The Mountain Vision

The Quarterly Publication of Christians For The Mountains

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TRUST and HOPE

The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

The theme of this our third Mountain Vision issue is trust and hope. Christians For The Mountains (CFTM) is a ministry that reaches into the dark situations where God’s created earth and inhabitants are defiled and destroyed. Our going is tough. We look for glimmers of light at the end of the long dark tunnels we find ourselves in. Unless the flame of hope lights our way, we can get lost in cynicism and despair.

Over the past three years, CFTM has had the privilege of working alongside 200 student volunteers from over 20 Christian-based colleges. These students, most of them in the 20-year old range, did not spend their March spring breaks on Florida beaches or with their families, but instead traveled to central Appalachia to conduct health research in mountaintop removal communities. The studies in West Virginia (2011) and Kentucky (2012) have now been peer-reviewed and published in health journals, while the study in SW Virginia last March is still being analyzed. Our student volunteers not only perform valuable research, but their own lives are powerfully shaped for their own futures. Being with these vibrant, intelligent, Christ-serving students who have hearts for service rekindles hope in my colleagues and me.

In this issue we feature three inspirational stories written by volunteers at our Virginia health research project last March that will inspire hope in you our readers (pages 4, 5, 7). We also include a description of our stepped-up project plan on page 15, and an invitation for your financial support on page 3. All new income that CFTM receives for the next 6 months will go toward the 2014 health project.

What’s inside:

Don’t Give Up Hope! (Editorial) 2 Agrarian Reading of the Bible (book review) 6 The OVEC Story 13
CFTM’s Steering Committee and Staff 2 Why Am I Here? (by Anne Brock) 7 Toward an Ethic of the Seas (by Allen Johnson) 14
Join CFTM in Supporting Health Research Project 3 ACHE Campaign News 8 Appalachian Community Health Project 2014 15
Volunteers Conduct Health Research in Appalachia 4 Sabbath (by Robert Sage Russo) 9 Quotes, Scriptures, Songs, and Poems 16
When Words Grow Legs (by Alex Gerrish) 4 Gospel-Driven Agriculture (by Sage Russo) 10
Returning and Restoring Justice (by Allyson Green) 5 Sabbath Liberation (24/6 book review) 12

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“Don’t give up hope!” (2 Corinthians 4:16)
Persist in Hope!  
by Allen Johnson, Editor

In October 2004 the Boston Red Sox baseball team was down to its final inning facing the best pitcher in baseball and had already lost all three of their previous best of seven games to the New York Yankees vying for the American League championship. Losing this game would mean another lost chance to advance to and win a World Series, a feat that had eluded the Red Sox for 86 long years. Many Red Sox fans turned off their radios and televisions rather than bear the expected coming loss. Yet miraculously, so it seems, the Red Sox tied and then went on to win the game in extra innings. They then won the next three games to propel them to the World Series which they then won in four straight games.

Persist in Hope!

One of my favorite Bible stories is found in II Kings 7. The city is under siege by Aramaean enemy forces. People are so starved that a child is even cooked and eaten. Meanwhile, four outcast lepers outside the city gate face a dilemma. Stay and die for sure, or risk going into the enemy camp most likely to die but who knows, maybe live? And so at dusk the lepers go into the enemy camp to learn that God had stirred up a great noise to cause the Aramaens to panic and flee. The lepers find food in great abundance, stuff themselves full, and then take the great news to share with their suffering city.

Persist in Hope!

Hope is crucial. I struggle to write this column on hope, for words come hard. Yet I know that hope is basic to life. And just to be clear, I’m not talking about wishing for this or that like, “I hope the home team wins tonight’s ballgame,” or “I hope the weather is nice for our picnic this evening.”

Instead I’m talking about “hoping against hope” that disastrous climate change will be averted, or hoping on a regional scale that decaying, worn-out communities in Appalachia will revive. Hope “keeps on keepin’ on” even when the darkness of desolation closes in. Hope is a youth gathering up five smooth stones for his sling to confront a Goliath. Hope is Jesus desperatly crying out from a cross, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me!’ when all appears lost (but then a few days later—Resurrection).

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1)

In the Bible, Hebrews chapter 11 lists numerous accounts of faith in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and others are applauded for their faith. Verse 6 says that “it is impossible to please God without faith.” But as verse 1 points out, faith is inextricably intertwined with hope. Hope fuels the engine of faith.

There are heroic people who have battled to end mountaintop removal for two decades. A few battles are won from time to time, such as the building of a new Marsh Fork Elementary School to replace the old one that was situated adjacent to a coal preparation plant. Yet each day 5.5 million pounds of explosives detonate in central Appalachia toppling mountains and spewing toxic pollutants into the lungs of nearby inhabitants. King Coal continues its rule over state policymakers. The region’s quality-of-life indices continue to be rock bottom nationally. Do we “give up” or “get up?” The answer depends upon whether our candlelight of hope stays lit.

If I’m asked what is the most important ministry of Christians For The Mountains, I’m likely to say, “To keep hope alive.” Our hope is in God, a hope that God’s righteousness will prevail, a hope that God’s encompassing love will indeed overcome evil. Such a hope is a costly hope, for that hope can keep fired bright only by a corresponding faith that puts our hands, feet, minds, and resources to work. That, my friends, is a faith that wins God’s victory, because that is a faith that pleases God.

Persist in Hope!
PLEASE PARTNER WITH THE 2014 APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY HEALTH PROJECT
Your Contribution is very much needed!
Any and all new donations CFTM receives through May 2014 will be applied to the ACHSP.

Peter Illyn with Students in Floyd County, KY in 2012

What Will The Money Be Used For?

This project will cost over $100,000. Much of this money has been raised through the generosity of Civil Society Institute, The One Foundation, and partner organizations such as OVEC. However, the importance of this project leads CFTM to dedicate our next six-months fundraising to this project.

We anticipate 200 student volunteers during 4 weeks of spring breaks in March and two weeks during May. The student volunteers will pay a portion of expenses. They participate in cooking the meals, cleanup, and chores as needed.

• Van rental and fuel costs
• Short-term staff and intern expenses to provide logistical support and April work
• Equipment and supplies to conduct the surveys
• Lodging and food

For details, see page 15, and/or contact allen@christiansforthemountains.org

OUR INVITATION

This project is life-changing! Students come down to help out with community health research and go back to their college campuses fired-up in their faith to God and commitment to serve. Being around these talented, servant-hearted young people renews my own hope, too, as I see God powerfully at work in this rising generation. And yet there is much more, since the research data these volunteers gather is very useful in probing into the causes of why community health in central Appalachia is rock-bottom in the nation. This research can lead toward ways to save lives and improve life quality for the people living in this region. This project is an investment in the future of our Christian youth as well as an investment in the future well-being of central Appalachia.

Please do not take this as pressure on you to give to this effort. We are very aware that there are many worthy and needful causes to contribute to. Whether or not God leads you to donate to this project, your prayers will be valuable. Thank you. —— Allen Johnson

Student-led devotionals outside their lodging at Natural Tunnel State Park during the March 2013 health project.

Please Join Together With Us

Name _________________________________________________________________________

Circle if you would like your gift to be considered a membership as well.

Address _______________________________________________________________________

Individual   Family   Org

Senior   $15
Student   $15
Regular   $25   $35   $50
Associate $50   $75   $100
Patron    $100   $150  $200
Sponsor   $500   $700  $1000

City ________________________________________State __________________  Zip __________________

Phone ______________________ Email _____________________________________________________

Organization/School(s) ____________________________________________________________________

We welcome any other information you would like to share
(such as your faith; experience; skills; special interests; etc....use separate sheet)

Mail to: Christians For The Mountains   12664 Frost Road, Dunmore, WV 24934
[Note: This form is not necessary. We welcome pertinent info. Our web online form is also available.]

CFTM has 501(c)3 nonprofit tax exempt status through a partnership with World Stewardship Institute. 887 Sebastopol Rd Ste A, Santa Rosa, California 95407-6828. Contact Person is Fred Krueger. Telephone 707-573-3161.

