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Author(s): Maddie LaForge

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Coming Close to Appalachia: *A Theology of Kinship and Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*

Maddie LaForge

*Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

ABSTRACT: Mountaintop removal coal mining is a visible and destructive act of violence against the Appalachian land and people. The mountains are blown up in this process of coal extraction, devastating its land and citizens who inhabit it. Exploring how MTR coal mining was developed and perpetuated, it becomes clear that the problems run deeper than the practice itself. Overtime, we as a nation have crafted a narrative surrounding Appalachia that has distanced this land and community from the rest of the United States. Alienation cultivates a culture of indifference which allows for such injustice. Until we address the issue of separation, we will fail to raise the national consciousness necessary to end this destructive practice. The antidote to separation is coming closer. Christianity offers a theology of kinship to the struggle to end MTR coal mining. This theology draws upon liberation philosophy, social analysis and ethics, and biblical spirituality. Christian hope involves ethics and prophetic imagination. With this hope, the conclusion looks to groups already practicing a theology of kinship. These groups, envisioning sustainable communities, tell a new story of Appalachia. As the Catholic Committee of Appalachia says, “The telling takes us home.”

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A Sigh of Lament

I looked up from my small spot in the garden and watched the smoke rise from the next mountain ridge. The smoke seemed so close...it couldn't possibly be real. But the smoke was there, invading the bright, green hills,

spiraling upward from its violent rupture. Helpless in the face of such tragedy, I could only release a sigh of lament. What brought a city girl to her knees in that garden? What moved my heart to break for the Appalachian Mountains?

These mountains invited me
to stand in her hollows
to touch her soil
to listen to her streams
to breathe in her fresh air
to wonder with the clouds
And awe at the stars¹

The Appalachian Mountains invited me in and welcomed me home to the web of life.² I came closer to the Appalachian land and people, and I began to understand what Pope Francis reiterates in *Laudato Si*: “everything is interconnected.”³ One month, just a moment of encounter, cultivated a lasting kinship with Appalachia so that I now understand that this community is living under oppression. The United States is sacrificing the Appalachian land and people in order to uphold the pervasive technocratic paradigm.⁴ We as a nation have created a narrative about Appalachia which has distanced this land and people. Thus, we permit mountaintop removal coal mining, one of the most visible and destructive methods of violence committed against this region. As a collective nation, we fail to acknowledge this injustice.

Saving this community requires a new national consciousness which values the life and dignity of the Appalachian land and people. A national

¹ Poem is an original work by the author of the article.

² Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *This Land is Home to Me* (1975) & *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995) (Spencer, WV: The Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2007).

³ Francis, *Laudato Si: Encyclical on Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 70, 138, 240.

⁴ In 106-114 of *Laudato Si*, Francis elaborates on a working definition of the technocratic paradigm. He begins, “The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.” Francis’s definition builds on Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, which discussed how a “technocratic cultural perspective” threatens humans as meaning-making and truth-seeking creatures in 70.

conversion is necessary to make lasting changes in political, legal, and economic policies which enable mountaintop removal (MTR) coal mining. I propose that a theology of kinship can bring about such a conversion. The following study examines the history of Appalachia and MTR coal mining in order to show root causes of the problem, especially a particular technocratic narrative. The issue is not just the method of coal extraction itself; MTR coal mining cannot simply be replaced with another practice. The problem is one of distance; we as a nation have become estranged from our land and fellow citizens. A theology of kinship encourages the socio-cultural shift required to form sustainable communities. It also offers a prophetic vision to the MTR struggle rooted in Christian spirituality. Creating this vision involves listening and truth telling, which we can cultivate through the practice of storytelling. Looking to the future, we find hope in the possibility of creating sustainable communities, and we look to those who are already living in the spirit of kinship for guidance.

What is Mountaintop Removal?

Quite simply, we as a nation have waged war on the Appalachian land and its inhabitants. Dropping large quantities of explosives on another country would be considered an act of warfare.⁵ The process of mountaintop removal coal mining involves clearing all vegetation, using explosives to remove all earth, and exposing the coal seam. Then, machinery dumps all the vegetation and earth (“overburden”) into nearby valleys (“valley fill”) or slurry impoundments (where wastewater from the process is stored). Mining and hauling machines remove all coal and surrounding non-coal materials (“spoil”). The coal and spoil are taken to a processing facility.

