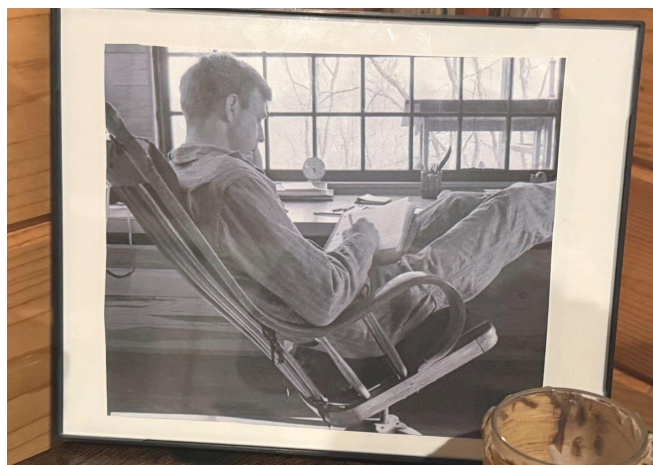




In Memoriam: Wendell Berry

1934–2026

It was late fall or early winter of 2000, as I recall. Wendy and I, along with a few friends, made our way to a bookstore in downtown St. Paul to hear a man read from his newest book. It was not the first time I had heard of this man, Wendell Berry of Kentucky. But that evening made me a student of this Kentucky farmer, novelist, poet, conservationist, and profoundly deep and witty writer.



The book from which he read that night was *Jayber Crow: A Novel: The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself*. I left that bookstore with a copy that is now worn, battered, and deeply loved. I now have thirty-five of his books in a place of prominence on my bookshelf. I have read them all, many of them more than once. I am pretty sure a friend or two has others

that once sat on my shelf but never found their way home. On a wall in our house, I have a letter from him, written in Advent 2017, and nearby, a picture of him sitting at his writing desk—just a few feet from my own.

Wendell died on August 31, 2026, at his home in Port Royal, Kentucky. He was ninety-two. I grieve his death. I feel it as a personal loss. My tears fell, and my voice choked when I heard the news because, for more than twenty-six years, he had become an honored teacher, a spiritual influence, and a wise voice in my life. I want to tell you why.

My remembrance begins, perhaps surprisingly, with the implements he used to write more than fifty books—including his final book, published only a year ago when he was ninety-one. He

wrote all of them with pen or pencil because he believed that one can type faster than one can think well.

One of the first pieces of his writing I encountered—possibly forty years ago—was his explanation to a skeptical world of why he would never use a computer. “*Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer*” first appeared in the Autumn 1987 issue of New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly. Harper’s reprinted it in September 1988 under the heading “*Against PCs*.” He never did buy one. He continued to write with a pencil to the end. Many ridiculed, criticized, and mocked him for it. His response in the essay ended with this thought:

“My final and perhaps my best reason for not owning a computer is that I do not wish to fool myself. I disbelieve, and therefore strongly resent, the assertion that I or anybody else could write better or more easily with a computer than with a pencil. I do not see why I should not be as scientific about this as the next fellow: when somebody has used a computer to write work that is demonstrably better than Dante’s, and when this better is demonstrably attributable to the use of a computer, then I will speak of computers with a more respectful tone of voice, though I still will not buy one.”¹

This storyteller made me laugh, cry, grieve, celebrate, and ponder more than any other writer in my seventy-seven years of life. He taught me how to pay attention, belong, remain faithful, grow old, and face death.

Over the past few days, I have reviewed the many ways his words found their way into my own. A student at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology once said to me, “I don’t think you have ever given a speech without introducing us to something else you have learned from Wendell Berry.” The student was probably right.

At my farewell homily to the school, I was given my own copy of Wendell’s **Jayber Crow**. A theology professor had absconded with it from my office one day while I was away—had “stolen” my own book—and sent it to Wendell to sign for me. He wrote: “Oct., 2017, Dear Keith Anderson, as you continue your adventure, I know you have the good wishes of your friends at The Seattle School. To theirs, I now add mine. I hope to see you here. Sincerely, Wendell Berry.”