Your donations are tax deductible. Thank you for prayer support.
Editor's Note: College students have volunteered on their spring breaks as health researchers for the past three consecutive years. Restoring Eden recruits and organizes the students. In 2013, approximately 100 students were trained and sent door-to-door to gather personal health data in southwest Virginia. Christians For The Mountains and Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards provided logistical support. These studies are being utilized by researcher Dr. Michael Hendryx to determine the quality of community health in regions with heavy mountaintop removal mining. The following students offer reflections.

Plans are underway for expanded research in March through May, 2014, utilizing student surveyors. Students or others who can volunteer one or more weeks during this time period can contact Restoring Eden at peter@restoringeden.org and copy allen@christiansforthemountain.org.

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When Words Grow Legs

By Alex Gerrish

Words are powerful tools. They have the ability to destroy or create, to condemn or affirm, to divide or to compromise. In the world of activism, the threading together of words is pivotal. Who is your audience? What is your message? How will you lovingly embolden others to support your cause? Often we get caught in the same recited spiel and statistics, hoping that somehow if we speak with enough conviction we will convince our listeners to join us. Yet every once in a while we stumble upon a moment that embodies what all those words have tirelessly tried to convey. I faced one of those moments during the Appalachian Community Health Survey Project this past March.

Midweek we drove into a ‘holler’ (for those new to mountain lingo, it’s a hollow, a rising valley between two mountains) that was situated within very close proximity to two mountaintop removal coal mine operations. After surveying an endearing older gentleman with aged lungs and a family full of cancer, and a soot-faced, coal-mining, father of three a few houses down, my partner and I walked up to knock on the next door. A young woman answered, with a wailing infant in the background.

She informed us that her two-year-old son had a heart defect and gets fussy around new people, so it would be better to come back another time.

"Now’s not a good time, I’m trying to get my son down for a nap" she said. “Well it will just take a couple minutes, and it’s really important work” (our feeble attempt at persuasion). She informed us that her two-year-old son had a heart defect and gets fussy around new people, so it would be better to come back another time.

We thanked her and went on our way. A couple days later we returned to the same holler to administer surveys to the remaining houses on the block. When my partner and I approached the last house, an elderly woman came to the door. The first thing I noticed was her tear-stained blouse.

“Good morning, ma’am, we are Christian college students conducting health surveys in your community. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions?” Her voice wavered as she responded, “I’m sorry, now is not a good time, my two-year old grandson passed away a couple days ago.” She continued, explaining that he had a heart defect and when his mother put him down for a nap two days before, he never woke up.

“Now’s not a good time, I’m trying to get my son down for a nap” she said. “Well it will just take a couple minutes, and it’s really important work” (our feeble attempt at persuasion). She informed us that her two-year-old son had a heart defect and gets fussy around new people, so it would be better to come back another time.

I saw what firsthand health data had the potential to address. The persuasive elevator speeches I have long employed to ‘care for God’s creation’ gained a renovated fervor—a heartfelt experience to accompany the words. As a recent graduate of a Christian college, looking forward to what is to come, this reality captivates my thoughts and fuels my ever-growing desire to care for God’s ongoing restoration of His physical creation, and those systems and people who depend upon it, and I am so thankful.

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Students from the following schools have participated in the Appalachian Community Health Survey Project over the last three years:

- Bethel University (MN)
- Northwestern College (MN)
- St. Olaf College (MN)
- St. Catherine University (MN)
- Wheaton College (IL)
- Olivet Nazarene University (IL)
- Mercy College of Applied Sciences (IA)
- Dordt College (IA)
- Calvin College (MI)
- Hope College (MI)
- University of Michigan (MI)
- Anderson University (IN)
- Case Western Reserve University (OH)
- Malone University (OH)
- Geneva College (PA)
- Messiah College (PA)
- Carson-Newman College (TN)
- Lipscomb University (TN)
- University of the South – Sewanee (TN)
- Sanford University (AL)
- University of Portland (OR)
Returning and Restoring Justice  by Allyson Green

This year’s spring break was a lesson in returning for me. I signed up to join Restoring Eden’s Appalachian Community Health Survey Project knowing that I would be collecting important health data that would ultimately contribute to a better understanding of health disparities in Appalachia. I knew I would hear lots of stories from residents along the way. But what I didn’t know was that those stories would come from residents of Wise County, Virginia—a county I lived in for a year right after college.

The dominant industry in Wise County, like many others in Appalachia, is coal mining, and as the coal becomes harder and harder to get through traditional underground methods, companies are turning to mountain-top removal mining. This literally means what you might imagine just from the name—the top of a mountain is removed, the excess rock/soil/trees are pushed into a valley, and the coal is dug out using gigantic machinery. Those tops of mountains are not only home to some of the most diverse forests in the world, but they have been home to people for centuries. When a mountain disappears, so does the history attached to that mountain—the folklore, the childhood adventures, the hidden cemeteries, the food gathered each spring, and most of all the beauty of God’s creation displayed so elegantly in the peaks and curves of each mountain.

When I left Wise County four years ago, concerned residents were just starting the fight against a permit to mine one of the last standing ridges in one area of the county. I’ve kept up on the news a bit since leaving, but I was not prepared to see just how much land had been mined in that short time period. The ridge that resident are fighting for, currently still standing thanks to their efforts, is surrounded both by mines and by small communities. It’s these communities that we visited during spring break, going door to door in the cold, rain, and snow, and asking for a few minute of their time and a few breaths of air to measure self-reported health status and lung capacity. We were met with friendly faces and suspicious looks, welcoming words and pleas to leave, a bowl of soup and barking dogs. Through these varied interactions, we managed to collect some data and some stories that we all shared each evening as we recovered from the events of the day and reflected on these experiences together.

“We” here means the staff from Restoring Eden, a few community members and activists, 16 undergrads from Christian colleges, three fellow grad students from U of M, and me. Because all the students came from different academic and faith backgrounds—social work to public health to environmental studies, and from Nazarene to CRC—we all brought unique perspectives to our experiences. Having been steeped in the language of creation care, the science of ecological and human health, and the realities of injustices here and abroad over the past eight years or so, I think I had forgotten what it’s like to be challenged in my faith and world view when faced with the realities of a broken world. I know why taking care of the earth is both a matter of faith, of health, and of responsible citizenship, but it took time to make those connections. I can’t expect those connections to be instantly obvious to other people just by saying, “Hey, this is God’s creation that we are called to care for; that we as humans are intrinsically dependent upon, and that we as humans are also destroying for the sake of progress that is harming us—some more than others—and dismantling the ecological systems that are in place to keep the earth in balance.” That sentence is perfectly logical to me, but I know that I made some claims that are not always part of the dominant narrative of our society, either as Christians or as citizens.

I expect this to be a place of common ground to start from with fellow Christians, but my experiences with the Church have shown me this is not the case. I sometimes give up hope in trying to even start those kinds of conversations for fear of not being able to reach common ground in the end. In talking with and listening to everyone during this week, from students facing these issues for the very first time to seasoned veterans of the Creation Care movement, my hope was restored. When injustices become real, dialogue is what it takes to move from despair to purposeful response.

So, through the week, I found myself returning. Physically, to places where I once planted trees, collected bugs, tested streams, and danced to the tunes of the fiddle and the banjo. Mentally, to the places in my life where I began making the connections between faith, the environment, health, and injustice. And spiritually, to the pockets of cynicism left over from times when I have seen too little dialogue and too much inaction from the Church on issues like mountain-top removal where we should be at the forefront of working for restoration. And I returned to Michigan—to too much homework and a never-ending to-do list—with new friends and new stories, but maybe more importantly with a re-ignited longing for justice.

