

The New  
**Agrarianism**

Land, Culture, and the Community of Life

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## Chapter 5

# The Whole Horse

*Wendell Berry*

*For more than a third of a century, the leading agrarian voice in America has been Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry. From his small, hilly farm in northern Kentucky, his native home and home to generations of his ancestors, Berry has commented on what he perceives as the moral, social, and ecological decline of his country. His criticisms have ranged widely, from abortion to nuclear power to free trade. Yet at the center of his life and writings have always been the problems facing farms like his own and small towns such as nearby Port Royal. As Berry has put it, his work "has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home both in this world and in my native and chosen place."*

*In this new essay, Berry explores the profound differences between an economic system based on agrarian ideals and its consumptive, domineering opposite, which Berry terms industrialism. Agrarianism, he tells us, is not just an idea or a set of ideas; it is "a practice, a set of attitudes, a loyalty, and a passion. . . . Whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land."*

*In this tightly constructed and overflowing work, Berry synthesizes the agrarian alternative, with particular reference to economic issues. He chides the modern conservation movement for paying inadequate attention to the fundamental elements of the economy; for working within, and hence unintentionally supporting, a system that is inherently destructive of land, people, and culture. An economic transformation is needed, he argues, and it is best begun at the local level and with attention to local matters.*

This modern mind sees only half of the horse—that half which may become a dynamo, or an automobile, or any other horsepowered machine. If this mind had much respect for the full-dimensioned, grass-eating horse, it would never have invented the engine which represents only half of him. The religious mind, on the other hand, has this respect; it wants the whole horse, and it will be satisfied with nothing less.

I should say a religious mind that requires more than a half-religion.

—Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," in *I'll Take My Stand*

One of the primary results—and one of the primary needs—of industrialism is the separation of people and places and products from their histories. To the extent that we participate in the industrial economy, we do not know the histories of our families or of our habitats or of our meals. This is an economy, and in fact a culture, of the one-night stand. "I had a good time," says the industrial lover, "but don't ask me my last name." Just so, the industrial eater says to the svelte industrial hog, "We'll be together at breakfast, I don't want to see you before then, and I won't care to remember you afterwards."

In this condition, we have many commodities but little satisfaction, little sense of the sufficiency of anything. The scarcity of satisfaction makes of our many commodities, in fact, an infinite series of commodities, the new commodities invariably promising greater satisfaction than the older ones. And so we can say that the industrial economy's most marketed commodity is satisfaction, and that this commodity, which is repeatedly promised, bought, and paid for, is never delivered. On the other hand, people who have much satisfaction do not need many commodities.

The persistent want of satisfaction is directly and complexly related to the dissociation of ourselves and all our goods from our

and their histories. If things do not last, are not made to last, they can have no histories, and we who use these things can have no memories. We buy new stuff on the promise of satisfaction because we have forgotten the promised satisfaction for which we bought our old stuff. One of the procedures of the industrial economy is to reduce the longevity of materials. For example, wood, well made into buildings and furniture and well cared for, can last hundreds of years, but it is now routinely manufactured into products that last twenty-five years. We do not cherish the memory of shoddy and transitory objects, and so we do not remember them. That is to say that we do not invest in them the lasting respect and admiration that make for satisfaction.

The problem of our dissatisfaction with all the things we use is not correctable within the terms of the economy that produces those things. At present, it is virtually impossible for us to know the economic history or the ecological cost of the products we buy; the origins of the products are typically too distant and too scattered and the processes of trade, manufacture, transportation, and marketing too complicated. There are, moreover, too many good reasons for the industrial suppliers of these products not to want their histories to be known.

When there is no reliable accounting and therefore no competent knowledge of the economic and ecological effects of our lives, we cannot live lives that are economically and ecologically responsible. This is the problem that has frustrated, and to a considerable extent undermined, the American conservation effort from the beginning. It is ultimately futile to plead and protest and lobby in favor of public ecological responsibility while, in virtually every act of our private lives, we endorse and support an economic system that is by intention, and perhaps by necessity, ecologically irresponsible.

