

Volume 9 Number 2 (2015): 39-54
<http://www.infactispax.org/journal>

Inculcating Peaceability: “Let us make what peace is left for us to make”

Jane M. Schreck
Bismarck State College
Jane.Schreck@bismarckstate.edu

What Kentucky writer-farmer-thinker Wendell Berry thinks about agriculture is usually straightforward and clearly identified as such. What he thinks about culture sometimes has to be gleaned from his opinions on other topics. One topic of American culture that he takes on often in an oblique way is education, and his short story “Pray without Ceasing” (*Fid*, 1992) is a prime example. Many relevant themes of education play out in the story and how Berry tells it, but formal education is never mentioned—the closest we get is the appearance of Jack Beechum’s grade school teacher. Yet Berry himself cited this story as a way to gain insight into how education could better serve our world, and the story connects with his deepest hope for education. The story raises important questions about the relationship between formal education and violence, something Berry has called the “great moral issue of our time” (*WI*, 2005, p. 145), and the story suggests how education could do better.

Andy Catlett is the narrator of the story. He is thirty in 1965 and newly moved back to Port William with his family to farm. Braymer Hardy, an older neighbor, has found a newspaper article from 1912 about the murder of Andy’s great-grandfather Ben Feltner by his neighbor and friend Thad Coulter. Andy is moved by this tangible link to the past to seek out what else can be known, to fill

in the gaps in what he knows about the murder “from bits and pieces dropped out of conversations among [his] elders” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 8). He goes to see his grandfather, Mat Feltner, ill and failing now, and ends up talking to his grandmother, Margaret Feltner, instead.

The murder of Ben Feltner is one of the great tragedies in the history of Port William, relieved only by the certain knowledge that it could have been much worse. Ben Feltner was a good man, well liked in the community. Braymer Hardy tells Andy that he knew Ben and says he was “fine as they come. They never made ‘em no finer. The last man on earth you’d a thought would get shot” (p. 6). When Andy shows his grandmother the old article, her first response is to say, “It’s a wonder that Mat didn’t kill Thad Coulter that morning” (p. 11). The tragedy that could have been worse has its roots in the ambition to help a child get out and improve himself.

In the early twentieth century, Thad Coulter’s son, Abner, wants to open a grocery store in Hargrave, county seat and a town with more promise than Port William. After all, “Abner had been reserved for something better” (p. 22) than farming, as his parents understand: “Abner was smart—too smart, as Thad and Rachel agreed, without ever much talking about it, to spend his life farming a hillside” (p. 22). Berry has a diagnosis for the condition, as he explains:

And yet in Port William, as everywhere else, it was already the second decade of the twentieth century. And in some of the people of the town and the community surrounding it, one of the characteristic diseases of the twentieth century was making its way: the suspicion that they would be greatly improved if they were someplace else. (pp. 19-20)

As it would for any parent, this judgment causes dissonance for Thad. He loves his farm, thinks it is “a pretty farm” (p. 22), largely because of the work and thought he has devoted to it. To then deem the farm unworthy for his own son causes Thad to be “divided in his mind” (p. 22). It is as if to love his son, he must despise his life. Thad has trapped himself between these two extremes, confusing his judgment and pressing him to disregard his life and himself. But Braymer tells Andy, “Thad Coulter was a good kind of feller, too, far as that goes. I don’t reckon he was the kind you’d a thought would shoot somebody, either” (p. 6). But things get set in motion.

Abner takes out a loan from the Hargrave bank “secured by a mortgage on his father’s farm” (p. 12), so Thad “had in effect given his life and its entire effort as hostage to the possibility that Abner, his only son, could be made a merchant in a better place than Port William” (p. 12). When Abner fails and disappears into the night on a borrowed horse (p. 12), Thad is left to face the bank and the near

inevitability of losing his farm. Further, he imagines the public ridicule he will face because of his broad boasting about Abner's success in leaving Port William. His desperation turns to delusion with the help of two days of solitary drinking.

Disgusted with his son, he becomes disgusted with himself, and in spite of the pleadings of his wife and daughter to come into the house, he declares that he is fit only to "shelter with the dogs and hogs" (p. 14). After two days and nights of drinking in the barn, he walks to town to seek help from his friend Ben Feltner. As Thad explains his situation to Ben, Thad lapses into irrational cursing, and Ben judges it best to allow Thad time to sober up. After listening for a time, Ben tells him to go and come back later. "And then we'll see" (p. 15), he tells Thad.

