

**Course Syllabus**  
**The Common Good and Common Ground: Is it Possible?**  
**IDH 2930 - 28914 - 'Common Ground'- Fall 2023**

**Instructor:** Todd Best  
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Office Hours: by appointment

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**Required Text:** Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace* (Wirzba, editor)  
-Additional supplemental materials provided electronically

**Course Description:**

Is there such a thing as a “common good”? What is the common good, anyway? If so, is there a way to find common ground amidst our differences as we collectively think about our shared life as a society? As we find ourselves in highly contested cultural and political space, we experience deep divisions and differences about what we envision for society. Is a collective and collaborative conversation possible in which we can nurture a healthy shared life together? Over the years, Wendell Berry has offered a voice that serves as a starting point for a conversation to reclaim the common good. Addressing our navigation of areas like food systems, ecology, community, difference, gender, race, economics, education, citizenship, technology, war and peacemaking, Berry works from a place of common rootedness to provide a vision for moving forward. These cultural focal points and their related questions are taken up by Wendell Berry in his decades of writing, as he asks readers to think more deeply about human activity in the world. For Berry, an English professor turned farmer/writer/cultural critic, that requires eyes and ears wide open as we seek to understand who we are, where we are, and how we might flourish in the midst of the place we find ourselves. This seminar style course, rooted in discussion, will provide students the opportunity to read Berry’s essays carefully and reflectively. We will consider selections from *The Art of the Commonplace* alongside some of Berry’s short stories and poems, as well as supplemental film, poetry and other art. Our reading will feed what promises to be a rich ongoing classroom discussion as we join Berry in working on these questions. Additionally, students will further process the class content through short writing assignments as they interact with the book and the ideas to which it may point.

**Course Objectives:**

1. Read Berry and other content carefully and reflectively, treating author as a conversation partner
2. Understand and articulate Berry’s ideas, placing in context of wider human experience
3. Engage the text \*critically and respond \*personally
4. Actively discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes careful reading and careful listening

\**Critically* does not mean negatively only. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful responses and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read “Reading Charitably” in Canvas.

\**Personally* means two things: 1) realizing that as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author. Let questions emerge and let your imagination consider the implications of the reading. 2) As you interact with the reading, allow the content to be filtered through *your own* experience in life.

### **Class Structure and Flow**

The class structure will be quite simple: reading that culminates in in-depth conversation. Each week we will read one or more essays, sometimes accompanied by a supplemental article, podcast, video, or poem. Students will come to class having read the week’s material and having written a brief blogpost-style reflection as a precursor for conversation with classmates. During class, we will discuss the reading. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar will be used to enhance the conversation. Periodically, there will be additional creative assignments.

*Depending on class size, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.* In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by class members, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute every week, and not merely listen.

### *A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility*

This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the shared human experience. It probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don’t always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: which is to be

- observant
- reflective
- imaginative

as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion of individual perspectives, while leaving room for friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author’s views as well as each other’s, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in

spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class about understanding and perspective about the idea of seeking common ground for the common good. So, to the degree that learning is about knowledge, we are seeking knowledge, but it's a different kind of knowledge than what we might be used to.

Other helpful tips:

There will be several places in which religious ideas are fully in view. A little background in the Christian tradition would be helpful, but not mandatory. To be clear, religious ideas will be on the table for discussion, though religion is only one lens that will be employed. There is plenty of room for a plurality of perspectives - and if you have religious identity, please know that you have full freedom to draw upon that as a resource. In fact, it is encouraged. But please do so, not merely by quoting a religious text, but by putting your own skillful reasoning to use in articulating your thoughts. Use your own religious imagination, rooted in your tradition.

**Assignments and Grades:**

Attendance and Participation 25% (250 points)

Weekly Reflections 30% (10 x 30 points = 300)

Review Essay 20% (200 points)

Final Essay/Project 25% (250 points)

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

A minimum grade of B is required to earn Academic points towards your Honors Completion Requirements. (Exception: Honors Quest I and II sections require a C). Once you have earned your final grade in this course, please upload the course information and final grade from your Unofficial Transcript into your Honors Canvas Cohort: Honors Completion module to earn Honors Completion credit.

**Attendance and Participation:** Since this is a discussion-based class, attendance is vital and assumed. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four

absences.

In addition to attendance, students are expected to regularly contribute to classroom discussions. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class as well as interaction via online discussion in Canvas (e-learning). Regarding online Discussion, the instructor will monitor and note both the frequency of comments and the quality of engagement. A worthy goal would be to initiate a discussion, comment on a discussion, or pose questions weekly in the Discussion forum in Canvas. Further participation could include making connections between class readings and your observations in culture (bringing to our attention related articles, books, poetry, film, artwork, thinkers, personal experiences).

In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by a student or small groups, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute, and not merely to listen, every week. Each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the weekly reflections (see next).

**Weekly reflections:** Students will submit weekly blogpost-style summaries with brief reflections (150 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. Students may consider using the following questions as prompts: (these are also helpful for class discussion)

- Which of Berry's ideas or most captured your attention this week?
- What do you find confusing or troubling in them?
- What do you find most compelling in his thinking?
- How would you criticize or build upon his thought? (basing your critique on good reasons)

Each weekly blog post should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class.

\*\*reflections will be submitted weekly **AT MIDNIGHT THE DAY BEFORE CLASS**, with instructor response periodically.

**Creative Review Essay:** 500-750 words. Details given in class/Canvas.

**Final Essay/Project:** 1000-1250 words. Details given in class/Canvas.

**Grading Scale:** 93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

**Classroom Decorum:**

Students' full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all

phones, computers, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, unless clearly related to class discussion (see instructor for permission). This is a weekly conversation, and for us to have a good conversation we need everyone to be engaged in face to face fashion. Please, no checking on anything electronically during class. I will avoid the “eyes in the sky” instructor if you will avoid “checking out”. Get your money’s worth from this class by staying attentive and engaged.

Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity. Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior. For more information, visit:

<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:**

If you require classroom accommodation because of a disability, you must first register with the Disability Resource Center <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>. The Disability Resource Center will provide documentation to you, which you then give to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

**Resources:**

Honors Program, 201 Walker Hall, 352-392-1519

Quick questions for an Honors advisor? Email [advisor@honors.ufl.edu](mailto:advisor@honors.ufl.edu)

Need an Honors advising appointment? Schedule via Microsoft Bookings:  
<https://bit.ly/ufhonorsadvising>

**Course Schedule: tba - see separate document in Canvas.**

**How to read in community....**

*Late Request*

With love’s confidence I’m asking,  
if you should offer this book  
to another, ask of him  
as now I ask of you  
to read slowly,  
and thoroughly, tasting  
each word’s trouble.  
Without doubt, certain passages  
should never stand alone,  
but will require assistance

offered by others to further  
endow their meaning. I fear  
for the reader who dabbles,  
who gleans, who hurries to take  
and flee, and who by doing so acquires  
nothing but a novel form  
of his current poverty and error.

—Anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*