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“Please name the children whom you would be willing to kill.”

The gentle rippling of homemade picket signs and the distant hum of traffic are the only audible sounds on Louisville’s Belvedere, situated in view of the Ohio River. Farmer, poet, and Kentuckian Wendell Berry reads his poem “Questionnaire” to the attendees of the Energy for Change Rally. Upwards of two thousand guests gathered to promote renewable, clean energy and healthy communities. Ten minutes earlier, enthused shouts of “Hey hey! Ho ho! Fossil fuels have got to go!” flooded Louisville’s streets, puncturing the sweltering curtain of heat that hung over the city with sound. But now, the crowd is still and silent, processing Berry’s hard-hitting, extreme, but warranted demand. In context, the above statement asks the poem’s audience (citizens, corporations, and politicians who hold some stake in energy change) to consider the “ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security” for which we would “kill a child.” In light of my work with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and research on environmental justice, Berry’s demand forced me to reflect on Kentucky’s position in regards to coal, communities, and the environment. I wonder, what line has to be crossed and what damage has to be done to make citizens, politicians, and corporations cognizant of the systemic harm coal companies issue upon people and the earth?

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) is a grassroots organization that encourages ordinary Kentuckians to become prominent leaders in the fight for social, political, and economic justice. For over thirty years, the organization has empowered and educated citizens to fight for causes that matter. Historically, KFTC is associated with environmental justice—a long-standing topic with deep-rooted passions, especially in the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky. My initiation into Appalachian empowerment and energy transition occurred at the Energy for Change Rally and ended, appropriately, in Harlan, Kentucky, a small mountain town that is the popular topic of old mining protest songs and gripping documentaries like Harlan County USA. In my experiences, whether it be the events that framed my internship or personal research compiled to assist KFTC, the running thread through my work was coal and how to move away from it.

I’d like to return, for a moment, to Wendell Berry’s disturbing sentiment from “Questionnaire.” I heard this chilling line in June, right as my internship with KFTC was beginning to take shape. Freshly initiated into the positive world of solar transition, I had conducted research over Kentucky’s legislation and assessed ways in which policies might be altered to promote renewable energy in a state long-governed by nonrenewable resources. Cold hard facts and numbers stared at me from countless reports, which showed Kentucky’s potential for greater implementation of solar energy. But the obstacles to this implementation, which previously hid under a guise of apparently harmless numbers, were not substantiated in my mind until Berry’s harsh words smacked me across the face. To ask audience members to state the number of children they would sacrifice in the name of fossil fuels almost seems melodramatic until a tangible illustration of the situation appears. Take Marsh Fork Elementary School in West Virginia. The school sits just 400 yards below a coal impoundment holding 2.8 billion gallons of toxic coal sludge. If the impoundment’s dam were to fail, the school’s 230 children...
would have less than five minutes to evacuate the school. How many children are we willing to kill?

Harmful extractive practices like mountaintop removal create safety hazards, and devastate streams, land, and communities. In fact, West Virginia and Kentucky are consistently ranked among the most unhealthy states in the nation, largely due to the coal industry. But perhaps the most troubling aspect of Appalachia’s situation is that the region cannot help but be dependent on coal companies. As my internship continued, I grew more familiar with the face of Appalachian poverty. My experience in Harlan at a KFTC-sponsored water testing workshop, the second big event of my internship, illuminated important insights on poverty in the mountains.

Harlan County is home to about 29,000 souls and a lot of coal. While waiting for the workshop to begin, a sweet local talked to me in the Harlan County Public Library about life, family, and coal. “My son is 41, and the best decision he ever made was to leave Harlan.” She had wide, blue eyes with trouble wrinkles lining her smiling face. Her family suffered the burden of strip mining in one of Kentucky’s poorest counties. “They ripped up everything and my family never saw a cent. That’s just not right.” Their land was torn from the earth so King Coal could extract the riches that waited below. The land was devastated for profits -- profits that were never seen nor felt by the family or the community as a whole. In coal towns like Harlan, companies extract millions of dollars worth of natural resources. Yet, the town remains in shambles, while the profits from coal riches never find their way back into the county. But the people of Harlan are dependent on the coal companies all the same—they own half the town and employ half the people. It’s the perfect storm of exploitation and dependence.

We talked for about 45 minutes before the workshop started, and then she left to complete her work and return home. Her words stuck with me throughout the day and in the days following the workshop. By listening to one woman—a single mother with a son in Alabama and no one else to turn to—I learned more about the nature of poverty in Eastern Kentucky than I had through endless research. Her thoughts lend themselves to important insights on the subject, and through her words I have broken my discussion of poverty in the Kentucky Appalachians into three underlying characteristics: distrust, perceptions of dependency, and relativity.

