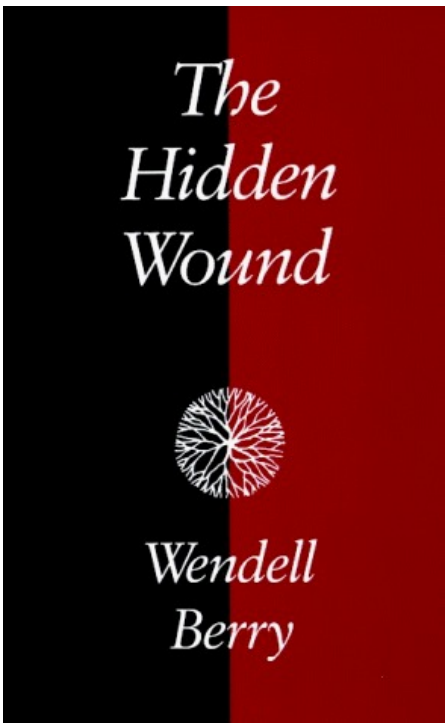

The Hidden Wound

Wendell Berry

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The Hidden Wound Wendell Berry
This book-length essay is a rigorously honest, deeply felt exploration of the hidden wound of racism and its damaging effect on American whites. Available for the first time in paperback.

The Hidden Wound Details

Date	:	Published December 3rd 2005 by North Point Press
ISBN	:	9780865473584
Author	:	Wendell Berry
Format	:	Paperback 150 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Race, History

From Reader Review The Hidden Wound for online ebook

Drew says

One of the most important books I've ever read.

Marissa says

I found this book extremely moving. Berry has a way with words. I had not read any of his work prior to this book, but I have a much greater desire to read some now. He explains the issues in such a profound yet emotional manner... it has really caused me to reflect upon my own situation and the way I interact with those around me.

"... These are in the best sense instructive texts, and their aim is revolution of a sort. But they are not political texts. They are not interested in the superficial revolutions by which men change their politics; they are interested in the profound metamorphoses that occur when men 'rectify their hearts'" -Pg. 104

"It is, then, not simply a question of black power or white power, but of how meaningfully to reenfranchise human power." -pg. 106

"I believed then, and I believe more strongly now, that the root of our racial problem in America is not racism. The root is in our inordinate desire to be superior-- not to some inferior or subject people, though this desire leads to the subjection of people-- but to our condition." -pg. 112

Megan says

Perhaps one of the best books about the toll racism takes on white people.

Drick says

I had never read a Wendell Berry book, but I knew lots of folks who had, so I was interested in his take on racism, which is the focus of this book. Berry has an itereting thesis that racism was an outgrowth of capitialist expansion and both were an attempt to distance oneself from the land and manual labor. Beginning with reflections from his childhood growing up in segregated Kentucky, he provides some unique insights into the nature of black-white relastionships and its connection to urbanization and industirialism. This book has prompted to consider looking at my own family history and the hidden or forgotten stories of racial exploitation and white supremacy.

Eleanore says

"I am a good deal more grieved by what I am afraid will be the racism of the future than I am about that of the past." This is easily some of the best writing about American racism from the source of a white ally I've ever read, and considering the time it was written (1968-69) and when its afterword was added (1988), it remains remarkably incisive and relevant still today. I'm sure this does not surprise Berry one bit, either, given the conclusions he's drawn within it.

Patti says

Wow, Wendell Berry wrote this book when he was only 34. At the Wisconsin Book Festival, Rick Bass said it was his favorite Wendell Berry book. It is an amazing chronicle of a man looking honestly at his beliefs and his culture regarding racism and trying to wipe away the cob webs and face the real life effects on blacks and whites alike.

This book was published in 1970 and I don't think our culture has yet faced the "wound" as Berry tries to in this book as illustrated by the reaction to Barack Obama's "racism" speech. By chance the next book I picked up to read is a compilation of essays about the state of America, "These United States: Original Essays by Leading American Writers on Their State Within the Union" edited by John Leonard. The first essay is by Diane McWhorter as she discusses these same issues in present day Alabama. It is subtitled "The Past is Still Not Past". I highly recommend it as a continuation of the issues discussed in "The Hidden Wound".