If the industrial economy is not correctable within or by its own terms, then obviously what is required for correction is a countervailing economic idea. And the most significant weakness of the

conservation movement is its failure to produce or espouse an economic idea capable of correcting the economic idea of the industrialists. Somewhere near the heart of the conservation effort as we have known it is the romantic assumption that, if we have become alienated from nature, we can become unalienated by making nature the subject of contemplation or art, ignoring the fact that we live necessarily in and from nature—ignoring, in other words, all the economic issues that are involved. Walt Whitman could say, “I think I could turn and live with animals,” as if he did not know that, in fact, we *do* live with animals, and that the terms of our relation to them are inescapably established by our economic use of their and our world. So long as we live, we are going to be living with skylarks, nightingales, daffodils, waterfowl, streams, forests, mountains, and all the other creatures that romantic poets and artists have yearned toward. And by the way we live we will determine whether or not those creatures will live.

That this nature-romanticism of the nineteenth century ignores economic facts and relationships has not prevented it from setting the agenda for modern conservation groups. This agenda has rarely included the economics of land use, without which the conservation effort becomes almost inevitably long on sentiment and short on practicality. The giveaway is that when conservationists try to be practical they are likely to defend the “sustainable use of natural resources” with the argument that this will make the industrial economy sustainable. A further giveaway is that the longer the industrial economy lasts in its present form, the further it will demonstrate its ultimate impossibility: every human in the world cannot, now or ever, own the whole catalogue of shoddy, high-energy industrial products that cannot be sustainably made or used. Moreover, the longer the industrial economy lasts, the more it will eat away the possibility of a better economy.

The conservation effort has at least brought under suspicion the general relativism of our age. Anybody who has studied with care the issues of conservation knows that our acts are being measured

by a real and unyielding standard that was invented by no human. Our acts that are not in harmony with nature are inevitably and sometimes irremediably destructive. The standard exists. But having no opposing economic idea, conservationists have had great difficulty in applying the standard.



What, then, is the countervailing idea by which we might correct the industrial idea? We will not have to look hard to find it, for there is only one, and that is agrarianism. Our major difficulty (and danger) will be in attempting to deal with agrarianism as “an idea”—agrarianism is primarily a practice, a set of attitudes, a loyalty, and a passion; it is an idea only secondarily and at a remove. To use merely the handiest example: I was raised by agrarians, my bias and point of view from my earliest childhood were agrarian, and yet I never heard agrarianism defined, or even so much as named, until I was a sophomore in college. I am well aware of the danger in defining things, but if I am going to talk about agrarianism, I am going to have to define it. The definition that follows is derived both from agrarian writers, ancient and modern, and from the unliterary and sometimes illiterate agrarians who have been my teachers.

The fundamental difference between industrialism and agrarianism is this: Whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land.

Agrarianism, furthermore, is a culture at the same time that it is an economy. Industrialism is an economy before it is a culture. Industrial culture is an accidental by-product of the ubiquitous effort to sell unnecessary products for more than they are worth.

An agrarian economy rises up from the fields, woods, and streams—from the complex of soils, slopes, weathers, connections, influences, and exchanges that we mean when we speak, for

example, of the local community or the local watershed. The agrarian mind is therefore not regional or national, let alone global, but local. It must know on intimate terms the local plants and animals and local soils; it must know local possibilities and impossibilities, opportunities and hazards. It depends on and insists on knowing very particular local histories and biographies.

Because a mind so placed meets again and again the necessity for work to be good, the agrarian mind is less interested in abstract quantities than in particular qualities. It feels threatened and sickened when it hears people and creatures and places spoken of as labor, management, capital, and raw material. It is not at all impressed by the industrial legendry of gross national products, or of the numbers sold and dollars earned by gigantic corporations. It is interested in—and forever fascinated by—questions leading toward the accomplishment of good work: What is the best location for a particular building or fence? What is the best way to plow *this* field? What is the best course for a skid road in *this* woodland? Should *this* tree be cut or spared? What are the best breeds and types of livestock for *this* farm?—questions that cannot be answered in the abstract and that yearn not toward quantity but toward elegance. Agrarianism can never become abstract because it has to be practiced in order to exist.

And though this mind is local, almost absolutely placed, little attracted to mobility either upward or lateral, it is not provincial; it is too taken up and fascinated by its work to feel inferior to any other mind in any other place.

