

The Obsolescence of High-Tech Relationships

MEN AND WOMEN IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND

By Wendell Berry

The domestic joys, the daily housework or business, the building of houses—they are not phantasms . . . they have weight and form and location . . .

—WALT WHITMAN, *To Think of Time*

I AM NOT AN AUTHORITY ON MEN OR WOMEN or any of the possible connections between them. In sexual matters I am an amateur, in both the ordinary and the literal senses of that word. I speak about them only because I am concerned about them; I am concerned about them only because I am involved in them; I am involved in them, apparently, only because I am a human, a qualification for which I deserve no credit.

I do not believe, moreover, that any individual *can* be an authority on the present subject. The common ground between men and women can only be defined by community authority. Individually, we may desire it and think about it, but we are not going to occupy it if we do not arrive there together.

That we have not arrived there, that we apparently are not very near to doing so, is acknowledged by the title of the Jung Institute of San Francisco symposium where I first gave this paper, "Men and Women in Search of Common Ground." And that a symposium so entitled should be held acknowledges implicitly that we are not happy in our exile. The specific cause of our unhappiness, I assume, is that relationships between men and women are now too often extremely tentative and temporary, whereas we would like them to be sound and permanent.

Apparently, it is in the nature of all human relationships to aspire to be permanent. To propose temporariness as a goal in such relationships is to bring them under the rule of aims and standards that prevent them from beginning. Neither marriage,

nor kinship, nor friendship, nor neighborhood can exist with a life expectancy that is merely convenient.

To see that such connections aspire to permanence, we do not have to look farther than popular songs in which people sill speak of loving each other "forever." We now understand, of course, that in this circumstance the word "forever" is not to be trusted. It may mean only "for a few years" or "for a while" or even "until tomorrow morning." And we should not be surprised to realize that if the word "forever" cannot be trusted in this circumstance, then the word "love" cannot be trusted either.

This, as we know, was often true before our own time, though in our time it seems easier than before to say "I will love you forever" and to mean nothing by it. It is possible for such words to be used cynically—that is, they may be *intended* to mean nothing—but I doubt that they are often used with such simple hypocrisy. People continue to use them, I think, because they want those feelings to have a transferable value, like good words or good money. They cannot bear for sex to be "just sex," any more than they can bear for family life to be just reproduction or for friendship to be just a mutually convenient exchange of goods and services.

The questions that I want to address here, then, are: Why are sexual and other human relationships now so impermanent? And under what conditions might they become permanent?

It cannot be without significance that this division is occurring at a time when division has become our characteristic mode of thinking and acting. Everywhere we look now, the axework of division is going on. We see ourselves more and more as divided from each other, from nature, and from what our traditions define as human nature. The world is now full of nations, races, interests, groups, and movements of all sorts, most of them unable to define their relations to each other except in terms of division and opposition. The poor human body itself has been conceptually hacked to pieces and parceled out like a bureaucracy. Brain and brawn, left brain and right brain, stomach, hands, heart, and genitals have all been set up in competition against each other, each supported by its standing army of advocates,

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press agents, and merchants. In such a time, it is not surprising that the stresses that naturally, and perhaps desirably, occur between the sexes should result in the same sort of division with the same sort of doctrinal justification.

This condition of division is one that we suffer from and complain about, yet it is a condition that we promote by our ambitions and desires and justify by our jargon of “self-fulfillment.” Each of us, we say, is supposed to “realize his or her full potential as an individual.” It is as if the whole two hundred million of us were saying with Coriolanus:

I'll never

Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand

As if a man were author of himself

And knew no other kin. (V, iii, 34-37)

By “instinct” he means the love of family, community, and country. In Shakespeare’s time, this “instinct” was understood to be the human norm—the definition of humanity, or a large part of that definition. When Coriolanus speaks these lines, he identifies himself, not as “odd,” but as monstrous, a *danger* to family, community, and country. He identifies himself, that is, as an individual prepared to act alone and without the restraint of reverence, fidelity, or love. Shakespeare is at one with his tradition in understanding that such a person acted inevitably, not as the “author of himself,” but as the author of tragic consequences both for himself and for other people.

