

Richard Gamble
Hillsdale College

Civic Virtue and the Stories We Tell
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If you have read just one of Wendell Berry's novels or short stories, then you have glimpsed this Kentucky farmer's love for family, place, and story. In a contemplative section of his 2004 novel, *Hannah Coulter*, Berry entwines these three enduring parts of the human experience. With your indulgence, I'd like to read about a page from Hannah's thoughts and eavesdrop on her reflections of how education forms (or too often misforms) the souls of young people. My object in recalling Berry's story about a very small place—his fictional town of Port William, Kentucky—is to raise some important questions about the story of a very big place, the story of America. I want to spend the next twenty minutes thinking aloud with you about the teaching of our nation's history and the cultivation of civic virtue. I am not here this morning to offer definitive answers or to formulate a policy. I have not settled in my own mind the place of the teaching of history in the formation of character and judgment—I mean the place of real history with all its weightiness, and seriousness of purpose, and messy complexity as opposed to romanticized versions of the past that make us feel good about ourselves and serve some narrow agenda. Instead of answers and policy proposals, I want to explore a critical question that I know from experience is on the minds of conservative eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds, on the minds of the students I teach.

Here, then, is part of the conversation going on inside Hannah Coulter's head. If I recall correctly, she is a twice-widowed grandmother in her seventies as she narrates the painful lesson her second husband Nathan taught her about joy, and prayer, and gratitude:

When they were little the children were always wanting stories. We read them stories and we told them stories. The stories they wanted most to be told were the stories of Nathan's childhood at Port William and mine at Shagbark.

"Tell us what you did when you were little."

"Tell us about the old days."

Well, the days before the war [that is, the Second World War] were the "old days," sure enough. The war changed the world. The days when Nathan and I were little, before we had electricity and plumbing and tractors and blacktopped roads and nuclear bombs, must have seemed almost legendary to the children, and so they were fascinated.

But did we tell the stories right? It was lovely, the telling and listening, usually the last thing before bedtime. But did we tell the stories in such a way as to suggest that we had needed a better chance or a better life or a better place than we had?

I don't know, but I have had to ask. Suppose your stories, instead of mourning and rejoicing over the past, say that everything should have been different. Suppose you encourage or even just allow your children to believe that their parents ought to have been different people, with a better chance, born in a better place. Or suppose the stories you tell them allow them to believe, when

they hear it from other people, that farming people are inferior and need to improve themselves by leaving the farm. Doesn't that finally unmake everything that has been made? Isn't that the loose thread that unravels the whole garment?

And how are you ever to know where the thread breaks, and when the tug begins?

Out of its context, this passage loses much of its poignancy. And I am afraid I will do Mr. Berry's artistry a further injustice by using his words as a way to talk about a story that he would likely think too big for anyone to belong to. What do I mean? Well, a number of years ago, Robert Nisbet asked us to consider whether it was remotely possible to belong to, truly to be a member of, a community (so-called) of hundreds of millions of people and of so many millions of square miles. Such a scale and such distant horizons were not conducive to life lived face to face with other human beings. The sheer magnitude was simply beyond human experience and capacity. I would expect that Wendell Berry would similarly question an individual's ability to belong to a story as large as the United States. Perhaps that is part of what he is doing in his small stories about the Port William membership. A story that's too large might inhibit the formation of membership and community. The scale of a family story or a neighborhood story might be just the right size for real people, while a national story, and certainly a grand imperial epic, might be too big for ordinary folk and suited only to aggregates and abstractions. I'm not sure.