After the mining process, the mountain is to be returned to its “approximate original contour” (AOC). However, the AOC provision of the Surface Mining and Control Reclamation Act (SMCR) can be circumvented if companies offer an economic alternative. Rather than restoring the land,

⁵ Kyle T. Kramer, “Though the Mountains May Fall: In Appalachia, the Coal Industry Thrives on Stripping the Landscape—and People’s Livelihoods,” *U.S. Catholic*, 77, no. 4 (2012): 12–16.

developers build golf courses, shopping malls, or prisons.⁶ The land that is restored does not look the same. The plateaus are often reseeded with non-native grass.⁷ There is little consideration for the biodiversity of the region or the effects of land flattening and topsoil removal.⁸ Surface mining alters the landscape so that it would take hundreds (if not thousands) of years for the earth, vegetation, and wildlife to return to its original state.

The effects to the mining site alone do not consider the damage done by the overburden dumps. Surrounding valleys and streams are filled with rocks and slurry. The water sources that are not filled are turned toxic through the mining process. Bombing the mountains exposes toxic chemicals like methane and arsenic that lie dormant deep within the rocks. Removing all vegetation and topsoil makes the land prone to mudslides and flooding. We are changing the physical landscape of our country by flattening one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world and destroying the second-most biodiverse region of the United States. In doing so, we are making the land uninhabitable for all wildlife and people.

The people living in what were once self-sustaining farmlands are now forced to move because their drinking water (if available) is toxic and the air is full of dust and debris.⁹ The people of Appalachia live in danger of mudslides, flooding, loose boulders, and chemical spills. In 1972, an earthen dam holding one hundred thirty-two million gallons of sludge (a by-product of coal processing) collapsed. One hundred twenty-five West Virginia residents were killed. Local officials attributed the disaster to weather conditions and deemed it an “act of God” rather than fault of the company that made the dam.¹⁰ In 2004, a stray boulder rolled down from an A&G Coal surface mine in West Virginia and landed on a home in the valley below. Three-year-old Jeremy Davidson was crushed to death by that

⁶ Joseph Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 22.

⁷ Kramer, “Though the Mountains May Fall,” 1.

⁸ The biodiversity of the Appalachian region is extremely valuable to our country’s ecosystem and ability to live in this land. Losing the Appalachian biodiversity puts the United States at great environmental, economic and social risk. See Tom Tietenberg, *Environmental Economic and Policy*, 4th ed (New York: Pearson Education, 2004).

⁹ Palmer, et al., “Mountaintop Mining Consequences,” *Science*, 327: 5962, (Jan 8, 2010): 148-149.

¹⁰ Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*, 20.

boulder while sleeping in his bed. A&G Coal was fined \$15,000.¹¹ These are the stories the American public so often forgets to tell as the debates rage on over politics, jobs, oil dependency, and climate change.

These are the stories we cannot forget to tell as the demand for coal and natural gas is increasing.¹² Burning coal is a major source of electricity in the United States. Politicians champion local energy sources as ways to decrease US dependency on foreign oil. They cite natural oil and gas obtained through fracking as a “cleaner, safer source of energy, perhaps as a ‘transitional fuel.’”¹³ Finally, politicians suggest that these methods can provide jobs to a region of the United States that suffers from unemployment. Since the discovery of coal, mining has become part of the Appalachian identity so that now many view oppositions of MTR as threatening to the local economy and life-line. Pro-MTR locals worry, “Without mining, how will I feed my kids?” However, *Public Health Reports* states, “The human costs of the Appalachian coal mining economy outweigh its economic benefits.”¹⁴ In addition to economic value, the “jobs versus the environment” discussion also involves ethical values of place and identity. Underlying those values are questions of what makes a place valuable, what is considered good, dignified work, and what constitutes authentic Appalachian culture.¹⁵ We have arrived at a point where we as a nation are attacking a part of our country, our own people and land, and many of the people living in that land believe these destructive practices must continue.

How Did We Get Here?

Appalachia was not always poor. As a tremendously biodiverse region rich in natural resources, this is good land for self-subsisting, agrarian-based communities. Indeed, these communities did exist (albeit not always

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² The Appalachian Mountains are also a leading source of natural gas in the United States. Natural gas is obtained through an equally (if not more) destructive process called hydraulic fracturing or “fracking.” *This Land is Home to Me*, 19.

