

# Wendell Berry's Unsettling Description of Modern Life

"Man is a political animal." Chances are that you've come across this line from Aristotle. You've also probably encountered the John Donne line that "No man is an island entire of itself." And you may have heard them used to justify our life in modern society, where many of us are packed into cities and suburbs and live out much of our existence in large organizations.

But even though human beings are called to live in some form of community, many of us frequently feel anxious because we have become dependent upon an ever-increasing amount of outside forces.

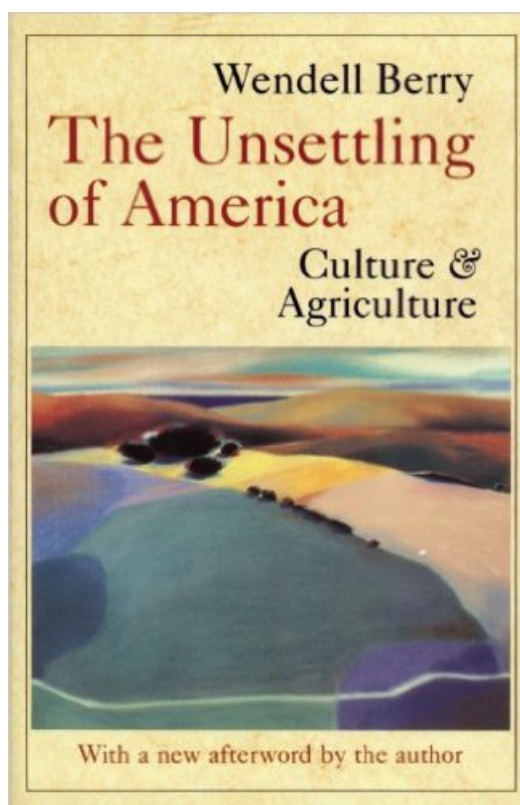
According to famed author Wendell Berry, the specialization required by modern society is a main cause of this dependency-induced anxiety. I encourage you to read his following description of the modern condition and ask yourself whether some of it rings true:

"The disease of the modern character is specialization. Looked at from the standpoint of the social *system*, the aim of specialization may seem desirable enough. The aim is to see that the responsibilities of government, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, education, etc., are given into the hands of the most skilled, best prepared people."

But there's a catch:

"A system of specialization requires the abdication to specialists of various competences and responsibilities that were once personal and universal. Thus, the average – one is tempted to say, the ideal – American citizen now consigns the problem of food production to agriculturalists and 'agribusinessmen,' the problems of health to doctors and

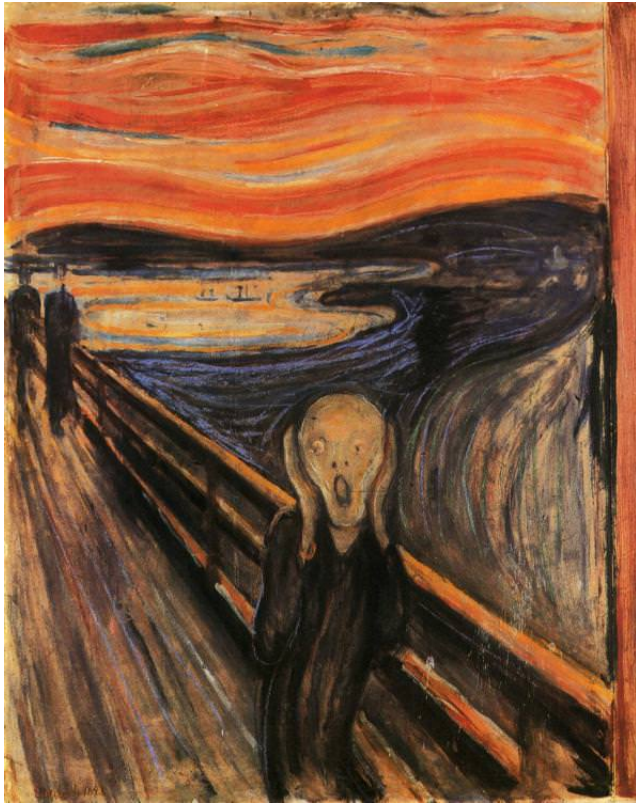
sanitation experts, the problems of education to school teachers and educators, the problems of conservation to conservationists, and so on. This supposedly fortunate citizen is therefore left with only two concerns: making money and entertaining himself. He earns money, typically, as a specialist, working an eight-hour day at a job for the quality or consequences of which somebody else – or, perhaps more typically, nobody else – will be responsible. And not surprisingly, since he can do so little else for himself, he is even unable to entertain himself, for there exists an enormous industry of exorbitantly expensive specialists whose purpose is to entertain him...



The beneficiary of this regime of specialists ought to be the happiest of mortals – or so we are expected to believe. *All* of his vital concerns are in the hands of certified experts. He is a certified expert himself and as such he earns more money in a year than all his great-grandparents put together. Between stints at his job he has nothing to do but mow his lawn with a sit-down lawn mower, or watch other certified experts on television. At suppertime he may eat a tray of

ready-prepared food, which he and his wife (also a certified expert) procure at the cost only of money, transportation, and the pushing of a button. For a few minutes between supper and sleep he may catch a glimpse of his children, who since breakfast have been in the care of education experts, basketball or marching-band experts, or perhaps legal experts...

The fact is, however, that this is probably the most unhappy average citizen in the history of the world. He has not the power to provide himself with anything but money, and his money is inflating like a balloon and drifting away, subject to historical circumstances and the power of other people. From morning to night he does not touch anything that he has produced himself, in which he can take pride. For all his leisure and recreation, he feels bad, he looks bad, he is overweight, his health is poor. His air, water, and food are all known to contain poisons. There is a fair chance that he will die of suffocation. He suspects that his love life is not as fulfilling as other people's. He wishes that he had been born sooner, or later. He does not know why his children are the way they are. He does not understand what they say. He does not care much and does not know why he does not care. He does not know what his wife wants or what he wants. Certain advertisements and pictures in magazines make him suspect that he is basically unattractive. He feels that all his possessions are under threat of pillage. He does not know what he would do if he lost his job, if the economy failed, if the utility companies failed, if the police went on strike, if the truckers went on strike, if his wife left him, if his children ran away, if he should be found to be incurably ill. And for these anxieties, of course, he consults certified experts, who in turn consult certified experts about *their* anxieties...



It is rarely considered that this average citizen is anxious because he *ought* to be... He ought to be anxious, because he is helpless. That he is dependent upon so many specialists, the beneficiary of so much expert help, can only mean that he is a captive, a potential victim. If he lives by the competence of so many other people, then he lives also by their indulgence; his own will and his own reasons to live are made subordinate to the mere tolerance of everybody else. He has *one* chance to live what he conceives to be his life: his own small specialty within a delicate, tense, everywhere-strained system of specialties."

~ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

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