One

Welcome home

One of the peculiarities of the white race's presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be. The continent is said to have been discovered by an Italian who was on his way to India. The earliest explorers were looking for gold, which was, after an early streak of luck in Mexico, always somewhere farther on. Conquests and foundings were incidental to this search — which did not, and could not, end until the continent was finally laid open in an orgy of gold seeking in the middle of the last century. Once the unknown of geography was mapped, the industrial marketplace became the new frontier, and we continued, with largely the same motives and with increasing haste and anxiety, to displace ourselves — no longer with unity of direction, like a migrant flock, but like the refugees from a broken anthill. In our own time we have invaded foreign lands and the moon with the high-toned patriotism of the conquistador and the same mix of fantasy and avarice.

That is too simply put. It is substantially true, however, as a description of the dominant tendency in American history. The temptation, once that has been said, is to ascend altogether into rhetoric and inveigh equally against all our forebears and all present holders of office. To be just, however, it is necessary

> *to remember that there has been another tendency: the tendency to stay put, to say "No farther, this is the place." So far, this has been the weaker tendency, less glamorous, certainly less successful.*
>
> —Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

By the time I arrived back home I'd traveled more than seven hundred miles by train, slept in four different beds, given three talks, introduced thirteen speakers and met more than three hundred new people, none of whose names I could remember. I was exhausted and frazzled, held together by one thought, the thought that always sustains me at the ends of these speaking trips — I'm going to be home soon.

I am greeted first by the goats, who call out to see if I have food for them, and then by the dogs that frisk and leap around me, gently chastising me for failing to provide their daily head scratchings. I open the door and am greeted, not by a smooth and peaceful immersion into the paradise of domesticity but by my real and ordinary life in all its glory and chaos.

Our two-year-old foster son screams "Mama!" and leaps into my arms, while my six-year-old hugs my back and three boys simultaneously try and tell me everything that has happened in my absence. My husband pulls away from the stove where dinner is simmering and kisses me across a mob of children, while my eldest, dribbling a basketball, shoots me a quick pass in friendly greeting. The house is not perfectly tidy. It is not an oasis of peace. The kindest possible description of its aesthetic would be "lived in." It is just home — and it is unutterably beautiful to me.

A neighbor has dropped off a load of hay and it must be shifted into the barn, so we all troop outside on the chilly November afternoon to work and play together. The younger kids climb on the bales, the goats nibble at their edges and Eric, the big boys and I make short work of eighty bales of hay. After days of using my brain to talk about energy, climate and economy, I'm back to using my whole self, and it feels glorious.

In some measure, my home is not a place so much as it is people — it would be home if I were coming back to a high-rise apartment in Chicago or a brownstone in New York as long as my children and spouse were there. And yet, the particulars of place matter. As I came down the

road back from my journey, the landscape, shifting from autumn into winter, spoke to me and called me home. My trip took me to lovely places full of wonderful people, but they did not call to me as my home does.

Things are changing here from moment to moment as the cold of winter begins to settle in and the nights get longer. The children grow and change, the livestock multiply, the landscape evolves, the climate changes. And yet, in human terms, essential elements remain the same. The sight of my children racing outside into the late fall sunshine, oblivious to mud from copious rain, my husband emerging from the barn where he is checking on a rabbit due to deliver a litter of babies any day, is both old and new. This place has seen these stories before — other children, other animals have lived and played and birthed and died here.

The basic structure of my life is intimately tied to the rocky foundation of my hundred-year-old house, the old Quaker barn beams that crisscross my living room and the new addition that we built for Eric's grandparents six years ago. Eric's grandparents have passed away now, but their place, their garden, their memories and legacy, remain.

My home is in the dirty laundry, covered with garden soil accumulated as my children helped plant bulbs. It is in the garden beds themselves, in perennials I planted that are settling in for winter, and in spring's new growth to come, in the plants from last season returned to the soil. My home is in the pregnant bellies of my goats, carrying their burdens lightly, and in the promise of their new kids to delight us — and support our work. It is in the bees, huddled in their hives, and in the chickens, resting upon their nests in these quiet darkening days.

My home is on the bookshelves, filled to overflowing, in the music made by my son, laboriously practicing piano, in the music of the wind against the chimes left here by the previous owners. It is in the sound of my neighbors' horses neighing across the fields and in the feel of the worn flannel on the sheets of my bed.

My home is a sense of place, an attachment to one place, one house, one set of people, one relationship between myself and a bit of dirt. It is the conditions that make it possible for me to live here — my home is my home because I am fortunate enough to have a home. I live in a nation where more and more people are losing their places and losing them more and more rapidly. In 2009 more than three million

households — one in every thirty — lost their home to eviction or foreclosure. 2010 was a little better, parts of 2011 worse. The very fact that I have kept my home and do not immediately fear its loss is becoming increasingly unusual.

Money is not the only thing that can frame our relationship to home. A few months earlier, two consecutive hurricanes were driven inland to my area of upstate New York, dumping twenty inches of rain upon us. Up here in the hills it was a minor disaster: we lost our gardens, our apple crop, a car and some other small things to fallen trees and deep flooding, but our house was safe, situated as we are on a hill. In the valleys below us, however, thousands of people lost everything.

There's nothing unusual about the way I love my home, or about the people it ties me to, or even my relationship to the land beneath it. What is strange and different about my home is that part of the reason I do not live in fear of losing it is that I planned for a situation like the one most of us now find ourselves in — an unstable economy, a job that might disappear, sinking property values.

In many respects my home is just like yours — the place where beloved people, familiar things and a sense of comfort come together, the place that feels good and safe and reassuring to me. In other respects, it is very different — it is designed to allow me and my family to live well in highly variable circumstances, to use less money and less energy and fewer resources. My home is designed to produce more of what I need and cost me less than most American homes.