An agrarian economy is always a subsistence economy before it is a market economy. The center of an agrarian farm is the household. The function of the household economy is to assure that the farm family lives so far as possible from the farm. It is the subsistence part of the agrarian economy that assures its stability and its survival. A subsistence economy necessarily is highly diversified, and it characteristically has involved hunting and gathering as well as farming and gardening. These activities bind people to their

local landscape by close, complex interests and economic ties. The industrial economy alienates people from the native landscape precisely by breaking these direct, practical ties and introducing distant dependencies.

Agrarian people of the present, knowing that the land must be well cared for if anything is to last, understand the need for a settled connection not just between farmers and their farms but also between urban people and their surrounding and tributary landscapes. Because the knowledge and know-how of good caretaking must be handed down to children, agrarians recognize the necessity of preserving the coherence of families and communities.

The stability, coherence, and longevity of human occupation require that the land should be divided among many owners and users. The central figure of agrarian thought has invariably been the small owner or small holder who maintains a significant measure of economic self-determination on a small acreage. The scale and independence of such holdings imply two things that agrarians see as desirable: intimate care in the use of the land, and political democracy resting upon the indispensable foundation of economic democracy.

A major characteristic of the agrarian mind is a longing for independence—that is, for an appropriate degree of personal and local self-sufficiency. Agrarians wish to earn and deserve what they have. They do not wish to live by piracy, beggary, charity, or luck.

In the written record of agrarianism there is a continually recurring affirmation of nature as the final judge, lawgiver, and pattern-maker of and for the human use of the earth. We can trace the lineage of this thought in the West through the writings of Virgil, Spenser, Shakespeare, Pope, Thomas Jefferson, and on into the work of the twentieth-century agriculturists and scientists J. Russell Smith, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Albert Howard, Wes Jackson, John Todd, and others. The idea is variously stated: We should not work until we have looked and seen where we are; we should honor Nature not only as our mother or grandmother but also as

our teacher and judge; we should “let the forest judge”; we should “consult the Genius of the Place”; we should make the farming fit the farm; we should carry over into the cultivated field the diversity and coherence of the native forest or prairie. And this way of thinking is surely allied to that of the medieval scholars and architects who saw the building of a cathedral as a symbol or analogue of the creation of the world. The agrarian mind is, at bottom, a religious mind. It subscribes to Allen Tate’s doctrine of “the whole horse.” It prefers the Creation itself to the powers and quantities to which it can be reduced. And this is a mind completely different from that which sees creatures as machines, minds as computers, soil fertility as chemistry, or agrarianism as an idea. John Haines says that “the eternal task of the artist and the poet, the historian and the scholar . . . is to find the means to reconcile what are two separate and yet inseparable histories, Nature and Culture. To the extent that we can do this, the ‘world’ makes sense to us and can be lived in.” I would add only that this applies also to the farmer, the forester, the scientist, and others.

The agrarian mind begins with the love of fields and ramifies in good farming, good cooking, good eating, and gratitude to God. Exactly analogous to the agrarian mind is the sylvan mind that begins with the love of forests and ramifies in good forestry, good woodworking, good carpentry, and gratitude to God. These two kinds of mind readily intersect and communicate; neither ever intersects or communicates with the industrial-economic mind. The industrial-economic mind begins with ingratitude and ramifies in the destruction of farms and forests. The “lowly” and “menial” arts of farm and forest are mostly taken for granted or ignored by the culture of the “fine arts” and by “spiritual” religions; they are taken for granted or ignored or held in contempt by the powers of the industrial economy. But in fact they are inescapably the foundation of human life and culture, and their adepts are capable of as deep satisfactions and as high attainments as anybody else.

Having, so to speak, laid industrialism and agrarianism side by

side, implying a preference for the latter, I will be confronted by two questions that I had better go ahead and answer.

