

CENTER FOR REFLECTION ON THE SECOND LAW  
8420 Camellia Drive, Raleigh, North Carolina 27612  
(919) 847-5819

Affiliated with  
The Riverdale Center for Religious Research  
5801 Palisade Avenue, Bronx, New York 10471

James F. Berry  
Advisory Board  
American Teilhard Assoc.

April 28, 1981

Circular No. 14

"Thrift, husbandry, workmanship, excellence, order, pride, humility, connectedness, rootedness, community, are words which continually wrap themselves around each other and embrace in the writings of Wendell Berry." That statement was copied from the recording I have of Agnes McDonald talking to the Second Law study group at our last session. Berry's religious regard for the homely virtues illuminated the discussion of values important to human survival and what is the same thing, the survival of the earth. The Kentucky poet, farmer, novelist and conservator is rooted in the earth, finds the human to be out of the earth, part of the earth, integral with the earth. He finds that to regard God as being "out there" somewhere far away is to find an excuse to treat the earth with contempt, to exploit it without regard to its own rites of renewal.

But if God is to be found in this soil here, in this plant, in this growth process, and if God is seen to be here and now, in this tree and this blade of grass, this bird-song, insectdrone, then we will treat the earth as heart and soul, body and spirit, as ourselves, for that is what it is. It is we in our differentiated way, our subjective interiority, our identification with all. If you will read The Unsettling of America it will come home to you.

-----

We must frequently renew our connection with the Second Law as controlling metaphor. Many economists, I guess most, ignore it or deliberately scorn it putting their faith in technology. They are sure that technology is capable of solving problems of pollution and shortages for instance. But they must be less certain of themselves when they behold the shocking facts of the loss of plant and animal species and the loss of topsoil. These are problems that technology can address but only after a recognition that there are problems whose causes are deeply involved with technology. Farming technology results in such predicaments as, "In Missouri for example, a soil conservation official estimates that more than two-thirds of the land in his area has lost half its topsoil in the past 100 years." And, ". . . some 15 million tons of America's best farmlands now flow out of the mouth of the Mississippi River every month into the Gulf of Mexico." Quest 81 magazine, June 1981. And out of Science magazine, 25 April 1980, "It is estimated that of the four to five million individual species of plants and animals in the world three million are in the tropics where an area of rain forest the size of Massachusetts is disappearing every month. . . . the destruction of these vast ecosystems without the development of ways for replacing them with others equally productive foredooms large parts of the human race to misery and portends instability for the entire globe by the year 2000." The author of the article is Constance Holden.

Recognition of the power of the Second Law to give an insight into this problem is what this endeavor is about. Technology, in most cases, does not solve problems. Technology is the problem. Please regard the caveat, "in most cases". There is such a thing as appropriate technology; technology which imitates earth process technology, but the kind of technology which poisons water and air, and treats topsoil as not worth conserving is wrong technology and its abandonment is a matter of highest urgency. The Second Law tells you with the certainty of death that these losses are irreversible;

that poison cannot be recalled; that soil cannot be replaced; that petroleum is not going to provide energy again; these losses are forever.

The automobile, it begins to become apparent, is not a boon; it is a curse. The manufacture, use and subsequent disposal of automobiles results in the conversion of the earth's resources to junk at an astounding rate. We are principally impressed in these days with the gigantic quantities of petroleum being steadily converted into pollution for trivial, even evil, purposes. Anyone who takes the time to think about it a moment or two knows with certainty that what we are doing is wrong. To take something useful and make it into junk and poison for some sort of fleeting satisfaction is sinful. If there is a virtue relating to the use of the things of the earth, that virtue must be thrift, and if there is an unthrifty practice in the world today, it is the use of the petroleum powered vehicle to move things and people. Our society has gone wrong. The fact that it is widely believed that when petroleum is used up, technology will find a ready substitute, is a myth akin to the belief that a perpetual motion machine is just about to come on the scene and provide cheap clean energy for a thousand generations of super humans.

The Second Law denies the possibility of perpetual motion and the Second Law places on the human race a stern imperative, "Be thrifty or perish!" The rate at which life supporting stuff is used up is subject to human control. We may use the earth stuff rapidly and wrongly as we are doing, and die poisoned, or we may use it thriftily and live in harmony with a beneficent earth. What seems generally accepted by more and more people in the Network is that the internal combustion engine fueled by petroleum has to go. And that means that people must organize to support themselves in localized communities. That this is being recognized more and more is attested by the growth of such projects as the New Alchemy Institute in Woods Hole, Massachusetts and the Meadowcreek Project in Arkansas. There are others and this Center is accumulating a file of information on them.

Readers of the Circular would be very interested in what's going on at Woods Hole, Massachusetts where John and Nancy Todd have put together an operation devoted to the development of appropriate technology which respects the earth. "To Restore the Lands, Protect the Seas, and Inform the Earth's Stewards" is their motto. They have definitely proved that in a climate as severe as Massachusetts' that people can support themselves in a human and joyful way using the sun and the soil and the wind and the water in cooperative ways so as to get good food, comfortable shelter, pastoral beauty, cultural richness, creative work along with hard toil and be whole people in wholesome harmony with their surroundings, and not tapped into the power grid. We will treat this subject more fully next time. Everyone is urged to send \$25 to the New Alchemy Institute, 237 Hatchville Road, East Falmouth, Massachusetts to become a member and get involved with a project that holds promise of finding ways for the human to be a natural part of a healthy ecology.

- - - - -

May 26, 1981 - Second Law Study Group will discuss Aldo Leopold's  
A Sand County Almanac.