

“Readers Refuge” article for September 16, 2009 meeting

The Following is from “A Sense of Place”

By Wallace Stegner

If you don't know where you are, says Wendell Berry, you don't know *who* you are. Berry is a writer, one of our best, who after some circling has settled on the bank of the Kentucky River, where he grew up and where his family has lived for many generations. He conducts his literary explorations inward, toward the core of what supports him physically and spiritually. He belongs to an honorable tradition, one that even in America includes some great names: Thoreau, Burroughs, Frost, Faulkner, Steinbeck – lovers of known earth, known weathers, and known neighbors both human and nonhuman. He calls himself a “placed” person.

I was born on wheels. I know about the excitement of newness and possibility, but I also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness. Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material of places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while. I spent my youth envying people who had lived all their lives in the houses they were born in, and had attics full of proof that they had lived.

Changing everywhere, America changes fastest west of the 100th meridian. Mining booms, oil booms, irrigation booms, tourist booms, culture booms as at Aspen and Sun Valley, crowd out older populations and bring in new ones. Communities lose their memory along with their character. For some, the memory can over time be reinstated. For many, the memory too will be a transient, for irrigation agribusiness from California and Arizona to Idaho has by now created a whole permanent underclass of the migrant and dispossessed, totally placeless people who will never have a chance to settle down anywhere, who will know a place briefly during the potato or cantaloupe or grape harvest, and then move on.

I doubt that we will ever get the motion out of the American, for everything in his culture of opportunity and abundance has, up to now, urged motion on him as form of virtue. Our tradition of restlessness will not be outgrown in a generation or two, even if the motives for restlessness are withdrawn...At least in geographical terms, the frontiers have been explored and crossed. It is probably time we settled down. It is probably time we looked around us instead of looking ahead. We have no business, any longer in being impatient with history. We need to know our history in much greater depth, even back into the geology which, as Henry Adam said, is only history projected a little way back from Mr. Jefferson.

The following continues the theme of “Sense of Place” and comes from the writings of Clay Jenkinson, author of “Message on the Wind.”

Colorado is not overused by walkers but by vehicles. Some places we should be able to visit only by way of an ordeal – walking. You can have all the West you want but it will require walking – if we do that, the West will be all right.

The great thing about North Dakota is that it is so improbable. No one wants to go there. Improbable places are annoying. They are not wired. That makes them especially attractive to me.

Let the West be the West and, as John Wesley Powell said, design institutions and habits of the heart which are equal to that landscape.

The great desideratum of life is to have loved first or deepest in a place that contributes to the soul of that experience, a place that is not merely accidental. In the ideal existence the essential moments of life are rooted in a meaningful landscape and they are inconceivable elsewhere. One wants to have formed one’s value system not just in a place but because of that place. One wants to have engaged in romantic play in a landscape that is essential to that drama.

One wants one’s religion to be centered not merely in a text, a doctrine, a creed, or a chapel, but in a locale, a sacred precinct, a circle of land and sky, a place where the wind bloweth, where it listeth.

One wants one’s first born to have been born not in a hospital in Reno or an Air Force base in Munich or Stuttgart, but in a place that matters most of all the places that, mean something in one’s life. One wants a true, deep rooted home – a refuge to return to to seek clarity and unconditional love. One wants landscape in one’s soul and one’s soul to dwell in a landscape somewhere.