

## The Fall of Community, the Ruins of Sex

BY WENDELL BERRY

This article is adapted from the speech Mr. Berry delivered at the University of Louisville April 8 when he received the 1992 Victory of Spirit award. Mr. Berry, of Port Royal, Ky., is an author, poet, farmer and environmentalist. The Louisville Community Foundation will soon publish a full text of the speech. Free copies can be ordered by writing the foundation at 1404 Kentucky Home Life Bldg., Louisville, KY 40202, or by calling 685-4640.

**T**HE SEXUAL harassment phase of the Clarence Thomas hearing was handled by the news media as if it were anomalous and surprising. In fact, it was only an unusually spectacular revelation of the destructiveness of a process that has been well-established and well-respected for at least 200 years — the process, that is, of community disintegration.

The surprise and dismay occasioned by the Thomas hearing were not caused by the gossip involved (for that, the media has prepared us very well), but by the inescapable message that this process of disintegration, so little acknowledged by politicians and commentators, can be severely and perhaps illimitably destructive.

In the government-sponsored quarrel between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, public life collided with private life in a way that could not have been resolved and that could only have been damaging. The event was depressing and fearful both because of its violations of due process and justice, and because it was an attempt to deal publicly with a problem for which there is no public solution. . . . It was a public procedure that degenerated into a private quarrel. It was a private quarrel that became a public catastrophe. . . .

Does this mean that sexual conduct is only private in its interest and meaning? It certainly does not. For if there is no satisfactory way to deal publicly with sexual issues, there is also no satisfactory way to deal with them in mere privacy.

To make sense of sexual issues, or of sex itself, a third term, a third entity, has to intervene between public and private. For sex is not, and cannot be, any individual's "own business"; nor is it merely the private concern of any couple. Sex, like any other necessary, precious and volatile power, commonly held, is everybody's business. . . .

The indispensable interest, and the indispensable form, intervening between public and private interests, is that of community. The concerns of public and private, republic and citizen, necessary as they are, are not adequate for the shaping of human life. Community alone, as principle and as fact, can raise the standards of local health (ecological, economic, social and spiritual) without which the other two interests will destroy each other.

**B**Y COMMUNITY, I mean the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place, and wishing to continue to do so. To put it another way, it is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy and local nature.

Lacking the interest of or in such a community, private life becomes a sort of reserve in which individuals defend their "right" to act as they please and attempt to limit or destroy the "rights" of other individuals to act as they please. (Community, of course, is an idea that can extend itself beyond the local, but it does so metaphorically. The

idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities.)

A community identifies itself by an understood mutuality of interests. But it lives and acts by the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion and forgiveness. If it hopes to continue long as a community, it will wish to — and will have to — encourage respect for all its members, human and natural. It will encourage respect for all stations and occupations.

Such a community has the power — not invariably, but as a rule — to enforce decency without litigation. It has the power, that is, to influence behavior. And it exercises this power, not by coercion or violence but by teaching the young, and by preserving stories and songs that tell (among other things) what works and what does not work in a given place.

Such a community is (among other things) a set of arrangements between men and women. These arrangements include marriage, family structure, divisions of work and authority, responsibility for the instruction of children and young people. These arrangements exist, in part, to reduce the volatility and the danger of sex — to preserve its energy, its beauty and its pleasure; to preserve and clarify its power to join, not just husband and wife to one another, but parents to children, families to the community, the community to

nature; to assure, so far as possible, that the inheritors of sexuality, as they come of age, will be worthy of it.

But the life of a community is more vulnerable than public life. A community cannot be made or preserved apart from the loyalty and affection of its members and the respect and goodwill of the people outside it. And for a long time, in the industrial countries of the West, these conditions have not been met.

As the technological, economic and political means of exploitation have expanded, communities have been more and more victimized by opportunists outside themselves. And as the salesmen, saleswomen, advertisers and propagandists of the industrial economy have become more ubiquitous and more adept at seduction, communities have lost the loyalty and affection of their members.

**T**HE COMMUNITY, wherever you look, is being destroyed by the desires and ambitions of both private life and public life, which, for want of the intervention of community interests, are also destroying one another.

Community life is by definition a life of cooperation and responsibility. Private life and public life, without the disciplines of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and exploitation. As private life casts off all community restraints in the in-

terest of economic exploitation or ambition or self-realization or whatever, the communal supports of public life are undercut, and public life becomes simply the arena of unrestrained private ambition and greed.

As our communities have disintegrated from external predation and internal disaffection, we have changed from a society whose ideal of justice was trust and fairness among people who knew each other into a society whose ideal of justice is public litigation, breeding distrust even among people who know each other.

