

Go Tell it on the Mountain – End Mountaintop Removal NOW

October 25, 2009 by Sharon Baiocco

Just 200 miles west of here, in the mountains of Appalachia, an epic struggle is underway. Some fear that violence will erupt. On one side are the coal and power companies, along with the few miners who still have jobs; and on the other are their neighbors, among the poorest in the country, whose homes, health, and beautiful mountains are being destroyed. A growing movement of environmentalists is joining them. We are fighting over what has come to be known as “MTR,” mountaintop removal mining, where the tops of mountains are cleared and blown up, exposing the coal deep inside the mountain so it can be extracted more easily.

Our UU 7th principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” challenges us to think globally, and the Green Sanctuary Committee here has chosen to respond to the call for climate action with an interfaith environmental justice movement. Since we are people of faith AND of science, we are launching an eco-justice action to save the endangered mountains and people of Appalachia, believing that hearts and minds are the greatest sources of the will to change.

Joining us tonight in this movement, we are honored to have representatives from The Church of the Incarnation, the Charlottesville Friends’ Meeting; the Geshar Center for Jewish Spirituality, Meditation, and Healing; and St. Paul’s Memorial Church. We are also honored to recognize Congressman Tom Perriello as a co-sponsor of the new Clean Water Protection Act.

Coal accounts for 39% of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions, the major cause of global warming, according to the U.S. Dept. of Energy. And here on the edge of

Appalachia, we are witnessing the destruction of the mountains that we love through mountaintop removal coal mining. Three years ago, our national church adopted an Action of Immediate Witness, “End Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining,” as five other denominations have also done (*ilovemountains.org/resolutions*), often stating that mountaintop removal mining is blight on God’s creation. But until now, we faith communities in Charlottesville have taken no action.

We are holding this memorial vigil today in support of our neighbors in Appalachia, the nearly 500 mountains that have disappeared due to mountaintop removal mining, and the 79 other mountain sites that are threatened. Together, these sites comprise an area larger than the state of Delaware. These mountains are the oldest in the world and home to one of the oldest, most diverse ecosystems on earth. Yet MTR-mined coal provides less than seven percent of our nation’s electricity. If we ended mountaintop removal today, we could conserve this amount nearly overnight through behavior change, education, responsible legislation, and investment in renewable energy. (*Mike McCoy, Virginia Field Organizer, Appalachian Voices, "A New Energy Future." Conference sponsored by People's Alliance for Clean Energy Charlottesville, Oct. 17, 2009.*)

Mountaintop removal is a deep, personal assault on those of us who live in the shadow of the Blue Ridge. When my husband and I moved here in 2005, as we came over Rockfish Gap on a late afternoon, the Southwest Ridge and Rockfish Valley glowed golden in the setting sun. Truly, “They had me at ‘hello.’” Now I live on Pantops Mountain, and for four years from my back yard I have watched mountaintop removal in all its horror – blasting, hammering, earth-moving, clear cutting, burning, eroding, polluting – in the name of new homes -- not coal. Yes, this is personal. Imagine how you would feel if one day you looked at a sunset

over Wintergreen, for example, only to see a gaping hole where the mountaintop once was? It's decapitation, it's desecration, and IT MUST STOP.

And YET – WE are the beneficiaries of this heinous practice. No longer can we hide from our connection to the shocking truth (PUN intended.) Charlottesville gets its electricity from the grid, from Dominion Virginia's Bremo Bluff Power Station in Fluvanna County, the one closest to us, that obtains its coal from five mountaintop removal sites: Hazard, KY; Winchester, KY; Gilbert, WV; Lewisburg, WV; and Beckley, WV. (<http://www.ilovemountains.org/myconnection/>)

We Virginians sit at the epicenter of the greatest source of greenhouse gas pollution – coal and coal-fired power plants. The Southeastern states emit twice the pollution from power production as the Northeast and an amount equal to the CO2 emissions of the third largest polluter in the world, Russia and its former satellites. (*Dept. of Energy*

http://www.eia.doe.gov/cneaf/electricity/page/co2_report/co2report.html#table_1)

Mountaintop removal mining (MTR) has been allowed because of a loophole in a 1977 federal law that was designed to prevent various forms of strip-mining. MTR coal mining replaces forests and peaks with wastelands and sludge ponds, pollutes thousands of miles of streams and brings massive environmental damage to mountain communities. Pollution from coal plants produces dirty air, acid rain, contaminated land and water, childhood asthma, birth defects and respiratory diseases that take nearly 25,000 lives each year. (*Conrad G. Schneider, The Dirty Secret Behind Dirty Air: Dirty Power, Washington, DC: Clear the Air, June 2004.*

http://www.catf.us/publications/reports/Dirty_Air_Dirty_Power.pdf)