Whether or not you agree with Berry's politics or economics or theology, and many of you do not, will you at least grant that through his art he opens our modern culture's imagination to a fundamental insight about identity, community, and the formation of character? Through the experience of Hannah Coulter, Berry shows us that not only *what* stories we tell but *how* we tell them shapes the moral imagination of the rising generation. Education happens in many contexts: in the family from the time children are infants; in the extended family of grandparents and aunts and uncles (including the memory of ancestors long dead); in the alleys and sidewalks and playgrounds of neighborhoods; in the church; and within the classroom walls of more formal education. Consciously or not, all of these institutions play a role in civic education because they all pass down a version of the past to the next generation in line, a version of the past that will make some things attractive and other things repellent, some things normative for human beings and other things aberrant. These stories either cultivate *pietas* or they subtly or not so subtly destroy it.

What stories do we tell beyond our families and communities? What stories do we tell as Americans? There is not one story that unites all Americans. You may have expected me to add the qualification "any longer" to that sweeping claim – "there is not *any longer* one story that unites all Americans." We might console ourselves with a bit of nostalgia by pretending that back in the good old days we had a single, dominant, binding national narrative, and that that narrative produced virtuous statesmen and citizens. A hundred years ago we experimented with something called "*Americanism*" to tie us together. And that experiment is still underway. But the more I study the American past, the more I see that we have always argued among ourselves—sometimes more, sometimes less—about just which people and principles gave birth to the beliefs and institutions that distinguish us as a people, that make us authentically American. Look at the early nineteenth century. While loudly debating slavery and states rights and

the Union and the meaning of “general welfare,” the disparate regions of the United States also fought over which narrative of the colonial era and of the founding period was normative and therefore defined America. Sectionalist historians North and South waged a war of words in print over exactly who the “fathers” were. Not everyone in antebellum America thought of himself as a descendent of the Pilgrims and Puritans. When Lincoln spoke in 1863 of “our fathers” bringing forth a new nation, the content of that claim, the very identity of those “fathers,” had been contested for more than a generation. States no longer believed they had a common future as a union in part because they no longer believed they had a common past, or enough of a past in common, to bind them together.

Before I stray too far, let me return to Berry’s distinction between “telling the right story” and “telling the story right.” The teacher of American history has the responsibility to do both of these tasks and to do them well. I do not believe that telling the right story means purging the American past of all its unpleasantness. We mourn and we rejoice when we read the American past. The American enterprise was and is a human enterprise, and as such it is filled with everything human: with sin, and the lust for dominion and all that comes with being part of the fallen and selfish City of Man, but mixed in with goodness and self-sacrifice and dedication to principle and real achievement. History, any history, is a story of good and bad, of gain and loss, of addition and subtraction. America is not exempt. The “right story” of America, then, will have the courage to acknowledge the role of ambition in building our success. To use Walter McDougall’s memorable phrases, we were a nation of hustlers who built a republic of pretence. And of course we have been much more than that, and McDougall celebrates that. If we are going to tell a story that has integrity to it, then we have to look intently and honestly in the mirror the muse of history offers to us. That mirror will show us a republic and a nation, modesty and hubris, self-restraint and imperialism, aristocratic virtues and populist demagoguery.

Let’s take three themes that seem to be much on the mind of conservatives these days: nationalism, populism, and imperialism. The “right story” has to admit and account for the benefit and cost of these ideologies and policies to America. But this point about benefit and cost leads me immediately to move from “telling the right story” to “telling the story right.” Beliefs about whether nationalism, populism, and imperialism have been forces for good or evil may divide us here in this room, whether these things have been the making or the unmaking of America. I believe that they have slowly destroyed our republic, that they have shown their power to “unmake everything that has been made.” You may take the opposite view. Perhaps the nationalist, populist, imperialist America is the very America you find attractive and that you want to be attractive to the next generation. If that is so, then I ask if you believe that the qualities of soul manifested in these movements are in fact virtues? If not, then civic virtue cannot be inculcated with a story that makes them normative and appealing. Surely the good citizen does not make a god of his nation. Surely the good citizen does not confuse the voice of the people with the voice of God. Surely the good citizen fears the lust for dominion that he knows lurks in every human heart, beginning with his own.