Perhaps Ben should have expected this, but Thad is insulted to be turned away. Broken and humiliated, he cannot see the sense of what Ben has proposed. The request that they discuss the matter when Thad is thinking clearly pushes him further into despair, and he begins cursing:

I cuss you to your damned face, Ben Feltner, for I have come to you with my hat in my hand and you have spit in it. You have throwed in your lot with them sons of bitches against me. (p. 16)

Ben remains even-tempered and not physically forceful, but escorts Thad out in a way that is beyond refusal. Far from wanting to insult Thad, Ben is already making plans to help, and after Thad leaves, Ben goes out, hoping to find some of Thad's kinsmen in town, to let them know what has happened and get them to help Thad sober up. Ben finds Dave Coulter, a cousin of Thad's, in town and tells him that once Thad is sober, "then we could see if we can help him out of his scrape" (p. 29). That he uses the word *scrape* suggests a deference to his friend's problem.

Meanwhile, Thad's rage at himself and the world gets redirected at his daughter Martha Elizabeth, who has come to town to take him home. Once they are home, he threatens her with a whip for trying to help him, his uncharacteristic cruelty toward her further shaming and angering him until all his anger becomes focused on Port William itself and its living embodiment, Ben Feltner, the friend he thinks has turned him away. Ben has become in Thad's mind his only hope, his only friend, and his sharpest critic. Having encouraged his son to disown Port William, Thad finds it easier now to do the same—he too becomes afflicted with the disease of wondering if someplace else would be better. "If Port William could not save him," he thinks, "then surely there was another place that could" (p. 20). But Thad cannot simply disappear into the night on a stolen horse as his son did—his attachment to Port William is too strong. Instead he needs to destroy

it: “he must rid himself of it somehow” (p. 20). Thad decides he needs to go back to town with a pistol, but first he finishes off his jug of whiskey.

At the very moment when Ben is standing on the street in Port William, laying out a plan with Dave Coulter to help Thad, Thad arrives back in town and shoots Ben in the forehead. As Thad flees Port William, he realizes that “two lives had ended for a possibility that never had existed: for Abner Coulter’s mounting up in a better place” (p. 43). By the time he reaches Hargrave, the full reality of his act has hit Thad, and he turns himself in to the sheriff, saying “I have killed a man... Ben Feltner, the best friend I ever had” (p. 45).

But this short story is not over; it does not end with the murder nor with Thad’s subsequent suicide. Berry’s fictional world, while sometimes based on real people, landscapes, and events, is not history. He is a fiction writer, not a chronicler. He chooses where to begin and end, what characters and details to include, what order to present the events, what imagery, what point of view and voice. He uses imagination—his own and his reader’s—to shape the story and give it meaning and wholeness. The point of “Pray without Ceasing” is not senseless death. The deaths have to be placed within the context of the people, landscapes, and events—and it all needs to be placed within the context of time. We know something of the violent nature of Port William, particularly in the years following the Civil War, from stories such as “The Hurt Man” (*TDL*, 2004) and “Fly Away, Breath” (*PT*, 2012). If violence can be stopped, it has to be stopped with a decision for peaceability. It has to be stopped with an acknowledgement of human frailty and with mercy. It has to be stopped finally with love.

Ben Feltner’s son, Mat, is in town at the time of the murder. He is twenty-eight years old, a young husband and father with the potential for a long life ahead of him, a son yet to be born, and grandchildren still undreamed of. He has been away to college and is now back, settling in to what becomes a long life in Port William. But his life might have been sadly different. At the sight of his dead father bleeding into the dirt, he is seized with an impulse for revenge, the need to answer violence with more violence. Jack Beechum, Ben’s brother-in-law and Mat’s uncle, is in town that day too, and when he sees Mat running from Ben’s body and toward his horse, Jack knows instinctively that Mat must be stopped. He does not have time to have puzzled it out—“Jack could hardly have known what he was doing. He had had no time to think. He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he *could* think” (p. 36; italics original). Jack loved and respected Ben Feltner as he would a father. Jack can be impulsive and heedless of consequences. He has also been known to indulge his anger and resort to violence himself (*OJ*, 1974/1999, pp. 63 and 67). His own grief and rage must have been tremendous, but in an instant, his own need for revenge becomes

subsumed by love. He knows instinctively what Ben would have wanted and what Mat needs. He collides at a full run with Mat and is able to hold Mat in “a desperate embrace” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 37), stopping Mat from adding his own life to the lives destroyed that day. And Jack accomplishes this at considerable cost to himself, for Jack “ached afterward. Something went out of him that day, and he was not the same again” (p. 36).