Nick says

In order to provide a meaningful summary of this book, I need to fill you in on some details about my classwork, so please indulge a brief digression. The last ten weeks of classes were fairly typical for me—a few intense academic courses and a few that, while necessary for my education, didn’t seem to demand as much from me. One of these less important classes, “Pastoral Practice and Racism,” was in my schedule because one class I had initially enrolled in was intended to satisfy a cultural requirement but was obviously geared towards students of another background who came to the United States. “Racism” worked in my schedule, and so I took it, though it was the in the dreaded once-a-week time slot, from 1-4 p.m. on Wednesday afternoons.
My basic sense of the class was this: there is something to all this talk about racism, prejudice, and discrimination, but none of the prevailing explanations (power, politics, xenophobia, etc.) taken by themselves held any water. All the talk about “celebration of diversity” and “learning from non-white communities” sounded enlightened and welcoming, but no one could ever tell me outright what it was we can learn, or what they have to offer. There was plenty of call for dialogue (which was taken up with even greater vigor when the Reverend Wright began his crusade), but I wasn’t sure what we were supposed to be talking about as long as we made sure we were talking. Now, most of this was due to the fact that the class was being taught by a local priest who was committed to the civil rights movement but didn’t have a formal grounding in it. He also conducted his class in the interrogative mood, answering questions with questions; this certainly got us talking, but at a cost of accumulated frustration. I wanted something to chew on, but all this added up to a buffet of statistics and good intentions that spread about a heavy malaise as we sampled from it.
In one of our assigned readings, the author made a passing reference to the book I am reviewing now, and

having read one of Berry's books before, I set out to lay my hands on a copy to supplement the coursework. It was the best decision I made all quarter long, and saved me from personally writing off the class as unsalvageable. For the first time, I was reading an informed and reflective opinion about what white racism did to whites and what whites had to learn from blacks. He is a southern writer dealing in southern racism, and so not all of it was clearly applicable to our own situations of a primarily urban setting, but after the shadowboxing I'd been engaging in for weeks, I was delighted to have a sparring partner.

The first third or so comprises Berry's reminiscences of growing up as a white child with black mentors. It's not immediately appealing, but stick with it—much of the rest of the book will operate on this body of experience. Berry ranges wide as he catalogues the ramifications of racism. He takes up the effect slaveholding had on southern Christians and their leadership, insisting that the heavy emphasis on faith and the soul in southern varieties of Christianity was necessary to gloss over the contradictions inherent in attending church with one's slaves. He discusses the American culture and its superficiality born of smoothing over the festering sore it must conceal. He points to Tolstoy, Twain, and Homer as offering exemplars for what is possible (and necessary) for contemporary relations between classes and races.

But by far the most compelling treatment is the way he ties the race question in with his passionate defense of the land and humanity's relationship with it. The greatest loss the white race ever suffered from its slaveholding was the loss of contact with the land as a lived experience, substituting the capitalist's abstract management for the sake of profit. Actually working the land was relegated to "nigger work" and hence was unworthy of the white man. While this did much to enrich whites, a corresponding impoverishment fell upon them (as is so often the case with sin—nobody wins).

Berry describes this impoverishment this way: "It seems to me that the black people developed the psychology, the emotional resilience and equilibrium, the philosophy, and the art necessary to endure and even enjoy the hard manual labor wholly aside from the dynamics of ambition. And from this stemmed an ability more complex than that of the white man to know and to bear life. What we should have learned willingly ourselves we forced the blacks to learn, and so prevented ourselves from learning it." Interestingly enough, this is a perceptive investigation of the mechanisms and anthropological effects of social sin. In an age when we are only beginning to recognize and dismantle the structures that undermine human flourishing, these insights are valuable even thirty years after they were written.

In short, I found Berry's insights to be unrecognized more than a quarter century after they were put into words. To his credit, he continues to be a vocal defender of the same ideals he puts forward here. Those of you who get through *The Hidden Wound* might want to pick up his 1996 book Sex Economy Freedom and Community, which doesn't deal directly with racism but articulates in greater detail the dehumanizing forces at work in the culture and economy of our own day. It is an equally informative (and pleasing) read.