I have one more year of school, and it’s killing me because I am here in a classroom instead of out there joining conversations that help connect faith and action. In returning to Wise County, however, I was able to see not just how much the county has changed but how much I have grown in my own ability to articulate and understand why fighting to save one of the last standing ridges in the area is a matter of faith, of health, and of responsible citizenship. So, while I dove back into my work here, wishing I was still in Wise County joining the good work of people in Appalachia, I returned willing to start and continue the kinds of conversations that got me to where I am and willing to keep learning the skills that I will use one day when I join the real world again to work for the flourishing of all things—all people, all critters—wherever I am and wherever there is justice to restore.

Allyson Green is a graduate student at University of Michigan working on a joint MS in Environmental Justice and MPH in Environmental Health. She is also a graduate fellow of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7)
“Agriculture as currently practiced is the ‘largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity,’” according to a 2005 United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Multi-national corporations now control much of the world’s most essential human industry, food production, managed by technical specialists for maximum short-term profit rather than multi-generational families directly invested in long-term land use. Are the ancient texts of the Bible relevant?

Any serious Bible reader seeks understanding of the setting in which biblical texts were written. Rural advocate Wendell Berry gets right into the heart of this book’s exegetical framework in the third sentence of his forward. “Ellen Davis’s premise is that the message of the earliest prophetic writers of the Bible was distinctly agrarian.” The author argues that the milieu of the biblical era was that of an agricultural, land-based people, often in struggle with an exploitive urban ruling class. Lessons apply today.

Dr. Ellen Davis is currently Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School. She admits to no personal direct experience in rural living, being herself a “confirmed urbanite.” Yet her eagerness to better understand the ecological crisis led her to read rural-based authors including Wendell Berry. Indeed, Davis’s book can almost be read as a theological overlay to Wendell Berry, who is copiously quoted throughout her volume. Recognizing that most biblical scholars are fellow urbanites, Davis plunged into this agrarian perspective to answer the question, “How do these texts view the relationship between humans (or Israelites in particular) and the material sources of life as an essential aspect of living in the presence of God?”

I have read dozens of books on theology and biblical interpretation. This volume is one of my favorites. Not only does Davis’s agrarian approach bring out fresh insight into biblical passages, but she poses these passages as questions to modern industrial agricultural and economic practices. On Jeremiah 4:23-26, Davis comments, “When Jeremiah sees the fruitful land become baren, the mountains undone, the birds of heaven fled—these are sure signs of radical social failure; there is no justice in the seat of power.” This passage reminds Davis of her visit in 1996 to a mountaintop removal site in Kentucky. She comments, “Mountaintop removal is an emblematic act. Along with nuclear testing, this is the most dramatic rupture of the created order that North Americans have effected on our own continent.”

Why do humans defile the earth upon which our existence depends? The biblical prophets speak of the perverse, diseased imagination (or “leb” heart) which leads us to ignore the consequences of our human conceit. Davis discusses sloth (or acedia) as one of the seven deadly sins. Rather than defining sloth as laziness, Davis follows the lead of theologian Karl Barth that “sloth chiefly is a sin of commission, not omission; it evidences itself in foolishly assertive action.” In other words, human hubris is stupidity. Davis defines the stupidity and dissipation of sloth as “the bravado that purports to offer simple solutions to our most basic and persistent physical challenges.” Examples abound which boil down to human societies believing they can plunder, pollute, and abuse the earth’s ecosystem without consequence. The biblical prophets proclaim a heavy consequence to living outside God’s created order. “Sloth…is about a style of life and work that is pursued without regard for the enduring health of community and place. Sloth is a deadly sin, because it is opposed to love.”

In her forward to Norman Wirzba’s Essential Agrarian Reader, Barbara Kingsolver writes,

Most of our populace and all our leaders are participating in a mass hallucinatory fantasy in which the megatons of waste we dump in our rivers and bays are not poisoning the water, the hydrocarbons we pump into the air are not changing the climate, overfishing is not depleting the oceans, fossil fuels will never run out, wars that kill masses of civilization are an appropriate way to keep our hands on what’s left, we are not desperately overdrawn at the environmental bank, and really, the kids are all right.

Professor Davis lays out the fundamental principles of the early biblical prophets:

• Fertile soil is a gift and trust from God.
• Our relationship to the soil, demonstrated primarily in our practices of food production and consumption, is fundamental to every other aspect of human life;
• Misuse of the gift of land, including maltreatment of those who work the soil, will ultimately undo every political structure, no matter how sophisticated, stable, and powerful it appears to be.

The prophets Amos and Hosea “lived in a vigorous society that for some decades enjoyed considerable success in pursuing domestic and foreign policies that were enriching for the elite, but difficult and disastrous for small farmers…with the religious establishment endorsing the policies of the state.” Those prophets foresaw that exploitation of the land and people (which invariably twin together) would run aground in God’s judgment.

“Mountaintop removal is not for sale. It is not for sale to be destroyed.” Gibson viewed the land of his ancestors as noble traits. “Our mothers give us birth, the land gives us life.” Gibson viewed the land of his ancestors as “not for sale to be destroyed.” Gibson would ask, “What in your life is so precious that it is just not for sale?” From a biblical perspective, land is not a commodity for profit and exchange, as the moral story of King Ahab and Jezebel murderously manipulating for Naboth’s ancestral vineyard illustrates (1 Kings 21).

Ellen Davis has provided us an extraordinary gift in her exegetical study of biblical agrarianism. Whether we are rural or urban dwellers, her work reveals the attitude toward the land that God asks of us. Davis reminds us that our “primary human vocation is to maintain its [the land’s] fertility (Genesis 2:15).” The quality of our obedience to maintain and even enhance God’s life-giving ecosystem is finally determinative of everything else pertaining to life here on Earth.

In sharp contrast, a righteous agrarian society is grounded on principles that are best acquired through intimate, long-term coexistence with land and neighbors. Those that God trusts with the land, and blesses, are people who cultivate “thought and action rooted in love.” This love then bears forth in affection for the land, its human and non-human inhabitants, the heritage of its past, and its promise for the future. Wendell Berry describes this affectionate mind as “committed to the preservation of the good (no matter how small).” The good fruits borne from this affectionate mind include humility, thanksgiving, generosity in giving, confidence of faith, and praise to The Source of Life. Therefore the land gives life to its inhabitants generation after generation.

Leviticus is one of those books in the Bible that is quietly pushed aside as irrelevant for our era. Yet professor Davis brings out the strong ecological and justice grounding underlying the long lists of regulations. For starters, the Israelite people understood that land belonged to God, who authorized land allotments as gifts for families to tend and live upon. Land was not to be sold in perpetuity. Powerful interests who oppressed the people of the land, such as foreclosing on property due to indebtedness, were deemed as wicked. Righteous land ownership , according to a quote by Eric Freyfogle, was “one that respects the land and its mysteries, that honors healthy, enduring bonds between people and place, and that situates land users within a social order that links past to future.” The Sabbath was understood as a time of restraint and liberation, as land, animals, and workers had their times of rest. The Sabbath was “a renewing economy that memorializes God’s work in creation, in contrast to an industrial economy that exhausts workers and material goods…”

There are still rural people of Appalachia including folks in our towns and cities who hold many of these positive biblical principles of the land, even if unconsciously. Larry Gibson exemplified these noble traits. “Our mothers give us birth, the land gives us life.” Gibson viewed the land of his ancestors as “not for sale to be destroyed.” Gibson would ask, “What in your life is so precious that it is just not for sale?” From a biblical perspective, land is not a commodity for profit and exchange, as the moral story of King Ahab and Jezebel murderously manipulating for Naboth’s ancestral vineyard illustrates (1 Kings 21).

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Why Am I Here?   by Anne Brock

One of my least favorite sermons ever, from a dear pastor at a church my family previously attended, was about all of the awful things that could happen to us as Christians if we truly followed Jesus. It was not a jump-out-of-your-seat-and-cheer kind of sermon, not one to motivate you to be on Team Jesus, but rather one to leave you speechless, doubtful and dumbfounded.

