

# From the Editor: The Great Economy

By Ray Waddle



Looking at the aerial photography of Emmet Gowin featured in this *Reflections*, I recall his words, "All important pictures embody something we do not yet understand."

Gowin has photographed bomb test craters in Nevada, acid rain fields in Northern Bohemia, and dozens of other places of "ugly duress." His environmental photos often suggest earthly wounds silently borne, as if the planet were waiting for remedy or at least acknowledgment, or poised to connect with the viewer and change us.

Change might come as a moment of spiritual catharsis or a breakthrough in public policy. In any case, the photographer's job is to bear witness.

Gowin, a preacher's son with roots in rural Virginia, says he is drawn to the "light that fills a terrible place." His work ponders a troubling paradox: "Our fascination for what is terrible is great. Our need for beauty is great," he says in *Changing the Earth*, his catalogue of aerial photos (Yale University Press, 2002).

That paradox might be a handy summary of the human condition itself—impulsive, self-defeating, baffling as ever, an estate "we do not yet understand."

The Katrina photos featured here by journalist Evan Silverstein move in an opposite direction—snapshots close to the ground, chronicling the dazed aftermath of the Gulf Coast hurricane's catastrophic blast, with the consequent flooding of New Orleans after the levees failed.

Both kinds of photos catalogue devastation and heartbreak and something else too—the news that there's nowhere to hide. Everybody knowingly or not bears some relation to the destruction. The photos assert everyone's vulnerability to weather, war, profit motive, and pollution. And they indict human practice everywhere: All taxpayers fund the steady manufacture and testing of new weapons. All of us use fossil fuels, which are refined extensively in South Louisiana and which aggravated the poisonous local conditions after Katrina.

Arguably, too, Katrina's fierceness was evidence of climate instability caused by global warming, which scientists now blame with near certainty on the human production of greenhouse gases, every-

body's problem.

Directly or indirectly, the words and images in this *Reflections* issue point to something strange and urgent about the new century. Despite our civilization's dazzling tonnage of data, we labor with a deficit. We claim a paucity of convincing metaphors that can explain this world, its damage and pain, its yearnings and interconnectedness, in ways that mobilize consensus and healing.

As a nation, it seems obvious we're casting about for a new story, a defining image. In the past they've always been nearby, giving shape to historical experience or making a case for a point of view—the Puritans' City on a Hill, Lincoln's House Divided, Falwell's Christian Nation, the Age of Aquarius—phrases designed to energize and otherwise explain a dawning reality.

Now we're tangled in a new rough patch (to use another metaphor)—a war that forces us to clarify our values and mission. At the same moment, scientific evidence says human civilization is dangerously altering the climate. And a hot-burning economy redefines extremities of wealth and poverty, while slow-burning fears of terrorism and other geo-political dreads taint the emotional landscape. Is there a metaphor that covers it all?

The photographs here connect in my mind to another artist featured in these pages, a poet who is also an essayist, novelist, Kentucky farmer, and contrarian—Wendell Berry. He has written elsewhere of a metaphor that, to his reckoning, encompasses the very truth of the world. He calls it the Great Economy.

We're all part of the Great Economy, Berry argues—the God-created cosmos where everything is connected and even the fall of a sparrow is noticed. But humans reside in it uneasily. It's a real economy, with principles and patterns and laws, but an economy we can understand only in part. And it requires humility, because it exacts harsh ecological penalties if we refuse to live in harmony with it. It is far bigger than we are.

Then there's the little economy—that is, the industrial economy. Berry says the industrial economy thinks it is the only economy. That's the problem: it values only what it can see and use today.

"What it cannot use, it characteristically describes as 'useless,' 'worthless,' 'random' or 'wild,' and gives it some such name as 'chaos,' 'disorder' or 'waste'—and thus ruins it or cheapens it," Berry writes in his essay "Two Economies."

That western deserts or eastern mountains were once perceived as 'useless' made it easy to dignify them by the 'use' of strip mining. Once we acknowledge the existence of the Great Economy, however, we are astonished and frightened to see how much modern enterprise is the work of hubris, occurring outside the human boundary established by ancient tradition. The industrial economy is based on invasion and pillage of the Great Economy.

The Great Economy is a metaphor, yet no "mere" metaphor. It is a practical reality we must heed. In some precincts, it goes by another name — the Kingdom of God.

In *Changing the Earth*, Emmet Gowin declares, "I believe difficult images bring us all closer to a shared experience." Despite all odds, perhaps difficult issues can too. That's the hope of this *Reflections*.

