

## Cheryl's List Blog #15

In the agrarian essay "Two Economies," Wendell Berry argues that farmland is ruined because topsoil is undervalued. Any estimate based on the prevailing but narrow focus of an industrial economy necessarily fails to appreciate the soil's contribution to the health of our ecosystem. Topsoil cannot be made. Topsoil can only be approximated. We underestimate the complex life processes going on within it. More than that, seeing topsoil as an expendable commodity blinds us to the steady miracle it performs: turning dead and decaying matter into life.

In attempting to control soil, our wit and science merely erode it, belittle it, and steal from it. To avoid the hubris of an industrial economy's concept of soil, Berry prescribes a different approach, one that acknowledges God's Kingdom and the all-encompassing interconnectivity of what he terms the "Great Economy." Humans live in this economy, he explains, "subject to powers and laws that they can understand only in part." He adds, we are in this Great Economy "whether we know it or not and whether we wish to be or not." In this Kingdom's economy, "the fall of every sparrow is a significant event" (Berry).

At Cheryl's List we never talk about topsoil. We, of course, talk about household items. But, we do so in a way that is predicated on a Great Economy. Allow me to explain.

A couple of weeks ago, Esther and I presented Cheryl's List to a Trevecca Nazarene University business class on nonprofits. After we described our origination, goals, and successes, the first student to speak did not ask about inventory management or fuel costs or volunteer workers. She asked if we kept up with folks. The answer was and is "sort of." The student was inquiring about another kind of economy, one beyond the mechanics of furniture needs.

At Cheryl's List, we carry furniture but we deliver commodities far more precious. We have always considered the intangibles of home. When we tell people we work for hugs, we hope the message reciprocated is one of humans valuing other humans; we hope the net result is a healthier economy.

Connectivity is symptomatic of a community's economic health and is achieved in a variety of ways. Cheryl's List has never pushed a one-stop approach. In fact, we frequently return to pick up or deliver other items. By relying on caseworker's referrals, we indirectly stay in touch with their clients. Also, our chaplain, Lynn, establishes long-term (ongoing) relationships with some of our people. This month, as we officially turn one year old, Sue, Ruth, and others on our team are mailing birthday cards to the people we have contacted. Beyond that, we aspire to someday offer more than furniture; we may even offer employment opportunities.

Integral to Wendell Berry's definition of the Great Economy is the principle "that humans do not and can never know either all the creatures that the Kingdom of God

contains or the whole pattern or order by which it contains them.” Such gaps in our understanding have come to be some of my most cherished Cheryl’s List revelations.

I close with an anecdote of that ilk from about three weeks ago. First, a woman contacted us wanting to donate a washing machine. While we normally decline appliance donations, I told her we would be interested. In fact, I told her, “Your offer probably means we are about to get a request for just such an appliance.” A few days later, among the calls received, was a request to help a family involved in domestic violence relocation. They needed most everything except for a washer/dryer. Their dire need moved them to the top of the list. We would deliver to them on Saturday. Mattresses were purchased. The day before the truck was loaded, we learned that their need had changed. An ice-related traffic accident had tumbled their tow-behind trailer and ruined their washing machine. “Did we have one?” asked the caseworker. Hah! We sure did.

How does that stuff keep happening? I would argue that Mr. Berry is on to something. In the Great economy, not only is topsoil important, but also that families help one other.