So here is my question: What are the costs of making these things attractive in the story we tell about our past? Can we promote civic virtue by presenting these features of American history as normative or perhaps even as the telos to which the “real” America has been tending from the very beginning? Do we tell the American story in

such a way that the trajectory toward nationalism, populism, and empire appears preordained, a matter of America gradually becoming more and more what it was always meant by God or History personified to become? What are the costs of making these things attractive to our children? Here lies the connection between civic virtue and the stories we tell. The teaching of history, along with poetry and rhetoric and the rest of liberal learning, shapes the imagination of the young. As a story, history nurtures the child's likes and dislikes. It presents to the heart and mind a picture of how the world was and is and, at least by implication if not directly, how the world ought to be. While we might approximate something we could call "objectivity" in telling the right story, "telling the story *right*" takes us into the subjective realm of the affections, into the very ordering of the loves within a child's soul.

Telling the right story the right way requires teachers (and I mean teachers here in the broadest sense and include parents and neighbors and pastors) – telling the story the right way requires teachers who have the wisdom and experience to know that the story has to be suited to the age and maturity of the child. There are parts of our personal family story that we do not share with young children, and for good reason. They would not know what to do with the burden of this knowledge. We would bring pain and confusion to tender hearts at a loss to know what to make of such knowledge. I believe it was Willa Cather who said that unhappiness is the secret that age keeps from youth. We all conspire in this secret. It does not mean that we think that unhappiness is the sum total of what life for grownups is all about. Not at all. Rather, it means that we take care to form the souls of children slowly and with a measured knowledge of the world's evils.

And so with our American story. At first, we tell a story fit for children. But we ought not always and only to tell a story fit for children. Someday we have to grow up. Children need to stop being children. The selective story of the American past needs to give way gradually and prudently to the larger story of America, a story fit for grownups and a not a story destined to keep citizens of the republic in a condition of perpetual adolescence. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the college history teacher. After more than twenty years of teaching, I still struggle—I struggle now more than ever before—with how to tell the whole truth about America in a way that helps young people become adults while at the same time avoids the contagion of cynicism and disillusionment. My students will be the first to tell you that I do not always succeed. I have to tell the right story. But that is not enough. I have to tell it right.

Hannah Coulter feared late in life that she and her husband had told their story the wrong way. Even if unwittingly, they had told their story in such a way that they made contentment and thankfulness unappealing and abnormal and restlessness and ingratitude appealing and normal. If we tell the American story in a way that makes nationalism, populism, and imperialism attractive, then we will not cultivate civic virtue with that story. Patriotism is a virtue; nationalism is not. Self-restraint is a virtue; populist self-indulgence is not. Modesty is a virtue; imperial ambition and vulgarity are not. Some people naively believe that only an inspiring, idealized story of America's past in our school curricula will inculcate civic virtue. As understandable as that view might be, it considers only the content of the story we tell and not the telling of the tale; it sanitizes or even sanctifies the past without considering that what matters more for civic virtue is how the telling of the story shapes the affections.

I will give the last word to C. S. Lewis, a man who knew a few things about shaping a child's moral imagination. In the first chapter of *The Four Loves*, in a meticulous handling of the healthy, well-ordered love of one's country, Lewis wrote, "I think it is possible to be strengthened by the image of the past without being either deceived or puffed up. The image becomes dangerous in the precise degree to which it is mistaken, or substituted, for serious and systematic historical study. The stories are best when they are handed on and accepted as stories. I do not mean by this that they should be handed on as mere fictions (some of them are after all true). But the emphasis should be on the tale as such, on the picture which fires the imagination, the example that strengthens the will." Here again is the connection between story and character. For the study of history to play its proper role in the development of character it must be true and it must take care how it fires the imagination and strengthens the will. As a mother and grandmother, Hannah Coulter knew that children are "always wanting stories." She watched the consequences of her own stories in the lives of her children and grandchildren. The right stories told right will lead the heart of the child home. No home or community or republic can endure without such stories.