The first is whether or not agrarianism is simply a “phase” that we humans had to go through and then leave behind in order to get onto the track of technological progress toward even greater happiness. The answer is that although industrialism has certainly conquered agrarianism, and has very nearly destroyed it altogether, it is also true that in every one of its uses of the natural world industrialism is in the process of catastrophic failure. Industry is now desperately shifting—by means of genetic engineering, global colonialism, and other contrivances—to prolong its control of our farms and forests, but the failure nonetheless continues. It is not possible to argue sanely in favor of soil erosion, water pollution, genetic impoverishment, and the destruction of rural communities and local economies. Industrialism, unchecked by the affections and concerns of agrarianism, becomes monstrous. And this is because of a weakness identified by the Twelve Southerners of *I’ll Take My Stand* in their “Statement of Principles”: Under the rule of industrialism “the remedies proposed . . . are always homeopathic.” Industrialism always proposes to correct its errors and excesses by more industrialization.

The second question is whether or not by espousing the revival of agrarianism we will commit the famous sin of “turning back the clock.” The answer to that, for present-day North Americans, is fairly simple. The overriding impulse of agrarianism is toward local adaptation of economies and cultures. Agrarian people wish to fit the farming to the farm and the forestry to the forest. At times and in places we latter-day Americans may have come close to accomplishing this goal, and we have a few surviving examples, but it is generally true that we are much further from local adaptation now than we were fifty years ago. We never yet have developed stable, sustainable, locally adapted land-based economies. The good rural enterprises and communities that we find in our past have been almost constantly under threat from the colonialism, first

foreign and then domestic and now “global,” that has so far dominated our history and that has been institutionalized for a long time in the industrial economy. The possibility of an authentically settled country still lies ahead of us.



If we wish to look ahead, we will see not only in the United States but in the world two economic programs that conform pretty exactly to the aims of industrialism and agrarianism as I have described them.

The first is the effort to globalize the industrial economy, not merely by the expansionist programs of supranational corporations within themselves but also by means of government-sponsored international trade agreements, the most prominent of which is the World Trade Organization Agreement, which institutionalizes the industrial ambition to use, sell, or destroy every acre and every creature of the world.

The World Trade Organization gives the lie to the industrialist conservatives’ professed abhorrence of big government. The cause of big government, after all, is big business. The power to do large-scale damage, which is gladly assumed by every large-scale industrial enterprise, calls naturally and logically for government regulation, which of course the corporations object to. But we have a good deal of evidence also that the leaders of big business actively desire and promote big government. They and their political allies, while ostensibly working to “downsize” government, continue to promote government helps and “incentives” to large corporations and, however absurdly, to adhere to their notion that a small government, taxing only the working people, can maintain a big highway system, a big military establishment, a big space program, and award big government contracts.

But the most damaging evidence is the World Trade Organization itself, which is in effect a global government with power to

enforce the decisions of the collective against national laws that conflict with it. The coming of the World Trade Organization was foretold seventy years ago in the “Statement of Principles” of *I’ll Take My Stand*, which said that “the true Sovietists or Communists . . . are the industrialists themselves. They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government.” The agrarians of *I’ll Take My Stand* did not foresee this because they were fortune-tellers but because they had perceived accurately the character and motive of the industrial economy.

The second program, counter to the first, is composed of many small efforts to preserve or improve or establish local economies. These efforts on the part of nonindustrial or agrarian conservatives, local patriots, are taking place in countries both affluent and poor all over the world.

Whereas the corporate sponsors of the World Trade Organization, in order to promote their ambitions, have required only the hazy glamour of such terms as *the global economy*, *the global context*, and *globalization*—and thus apparently have vacuum-packed the minds of every politician and political underling in the world—the local economists use a much more diverse and particularizing vocabulary that you can actually think with: *community*, *ecosystem*, *watershed*, *place*, *homeland*, *family*, *household*.

And whereas the global economists advocate a world-government-by-economic-bureaucracy, which would destroy local adaptation everywhere by ignoring the uniqueness of every place, the local economists found their work upon respect for such uniqueness. Places differ from one another, the local economists say, and therefore we must behave with unique consideration in each one; the ability to tender an appropriate practical regard and respect to each place in its difference is a kind of freedom; the inability to do so is a kind of tyranny. The global economists are the great centralizers of our time. The local economists, who have so far attracted the support of no prominent politician, are the true decentralizers and

downsizers, for they seek an appropriate degree of self-determination and independence for localities. They seem to be moving toward a radical and necessary revision of our idea of a city. They are learning to see the city not as a built and paved municipality set apart by "city limits" to live by trade and transportation from the world at large, but rather as a part of a community that includes also the city's rural neighbors, its surrounding landscape and its watershed, on which it might depend for at least some of its necessities, and for the health of which it might exercise a competent concern and responsibility.