"Why am I here?" I kept asking myself after leaving a relatively comfortable home to drive winding country roads in one of the poorest parts of Appalachia, chasing a story I knew most Americans don’t even care about. I was supposed to meet up with a crew of Christian college students conducting health surveys, but they were ahead of me by several hours. Mennonite Pastor Russo of Christians for the Mountains patiently gave me directions by phone, only later explaining that one of the roads I’d traveled alone was where a boulder had come crashing off the mountain a few years back, killing a young boy in his sleep.

When I did catch up with the students, they seemed more upbeat than I’d expected, given the gravity of their mission project. It was their task to knock on doors, often unwelcome, and inquire about the health of people living next to mountaintop removal mining. They were interlopers in a community where “We Support Coal” and “Coal Keeps the Lights On” were on everything from bumper stickers to the sign at the local pizza joint. They had paid their own way, volunteered their time, and faced rejection or ridicule to do the dusty work they felt Jesus was calling them to do.

I never heard a complaint from these bright-eyed, young adults. They were sometimes shaken up by what they witnessed. Learning that multiple family members in one house could be suffering from heart disease, breathing problems or cancer was a big dose of reality for them. They sensed that their task was important and holds hope for improving public health. The premise that people who live near MTR might get sicker than average Americans was not an abstraction to these volunteers. They prayed and cried over lives they’d only known briefly or heard about. They wondered why a local boy born with a heart defect was so sick he couldn’t survive through spring.

I was privileged to tell a tiny part of this heartbreaking Appalachian story, and I have a feeling the volunteers developed a much stronger Christian witness because of what they experienced. The health data they gathered is destined for a legacy of its own.

When the Rev. Peter Illyn invited me to come visit an MTR community a second time and get a good look at the guts of an MTR-blasted mountain for myself, it again prompted the question, “Why am I here?” This is not feel-good Team Jesus stuff. Just like the words from that pastor years ago, Rev. Illyn’s message at Restoring Eden is relevant and necessary, even if it is a hard sell for those wondering what it means to truly follow Christ.

FlourSackMama.com is a blog featuring original articles, green consumer resources, clean couponing and simple living tips with your busy family in mind.

Anne Brock asks, “What if we could all breathe clean air, drink safe water and eat healthy food without spending a fortune on it?”

“When will we get serious about preventing cancer and other terrible diseases, even if it means taking an honest look at everything in our environment?”

“Why not spend a moment each day thinking of someone who might follow decades later in our footsteps or of anything bigger than ourselves?”

Follow FlourSackMama.com for “Grandma’s Traditions” along with contemporary ideas.
Bo Webb’s written testimony to the US Senate Sub Committee on Public Lands, Forest, and Mining (Excerpts from Testimony in 2013)

I appreciate this opportunity to submit my written testimony to the Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining at its hearing to examine the current state of coal-generated electricity in U.S. power markets, and the challenges and opportunities the coal industry faces in the future.

I believe there needs to be an honest and transparent examination of the problems the coal industry faces in this 21st century.

As coal has become more expensive to extract in Appalachia, the coal industry, in order to compete in the market place has resorted to blasting entire mountains to ashes as a way to expose thin seams of coal previously thought untouchable. Unfortunately for we the people living near this type of mining activity (mountaintop removal) the pervasiveness of this endeavor has had dangerous negative effects on our health.

Cancer rates in MTR communities are nearly double those in non-MTR communities.

Birth defects are highly elevated in MTR communities while research clearly indicates increasing defect rates as MTR becomes more widespread. There are over 20 health studies now that should be raising red flags for anyone interested in the wellbeing of people living near MTR sites. However, rather than acknowledge the health science, our leaders have been deaf and mute, and the coal industry has embarked on a $15 million campaign to deny the scientific realities. As we are ignored and our pleas denied, our people suffer and die.

MTR provides very little of our nation’s electricity, it provides very few jobs; approximately 7000 jobs in West Virginia, the largest producer of MTR coal. Recent research shows excess death rates of 4000 people per year in counties that produce coal by the MTR method. Although at this time we cannot say MTR is the reason for these excess deaths, we can clearly say MTR is the most suspected cause of a myriad of human health disparities based upon ever growing scientific peer reviewed research that shows highly elevated levels of PAH toxins in our air and our garden soils. The United States Geological Survey has gone as far as to state that these toxins are not coming from an upwind coal fired power plant, they are not coming from someone burning wood or coal in their homes. They have the same exact signature as the blasted “overburden” on the MTR sites above our homes. We are breathing these toxins, they are in our garden soils. Much of these airborne toxins are ultra-fines of silica and aluminum. These are virus-sized particulates that enter the body and travel through the bloodstream to vital organs. In short, we are contaminated. I have been advised by United States Geological Survey scientists to not eat vegetables from my garden nor apples from my apple trees. We cannot allow this abuse of our citizen’s health nor our children’s health to continue for one more day. Yes, we need coal in the foreseeable future but we do not need mountain top removal coal, we cannot trade innocent lives for a few short term jobs, not in my America and hopefully not in the US Senate’s America.

Today, as we stand ready to launch missile strikes against Syria for using chemical weapons against their civilians killing at least 1300 of them. Yet here in our own country we are allowing innocent people to continue to be exposed to the dangerous fallout of mountaintop removal blasting toxins; ironic indeed. In discussing this with a few colleagues we further considered the question of how does the TNT force of MTR blasting compare to the TNT force of a cruise missile strike. According to the last available records I have from the Institute of the Makers of Explosives there is approximately 5 million pounds of ammonium nitrate/diesel fuel mix detonated per day on the average in WV and KY where MTR is most popular. This type of fuel mix explosive provides about 80 percent of the explosive force of TNT. With a cruise missile carrying a warhead of approximately 1,000 pounds of TNT, coal companies are detonating the equivalent of more than 4000 cruise missile strikes per day in WV and KY combined.

Any transparent and honest examination of the coal industry’s problems needs to include the negative impacts, the market realities, and depleting reserves, and not merely rehash the worn-out “war on coal” rhetoric. Otherwise, this will become simply another political feeding frenzy where the EPA and the citizens working to protect their health and homes are the bait.

Bo Webb is a sixth-generation resident of the Coal River Valley in West Virginia who lives directly beneath a massive 2000 acre mountaintop removal operation. Bo is a Vietnam War veteran, former president of the Coal River Mountain Watch, co-founder of Mountain Justice Summer, a leader of the Appalachia Rising protest on mountaintop removal in front of the White House, and a community member who helped move Marsh Fork Elementary School out from under a 2.8 billion gallon sludge dam. Bo was awarded the prestigious Purpose Prize in 2010. Bo Webb leads the Appalachian Community Health Emergency (ACHE) campaign.

HR 526, reintroduced Feb. 6, 2013 by Rep. John Yarmuth (D-KY) Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) and joined by 22 other original co-sponsors. Over 40 with more coming on.

Calls for a moratorium on new mountaintop removal permits, or expansions of existing permits.

Requires air and water monitoring at existing permitted MTR operations, to be reported to the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

HHS conducts a comprehensive health study in Appalachian MTR communities on health disparities.

Study is paid for by a one-time fee on MTR operators.

Secretary of HHS reports to Congress.

Please help with the ACHE Campaign!!! Financial and volunteer support are very much needed!!! www.ACHE.org
Sabbath – Rest and Restoration for the People and the Land

By Robert (Sage) Russo

The Sabbath was enacted by God at creation. “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Gen.2:1-3).

The Sabbath is a time to release us from thinking we need to do it all. It is a time to move away from the deceptive lie that plagues so many of us: that all production is simply our doing, by our strength. It is a time to rest and trust that God is still holding the world in His hands, and that we can trust in Him.

The Sabbath rest is not primarily a rule of what we're not supposed to do. Instead the Sabbath is an ordinance about what we are at liberty to do – relax. The religious rulers of first century Israel were so focused on abiding to every letter of the law they created a whole list of rules about what a person could not do. In doing so, they became enslaved to these new rules and missed the whole point of the Sabbath. Jesus corrected them many times in the Gospel accounts – most commonly concerning the right to care for others and bring healing to others on the Sabbath.

