



# Wendell Berry

**Biography Timeline:** **August 5, 1934**, born Wendell Erdman Berry in Henry County, Kentucky, the first of four children of John Berry, lawyer and official with Burley Tobacco Growers Association, and Virginia Erdman Berry; **1936**, family moves to New Castle, Kentucky; is baptized at New Castle Baptist Church; **1948**, after 8<sup>th</sup> grade attends Millersburg Military Institute secondary school; **1952**, graduates from Millersburg Military Institute; enters University of Kentucky; meets Tanya Amyx, daughter of a University of Kentucky art professor; **1956**, graduates from University of Kentucky with A. B. degree in English; **1957**, graduates from University of Kentucky with M.A. degree in English; marries Tanya Amyx, with whom he will have two children, Mary Dee and Pryor (Den) Clifford ; **1958**, wins Wallace Stegner fellowship at Stanford University and participates in creative writing program, for a year, along with other Stegner Fellows including Edward Abbey, Ernest Gaines, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, Tillie Olsen, and Robert Stone; **1959**, teaches at Georgetown College; **1960**, publishes first novel *Nathan Coulter*; **1962**, Vachel Lindsay Prize from *Poetry*; receives Guggenheim Fellowship and travels with family to Italy and France; **1962-1964**, teaches at New York University College in the Bronx; **1964**, accepts a creative writing position in the English Department, University of Kentucky; during the next dozen years, while at UK and in and out of Lexington, comes to know Gurney Norman, Thomas Merton and photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard; **1964**, buys 12 acres of farm land, Lanes' Landing, Port Royal, Kentucky; publishes first poetry book, *November twenty six nineteen hundred sixty three*, an elegy for President John F. Kennedy; **1965**, Rockefeller Fellowship; **July 4, 1965**, "comes home" and moves to farm, what will become a 125-acre family homestead; dedicates himself to making previously abused land productive again and becoming environmentally responsible; disdains engine-driven tractors, preferring instead horse-drawn plows; **1977**, resigns from University of Kentucky; edits and writes for the Rodale Press, including *Organic Gardening and Farming* and *The New Farm*; **1987**, American Academy of Arts and Letters Jean Stein Award; returns to the English Department of the University of Kentucky; **1989**, Lannan Foundation Award for Non-Fiction; **1993**, retires once and for all from University of Kentucky; **1994**, Ingersoll Foundation's T. S. Eliot Award; **1997**, Lyndhurst Prize; **1998**, Aitken-Taylor Award for Poetry from *The Sewanee Review*; **1999**, Thomas Merton Award from the Thomas Merton Center for Peace and Social Justice in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Lannan Foundation Award for Non-Fiction; **Dec. 20, 2009**, withdraws his personal papers from the University of Kentucky archives over the university's naming of a new basketball dormitory, "Wildcat Coal Lodge," in honor of coal industry; **March 2, 2011**, awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama; **2011**, The Berry Center established in New Castle, Kentucky, with Mary, Berry's daughter, as Executive Director, with the purpose of "working on issues of farmer education, consumer education, land use, agricultural policy, and urban/rural connectedness;" **February 27, 2012**, The Berry Center establishes The Berry Center Program at St. Catharine College in Springfield, Kentucky, to start an interdisciplinary agricultural degree; **April 23, 2012**, delivers 41st Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, "*It All Turns on Affection*," for the National Endowment for the Humanities; attends worship with his family at Port Royal Baptist Church; **2013**, elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences; receives the Freedom Medal from The Roosevelt Institute; receives the Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion from the American Academy of Religion; **2014**, receives Alan Tate Poetry Prize from *The Sewanee Review*; elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters; **January 28, 2015**, inducted as first living writer into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame.

Wendell Berry is a novelist, essayist, poet, and environmentalist of prodigious

output, with more than 75 books and chapbooks to his credit. What is more remarkable is the astounding quality of his artistic endeavors, marking him as a writer of the first rank among the esteemed leaders of American letters. Though Berry refuses to allow the formation of campaign committees on his behalf, it is clear that he is (or at least should be) among the top U.S. candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature. His equally sterling public advocacy efforts mark him as a top champion of citizenship involvement.

Berry is also a person of profound and deep faith. While he eschews much of the trappings of institutional religion, his disciplines of prayer and devotion are readily seen throughout his writing. His Christian faith is especially and abundantly plain in his poetry. He also bears within his relationships and his writing a deeply sensitive ecumenical spirit.

Berry is a person of the earth, intimately acquainted with sweat and hard work. His fidelity to the rhythms of the earth is even evident in the writing disciplines he practices. For example, he writes during the day time so as not to use electricity. As a second example, he writes in long hand and his wife Tanya (whom he describes as “my critic, my best reader, my fellow worker”) types up his work on a manual Royal typewriter. As still another example, he has chosen the 125 acres of his farm as the location for the actual writing of his “*Sabbath*” poems. He has written these famous “*Sabbath*” verses – most of which were first gathered together in the collection *A Timbered Choir* and then later in *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New 1979-2013* – on Sundays while walking, sitting, and musing on the very ground of his farm.

One of Berry's premier concerns – as a farmer, as a writer, as a citizen and as a Christian – is the recognition and practice of generosity. In one of his poems he says, “Every day you have less reason/ not to give yourself away.” (1)

Honor, too, is one of the major themes in Berry's considerable artistry. Honoring the land, honoring the Creator of the world, honoring neighbors, honoring the truth. Like William Faulkner did with Yoknapatawpha County in his novels, Berry has done with the mythical Port William Township in his novels and short stories. In between nearly every line there is an emphasis on plain-dealing, patient enduring, integrity, and honor.