The problem, of course, is that we are *not* the authors of ourselves. That we are not is a religious perception, but it is also a biological and social one. Each of us has had many authors, and each of us is engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship. We could say that the human race is a great coauthorship in which we are collaborating with God and nature in the making of ourselves and one another. From this there is no escape. We may collaborate either well or poorly, or we may refuse to collaborate, but even to refuse to collaborate is to exert an influence and to affect the quality of the product. This is only a way of saying that by ourselves we have no meaning and no dignity; by ourselves we are outside the human definition, outside our identity. “More and more,” Mary Catharine Bateson wrote in *With a Daughter’s Eye*, “it has seemed to me that the idea of an individual, the idea that there is someone to be known, separate from the relationships, is simply an error.”

Some time ago I was with Wes Jackson, wandering among the experimental plots at his home and workplace, the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. We stopped by one plot that had been planted in various densities of population. Wes pointed to a Maximilian sunflower growing alone, apart from the others, and said, “There is a plant that has ‘realized its full potential as an individual.’” And clearly it had: It had grown very tall; it had put out many long branches heavily laden with blossoms—and the branches had broken off, or they had grown too long and too heavy. The plant had indeed realized its full potential as an individual, but it had failed as a Maximilian sunflower. We could say that its full potential as an individual *was* this failure. It failed

because it had lived outside an important part of its definition, which consists of *both* its individuality and its community. A part of its properly realizable potential lay in its community, not in itself.

In making a metaphor of this sunflower, I do not mean to deny the value or the virtue of a *proper* degree of independence in the character and economy of an individual, nor do I mean to deny the conflicts that occur between individuals and communities. Those conflicts belong to our definition, too, and are probably as necessary as they are troublesome. I do mean to say that the conflicts are not everything, and that to make conflict—the so-called “jungle law”—the basis of social or economic doctrine is extremely dangerous. A part of our definition is our common ground, and a part of it is sharing and mutually enjoying our common ground. Undoubtedly, also, since we are humans, a part of our definition is a recurring contest over the common ground: Who shall describe its boundaries, occupy it, use it, or own it? But such contests obviously can be carried too far, so that they become destructive both of the commonality of the common ground and of the ground itself.

The danger of the phrase “common ground” is that it is likely to be meant as no more than a metaphor. I am *not* using it as a metaphor; I mean by it the actual ground that is shared by whatever group we may be talking about—the human race, a nation, a community, or a household. If we use the term only as a metaphor, then our thinking will not be robustly circumstantial and historical, as it needs to be, but only a weak, clear broth of ideas and feelings.

Marriage, for example, is talked about most of the time as if it were only a “human relationship” between a wife and a husband. A good marriage is likely to be explained as the result of mutually satisfactory adjustments of thoughts and feelings—a “deep” and complicated mental condition. That is surely true for some couples some of the time, but, as a general understanding of marriage, it is inadequate and probably unworkable. It is far too much a thing of the mind and, for that reason, is not to be trusted. “God guard me,” Yeats wrote, “from those thoughts men think / In the mind alone . . .”

Yeats, who took seriously the principle of incarnation, elaborated this idea in his essay on the Japanese Noh plays, in which he says that “we only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body.” But we need a broader concept yet, for a marriage involves more than just the bodies and minds of a man and a woman. It involves locality, human circumstance, and duration. There is a strong possibility that the basic human sexual unity is composed of a man and a woman (bodies and minds), plus their history together, plus their kin and descendants, plus their place in the world with its economy and history, plus their natural neighborhood, plus their human community with its memories, satisfactions, expectations, and hopes.

By describing it in such a way, we begin to understand marriage as the insistently practical union that it is. We begin to

understand it, that is, as it is represented in the traditional marriage ceremony, those vows being only a more circumstantial and practical way of saying what the popular songs say dreamily and easily: "I will love you forever"—a statement that, in this world, inescapably leads to practical requirements and consequences because it proposes survival as a goal. Indeed, marriage is a union much more than practical, for it looks both to our survival as a species and to the survival of our definition as human beings—that is, as creatures who make promises and keep them, who care devotedly and faithfully for one another, who care properly for the gifts in this world.