But through their struggle, Jack has been able to redirect Mat’s anger and grief, allow Mat time to come to himself and end the violence, and give him the strength to contain that grief and anger (pp. 36-37). When Mat goes home to tell his mother of the murder, he is gentle again, he is clear in his thinking, and he is mindful of his responsibilities to those he loves and who love him. His four-year-old daughter, Bess, has been waiting for the men to come home for the noon meal. When her father comes in, she is happy that they will be able to eat. The adults know from the look on Mat’s face that something is wrong, but Mat has the strength to spare his daughter the abruptness of the news that her grandfather is dead. He suggests that his wife, Margaret, take Bess upstairs to read a book. Years later, as Margaret Feltner is remembering it all and telling the story to her grandson Andy, she says she knew then what had happened, and she “just wanted to crawl away” (p. 38). But she too has the responsibilities of love. She tells Andy, “I had your mother to think about. You always have somebody to think about, and it’s a blessing” (p. 38).

Mat’s turn from violence is tenuous, and Jack knows it. He stays by Mat’s side all day while preparations are made for a vigil at the house. That evening, just as the Feltners and the neighborhood ladies and a few of the men are preparing to sit down to supper—a recognition that the living must go on, in their ordinary routines and in their ordinary needs—a crowd gathers in front of the house. It is the men of Port William, come to declare their friendship with Ben and claim their side in the divide. The town doctor is chosen as spokesman, and he tells Mat that Thad is in jail at Hargrave. Then he says, as if necessary to clarify, “We want you to know that we don’t like what he did” (p. 56), and others from the crowd shout their agreement. Without knowing the whole story, they have concluded that this was “a thing done out of meanness” (p. 56), and they are offering to preempt the legal system. “We’ll ride down there tonight,” Doctor Starns says, “and put justice beyond question” (p. 56). Then to remove all doubt about their intentions, he adds, “We have a rope” (p. 56).

Port William has never had organized law. The sheriff in Hargrave describes the town as “nothing but trouble, almost beyond the law’s reach and certainly beyond its convenience—a source, as far as he was concerned, of never foreseeable bad news” (p. 46). The story “The Hurt Man” (*TDL*, 2004) says that the town “remembered all its history of allegiances, offenses, and resentments,

going back from the previous Saturday to the Civil War and long before that” (p. 5). The town is described in that story, set in 1889, as “a dozen miles by river from the courthouse and the rule of law” (p. 5), where “anger had a license that it might not have had in another place” (p. 5). By the time of Ben Feltner’s murder, it is also connected to the courthouse by a road, but it is still far removed, in space and oversight. The town is used to dealing with its own, and too frequently it has selected violence in those dealings. So when the men of Port William come to the Feltner home that evening, probably a mix of some who witnessed the murder and some who have only heard about it, what they are proposing is a lynching. Indeed “a noose [is] already tied” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 56). With the town’s history, such an action is not unimaginable to them, but still they fear it enough to hesitate: They want Mat’s permission to proceed.

The crowd’s choice of spokesmen—and his acceptance of that role—is telling in understanding Berry’s views on education. Doctor Starns has counted Ben Feltner as a friend, but so have all the men in the crowd that night. This is not the reason he is chosen to speak for them. Nor certainly is he chosen because he has devoted his life to healing and sworn an oath to do no harm. No doubt he is chosen that night, as he probably has been chosen on other important occasions, out of deference and unquestioning respect for his education. This is an ongoing theme in Berry’s writing: the misplaced regard people too often have for credentialed education over character, intelligence, or actual learning. When Berry was asked in an interview to identify the most dangerous superstitions of modern industrial culture, among the several that Berry named were “that education is good; that education makes people better” (1993/2007, p. 93). Berry is not saying that education is bad or that it cannot make people better. What he is saying is that too often these ideas are accepted unquestioningly by modern industrial culture—in a superstitious way. Judgment based on superstition tends toward an uncritical acceptance of education. While Berry is certainly in favor of learning and admiring of intelligence, he avoids endorsing anything unthinkingly, including education.

In his essay, “A Remarkable Man” (*WPF*, 1990/1998), Berry reviews the book *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. Berry declares it “a remarkable book because Nate Shaw was a remarkable man” (p. 17). The book tells the life story of “Nate Shaw” (pseudonym) in his own words. He is a black Alabama farmer, born in 1885 and living into the 1970s, in spite of twelve years in prison for trying to defend a neighbor from having his livestock seized by the county.