At this point, I want to say point-blank what I hope is already clear: Although agrarianism proposes that everybody has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everybody should be a farmer or that we do not need cities. Nor does it propose that every product be a necessity. Furthermore, any thinkable human economy would have to grant to manufacturing an appropriate and honorable place. Agrarians would insist only that any manufacturing enterprise should be formed and scaled to fit the local landscape, the local ecosystem, and the local community and that it should be locally owned and employ local people. They would insist, in other words, that the shop or factory owner should not be an outsider but rather a sharer in the fate of the place and its community. The deciders should live with the results of their decisions.

Between these two programs—the industrial and the agrarian, the global and the local—the most critical difference is that of knowledge. The global economy institutionalizes a global ignorance, in which producers and consumers cannot know or care about one another, and in which the histories of all products will be lost. In such a circumstance, the degradation of products and places, producers and consumers, is inevitable.

But in a sound local economy, in which producers and consumers are neighbors, nature will become the standard of work and production. Consumers who understand their economy will not tolerate the destruction of the local soil or ecosystem or watershed

as a cost of production. Only a healthy local economy can keep nature and work together in the consciousness of the community. Only such a community can restore history to economics.



I will not be altogether surprised to be told that I have set forth here a line of thought that is attractive but hopeless. A number of critics have advised me of this, out of their charity, as if I might have written of my hopes for forty years without giving a thought to hopelessness. Hope, of course, is always accompanied by the fear of hopelessness, which is a legitimate fear.

And so I would like to conclude by confronting directly the issue of hope. My hope is most seriously challenged by the fact of decline, of loss. The things I have tried to defend are less numerous and worse off now than when I started, but in this I am only like all other conservationists. All of us have been fighting a battle that on average we are losing, and I doubt that there is any use in reviewing the statistical proofs. The point—the only interesting point—is that we have not quit. Ours is not a fight that you can stay in very long if you look on victory as a sign of triumph or on loss as a sign of defeat. We have not quit because we are not hopeless.

My own aim is not hopelessness. I am not looking for reasons to give up. I am looking for reasons to keep on. In outlining here the concerns of agrarianism, I have intended to show how the effort of conservation could be enlarged and strengthened.

What agrarian principles implicitly propose—and what I explicitly propose in advocating those principles at this time—is a revolt of local small producers and local consumers against the global industrialism of the corporations. Do I think there is hope that such a revolt can survive and succeed, and that it can have a significant influence upon our lives and our world?

Yes, I do. And to be as plain as possible, let me just say what I know. I know from friends and neighbors and from my own



family that it is now possible for farmers to sell at a premium to local customers such products as “organic” vegetables, “organic” beef and lamb, and pasture-raised chickens. This market is being made by the exceptional goodness and freshness of the food, by the wish of urban consumers to support their farming neighbors, and by the excesses and abuses of the corporate food industry.

This, I think, gives the pattern of an economic revolt that not only is possible but is happening. It is happening for two reasons: First, as the scale of industrial agriculture increases, so does the scale of its abuses, and it is hard to hide large-scale abuses from consumers. It is virtually impossible now for intelligent consumers to be ignorant of the heartlessness and nastiness of animal confinement operations and their excessive use of antibiotics, of the use of hormones in meat and milk production, of the stench and pollutants of pig and poultry factories, of the use of toxic chemicals and the waste of soil and soil health in industrial row-cropping, of the mysterious or disturbing or threatening practices associated with industrial food storage, preservation, and processing. Second, as the food industries focus more and more on gigantic global opportunities, they cannot help but overlook small local opportunities, as is made plain by the increase in community-supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, health food stores, and so on. In fact, there are some markets that the great corporations by definition cannot supply. The market for so-called organic food, for example, is really a market for good, fresh, trustworthy food, food from producers known and trusted by consumers, and such food cannot be produced by a global corporation.

But the food economy is only one example. It is also possible to think of good local forest economies. And in the face of much neglect, it is possible to think of local small business economies—some of them related to the local economies of farm and forest—supported by locally owned, community-oriented banks.

