

Course Syllabus
Common Ground and the Possibility of the Common Good
IDH 2930 - 0181 (26258) - 'Common Good' - Fall 2020

- Instructor:** Todd Best
411 CSE, email: tabest@ufl.edu, ph. 352-392-6885
- Office Hours:** by appointment (Zoom meeting)
- Location:** online
- 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 truly *common good*? If there is - or can be - how are we to find *common ground* in the pursuit of the common good? As we find ourselves in the middle of societal contentiousness, vicious political battles, divisions over race and gender, and even a politicized global health crisis, how can we begin to look beyond our differences to think about how to share life together? Is a collective and collaborative conversation possible in which we can nurture a healthy common good? Wendell Berry offers a voice that can serve as a starting point for conversation to reclaim a vision of the common good.

Food systems, ecology, community, race, gender, religion, agriculture, economics, education, citizenship, technology, war and peace. These are a few of the touchpoints in the landscape of the collective human experience. Is there a way to unite our collective activity? How is it that humans are to live in the world that is increasingly putting us at odds with everything non-human - and even worse, at odds with other humans? Furthermore, what, if any, are the connections between human and non-human nature, the land, and other spaces? Living among the tensions of the late-modern world presents us with challenges as well as possibilities. These broad questions and accompanying tensions are taken up by Wendell Berry in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 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 will provide students the opportunity to read Wendell Berry carefully and reflectively. We will consider selected essays in *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. Additionally, students will participate in reflection through short writing assignments as they interact with the book as well as 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 both 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 Blogposts 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.

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 blogposts (see next).

Blogposts: 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.

Blog URLs 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 cell 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). This is a weekly conversation, and for us to have a good conversation we need everyone to be engaged in face to face fashion. 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.

Course Schedule: tba - see separate document in Canvas.