According to Berry, Shaw tells of his life with intelligence and humor, in language that is expressive and specific to his place, with a pride in his work and the conviction of character—all of which Berry admires. To Berry, Shaw is “a man of exceptional competence, both practical and moral” (p. 21). Berry says the

book has two themes: Shaw's love for farming counterbalanced with his awareness of and his "uneasiness" (p. 23) about his lack of formal education (p. 23-24). Berry's own love of farming and his skepticism about institutionalized education make him wonder how education might have changed Shaw. Would education have made him a better farmer? Possibly. But Berry believes it might well have led him away from farming (p. 25). Would education have made him a better man? This seems unlikely to Berry because "Shaw is not *potentially* admirable; he is admirable *as he is*" (p. 24; italics original), and his character is the result of "a strong, sustaining culture" (p. 24). Berry says this book on Shaw is "a burden" (p. 25) to us, that Shaw "burdens us with his character" (pp. 25-26) because "here is a superior man who never went to school!" (p. 26). The book and Nate Shaw's life are a direct challenge to the almost superstitious acceptance of education as an absolute good. For Berry, this should make us all stop and consider what our educational institutions have produced for us, the purpose we have conventionally assigned to education, and what superstitions we cling to about education.

In the industrial culture, "the purpose of education," says Berry, "has been to prepare people to 'take their places' in an industrial society, the assumption being that all small economic units are obsolete" (p. 25), and "the superstition of education assumes that this 'place in society' is 'up.' 'Up' is the direction from small to big. Education is the way up. The *popular* aim of education is to put everybody 'on top'" (p. 25; italics original). Nate Shaw's life burdens us, as Berry puts it, with an obligation to reconsider our assumptions about education: "What a trial that ought to be for us," says Berry, "whose public falsehoods, betrayals of trust, aggressions, injustices, and imminent catastrophes are now almost exclusively the work of the college bred" (p. 26). In other words, Berry wants us to confront a full accounting of the good of education, that here, as everywhere, the gains need to be balanced with the losses, advances with damages.

This digression from "Pray without Ceasing" has two purposes: first, to illuminate Berry's skepticism about the absolute good of formal education, and second, to highlight his opinion on the pattern of misdeeds of the "college bred." He has noted this relationship between education and damage elsewhere. In a commencement address to the 2009 graduates of Northern Kentucky University, he quoted Canadian ecologist Stan Rowe: "well-educated people, not illiterates, are wrecking the planet" (quoted in Berry, *WM*, 2010, p. 33). The dynamic is simple: because of greater influence, the educated can do greater damage, and because educational institutions tend to train students to serve the industrial economy not the ecosphere, that damage is often done on a bigger-is-better scale. Said Berry about education today:

To have founded an enormously expensive system of education on the premises of, and in service to, such an economy has been a mistake, calling for a long, arduous work of revision. If authentic hope is to survive in our present circumstances, education will have to change..., both self-education and the work of schools. (*WM*, 2010, p. 33)

The change Berry advocates is that formal education change its focus “from the economy to the ecosphere as the basis of curriculum, teaching, and learning” (p. 33). This is not simply the plea of a nature lover. This is, for him, the practical calculation of a thinker who recognizes that any legitimate economy must be sustainable, locally adapted, and based on the material world.

Likewise, education must be based on the material world. “Education in the true sense,” says Berry in “Higher Education and Home Defense” (*HE*, 1987), “is an enablement to *serve*—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit” (p. 52; italics original). He reminds us that “to educate is, literally, to ‘bring up,’ to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures” (p. 52). To Berry, the “up” of “bring up” is different from the “up” that has education be the way “up,” the direction of “small to big” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 25). And the “place” of “take their places in an industrial society” is different from “place” in the description of Nate Shaw and his personal character as “native to his place in the world” (p. 25).

No doubt Doctor Starns did much good for the people of Port William in his time, and no doubt much of that good was due to his education and training as a doctor. But all that good could have been undone in a moment by his leading part in turning that group of Port William citizens—his neighbors and his patients—into a lynch mob. In that moment, standing up for the crowd of men in front of the Feltner house, Starns was standing against his place—very different from Nate Shaw’s stand for his place and his neighbors.