It's a process we've come to call "Adapting in Place" — that is, using what we have to make our lives run smoothly whether things are good or bad. And we've come to realize over the years that it isn't just our family that will need to do this — that most of us have to face the fact that the world is changing radically. We can see it changing before our eyes, as surely as the winter comes and the seasons shift. We have less wealth, our climate is less stable, we never know what we'll be paying for food, gas or heat, we can't count on many old assumptions. We need our lives to have a kind of resilience, to work for us in the face of difficulty.

Ideally, of course, we'd all have the money and government support to smooth over the changes in our way of life. New rail lines and public transport would be springing up all over. Inefficient housing would be

replaced with energy-efficient, tightly built housing. Safety nets would be strengthened for those who can't make it without help. But exactly the opposite is happening – we're not investing in the things that matter most. The vast majority of the infrastructure building projects subsidized by Barack Obama's first-term economic stimulus funds, for example, went to existing highways and pre-planned programs that didn't do much to make our lives work better — programs that propped up the status quo by encouraging us to drive rather than share transport. Meanwhile states are slashing safety nets for kids, the disabled and the elderly left and right because they can't run the kind of deficits the federal government can.

The conversion of an ordinary old farmhouse to work with a lot less grid power, a lot less heating energy and a lot less money (among other things) started out as a way for us to live well on a small budget, but became more than that. Eventually it became part of a long-term attempt to imagine a way of life worth having. And that project is a really important one — perhaps one of the most important things we can do. For the last three generations, Americans and other Westerners have spent their time exporting a model life that simply can't go on — and we know it can't. We know for a fact that seven billion people cannot live the way Americans do — but that's what our TV shows, our movies, our economic policies, our belief in endless growth have sold.

Now the world is telling us they want what we've had all this time — no matter how dangerous to future generations, no matter how polluting or depleting, no matter what the cost. That is, they want the right to disregard all those issues, just as we have. So we have to show them another model. Both morally and practically, all of us need to offer up a good and viable vision of a way of life that uses only a fair share of the world's resources.

We came to this project simply — we had little money but a strong desire for a good life for ourselves, for our children and for our extended family. We wanted to eat good food, drink clean water, breathe good air. We wanted a home and a place to call our own, a stable place where our kids could live and thrive. We wanted our children to grow up with family. We wanted elderly family to live well as long as they lived. We wanted relationships with good neighbors and reasonable comfort. We wanted to do as little harm to others as possible, and have as happy a life

as we could. Someone, we thought, had to model what a life with less that produced more could look like. Why not us?

And so, having no idea what we were getting into, we set to it. We didn't begin with grand dreams of changing the American way of life, but we've come to think that if there is going to be an alternative to the high-cost, high-waste life, someone has to model it. Why not us? For that matter, if not you, if not me, then who?

In the decade we've been here, we've looked at almost every system in our lives that provides us with something we need. We've changed the way we create and retain warmth, the way we buy, store and produce food, how we get and use water, the ways we clean and dry our clothes and every other place we use energy, money and resources. But this hasn't been a purely inward-looking prospect, because we've also focused on the systems in our communities and our culture that shape our lives and provide assistance and care, and found ways to use fewer resources in every one.

We are not perfect, and we haven't created an ideal life. Still, we use significantly less than the average American, if never quite as little as we'd like. We are slowly reducing our personal share of greenhouse gas emissions, our dependency on oil and coal. We don't worry about storms or natural disasters much anymore — we can weather an extended power outage and live well at home if we can't get out. We don't panic if something breaks and we don't have enough money to fix it — in most cases we have redundant backup systems that work for us. We're not pure and we're not perfect — we're real people who screw up a lot. But we are trying.

We still worry about money, but years and years of living on tight budgets — usually less than forty thousand dollars for our family of six, seven or more, and often much, much less — has made us comfortable with the prospect of facing harder times. We haven't found the magic bullet, but we've been careful about debt and living as far as possible below our means, and we have a measure of insulation. Our household economy — the work we do at home — reduces our expenses as well as meeting some of our needs outside the money economy. We barter with neighbors and share with friends and find that we need less and less as we learn more and more.

We've done this on a farm in rural upstate New York, where we've learned a lot about how to deal with the particular challenges of our

place, family, climate and culture. But I've also spent the last few years working with people all over the world who want to do the same thing in their homes — people who want to feel safe and hopeful and make a life that works well with less. Most of them don't live next door to me — they live in apartments in Paris or Brooklyn or suburban homes outside Cleveland or Toronto. They don't have farms — they have a quarter or eighth of an acre in a leafy suburb, or a small city lot, or a balcony in an apartment complex. They don't necessarily need the same things my family does — their kids are grown or they never had any, they are disabled and can't do heavy work, or they are single and living in a dorm. What they need is a life that serves them, a sense they are living a viable dream and creating something with a future.

As much as I've enjoyed living my own story, I'm not sure it would make that interesting a book. The answer can never be "do it like me" — instead, the answer is for people to find their own ways to accomplish the same ends — less resource-intensive, less cost, lower carbon, safer, more sustainable, healthier, happier and more resilient — but where you are, with the people you love, with the money and resource you have for them. Like my sense of home, what I'm doing is tied to one place but is not particular to it. Instead, I've developed a set of tools and strategies that can be applied wherever the desire (or the need) exists. There's nothing precious about it, nothing restricted to the affluent, the rural, the white, the privileged. I know this because I know literally thousands of people who are adapting in place right now — that is, making the place they live in work for them. You'll meet some of them in this book.

It would be easy to dread this change; living with less sounds pretty dire when you can't envision what "less" looks like. And that's the problem — we have a pretty clear vision of "the American dream" and know more or less what it entails. But we don't have a clear vision at all of our future, and that scares the heck out of us. We think about "less" and think "harder, more inconvenient, more painful, more frightening, different and I can't figure it out." That's why we need a picture, and a set of plans for getting there.

