

Check is in the Mail

“As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind---“

Emily Dickinson

“If you tell a lie, always rehearse it. If it don't sound good to you, it won't sound good to anybody. “
Leroy “Satchel” Page

As hopeful people we sometimes mislead each other and ourselves about what's coming next. Nothing wrong with that. Out of all that can possibly happen it is natural for us to divine best case scenarios and put our faith there. My concern for the future of Appalachia is not that we occasionally lie to ourselves. It is that we do it so poorly. Happy endings should be at least plausible. Before we can build a better future, we need to come up with a less far-fetched storyline to believe in.

At the start of the twentieth century central Appalachia was seen as the richest, most accessible repository of U.S. natural wealth. And indeed it was rich in coal, gas, oil, timber, and proximity to emerging markets. It also had the kind of rugged beauty and broad mountain vistas that would later come to underpin second home markets, the retirement industry, and tourism in other parts of the country and around the world. We had it all.

Today Appalachia is regarded as the poorest part of the country, especially so in those areas that were blessed with rich deposits of coal. So how does the very richest become the very poorest? Not by accident. Not without a plan. Not without a story.

I live in the Fifth Congressional District of Kentucky. It is ranked 435th (of 436) in the Well Being Index, a national measurement of wealth, health, and happiness. To say we are ranked last in Appalachia may even sound worse than saying we are the worst in the country. Our life expectancy here has slipped behind that of Mexico and China, and, according to a recent study done at Harvard,* we have local counties where the average income is at about a quarter of what most Americans make and more closely at par with developing countries like Uruguay, Panama, and Serbia (a nation the U.S. bombed in 1999). Correspondingly we have alarmingly high rates of clinical depression and suicide. To live in the coalfields and pretend that the region is in good shape is to hide from reality and to seal yourself off from your neighbor's suffering.

But sealing ourselves off is a bit of a cottage industry in the mountains and a necessary enterprise to accommodate the economic disparities now in place. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, then what do we call people who see the same thing happening to them over

and over, but believe it when they are told that this time it is going to turn out better? I think they are called us.

I saw a pick-up truck in Hazard the other day with three stickers. The first was "Friends of Coal" on the rear window. Just below that was "Coal Mining Our Future." And on the bumper was a strip that said, "Daddy, Don't Sell the Farm."

Those of us who live in the coalfields do not so much resolve mixed messages as we endure them. We build a perimeter around them and expect them to get along with each other. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." The functioning part is the challenge. We want prosperity. And we tell ourselves we can achieve it by doing the same thing that has made us poor.

The organization called Coal Mining Our Future says it explicitly: "Our mission is to ensure continuous education and prosperity for the people of Kentucky through coal mining." And there is indeed comfort in believing that it could all somehow be true. There may only be twenty more years of accessible reserves remaining here, total mining employment may be half of what it was in the 80s and still on the decline, the state may be paying the mining industry more in subsidies than it's getting in return, power companies may be abandoning plans for new coal-fired plants, and the future price of carbon sequestration may be impossible for anyone to pay, but hang the details. We would like to think there is still a place for us, for Appalachia in American prosperity. And coal is what we got, it's who we've been, so if we are going to get to easy street, then doesn't it have to be coal that gets us there?

The Commonwealth of Kentucky itself is part of the public persuasion effort. The state issues special black license plates with the slogan "Coal Keeps the Lights On." And even though the journal *Science* reports, "scientific evidence of the severe environmental and human impacts from mountaintop removal is strong and irrefutable. Its impacts are pervasive and long lasting and there is no evidence that any mitigation practices successfully reverse the damage it causes," the state spends hundreds of thousands of tax-payer dollars in an effort to teach school children that mountain top removal mining not only leads to prosperity, it also improves the environment. That's their story, and they are sticking to it.

Of course, no one wants to be told that the future is bleak. The present may be bleak. We may be committed to the same rapacious mountaintop mining, the same substandard education, the same ole twiddling away of limited investment opportunities, the same political corruption, and maybe it is also true that half our kids are on food stamps and running around in other people's clothes, but none the less we long to hear that things are going to be better because of it. Just as we are compelled to tell our children stories with happy endings, we feel obliged to tell each other what will get us through the day. And then tell ourselves what it takes to get us through the night.

We have all been there before: The check is in the mail. Yes, baby, I'm going to call you. Have you lost weight? I can stop anytime. This won't hurt a bit. Technically, I'm married, but we are separated. I love what you've done to your hair. As soon as I get paid, you'll get paid. Really, officer, was I speeding? Hey, kids, the future is bright.

Sturdy optimism is what keeps us going. And polite conversation. Maybe in the long run the stories don't all pan out, maybe they are based on a mistaken understanding, on too much hope, or even on some industry's calculated and self-serving falsehoods, but no matter. In some secret place we've learned that if we can hang on to those narratives long enough, and believe in them hard enough, then we can scuttle the doubt and muddle through. That is why a good plan is so valuable. It is a strategic prevarication. It keeps the current realities at bay while we allow ourselves to conjure up a better future to believe in.

When I was a callow lad and a fresh-faced student at the University of Kentucky, I became very interested in issues of justice and full of hope that things could turn out better for the people of Appalachia, my people. I became intrigued with the attempt of the Knott County (Kentucky) Fiscal Court to ban strip mining in that county. It was a brazen, Quixotic move, but it was the county where the Widow Combs had sat in front of the bulldozer and the legendary Dan "the Red Nose" Gibson had held off strip miners with a squirrel gun. It made me think that local people had a real shot at determining their destiny. I began to research the issue and along the way ended up spending an afternoon with Fred Luigart, the president of the Kentucky Coal Association.

