

Coming Home

In the oppressive, muggy air of late July, in the middle of a drought, I stumbled over the parched and cracked ground of an overgrown, weedy field in southwest Indiana. Chiggers and ticks bit; thorns and thistles scratched. I was in over my head, but not just because of the tall weeds. Though I knew next to nothing about land beyond what I'd learned from reading and dreaming, I was out there assessing this little twenty-acre patch, trying to decide if it would become my farm, my home, and my new vocation.

The small-town realtor who had come with me to attempt to sell this corner of his family home-place huffed alongside me in a sweat-soaked plaid shirt, intent upon sharing what seemed to be his family's entire century-long history of the land: what livestock had been raised on it, where the underground clay drainage tile lines lay in the field, the location of an old fencerow. Unfortunately, as I took in far more with my eyes than my ears, I could see clearly (even with comparatively untrained eyes) that the land was a mess. The woodlot had been logged the winter before, heavily and carelessly, so that many of the trees that remained were either stunted or crooked or both. Huge ruts from the logging equipment still crisscrossed the woods and fields. Tops from the felled trees

had been left in the fields, where weeds and vines had all but buried them in their tangles. Saplings as thick as my wrist had grown up in the rutted fields, which had gone uncropped and unmown for several seasons. The entire place was a testament of neglect, abuse, and absentee ownership, the lack of love and care as tangible as the rough ground beneath my feet.

And yet somehow, in spite of all this, as I stood down by a dry creek bed looking northward up a gentle rise toward the road, this place, or God, or my own longing, spoke to me. I am not the type of person who tends to hear voices of divine inspiration, but in this rare moment, I heard, or perhaps felt, something clearly within me: “This place can be home to you. If all you ever do is bring this land back to health, care for it well, become a good and generous neighbor, and do all this as a prayer—that is enough.” Though I couldn’t recognize or articulate it at the time, that voice invited me into one of the most powerful narratives in history and literature, from the ancient Hebrews to Dorothy in the land of Oz: finding home.

The land spoke home to me, then, not because it was perfect and pristine, but because despite its ill treatment and the disarray that resulted from it, I could see that life still pulsed strong in it. I felt and hoped that I could play a role in helping some semblance of order emerge from its current chaos. I had an inkling then, and would come to believe more and more deeply over the years, that home is not the place where everything “clicks.” Rather, home is a place of messy woundedness, the healing of which calls on our unique gifts and offers a unique opportunity for our own redemption.

The property that would become my home was a long, narrow rectangle, an eighth mile wide by a quarter mile deep. The northern half, which fronted a paved but little-used country road, was rough, overgrown cropland sloping down gently southward

toward a creek bed lined with cedars, multiflora rose, and various scrub trees. Beyond the creek were a few acres of boggy, deep-soiled bottomland field, rank with overgrown fescue and six-foot-tall Joe Pye weeds; and south of that, a mixed-hardwood woodlot of tulip poplars, red maples, hickories, black walnuts, wild cherries, and red and white oaks. Beyond the woods on the far southern end of the property was another small field, cropped nearly to death, thick with broom sedge, maple and poplar saplings, and ragweed.

There was no county water line, gas line, or sewer hookup nearby, and even the nearest electric line was some distance away. I saw this as an advantage: it made the land less attractive to a developer and gave me a great excuse to try all the neat back-to-the-land, off-the-grid, living-lightly strategies I'd read all about in *Mother Earth News*—things like solar power, a rainwater cistern, and wood heat. The realtor and I returned to our cars, leaning on them as we picked off ticks and talked. It was a fairly decent asking price for land in rural Indiana without ready access to major utilities. I told him I'd think about it.

That evening I called my "Uncle" Ron Zimmerman, who knew of my search for land, and whose judgment I trusted better than my own. Ron was a farmer three counties west, a man who had worked himself to the bone starting a hybrid seed corn company. He had made a fair amount of money and had retired early in order to avoid a heart attack. Now he spent most of his time reading, puttering around in his immaculate garage, and roaring around the country on a shiny Harley Davidson. His son had married my sister, but the connection between us was far deeper than relation by marriage. Ron's children had not shared his lifelong love of farming and land, while my family puzzled over my new-found one. And although (or perhaps because) his farming had been large-scale and chemical-intensive, Ron could appreciate my

dreams about a small, organic farm. So Ron took it upon himself to adopt me as the ersatz son on whom he could bequeath the experience he longed to share. For my part, I gratefully allowed myself to be adopted, and we forged a close bond.