The ordinance of the Sabbath was given to the Israelites through Moses after they were liberated from Egypt and were making their way to the Promised Land to be formed as God's people. Because of the tendency for the Israelites to go back to the old ways of thinking and living in Egypt, God gave them new instructions to show them how to live in accordance with God's heart. This instruction concerning Sabbath rest is in direct contrast to living under slavery in Egypt and points them to the Kingdom of God. Instead of being enslaved to a production driven way of life, God decrees a day off once a week. In a way, you can say that God was the first union organizer by liberating the people out of slavery and guaranteeing them time off each week to live life as more than just a “worker.” Revealing the heart of God, the Sabbath wasn’t just for the Israelite people but for all the people in their household and in their land, including the foreigners, and even the livestock and the fields (Dt.5:12-15). This shows God's care for all God's creation. It also helps us recognize that all living beings from people to the land are gifts from God, and to think about how we can be a gift to them in mutual expressions of God's care for us all.

The Sabbath speaks to how God created us to be more than just machines for work. We were made to create, produce and enjoy the beauty of the world, turning our hearts to its Creator. When God rested at the end of the first week of creation, it wasn’t because of tiredness. Instead God rested to more fully appreciate all of the beauty of creation, enjoying how good it was.

If we are to follow God’s example, then we are to rest from our work one day of the week to enjoy and appreciate the fruit of our labors. But there is more. Life isn't all about us and what we have done, but is about God. Thus the Sabbath is a time to rest from working and appreciate all that God has done, all that God has made.

God knows that rest is about restoration. More than anything, the Sabbath is never intended as a burden but is always intended for healing and renewal. This is why Jesus said “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27).” It is rejuvenating for both our physical bodies and our minds to rest from thinking about the demands of work, as well as also for our spirits, giving us a time of restoration with God.

What a gift it is to relax and enjoy God’s wondrous work! But if we can no longer enjoy God’s creation something is wrong. Our participation with God has gotten off track. We are no longer co-laboring alongside God if we destroy what the Lord has created, if we overwork and abuse the people, animals, and land that God gifts us with.

How then do we look at a clear-cut forest or a mountain that has been decimated for coal extraction, or a buried stream, or land and waterways now filled with toxins as a result of our work week? What about people who have been worked so hard that one day a week of rest is hardly enough time to recover and to enjoy the goodness of God? Are we really living into the heart of the Sabbath if we continue to work people, livestock or the land to an extent that they may not recover? To do so would be abuse.

Yes, there is Sabbath rest for the land and the people. But since rest is about restoration, what would it be like for you, for us, to consider how we treat the people who labor for us, the livestock and also the land we work, and reshape our relationships with them; so there can be true rest and restoration enough to enjoy God, what God has made and is doing in our lives; and thus worshiping the liberating God by this practice of Sabbath that helps distinguish who God’s people are? May we revive this practice of Sabbath renewal as an expression of God's Kingdom here on earth today.

"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Dt. 5:15).
Gospel-Driven Agriculture: Gardening For The Glory Of God by Robert Sage Russo

Is gardening neutral in the Christian life? While I wouldn’t say that it is essential, I would say that it can be very beneficial. When farming or keeping a garden we get to experience God in a new way. In Genesis 2:15, we are told by God to “tend and keep” the garden (NKJV). In my experience, I sense I’m closer to God’s original design for us as people when co-laboring alongside God helping life flourish.

Gardening allows us to pay closer attention to the rhythms of the day and the seasons. We learn it is best to work in a garden in the early morning or evening when there is more shade. We see how God cares for all His creation, the flowers opening as the sun rises, and a season of fruit-bearing and a season of rest.

Keeping a garden gifts us in season with immediate tasty fresh food to eat for ourselves as well as to share with neighbors, along with surplus to can, freeze, or dry for the off season. We can also show our children where food really comes from and how God provides for all living creatures. Even more so, we learn how in the cycle of life all things have their place, even compost for the replenishment of the soil itself, thus teaching us the interconnectedness of all life (Psalm 104). We learn a growing appreciation for how clean water and soil is not just a political issue, but essential for life. What is put in the water and air directly effects our food and our health. As we see how some varieties of fruits, vegetables, and animals flourish more than others in different regions, gardening also gives us a deeper sense of place.

But more than anything, gardening allows us to spend time with God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, in a special way. As God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the day, so can we today as we labor alongside the One who makes the crops grow. As we carefully plant seeds and thin areas for more abundant growth, we pray over the fields and give thanks noticing the beauty of the fruit and crops that while we sweat for, He gives life to.

What Does This Have To Do With The Gospel?

Jesus taught the Gospel of the Kingdom of God many times using gardening/farming illustrations. We can learn these lessons more deeply as we engage in working the soil. Yet also the way we keep a garden or farm can have a lot to do with living out the gospel.

The Gospel is about how God’s son, Jesus came to earth born of a woman, under the law, as the new Adam, teaching us and living sinlessly, paying the price for our sins by dying on the cross and being resurrected to eternal life, so that we may have eternal life, justified, not by our work, but by his work, so even though we have broken the law of God, we are forgiven and redeemed by Christ. But the Gospel is about more than being forgiven. The Gospel is also about us living with God’s Spirit within us, and now fully reconciled to God, walking in close relationship with Him as His children, in His ways.

What does gardening as a Christian focused on living in the Kingdom of God look like?

In farming or whatever else we do when we’re focused on living a life that has been redeemed by Christ, we end up living a life that is really focused on living out God’s heart for the world and thus glorifying God in how we work and live.

The most basic aspect is a matter of orienting our hearts and minds toward God. With regard to gardening or land use, it also involves orienting ourselves with the land. Like the cross, we have to look at the vertical relationship and then the horizontal relationship. The land belongs to God, it is a gift from God and God is the first and chief gardener of the land. We belong to God and are given to the land as caretakers. We need to use the land, but in doing so, we are to take care of it, recognizing that the land does not belong to us but to God (Leviticus 25:23).

God’s Design Displayed In Eden

Since God planted the first garden we can look here for God’s gardening design.

Noah Sanders, a young farmer who recently released his first book, Born-Again Dirt, and writes a blog of the same title, points out that the Garden of Eden displayed three key elements – Beauty, Productivity, and Habitability.

The garden is a beautiful space abounding with diversity. There were many different types of plants from vegetables and fruits, to berries, shrubs and trees. Animals were not penned up separately but were integrated into the landscape.

Eden wasn’t just a production factory, for although it was extremely bountiful its purpose was larger. Eden provided food for all life, gifted humans with beauty, and was a place for them to dwell. There were no churches or temples then. The garden was where humans did everything, and it is there where they lived out their deep relationship with each other and God.

Looking at Eden, we can design our gardens to be a beautiful, diverse place to spend time with other people and with God. It can be a place where diverse plants and animal life work together producing the harvest and helping replenish and sustain each other, much like the permaculture methods are re-teaching us.

Sustainable And Productive

It can seem hard to be both sustainable and productive. However when we seek to do so, I believe we can practice honoring God, care for the land and animals, and help provide for our neighbors much more easily.

It’s all about walking in balance, which is a fine line. We can reforest the land, which is very sustainable for the land, yet we still need a certain level of farmable ground so we can all eat and have enough to go around. It is a prayerful balance between conservation and utilization. As Sanders reads the scripture he believes that “creation is beautiful in its natural state, but it can be even more productive in careful management and cultivation.” “Careful” being the key clause here. As we know “managing” of the land has often looked a lot like “manhandling” of the land instead. The first commands given to humankind is to “tend and care for the land” (Gen.2:15). Elements both of working the land, and caring for the land, which imply putting the motive of love and respect from your heart into practice, are seen early on in the Bible. When we don’t practice conservation, we are wasteful of the land and limit the richness of its life. Likewise, failure to try to increase productivity to meet real needs is also wasteful. Both elements must be present in true careful management, which is necessary when living off the land for generations. Again permaculture serves as model of trying to really live this practice.