¹³ People’s Pastoral, *The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us*. (Spencer, WV: The Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2015), 19.

¹⁴ Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*, 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

peacefully). Besides the original Native Americans, other groups who moved into Appalachia included the Swedish in 1638 and the Scots-Irish in 1715.¹⁶ These groups were fierce woodsmen who defended themselves from outsiders. Daniel Boone and other figures received mythic fame for conquering the Appalachian wilderness. This was prized land. Overtime, however, the narrative about Appalachia shifted. Appalachia was no longer desirable land. It was a “virgin wilderness” isolated from the rest of society.¹⁷ Descriptions of the people living in Appalachia also changed—from fierce mountaintop folk to backwards, ignorant “Hill-Billies.”¹⁸ A Hill-Billie was threatening because he was free from hierarchy and did not fit into the American capitalist system. Appalachia, a wild, isolated region, needed to be tamed. Its inhabitants, primitive, underdeveloped people, needed to fit into the capitalist model of progress the rest of the country was running on.

A series of laws in the 1760s to the 1780s brought Appalachia under federal control, dividing the land into states and townships. Hamilton aimed to bring administrative control to the region and fold Appalachia into the capitalist system. However, the self-sustaining farmers lived “off the grid.” They did not fit into the traditional stage theory of progress in which wealth is obtained through greater efficiency and division of labor. “Unlike capitalist firms, peasants have an acute sense of ‘enough’ and only exert themselves to attain it.”¹⁹ The production cycle begins and ends on the farm; there is no need to move beyond that. By taxing the farmers and introducing money, Hamilton put a monetary value on the farmers’ labor. Furthermore, he began changing the purpose of an ecological base. Whereas an ecological base was once meant to sustain a family or local community, under Hamilton’s vision (and that of the technocratic, Western notion of progress) the ecological base would generate money. It would be

¹⁶ Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), 87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ In 1900, a journalist for the *New York Times* described a person he had never seen before: “A Hill-Billie is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.” See Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

cultivated for full-time production.²⁰ Thus began the precedent for viewing the wilderness as property.²¹

The industrialization of the mountains extended and deepened the process of capitalist development. Lumber and coal companies monetized more than a portion of the farmers' labor. The companies sought to separate the people from the land altogether. The farmers' labor was worth a certain dollar amount, and his labor was disconnected from his farm. As demand for coal increased, especially with the Industrial Revolution, production soared. In the second half of the 19th century, farmers lost their land to lumber and coal companies. "During a comparatively few years nearly the whole population which originally earned its living from the ground has been pushed out from places of seclusion into a whirl of modern industry."²² Small farming communities turned into "coal country."

Coal camps came along with the mines. The move to coal camps meant a new life of dependency for the mountain people. Families had no choice but to live in small houses owned by the company. Workers were paid in tokens or coupons to the company store instead of United States currency. Wages were very low, and working conditions were dangerous. Labor unions were dissuaded, stigmatized, and even fought with violence. The miners and their families lived in structured indebtedness. The companies owned their land, their food, their work, their income, their house...and the companies could take it all away. Dorie Cope moved into a coal camp. She wrote, "Our isolation had ended. They had opened a door—a door we were forced to use as an exit from our ancestral homes. Then, after the exit, the door was closed to us. We were given visitors' rights to the land—to come and look, but not to stay."²³

The World Bank contends that poverty comes from economic isolation and that development brings peasants into a mutually beneficial relationship with the larger world. However, poverty can also come from structured indebtedness, forced inclusion into the global economy, and

²⁰ Ibid., 121.

²¹ Ibid., 92.

²² Ibid., 174.

²³ Ibid.

dispossession.²⁴ The people living in Appalachia were not poor until they lost their ecological base. When the people lost possession of their land through forced entry into the capitalist system, they lost their self-sufficiency. The lives of the mountain people depended upon corporations, the US government, and the global economy. Poverty comes from lack of control over one's environment.