The process of adapting in place requires a new way of thinking about the idea of "home," of gathering up what we love about our places and our lives and preserving those people and things that matter most

to us, and giving them a hope for the future. Because right now most of the presumptions inherent in our way of life involve us asking future generations to pay the price for our failures — for our inaction on climate change, for our borrowing against their future economically and for our reckless use of resources. Every human culture believes in protecting and preserving the future — and yet, somehow, we've become a people who, instead of making sacrifices to offer better to the next generation, devours their share of the world instead.

I don't believe most of us want that — and if we could see our way to something better, I believe we'd jump at it. But we live in a world full of people telling us that things can go on this way forever — even as things begin to fall apart. The only way to convince people to change is to give them a different dream to hold on to.

I'm not arrogant enough to think that I could invent a new dream or vision for all of us. But I do think that we can do it collectively, that we can provide something just as powerful as what we're sold by Madison Avenue — a new story to tell about ourselves. And if we can change our stories, and create a way of life that is both worth having now and that has a future, maybe we can change other things, too.

How do we do this? The first thing we have to do is understand the difference between the stories we have been told and the reality that we live, what it means to stay in one place and how we might begin to make a real home there. And that's what this book is about — about coming home to ourselves and our lives and giving them a future. What's miraculous about home is that once you live there, no matter how chaotic or messy or imperfect the future, it has that glorious quality of being home. Once we learn to fully live in our place, in our world as it is, we can feel at home there — and begin to build upon that.

What would such an experience of home look like, though? How might it be achieved? What might it mean to settle and stay in one place and build this new life in a world where those things were valued, and where the shared project of finding our way home might inspire us?

Wendell Berry wrote *The Unsettling of America*, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, before I was born. In it he articulated the tension in American identity between the impulse to stop and stay and the impulse to always go on to the next thing. Many of us now find that there is no

next new frontier, that one place suffers from much the same gradual economic and ecological decline as another.

This is a slow and sometimes painful realization, that we are here where we are. It can be difficult to give up the notion of moving on, to recognize that the next thing may not represent a substantial shift in our fortunes, that the next move may not be to a better life. It can be hard to consider that we may have chosen without choosing to stay, because we can no longer sell or no longer afford to move. We are here. We are home.

I know that many of my readers are not where they plan to be, and many of us may move and seek something better. There are many particulars of migration and movement in our future — in fact, I suspect many of these movements may, in some degree, track a backward path past the frontiers of each stage in America. As climate change accelerates, perhaps the new call becomes "Go East, Young Man — at least there's water!" Others may be driven, not back but in wholly new directions.

We know that coastal population centers will have to be unsettled or moved, we know that outer exurbia may fall to high gas prices. And yet, I think there is a larger truth here — that what we have now may be the starting point for a new life — one with radically different priorities and emphasis, but building on our present infrastructure.

Hence, of course, the idea of Adapting in Place for both those who have chosen something optimal and those who have had their place thrust upon them. The truth is that even those who build their dream houses move — the average stay in a "dream house" is only seven years in the US. Those who chose the "perfect" place and those who did not choose at all may have more in common than they think. We must acknowledge that on some level, it is possible to organize people around the idea of staying here, wherever here may be, because we are here and the ground below us is at the root of what we have to sustain us.

Much of what I write about involves enlisting the people around you. This is an enormously difficult job for most of us — partly because of the anomie of our culture, partly because we are not accustomed to community, partly simply because we have not had to. For several generations each of us could live a fossil-fueled, private solution to needs once met collectively.

The tools we have to get our next-door neighbors to work with us are not easy ones — some people do it, others find themselves saying "OK, I'm here, but I'm fundamentally alone, and I can only go so far that way." Any hope of settling meaningfully — in the largest sense of the word, that of transforming our homes and nations, wherever they may be, into places where the dominant narrative is overturned and we are enlisted into the vast project of making our here livable — must begin with other people. How do you get them together?

Wendell Berry rightly insists that we do have in us, even here in America, a strain of thought to draw on that is about staying, about making the place you live in better, about committing to a piece of land and a set of people. Berry keeps reminding us of this, requiring that we see it in the overarching narrative of always moving for the better job, the bigger house, the next frontier, the final frontier.

We do have a history to draw upon — and that matters. In our book *A Nation of Farmers*, Aaron Newton and I wrote about the problem of choosing a history:

> The simple truth is that the glorification of our past makes us believe lies. Glorification of our State makes us accept unacceptable things. And yet, there is a United States worth believing in — moments in history in which competing forces of powerful and weak met and created something decent, something worth treasuring and admiring. It never happened without resistance, but neither was the story always a narrative of good people and evil leaders — it is far more complicated than that.
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> All of us were taught a state- and hero-centered history that erased too many ordinary contributions and focused our national pride on the wrong things. But we did have that teaching; we did learn that nationalism. Perhaps a large part of our projects is the unlearning of the untruths, but smashing idols isn't enough — we need to give people who love their country a place to put that love, give those who derive hope and comfort

> from their sense of the past a past to attach themselves to.

James H. Kunstler has described the dangers of the "psychology of previous investment" when applied to our driving culture — he observes that we become so attached to the things we have invested ourselves in that we go on preserving them long after such preservation has become destructive. Still, perhaps this urge can work for us as well as against us, if we can articulate a past, a history, something worth preserving and staying for that lays the ground for a livable future. That history of staying, thrust upon us now as it is, may be something to hold on to.

In tribute, then, to Berry's *Unsettling of America* and his long call for resettlement, I have come to think of my/our project in terms of Settlement. And this invokes something else worth invoking — the Settlement movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conceived as a way to remedy class conflict and integrate immigrants into a society. Never have those two goals seemed more relevant than today. As I write this, the Occupy movement has class in its sights, while immigration takes a political center stage in the coming election.

The Settlement movement called for ordinary people to go and live among the poor, like the poor, offering what they could to remediate their circumstances — to live together, and from one another learn and build something better. Lillian Wald, Dorothy Day, Jane Addams — their focus on the idea of a settlement as a means to integrate rather than disintegrate, to help people learn to live where they were, seems eminently relevant to us as we move toward a world where most of us are poorer, less secure, moving off the frontier into a changing world.