In Harlan, and in many Appalachian towns just like it, there is a general feeling of complete distrust that stretches beyond party lines to encompass the entire governing “system,” which seems to include coal companies. In the midst of our conversation, the lady admitted, “I used to be a Democrat. All my life I was a Democrat. But I changed. It’s the system.” Long-time Democratic counties, which supported the party because it genuinely seemed to care for their well-being and provided defense from often-abusive coal companies, choose to flip the coin and toe the Republican party line because they believe (or have been convinced) that Democrats no longer support their way of life. They feel that the only way they will continue to have employment is by supporting the Republican cause. And when you visit the town and hear their stories, these sentiments are understandable. The lady kept mentioning a name over and over again, a name I was unfamiliar with. When I asked her who she was referring to, she said “Why they’re the family who owns half of Harlan.” A coal family. A single family has half the county
in its pockets. While it’s obvious that their presence and the subsequent careers they provide haven’t done much for Harlan (the county has soaring unemployment and poverty rates), citizens feel gridlocked. With the company, things aren’t great. In fact, things aren’t that good at all. But without them? They’re too scared to imagine. Rhetoric like “Appalachian transition” from coal to clean energy translates to lost jobs and helpless families. In their fear, citizens think the Democratic party wants to take everything away from them.

What’s also true is that the perceived dependency on coal companies found among Harlan citizens isn’t naturally-occurring but a corporate invention. Because citizens think they cannot live without the coal companies, the industry frees itself to committing heinous abuses to its employees and the community. For instance, they deprive citizens of clean water by polluting natural mountain streams, refuse to take responsibility for their actions, and continuously convince citizens that organizations like KFTC are crazy for pointing fingers at the companies. They want citizens to think that any organization that tries to aid them is simultaneously trying to oust the company and their jobs. This creates a dangerous cycle of a people who need assistance and empowerment, but are afraid that a cry for help will lead to lost jobs and lost livelihoods. It is almost as if calling for aid against an abusive status quo is a betrayal to their town and their people.

An analysis of poverty in Appalachia warrants the familiar discussion of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. In the hierarchy, just above basic, physiological needs comes safety, including security of the family, health, employment, and property. For humans to reach their pinnacle state of “self-actualization,” they must feel safe and secure. However, while Kentucky is governed by a stilted political system that continually supports harmful, extractive practices due to fear that profitability will decrease if such problems are directly addressed, Appalachian citizens will suffer from insecurity. In fact, I would argue that insecurity is the driving factor in maintaining a culture of despair and poverty in the mountains. We must continue to refine our definition of what it means to be poor in reference to these citizens. “Poor” can often go beyond lack of food, clothing, and shelter to encompass the demeaning reality that Appalachians often have no control over their own well-being. It is relative poverty, and it is reinforced by the greedy, extractive economy supported by Kentucky and Washington alike.

Impoverished citizens in Appalachia are unable to control their physical well-beings, and also suffer the mental stress of knowing that any second an overpowering company can strip their land, extract it for everything, and that they’ll never see a cent. Such abuses are violations of human dignity. Poverty in the mountains manifests itself as a lack of voice and exploitation from an all-powerful body. I am reminded of extractive economies, like those found in Latin America. Think sixteenth century Potosí in Bolivia with silver, and the poor sugar economy in northeastern Brazil. Establishing economies based on one source paved the way for poverty and devastated communities. The tricky thing about Appalachia, and the aforementioned Latin American examples, is that it is so abundant with natural resources, it seems like it should be a prosperous region. But this apparent paradox is resolved when the economic practices of huge, profit-hungry coal companies are analyzed. Citizens of towns like Harlan live and work on top of abundant natural resources but maintain no ownership over them. Appalachian residents often feel a sense of impermanence and volatility and are vulnerable to the whims of corporations wishing to satiate America’s overwhelming appetite for natural resources. Economically and
politically, the region has been exploited, which results in the poverty felt throughout Appalachia’s history. It is a clear case of resource exploitation. Land has been forever owned by outsiders. Citizens feel they have no control over their own property, the place they grew up as a child, and the place they will one day die. This sense of powerlessness might be why the lady in the library was so proud of her son’s decision to leave Harlan County.

Thankfully, KFTC and other environmental justice organizations exist, keeping the needs of Appalachian citizens in mind. By promoting the transition from non-renewables to clean energy, nonprofits are paving the way for clean jobs and healthy communities. Ever-growing numbers of supporters in and outside of the mountains are rallying behind the same goals: clean earth, clean communities, healthy people. Organizations are breaking down political and economic obstacles and are building a cleaner, brighter future for Appalachian citizens. It seems like silver linings outline the low-hanging clouds that roost in the mountains during Appalachian mornings. Can you see them through the soot?