The collapse of coal in 1910 and the Great Depression devastated Appalachia. Industrial work returned after WWII, but the conditions of mining camps did not improve. Even by 1960, only about 45% of homes in West Virginia had running water. The narrative of mountain people "as a cynical, hardened and bitter a lot as can be imagined outside prison walls...illiterate, uncouth and hard-drinking" circulated throughout the United States.²⁵ In the 1960s, Appalachia became a focus of the War on Poverty. The Appalachia Regional Commission (ARC) was created in 1965. ARC had some success, but by the year 2000, unemployment rates were roughly the same as they were in 1970. The coal industry does not create a sustainable economy, especially because it destroys the ecological base.²⁶ Alleviating poverty in Appalachia must be a long-sighted venture, aimed at creating independent self-sustaining communities.

Surface mining and natural gas are the most recent manifestations of dominion over the Appalachian land and people. Between 1960 and 1978, strip-mined coal increased by almost 130%. Deep mine production fell by 42%.²⁷ The phenomena of landlessness continues as people are forced to sell the mineral rights to their land out of economic necessity. These mineral rights are de facto ownership, as corporations can elect to lay claim to the minerals whenever they choose.²⁸ The consolidation of ownership leads to even greater extraction of coal, oil and gas, meaning even further

²⁴ Ibid., 258.

²⁵ This description comes from *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, written in 1962 by Harry Caudill. The book was a major contributor to popular opinion of Appalachians in the 1960s. Ibid., 260.

²⁶ Ibid., 262.

²⁷ Charles Geisler, et. al., *Who Owns Appalachia? Landownership and Its Impact* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 120.

²⁸ Land is obtained by corporations through "broad form deeds." See Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*, 16.

destruction.²⁹ Stories of famous MTR protestors who defended their land include Dan Gibson, who single-handedly defended encroachment from coal and mining companies. Gibson became an active organizer against MTR and supported other families whose land was threatened by mining incursions.³⁰

As the movement to resist surface mining grew, protestors realized that their most powerful tool was storytelling. Activist Jeff Chapman-Crane said, “You just have to tell the truth out loud, there’s power in that.”³¹ Tracing Appalachia’s history, it is evident that a particular narrative about the region influenced its geographical and social history. The United States created a narrative that Appalachia is a wild, isolated region filled with ignorant people. Appalachia is property to be developed. The land is filled with resources and labor to extract them, both of which are valuable to the US economy. By labeling this community as “other,” we justify exploitation and oppression of this community.

This story is not unique to Appalachia. In many parts of the world, people have become estranged from the earth and from one another. Any theology that hopes to offer healing and liberation must consider this context. For Appalachia, healing and liberation means an end to mountaintop removal coal mining since it is destructive to the land, the local people, and other US citizens’ relationships to Appalachia. However, as we have seen with the advent of natural gas, a “transition fuel” will not save the mountains.³² One gas field resident writes, “Pennsylvania was affected by gas well drilling. My drinking water turned brown in January, and in April four calves were stillborn and six others had birth defects and died within hours of their birth. Their eyeballs were white or blue without pupil or iris. Their mothers had been drinking from a pond.”³³ There is no quick fix, and as seen in the nuances of the MTR debate, the roots of the conflict go deeper than the mining process itself. We must restore our

²⁹ Geisler, et. al., *Who Owns Appalachia?*, 115.

³⁰ Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³² In no. 175, *Laudato Si* explains how stop-gap methods to reduce greenhouses gases and pollution are insufficient. A more responsible approach is needed to address the problems of global warming and poverty. The real need is a cultural shift, not a replacement technology or legal policy.

³³ *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 19.

connection to the land and one another. We need to rediscover that “everything is interconnected.”³⁴ Saving Appalachia necessitates a cultural shift: moving from a culture of consumption to a culture of encounter. This involves a theology of kinship.

Theology of Kinship

Theology offers the MTR struggle something that politics and economics cannot: prophetic imagination.³⁵ Christian hope for the future is founded on our identity as God’s creation, philosophy of liberation, social analysis and ethics, and biblical spirituality. The prophets invite people to re-vision life and thus offer new stories.³⁶ Speaking truth to power involves ethics *and* imagination. The interpreters of the Christian (and specifically Catholic) tradition invite us to re-vision life so that we can imagine the possibility of a future without MTR...or any other destructive replacements. We see an end to MTR, but we also see sustainable communities. We hope for a future in which we all care for our common home because we as a society respect the reality that “we form one mutually interdependent community of life. We are all kin.”³⁷ Elizabeth Johnson explains that the ecological crisis calls for an attitude of kinship. Understanding human relationship with the earth as one of kinship recognizes the interconnectedness of all species and human dependence on the natural world.³⁸ If we as inhabitants of this world view other peoples and species as kin, that is related to us, we are compelled to respect the world and all of its inhabitants. We care for the earth and one another because we are family.