Zach says

"The Hidden Wound" by Wendell Berry is an essay that was penned during the turbulence of the civil rights unrests from 1968-1969. Berry here sets his own thoughts and experiences to the pen, and all the insights of his agrarian perspective and characteristically incisive prose reveal a depth of wisdom and understanding underlying this sensitive topic that few others writers are able to achieve. The hidden wound, according to Berry, is the indelible and diseased mark that slavery has left on this nation. It is a wound revealed in our institutions, in our relation to the ecology around us; it is reflected in our agricultural practices, in our industrialism, and, ultimately, it is a wound within our very psyche as American individuals. Berry sees race relations for the dysfunctional and disintegrating relationship that it is. How could the white man have very enslaved another man because of the color of his skin? Such a violent and oppressive act has damaged the white man and the black man alike, and the selfishness behind it is still lurking within us, perniciously. Berry

thinks of white guilt as self-righteous, and black anger also as self-righteous. In both cases he believes these mirrored forms of a kind of self-love. The solution, as Wendell Berry urges, is to love one another as human beings first. Only through accepting the humanity of the black man may the white man heal the wounds within himself. Anyhow, Berry says it better than I can, so I'm attaching here the concluding paragraphs of "The Hidden Wound:"

"I believe that the experience of all honest men stands [..] against the political fantasy that deep human problems can be satisfactorily solved by legislation. On the contrary, it is likely that the best and least oppressive laws come as the result or the reflection of honest solutions that men have already made in their own lives. The widespread assumption that men can be set free if dignified or improved by monkeying with some mere aspect or manifestation if their lives -- politics or economics or technology -- promises no solution, but only an unlimited growth of the public apparatus. The American people may solve their problems themselves, and so save the world a catastrophe, but not by insisting that the government do their work dir then. No man will ever be whole and dignified and free except in the knowledge that the men around him are whole and dignified and free, and that the world itself is free of contempt and misuse.

For want of the sense of such freedom, even as an ideal, the white race in America has marketed and destroyed more of the fertility if the earth in less time than any other race that ever lived. In my par of the country, at least, this is largely to be accounted for by the racial division of the experience of the landscape. The white man, preoccupied with the abstractions of the economic exploitation and ownership of the land, necessarily has lived on the country as a destructive force, an ecological catastrophe, because he assigned the hand labor, and in that the possibility of intimate knowledge of the land, to a people he considered racially inferior; in thus debasing labor, he destroyed the possibility of a meaningful contact with the earth. He was literally blinded by his presuppositions and prejudices. Because he did not know the land, it was inevitable that he would squander its natural bounty, deplete its richness, corrupt and pollute it, or destroy it altogether. The history of the white man's use of the earth in America is a scandal. The history of his effort to build here what Allen Tate calls 'a great European pattern' is a farce. To farm here, as we have done for centuries, as if the land and the climate were European, has been ruinous, ecologically and agriculturally, and no doubt culturally as well.

The notion that one is too good to do what it is necessary for somebody to do is always a weakening. The unwillingness, or the inability, to dirty one's hands in one's own service is a serious flaw of character. But in a society that sense of superiority can cut off a whole class or a whole race from its most necessary experience. For one thing, it can curtail or distort a society's sense of the means, and of the importance of the means, of getting work done; it prolongs and ramifies the life and effect of pernicious abstractions. In America, for instance, one of the most depraved and destructive habits had always been an obsession with results. Getting the job don't is good. Pondering as to how the job should be done, or whether or not it should be done, is apt to be regarded as a waste of time. If we want coal, it seems to us perfectly feasible to destroy a mountain or a valley in order to get it. If we want to 'contain Communism,' we do not hesitate to do so by destroying the 'threatened' country. Today we send a bulldozer or a bomber to do our dirty work as casually, and by the same short-order morality, as once (in the South) we would 'send a nigger,' or (in the North) an Irishman, or (in the West now) a Mexican.

The abstractions of the white man's relation to the land has forced the black man to develop resources of character and religion and art that has some resemblance to the peasant cultures of the old world [..] but at the same time it has denied him the peasant's sense of a permanent relation to the earth. Hr has wandered off the land into the cities in the hope of being better treated, only to be scorned as before. And on the land his place has been taken by machines -- and we are more estranged from our land now than we ever were.