The business of humanity is undoubtedly survival in this complex sense—a necessary, difficult, and entirely fascinating job of work. We have in us deeply planted instructions—personal, cultural, and natural—to survive, and we do not need much experience to inform us that we cannot survive alone. The smallest possible "survival unit," indeed, appears to be the universe. At any rate, the ability of an organism to survive outside the universe has yet to be demonstrated. Inside it, everything happens *in concert*; not a breath is drawn but by the grace of an inconceivable series of vital connections joining an inconceivable multiplicity of created things in an inconceivable unity. But of course it is preposterous for a mere individual human to espouse the universe—a possibility that is purely mental, and productive of nothing but talk. On the other hand, it may be that our marriages, kinships, friendships, neighborhoods, and all our forms and acts of homemaking are the rites by which we solemnize and enact our union with the universe. These ways are practical, proper, available to everybody, and they can provide for the safekeeping of the small acreages of the universe that have been entrusted to us. Moreover, they give the word "love" its only chance to mean, for only they can give it a history, a community, and a place. Only in such ways can love become flesh and do its worldly work. For example, a marriage without a place, a household, has nothing to show for itself. Without a history of some length, it does not know what it means. Without a community to exert a shaping pressure around it. It may explode because of the pressure inside it.

These ways of marriage, kinship, friendship, and neighborhood surround us with forbiddings; they are forms of bondage and involved in our humanity is always the wish to escape. We may be obliged to look on this wish as necessary, for, as I have just implied, these unions are partly shaped by internal pressure. But involved in our humanity also is the warning that we can escape only into loneliness and meaninglessness. Our choice may be between a small, human-sized meaning and a vast meaninglessness, or between the freedom of our virtues and the freedom of our vices. It is only in these bonds that our individuality has a use and a worth; it is only to the people who know us, love us, and depend on us that we are indispensable as the persons we uniquely are. In our industrial society, in which people insist so fervently on their value and their freedom "as individuals," individuals are seen more and more as "units" by their govern-

ments, employers, and suppliers. They live, that is, under the rule of the interchangeability of parts: What one person can do, another person can do just as well or a newer person can do better. Separate from the relationships, there is nobody to be known; people become, as they say and feel, nobodies.

It is plain that, under the rule of the industrial economy, humans, at least as individuals, are well advanced in a kind of obsolescence. Among those who have achieved even a modest success according to the industrial formula, the human body has been almost entirely replaced by machines and by a shrinking population of manual laborers. For enormous numbers of people now, the only physical activity that they cannot delegate to machines or menials, who will presumably do it more to their satisfaction, is sexual activity. For many, the only necessary physical labor is that of childbirth.

According to the industrial formula, the ideal human residence (from the Latin *residere*, "to sit back" or "remain sitting") is one on which the residents do not work. The house is built, equipped, decorated, and provisioned by other people, by strangers. In it, the married couple practice as few as possible of the disciplines of household or homestead. Their domestic labor consists principally of buying things, putting things away, and throwing things away, but it is understood that it is "best" to have even those jobs done by an "inferior" person, and the ultimate industrial ideal is a "home" in which *everything* would be done by pushing buttons. In such a "home," a married couple are mates, sexually, legally, and socially, but they are not helpmates; they do nothing useful either together or for each other. According to the ideal, work should be done *away* from home. When such spouses say to each other, "I will love you forever," the meaning of their words is seriously impaired by their circumstances; they are speaking in the presence of so little that they have done and made. Their history together is essentially placeless; it has no visible or tangible incarnation. They have only themselves in view.

In such circumstance, the obsolescence of the body is inevitable, and this is implicitly acknowledged by the existence of the "physical fitness movement." Back in the era of the body, when women and men were physically useful as well as physically attractive to one another, physical fitness was simply a condition. Little conscious attention was given to it; it was a by-product of useful work. Now an obsessive attention has been fixed upon it. Physical fitness has become extremely mental; once free, it has become expensive, an industry—just as sexual attractiveness, once the result of physical vigor and useful work, has now become an industry. The history of "sexual liberation" has been a history of increasing bondage to corporations.