Fred was the former editor of the Hazard Herald and a one time award-winning whiz-bang reporter for the Louisville Courier-Journal. Once when I was small, and he was a reporter, I saw him in the chair at Dewey's Barbershop getting his hair clipped, his shoes shined, smoking cigarettes, and writing a story on a yellow pad all at the same time. Everyone there gave him a wide berth. He looked like the busiest man alive, totally focused, undoubtedly speeding toward the evening's deadline.

What got me through the door of the Coal Association was the fact that Fred and my dad had been drinking buddies back in Hazard. My dad was not so interested in issues of justice, but he got a kick out of the fact that I was. It was kind of like when my mom taught our dog to stand on his hind legs and play the piano. It wasn't so much the music as it was marvel at seeing such odd enterprise.

I learned a lot that day in the spring of 1971. Fred Luigart told me that it was not immoral for people to have to leave a place, if the economy there would no longer support them. That I should read Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. That I should take econ courses. That their polls showed that it did not matter what happened in Knott County because not enough Kentuckians opposed strip mining. That he smoked Chesterfield. That he could wait and leave his office in downtown Lexington at 5:30 and get home the same time that he would if he had left at 5, because of the traffic.

He asked me, "How many towns will there be in east Kentucky in the year 2000?" I was completely flummoxed by the question. He answered for me, "one, Pikeville" (where they planned to reroute the river and build infrastructure to oversee the coal business). He said, "possibly two, Harlan" (the next largest mining center). And then he offered, "and an outside chance, Hazard" (I think he said this because I was looking forlorn on news that my hometown was to be disappeared and I had no moral recourse).

He said that in the year 2000 the Appalachian end of the state would be completely under water. They had invented a process for converting coal into gas underground, piping it to the surface, and taking it out on barges. That in the future there may be some business opportunities in recreation (like renting boat docks and selling rods and reels and water ski ropes), but that for the most part the people in the hills would have to go somewhere else to find work. (That may have been the very moment I started hating Lexington. The city's traffic could snarl up from Boonesboro to Gravel Switch, and to this day I would pity no commuter.)

The Kentucky Coal Association also owned one of the first photocopiers around, a complicated Xerox machine that printed everything on onionskin. He let me go through the files and pick out whatever I wanted to copy. One of the documents I chose and sneaked into my stack was a note to Fred from John Breckinridge, the Kentucky Attorney General. It was the cover letter attached to his official opinion that the Knott County Fiscal Court had no jurisdiction to stop strip mining in their own county. The letter pointed out that Fred would like the opinion and suggested they go have lunch to discuss Breckinridge's candidacy for Lieutenant Governor. When Fred, who was operating the copier, came across that letter he read it, mused for a second, then said, "we better hang on to that."

There is nothing immoral about making a big plan. If Fred were still alive I would tell him that. Even a plan that displaces hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, sinks their broad vistas under cubic acres of water, and makes mineral extraction acceptable grounds for invoking eminent domain. As the song says, "You got to have a dream, if you don't have a dream, then how you going to have a dream come true?" (Had a dog that could play that on the piano.)

It may seem crazy now, but that plan to put us all under water got a lot of traction. You somehow could believe in a story that audacious, if it was whispered to you just right. Correspondingly there were several attempts in East Kentucky to build the series of connecting full submergence dams that Luigart talked about from Kingdom Come to Red River, and even after it came out that the coal gasification didn't work. (Turned out the gas would blow up before they got it to the surface. Luckily they discovered that before Hazard was submerged. Or blown up.) And for decades most of East Kentucky was functionally redlined from federal home loan programs. Perhaps that was just coincidence. But then again, who sends out the memo that says: "We no longer believe the story we've been telling you for the last couple of years, so now you're off the hook."

But in the absence of big plans our challenge remains. What do we tell ourselves? When it comes to a future for us here in the coalfields, what exactly can we make ourselves swallow? We can keep on saying that coal mining is the future. After all some people will get to fill those jobs as we extract what remains. And right up until it's all gone the industry will hire spokespeople to tell their neighbors that mining is our future forever and ever, amen. That is unless of course the state steps up and does that job as part of its subsidy package.

Or we can start telling ourselves that tourism is our ticket. Still that scenario may have been more believable, if we had left a few more broad mountain vistas in tact. It is true that the largest manmade constructions east of the Mississippi are here in the coalfields, but we may have been able to attract more visitors, if we had put up at least one Eiffel Tower or Space Needle or colossus of Lady Liberty playing a banjo, and not so many five mile long hollow fills where valleys and streams once stood.

We could tell ourselves that big business wants to come here and put in their state of the art manufacturing plants on the land we have prepared for them. After all what anyone who has flown over the region knows is that we have converted more hillside terrain into empty flattened industrial sites than has ever been attempted before, even imagined, in the history of man. And that story gets better because more excavation is on the way. We can say to ourselves, surely all that is holding back the Microsofts and the Googles and the General Motors from placing their newest campuses on some of our hundreds of thousands of previously mined acres is that the CEOs are trying to decide where to put the corner offices so they can get the most scenic views.

The only other story I can think of is that we tell ourselves that the future of the region depends on us, the people who have not been run out, washed away, or discouraged beyond all functionality. We could say we are determining our own destiny. Of course a happy ending to that story would depend on faith in local vim and enterprise and on making the best of what we have left. That would mean conserving the remaining mountains and streams, holding our political representatives accountable, making sure that the schools get better, demanding the best of ourselves and our kids, and not falling for the first bumper sticker promise we see. Right, who's going to believe that?

* **Rich Country, Rich Land, Poor People**, *The effect of coal endowment on income and local institutions in the United States*, by **John James Snidow**