Once it has shrugged off the interests and claims of the community, the public language of sexuality becomes inadequate to deal with the real issues and problems of sexuality. The public dialogue degenerates into a stupefying and useless contest between so-called "liberation" and so-called "morality."

The real issues and problems, as they are experienced and suffered in people's lives, cannot be talked about. The public language can deal, howbeit awkwardly and perhaps uselessly, with pornography, sexual hygiene, contraception, harassment, rape, etc. It cannot talk about respect, responsibility, sexual discipline, fidelity or the practice of love. . . .

And the conventional opposition of

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"liberal" and "conservative" is, here as elsewhere, perfectly useless. The "conservatives" promote the family as a sort of public icon, but they will not promote the economic integrity of the household or the community, which are the mainstays of family life. Under the sponsorship of "conservative" presidencies, the economy of the modern household, which once required the father to work away from home, a development that was bad enough, now requires the mother as well to work away from home.

And this development has the wholehearted endorsement of "liberals," who see the mother thus forced to spend her days away from her home and children as "liberated" — though nobody has yet seen the fathers thus forced away as "liberated." Some feminists are thus in the curious position of opposing the mistreatment of women and yet advocating their participation in an economy in which everything is mistreated.

The "conservatives" more or less attack homosexuality, abortion and pornography, and the "liberals" more or less defend them. Neither party will oppose sexual promiscuity. The "liberals" will not oppose promiscuity because they do not wish to appear intolerant of "individual liberty." The "conservatives" will not oppose promiscuity because sexual discipline would reduce the profits of corporations, which in their advertisements and entertainments encourage sexual self-indulgence as a way of selling merchandise.

**T**HE PUBLIC discussion of sexual issues has thus degenerated into a poor attempt to equivocate between private lusts and public emergencies. Nowhere in public life (that is, the public life that counts: the discussions of political and corporate leaders) is there an attempt to respond to community need in the language of community interest. . . .

In fact, there is no one to speak for the community interest except those people who wish to adhere to community principles. The community, in other words, must speak in its own interest. It must learn to defend itself. And in its self-defense it may use the many powerful arguments provided for it by the failures of the private and public aims that have so nearly destroyed it.

The defenders of community should point out, for example, that for the joining of men and women there need to be many forms that only a community can provide. If you destroy the ideal of the gentle man, and remove from men all expectations of courtesy and consideration toward women and children, you have prepared the way for an epidemic of rape and abuse. If you deprecate the sanctity and solemnity of marriage, not just as a bond between two people, but as a bond between those two people and their forebears, their children and their neighbors, then you have prepared the way for divorce, child neglect, community ruin and loneliness. If you destroy the economies of household and community, then you destroy the bonds of mutual usefulness and practical dependence without which the other bonds will not hold.

If these and all other community-made arrangements between men and women are removed, if the only arrangements left between them are those of sex and sexual politics, instinct and polity without culture, then sex and politics are headed, not only toward many kinds of private and public suffering, but toward destruction of justice,

as in the confrontation of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill.

**I**T IS CERTAIN that communities are destroyed both from within and from without: by internal disaffection and external exploitation. But it can be argued that community disintegration typically is begun by an aggression of some sort from the outside, and that in modern times the typical aggression has been economic. The destruction of the community begins when its economy is made, not dependent (for no community has ever been entirely independent), but subject to a larger external economy. . . .

The industrialization of the Eastern Kentucky coal fields early in the present century [followed a pattern in which a] decentral-

alized, fairly independent local economy was absorbed and destroyed by an aggressive, monetarily powerful outside economy. . . . [T]he once-independent mountaineers of Eastern Kentucky became the wage-earning servants of those who had dispossessed their parents, sometimes digging the very coal that their family had once owned and had sold for as little per acre as the pittance the companies paid per day.

By now, there is hardly a rural neighborhood or town in the United States that has not suffered some version of this process. The same process is destroying local economies and cultures all over the world.

The industrial revolution has thus made universal the colonialist principle that has proved to be ruinous beyond measure: the assumption that it is permissible to ruin one place or culture for the sake of another. Thus justified or excused, the industrial economy grows in power, and thrives on its damages to local economies, communities and places.

And the politicians and bureaucrats who measure the economic prosperity of their nations have judged according to the burgeoning wealth of the industrial interests, not according to the failure of small local economies or the reduction and often hopeless servitude of small local people. The self-congratulation of the industrialists and their political minions has continued unabated to this day. . . .

It is a public of industrially destroyed communities that the industrialists live off of. . . . The global economy does not exist to help the communities and localities of the globe. It exists to siphon the wealth of those communities and places into a few bank accounts. To this economy, democracy and the values of the religious traditions mean absolutely nothing. And those who wish to help communities to survive had better understand that a merely political freedom means little within a totalitarian economy. . . .