We must do it in community, we must work with people we once did not need, we must adjust our way of life. We must, ultimately, settle, in the sense of finding a home in places we thought we were only resting in momentarily. We must settle, in the sense of finding a vision that accepts what is viable in a settled way of life, to shift our happiness and expectations to meet our new realities rather than obsess about the lost and destructive dominant discourse. We must settle, in the sense of going out among people we did not choose, whose common ground is that they too have entered the process of settlement with us.

It is settlement that I think about when I think about how to survive the economic instability that has always been here but is newly acute. It is settlement that I write about — and in the end, it will be settlement, if we can do it, that creates something worth having for our posterity. Settlement, in the end is not loss but gain — a moment in which we turn around and realize that, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we had within us the means to find our way home all along.

> *We are living in the most destructive and, hence, the most stupid period of the history of our species. The list of its undeniable abominations is long and hardly bearable. And these abominations are not balanced or compensated or atoned for by the list, endlessly reiterated, of our scientific achievements. Some people are moved, now and again, to deplore one abomination or another. Others … deplore the whole list and its causes. Much protest is naive; it expects quick, visible improvement and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come. Protesters who hold out longer have perhaps understood that success is not the proper goal. If protest depended on success, there would be little protest of any durability or significance. History simply affords too little evidence that anyone's individual protest is of any use. Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.*
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> — Wendell Berry, *A Poem of Difficult Hope*

I. On not outrunning the boom

As you can probably imagine, my husband sometimes has more than a bit to put up with being married to me. One of the things that bothers him the most is that I'm absolutely no fun at movies. If you remember the show MST3K, I'm like them — all the time. There's something about the darkened room that brings out the snarky comments.

Early in our marriage we realized that we were both happier if we limited our joint film excursions to one of two categories — truly great movies, which we both enjoy, or ones bad enough that Eric doesn't mind

pitching in on the commentary. My absolute favorite movie for this second purpose is the ubiquitous "outrunning the explosion" deus ex machina flick, in which our hero(ine) — who in any rational world would now be maimed, dead or otherwise out of the public eye — manages to suspend the laws of physics long enough to run faster than an exploding bomb.

Every thriller or disaster film on the planet has an ordinary outrunning of the boom, but I do like the variants composed by various filmmakers. Consider "outrunning the temperature extremes" in *Day After Tomorrow*, "outrunning the laser beam" in various space operas, "outrunning the meteorites" in *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* and my newest fave, "outrunning the Yellowstone mega-caldera" in *2012* (which is particularly awesome because it is followed by "outrunning the caldera ash cloud," which apparently can be done, as the cloud overspreads Washington DC, by remaining comfortably in Las Vegas, where it is sunny and beautiful).

The convention is almost unworthy of comment, like the rule that knocking people on the head always knocks them unconscious but never gets our hero(ine) up on murder charges for causing accidental death, or the fact that heroic children in movies never feel the need to eat, whine or go the bathroom. The only reason I mention it here is that we accept it as ubiquitous — we know it is ridiculous, of course, but we are also so accustomed to this association of "disaster, suspension of the laws of physics and running super-fast" that on some level, it permeates our consciousness. The thing is, the ubiquitous does matter, even when we know deep down that it is false.

That's troubling because the truths of the disasters we are actually already undergoing is precisely the opposite of what film tells us. First of all, the laws of physics, instead of being conveniently suspended whenever they are really, really unpleasant, are in fact fundamental and definitive. That is, when something is not sustainable, it turns out that it doesn't go on forever. This, we are finding out, applies to burning fossil fuels in several respects.

If you know something really can't scale, it usually turns out that it doesn't. If it looks like material, physical limitations are closing in on you, it turns out they actually are. The laws of physics do not, in fact,

go on holiday just because we would very much like them to. This may seem obvious, and yet many millions of people assume that these laws don't apply to them. And many millions more who do intellectually understand that the laws do apply to them choose not to grasp the real implications all the way to the bottom.

Despite the fact that we know we are burning fossil fuels unsustainably and that costs will go up and availability come down after the first half is gone, we keep doing it. Despite the fact that we know we are warming the planet, we keep on doing that too.

The second thing to learn from the movies is that running away is not the answer. We now know that in the near future, many people will likely have no choice but to leave places they want to stay due to climate change and energy depletion — the UN estimates of refugees come in the billions. If, however, there is a partial solution to the multi-pronged ecological disaster we're undergoing, it is this — don't run, stop and stay. The refugees themselves will eventually have to find a place — or someone will have to make one for them.

In disaster films, our hero (it is usually a guy, either literally or metaphorically Bruce Willis) has insider knowledge — he calls it the minute the disaster happens, and unlike the rest of the bit players who die in the background, he races away to the only safe spot, usually saving some adorable moppet and a beautiful woman or two. From this experience, he comes to understand (through intervention of attractive female and adorable moppet) what is truly important in this life. It turns out what is really important is home and family and kids, apple pie and cuteness, but he could only learn this by watching the world end, through an external crisis journey that implies that he must have been on some kind of inner journey too (disaster movies are too busy toppling cultural icons to actually build characters with depth).

Now consider the reality. In fact, our carbon problem is very simple. We can't burn all the carbon we do have, and we don't have enough to build our way out of burning it. We have to use less. What are the obvious ways of using less? Well, for starters we could stop running, stay home and get out of our vehicles.

Because we cannot run away from it. Climate change will not come equitably to every place, but it will come everywhere. Energy depletion

too will come unevenly, but it will come, and so will the financial consequences of both. The ways to mitigate them are the exact opposite of running away to discover what we should have known already — we need to appreciate what we have here, and slow down further.

Slow down long enough to plant more trees that mitigate climate change, lower temperatures and respire water. Slow down long enough to know the people around you, rather than relying on a single, heroic gesture. Inaugurate the heroism on the ordinary acts of human generosity that are the foundation of community. Slow down enough to know that there really is nothing heroic at all about abandoning the great masses to their fate while you and the privileged few who accompany you escape — that unlike in the movies, people dying around you are not stock characters who rise again, but lives for which you bear some responsibility.