Along with my book came a hand-drawn map to help Wendy and me find our way to his farm in Port Royal, Kentucky, and an invitation to visit. COVID intervened before we could make that

¹ Wendell Berry, “*Why I am Not Going to Buy a Computer*,” Harper’s Magazine, 1987.

sacred pilgrimage. But we wrote, and my journey with him continued until the time of his passing. I did meet him and greet him with my heart's gratitude when he came to Seattle and spent an evening at Benaroya Hall reading his words, but mostly answering questions from perhaps one thousand people—many of them young farmers seeking to live faithfully according to his vision of careful stewardship of the earth.

In this remembrance, I want to do what I tried to do for our students at The Seattle School: introduce you to what I learned from Wendell, in the hope that you will buy first one, and eventually many, of his books.

What did I learn from him that I most want others to hear?

1. The Holiness of the Small, the Local, and the Particular

For more than six decades, Wendell wrote about a fictional community called Port William, Kentucky. He wrote of the Catletts, Feltners, Keiths, Coulters, Thripples, Woolforks, Dark Tom Cotman, Uncle Ben Fewclothes, Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othey, Burley, Hannah, Dr. Ardmire, Brother Whitespade, Nathan, Virgil, Troy Chatham, and Matty Keith—to name only a few. Most were part of the Port William community.

Some might say that his world was small, but they have possibly never read his work. His world was not small. It was particular—a place grounded in land, river, history, and people. From that one place, Wendell saw the whole world.

This may be the central Wendell teaching in my own work. God does not meet us only in dramatic spiritual experiences. God meets us in particular people, familiar places, ordinary work, repeated conversations, and the slow faithfulness of staying.

Wendell's Port William gave me an imaginative picture of this truth. People become themselves not in abstraction, but through knowing—and being known by—a particular community. This connects directly with my theology of identity, belonging, and sacred purpose.² The local and particular are not limitations to transcend; they are the ground beneath our feet from which we learn to see.

² Keith R. Anderson, **On Holy Ground**, title page.

2. Spirituality Begins by Watching

In an essay titled “On the Lookout for What Would Be Revealed,” I began with Berry’s description of Port William: “Port William repaid watching.”³ Paying attention is, in its own right, a spiritual discipline. “Spirituality is learning to pay attention to the presence of God in everything.”⁴

Wendell taught me that revelation often waits within the ordinary. We need eyes willing to linger. Paying attention is not merely observation; it is a spiritual practice. The person, place, classroom, neighborhood, or conversation before me may already be holy ground.⁵

Once I begin to watch in this way, I also begin to see the bonds that hold people together. Attention leads naturally toward belonging.

3. Belonging Means Membership—and Membership Requires Fidelity

Wendell’s word “membership” has become one of my principal ways of describing genuine community. Membership is deeper than affiliation, attendance, employment, or institutional loyalty. It means that our lives belong to one another.

A paragraph from *Jayber Crow* deserves to be quoted at length. It describes Jayber’s experience of the church:

“ My vision of the gathered church that had come to me after I became the janitor had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. What I saw now was the community, imperfect and irresolute, but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete, and yet ever holding bonds of the various forms of affection. It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing, and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill. I knew that in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership. It was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time. For the

³ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 5.

⁴ Keith R. Anderson, Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide to Seeking and Giving Direction*, p. 40

⁵ Tracy Balzer and Rod Reed: Building a Culture of Faith, a chapter by Keith Anderson, pp 141-154.

community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected beyond time by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness. As it is said, we may be perfected by grace.”⁶

The way Wendell taught me about fidelity was not abstract, theoretical, or philosophical. His book *Fidelity* was a collection of five stories about people from the Port William “membership,” as he called the community.