Quite simply, a theology of kinship means coming closer and getting to know one another. Face-to-face encounter is the very basis of the

³⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70, 138, 240.

³⁵ It could be said that Christian spirituality in general offers this gift to the struggle since the prophetic imagination comes from the Old Testament tradition and develops further through Jesus’s life, ministry, and death, documented in the New Testament.

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 23.

³⁷ Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 31.

³⁸ The kinship view differs from previously expounded models which she labels as kingship (domineering) and stewardship (caretakers). Ibid.

philosophy of liberation.³⁹ For me, that encounter was working alongside a farmer on her future home, an old farmhouse everyone else wanted to demolish. I listened to her story; I saw her hope for a home that respects the land and animals. For photojournalist Rasmussen, encounter was witnessing a coalminer underground; young people smoking drugs before a party; a retired war veteran living alone on his land; and a string band making music.⁴⁰ One cannot leave an encounter with the Other unchanged.⁴¹ Knowledge of injustice gained through lived experience compels us to see and act differently.

Therefore, the national conversion needed to stop MTR is gained through proximity. Coming closer to Appalachia and listening to people's stories is how we change the narrative. "We must hear first the cry of Appalachia's poor" begins the first Appalachian Pastoral Letter released by the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia.⁴² *This Land is Home to Me* (1975) is the first in a series of three prophetic pastorals from this region.⁴³ These documents demonstrate a Catholic response to the ecological and social crises manifested in Appalachia. In addition to the harsh realities and social analyses, the authors depict a spirituality of the hillfolk and reverence for life in the mountains. Thus, these documents serve as a means to reclaim the image of Appalachian culture and society. For the majority of the United States (and especially the Catholic community) that cannot or will not experience face-to-face encounter, these documents and others like them are essential to raising the national consciousness. Thus, the practice of storytelling empowers people to reclaim their narratives and serves as a tool in the fight to end MTR coal mining. The most recent pastoral, *The Telling Takes Us Home*, shares stories from coalfield residents, people who live in close proximity to extreme forms of mining like mountaintop removal. "We have heard story after story of the poisoning of water—streams, rivers, lakes, wells, and entire community water supplies. We have

³⁹ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Orbis Books, 1985), 17.

⁴⁰ Sarah Jones, "The War on Hillbillies," *New Republic* 248, no. 6 (June 2017): 42-49.

⁴¹ "The Other" in this case refers to a person who is marginalized, vulnerable, poor, or in some way oppressed and/or denied the right to participate in society.

⁴² *This Land is Home to Me*, 10.

⁴³ *At Home in the Web of Life* was released in 1995 by the bishops of Appalachia. *The Telling Takes Us Home* was published by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia in 2015.

seen communities where creeks run orange with acid, where faucets spit grey or brown liquid, and where mothers bathe their children in arsenic-laced water.”⁴⁴

By listening to the community, the authors found clear injustice and oppression of the Appalachian community. In *This Land is Home to Me*, the bishops identify the injustices of capitalist progress and development.⁴⁵ Fifty years later, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) calls our attention to the persistent injustice, “The story of Appalachia is the story of what many call a “sacrifice zone,” one of the many places of suffering in our world that re exploited for the sake of a global economy that seeks the “maximization of profit” at any cost and funnels wealth to those at the top.”⁴⁶ The Christian faith compels us to speak truth to injustice. It is necessary to name the oppression. We as a nation have legitimized (and encouraged) the practice of mountaintop removal coal mining. This practice kills the Appalachian community: the land and the people. We as a nation continue to distance ourselves from the injustice, failing to recognize our complicity in structural oppression. Our current socio-cultural, economic, and political practices are destructive to land and people. The United States is a society based on consumption and individualism, and we are noticing that the citizens are increasingly unhappy and unsatisfied.⁴⁷

We are not called to hide from evil. We must not shrink in fear of the magnitude of the problem. We cannot claim moral superiority and retreat to the high ground. In the face of the “culture of death,” the CCA and the larger body of Catholic Social Teaching call for a “culture of encounter.” The term “culture of death” first appears in *Evangelium Vitae* to describe any culture that denies solidarity. “This culture [culture of death] is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with

⁴⁴ *The Telling Takes Us Home* is a people’s pastoral from the Catholic Committee of Appalachia. Rather than releasing a third pastoral themselves, the bishops of Appalachia chose to highlight stories from the Appalachian community in their contribution to the body of Catholic Social Teaching. See page 13.