The decree of the Sabbath plays an important piece in being both sustainable and productive. Sanders explains that the Sabbath calls us to see that “anything that has life that we put to work and manage for increased productivity needs to be recognized as a gift from God and thus given rest.” Even the land itself is a living being. “Then God said, ‘Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ And it was so. The land produced vegetation… And God saw that it was good” (Genesis.1:11-12 emphasis added).

The Sabbath reminds us that we have the freedom to allow the land, animals, people, yes even ourselves to rest, because God is our provider, and thus we are freed from a production driven, self-reliance anxiety.
Gospel-Driven Agriculture (continued from page 10)

Even in observing the Sabbath Year (every 7 years) God promises that the land will produce enough in the 6th year to last for 3 years (Leviticus 25)! The same is seen on a smaller but equally desperate scale while the Israelites are traveling through the desert eating the manna God provided. They were instructed to observe the Sabbath, and in order to do so, God would provide enough manna for them on the sixth day, for them to keep over and eat through the Sabbath day without any of it rotting (Exodus 16:22-25).

We can live out the Sabbath principle in basic ways in our farms and gardens today. Observing the weekly Sabbath Day is obvious, but on a larger scale we can maximize production efficiency by using smaller spaces, freeing up other spaces to rest, and rotating the crops yearly or periodically allowing the previously used plots to rest and be restored with compost, healthy cover crops or chickens. The same goes for our animals. We can see the wisdom of God showing us ways to practice healthy stewardship of production and conservation, of work and restoration. Only in harmonious balance is there true productivity and sustainability. Sanders notes that tending to the land in this way “is an investment” that will yield bountiful results for generations. It matters to invest in the land well.

The Prophets Call Us To Justice

Throughout the scriptures we hear a resounding call for justice ranging from just business practices to just relationships. Since God incessantly calls us to live in socially just ways in all aspects of our lives, it is natural that justice should also apply to how we farm and garden. Since the land is for the glory of God, the ways our farms and gardens affect others should also give glory to God. It boils down to producing only in just ways. This would obviously apply to the treatment of the people and the animals that are working the land with you, but it’s also much more. In examining our dependence on oil, and the wars and environmental pollution that our dependence on cheap oil generates, our use of oil becomes a matter of justice. For some Christians it has lead to a decision to do all their plowing by horses or mules. Others are not able to go that far, so they try to moderate the use of tractors and/or gas powered tillers for smaller plots along with other methods.

It can mean using local heirloom seeds and saving one’s seeds each year which invest in the local economy rather than purchasing seeds from large corporations or using genetically modified seeds. It can be refraining from chemical pesticides and herbicides in an effort to keep the creeks and waterways downstream clean and free from chemical contamination. And if we can, it can be planting an extra row or two of crops for needy hungry neighbors. Since food pantries and soup kitchens are filled with prepackaged food, any fresh food from a garden is a real treat. If you have the space, let a neighbor in need keep a small garden plot on your land. These are just a few things we can do to live out our farming and gardening practices in ways that can help show God’s heart by caring for our local and global neighbors.

Ultimately it is a matter of our hearts. We can do all the “right” practices but be about our own glorification instead of God’s glory. In Zimbabwe, the Christian organization Foundation for Farming is helping people farm with biblically-centered principles. People are using their land and energy much more efficiently and bringing in a vastly higher yield than before. At the same time the farmers are learning of Jesus and growing spiritually. One of the main principles they are putting in place is proper management – meaning doing things on time, with high standards, and with a conservation effort to not waste that is translating into a lot more compost and mulch. All good. However here in North America, people tend to be about everything being “perfect” including their gardens. Joel Salatin teaches that “good enough is perfect.” Why the difference? Because gardening and farming for God’s glory is rooted in where your heart is. Are our actions driven by pride, sloth, selfishness or are they rooted in walking close with God and giving God praise? While the farming practices we use matter, what matters even more is the motivation of our hearts. We can learn all the right things, but are we open for innovation from God, to give God the glory?

I asked Noah Sanders if there are other practices besides farming that have changed since he started on this God-glorifying approach with agriculture. Sanders responded, “Well it’s everything-ism. Once I realized that my agriculture needs to be rooted in a heart for Christ, everything needs to be rooted in a heart for Christ. In all different aspects, this is how our lives are to be integrated – flowing from the heart to follow Christ, walking close with Him and worshipping God. When our heart is right it becomes more and more natural. In our culture it’s hard not to define our day by how much we accomplished off our checklist. But even if we get a lot checked off the list, but weren’t walking close with God it’s an unsuccessful day. A successful day is a day walking close with God.”

Jesus speaking,” And what about the seed that fell on rocky ground? That is like the people who hear the teaching and quickly and gladly accept it. But they do not let the teaching go deep into their lives. They keep it only a short time. As soon as trouble or persecution comes because of the teaching they accepted, they give up.”

“And what about the seed that fell among the thorny weeds? That is like the people who hear the teaching but let worries about this life and love for money stop it from growing. So it does not produce a crop in their lives.”

“But what about the seed that fell on the good ground? That is like the people who hear the teaching and understand it. They grow and produce a good crop, sometimes 100 times more, sometimes 60 times more, and sometimes 30 times more.”

…Teaching of Jesus (Matthew 13:19-23)
Sabbath As Liberation: A Response To Matthew Sleeth's Book, 24/6 reviewed by Allen Johnson

“What are your favorite Bible passages?”

That’s a conversation church folk might chat about in social conversation. How people respond opens a door on their personalities, their world views, and keys to their own faith journey.

One of my responses would include Isaiah 58. This chapter of the Hebrew (OT) scriptures is a scathing indictment against a “bless me and mine” religion. In modern lingo, it might go like this. “Hey, God, we have built a beautiful church building. We have a wonderful choir. We pray, we fast, we hold weekly evening meetings. We pay our ministry staff well, and contribute extensively to the building fund. So why is God not responding to us?” Isaiah thunders back through the millennia, “Look, you serve your own interests while exploiting your workers. You are stingy to the poor, and ignore the afflicted. However, if you turn around your ways and help the needy, then the glory of God will fill you with deepest fulfillment.”

Often I would read Isaiah 58, that is, I’d read up through verse 12 and abruptly stop. The remaining verses tie in the requirement to delightfully observe the Sabbath in order to usher in the anointing glory of God. That part sounded ethnically outdated and the Sabbath in order to usher in the anointing glory of God. That part sounded ethnically outdated and legalistic to me, so I mentally took scissors and cut out verses 13 and 14.

Reading Matthew Sleeth’s book, 24/6: A Prescription For A Healthier, Happier Life, has awakened in me a hunger and newfound appreciation for the Sabbath. The title is revealing. We all know that 24/7 means “all the time.”

Sleeth was a practicing emergency room physician for many years who worked and lived life at a frenetic pace while living the high-consumption American dream lifestyle. In mid-life, wife Nancy and Matthew Sleeth had powerful conversions to Jesus that coincided with his observation that increasing numbers of his patients seemed to be suffering from environmental-related diseases. Responding to God’s call upon their lives, Matthew resigned his medical practice, they sold their sumptuous home, gave away half their possessions, and moved their family to Wilmore, Kentucky into a house smaller than their former garage. Within a year they had reduced their electric use and trash production by 90 percent and their fossil fuel use by two-thirds.

The Sleeths now serve through a ministry, Blessed Earth, that teaches living a low-consumption, energy efficient, and fulfilling lifestyle in loving service to God.

Through Christ’s life-changing transformation, the Sleeths are discovering the healing, regenerative gift of the Sabbath. Matthew admits that he continues at a fast, work-intensive pace. Yet taking a day of rest rejuvenates his body and spirit, reconnects him with family, friends, nature, and faith, and reorders his life. The Sleeths practice their Sabbath with preparations the evening before such as cleaning the house, cooking meals ahead, and clearing off anxieties and agendas. The Sleeths eagerly look forward to their Sabbaths. Their Sabbath is typically a Sunday in which they participate in a church service, then eat a meal with family or friends, then read, relax, take walks in nature, all within the context of attentiveness to God.