Burley Coulter had been a wild young man, sometimes more present to the wilderness, farms, and land outside the conventions of Port William. He was most comfortable “out” there—in both geography and choice. He would sometimes disappear for days and nights with only his dog, fishing pole, and gun. He loved to be in the woods at night. He hunted, fished, and foraged. And then he grew old and sick. He needed surgery but had become too weak for it, until he slipped into a coma. Those who knew him best and loved him most knew that he could not—or should not—die in a hospital bed, kept alive by machines until the inevitable took place. So his friends “rescued” him from the hospital. I will not tell you the rest of the story; that is Wendell’s to tell. But he called it “fidelity.”

People recognize that they belong to one another and find ways to do what needs to be done.

In my farewell homily to The Seattle School, I connected Berry’s idea—and his word, fidelity—with the biblical idea of covenant: remaining present to something human and flawed because it is sacred, and because our faithfulness will shape generations.⁷ My own membership is beautifully diverse—young and old, colorful, drawn from many denominations and from no denomination at all—but these are people to whom I belong, just as they belong to us.

Such fidelity cannot survive on constant activity alone. It needs a rhythm of stopping—a Sabbath in which affection, place, and creation can again be received as gifts.

⁶ Berry, Jayber Crow, p. 205

⁷ Anderson, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, October 2017.

4. Sabbath Reminds Me That the World Does Not Depend upon Me

Berry exposed the spiritual danger of busyness—the temptation to use activity, influence, and accomplishment as measures of personal worth. He believed that Sabbath asks us to stop, rest, recognize that the world continues without our assistance, and delight in its beauty.

For probably fifty years, he kept a sacred practice. He spent his Sunday mornings “in a walking meditation, observing the world through his poetry.”⁸ He wrote in the preface to his Sabbath poems, “The poems are about moments when heart and mind are open and aware.”⁹

I now believe that without a Sabbath way of life, I remain driven and driving and come to believe in my own importance. Wendell’s Sabbath is therefore not mere relaxation. It is an act of humility, relinquishment, and renewed wonder. It restores creation from usefulness to gift and frees me from the fantasy that everything depends upon me.

*I go among trees and sit still,
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.*

*Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings and I hear its song.*

After days of labor,

⁸ Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems*, 1979- 1997, back cover.

⁹ Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, p xviii

*mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns; the trees move.*¹⁰

Our nation faces a crisis in listening because we have lost not only the civility to ask good questions, but the curiosity to believe the other has much to say. Wendell Berry's novels and poetry have always invited me into curiosity and discourse through worthy questions. In the older years, I have time enough to sit with questions that have long puzzled me. Sabbath is a time to ponder, wonder, muse, meditate, and ask God—and myself—my questions. Wendell said it with characteristic humor:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*¹¹

Sabbath, for Wendell, was almost always outdoors. He suggested that readers might best receive this poetry by finding their own quiet place to sit and listen—to enter Sabbath in its truest meaning. We stop in order to hear and to sing our song.

That slowing changes the way I understand time itself. It prepares me to receive aging not simply as diminishment, but as another call to fidelity.

5. Aging Calls Me to Generosity, Not Irrelevance

Berry's poem "There Is No Going Back" became the framework for my meditation on turning seventy. The more of his work I read, the more I heard him saying that aging gathers into us the lives, deaths, loves, and losses that have belonged to us. We become keepers of memory.

¹⁰ Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, "I go among the trees and sit still," p. 5

¹¹ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 1983, p. 97.

Reading his Sabbath poetry, and other poems as well, led me into a spirituality of aging: wisdom should become generosity, presence, mentoring, blessing, and availability. My reflections on turning seventy were published by The Allender Center in an essay I called *“There Is No Going Back.”*¹²

I took the title from a poem by Wendell Berry. Few writers have the ability for just the right word to evoke emotion and thought. Read it and see where its words land in your heart, story, and experience.

“No, no, there is No Going Back”

No, no, there is no going back.