Berry would have us wonder about the impact of formal education on our understanding of place, but also on both the arrogance of the educated and the ready acquiescence of power by the uneducated. When they arrive at the Feltner house, rope in hand, someone shouts out, “let the Doc do the talking” (*Fid*, 1992, p. 56). Starns is in the front of the crowd—apparently he has been among the leaders as they approached—and he does not hesitate to step forward and speak. He announces that they are ready to “put justice beyond question” (p. 56), as though a lynching could ever end the possibility of reflection or reappraisal or regret in an issue like justice.

So now it is all on Mat Feltner: His mother stands behind him at his right, his Uncle Jack on his left. The crowd goes silent, waiting for Mat's response. No doubt some in the crowd are expecting self-righteous anger from Mat and a hearty endorsement of their plan; maybe some have the sense to fear that response. Instead Mat's response is steady and clear: "No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it" (p. 57). He is gracious and formal with them, elevating them all above mobs and nooses. It is only at that moment, finally, that Jack Beechum is able to relax the fierce tension that has held him on his feet and close to Mat all day long out of love for him and dread for what he might do. Upon hearing Mat's words, Jack "stepped back and sat down" (p. 57) for the first time since morning. Mat's mother, Nancy, steps forward and speaks then too, emphasizing Mat's wishes and calling forth the weight of Ben's authority. She too thanks them and acknowledges them with the distinction of being Ben Feltner's friends. But she leaves no room for question about what should be done. She tells them:

I know you are my husband's friends. I thank you. I, too, must ask you not to do as you propose. Mat has asked you; I have asked you; if Ben could, he would ask you. Let us make what peace is left for us to make. (p. 57)

The possibility of peace is small, but the word has been uttered aloud, and now there is hope.

Mat invites the men in, to sit with them and share the food the neighbor women have provided in the town's shock and grief. Some do; the rest disperse, going back to their lives to follow this current of Port William's future, the one where they are not a lynch mob forever.

And what of faithful, loving Martha Elizabeth Coulter, Thad's daughter? She trails her father into town to bring him home—twice. The first time, she takes him home, and in telling the story to Andy, Margaret Feltner remembers "how gentle Martha Elizabeth had been with him" (p. 18). Martha Elizabeth is Thad's youngest child, now seventeen. He thinks she has "the levellest head of any of his children" (p. 21), and he regards her as "the best" (p. 21) of the five. She is described as "responsible beyond her years" (p. 21), "a tall, raw-boned girl, with large hands and feet, a red complexion, and hair so red that, in the sun, it appeared to be on fire" (p. 21). At first, Thad is relieved to be in her care, "resting in being with her" (p. 21) on the wagon ride home. But even Thad's love for her and her love for him cannot lessen the pain he feels at the sight of the "pretty" farm that he now stands to lose. He becomes too ashamed to look at his farm or daughter. When she tries to get him inside to eat and rest, he cannot bear her kindness. He pushes her away, and she falls. "He could have cut off his hand for so misusing her, and yet his rage at himself included her" (p. 23), and he threatens her with a

whip, shocking them both. She goes into the house, leaving him to sink further into despair and drink. When he finally comes into the shelter of the house, it is not for healing; it is for his pistol. Now he is armed and wildly unlike himself, and neither Martha Elizabeth nor her mother dare to stop him.

The second time Martha Elizabeth comes to town for her father, she is too late. The murder has already happened, and her walk to town becomes a walk through town, past the dead body and horrified citizenry of Port William, and all the way to Hargrave. Then it becomes a devoted vigil with her father, first outside the courthouse, then inside the cell, Saturday evening and all day Sunday. She tries to get him to eat something and drink some water. In his terrible shame and guilt, he is unable even to look at her. Each night, the sheriff takes her home with him, and his wife gives her something to eat and a safe place to sleep. On Monday morning, when the sheriff brings her to the cell to resume her vigil, they find Thad has killed himself.