Matthew Sleeth suggests that creation is like a crescendo. At the beginning of the week God uses a few simple ingredients and cooks up the universe. By midweek God stocks the lakes with fish and fills the skies with birds. On the sixth day God forms Adam and Eve. Finally on the seventh day, God tops these marvelous events and REST is brought into being. Sabbath springs into life with a total ceasing of work. Yes, work is good, but the purpose of work is not more work. The purpose of work is to live and glorify God. One of the ways we do that best is by remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy.

Sleeth goes on with comparisons. Our physical bodies need time to heal when there has been an injury. The same is true in the spiritual realm and Sabbath rest is the way our souls recover from all our busyness.

In Sleeth’s experience, the Sabbath rest encourages thankfulness without the wakeup call of illness, loss or ruin. With a Sabbath rest God has our full attention weekly, so we do not need a disaster to grab us.

Finally, Sleeth says stopping one day a week to have a Sabbath rest allows our hearing of God to improve. The Sabbath is also a day to celebrate a God who makes time for us to be with him.

The author incorporates personal anecdotal stories and scripture to illustrate his key points. The writing style is lively, reads easily, and elicits a hunger in the reader to be a Sabbath-keeper. To many minds the Sabbath is a dreary, kill-joy burden of negative “do nots” to be liberated from. Sleeth dispels this misinterpretation. Observing the Sabbath is itself liberation, that is, when it is observed in spirit and not legalistically. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus confronting the rigid legalistic Sabbath yokes. When Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath, religious leaders condemned him for doing work. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” Jesus retorted.

The book points out that in today’s society, the key point is not the particular day of the week one chooses for a Sabbath rest. Hotels, nursing homes, police and fire departments, farm livestock, all require 24/7 coverage. For workers in these institutions, an alternate day of the week should be sought for their Sabbath rest. For example, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann aligns his Sabbath in a Jewish night-to-night pattern, beginning Saturday evening and concluding by Sunday evening.

While personal styles of Sabbath-keeping can be flexible and creative, Sleeth decries the present frenetic pace of today’s American society. In sharp contrast to a few decades ago, most stores and restaurants are open on Sunday. People work longer hours, are constantly hooked up to mobile electronics, and incessantly multi-task. The Sabbath is a day to purge out the built-up overload and reset one’s emotional, physical, and spiritual clock.

The Isaiah 58 connection between Sabbath and justice for humanity and creation then falls neatly into place. Jesus said that we humans are not to live only by bread but by every word that comes from God (Matthew 4:4). Yes, we need to work to eat that we might live, but most central, our lives are for God.

My wife, Debora, read this book and promptly ordered four more copies as Christmas gifts for our sons. I recommend it highly.

24/6 is a book written by Matthew Sleeth, MD (Tyndale House Pub., Carol Stream, Il.) 2012

“Where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” ....saying of Jesus (Matthew 18:20)
HOPE, FAITH, AND COMMITMENT: THE OVEC STORY
by Allen Johnson

The Mountain Vision  Fall 2013  Page 13

In 1987 several concerned citizens joined together as the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC) to oppose a large BASF chemical company hazardous waste incinerator near Ironwood, Ohio. OVEC launched a three-state campaign working closely with the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Worker’s international union that resulted in the cancellation of the incinerator project.

That victory only served to open the eyes of the OVEC organizers to other community pollutants. In 1989 OVEC led a successful battle to close a toxic waste leak at an Aristeck Chemical deep injection well. OVEC also mounted successful drives against unregulated burning of chemical wastes as boiler fuel at a BASF plant and that addressed abandoned chemical waste dumps along the Guyandotte River. Health-impairing air pollution from an Ashland Oil refinery led to significant company fines along with compliance with air quality standards.

In the 1990s a private corporation pushed plans to build the largest pulp and paper mill in North America near Apple Grove, WV along the Ohio River. West Virginia economic development officials promised over one billion dollars in overall subsidies and incentives. The company planned to use an outdated chlorine-bleaching technology, a process that is heavily polluting creating toxic dioxin as a by-product to be discharged into the Ohio River. Sadly, the West Virginia Water Resources Board and the Air Pollution Control Authority approved the plans, which were subsequently upheld in court.

OVEC’s mission is to organize and maintain a diverse grassroots organization dedicated to the improvement and preservation of the environment through grassroots organizing, public education, coalition building, leadership development, strategic litigation, media outreach, and the promotion of sustainable alternatives.

Urged on by local residents, in 1998 OVEC plunged into their current work to end mountaintop removal (MTR) coal extraction. While the desecrating MTR method continues, OVEC has participated in successful lawsuits against illegal selenium pollution, pressured Patriot Coal Co. to begin phasing out mountaintop removal, engendered a moratorium on new underground sludge injection wells through its Sludge Safety Project, and helped four communities with water wells contaminated by underground injected sludge to receive clean municipal water. OVEC is participating in the ACHE campaign that calls for a freeze on new MTR permits and for a federal MTR community health study.

OVEC is intentional and effective in developing top-notch community leadership. Moreover, OVEC works alongside other advocacy organizations, respects their unique contributions, and gets behind their efforts. OVEC is always eager to offer advice, to share its trove of research, photos, and personnel, and to jump in on joint efforts. Christians For The Mountains is truly indebted to OVEC for their support over the years, including a startup grant to acquire Sage Russo as our first intern, the free use of Viv Stockman’s visceral MTR photos, Robin Blakeman’s connections and insight in reaching out to religious institutions, Tonya Adkins’ and Maria Gunnoe’s wonderful music for our Mountain Mourning Collection DVD, and Janet Keating for being a founding CFTM Steering Committee member with her wise counsel and bubbling optimism for our mission. The others of the staff, Maryanne Graham, Dustin White, Dan Taylor, and Dianne Bady are equally fervent, friendly, and dedicated. Past OVEC leadership has been exemplary, including Dave Cooper who spent a decade on his MTR Road Show, and Laura Forman who unexpectedly died at age 39 at a protest rally she organized against mountaintop removal.

OVEC founder Dianne Bady sums up OVEC’s leadership style as a partnership of hard work and spiritual attunement.

Over the years, Janet and Laura and I together realized that part and parcel of our jobs was this total disruption of our plans and our subsequent not knowing what to do next. We learned together that in these situations, we needed to rely on pure spiritual trust. We developed the idea that sometimes we just walked through a fog, and that this is the way it’s supposed to be, it’s not just a total disruption of our work – it IS our work. We learned together to rely on the trust that even though we don’t see much of that path through the fog, if we consciously acknowledge our unknowing and our total confusion, and ask for the Grace to see the next few steps, that we WILL know what to do next. Maybe only the next step or two. But first, we must just live with the uncertainty and accept it. This approach has required a great deal of personal growth. It did not come naturally to us. But learning to think and act in this way has been crucial to our ability to continue fighting issues that many others have seen as impossible to win. 1

We encourage our readers to become familiar with informational resources of OVEC, to act upon their Calls To Action, and to contribute financial support. OVEC publishes an outstanding quarterly publication, Winds of Change, and hosts its website at www.ohvec.org

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Janet Keating, Robin Blakeman, and Dustin White look over Viv Stockman’s research.

MISSION STATEMENT
CCA is a faith-based network of people raising a prophetic voice for Appalachia and her people.

Ten Serious Ocean Threats & Remedies

1. Ocean Acidification

Carbon Dioxide is a potent greenhouse gas that not only is warming the planet but also warming and acidifying the oceans. This increased acidity is detrimental to the oceanic food web in stunting growth in phytoplankton, zooplankton, corals, mollusks, and crustacea.

2. Plastic Garbage

Massive amounts of plastic waste pollutes the oceans, concentrating in five “garbage patch gyres.” Small and large pieces are ingested by ocean life too often ending in death. Properly dispose of all plastic, and advocate for biodegradables.