Ron came out the following morning and walked the place with me. We went over it carefully, noting that it had indeed been misused but was still a fine piece of land. The heavily logged woodlot would eventually recover, Ron said. The fields still had a decent amount of topsoil and could be cleared, manured, and resown to hay or crop. There was a lovely spot on a rise near the road for a house and barn, overlooking the rest of the farm. Ron's bright blue eyes, lined both with care and experience, saw not just the mess the place was, but what it could become. In his cautious, understated way, he gave it—and me—his blessing.

In Scripture, blessings empower characters to do things that they might never dare or manage on their own power alone. God blessed Noah, and on the strength of that blessing, Noah and his family repopulated and remade the earth after the flood. God promised a blessing to Abram, which gave him the courage to leave a familiar place and people, venture out into unknown territory, and ultimately become the father of a nation. Jacob wrested his brother Esau's blessing from his father Isaac, and later, on the bank of the Jabbok, wrestled a blessing out of God, who renamed him and renewed the promise that his posterity would become the people Israel. Ron's blessing worked similarly on me. That same afternoon, I bought the property.

I had saved up a fairly significant amount of money by combining a teacher's salary and income from other part-time jobs with a fiercely spartan lifestyle. When the owner and I agreed to a price, I wrote him a check for the whole of it, signed all the paperwork, and walked out the creaking door and down the slanted steps of

his old Main Street real estate office, a stunned and amazed new landowner.



It had taken me several years to become the person I needed to become to sign that check and choose a life on that piece of land. In many ways, I was the unlikeliest of persons to be drawn to either organic farming or spiritual concerns. I grew up a picky, meat-and-potatoes eater, and the few vegetables that did pass my lips did so only because of my mother's creative efforts to disguise them in tomato popsicles and zucchini brownies (today she waxes indignant that I've become mostly vegetarian). Although I had been a Boy Scout and had done my share of camping and merit-badge-earning, I had little concern for ecology as a child; I was more interested in spending weekends tearing up the backcountry with off-road motorcycles and four-wheel-drive trucks and Jeeps.

In short, I was a motor-head, someone who loved fixing engines and all things mechanical. But by a strange twist of fate, encouraged by my artist mother, I also loved classical music and was a decent violist and tenor. I enjoyed theater and other cultural events, read widely, and worked hard (too hard) in school. In hindsight, what felt like a conflicted, schizophrenic existence at the time turned out to be a combination of interests that would draw me to farming and help me learn the thousand practical skills it entails.

My family and I had attended a Presbyterian church with some regularity throughout my childhood, but in those early days I had few religious feelings. I did not sense my life as part of a larger story, nor did I have a strong awareness of sin or the need for salvation—mine or anyone else's. That there was pain in the world became real to me most tangibly when, aside from

the miserable growing pains associated with surviving seventh grade (which, I am convinced, rivals Dante's deepest circle of hell), I witnessed my parents' faltering marriage finally give out and end in divorce. The implosion of our family life woke me to sin, suffering, and the necessity of grace.

Perhaps as a way to cope, somewhere in my practical engineer's mind I discovered an introspective streak, one mixed with (and often fueled by) melancholy. It led me to ask questions about the deeper meaning and purpose of things. By a meandering path that led through a range of spiritual books from Norman Vincent Peale to C. S. Lewis, a dating relationship with a very evangelical Methodist, an association with para-church teen organizations like Young Life, and an Ichthus Christian music festival/revival, I said my own "yes" to the Lord. I joined and became active in the Methodist church attended by my girlfriend and her devout family and tried to follow Christ wherever he might lead.

My father worked long hours at a demanding job, and as I grew up, particularly after the divorce, he and I were not all that close. Though only much later would I discover the modern "men's movement" of Richard Rohr, Robert Bly, and others, the distance and absence I felt between us caused me to seek out, almost instinctively, a series of male mentors and father figures, all of whom shaped my thinking and nudged me in new directions. The first of these I met in college at Indiana University.

