

Moved by Mountains

Life is full of peaks and valleys, triumphs and tribulations. We often cause ourselves suffering, by wanting only to live in a world of valleys, a world without struggle and difficulty, a world that is flat, plain, consistent. We resist the truth of difference and diversity. We resist acknowledging that our constants exist within a framework where everything is always changing. We resist change. When we are able to face the reality of highs and lows embracing both as necessary for our full development and self-actualization, we can feel that interior well-being that is the foundation of inner peace. That life of appreciation of difference, of diversity, a life wherein one embraces suffering as central to the experience of joy is mirrored for us in our natural environment.

Earth is a diverse ecosystem. Mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, and lakes, the forests are all naturally organically balanced. We have much to learn as inhabitants, as witnesses to this environment. Like the indigenous Native Americans who peopled the Americas before the rest of us, if we listen, nature will teach us. However, if we think of the natural landscapes that surround us as simply blank slates, existing for humans to act upon them according to our will, then we cannot exist

in life-sustaining harmony with the earth. We cannot proudly declare like the biblical psalmist that “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.” The psalmist wanted us to know that we can gain spiritual strength by simply beholding the natural world, that indeed to look upon the wonders of nature is to gaze at divine spirit. Estrangement from our natural environment is the cultural contest wherein violence against the earth is accepted and normalized. If we do not see earth as a guide to divine spirit, then we cannot see that the human spirit is violated, diminished when humans violate and destroy the natural environment.

Nothing epitomizes this violence more in our contemporary life than mountain-top removal (when the summit of the mountain is removed to extract coal) and the devastation that occurs in its wake. In Stephen George’s essay, “Bringing Down the Mountain,” he explains the way it all happens: “Mountaintop-removal mining is a simple process, plow the trees (but don’t bother to harvest them) and everything else living on the mountain, blast off the top (usually 800 to 1,000 feet), take out the coal, and leave a leveled area...” Much of this mining takes place in Appalachia yet it is still one of the materially poorest regions in our nature. The wealth that is in our natural world when measured in dollars is not ever abundant yet it could be so if humans were not abusing and wasting this precious resource. As George explains, the amazing natural legacy of the Appalachians is endangered “a splendorous spread of rolling hills and green mountains mirrored nowhere in the world — is being systematically destroyed so than an unsustainable way of life in our cities may continue.”

Coal is one of earth’s great gifts. As a child in Kentucky, our family lived in an old Victorian-style house. Its modern heating system was not effective. To stay warm during the freezing cold months, we burned coal in the small fire places that were a given in this old style architecture. Watching the coal burn, feeling its hot heat, we were in our childhood filled with wonder. Coal was awesome. Colored the deepest shade of black, it was both beautiful and functional. Yet it did

not come into our homes and into our lives without tremendous sacrifice and risk.

In the early evenings when the neighborhood men who mined coal came home from work with their bodies covered in ash, their hats with lights, their lunch boxes, we would follow them, not understanding that they were beat, bone weary, not in the mood to play. There is no child raised in the culture of coal mining who does not come to understand the risks involved in harvesting coal. In the world of coal mining without big machinery, coal mining has a human face. Man is limited in his physical capacity. He can only extract so much. Machines can take and keep taking.

The smallest child can look upon a natural environment altered by conventional mining practice and see the difference between that process and mountaintop removal. Introducing the collection of essays in the book *Missing Mountains*, Silas House shares the way in which being raised in a coal mining family was for him a source of pride. He begins with the statement, “coal mining is a part of me,” then recalls a long history of family members working in the mines. And while he speaks against mountaintop removal, he shares this vital understanding: “We are not against the coal industry. Coal was mined for decades without completely devastating the entire region. My family is a part of that coal mining legacy. But mountaintop removal means that fewer and fewer people work in mining, because it is so heavily mechanized. If mountaintop removal is banned, there might actually be more mining jobs for the hard-working people of Kentucky. And beyond that the proper respect might finally be returned to the spirit of the land and its people.” Without a sustainable vision of coal usage, without education for creating consciousness that would enable our nation to break with unhealthy dependency on coal, we cannot restore the dignity both to the earth and to this rich resource.