For examples of a whole and indigenous American society, functioning in full meaning and good health within the ecology of this continent, we will have to look back to the cultures of the Indians. That we failed to learn front hem how to live in this land is a stupidity -- a racial stupidity -- that will corrode the heart of our society until the day comes, if it ever does, when we do turn back to learn from them. Inheriting the cultural graph of thousands of years, they had a responsible sense of living g within the creation -- which is to say that they had, among much else, an ecological morality -- and a complex awareness of the life of their land which we have hardly begun to have. They had a cultural and spiritual wholeness of which the white and black races have so far had only the divided halves.

Empowered by technology, the abstractions of the white man's domination of the continent threaten now to annihilate the specific characteristics of all races, virtues and vices alike, absorbing them as neutral components into a machine society. It is, then, not simply a question of black power or white power, but of how meaningfully to reenfranchise human power. This, as I think Martin Luther King understood, is the real point, the real gift to America, of the struggle of the black people. In accepting the humanity if the black race, the white race will not be giving accommodation to an alien people; it will be receiving into itself half of its own experience, vital and indispensable to it, which it has so far denied at great cost.

As soon as we have fulfilled the hollow in our culture, the silence in our speech, with the fully realized humanity of the black man -- and it follows, of the American Indian -- then there will appear over the horizon of our consciousness another figure as well: that of the American white man, our own humanity, lost to us these three and a half centuries, the time of all our life on this continent.

It is not, I think, a question of when and how the white people will 'free' the black and red people. It is a condescension to believe that we have the lower to do that. Until we have recognized in them the full strength and grace of their distinctive humanity we will be able to set no one free, for we will not be free ourselves. When we realize that they possess a knowledge for the lack of which we are incomplete and in Lao , then the wound in our history will be healed. Then they will simply be free, among us -- and so will we, among ourselves for the first time, and among them."

Jeff says

After reading a bit about racism and U.S. race history in college textbooks, it was fascinating to read Wendell Berry's thoughts on the subject. His words were personal and refreshing. Being white himself, I don't think I can say he understands the issue completely (I don't think *he* would say that, either), but he seems to be keenly aware of the limits of his knowledge and describes every nook and cranny of knowledge within those limits. That is, I think he expresses his experience of race from a white perspective thoroughly and well, without postulating on what he doesn't know.

Similar to what I've read in his other works, Berry in *The Hidden Wound* connects the main issue to agriculture and the land. The way he does this with racism, particularly in the afterword, was revealing. Berry's other recurring topic, spirituality, shows up here as well. The careful, clear phrases he uses to describe the spiritual damage caused by racism were so precise that I often put down the book just to reflect on what he had said.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to know more about race and racism.

Briana says

I love Wendell Berry-pretty much all of his writing, whether its his poetry or his fiction or his essays rocks my world. The Hidden Wound is not my favorite work but its in the top three for sure. Berry wrote this during winterbreak at Stanford in 1969-when student riots were breaking out around campus and students were voicing the need for a Black Studies program. In his typical style Berry unflinchingly lays out the tangled web of race relations in this country by focusing on the role of black people in his own life. The starting assumption is that racism creates a hidden wound in everyone-whites as well as blacks-and Berry admits that while he has been aware of the wound for a long time, he had tried to ignore it or cover it up until he sat down to write his essay. At one point he claims that there is not much love in much of the talk about race and racism today-and that the love that is present is the love of self-righteous blame on the part of the perceived victims (minorities) and the love of self-righteous guilt on the part of the perceived oppressors (in the case of the essay, white people, but given some of today's conversations we could just as easily say the "overculture" or "mainstream" or whatever is most definitely *not* the minority). In a way I think the entire essay turns around this lack of love-and the appeal that we bring love back into the picture, in our dealings with one another, our neighbors, our community members and in the recognition that in denying anyone for any reason a sense of basic dignity denies ourselves that same dignity, absolutely and finally.

Justin Lonas says

I think rather highly of Wendell Berry, but find his oeuvre somewhat uneven. When he is on to something, he is prophetic. When he is cranky about a hobby horse, it shows, and his prose suffers.

This short book, which I only recently heard of, is among the finest of the former category. In traveling back through his childhood experience of America's racial caste system, he cuts to the heart of the social and economic dislocation crushing the American soul. Jim Crow and slavery are only the half of it.

Though this book is nearly 50 years old, it seems even more incisive now than I'm sure it must have been then.

