Appalachian Values Reconsidered (2016)

by Loyal Jones

I wrote the essay “Appalachian Values,” just over two generations ago in 1963. It has been reprinted in several books, and in 1995 it was published as a book with the wonderful photographs of Warren Brunner of Berea. It is the most-read piece that I have written. When I first published it, most of the parents of current Berea College first-year students were still babies or toddlers.

The population of the U.S. in 1963 was 189,000,000. When most of the current freshman class were born in the 1990s, the population was 253,000,000, and by the time they arrived in Berea, it was 324,000,000. During these times, Appalachian and other rural people have migrated to towns and cities within Appalachia and beyond, and Berea students are no longer mostly from farms, and coal towns, and small villages. We have welcomed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, and are making changes because of recent gender-related court decisions. We have benefitted from the many programs of the War on Poverty, and the Appalachian Regional Commission brought modern facilities and also new roads to make us more mobile. Our public schools have improved, and we have added community colleges and technical schools in reach of most of the population. We have become more diverse with migrants from other parts of this country and from abroad. We have lived through an age of automation and also the loss of high-wage jobs to low-wage countries as a result of world trade agreements. In addition, we are now in the midst of the digital revolution. All of these happenings have changed Appalachian people and also our culture and values.

The values I wrote about in 1963 were of mostly rural people, although, even then, the region was more diverse than the essay indicates. The people from the mountains of Georgia, Alabama, and both North and South Carolina were different in ways from those in the more industrial, coal-mining areas of Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. However, we shared a migratory pattern, an ethnic and religious identity, and a dialect that created a loose commonality. Even here there were also remnants of the Native American culture, and from the beginning of settlement there were African Americans, and many more of whom eventually came from the
Deep South to mine coal and do other work. Immigrants from Eastern Europe also joined them in Central Appalachia. Thus, we were never the homogeneous society that much of the literature written about us has implied.

Let me now mention some of the changes in values that I wrote about long ago that I have been observing for some time:

**Religion**

We are less religious than we were two generations ago, and yet Americans are far more religious than the other advanced countries of Western Europe, and we are probably the most tolerant of religious differences. Appalachia surely has the greatest variety of religious groups of any other place in the country, when one counts the main Protestant denominations, Catholic dioceses, and local and regional autonomous groups. Jewish synagogues can also be found in the major cities, and Muslim and other foreign immigrants are establishing places of worship. Mega-churches in larger towns and cities are reporting huge numbers of members. However, many of the younger generations are finding spiritual and moral meaning outside established churches. Yet, I think, Biblical instruction may still have a strong influence on their values.

**Individualism, Self-reliance, and Pride**

The first two of these values were once strong in the westward movement from the seaports of the East. It took great courage and a sense of competence to undertake migration from the old world to the new and on into the wilderness in hope of a better life. More recently, many of us rural people have left a rural life to establish ourselves in towns and cities, again in hope of finding employment and betterment. Urban life perhaps requires more interaction and cooperation than individualism and self-reliance.

On reflection of the term “pride,” I would not now link it with the values mentioned above. The kind of pride that I wrote about had to do with having confidence in our own competence, but another meaning of it has always had religious warnings about getting “too big for our britches,” or “too full of ourselves.” David Brooks, the columnist and social philosopher, in his recent book, *The Road to Character* (Random House, 2015), has warned against the modern weakening of humility and modesty in today’s society.
I agree with him in this belief.

**Neighborliness and Hospitality**

These values may have also weakened in towns and cities where we may not know our neighbors or are hesitant (or even unwilling) to get to know them. With the emphasis on crime in many news sources, we may have become less trustful of strangers. Also, our manners and customs have changed, so that we may invite only friends and neighbors we already know to meet for a meal, with invitations going out ahead of time. Of course, many urban people become acquainted with their neighbors and socially interact with them.

**Familism**

Some people have always migrated to where opportunity beckoned. In today’s economy, however, family members are scattered all over the county and world. Children leave their parents and other relatives to seek jobs elsewhere, or go to colleges and other schools far away and use their learning to get jobs wherever they might be. The scattered family may rarely be all together again. They may communicate with each other on digital and other devices but not so much personally. So the modern family is different from the old rural close-knit family.

**Personalism**

When I first entered Berea College in 1950, almost all the students, when I met them on the sidewalk, made eye contact, smiled, and uttered a greeting. Today, fewer than half do at Berea College. I sometimes invade their assumed privacy with a greeting. Some acknowledge me, but others do not. To be so ignored in my old person-oriented culture was one of the worst insults of all. Therefore, when I go down Berea’s Main Street, I scrutinize each face fearing that I might not notice someone whom I know.