Mountaintop removal robs the earth of that dignity. It robs the folk who live in the cultural wasteland it creates of their self-esteem and divine glory. Witnessing up close the way this assault on the natural

environment ravages the human spirit, the anguish it causes folk who must face daily the trauma of mountaintop removal, we who live away from this process are called to an empathy and solidarity that requires that we lend our resources, our spiritual strength, our progressive vision to challenge and change this suffering.

A beacon light to us all, elder Daymon Morgan embodies the unbridled spirit of a true Kentucky revolutionary. He acts as conservationist, a steward of the land, and as one who is committed to the struggle to end mountaintop removal. Returning from World War II, Morgan bought land on Lower Bad Creek in Leslie County, Kentucky. Raising a family, growing herbs on his land, he had allowed the earth to teach him, to be his witness. His story is special because he is in many ways representative of the ordinary citizen who is called to political action because of their love of the land and community. In recent times the Appalachian Studies program at Berea College makes certain that the faculty and staff, especially those who are new, take the Appalachian tour so that they may better understand our region, and have an opportunity to meet this amazing man of integrity who stands for all that is right and wonderful in a democratic country. Taking the tour provided me an opportunity to meet Mr. Morgan, to be in his presence, to learn from his knowledge. Even before he opens his mouth, the strength and stillness of his being radiate glory. In Buddhist tradition the student learns that it is transformative just to stand in the presence of a great teacher.

Both by his presentation and in my short dialogue with Mr. Morgan, I saw in his visage and heard in his own words the extent to which fighting mountaintop removal wears on his spirit, wears him down, especially when that resistance must take the form of challenging relatives who would surrender the land, their legacy, to big business. Before meeting Daymon Morgan, I had learned from his writing about the tens of thousands of years it takes for the organic matter of the forest to biodegrade and make rich soil. When this earth is attacked, he mourns: "It's very disturbing to me to see the things that

I love being destroyed. I got my medicine and my food from these mountains, and I still do. There's a place down here where I can lay down and drink out of this creek and I want to keep it that way because it's clear above. I feel like I'm being pushed into a corner." Just two years later hearing Morgan speak, we hear the emotional toil resistance takes. Yet he tells with pride that there is joy in struggle, that he continues to struggle because of the debt he owes this Kentucky land. He honors the mutual relationship between him and the earth by working to protect and preserve the world around him. I ask him about protecting this legacy beyond the grave. No matter the steps he does not take to still be resisting beyond death, his presence is making a difference in the here and now.

Unlike other Appalachian tour groups who have visited at Morgan's home, we were not able to make it up the mountain in our bus. He came down the mountain to talk with us. We were watched by coal mining hired hands sitting in vehicles. Subjected to a level of surveillance that bordered on harassment, their intent was to block us from using roads that would enable us to see first hand the devastation. Their intent was to keep us from seeing the work of mountaintop removal. Concern for our safety was paramount to Mr. Morgan. Still we were able to witness and experience the threat he faces daily from those who couldn't care less about the survival of our Kentucky land, culture, and the lives of folks who are mostly poor and working class. The lack of empathy for the lives that are devastated by mountaintop removal reminds us of the overall crisis in human values generated by dominator culture, by imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

In dominator culture the will to power stands as a direct challenge to the cultural belief that humans survive soulfully because of a will to meaning. When the will to meaning is paramount, human life retains dignity. The capacity of humans to create community, to make connections, to love, is nurtured and sustained. For those of us who believe in divine spirit, in higher powers, the issue of mountaintop

removal and all practices wherein the earth is plundered and the environment wasted is as much a spiritual issue as it is a political issue. In order to justify dehumanizing coal mining practices, the imperial capitalist world of big business has to make it appear that the plant and human life that is under attack has no value. It is not difficult to see the link between the engrained stereotypes about mountain folk (hillbillies), especially those who are poor, representations that suggest that these folk are depraved, ignorant, evil, licentious, and the prevailing belief that there is nothing worth honoring, worth preserving about their habits of being, their culture.

Mass media representations of poor folk in general convey to the public the notion that poor people are in dire straits because of the bad choices they have made. The media pushes images that suggest that if the poor suffer from widespread addiction to sugar, alcohol, or drugs, it is because of innate weaknesses of character. When mass media offers representations of poor mountain folk, all the negative assumptions are intensified and the projections exaggerated. No wonder then that it is usually easier for citizens concerned about environmental issues to identify with the hardships facing nature and the lives of the poor in underdeveloped countries than to identify with the exploitation of the environment, both the natural and cultural world of people here in our society, especially in Appalachia.

