that make us kind toward our fellow humans.

The problem obviously is that we are not well-practiced in kindness toward our fellow humans. In the course of our unprecedented inhumanity toward other creatures and the world, we have become unprecedentedly inhumane toward humans -- and especially, I think, toward human children.

I know of nothing that so strongly calls into question our ability to care for the world as our present abuses of our own reproductivity. How can we take care of the other creatures, all born like ourselves from the world's miraculous fecundity, if we have forsaken the qualities of culture and character that inform the nurture of children?

Maybe it is because of our wish to control nature that we are so

negligent of children (as also of old people) who are the people most manifestly controlled by nature. Or maybe it is because our society is so dominated by the economic ideal of productivity that we have no time for people who are not highly productive. Or maybe it is because of our rather frivolous idea of personal freedom that we shrug off the claims of those most in need and most deserving of our care. Or maybe it is the fault of an economy that now requires both parents of many families to work away from home. Or maybe it is the increasing commercialization of family relationships, according to which nobody, not even a husband or a wife, should do anything for anybody else that is not compensated by a price agreed upon in advance.

Whatever the reason, it is a fact that we are now conducting a sort of general warfare against children, who are being abandoned, abused, aborted, drugged, bombed, neglected, poorly raised, poorly fed, poorly taught, and poorly disciplined. Many of them will not only find no worthy work, but no work of any kind. All of them will inherit a diminished, diseased, and poisoned world. We will visit upon them not only our sins but also our debts. We have set before them thousands of examples -- governmental, industrial, and recreational -- suggesting that the violent way is the best way. And we have the hypocrisy to be surprised and troubled when they carry guns and use them. Our mistreatment of children is not mitigated by our current interest in reforming the institutions into which we put them.

There are of course many parents who care properly for their children, and the traditions of good upbringing still survive. But, like the local traditions of good land use, these traditions of family life have become subordinate, and they are having a hard time. As a lot of parents have found out, it is not easy to bring up your children in a way that is significantly different from the way your neighbors are bringing up their children. And it is a fact that many children now have neither the discipline nor the affection that are meant by "upbringing."

A child psychologist told me not long ago that he frequently sees four-year-olds who, when asked, "Who loves you?" reply, "I don't know," or, "You do." If we have even a suspicion that we must not exempt anything from care, how can we bear this? And yet this negligence is hedged around on every side by talk of rights and freedoms and careers and professions.

Abortion, for instance, which might by defensible as a tragic choice acceptable in the most straitened circumstances, is defended as "a right" derived from "the right of a woman to control her own body." The right of any person to control his or her own body, subject to the usual qualifications, is incontestable -- or, at any rate, it is not going to be contested by me. But the usual qualifications hold that if you can control your own body only by destroying another person's body, then control has come too late. Self-mastery is the appropriate way to control one's own body, not surgery.

I am well aware of the argument that a fetus is not a child until it can live outside the womb, but I am aware also that every creature is surrounded by such questions of dependency and viability all its life. If we are unworthy to live because we are dependent on life-supporting conditions, then none of us has any rights. And I would not try to convince any farmer or gardener that the sown seed newly germinated is not a crop.

Let us suppose, on the contrary, as we once did suppose, as some of us still do, that it is the right of every child, from conception, to have the care of both parents -- would that not go far toward growing us up out of our present sexual childishness and delusion?

As we humans come of age and enter into sexuality, we surely confront yet another law that we had better understand as absolute: sex and fertility are joined. We have spent a lot of effort and money to disjoin them, and have generated a lot of giddy propaganda about our supposed success -- but we have also a lot of tragic evidence to prove our failure, and I mean the numbers of childhood pregnancies, single parents, abortions, abandoned babies, babies kept but unwanted, children raised by public institutions and TV.

How is it that we come to these issues of sexuality in worrying about the conservation of nature? Well, for a reason that ought to be obvious: if sex and fertility are joined, then sex and the world are joined. Sex is a part of the world's wilderness; it is a part of our wildness. To say that we must be careful of it is not to say that we must make it tame, but rather that we must not damage it or ourselves by ignorance or foolishness. The world's wilderness, wherever we meet it, requires us, at a minimum, to grow up, to rid ourselves of false assumptions about who

and where we are. And this, we know, is exactly the way wilderness is understood and used by many primitive societies in their initiation of adolescent boys. To grow up is to go beyond our inborn selfishness and arrogance; to be grown up is to know that the self is not a place to live.