The fall of community reveals how precious and how necessary community is. For when community falls, so must fall all the

things that only community life can engender and protect: the care of the old, the care and education of children, family life, neighborly work, the handing down of memory, the care of the earth, respect of nature and the lives of wild creatures.

All of these things have been damaged by the rule of industrialism, but of all the damaged things probably the most precious and the most damaged is sexual love. For sexual love is the heart, the nucleus, of community life. Sexual love is the force that, in our bodily life, connects us most intimately to the Creation, to the fertility of the world, to farming and the care of animals. It brings

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into the place that holds the community together and joins it to its place. In dealing with community, as in dealing with everything else, the industrial economy goes for the nucleus. It does this because it wants the all-mastering power to cause fundamental change. To make sex the preferred bait of commerce may seem merely the obvious thing to do, once greed is granted its now conventional priority as a motive.

But this could happen only after a probably instinctive sense of the sanctity and dignity of the body — the sense, as the Bible puts it, of having been "fearfully and wonderfully made" or of having been made "a living soul" — had been destroyed. Once this ancient reticence had been broken down, then the come-on of the pimp could be sold on the promise of instant, innocent sexual gratification, "no strings attached." Sexual energy cannot be made publicly available for commercial use — that is, prostituted — without destroying all of its communal or cultural forms: forms of courtship, marriage, family life, household economy and so on. . . .

In the wake of the Thomas-Hill catastrophe in Washington, *The New York Times Magazine* contained a skin lotion advertisement which displayed a photograph of the naked torso of a woman. From a feminist point of view, this headless and footless body represents the sexual ideal of the worst sort of man: a woman who cannot think and cannot escape. From a point of view somewhat more comprehensive, the point of view of community, it represents also the commercial ideal of the industrial economy: the completely seducible consumer, unable either to judge or to resist. . . .

**I**F THEY had only themselves to consider, lovers would not need to marry, but they must think of others and of other things. They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and on its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is.

These lovers, pledging themselves to one another "until death," are giving themselves away, and they are joined by this as no law or contract could ever join them. Lovers, then, "die" into their union with one another as a soul "dies" into its union with God.

And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find, not something to sell as in the public market, but this momentous giving. If the community cannot protect this giving it can protect nothing — and our time is proving that this is so.

We thus can see that there are two kinds of human economy. There is the kind of economy that exists to protect the "right" of profit, as does our present public economy; and this sort of economy will inevitably gravitate toward protection of the "rights" of those who profit most. Our present public economy is really a political system that safeguards the private exploitation of the public wealth and health.

The other kind of economy exists for the protection of gifts, beginning with the "giving in marriage," and this is the economy of community, which now has been nearly destroyed by the public economy.

And there are, unsurprisingly, two kinds of sexuality that correspond to the two kinds of economy. The sexuality of community life, whatever its inevitable vagaries, is centered on marriage, which joins two living souls as closely as, in this world, they can be joined. This joining of two who know, love and trust one another brings them in the same breath into the freedom of sexual consent and into the fullest earthly realization of the image of God.

From their joining, other living souls come into being, and with them great responsibilities that are unending, fearful and joyful. The marriage of two lovers joins them, to one another, to forebears, to descendants, to the community, to Heaven and Earth. It is the fundamental connection, without which nothing holds, and trust is its necessity. Once this trust is

broken, all the suspicion in the world cannot compensate.

Our present sexual conduct, having "liberated" itself of the several trusts of community life, is public, like our present economy. It has forsaken trust, for it rests upon the easy giving and breaking of promises.

And, having forsaken trust, it has predictably become political. In private life, as in public, we are attempting to correct bad character and low motives by law and by litigation. "Losing kindness," as Lao Tzui said, "they turn to justice. . . ."

The difficulty is that marriage, family life, friendship, neighborhood and other personal connections do not depend exclusively or even primarily on justice — though, of course, they all must try for it. They depend on trust, patience, respect, mutual help, forgiveness — in other words, the practice of love, as opposed to the mere feeling of love.

**B**ECAUSE OF OUR determination to separate sex from the practice of love in marriage and in family and community life, our public sexual morality is confused, sentimental, bitter, complexly destructive, and hypocritical.

It begins with the idea of "sexual liberation": whatever people desire is "natural" and all right, men and women are not different but merely equal, and all desires are equal. If a man wants to sit down while a pregnant woman is standing, or walk through a heavy door and let it slam in a woman's face, that is all right. Divorce on an epidemic scale is all right; child abandonment by one parent or another is all right; it is regrettable but still pretty much all right if a divorced parent neglects or refuses to pay child support; promiscuity is all right; adultery is all right. Promiscuity among teenagers is pretty much all right, for "that's the way it is"; abortion is all right; the prostitution of sex in advertisements and public entertainment is all right.