What becomes of this long-suffering girl with the fire-red hair? Andy knows part of her story—he knows Miss Martha Elizabeth as an old woman. He knows her as “always near to smiling, sometimes to laughter. Her face, it seemed, had been made to smile. It was a face that assented wholly to the being of whatever and whomever she looked at” (p. 48). Andy struggles to see her as the girl swept up in this terrible drama and wonders that she could have become the old woman he knows. Martha Elizabeth “had gone with her father to the world’s edge and had come back with this smile on her face” (p. 48), and that is hard for Andy to reconcile. But his grandmother has had more time to consider it all, and she understands, in part because she has imagined it all: Thad’s despair and shame and the quiet, unwavering love of Martha Elizabeth. She sees it in the particulars of familiarity. She tells Andy, “All these years I’ve thought of him sitting in those shadows, with Martha Elizabeth standing there, and his work-sore old hands over his face” (p. 50-51). She imagines God’s love, knowing it “included Thad Coulter, drunk and mean and foolish, before he killed Mr. Feltner, and it included him afterwards” (p. 49), and that finally Thad must have seen his daughter, his “best,” standing by him in his guilt, as the very face of God’s love. While conceding that Thad was wrong to kill himself, Margaret also says, “surely God’s love includes people who can’t bear it” (p. 50). In her imaginings, she comes always to the mystery of love and the forgiveness required in loving frail human beings. “If God loves the ones we can’t,” she says to Andy, not doubting God’s love, but trying to comprehend the immense implications of that love, “then finally maybe we can” (p. 50). It is a hope in the possibility of mercy and peace, but it is also a necessity if we are to survive with each other.

The title of the story is provided, nearly at the end of the story, by the character Della Budge. Aged and ailing, able to walk now only with great

difficulty, she still comes to the Feltner home where Ben's body is lying in state, to offer an iced cake and a presence of grief and respect. Della Budge was once the schoolteacher in Port William. Indeed, she had been Jack Beechum's teacher, and they recognize each other with something between fondness and respect. We are told their teacher-student relationship was not an easy one—"For years they had waged a contest in which she had endeavored to teach him...and he had refused to learn...He was one of her failures, but she maintained a proprietary interest in him nonetheless" (p. 54). Jack is by now a man past fifty years old, and we are told that Miss Della is "the only one left alive who called him 'Jackie'" (p. 54). Jack's response to everything she says is a respectful, "Yes, mam" (p. 54), and as she is leaving, he helps "her out the door and down the porch steps" (p. 55). But before she goes, she and Jack share a brief conversation, nearly perfunctory in tone and content—a good man is dead, we are surprised, but we never know when our time is up. Jack agrees at each statement. She says, "So we must always be ready," then advises, "Pray without ceasing" (p. 54), quoting from the New Testament (1 Thes 5:17), a verse no doubt familiar to anyone who regularly attends the Port William church, a part of the culture of the place.

This verse is from the chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians that compares the return of Jesus to a thief coming in the night. Because of the possibility of such a surprise, this is also the chapter that encourages constant good behavior. Paul cautions against drunkenness, and he instructs the Christian community of Thessaloniki to support each other, giving comfort to each other and support. Paul says, "admonish the disorderly, encourage the fainthearted, support the weak, be longsuffering toward all" (1 Thes 5:14). It is a good program for harmony in a community. Indeed, it is an outline of what Ben Feltner was trying to do for Thad. Ben would have wanted to help Thad, not simply out of human sympathy or a tradition of moral instruction, but also out of practical necessity. No doubt Ben knew well that a good farmer tending his farm well is valuable to the community, that a good neighbor is an asset. Paul's further advice—"See that none render unto any one evil for evil"—speaks directly to Mat and Jack and their decisions not to answer a senseless killing with more killing, more violence.

The verse is a curious one for the title of such a tragic tale because of the joyful context it has within scripture. The verse before it is, "Rejoice always" (1 Thes 5:16), and the one after is, "in everything give thanks" (1 Thes 5:18). The verse is crowded on both sides by the exuberance of a pep talk from Paul to the Thessalonians. The moral instruction earlier in the chapter does not seem burdensome. Instead it is presented as something more like a privilege to know, the not-so-secret secret to a happy life, especially a happy life in community.

The verse is also an acknowledgement that all life is a prayer, it is an acknowledgement of mystery and of hope, and it is an acknowledgment of the constant need for mercy in the face of human frailty. Finally, it is an affirmation of Mat's decision on the steps of his porch before the crowd of men seeking vengeance; it is an affirmation of Jack's instinctive decision for love. That this line is delivered by Della Budge is probably no accident. Heavy as it is with its weight as the title and with the weight of all the scriptural implications, it is fitting that it be delivered by a schoolteacher, indeed by Jack Beechum's teacher. This is consistent with Berry's hopes for education: that it could preserve the good of local culture in a place and that it could "inculcate a capacity for peaceability" (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011).