⁴⁵ *This Land is Home to Me*, 20.

⁴⁶ *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 25.

⁴⁷ *This Land is Home to Me*, 21.

efficiency.”⁴⁸ Pope Francis has expanded on the culture of death/life dichotomy by introducing a new phrase to the documented history of Catholic Social Teaching, “culture of encounter.” It appears in *Evangelii Gaudium* as part the art of accompaniment, but Francis has taken on the term as his signature phrase.⁴⁹ He explains that a culture of encounter means looking and listening. From this cultural outlook, we do not simply pass people by; we are moved to compassion, to draw near and to touch others.⁵⁰ This cultural conception builds from a scriptural-spiritual tradition of compassion and mercy. A culture of encounter includes other themes in Catholic Social Teaching, such as human dignity, right to participation, solidarity, a preferential option for the poor, and care for our common home. The antidote to the separation is coming closer, and the Catholic tradition offers this theology of kinship to the MTR struggle.

Coming from this spiritual and social tradition, the CCA specifically condemned mountaintop removal coal mining in 1998.⁵¹ The CCA also offers a prophetic vision of encounter for the Appalachian region and the rest of the United States. *The Telling Takes Us Home* explains that in order to change our course, we need to change our individual and collective stories.⁵² Our new story must listen deeply to other people, Earth, and ancient wisdom traditions. It must “help us view creation not as dead matter for humans to dominate but as a living unity of being within which we human beings must learn to take our place humbly.”⁵³ A theology of kinship recognizes the dignity, integrity, and sanctity of the Other (including Earth). Understanding Earth and her inhabitants as “a living unity of being”

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 12, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed April 22, 2019).

⁴⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 220, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed April 21, 2019). John L. Allen Jr., “Francis and the ‘Culture of Encounter,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 20, 2013, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-and-culture-encounter>.

⁵⁰ Francis, Morning Meditation “For a Culture of Encounter,” Tuesday, September 13, 2016. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html (accessed April 21, 2019).

⁵¹ Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “Resolution on Mountain Top Removal/Valley Fill Strip Mining,” September 1998. <https://ccappal.org/publications/statements-resolutions/resolution-on-mountaintop-removal> (accessed April 21, 2019).

⁵² *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 27.

⁵³ *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 30.

or an interconnected “web of life” means that violence against someone or something else hurts any other member, including myself...including God.⁵⁴

Throughout the Old Testament, we witness God’s anger and pain at damage done to the land and the people.⁵⁵ God is angered when people do not follow the law and when people break the covenant. But God is also saddened because breaking the covenant is a rupture in relationship. The chosen people break the bonds between them and God through idolatry. The chosen people break communal bonds when they commit acts of violence and treat the poor unjustly. Unfaithfulness to God manifests as a breakdown of relationships. The new law, revealed by and through Jesus in the New Testament, is also about relationships.⁵⁶ The incarnation physically demonstrated God’s presence in the world, and Christians believe that God is continuously and creatively alive and active in the world around us.

From the Christian perspective, the “living unity of being” is God’s body, and we are all part of the Body of Christ.⁵⁷ Damage done to one part of the body, then, is damage done to the whole.⁵⁸ Our faith tradition uniquely sees mountaintop removal coal mining “as the crucifixion of the very body of God, and as the ultimate sacrament of spiritual death and our estrangement from nature, God, and each other.”⁵⁹ MTR feeds our consumption habits, assists the oppression of the poor, and bombs the living presence of God in Earth. MTR is a “single crisis of community,” a breakdown of relationships.⁶⁰ Just as the prophets of old called the chosen people back to God, we too must return to our home in the web of life. To

⁵⁴ Over against the culture of death, and in the name of the culture of life, we insist that all people and the rest of nature form but a single and precious ecosystem, created by the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). *Act Home in the Web of Life*, 51.

⁵⁵ Examples: Sabbath, widow/stranger/orphan.

⁵⁶ When asked which the greatest law is, Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matt 22: 37-40 (NIV).

