

Holy Discomfort: Counting the Cost of Fossil Fuels

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How much do fossil fuels really cost us? We feel pinched at the pump, we complain about our electric bill, and we shudder at oil-soaked pelicans on TV. The human and environmental costs, though, sometimes escape us until we can put a face on them. I did just that in the summer of 2009, when my church sent a mission group to repair homes in East Tennessee, homes on land that often went back several proud generations.

For someone from the flat topography of northern Indiana, the claustrophobia-inducing, ancient mountains of East Tennessee awed me. Although they were once as steep as the Rockies, time and weather have worn them down and covered them with woods and kudzu (I told my kids not to stand still for too long or they'd be wrapped with kudzu, too!). Narrow roads disappeared into deep hollows or hair-pinned to the top of ridges, where the green hills undulated to the horizon. I was humbled by how much I had never understood about Appalachia and the people who live there, how much their mountains *mattered*, despite the isolation, grinding poverty, and dearth of opportunity.

One evening at the dinner table, I chatted with one of the mission staff, a soft-spoken woman who referred to us as “you’ns.”

“Do you have any experience with mountaintop removal mining?” I asked cautiously, not wanting to ruffle

any feathers, but curious to confirm the things I had been reading about this particularly destructive form of coal mining.

She sat with her hands folded and spoke quietly. “Oh, yes. They took a mountain down just down the road,” she said. “Where the mine is now. It’s terrible.” But, she added, “People got to have jobs.”

Later that week I walked down the road about a half-mile from our mission headquarters to the mine entrance, open to the sky, unusual in the deep shady crevices of Appalachia. It was the negative of a mountain, I thought, because there was just a very big hole in the ground. Bearing witness to the reality, I felt rage, sadness, and helpless guilt—a holy discomfort.

I have periods of holy discomfort, times when the Holy Spirit prods me to pay attention, to stretch a little, to lean into the pain enough to see my way through it. It’s similar to giving birth—a purposeful struggle, but a struggle nonetheless, one that requires untapped resolve and determination because there is no going back. “Face facts,” says the Lord. “You *have* to change. And I’m going to help you.” Squirming and complaining, I inch forward toward Christlikeness. It’s not a pretty picture.

As I speak to people from all walks of life, read the news, and listen to ongoing political discussions (which seem to discuss or resolve very little), I sense a holy discomfort. With the

latest tragedies related to mining and drilling, more than ever we are faced with the realities of fossil fuels. They are not only non-renewable—once they’re gone, they’re gone—but using them for energy is an increasing burden on the environment and people. We have to face facts: recovering fossil fuels fouls our own backyard (literally, for the people in Appalachia). While such industries do provide jobs, those jobs often endanger people’s lives, destroy their health, and rarely provide long-term solutions to poverty. Protecting fossil fuels requires our government to spend trillions of dollars on military strategies that also endanger lives and consume valuable resources, while we allow state lotteries to fund our children’s educations. Is this the best we can do?

Because we are so dependent on fossil fuels, they will continue to power our lives, and we will pay the cost. Energy conservation can cut some of that cost—we can be smarter about the energy we use. And conservation is exponential: the more people do it, the more energy we save. However, my own discomfort comes from believing that we are better than this, that we can find solutions.

Next month we’ll look at alternative fuels and try to determine how close we are to leaving fossil fuels behind. Because mountains—and people—matter. ■

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