What makes this story especially poignant as told by Andy Catlett is that Andy shares ancestors with both the murdered and the murderer. Ben Feltner was his great-grandfather, father of Andy's grandfather, Mat Feltner. But Thad Coulter was also kinsman, first cousin to Andy's grandfather Marce Catlett, the lines joining years after the murder in the marriage of Andy's parents. Had Mat not made the decision for peace—had Jack not stopped him and held him fast until that decision became a possibility for Mat—things might have happened very differently, and Andy knows this now. He stands in time, uniting the two lines in that place that might otherwise have been hopelessly divided. The weight of that tragic moment is balanced against the weight of what followed and the alternate history of violence that ended on the Feltner's front porch. "My grandfather," Andy Catlett says as narrator, "made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness" (*Fid*, 1992, p. 59).

As Berry crafts the short story and as he himself regards it, it is not too much to say that the future of Port William changed that day. In considering the events surrounding the murder and his grandfather's own quiet death of old age all those years later, Andy becomes awash in time, the what-is asserting itself finally over the what-might-have-been:

This is the man who will be my grandfather—the man who will be the man who was my grandfather. The tenses slur and slide under the pressure of collapsed time. For that moment on the porch is not a now that was but a now that is and will be, inhabiting all the history of Port William that followed and will follow. (p. 58)

A space was created—first for Mat Feltner and then for the town itself—to decide against violence, to decide for love, and it is accepted as fact that it would not have happened without Jack Beechum and what he did in that moment to stop Mat. As Margaret Feltner tells Andy, "If it hadn't been for Jack Beechum, Mat

would have killed [Thad]” (p. 11; italics original), confirming her own witness to the events then and family lore since. “That was the point” (p. 11), Berry has Andy understand within the story: that Jack had stopped Mat from escalating the violence and sending Port William into a very different future.

It is worth noting here too that in the face of such a tragedy, the women of the town bring food to the Feltner home; the men bring a noose. The women speak of peace and prayer; the men speak of justice and vengeance. The women are animated by quiet, steadfast service, concerned for immediate physical needs such as hunger and comfort; the men are animated by violence, unconcerned for the long-term consequences. The women offer their presence; the men offer their action. The women tend to their business; the men try to step beyond their business.

A direct comparison of Della Budge and Doctor Starns illustrates this contrast well, particularly from the perspective of education. Typically, the town schoolteacher and the town doctor would be among the most educated of the citizenry, with each afforded a sort of deference as a result of that education. Miss Della arrives in the afternoon, in the daylight, and she is “bearing an iced cake on a stand like a lighted lamp” (p. 53). In contrast, the men, led by Doctor Starns, arrive at sundown, “the light cool and directionless” (p. 55), a “deepening twilight” (p. 57). It is not yet dark, but it is heading there. Miss Della comes into the house; Doctor Starns stays outside. If he comes into the house later when he is invited to join the family and the neighbors who are there, we are not told. Miss Della brings comfort and some cheer in her iced cake, but she also brings instruction—she is a teacher to the end with Jack, still working to enlighten, to bring light into darkness. She speaks in support of the best in the local culture. Doctor Starns brings anger and the threat of violence in the tied noose. He speaks with an angry chorus of “That’s right!” (p. 56) from the men behind him, urging him on and escalating the animus. He says of the issues of justice and legality, “We think it’s our business, and we propose to make it our business” (p. 56), planning to disrupt the order of law.

Most strikingly, when Doctor Starns comes to the Feltner home that night, he does not bring healing, to which he is supposed to have dedicated his life, and with the authority granted him by his neighbors, he speaks in support of the worst in the local culture. The respect afforded Miss Della then is appropriate because in this case she uses her education to serve the community, while the respect afforded Doctor Starns—and the destructive license that accompanies that respect—is misplaced because in this case he acts in defiance of what is best in his education and what is best for the community.

But both the women and men of Port William are moved by their culture and its expectations of them. Only Jack Beechum does the unexpected, moved by love rather than expectation in a radically countercultural way. And his unexpected radicalness allows Mat to do the same and opens a new future for Port William.