What do these struggling, sometimes failing, sometimes hardly realized efforts of local economy have to do with conservation as we know it? The answer, probably, is *everything*. The conservation

movement, as I said earlier, has a conservation program; it has a preservation program; it has a rather sporadic health-protection program; but it has no economic program, and because it has no economic program it has the status of something exterior to daily life, surviving by emergency, like an ambulance service. In saying this, I do not mean to belittle the importance of protest, litigation, lobbying, legislation, large-scale organization—all of which I believe in and support. I am saying simply that we must do more. We must confront—on the ground, and each of us at home—the economic assumptions in which the problems of conservation originate.

We have got to remember that the great destructiveness of the industrial age comes from a division, a sort of divorce, in our economy, and therefore in our consciousness, between production and consumption. Of this radical division of functions we can say, without much fear of oversimplifying, that the aim of producers is to sell as much as possible and that the aim of consumers is to buy as much as possible. We need only add that the aim of both producer and consumer is to be so far as possible carefree. Because of various pressures, governments have learned to coerce from producers some grudging concern for the health and solvency of consumers. No way has been found to coerce from consumers any consideration for the methods and sources of production.

What alerts consumers to the outrages of producers is typically some kind of loss or threat of loss. We see that in dividing consumption from production we have lost the function of conserving. Conserving is no longer an integral part of the economy of the producer or that of the consumer. Neither the producer nor the consumer any longer says, “I must be careful of this so that it will last.” The working assumption of both is that where there is some, there must be more. If they can’t get what they need in one place, they will find it in another. That is why conservation is now a separate concern, a separate effort.

But experience seems increasingly to be driving us out of the categories of producer and consumer and into the categories of citizen, family member, and community member, in all of which we

have an inescapable interest in making things last. And here is where I think the conservation movement (I mean that movement that has defined itself as the defender of wilderness and the natural world) can involve itself in the fundamental issues of economy and land use, and in the process gain strength for its original causes.

I would like my fellow conservationists to notice how many people and organizations are now working to save something of value—not just wilderness places, wild rivers, wildlife habitat, species diversity, water quality, and air quality but also agricultural land, family farms and ranches, communities, children and childhood, local schools, local economies, local food markets, livestock breeds and domestic plant varieties, fine old buildings, scenic roads, and so on. I would like my fellow conservationists to understand also that there is hardly a small farm or ranch or locally owned restaurant or store or shop or business anywhere that is not struggling to save itself.

All of these people, who are fighting sometimes lonely battles to preserve things of value that they cannot bear to lose, are the conservation movement's natural allies. Most of them have the same enemies as the conservation movement. There is no necessary conflict among them. Thinking of them, in their great variety, in the essential likeness of their motives and concerns, one thinks of the possibility of a defined community of interest among them all, a shared stewardship of all the diversity of good things that are needed for the health and abundance of the world.

I don't suppose that this will be easy, given especially the history of conflict between conservationists and land users. I suppose only that it is necessary. Conservationists can't conserve everything that needs conserving without joining the effort to use well the agricultural lands, the forests, and the waters that we must use. To enlarge the areas protected from use without at the same time enlarging the areas of *good* use is a mistake. To have no large areas of protected old-growth forest would be folly, as most of us would agree. But it is also folly to have come this far in our history without a single

working model of a thoroughly diversified and integrated, ecologically sound, local forest economy. That such an economy is possible is indicated by many imperfect or incomplete examples, but we need desperately to put the pieces together in one place—and then in every place.

The most tragic conflict in the history of conservation is that between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers. It is tragic because it is unnecessary. There is no irresolvable conflict here, but the conflict that exists can be resolved only on the basis of a common understanding of good practice. Here again we need to foster and study working models: farms and ranches that are knowledgeably striving to bring economic practice into line with ecological reality, and local food economies in which consumers conscientiously support the best land stewardship.

We know better than to expect very soon a working model of a conserving global corporation. But we must begin to expect—and we must, as conservationists, begin working for, and in—working models of conserving local economies. These are possible now. Good and able people are working hard to develop them now. They need the full support of the conservation movement now. Conservationists need to go to these people, ask what they can do to help, and then help. A little later, having helped, they can in turn ask for help.