To end MTR, we must become educated about it, about power plants, and about alternative renewable energy. The problem, in a word is COAL. "Coal is the

single greatest threat to civilization and all life on our planet," writes James Hansen, NASA's top climate scientist. Coal is America's dirtiest energy source -- and the country's leading source of global warming pollution. ("*James Hansen: Coal-fired power plants are death factories. Close them,*" *the Observer*, 15 February 2009
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/15/james-hansen-power-plants-coal>)

Here are the facts, good citizens of Virginia:

- When mined, coal releases methane. When burned, it produces other greenhouse gases. Six hundred U.S. coal-burning power plants are the single largest source of carbon dioxide pollution (30%) in our earth's atmosphere. (*National Resources Defense Council*) and (<http://www.treepower.org/quickfacts.html>)
- Coal power plants produce half of all the electricity generated in the U.S., but release 90% of CO2 emissions from electric utilities. (*Source: U.S. Department of Energy*)

Sadly, the recession has decreased states' ability to monitor emissions. Virginia has already eliminated more than 20 percent of its air-pollution inspectors in an attempt to make up for an estimated \$3 billion budget shortfall. The air inspectors oversee about 5,000 sites statewide, including power plants. (*The Washington Post*)

Industry lobbyists are spending millions of dollars to block clean energy solutions and persuade Americans that they can keep using coal without the consequences. But we CAN shift from coal to cleaner and cheaper ways to meet our energy needs, and we CAN make a huge reduction in the world's greenhouse gases, and there is some evidence that we are making progress. Last week after a raucous Army Corps of Engineers' hearing in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, the

Environmental Protection Agency announced exciting news: They plan to use their authority for the first time to veto the Clean Water Act Permit for the largest mountaintop removal site in West Virginia's history. Georgia and North Carolina legislators have introduced bills to ban MTR, and seven more states are taking some action. (<http://www.ilovemountains.org/state-actions>) Virginia is not one of them, and proposed mines in Virginia are unfortunately still moving forward (*Wise Energy for Virginia newsletter*).

And do not be misled by the false “jobs” argument: Despite claims that mountaintop removal helps local economies, counties that produce coal are devastated by poverty and unemployment. McDowell County in West Virginia has produced more coal than any other county in that state, yet the median household income is under \$20,000 and nearly four in ten residents live in poverty. (*Sierra Club* http://www.sierraclub.org/coal/downloads/2009.10.13_mtr_econstudies_whitepaper.pdf)

MTR actually eliminates mining jobs, but worse, it destroys the potential for alternative economic growth. In the biggest coal-producing state in the region, West Virginia, tourism already contributes more to the economy, and creates far more jobs, than the coal industry has for more than a decade. Mountaintop removal is permanently destroying the best economic assets that mountain counties have: the beautiful and ancient Appalachian Mountains themselves. (*Sierra Club*)

The better solution is to repower America -- first by reducing energy use, and next, by investing in clean energy. Green technologies and renewable fuels will create millions of good-paying jobs, lift our poorest communities out of poverty, reduce dangerous pollution and help fight global warming.

Yes, my friends, “We’ve got the power,” in both senses of the word. We’ve got the electric power coming from Dominion Virginia’s mountaintop removal sites, and we’ve got the power to change our energy-wasting behaviors, change our policies, and reduce global warming.

Moved by love, by no small amount of fear, and by faith – we CAN protect nature and make this world a better place for life in all its precious forms.

At times, we environmentalists feel all alone. We feel as though we are sending out radio signal warnings to the world, but the warnings fall on deaf ears. But this weekend we are learning that we are NOT alone – 4000 other action groups in 170 countries have joined us in taking climate action. www.350.org

Soon we at this church hope to launch an eco-justice program, “Go Tell it on the Mountain,” an interfaith effort to inform and mobilize the faith communities in our area to advocate to stop mountaintop removal and reduce our dependency on coal. I believe that we are at ground zero in a worldwide climate action that will be bigger even than the movements to end slavery, to promote women’s suffrage, or to achieve equal rights. Organizers of the International Day for Climate Action are calling it the “the first truly global event in human history.” (350.org)

Many critical issues confront us today, and a recent poll suggests that people are increasingly dismissing the importance of climate change. This requires us to become ever more resolute, ever more determined to lead.

So I ask that as you leave, you take our single handout, “What You Can Do.” Educate yourself, join our interfaith eco-justice movement, and urge Congress to enact the laws we need – Senate Bill 696, the Appalachia Restoration Act, and House Bill 1310, the Clean Water Protection Act. (ilovemountains.org) Continue to

press the EPA to use its regulatory power to withhold permits for all mountaintop removal sites under review. Together, we can find alternatives to coal power and end this environmental Holocaust called mountaintop removal.