Jack Beechum is a frequent character in the fiction of Port William, sometimes appearing in minor roles, sometimes featured as he is in the novel *The Memory of Old Jack*. Mostly in the fiction he is highly respected as a smart, careful farmer, a tireless worker, and a faithful friend and neighbor. He is that, but he is also flawed. Proud and somewhat vain, Jack sometimes displays a dangerous insensitivity in his dealings with people, and even when he recognizes the hurt he causes, he seems unable to effect a remedy. He can be hot-tempered and defiant, and he is capable of physical violence himself. One cannot help but wonder if some study of psychology or literature might have improved his interpersonal skills. When asked how a liberal arts education might have helped Jack Beechum with his personal relationships, Berry said, “I don’t know. That’s an interesting question because I somehow don’t want him to have a liberal arts education. And that’s because he was indigenous in a way that a liberal arts education is not going to allow” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). The use of the word *indigenous* may seem surprising here or even extreme, accustomed as we are to thinking of its use in describing native peoples. After all, Jack Beechum is probably no more than second or third generation in Kentucky. We do not usually think of the children or grandchildren of white settlers as indigenous, but perhaps we should. Perhaps that sort of connectedness should be our standard for a person’s relationship to place. In describing Jack as indigenous, Berry indicates the depth and seriousness with which he regards Jack’s connection to his land and community, and Berry reveals too his opinion of education’s role in disrupting that connection.

When pressed about the pain Jack caused for himself and others, Berry agreed that he had, but he noted that Jack “was a model and a standard for a lot of people too.” Then he said, “And he held Mat Feltner and kept him from killing” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011), as though to offer that act alone as redemption for any failings, however grievous. Berry clearly credits Jack with stopping Mat from seeking revenge on Thad Coulter, and in turn giving Mat the strength and the capacity to stop the crowd from lynching Thad. It does not take the skills of a fiction writer to imagine how a man’s life might be changed by taking part in a lynching or encouraging one, and those changes would surely never be for the good. The mortal lives of Ben Feltner and Thad Coulter both end as a result of this tragic incident in Port William. But because of Jack Beechum—just as he is, indigenous and “native to his place in the world” (*WPF*, 1990/1998, p. 25) in the same way that Nate Shaw was—Mat has a better future than he

would have had without Jack, and the would-be lynch mob and all of Port William have a better future, a future that allows for “what peace is left for us to make” (*Fid*, p. 57).

Would a college education have prevented Jack from acting on instinct to stop Mat? Would it have caused him to hesitate while he thought things through? Would it have emboldened a righteous sense of justice or self-importance in him that could have made violent vengeance acceptable? Would it have caused him to value reason over love or power over grace or justice over mercy? Would it have made him disregard the possibility of mystery and expect that all things are explainable and somehow reversible? Would it have removed him from his place so that he would lose sight of the connectedness of all things, the sense of grave consequence arising from grave action? Would a liberal arts education have displaced Jack, disrupted his indigenoussness in a way that he would not have been able to instantly see what the local culture would expect of Mat, nor see what the radically countercultural stand had to be? We cannot know this about Jack or about anyone, but we can see what was essential in Jack at that moment and ask what higher education does to support that in a person and what it does to destroy it. In closing his discussion of that story and that incident in the history of Port William, Berry said, “If you’re not going to have an educational system that inculcates that capacity for peaceability, for the refusal of that doctrine of maximum force relentlessly applied, then what’s the use of it? Why not keep your kids at home?” (W. Berry, personal communication, July 17, 2011). And that, finally, is Berry’s point.

An educational system that fails to value affection and imagination and humility is a failure. An educational system that fails to honor home and neighborhood and local place is a failure. An educational system that fails to admit to its own failings is a failure. Berry’s deepest hope for education is that its success would be measured by our ability to make peace—with each other and with our world. What we have in common is our humanity; what we share is our world. An education that inculcates the capacity for peaceability must begin there, teaching our students not just as future employees, not just as specialists in a particular field, not just as a bundle of learning outcomes. We must teach our students as whole—even holy—human beings, who live and work with other people in a place on earth, with both the people and the place in need of our care. Wendell Berry might say we should be educating our students to be good neighbors, prepared always for acts of redemption.

References

- Berry, W. (1974/1999). *The memory of Old Jack*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint.
- Berry, W. (1987). *Home economics: Fourteen essays*. New York: North Point.
- Berry, W. (1990/1998). *What are people for?* New York: North Point.
- Berry, W. (1992). *Fidelity: Five stories*. San Francisco: Pantheon.
- Berry, W. (1993/2007). Field observations: An interview with Wendell Berry. Interview by J.F. Smith. In M. A. Grubbs (Ed.), *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (pp. 86-102). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. (Reprinted from *Orion*, 12, pp. 50-59)
- Berry, W. (2004). *That distant land: The collected stories*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard.
- Berry, W. (2005). *The way of ignorance and other essays*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard.
- Berry, W. (2010). *What matters: Economics for a renewed commonwealth*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Berry, W. (2012). *A place in time: Twenty stories of the Port William membership*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.