*Less and less you are
that possibility you were.*

*More and more you have become
those lives and deaths
that have belonged to you.*

*You have become a sort of grave
containing much that was
and is no more in time, beloved
then, now and always.*

*And so you have become a sort of tree
standing over a grave.*

*Now more than ever you can be
generous toward each day
that comes, young to disappear
forever, and yet remain
unaging in the mind*

*Every day you have less reason
not to give yourself away.*¹³

¹² Anderson, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, “There Is No Going Back, Part One, November 5, 2019.

¹³ Wendell Berry, *New Sabbath Poems*, “No, no, there is no going back,”

I reflected on this further in my At the Table blog, “A Word to the Wise: You Are Not Finished.”¹⁴ I called Berry a “farmer, poet, and prophet.” In his late eighties or early nineties, he said something like this: “at least I’m not going to die young.” I wrote, “We are not called merely to grow older. We are invited to grow deeper.”¹⁵

Berry resisted the notion that older people should quietly withdraw. The later years remain a vocation: to pray, listen, mentor, remember, bless, and leave “one more breadcrumb of wisdom.” And as memory deepens, those who have died do not simply vanish from the community that formed us.

6. The Dead Remain Part of the Membership

One of the most moving uses of Wendell’s wisdom appeared in my At the Table blog, in a post called “*ICU on a Friday Night*,” written the weekend Wendy and I joined our family to accompany her sister Terri through her final hours in the ICU.¹⁶

I could not help but think of Jayber Crow, the barber, orphaned as a young boy and adopted by Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othey. Later in his life, he found a quiet place to sit and live with his memories, his grief, and his love. “I saw that, for me, this country would always be populated with presences and absences, presences of absences, the living, and the dead. The world as it is would always be a reminder of the world that was and of the world that is to come.”

I can only rarely read those words without remembering those I have loved and lost. Wendell’s words become more than nostalgia, deeper than sentimentality, and very close to a Christian understanding of communion, memory, and resurrection.

The dead are absent, but they are not erased. They remain present in places, stories, gestures, landscapes, and the people whose lives they shaped. The world as it is continues to bear witness to the world that was—and, through faith, to “the world that is to come.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Anderson, “A Word to the Wise: You are not Finished,” published in the blog *At the Table*, amentoringway.org, August 4, 2026

¹⁵ Anderson, At the Table, **A Word to the Wise: You are not finished**” August 4, 2026

¹⁶ Anderson, At the Table, amentoringway.org, “**The ICU on a Friday Night**” October 21, 2025

¹⁷ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 132

This is why Wendell's words belong so naturally in my recent stories of the death of Wendy's sister, Terri, and my own brother, Jerry. He gives language to my conviction that death changes the form of belonging but cannot finally abolish it.

Along with its announcement of Wendell's passing, The Berry Center included this short poem by him:

The Loved Ones

*The loved ones we call the dead
depart from us and for a while
are absent. And then as if
called back by our love, they come
near us again. They enter our dreams.
We feel they have been near us
when we have not thought of them.
They are simply here, simply waiting
while we are distracted among
our obligations. At last
it comes to us: They live now
in the permanent world.
We are the absent ones.¹⁸*

To belong to the living and the dead is not merely to remember them. It is to let love take material form in the care we offer one another now.

7. Faithfulness Is Expressed through Small Acts of Care

In my final aging essay, Wendell's vision of life became embodied in the little things I try to do when Wendy's neuropathy brings intense pain: carrying ice, filling a water glass, bringing food, getting the mail, offering humor, music, or a trip for coffee.

It has become a deeply held belief that I am called to vocation not only as a job or career, but as a way of life. Vocation is not always about what I do, but it is always about how I do whatever I find myself called to do. Calling has everything to do with how I am a teacher, parent, friend,

¹⁸ Wendell Berry, "The Loved Ones," The New Yorker, November 17, 2025

nurse, manager, technology banker, pharmacist, custodian, artist, or writer. Following Jesus is always about how I do whatever I am called to do. I am called to participate in something good that God intends for me and that the world needs. I call this sacred purpose.¹⁹

These actions may appear insignificant, but they are precisely the work of fidelity. Wendell taught me that love is not chiefly an emotion or abstraction. Love takes material form. It cares for bodies, remembers needs, tends places, keeps promises, and does the next necessary thing.