⁵⁷ St. Paul introduces the image of the Body of Christ for the Christian community in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (NIV).

⁵⁸ Sallie McFague uses the metaphor of the world as God’s body in her book, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 106. This metaphor is key for McFague and subsequent theologians who focus on eco-theology.

⁵⁹ *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 43.

⁶⁰ *At Home in the Web of Life*, 47.

come home, we need to make right our relationships: with God, with Earth, and with our sisters and brothers. There is an ethical imperative to a theology of kinship; there is also hope. It is with full faith and hope that we look to the future: the possibilities of encounter, growing in understanding of the Divine presence, and the good work already being done. We see ourselves coming closer.

Coming Closer: Raising a National Consciousness

Reviewing the story of Appalachia, it is clear that we are at a crossroads. MTR coal mining is simply unsustainable. There is not enough coal nor natural gas to maintain the United States' current consumption habits. As a nation, we can choose the unsustainable path in which Appalachia would be devastated by outside capital which, fueled by a consumerist society, turns the Appalachian community to waste. Or, we can choose the sustainable path, which encourages social and ecological cooperation and empowers the Appalachian people to build up authentic communities.⁶¹ This crossroads calls for *metanoia*. The situation demands a conversion of the United States, a raised national consciousness that would demand a halt to the corporate and governmental practices that support MTR coal mining. We need great political action, but as McFague articulates about the climate change crisis, we also need individual action. One without the other is incomplete and ineffective.⁶² The following section examines the possibility of a sustainable future in Appalachia, the local efforts to create sustainable communities, and the people who are raising the national consciousness.

Envisioning the future of Appalachia and imagining our place in it, we hope for an end to MTR coal mining and the creation of sustainable communities. In this way, Appalachia can be a model community, as John Rausch says,

Appalachia's residents need not and cannot attempt to leap from poverty to conspicuous consumption; they must aim for enough rather than excess. In this way Appalachia can become

⁶¹ *At Home in the Web of Life*, 66.

⁶² McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 157,

a model for the world of how to live within the limits of one's place. Within those limits new forms of spiritual and social abundance can be found, even with modest use of energy and natural resources.⁶³

Looking at Appalachia, past and present, it is clear that human dignity, community, and nature are intertwined. There is one, single web of life. It is also clear that in the current technocratic paradigm, sustainability is not a given. Sustainability simply means to put back what we take out—socially and ecologically.⁶⁴ In some spaces of Appalachia, we can see a shift from “more” to “enough.” People are turning away from coal and toward other sources of energy, adopting an attitude of conservation rather than consumption. Looking to sustainable agriculture, there are several community gardens and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, such as the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, Grow Appalachia, Grow Ohio Valley, and the Alderson Food Hub.⁶⁵ There are also several efforts for sustainable development, such as Step By Step and the Highland Education Project in West Virginia; Mountain Association for Community Economic Development in Kentucky; and the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee.⁶⁶ Grassroots groups are creating more sustainable practices in Appalachia and fostering kinship among communities by working together, sharing stories and participating in a common vision.

The bishops' proposition does not differ greatly from that of Steven Stoll. Stoll concludes *Ramp Hollow* with “The Commons Communities Act,” which promotes social ecology. Commons communities could be developed anywhere there is a sufficient ecological base to support a human community. In these communities, the environment is protected, and it is managed by the residents. Independence is key, and no nonresident or corporation is permitted to purchase property in the common territory.⁶⁷ However, Stoll recognizes that commons communities cannot be created

⁶³ Kramer, “Though the Mountains May Fall,” 12.

⁶⁴ *At Home in the Web of Life*, 78.

⁶⁵ *The Telling Takes Us Home*, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 272.

without respect for rural life. The United States needs a new national consciousness which recognizes the unjust narrative created about Appalachia, respects the ecological base, and values rural living. In addition to local action, those working to bring outsiders closer to Appalachia serve a vital role in the fight against MTR coal mining. Successful practices include activism and organizing, public prayer, and personal encounter.

