

Blog Entries for Green Sanctuary Blog, Congregational Stewardship
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Part II June 12, 2010 Witnesses to MTR's Environmental Holocaust

On a bright summer day in June ten members of our congregation began a trek to a MTR site near Larry Gibson's home on Kayford Mountain, West Virginia, about 200 miles west of Charlottesville. Gibson's home is a 50-acre site surrounded by 1200 acres of flattened mountains, but he has courageously fought for at least 20 years to live there and protect it while he educates the public about the environmental devastation that allows us to turn on our lights. Gibson has earned the name "Keeper of the Mountain," (now also the name of his foundation) by leading walks across states and traveling around the nation speaking about the injustices of MTR. He has turned his home into a "witness attraction" complete with covered picnic area, meeting house, and outhouses.

In heavy rain, we heard Larry tell about how his home has been threatened with drive-by shootings, and his door is on wheels, it is so heavy. "It's a fortress," he said ruefully. Twenty years ago he placed his land in a trust so that the coal companies who operate the nearby MTR site can never get it. He told us that the surrounding land was stolen from his ancestors by coal companies who were able to falsely duplicate deeds because his ancestors were illiterate and signed their original deeds with an "X." Larry thought his own property was protected, but one day bulldozers came to the little family cemetery nearby, and before the police could arrive, they plowed under all but a few of his ancestors' graves.

When the rain cleared, we steeled ourselves to hike to a ridge to view the MTR site. On our way we passed 250-foot crevices near the trail, a reminder that exploding a rocky mountain leaves unstable ground behind, as well as destroying the wildlife and habitat. Our party consisted of several hardy octogenarians, younger "seniors," and Rowan Van Ness, UUMFE environmental representative to the National Council of Churches in D.C. We were also joined by an artist, our guides from Charleston, and the indomitable Larry.

Surrounded on three sides by lower, layered MTR terraces, Larry's homesite sits near the top of what used to be Kayford Mountain, reminding me a little of Mesa Verde, and sadly, it could face the same outcome. Kayford was once home to five small communities, but now only Larry and his relatives live there. As the smoky fog from dense rainfall lay like cotton around the mountaintops in the distance, we viewed the site. In an odd way, the panorama before us held a surreal beauty. Its scale alone left us breathless. With MTR, "It's like you ask the barber for a haircut, and he lops off your head, your neck, and your shoulders," says Charlottesville playwright and actress Adelind Horan in her one-woman show about MTR, "Cry of the Mountain." The crater that was once the peak of Kayford Mountain looked more like a huge child's sandbox, and the trucks and heavy construction equipment far below resembled my grandson's toys. Some of the areas closer by were now covered with emerald green non-native grass and locust saplings. Nature was still at work, struggling to restore life to these

barren wastelands that were once primeval forests. The coal industry calls this "reclamation." But like the 478 other Appalachian mountains lost to MTR over an area the size of the state of Delaware, Kayford Mountain can never be replaced. It is gone forever. With hushed voices, we took in the scene. Larry had told us that he once saw a bear cornered and wounded, and before it died, it cried out eerily. "I wonder if a mountain could cry, what would it sound like?" he mused.

The next morning we attended the Sunday service of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Charleston led by the Rev. Rose Edington, our guide to the site and co-minister with Rev. Mel Hoover. In her sermon she said she had learned a new word that fit what many of us felt when viewing the site: "Apophosis," a wordlessness -- an unavoidable silence when awed by nature or human destruction of nature."

We promised our fellow UUs in West Virginia then that they were NOT alone. In fact, like UUs, other faith communities across this nation are organizing to reverse the laws that allow mountaintop removal coal mining – and we will not be silent. "Appalachia Rising," a national grassroots rally in Washington, D.C. Sept. 25-27 will offer MTR opponents the opportunity to give public witness against the destruction to the Appalachian culture, mountains, and rivers that provide fresh water to the entire Mid-Atlantic. At the same time, other environmental groups like Appalachian Voices are targeting congressmen and senators for lobbying to pass HR 1310, Clean Water Protection Act (CWPA), and S 696, Appalachian Restoration Act (ARA). In the end, like the movements against slavery and against smoking in public places that were opposed by powerful cotton and tobacco interests, I believe we will eventually change the laws of this land and overcome the coal industry too, putting a "condemned forever" sign on mountaintop removal coal mining -- simply because our cause is just.