Moreover, we are conditioned by film to believe that the disaster is not real until icons topple — the head of the Statue of Liberty toppling, the monument falling, the waves washing away the city. Sometimes it does happen that way — the crisis in the New Orleans Superdome or the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center do look a lot like scenes from an action movie. But disasters are slow as well, sometimes imperceptibly slow. The disaster comes when the birth of young birds and the cycle of the food source they grow on no longer coincide, when the ordinary costs of food, gas and housing rise beyond the means of ordinary people, when the waters are unfishable and jobs to buy food not forthcoming. Catastrophes are measured in real income declines, expiring unemployment, foreclosures, tropical disease, species extinction — the loss not of one vast monument but of the ordinary anchors of our world.

When confronted with disaster, our impulse to run is real — but for the most part, it isn't the answer. If our places remain habitable, if our world has a future, it is because we stay — stay to build the sea wall, stay to plant the trees, stay home and out of our cars, stay to talk to the neighbors, stay to mend and repair rather than buy new, stay to share and protect. In some profound way, we know that we cannot truly outrun the boom, but it has not yet fully penetrated that running is the wrong answer for most of us, that they serve best who stand and wait — and work where they stand.

II. Settling, occupying, stepping up

In the circles I run and write in, it is a common device to claim that other thinkers and writers have failed to understand the real, deepest cause of our problems, and have instead embarked upon too superficial a narrative explanation.

What's fascinating about this is that the thinkers doing so are almost always correct — that is, they are nearly always right that someone has missed a deep underlying cause. The reason for this is that causes are nearly as ample as effects. Thus the person who laments America's dependence on foreign oil can be usefully corrected by someone who observes that the problem is everyone's dependence on a finite resource, rather than a geopolitical error of resource development. The same person speaking of finite resources can then be corrected by someone who observes that a growing population is the "real problem" — that with few enough people, resource constraints would not be an issue. The person arguing in favor of population as the central underlying issue could then be corrected on several grounds — one might, for example, argue that the fundamental problem is the lack of equity between men and women, in which women lack the means and freedom to control their fertility or personal economies. Or you might argue that the fundamental problem is not population but social inequity — that the poor have access only to children as a source of improving their well-being. Both of these critiques (and plenty of others) would, in fact, be correct, and both would also be subject to further correction. It is, as they say, turtles all the way down.

I am cautious, then, of trying to identify first causes, because they are so easily overturned. At the same time, however, I find the articulation of origins, if transient and uncertain, to be valuable in that each exercise in imagining a root cause allows us to see our errors in new and useful ways. So recognizing that someone will inevitably argue that something else is truly the root cause and my own articulations are mere symptoms, I would like to suggest that we do not have a resource problem, or a climate problem, or an economic problem — we have a way of life problem.

Several years ago I was invited to attend a protest march on the coal plant that supplied the capital with energy. Many other people, including Wendell Berry, attended, marching to demand we stop warming the

planet with coal. I wished to join in but couldn't, and when I talked to some friends who were planning to attend, I felt that there was a gap in their understanding.

Many of the younger people I met who were excited to bus down to Washington understood very well the dangers of coal — of mining and mountaintop removal, of contamination of water or destabilization of the climate — and were courageously willing to stand up to stop coal consumption. What was missing from this protest in some cases was a sense of the connection between that and how they would live. Coal is the single largest source of electricity in the US — how many of them were prepared to live with about half as much electricity?

Some undoubtedly were. Wendell Berry, for example, has tried for decades to convince Americans that the pre-electric past was not hell. But most of the young people I met on their way to the protest, and even some of the older ones, were not. They felt that we should replace our coal with renewables, and if they understood the technical and resource challenges in doing so, assumed (or preferred to believe) that we could do this rapidly without substantive sacrifice or personal constraint. They saw the merits of the protest and of closing the coal plant, which were manifest. Without the corresponding grasp of a daily life, a new American dream that consumes far, far less, however, such protests are doomed to failure, because we do not really want them to succeed, do not really want the life we would get if anyone took us seriously.

As the Occupy movement rose up in America, I was struck with the same disconnect — the attacks on corporate capitalism were absolutely correct, compelling and right. The protesters recognized that we have lost ground and control in ways that are deeply disturbing. But most of the ones I knew failed to fully grasp the way their dependence on the same corporate interests for their most basic needs — the banks for the mortgages that shelter them, large agricultural and processed food corporations for the food they eat, and onward — undermine their protest. I met few people fully prepared to live without the corporations they deplore.

I believe strongly in political action. I took part in my first protest as a teenager, I have been arrested for political reasons, and I feel public protest is good for the soul, not just for drawing attention or making

change. I did not occupy or fight the capital coal plant, however, because I had to stay home — my son was nursing, my husband was working, the farm needed me — and I have come to think that this staying home had its merits as well. I do not say this to devalue public protest, which I think has an important role. But I do think that protest must be tied to the creation of other kinds of daily change.

This prioritization of protest over the emergence of an ordinary, sustainable life is understandable in a society that prefers the large and shiny to the small and domestic, and that demeans daily personal actions and ways of life as unimportant. I have in much of my other work attempted to articulate the ways in which our personal actions are, in fact, political. I have pointed out the many ways in which the conventional distinctions between personal and political are intellectually bankrupt, and while I may have made a modest fame in doing so, I've mostly failed so far.

This is problematic because it is precisely the emergence of a life worth living — and that can be lived by all the seven to nine billion people who will share our planet in the coming years — that is most urgently necessary. If creating and modeling some sort of preliminary life of this sort is my project, I come to it well after Berry, and less gracefully. Still, such a vast project with so few participants can always use one more.