But then, far down this road of freedom, we decide that a few lines ought to be drawn. Child molestation, we wish to say, is not all right, nor is sexual violence, nor is sexual harassment, nor is pregnancy among unmarried teenagers. We are also against venereal diseases, the diseases of promiscuity, though we tend to think that they are the government's responsibility, not ours.

In this culture of liberated sexuality, "free" of courtesy, ceremony, responsibility, and restraint, dependent on litigation and expert advice, there is much that is human, sad to say, but there is no sense or sanity. Trying to draw the line where we are trying to draw it, between carelessness and brutality, is like insisting that falling is flying ("free" and "natural") until you hit the ground, and then trying to outlaw hitting the ground.

The pretentious, fantastical and solemn idiocy of the public sexual code could not be better exemplified than by the new ubiquitous phrase, "sexual partner," which denies all that is implied by the names of "husband" or "wife" or "lover." It denies, with a sort of obsequious egalitarianism, anyone's responsibility for the consequences of sex. With one's "sexual partner," it is now understood, one must practice "safe sex" — that is, one must protect oneself, not one's partner, or the children that may come of the "partnership."

According to its claims, sexual liberation ought logically to have brought in a time of ease and candor between men and women. It has, on the contrary, filled the country with sexual self-consciousness, uncertainty, and fear. Women, though they may dress as if the sexual millennium had arrived, hurry along our city streets and pub-

lic corridors with their eyes hunted animals. "Eye contact," the very signature of our humanity, has become a danger.

The meeting ground between men and women, which ought to be safeguarded by trust, has become a place of suspicion, competition, and violence. One no longer goes there, asking how instinct may be enlarged in affection and loyalty, ramifying in many ways; now one asks how instinct may be indulged with the least risk to personal safety.

Seeking to "free" sexual love from its old communal restraints, we have "freed" it also from its meaning, its responsibility, and its exaltation: And we have made it dangerous. "Sexual liberation" is as much a fraud, and as great a failure, as the "peaceful" atom.

We are now living in a sexual atmosphere so polluted and embittered that women must look upon virtually any man as a potential assailant, and a man must look upon virtually any woman as a potential accuser. The idea that this situation can be corrected by the courts and the police only compounds the disorder and the danger.

And in the midst of this acid rainfall of predation and recrimination we presume to teach our young people that sex can be made "safe" — by the use, inevitably, of purchased drugs and devices. What a lie! Sex was never safe, and it is less safe now than it has ever been.

What we are actually teaching the young is an illusion of thoughtless freedom and purchasable safety, which encourages them to tamper prematurely, disrespectfully, and dangerously with a great power. Just as the public economy encourages people to spend money and waste the world, so the public sexual code encourages people to be spendthrifts and squanderers of sex. . . .

**T**HUS, STARTING with economic brutality, we have arrived at sexual brutality. Those who affirm the one and deplore the other will have to explain how they might logically have arrived anywhere else.

But sexual lovemaking between humans is not, and cannot be, the thoughtless, instinctual coupling of animals; it is not "recreation"; it is not "safe." It is the strongest prompting and the greatest joy that young people are likely to experience. Because it is so powerful, it is risky, not just because of the famous dangers of venereal disease and "unwanted pregnancy," but also because it involves and requires a giving away of the self, which, if not honored and reciprocated, inevitably reduces dignity and self-respect. The invitation to give oneself away is not, except for the extremely ignorant or the extremely foolish, an easy one to accept.

Perhaps the current revulsion against sexual harassment may be the beginning of a renewal of sexual responsibility and self-respect. It must, at any rate, be the beginning of a repudiation of the idea that sex among us is merely natural.

If men and women are merely animals, it is hard to see how sexual harassment could have become an issue, for such harassment is no more than the instinctive procedure of male animals, who openly harass females, and usually by unabashed physical display and contact; it is their way of asking who is and who is not in estrus. Women would not think such behavior offensive if we had not, for thousands of years, understood ourselves as specifically human beings — creatures who, in some ways animal-like, are in other ways God-like.

In asking men to feel shame and to restrain themselves — what one would not ask of an animal — women are implicitly asking to be treated as human beings in that full sense, as living souls made in the image of God. But any humans who wish to be treated, and to treat others, according to that definition must understand that this is not a kindness that can be conferred by a public economy or by a public government or by a public people. It only can be conferred, upon its members, by a community.

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