Now the human mind appears to be following the human body into obsolescence. Increasingly, jobs that once were done by the minds of individual humans are done by computers—and by governments and experts. Dr. William C. DeVries, the current superstar of industrial heart replacement, can blithely assure a reporter that "the general society is not very well informed to

make those decisions [as to the imposition of restraints on medical experiments on human patients], and that's why the medical society or the government who has a wider range of view comes in to make those decisions" (*Louisville Courier-Journal*, 3 February 1985). Thus we may benefit from the "miracles" of modern medical science on the condition that we delegate all moral and critical authority in such matters to the doctors and the government. We may save our bodies by losing our minds, just as, according to another set of experts, we may save our minds by forsaking our bodies. Computer thought is exactly the sort that Yeats warned us against; it is made possible by the assumption that thought occurs "in the mind alone" and that the mind, therefore, is an excerptable and isolatable human function, which can be set aside from all else that is human, reduced to pure process, and so imitated by a machine. But in fact we know that the *human* mind is not distinguishable from what it knows and that what it knows comes from or is radically conditioned by its embodied life in this world. A machine, therefore, cannot be a mind or be like a mind; it can only *replace* a mind.

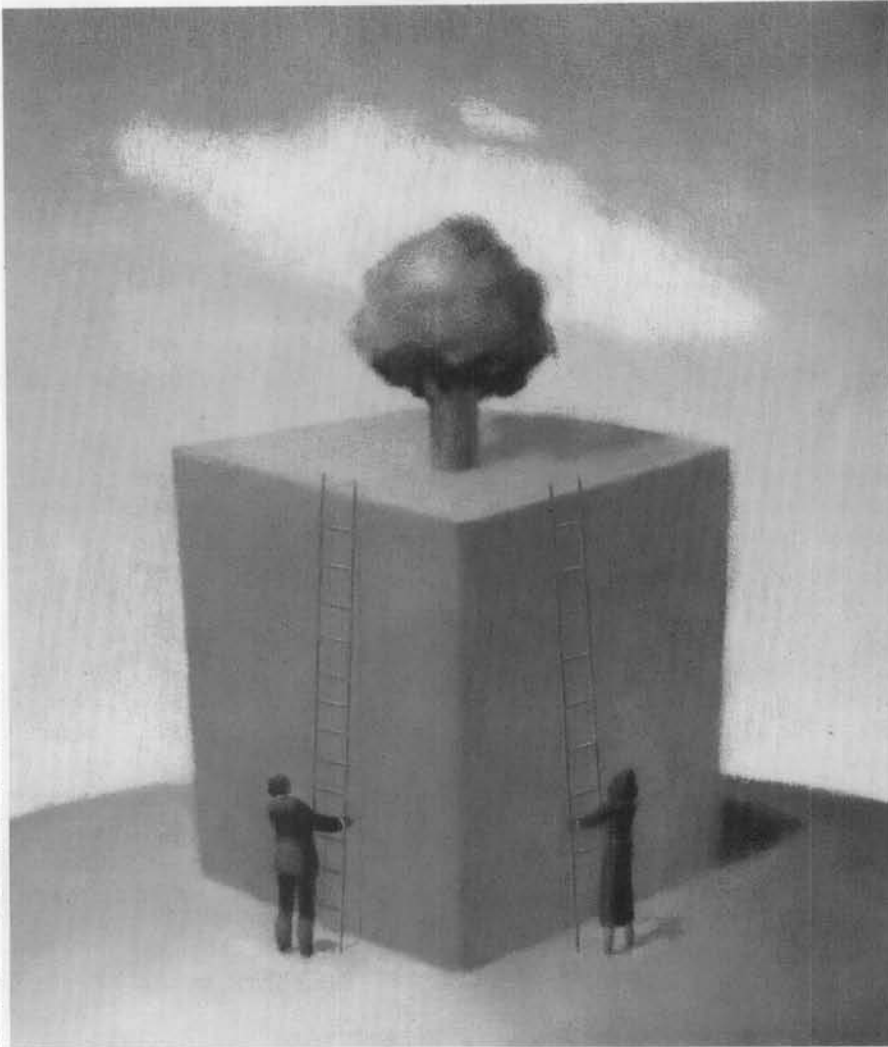
We know, too, that these mechanical substitutions are part of a long established process. The industrial economy has made its way among us by a process of division, degradation, and then replacement. It is only after we have been divided against each other that work and the products of work can be degraded; it is only after work and its products have been degraded that workers can be replaced by machines. Only when thought has been degraded can a mind be replaced by a machine, or a society or experts, or a government.