It is unreasonable, it is against nature, to assume either that we are sexually free in some absolute sense or that we have intelligence equal to such freedom. It is wrong to assume that sex carries us into a personal privacy that separates us from everything else. On the contrary, sex joins us to the world. It is one of the world's binding forces, like hunger and thirst. If it doesn't carry us into love for what it binds us to, then it carries us into disrespect, damage and loneliness.

Suppose, then, that instead of talking to our young people about "safe sex" and the presumably attendant freedoms and rights, we told them the truth: that sex is not only pleasurable but also consequential, that it is linked to fertility, that it should lead to obligation and responsibility. That it is beautiful, powerful, and (to the unprepared) dangerous. Suppose we told them -- as young people were told not so long ago -- that if they go to bed together they had better be ready to take care of a child.

And suppose that we older people were to give our minds in good faith to the proposition that one of the chief uses of a culture is to prepare young people for sexual maturity and responsibility. Thinking of the human family's "ecstatic moment, the sexual choice of man and woman," and of the perils of that moment, William Butler Yeats wrote that "the great sculptors, painters and poets are there that instinct may find its lamp."

The lamp that human culture holds up for the guidance of human instinct is something to think about. For our connection to nature is never theoretical. We work it out daily in the most insistently practical ways. In dealing with our own fertility and its consequences, we are not just carrying on personal or private "relationships." We are establishing one of the fundamental terms of our humanity and our connection to the world.

Again, we can turn for clarification to those opposed mythologies (and psychologies) of boomer and sticker. Boomers, as Wallace Stegner understood them, are people who expect or demand that the world conform

to their desires. They either succeed, and thus damage the world, or they fail, and thus damage their families and themselves. Wally understood the white exploitation of the American West as largely the work of people who would not or could not accept the limits imposed by aridity, and who therefore could not know where they were, let alone conform their expectations and their work to the nature of the place. And this question of adaptation to place applies, not just to the settlement of the West, but to our entire history on this continent. Can we develop appropriate cultural responses to the limits of our own nature, and to the nature of our land?

In The New Yorker for December 27, 1993, Daphne Merkin describes as follows "the postmodern view of connubial love":

> To live with a man or a woman on an ongoing, intimate basis is to grow jaded, weary of the imaginative possibilities; at some point our husbands and wives fail to live up to a long-ago sensed potential. They become to us who they have become to themselves, and it is hard to envision them as promising more than they currently yield.

Ms. Merkin's description conforms exactly to the understanding of boomer desire that we find in The Big Rock Candy Mountain: "Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there?" There is nothing new or "postmodern" in Ms. Merkin's sentences, which describe, in fact, the psychology of the Spanish gold-seekers of the sixteenth century and all their countless followers until now. The boomer's mind operates outside all restraints of culture and principle. Just as tragically, it operates outside history; it does not remember experience. It deals with all of its subjects on the basis of the crudest economic metaphor: any person, place, or thing is understood as a mine having a limited "yield;" when the yield falls below expectation, it is time to move on. The only acknowledged measure is "the imaginative possibilities" -- which is to say one's own "exaggerated, uninformed, unrealistic, greedy expectations." It is easy to see that this mind must be equally destructive of nature and of humanity -- hard on landscapes and on spouses; hard on children and other small creatures.

We have, in fact, no right to ask the world to conform to our desires.

Sooner or later, if we hope to grow up, we have to confront the opposite imperative: that our rights and the realization of our desires are limited by human nature, by human community, and by the nature of the places in which we live. If we can accept our world's real limits and the responsibilities that protect our authentic rights, if we can unite affection and fidelity, if we can keep instinct and light together, only then (as our tradition teaches) may we legitimately hope to transcend our limits, so that our life may grow in generosity, love, grace, and beauty without end.

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