In many ways, the story of the twentieth and early twenty-first century has been the overturning of one way of life (very broadly construed) and the emergence of another throughout the world. The consequences of this way of life and its variants are evident — we consume more of everything, so much so that we are using more than the planet can sustain, and rapidly making the future resources of the planet less available. There simply is no alternate calculation, no sleight of hand that makes the American way of life viable on a crowded planet.

This way of life had some true merits, and I don't want to deny them. Its greatest virtue (and great flaw — how often our great strengths and flaws are one) has been the recognition of the value of at least some of the people who are here now, a prioritization of the present.

I am inclined to be somewhat kinder to this prioritization than Berry is above (and Berry is, of course, more nuanced than any single quote could properly indicate) and argue that in many ways the people of the present were calling out to be recognized. Our prioritization of the

present has brought great good to many individuals — the children who did not die before age five, the mothers and fathers who got to keep them, the recognition that it was not enough to wait for heaven's justice, if such a thing exists, to provide freedom and justice for people of color or women, that those who were here now deserved such things. The sense that the people who were here now deserve more and better now is not inherently a bad thing.

The difficulty is that our virtue became the single most destructive flaw of all time. The recognition that those who were here now deserved more became, as such things often do, pathological. Not only did we deserve clean water and children who would not die before age five, but also electricity, private transportation, college education for everyone, a personal computer in every home, etc, etc. We moved rapidly beyond what could actually be achieved by every person, while wholly abandoning the project of preserving enough for any future generation. And the prioritization of the present meant an increase in struggles between multiple presents — the conflict between America and China for supremacy (now largely over and largely lost by the US) can be seen as a conflict between two presents, whose needs cannot simultaneously and equitably be met. Most of the rest of the world was never even in the running — and that was the great underlying lie of all of this, because implicit in the increasing catalog of needs was the reality that when some people got so many of their needs met, more die as a result.

Most of all, the story that prioritizes those who are here now erases those who will be here later — they have no claim. One could trace the history of the twentieth century as a narrative in which a way of life that, for all its limitations, presumed that the future had some rights gave way to a new way of life with no future, a pact in which one person's posterity cannot be connected to ours, so we cannot be responsible for them.

First we altered the material space in which we lived so that generations of people who expected to live and work in approximately the same places as their parents and be followed by future generations no longer had any connection to place. We prioritized mobility and separation, so much so that the "generation gap" of the 1960s and the snide jokes about grown children living in their parents' basements came to convince us that the highest goal of adulthood was to get away from your

past in a literal, material sense. Why preserve what you have? Why hold on to the old house, the old farm, the land, the family history? If you have raised your children to erase any connection to their past, taught / encouraged them to grow beyond their history, to abandon and dismiss those things, why preserve them? Why limit consumption just because it takes from the future? What certainty do you have that you will have a future, or that your grandchildren will come to visit? Why think seven generations ahead after seventy years of understanding at some visceral level that others could destroy the habitability of the world — is it not enough to hold what you can as long as you live?

It is, of course, also extremely profitable to consume a great deal and sell the future, so that has taken on its own life. It is even more profitable if you can also convince those who have lived quite modestly with fewer resources that they would be better off if they lived like those who have abandoned the future for the present, and this, appealing as it does to our most selfish and petty interests, is not difficult.

All of which is a complex way of saying that the problem is how we live — the "non-negotiable" American way of life (as a previous vice-president was heard to put it), which is now, with minor variants, the way of life most of the planet aspires to. No one, of course, is willing to take full responsibility for this — as we see in the battles over responsibility for anthropogenic global warming. China cannot constrain its emissions, we are told, because it is bringing its people out of poverty and into the way of life that we in America pioneered. America cannot constrain its emissions in part because China will not, and also because we must strive mightily to retain what's left of our economic standards. Thus we live in a global game of chicken with little hope of any actual restraint.

Except, perhaps this — we could change our way of life. We who became the global trendsetters, however inadvertently, tell an idealized story of how much better and happier we are through consumption, when we might consider telling another story. And if we told it compellingly enough we might just engage others, as our original story of freedom and happiness gained through the abandonment of future claims, future people and future rights.

In the quote I began with, Wendell Berry attempts to articulate the value of protest, particularly protest that is in many ways doomed to

failure, by meditating on Hayden Carruther's poem "On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam." Since "protest doomed to failure" often describes the work I do quite aptly, I found his arguments compelling. Though I should add that I sincerely think we could — with protest and action and, most of all, the emergence of a new way of life — do a great deal to mitigate our circumstances.

That said, I do think that even were I — and the many others who have read the numbers and come to the conclusion that we cannot go on as we are — to be successful beyond even my wildest aspirations, we would fail, indeed have already failed, to save many lives, to protect species and places and the viability of future lives as well as present ones. This is the human condition, to be doomed to failure, and we are at the moment more doomed than ever — or as Berry says later in the same essay, "And what might have been the spiritual economy of Eden, when there was no knowledge of despair and sorrow? We don't need to worry about that."

Nearly everyone who thinks about these things knows that we are, to put it bluntly, plenty doomed enough, and it wears on us. I get several emails every day that essentially say, "I agree with you and try to do my part, I consume little and less each year, I grow a garden, I tend my place and my community, and yet I live each day surrounded by people who destroy what I do in a moment, who care nothing about all this. I feel that I bear all the disadvantages of this — I have less than they do in a culture that doesn't value less, I struggle more with my time in a culture that believes that all labor should be saved by burning fossil fuels, I live as rightly and honestly as I can, but it wears on me to always do the hard thing and have less. How do you live with this?"

Berry offers us one possible answer — that the point of our protest is not to change our neighbors or the world, but to create a world in which we have at least preserved the value of things. By valuing them, we have at least held inside ourselves the fact that these things matter. Which is small consolation when your dreams are grand and the necessities so vast and urgent.

