

What are humans for?

Rich Heffern | Oct. 23, 2009 NCR Today

Somehow we manage to both disparage our humanity and exalt it at the same time.

We are told by TV evangelists that we are unworthy, abject sinners. Low self-esteem and depression are epidemic, even among teens. There is widespread interest in angels and UFOs, beings that will perhaps save us from ourselves. We don't really feel good about our humanness. We're always trying to improve. Self help books are legion in bookstores.

On the other hand, our human-centered theologies zero in on the relationship between God and humans, to the exclusion of all else. We see ourselves as the pinnacle of things, the last word on the subject of life forms. We see the whole universe as just a backdrop to the salvation drama between God and us humans.

The nonhuman world seldom enters into our deliberations about our economic future or our speculation about our place in the divine scheme of redemption. We exclude ourselves almost completely from what Fr. Thomas Berry calls "the great conversation," that ongoing dialogue between us and our planet's rivers, mountains and forests. The rich resources of the natural world are seen as nothing more than the raw material that fuels our constant "progress."

What healthy spirituality should do, among other things, is leave us with a proper estimation of our value as humans, one that is neither too disparaging nor too exalted. Spirituality enables us to form a realistic measure of our value and place, based on our relationship with the divine.

We need to hurry up and achieve this true measure, for a distorted assessment of our humanity destroys the planet.

We casually destroy the other life with which we share the planet, with no sure knowledge of the consequences of such drastic tampering. In our drive to improve ourselves, when bookstore shelves overflow with self help tomes and new health regimens, do we ever stop to ask: What sense does it make to be a healthy person living on a dying Earth??

Healing this imbalance in our self image perhaps begins at home, in finding ways that are practical, available to everyone, rooted in age-old human practices. Block by block, household by household, one person at a time, may very well be the only way back to a world that is cherished as sacred, and to a view of our humanity that is in balance.

One of the foremost prophets in the movement to restore balance to the human enterprise is novelist and essayist Wendell Berry who lives and farms with his family in Henry County, Kentucky, and is the author of more than 30 books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

The traditional community is one of Berry's central metaphors for cultural and natural harmony and the touchstone for determining where the human being fits in to the whole. Such a community is a highly intricate

alliance in which individuals function as 'parts' of a membership, each depending on and affecting all the others. The traditional community, like the traditional farms within it, is a model of interdependency. A neighborhood or even a parish is such a community.

Berry explains, 'A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives.'

In a commencement address delivered at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, Berry gave some advice that to most modern graduates would sound old fashioned. But the advice he gave was timeless, and his reminder seems deeply prophetic in view of the world's current environmental and financial crises. He told the graduates:

'Understand that there can be no successful human economy apart from nature or in defiance of nature.

'Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale.

'In making things always bigger and more centralized, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and more dangerous to everything else.

'Learn, therefore, to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale greed, crudity, and glamour.

'Make a home. Help to make a community. Be loyal to what you have made. Put the interest of the community first.

'Love your neighbors, not the neighbors you pick out, but the ones you have.

'As far as you are able make your lives dependent upon your local place, neighborhood, and household, which thrive by care and generosity, and independent of the industrial economy, which thrives by damage.

Our task as Christians is to not stand silently by, while a predatory economy ravages the world, destroys its natural beauty and health, divides and plunders its human communities and households. What can one person do? Invest in local communities. It's a good way to love this miraculous world that we did not make, that is a gift to us.

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