Love, real, enfleshed, shared love, love that bounds forth from and abides between human beings, is, for Berry, the key to all of life. Love is what compels him to protest the exploitation of Kentucky's wilderness by strip-mining, the fouling of U.S. ground water and rivers by the pollution of contemporary society, and the body counts in America's wars, once in Vietnam and now in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is love that fuels his own calling as a writer. And it is love that keeps him close to the ways of Jesus: “I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.” (2)

## **Praying with Wendell Berry: Suggestions for Use**

Day 1 In *A Timbered Choir*, what may be his most remarkable literary effort with religious sensibilities, Wendell Berry collects poems he has written on his

Kentucky homestead stretching over two decades. In these Sabbath poems Berry gives voice to how life can move us ever toward a posture of generosity. Pray today that God will impart an attitude of generosity within you “toward each new day,” starting now.

Day 2 In the essay “*Word and Flesh*,” in his book *What Are People For?*, Berry describes the twinned mysteries of love’s immeasurable transcendence and its absolute incarnational necessity in human life. “Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, ‘the least of these my brethren.’ Love is not, by its own desire, heroic. It is heroic only when compelled to be. It exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, and unrewarded. The older love becomes, the more clearly it understands its involvement in partiality, imperfection, suffering, and mortality. Even so, it longs for incarnation. It can no longer live by thinking.” (3) Pray today by giving thanks for the specific incarnations of love in your life. They may baffle you but they also may still move you to live each day with exhilarating joy.

Day 3 In the poem “*What We Need Is Here*,” Berry describes the given-ness of life’s multitude of graces.

*Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, holds  
them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye,  
clear. What we need is here. (4)*

Pray today by offering a prayer of joyful thanks that what you need is available to the grasp of your heart, mind, and soul. Say not only “Thanks,” but receive the “given,” the graces that are yours.

Day 4 In one of his “*Sabbath*” poems, Berry gives a multi-faceted, almost cosmic view of what his Sabbath experience is on his farm.

*Another Sunday morning comes  
And I resume the standing Sabbath  
Of the woods, where the finest blooms  
Of time return, and where no path  
  
Is worn but wears its makers out*

*At last, and disappears in leaves  
Of fallen seasons....*

*..... Past life*

*Lives in the living. Resurrection  
Is in the way each maple leaf  
Commemorates its kind, by connection*

*Outreaching understanding....*

*Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by  
Your will, not ours. And it is fit  
Our only choice should be to die  
Into that rest, or out of it. (5)*

Pray today for an understanding, plain or mystical, of how the keeping of Sabbath, initiated by God, helps to keep us whole and fit and ever more moving into the resurrected life that God intends for all of the earth.

Day 5 In *What Are People For?*, Berry writes an appreciative reminiscence about one of his most influential teachers, the writer Wallace Stegner. In his recollection, Berry comments on the importance of teachers and the impact teachers have, directly and indirectly, on our lives: "A teacher's major contribution may pop out anonymously in the life of some ex-student's grandchild. A teacher, finally, has nothing to go on but faith, a student nothing to offer in return but testimony." (6) Give thanks for your teachers whose contributions to your life are "popping out" even now and may yet do so in the future, in your children, among your friends. If you are a teacher, seek God's strength for enduring, confident that your efforts will bear fruit. If you are a student, pray for an occasion to give testimony.

Day 6 In *Sabbaths 2001*, Berry takes up his Sabbath poetry-writing practice again and offers insights about truly seeing and hearing in the context of prayer.

*Sit and be still  
until in the time  
of no rain you hear  
beneath the dry wind's  
commotion in the trees  
the sound of flowing  
water among the rocks,  
a stream unheard before,  
and you are where  
breathing is prayer. (7)*

Pray today that God will lead you ever closer to that place and time where and when “breathing is prayer.”

Day 7 In his book of poems, *Leavings*, Berry proffers still more of his “Sabbath” poems. In one of them from 2005, he writes:

*I know that I have life  
only insofar as I have love.*

*I have no love  
except it come from Thee.*

*Help me, please, to carry  
This candle against the wind.*(8)

Pray this poem today with a profound sense of hope for the strength God gives for the endurance of the light of love in your life.

Also on this day, sometime during your waking hours, use each of the following ways of praying which have been inspired by Wendell Berry.

- \* Quiet your mind, heart, and soul with a time of rest and reflection and consider the realities which really last and are part of God’s eternal nature.
- \* Pray that your daily routine will be commensurate with an ecologically sound approach to conserving the earth as the home for humanity’s coming generations.
- \* Ponder the significance and power of “place” in your life.
- \* Pray for good work to do, and pray for strength to give to God and your neighbors the best work that is in you.
- \* Count the ways that Sabbath has happened for you this week.

#### NOTES

- 1 Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), p. 167.
- 2 Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common Place: The Agrarian Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 235.
- 3 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 200.
- 4 Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington D. C.: Counterpoint, 1999), p. 90.
- 5 *A Timbered Choir*, pp. 6-7.
- 6 *What Are People For?*, p. 54.
- 7 Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths 2001* (Monterrey, Kentucky: Larkspur, 2003)
- 8 Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010) p. 33.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Jason Peters, ed. *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007)

Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (eds.) *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009)

### Wendell Berry's Poetry

Wendell Berry, *The Country of Marriage* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973)

Wendell Berry, *Given: New Poems* (Washington D. C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005)

Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010)

Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington D. C.: Counterpoint, 1999)

Wendell Berry, *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New 1979-2013* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013)

Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998)

Wendell Berry, *A Small Porch* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016)

### Wendell Berry's Nonfiction

Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970)

Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000)

Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992)

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977)

Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990)