I'd offer another consolation, however, because I believe there is another value to protest — and by this I mean protest in our lives as well as political protest. It is this — when protest is successful, on those

rare and remarkable and wondrous occasions when resistance is possible, it is successful not because of the pure, clear persistence of actors who carry signs or passively protest or fight legal battles. Instead, it is successful because political protest is chained not to doors or trees but to the emergence of a new way of life. This way of life is not perfect or sufficient, but the overwhelming emergence of something new and different in ordinary and daily ways is a hallmark of almost every successful political protest.

Thus the success of the civil rights movement — which hardly eliminated racism or inequity but did make many things possible that were not before, and did at least transform some of the ways that people lived together — depended not just on protest but on the emergence of a new way of daily life in which black and white people who had previously lived together in one set of relationships began to tentatively develop a new one, involving shared schools, meals and livelihoods.

The success of gay rights protests, from the Stonewall Riots to peaceful marches to legal challenges to the blood throwing of ACT UP, has been linked to the emergence of a culture in which gay people are now open and honest family members, neighbors, loved ones and friends, and in which we expect to have Dave and Jim and their daughter over for dinner along with Rose and Steve and their daughter.

I know about the daily acts and transformational changes of the civil rights movement from those who have managed to capture the history of ordinary life before, after and during this period of rapid change. I know about the daily acts and transformational changes of the gay rights movement because I lived within it — saw the ways that my mothers, together at church, at my school, among our neighbors, changed the way people thought.

It is much easier to draw attention to a parade, a protest, a legal event, and these absolutely matter, but what mattered as much or more were the everyday actions of ordinary people who went about the hard work of developing a life in which black and white people, or gay and straight people, lived together differently than they had before. It is often assumed that the public protests created the way of life, but I would argue otherwise — the public protests are an expression, a call to action, a way of drawing attention. They matter, but they matter only

so much as they enable and support a profound transformation that is already underway.

This is the true value of protest, and why I am so very convinced that it matters that we both protest the totalizing, all-encompassing nature of our consumptive, destructive society, and also that we nurture and create and explore and develop the emergence of a new way of life. I know from watching the lives of my parents that this kind of work is tiring, and seems to have few public rewards. A protest is dramatic, it is exciting, you can attribute a great deal to it, but it is the life that underlies it that changes the world in the end.

I understand why it is frustrating to have less and use less, to be mocked or disdained or simply regarded as strange and outside the norm. In a society where public protest is regarded as "action" and living is regarded as "inaction," I understand why you might feel like you were accomplishing nothing or changing nothing.

At the same time, when I was eight and my parents came out to me, they were afraid. They were so afraid that they concealed their relationship, only revealing it to their children after a long time. They feared losing custody of my sisters and me, they feared loss of jobs, they feared physical attacks, and they had reason for fear. We could not let people know.

Seven years later, my mother and stepmother were foster parents, caring for other people's children, implicitly recognized in many quarters as better parents than a significant number of straight people. They were still frightened sometimes, but things were better. Nine years later, my stepmother came and spoke to my high school class about being a lesbian and gay and lesbian issues, with the full support of my school principal. Ten years later, my mother and stepmother were married in their church, in a celebration that included their grown children, their forthcoming first grandchild in utero and most of their congregation. A few years after that they were married at city hall in the town they had resided in for nearly thirty years.

There were a few moments in my childhood when I looked and said "things are changing." But for the most part, I was barely aware that my mothers and I and my sisters and millions of gay families were engaged in the creation of a way of life that made space for people who had

once been marginalized. I knew many people who despaired at various points, who said "we will never be able to...." And some of them were right, they still aren't able.

Yet many of them were wrong — now they can. Saying that we have not solved it all, that gay people still suffer discrimination, that gay kids still kill themselves, that the beatings have continued although morale has improved, is entirely true — but it doesn't change the fact that the world is different, that gay lives are better, and there is more to be done, but what has been accomplished was worth accomplishing and mattered enormously.

We know it is possible for people to use vastly fewer resources, produce vastly fewer emissions, live with much less than we do and still have good and worthwhile lives — we know this because our great-grandparents did it and because people in the world are doing it now. We know there are things in our present that we need to preserve for our future, and things that we must and can abandon. What those are and how we do this is our project in the world. Whether you call it adapting in place or creating a new life or a quiet domestic political protest or anything you want, this is the only thing left that can save the world — or at least a little piece of it. The political process will follow the emergence of a new way of life, and there will be plenty of things for us to chain ourselves to, to march against, to speak out for, to go to jail for, to challenge in a court of law. All of those things, however, must be subsequent to this — that we make a life worth living, that allows us all to live, and that makes a place for posterity.

It isn't an easy project in a world that assumes a great deal of energy and emissions, that says freedom is consumer choice and participation is mandatory and wealth is our goal. So when you are in your garden, when you ride your bicycle or walk, when you explain to your neighbor yet again why you don't want their lawn chemicals on your yard, when you hang out your laundry, when you deliver a meal to a neighbor who is ill, when you say "no, we don't do that," when you teach your children who you are and why you do the difficult thing, when you try and convince yourself that you aren't too tired, when you get up in the morning and it looks like all you've done is pointless, remember this — you are doing something hard and vast and new. Without your work

and courage there is no hope at all for all of those with the courage to chain themselves at the gates. Without those who chain themselves at the gates, enough people will not know what you have done. With both together, change begins.

III. My house and Al Gore's house: finding a fair share

Not long ago I was out at a dinner of climate activists, at the beginning of a conference, and as we were climbing into the car of one of the program leaders, there was talk about whose car was messier. This is a competition I always win — I mentioned to them that not only do I have little kids in my car, messing it up, but I drive goats around in my Taurus.

Several people asked me why I drive goats in a car, which even to me seemed like a reasonable question. The answer is that I am a farmer with goats but no pickup truck, so when they go to be bred or to the vet, they travel in the back seat, sometimes with their heads hanging out the window (once we stopped for gas and the attendant asked us "what kind of dog is that?").