Luke Timothy Johnson, the well-known Catholic New Testament scholar and one of my professors, suffered through countless office hours of my religious questions, which had begun with my Christian conversion in high school and become more acute in college. I had admired and sought out evangelical communities during high school, impressed by their passion and by the strength of their convictions. But the rock-solid certitude that came with this particular expression of the faith seemed to leave little room

for doubt, of which I had plenty—even before college. I couldn't believe that the Bible was literally inerrant, that believers of other faiths were utterly mistaken (and probably bound for hell), that concern for an imminent Apocalypse should eclipse working for justice here on Earth, or that Christianity had little useful to learn from culture, science, and other religious traditions. Luke, on the other hand, somehow had both a grounded connection to faith (he had spent ten years as a Benedictine monk) and, at the same time, the willingness to challenge it. With patience, compassion, and a razor-sharp wit, Luke nurtured my faith by welcoming my doubts—and by showing me that Christianity's expansive tradition had plenty of room for them.

If Luke invited my doubts, it was Scott Russell Sanders who helped flesh out what it might look like to put faith into action. I was able to take a small seminar with Scott my freshman year, and in that course he challenged us to discern what values animated both our culture and our economic system, and whether those values truly supported the health of communities and responsible stewardship of the natural world. The religious circles in which I had run up to that point critiqued society for its moral decadence and its failure to acknowledge Jesus but had little to say about what helped or hindered a robust civic life and the wise use of natural resources. Though Scott did not push any particular religious viewpoint, I came to see that these questions were profoundly spiritual ones, and that finding (and living) answers to them was essential to an engaged faith. I began to suspect that being Christian wasn't just about believing the right things in order to get to heaven; it also had to do with helping “thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Strangely, I found out only later that Scott was a well-known author and conservationist. At the time, he impressed me as much with his person as with the ideas he presented. I came to admire

and respect his soft-spoken perspicacity and the gentle, humble, but firm way he challenged us sometimes-arrogant students to re-think some of our long-held assumptions. In Scott, I got to know a man who cared passionately about family, community, economy, and environmental health, and who made an assiduous effort to live in the world with integrity and graciousness. I wasn't quite ready to take to heart his wholesale critique of American capitalism, individualism, and ecological insensitivity, but in who he was, what he believed, and what he practiced, Scott planted seeds of a conservation ethic that would germinate years later.

Scott in turn introduced the class to the writings of Wendell Berry, a personal friend of his and one of America's foremost cultural critics. We began with *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* and its stinging critique not only of modern agribusiness, but of a culture of consumption and a collective lifestyle addicted to the profligate use of cheap food, fossil fuels, and raw materials. I soon also discovered Wendell's novels and poetry, of which I couldn't read enough. I found myself captivated by his keen and prophetically blunt critique of modern American culture, his simple, self-sufficient rural lifestyle on a farm in his native northern Kentucky, and his vision of an economy and culture more in harmony with the natural world. An instant fan, I wrote him a letter, inviting him to give a series of lectures at Indiana University. Not long after, I realized that I had foolishly asked him, a farmer, to come for a week during planting season! He refused politely, but this exchange began an occasional correspondence that has continued through the present. Through his published work, our letters, and a visit or two, Wendell has had a profound influence on my thinking and my life choices, even as he rightly encouraged me to discover my own path rather than simply emulate his. Like Scott, Wendell showed me that a truly healthy culture and economy depended on a healthy relationship with the Great Economy:

the divinely designed and governed world of nature. Wendell also insisted that meaningful change almost always begins and is sustained at the local level, and that individual life choices should reflect not just one's personal ethical commitments, but one's vision of the ideal society.

I spent my junior year of college studying at the University of Hamburg, Germany, and did a good deal of traveling throughout eastern and western Europe. While there, I got to know public transportation, recycling, and other habits of a society that, while quite advanced, seemed far more intentional (and gentle) than ours. I still remember marveling at how a work crew, fixing a waterline near my apartment, carefully dug up concrete sidewalk pavers—without damaging them—and then proceeded to repair the line. After the repairs were completed, they painstakingly returned the sidewalk to its place. I noted with sadness how in America, workers would likely have simply jack-hammered the sidewalk, tossed it into a dumpster, and poured new concrete.

It was also in Germany, specifically while traveling in “godless” East Germany, of all places, that I began to make connections between the life of faith and tangible acts of justice. As part of a research project on the role of the Church in the fall of communism, I met and interviewed several East German Christians whose living, breathing, oftentimes defiant faith had led them to take great personal risks and suffer great hardship as they worked for social change. Their material lives were simple and humble by force of circumstance and yet had a richness and authenticity I envied.

My time abroad also introduced me to a sense of the sacred, mainly through church architecture. I was awed by the majestic cathedrals and basilicas in Cologne, Rome, and elsewhere. These structures were a testament to a faith that had moved mountains of stone and fashioned earthbound materials into edifices that