Gabrielle says

How a white Southerner addressed racism in the Sixties...and with the re-emergence of the book in the Eighties through the auspices of the late, lamented North Point Books...he's addressed it for all time. As a friend told me, *He's got it. He's one of the few white people to 'get it,' too.* I'm sure Berry's views have widened since. This is a brave, honest book from someone who appreciates community and the land.

Christine Starr Davis says

The poet and essayist Wendell Berry wrote a book about racism. Yes he did. It is moving and provocative and full of his insights and his uncertainties. He reflects on the damage racism has done to humanity through the lens of his own experience and his long-articulated passion for the land.

It is the last book I tackled in 2017. I am simmering in it and expect the flavors to grow richer like a good stew. Written in 1968-9, with an afterword added in 2010, Berry raises credible questions and proposes novel challenges unlike any I've encountered. These aren't platitudes but excavations by a white man looking at racism as something that continues to rob us all of our dignity and humanity.

Sometimes, a poet sees what is hardest to see and finds words to express it. Berry is such a poet.

Naeem says

Recommended to me by Alex Lima, this book does at least two things with great efficiency and poetry. It gives a sense of what whites lose from racism. Berry does this by telling from his childhood in which a black man and black women play pivotal roles in developing his sense of justice. It also shows how this wound is systematic -- infecting the church and other institutions.

For these two aspects alone, it probably deserves 4 or 5 stars. But since I am looking for material just like this, I found it wanting on two counts. I found Berry a bit romantic about the human relationship with land. I believe in the importance of space/time specificity for human health. We need to connect to spaces and places as much as we need light, air, and water. And while I am sure that a working relationship with land -- farming, for example -- provides skills, virtue, and wisdom, I have seen how having to work the land bends human bodies into living tools. Bent tools also break. Land and nature can do that to human beings. (Its the same problem I have with Ward Churchill's view of land, by the way.)

Nor is Berry's book as systematic as I would like. I would like a book that works from personal experience towards how every institution of society is contorted by the hidden wound of racism.

If you find something like this, do let me know.

Carl R. says

No one, but no one exemplifies the phrase “Less is more” than Wendell

Berry. In The Hidden Wound, an extended essay (100 pages and change) written in 1968-69, with an afterword in 1988, he takes on the subject of black-white race relations in America. He begins with KY boyhood memories of a couple of workers on his grandfather’s farm, then attempts to extrapolate from his experience with them to the inner lives of American blacks and whites in history and the future. He’s on risky ground, and his tentative tone shows it:

I suppose it is the aim of every writer to produce a definitive statement, one that will prove him to be the final authority on what he has said. but though my aim here is to tell the truth as nearly as I am able, I am aware that the truth I am telling may be a very personal one, the truth, that is, as distorted and qualified by my own heritage and personality. I am, after all, writing about people of another and a radically different heritage, whom I knew only as a child and whose lives parted from mine nearly a quarter of a century ago. As I write I can hardly help but thinking of the possibility that if NicK and Aunt Georgie were alive to read this, they might not recognize themselves.

He needn’t have been so cautious, for so many of his observations are both original and true:

In a racist society, the candor of a child is ... extremely threatening. ... The racist fears that a child’s honesty empowered by sex might turn into real and open affection toward members of the oppressed race and so destroy the myth of that race’s inferiority.

In the afterword, looking back twenty years later on what he had written, in the year Jesse Jackson nearly won the democratic nomination for president, Berry lifts the situation beyond race. What good does it ultimately do to dress black people in corporate clothes and hand them the same salaries as their white counterparts if they are practicing the same corrupt, impersonal, detachment from productive work and inner fulfillment as their white counterparts? To Berry, America began to lose it all when we lost touch with the source of our work, our creation. When the money we earned to put bread on the table came from abstract entities like stocks and bonds and oil futures instead of crops and crafts produced in some way by our own direct efforts. When whole communities became anonymous one from the other and we were no longer a nation of intertwined humans, but isolated entities each trying to strive and exist as an organism unto itself.

All these wonderful insights beg the question, so what do we do about it? The Hidden Wound has no real answers to that one, and twenty years later, even though we have elected a black president, no real answers have appeared. So why read this? Because it’s a sensitive, wonderfully written piece by one of the foremost authors of our time. And the only farmer-author left among us. At least as far as I know. From Kentucky.