Why don't I have a pickup? Don't all farmers have to have a truck? I admitted a truck would be a nice thing. As it is, a few times a year we barter for use of a truck with a friend of mine; she trades it for use of our pasture for her sheep and donkey. It is a bit of hassle to have to put down newspaper for the goats in the car, and to be reliant on my friend's truck when we want to get hay or take poultry to the butcher. But we are trying to live a comparatively low-resource life, and I know that if we owned a truck, we'd use it a lot more than we do. By not owning one, we make sure that when we use a low-mileage vehicle, we really need to.

The other speaker, a scientist from the CDC and an expert on the medical implications of global warming, was kind of mystified and skeptical that the inconvenience was worth it. Like most climate scientists I know, he didn't seem to believe that personal actions matter that much — and there's something to be said for his case. In the great scheme of things, whether I have a truck or not isn't very important. I could drive my goats around with the a/c running and the windows down in a Hummer, and it wouldn't be a drop in the bucket in world climate emissions. And yet, I think it does matter — not just for me, but in general.

The very first time I was asked to do a public presentation on peak oil and climate change, one of the people in the audience, an older man, stood up and said to me, "Look, you may be right, this sounds right. But a lot of people sound right, and I just want to know why I should believe you. I don't know whose papers to read or how to read them for the science — I never took a lot of science in school, and that was fifty years ago. What I want to know is if it is true, why don't the people who say it is true act that way? I've been hanging my laundry out on the line for forty years and more, and my wife just got us a dryer. Now you are saying I shouldn't use it. And I won't if you can show me a climate scientist out there with his underwear out on the line."

Now logically speaking, whether any given climate scientist hangs his laundry, runs it through the dryer or delights in the feeling of damp shorts is really not the point. It doesn't make a bit of difference to whether his computer models are correct. Whether a climate scientist drives an SUV or takes the bus makes no difference to the data revealed by her ice core samples. This is a red herring.

And yet, it isn't just a red herring. The perception of fairness and justice is a really big deal for people, and to underestimate its importance, I think, misses a central point. This guy was saying that he'd consider giving up some of his luxuries — but only if he felt that the people who were demanding he do so were also giving theirs up.

There's considerable psychological research that suggests that fairness matters an awful lot to us. In one paper, a study used a "Prisoner's Dilemma"-type game in which one recipient receives painful shocks to show whether our empathy for people's pain is affected by how we perceive the fairness of their actions. All participants found less empathetic responses when the person getting the shocks was acting unfairly. In men, it was found that not only were they not feeling empathy, but they received pleasure thinking that someone was getting revenge.

Other research suggests that people will even act against their own interests to avoid perceived unfairness — in fact, we can see this in many debates on social welfare policies. Many of the people who oppose these programs are among those who would benefit the most from them — the American healthcare debate is a good example. But the sense that others would benefit unfairly or more than they is so troubling to them

that they often oppose the program, despite the fact that it would help them.

Similarly, historical evidence suggests that things that seem completely impossible to us now, things that no one believes are politically palatable, actually could be politically palatable if they were reframed in terms of fairness. Amy Bentley, whose book *Eating for Victory* focuses on food rationing and the relationship of food to World War II, observes that food rationing was actually fairly popular during World War II. This sounds very strange to our ears — who believes that some form of rationing would be politically viable? And yet, it was — because it was largely framed in terms of fairness. Women worried that without rationing, limited supplies of meat or sugar would be bought up by others, or that prices would rise out of reach due to scarcity. Rationing ensured a fair share for everyone, to the extent that after it was lifted, a substantial portion of the populace felt it had been lifted too soon and was willing to consider reinstating it.

The same thing is true of 1970s' gas rationing — in areas where gas was rationed, people reported lower degrees of concern about gas access and greater degrees of happiness. No one liked waiting in line to buy gas, but what really worried them was the idea that someone would get there before them and they wouldn't be able to get any gas. A program that made sure they were being treated fairly increased their security.

And this is what I detect in the question that man asked me — this quest for fairness. This is what underlies the anger that many people feel about Al Gore's house — OK, they know that the former vice-president isn't going to live in a hovel, but they feel that if Gore is going to call for constraints and changes in their lives, that he should enact them himself, that there's something wrong with calling for restraint in others and not showing it in your own life.

This plays out beyond the personal level — it's precisely the battle that is going on at the international level. The question of how we are to distribute the burden of dealing with climate change may, in the end, be the deal breaker. Russia, China, India and other nations of the Global South call out "foul!" when nations like Britain, Australia, the US and Canada want to continue to emit vastly more per person than they do. The US whines that there's nothing they can do without China, because

there are so many people there, and it isn't fair. And if someone seems to be getting off unfairly, well, we'll let the whole world go to hell rather than have that happen.

It is true that this doesn't really make much sense, but I'm not at all convinced that a rational argument about why things don't have to be fair will ever affect most people's deep-seated need for fairness. Assuming that we really should be rational beings all the time never has worked yet. Ultimately, I suspect that we're going to have to accept that, for a chunk of the population, perceived fairness will always outweigh everything. Even though climate scientists could reasonably say it is more important that they go to conferences and compare data than it is that Steve down the street go see Granny twice a year in Cleveland and taking his every-two-year trip to Cancun, the reality is that Steve doesn't see it that way. If we're going to ask him to constrain his flying, everyone has to do it, and the scientists will just have to video-conference. Even though it doesn't matter even a tiny bit for total emissions whether I fly to Georgia for my climate conference or take the train, whether my goat goes in the front seat or in the pickup, it does matter. And so I put my behind on the train for 22 hours, and put down the newspaper for the goat.

There's also a credibility factor here — the painful truth is that people look for confirmation when told things that are strange or disturbing. If you believe that climate change or peak oil could really transform the world, people believe that you should be living your life that way. If you aren't, they start to wonder — how serious is this?

It isn't fair that fairness counts so much — it makes it a lot harder for people. But that is the reality — that any strategies with any meaningful hope of social acceptance must come with the advantage of being fair and equitable. We're going to have to put our money where our mouths are.