Perhaps we could blame this impersonalization on the digital age. Some students are looking at their smart phones as they walk, or have ear buds in their ears and are listening to music, and when students visit the coffee shop together, each may be carrying a digital device. Often, when they sit together, they are absorbed in using their devices rather than in interacting with each other. There are many benefits of living in the digital world, and I make use of them too, but I wonder if devices aren’t becoming more important to us than the person with
whom we are communicating. Yet, I don’t want to lay this impersonality on just the young people. Recent researchers have reported that millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) have some better values and aspirations than us older folks. I also see the same trend I described above with adults, who are often too occupied with their smart phones to get involved in a conversation. I have noticed that some professional people don’t seem to know much about the persons with whom they work, beyond the abilities for which they were hired. I feel that I have come through a very personal era into an impersonal one. My own efforts in Appalachian Studies have been vastly assisted by the people I have known who have helped me in my work. Doug Wallin, the best unaccompanied ballad singer I ever heard, called me early one morning and inquired, “Loyal?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “It’s good to hear your voice; I heard you died.” I assured him that his news was premature, but I felt great being reminded that I was still alive, and with a friend like Doug who took the time to investigate a rumor about me. Doug is gone now, but I remember him fondly, as I do others, also gone, and am grateful for all they did to enhance projects that I held dear. I still treasure all the things they taught me and all the ideas, jokes, and stories that we exchanged.

**Love of Place**

Most Americans do not now live in the places where they were born. Perhaps more Appalachians do than others but not as many anymore. We have always moved to seek opportunity, and today we are a more mobile population. As mentioned in my words on familism, many of our families are scattered throughout the country and the world, and many of us have no memory of where we were born. We may encounter the value of home and place only at bluegrass festivals where musicians express their desire to return to the old homestead.

**Modesty**

A gentle modesty and a sincere sense of humility was a primary value in the older Appalachian culture, even though it no doubt hindered some people in their achievement. It, too, is diminishing in our time, especially in the biographical resumes we write to sell ourselves to employers. One’s ego can become a problem. David Brooks in *The Road to Character*, mentioned above, makes it plain that the current American populace could benefit from more humility. He
profiles some of his admired people who overcame personal problems, subdued their own egos, and found moral commitments beyond their personal desires that required the imagination and efforts of others. In doing so, they were of great benefit to society. Humility is a religious value, stressed in Appalachian churches. The lesson is not to put ourselves above others. That lesson has been lost in much of our modern political and capitalistic culture.

**Sense of Beauty**

The sense of what is lovely in the arts changes through generations and as each of us progresses through school and life. Teachers in schools and colleges, promoting the “fine arts,” have been known to denigrate the folk arts in Appalachia, so that many native students begin to look down on what they had treasured before. I invited the cultural historian Dr. Bill C. Malone (author of such books as *Country Music, USA*, and *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*) to lecture on Appalachian and country music in a summer workshop in Appalachian Studies. He played a song by Ralph Stanley, who became a national sensation in the movie *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* A woman in the class threw up her hands and shouted “Oooh! I can’t stand that kind of singing!” Malone looked sternly at her and said, “Does that make you better than he is, Madam?” We all have different tastes and have a right to them, but do we have the right to denigrate the tastes of others? The sentient and learned person, it seems to me, ought to be able to see the function of the arts in any culture and to appreciate them as they are practiced. I had the experience of hearing the great Spanish classical guitarist, Andres Segovia, in a Berea convocation and marveled at his artistry and the beauty of his music, but that has not lessened my admiration for Chet Atkins and Doc Watson, or of the many folk artists that have played at the annual Celebration of Traditional Music at Berea College. I feel the same about the other arts and the crafts of Appalachia, as I also appreciate the creations of other artists in modern times.

**Sense of Humor**

Billy Edd Wheeler, singer, songwriter, and playwright, attended Berea College with me, and later we decided to hold a summer Festival of Appalachian Humor at the College. It was well-attended, and we had a wonderful time telling jokes and tales, singing funny songs, learning
about the value of humor. We published a book, *Laughter in Appalachia: A Festival of Southern Mountain Humor*, and it sold so well that we organized three more such festivals and did three more books (published by August House in 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1995). All these books are still in print. I believe that this indicates that Appalachian humor is still being enjoyed here and throughout the country.

**Patriotism**

Some fifty years ago, a Headstart program in western North Carolina used my values essay as a training item, and then they asked their native staff and teachers to evaluate it for authenticity. They voted that the values I described were true for their families and communities, except for patriotism. The Vietnam War was by then becoming unpopular as it had lasted through the terms of three presidents and was very costly in lives and funds. I believe that this influenced their opinion. However, research at the Veterans Administration and at East Tennessee State University shows that Appalachian soldiers, who made up about 8% of Americans who fought in the Korean and Vietnam wars, had received 18% of the Medals of Honor in Korea, and 13% in Vietnam. One researcher wrote that if you were an Appalachian soldier in Vietnam, you were 50% more likely be killed than your comrades from elsewhere. This was because officers “chose Appalachians for point men and for patrols because they felt they were more motivated, more likely to be woods-wise, and more familiar with the use of weapons.” I think that Appalachian soldiers—now including women—are probably still serving today in the same percentages in the seemingly endless battles in the Middle East. Others serve in various other ways—VISTA, Peace Corps, Teach for America, etc. We take great interest in political campaigns, and we vote.

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So, in the span of time I have covered, the USA has changed, Appalachia has changed, and so have our values. Some values have changed for the better, but some, from my old-fashioned perspective, have been lost or have become less important. Yet, I think they are there somewhere in our consciousness and still help to guide our lives. Values, like other things, are bartered; we rearrange their ranking order
throughout our lives, discard some, and adopt new ones. I think, though, that we must be mighty careful not to make bad trades.