In Alice Walker's most recent book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, she describes soul murder in dominator culture as "pain that undermines our every attempt to relieve ourselves of external and internalized...domination...the pain that murders our wish to be free." She concludes, "It is a pain that seems unrelenting. A pain that seems to have no stopping and no end. A pain that is ultimately, insidiously, turning a generous life loving people into a people who no longer feel empathy for the world. We are being consumed by our suffering." While Walker is talking about the fate of black folk, her words speak to the human condition in our culture, especially to the lives of exploited and oppressed people of all colors.

To truly create a social ethical context wherein masses of American citizens can empathize with the life experiences of Appalachians, we must consistently challenge dehumanizing public representations of poverty and the poor. Restoring to our nation the understanding that people can be materially poor yet have abundant lives rich in engagement with nature, with local culture, with spiritual values is essential to any progressive struggle to halt mountaintop removal. Seeing and understanding that abundance means not only that we must collectively as a nation change our thinking about poverty, it means we must see a value in life that is above and beyond profit motives. And that is a challenging task in a material culture where individual citizens of all classes spend significant amounts of their daily life fantasizing about becoming wealthy by winning the lottery as well as spending much of their income on purchasing lottery tickets. This situation would be cause for widespread despair were it not for the education for critical consciousness that is already leading many American citizens to reevaluate their lives. Among all classes, decreased economic resources caused by job loss, low wages, high housing costs, etc., are all circumstances that are serving as a catalyst for folks to rethink their lives. This rethinking often includes a return to spiritual values which often acts to reconnect folk with nature. Walker tells us in her recent work that we have only spirit to guide us, that “spirit is our country because it is ultimately our only home.”

One of the unintended benefits that has come with the widespread rebirth of religious fundamentalism has been the outgrowth of new ways of thinking about the poor. Concurrently, this revived theology calls for those who are truly living according to the biblical word to identify with the poor and to seek to live simply. That call to simple living often begins with a reawakening of wonder sparking awareness of our profound connection to nature. The Christian Bible tells believers to turn again and again to nature to understand the essence of spiritual values. And certainly all the diverse religions of the world pay homage to the role nature plays in our humanization,

our spiritual self-actualization. In her essay, “Turning Slowly Nature,” Diane Glancy offers this insight: “It seems to me that nature is an un-saved world. A world groaning for redemption, for release from fear, guardedness, a state of alertedness, a predatory state. Nature longs for release. Creation groans for deliverance like the humanity that inhabits it. In the biblical book of Romans we are told, ‘The creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21).”

As we work to redeem nature, to rescue and preserve our natural environment so that future generations may be at home here, we claim our own salvation as witnesses and as custodians. Writing about integrating her Native American and European ancestry in the essay, “Becoming Metis,” Melissa Nelson tells us how a commitment to deep ecology was a perspective that served her even as it was the more holistic visions offered by Native traditions which provided for her a spiritual, philosophical, and political foundation from which to grow. She explains: “To indigenous peoples, the basic tenets of deep ecology are just a reinvention of very ancient principles that they have been living by for millennia before their ways were disrupted, and in many cases destroyed, by colonial forces. To learn who I am today, on this land, I live on, I’ve had to recover that heritage and realize a multicultural self... By studying the process others have gone through to embrace the cultural richness of diverse backgrounds, I have come to understand the importance of decolonizing my mind.” We must all decolonize our minds in Western culture to be able to think differently about nature, about the destruction humans cause.

With prophetic vision Enrique Salmon explains in “Sharing Breath” that “Cultural Survival can be measured by the degree to which cultures maintain a relationship with their bioregions. Ecologists and conservation biologists recognized an important relationship between cultural diversity and biological diversity.... Cultural histories speak the language of the land. They mark the outlines of the human/land consciousness.” Our vernacular Kentucky language reso-

nates with the richness and warmth of our land. When we open our mouths, generations can be heard as though we are indeed “speaking in tongues” as we embrace collective unconscious remembering our ancestors, remembering their love of the land. It is that love which must lead us again and again to do all that must be done to stop mountaintop removal, to recover the beauty and function of coal without laying waste the earth. The culture of Appalachia cannot live if our mountains are dead. We cannot look to the hills and find strength if all we can see is a landscape of destruction.