

“Mother Earth” is our home, our only home, and therefore deserving of our respect, and indeed our veneration. Many believe that God created the Earth, while others believe that its creation is a mystery still unsolved. Either way, one must acknowledge that the Earth is our workplace, our garden, and our lifeline.

While the Earth nourishes and sustains us, we may, as the human species, destroy ourselves and take down other species with us, in a mindless quest for extracted resources such as coal. The Earth will survive, whether we do or not. The Earth may indeed “decide” to eliminate our rambunctious and destructive selves, in order to give “herself” the needed respite to renew and once again create life that may not prove so destructive. Yes, the Earth will survive. The real question is: will the human race survive as well?

Mother Nature appears cruel and capricious, as seen in the practice of animals devouring each other and plants being poisonous, not to mention volcanoes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes. This dynamic cycle of life and death is part of the mystery. We cannot survive without the taking of other life. Even vegans eat plants--another life form. But it is one thing to partake in this natural cycle that is as long as life itself; it is altogether different to wantonly obliterate vast swathes of land, wiping out whole communities, causing incalculable losses of plant and animal life, leaving illness, poverty and despair. And this is what mountaintop removal mining does.

When I witness the unjustifiable destruction of our home in the interest of “cheap energy,” I must question how “cheap” it really is. Does not the destruction of our mountains, our trees, our land, render any “savings” null and void? Is not the health of people and the welfare of future generations worth figuring into the equation? What can we answer when our grandchildren ask “why did you allow the destruction of the earth just to save a few dollars?” Why do we allow the government to subsidize the very industries that are destroying our home? The “cheap” energy, as compared to green renewable energy, is only cheap because of these subsidies and the many externalized costs that the industry evades. Why do we allow the few to rake in the profits at the expense of everyone else? Even these highly paid extractors are poisoning themselves and their children with their actions. It seems insane.

The Appalachian Mountains are the oldest mountain range in the world. During the age of glaciers, the ice pushed down to just north of my region in Virginia. This meant that after the ice retreated, it was our biological resources that re-seeded the majority of North America. Next to the Amazon Rainforest, Southern Appalachia is the most biologically diverse place on the planet. And mountaintop removal is destroying it, leaving areas that can only be described as barren moonscape.

Mountaintop removal, or MTR, is a radical form of coal mining in which entire mountains are literally blown up. First the trees are bulldozed, then the mountaintops are blown off. After the coal is extracted, the “waste” from the mountaintop is dumped into adjacent valleys, where it buries streams and causes water pollution. This practice also causes flooding, due to the loss of the trees; cracked home foundations, due to the blasting; and air pollution from rock and coal dust.

Recent health studies indicate that the people of Appalachian coal regions suffer from a markedly lower life expectancy than the rest of the country. My area of Virginia has some of the highest asthma rates around. There are pockets of lung cancer, including the illness of people who have never smoked.

Some say that God put the coal in the ground for humans to find and use. Others say that He put it in the ground to hide it from us. There is yet another theory: coal serves as the Earth's filter. When water passes through in-ground coal, the coal cleans the water and provides for the clear Appalachian streams. These streams feed into the water supply of a vast part of this nation. But what happens to filters as they are used? They collect dirt. Would you burn the filter from your car or house? Think of what that practice would release into your environment. My faith tells me that the true purpose of coal is to serve as Earth's filter. This is how it was placed and what it has been doing. By destroying our environment we not only damage ourselves, we disrespect the great gifts manifested around us. We must once again show respect for creation and the Earth that sustains us.

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