It is true, furthermore, that, in this process of industrialization, what is free is invariably replaced by a substitute that is costly. Bodily health as the result of useful work, for instance, is or was free, whereas industrial medicine, which has flourished upon the uselessness of the body, is damagingly and heartlessly expensive.

In the time of the usefulness of the body, when the body became useless it died, and death was understood as a kind of healing; industrial medicine looks upon death as a disease that calls for increasingly expensive cures.

Similarly, in preindustrial country towns and city neighborhoods, the people who needed each other lived close to each other. This proximity was free, and it provided many benefits that were either free or comparatively cheap. This simple proximity has been destroyed and replaced by communications and transportation industries that are, again, enormously expensive and destructive, as well as extremely vulnerable to disruption.

Insofar as we reside in the industrial economy, our obsolescence, both as individual and as humankind, is fast growing upon us. But we cannot regret, or, indeed, even know that this is true without knowing and naming those never-to-be-official institutions that alone have the power to reestablish us in our true estate and identity: marriage, family, household, friendship, neighborhood, community. For these to have an effective existence, they must be located in the world and in time. So located, they have the power to establish us in



our human identity because they are not merely institutions in a public, abstract sense, like the organized institutions but are also private conditions. They are the conditions in which a human is complete, body and mind, because completely necessary and needed.

When we live within these human enclosures, we escape the tyrannical doctrine of the interchangeability of parts; in these enclosures, we live as members, each in its own identity necessary to the others. When our spouse or child, friend or neighbor is in need or in trouble, we do not deal with them by means of a computer, for we know that, with them, we must not think without feeling. We do not help them by sending a machine, for we know that, with them, a machine cannot represent us. We

know that, when they need us, we must go and offer ourselves, body and mind, as we are. As members, moreover, we are useless and worse than useless to each other if we do not care properly for the ground that is common to us.

It is only in these trying circumstances that human love is given its chance to have meaning, for it is only in these circumstances that it can be born out in deeds through time—"even," to

quote Shakespeare again, "to the edge of doom"—and thus prove itself true by fulfilling its true term.

In these circumstances, in place and in time, the sexes will find their common ground and be somewhat harmoniously rejoined, not by some resolution of conflict and power, but by proving indispensable to one another, as in fact they are.

WATER LILY CHILD

You were June's rose-child
until spring ended
and our short summer began.
But now I see you are of July,
the water lily month,
for you are clearly
a water lily now,
no more to be kissed in petal folds
of your perfumed baby neck,
dark lashes flitting like butterflies
across the sky of your eyes.

That morning when you changed
from rose to lily,
so suddenly, in the night
while I slept smiling,
I tried to reach out
over the water,
to catch you, net you into shore,
but even my breath,
thin as porcelain,
made little waves
that widened and carried you further
in its anxious rippling.

"Please don't go," I whispered,
but you, lovely water lily,
lovely lotus of the pond,
my water lily child,
had already said goodbye.
So waxen-clear, unbruised,
you had to drift.

I remember rose days—
you asked me to walk
with you to school

up the hard hill
together hand in hand
then you saw your friends,
skipped ahead, waved goodbye,
and I walked home,
wondering at my tears;
I sat at your feet
on your narrow attic bed,
in cozy twilight or in storm,
we read, talked, I tucked you in,
kissed you, said, "I love you,"
turned out the light.

And then—I was at your feet again,
kneeling as you shimmered above,
blooming and unfolding,
your radiant face, the center blush,
stained arms like petals

and I, slowly rising to meet your eyes,
fingers stumbling on twenty-four pearls,
each loop closing over, finishing,
to clothe you in your wedding dress.

I felt alone and old,
wondered if my mother
felt the same when she saw me
transformed into the same bloom.
When she looks at me, sometimes,
I see myself reflected,
growing smaller, sailing fainter
in watery ponds of her aging eyes.

Perhaps I can remember you as rose
for I shall keep scented petals
in a painted ginger jar.

JULIA E. BARRETT