In our culture, we tend to regard large things and major events as important. We imagine that extraordinary missions are the ones that count. Wendell's stories tell me otherwise. His own life was a study in integrity. Half the day he farmed; the other half, he wrote. He raised crops and animals, both of which require small acts of daily care. I picture him mucking stalls, plowing fields, shaping and sharpening his equipment and tools—and then writing more than fifty books, including some of America's finest novels, essays, and poetry.

His daily rhythm honored both kinds of work: the quiet, often solitary labor and the work that led to national prominence. Today, when we buy meat from the cooperative in Kentucky that practices his values of the local farm, we enter his membership at our own table.

Choosing how I will spend my days is not merely selecting the correct occupation or receiving a single divine blueprint. It is learning, over time, to notice how God has accompanied me through places, relationships, interruptions, losses, and unexpected turns—often through the small, seemingly unimportant acts of kindness, care, and love.

For me, nowhere did Wendell express the sacredness of such enduring, embodied love more beautifully than in a poem I have carried into my own marriage.

8. The Blue Robe

For many of the fifty-six years of my marriage, I have tried to read one of Wendell's poems to Wendy each year on our anniversary in August. Most years, my voice cannot finish the words, and my eyes fill with too many tears to see the words on the page anyway.

I dedicated my book *A Spirituality of Listening* to her with his words because of the raw honesty of words I could not write but feel and know.

¹⁹ Anderson, *On Holy Ground*, p. 38

Because you alone know the meaning of the words: “Now instead of two stories fumbling to meet, we belong to one story that the two, joining, made.”

Powerful as they are standing alone, in their context the words become our life together in all its imperfection, flaws, failures, redemption, forgiveness, and grace.

The Blue Robe

By Wendell Berry

How joyful to be together, alone
as when we first were joined
in our little house by the river
long ago, except that now we know

each other, as we did not then;
and now instead of two stories fumbling
to meet, we belong to one story
that the two, joining, made. And now

we touch each other with the tenderness
of mortals, who know themselves:
how joyful to feel the heart quake

at the sight of a grandmother,
old friend in the morning light,
beautiful in her blue robe!²⁰

Final Thoughts

My final thoughts on the lessons I have learned from Wendell are, I dare to say, not yet finished. There is more to read, ponder, and honor. As long as I have hours and days, I shall continue to be his student, however imperfectly I might understand his ways of thinking. Still, I have been shaped by what I have read. One line, taken entirely out of context from his poem “Boone,” may offer the best clue to what I continue to enter: “We hold a country in our minds...”

²⁰ *Wendell Berry, New Collected Poems, “The Blue Robe,” p. 315*

I have rarely been to Kentucky, and I met Jayber Crow—the fictional barber of the fictional town of Port William—only in the novel. When I finished reading the book for the first time, I held it in my hands like a sacred object and cried because it was “finished.”

Later, I held many more of Wendell’s books with the same sacred honor: *Hannah Coulter*; *Nathan Coulter: A Novel*; *A Place on Earth: A Novel*; *The Memory of Old Jack*; *The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership*; *Remembering: A Novel*; *Fidelity: Five Stories*; *Watch with Me and Six Other Stories of the Yet-Remembered Ptolemy Proudfoot and His Wife*, *Miss Minnie*; *A World Lost: A Novel*; *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories*; *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*; *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership*; *How It Went: Thirteen More Stories of the Port William Membership*; and *Marce Catlett: The Force of a Story*.

Wendell Berry taught me that the holy life is not found by escaping the ordinary, but by becoming faithful to it—to this place, these people, this body, this work, this grief, and this day.

Or, even more concisely: Wendell taught me to pay attention, belong deeply, live slowly, keep faith, and give myself away.

That is the Wendell Berry who appears in my writings: not simply the defender of farms and rural communities, but a witness to covenant—a man who taught me that we become human through faithful membership in creation, community, memory, suffering, and hope.



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