The Bank Like Appalachia Matters (BLAM) campaign founded by the Philadelphia-based Earth Quakers group demonstrates how activism can encourage kinship. In 2010, the Earth Quakers group organized a direct-action campaign against PNC Bank, which was a primary funder of mountaintop removal coal mining. The group withdrew their investments and savings from PNC Bank and organized others to do the same. Protestors disrupted shareholders meetings and participated in sit-ins at PNC branch locations, including the branch in Washington DC during the Appalachia Rising event. Protesters piled dirt onto a tarp on the bank floor to symbolize the mountains affected by mountaintop removal. Through their organizing efforts, Quaker groups and individuals divested over \$3.6 million from PNC Bank. In 2015, PNC Bank decided to withdraw funding from all on-going mountaintop removal efforts.⁶⁸ The Earth Quakers' social justice work raised a consciousness of the destructiveness of MTR coal mining which converted individual and group practices as well as a major corporate policy.

Catholic priest John Rausch uses public prayer to create sacred spaces of healing, protest, and kinship. Liturgy can be a space for lament and hope. After a tragic flood in the tiny coal camp of McRoberts, Kentucky, people gathered together to listen to people's stories of suffering. Then, each person planted a flower in the mud, planting hope and compassion amidst catastrophe.⁶⁹ Rausch leads liturgies at the sites of surface mines. The people present lament with their sacred land and scatter wildflower seed, saying, "Let's take back the mountain for God and our community!"⁷⁰ These liturgical practices cultivate kinship with the land and the people living in the community. Listening to one another and

⁶⁸ Witt, *Religion and Resistance*, 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 13.

contact with the earth is an essential part of prayer. Rausch also leads mountaintop removal “witness tours,” pilgrimages of public protest to MTR coal mining which are publicized on YouTube.⁷¹ Rausch invites Catholics across the United States into the struggle, emphasizing the Catholic commitment to the preferential option for the poor. Through liturgy, he creates kinship among the Appalachian community. By sharing these practices through media (video or writing), Rausch also encourages a theology of kinship for the broader US audience. The Prayer on the Mountain encouraged prayers among all the faithful and raised the national consciousness.⁷²

Bethlehem Farm is a Catholic intentional community in West Virginia focused on sustainability. The farm participates in various community learning events that teach sustainable agriculture practices to farmers. As part of their Catholic mission, the farm offers home repair services to the local community. This work is largely accomplished through groups visiting for service trips. By inviting students and families to join their mission of living the gospel, Bethlehem Farm “transforms lives through service with the local community and the teaching of sustainable practices.”⁷³ Transformation happens through kinship—coming closer to the land through organic farming and coming closer to Appalachian people through community dinners, prayer services, and working side by side.

Coming closer is the commonality between these affective practices. Conversion comes from encounter, a point of contact with the Other. Great thinkers—sociologists, biologists, psychologists, and theologians—explain that the root cause of environmental and communal destruction is separation. A fictitious narrative has separated Appalachia from the United States, making its people characters and the mountains a distant land. This narrative sanctions extraction and exploitation that oppresses the land and people. However, Appalachia’s problems are the United States’ problems, albeit more extreme.⁷⁴ I did not see mountaintop removal coal mining as my problem. It took just a moment of encounter—

⁷¹ Kramer, “Though the Mountains May Fall,” 16.

⁷² Witt, *Religion and Resistance*, 87.

⁷³ Bethlehem Farm, “Welcome Home,” <http://bethlehemfarm.net/> (accessed April 26, 2019).

⁷⁴ Jones, “The War on Hillbillies,” 1.

smelling the rain, touching the dirt, and listening to the people—and I was changed.

We need legal and economic action to stop MTR coal mining. We need community-based sustainable practices to revive impoverished communities. However, to heal the wounds of separation and create lasting peace, we need a theology of kinship. We have forgotten that we belong to each other, so we must get to know one another. A theology of kinship offers a prophetic vision of a socio-cultural conversion and a message of hope and healing to Appalachia and the wider United States communities. Each step closer to Appalachia is a step along the way. A step is seeing the life and dignity of the land. Another is listening to truth telling. Let us choose to walk along the path of sustainability, adopting an attitude of “enough.” Let us choose to reimagine our world as one in which Earth is sacred and God’s people are cherished. Let’s take the next step to end MTR coal mining.

Maddie LaForge teaches social justice and moral issues at St. Francis High School in Mountain View, CA. She holds a Master of Divinity from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, CA. Her areas of interest are Christian social ethics and pastoral theology. Maddie also holds a Bachelor of Science from Spring Hill College in Mobile, AL, where she majored in psychology and theology.

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