3. Overfishing

70% of the ocean fisheries have crashed or are seriously depleted. This impacts a sustainable food source as well as disrupting the ecosystem web of life. Overharvest is complicated by international barriers, inadequate harvest quotas and enforcement, and the extraordinary capabilities of factory fishing fleets. Ghost nets break off to aimlessly drift ensnaring marine life for years. Massive amounts of sea life is caught in fisheries only to be discarded as bycatch, such as about 5 pounds of bycatch for each pound of shrimp. Science-based international treaties along with establishing marine sanctuaries to rejuvenate fish stocks are important needs.

4. Killing Off Top Ocean Predators

Large Bluefin Tuna bring in enormous prices that are leading to its near extermination. Slow growing Orange Roughy take 25 to 40 years to reproduction age and can live over 100 years, that is, those not caught by overfishing. Large sharks are caught, their fins sliced off for soup, the bodies thrown over into the sea. 30% of shark species are threatened with extinction. Support only sustainable fishing.

5. Ocean Dead Zones

Massive fertilizer and animal waste runoffs into oceans is increasing the number of over 400 oxygen-depleted dead zones where life cannot be supported. Sustainable agricultural practices are key to revitalizing these seas.

6. Mercury Contamination

Mercury gets into the food chain that eventually ends up on the dinner plate. 15% of babies in the eastern USA are born with mercury-caused neurological damage, while many adults also suffer from mercury-related ailments. Humans contribute 80% of mercury in nature, with coal-fired power plants being the major culprits.

7. Dying Coral Reefs

Rising water temperatures and acidification related to Global Warming, and unethical fishing that use cyanide poison or blasting, are threatening most of the world’s coral reefs. Besides impacting sustainable fishing and tourism, reefs protect land masses from storms, and are major contributors to overall marine ecology.

8. Destruction of Mangroves

Mangroves are the nurseries for many species of fish, shrimp, and other forms of life, as well as protecting seashores from erosion and storm surge damage. Palm oil plantations and housing developments are some of the major threats.

Toward an Ethic of the Seas

Increased human population magnified by modern technology and abuse is endangering the seas to the serious detriment of all life on Earth. Religion must step up to address this serious threat to God’s creation, a task that the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care feels called to.

At this time, groundwork is being laid to develop an “Ethic of the Seas” that will inculcate within religious institutions and their people an ethos of nurture, protection, and appreciation of the ocean. Religion will lend support and advocacy for regional, national, and international public policy. Present tasks, then, are to (1) uncover the spiritual values inherent within God’s ocean creation; (2) develop an ethic consonant with our faith; (3) understand both science and society within the context of the seas; (4) implement a faithful response through education, public policy advocacy, and personal and corporate lifestyle.

A Message from the Green Turtle

“[We] must change our attitudes toward the ocean. We must regard it as no longer a mystery, a menace, something so vast and invulnerable that we need not concern ourselves with it…. Instead we want to explore the themes of the ocean’s existence—how it moves and breathes, how it experiences dramas and seasons, how it nourishes its hosts of living things, how it harmonizes the physical and biological rhythms of the whole earth, what hurts it and what feeds it—not least of all, what are its stories.”

“The sea returns to us that which we give it. If we protect it protects us; if we abuse it returns the abuse.”

---- Jacques-Yves Cousteau (1910-1997)

Marybeth Lorbiecki is an adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, teaching upper level college writing and children’s literature. She is the author of award-winning books for children as well as for adults, including Aldo Leopold: A Fierce Green Fire. Her newest book, Mending the Earth, Mending the Soul: John Paul II’s Ecology, will be published in spring 2014. Marybeth will lead the Ocean Ethic Project in conjunction with the Franciscan Action Network and the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care. Marybeth and her husband, David Mataya, have three children.

Marybeth Lorbiecki

Marybeth Lorbiecki and Laura Dagley with a Green Turtle on Oahu during an expedition toward developing an Ethic of the Ocean (October 2012).
Spring 2014, 200 students from Christian colleges will conduct research in Appalachian communities that are in close proximity to mountaintop removal (MTR) operations. This project will be a major expansion of previous community studies over the past three years. Rather than taking a Florida vacation or being with their families, these students are volunteering their time and some of their own finances to conduct important research that we hope will lead to health safeguards for some of the sickest populations in the United States. Christians For The Mountains, Restoring Eden, Southern Appalachian Labor School, Lindquist Environmental Appalachian Fellowship, and Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition are leading this undertaking, and are requesting your financial support for this project. All earmarked financial contributions will go to this work.

Background

Mountaintop removal (MTR) is an extreme form of strip mining used throughout Central Appalachia. Coal companies blow off the entire tops of mountains with powerful explosives (ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel), dump millions of tons of rubble into valleys, and bury and pollute headwater streams. An area the size of Delaware, over a million acres, has already been decimated; additionally, nearly 2,400 miles of streams have been permanently buried, polluted or destroyed. MTR occurs, no primary health data has been compiled or published in peer-reviewed journals, mapping and routing, and acquiring privacy envelopes and additional illness symptoms across multiple organ systems, lifetime and current asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and hypertension rates than those living in communities of Central Appalachia without MTR. The most striking finding indicates that serious diseases and cancer was twice as likely to be found in MTR impacted communities. Additionally, Christian college students, many from the most conservative Christian schools in their area, witnessed and understood the externalized environmental and human health impacts of MTR. They encountered first-hand that the data being collected reveals an alarming relationship between community health and MTR, illustrating the idea of 'externalized health costs' in ethical decision making, especially around issues of dirty versus clean energy.

Impact

The studies published with the data collected from the ACHSP have been used by activists, both local and nationwide, to empower voices of justice and amplify concerns of the residents of rural Central Appalachia. Health studies are being used in court cases to fight coal companies seeking new or expanded MTR permits. Concerned about the impacts of our health survey results, three coal companies (Alpha Natural Resources, Arch Coal, and Patriot Coal) are backing a $15 million campaign to discredit the results of the independent, peer-reviewed research with their own well-funded studies.

Would You Consider Volunteering?

We are recruiting volunteers to conduct this extensive project. We are especially interested in those with backgrounds or are pursuing majors in health, social work, sociology, journalism, or biology, but welcome all applications.

Volunteers and staff are expected to put in long days of hard work, be cooperative with other team members and the project, assist with the daily chores of cleanup and meal preparation, be willing to deal with schedule and accommodation flexibility, and exhibit good character. This work involves meeting the public and asking for personal information, therefore a confident, cheerful disposition is important.

We provide training in all aspects of the survey work including IRB protocol, the use of instruments, mapping and routing, and Appalachian culture.

The project takes precautions for the safety of our volunteers and staff, including maintaining communications during field work, and pairing up. In the past three years we have had no problem.

This program has been life-changing for many of our student volunteers!

More info? allen@christiansforthemountains.org
Upcoming for the Next Edition of *The Mountain Vision*

The fourth edition is scheduled for February. Please let us know if your friends would like a sample copy.

In the upcoming issue we plan to discuss the interconnectedness of water quality and supply, energy production, and climate. This will lead to emerging technologies and strategies to conserve water and energy, along with examples of compatible Christian lifestyle practices.

We invite and welcome your comments and suggestions.

*Mountain Vision* is an outreach ministry of *Christians For The Mountains*. Copies are sent free of charge to advocates for God’s “will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10).

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**It is good to give thanks to the Lord,**  
*to sing praises to your name, O Most High;*  
*2 to declare your steadfast love in the morning,*  
*and your faithfulness by night,*  
*3 to the music of the lute and the harp,*  
*to the melody of the lyre.*  
*4 For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;*  
*at the works of your hands I sing for joy.*

(Psalm 92:1-4)

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**Come Ye Thankful People Come**
by George J. Elvey & Henry Alford (1858)

Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home;  
All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.  
God our Maker doth provide for our wants to be supplied;  
Come to God’s own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home.

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**We Gather Together**
Hymn by Adrianus Valius (1597)

We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing;  
He chastens and hastens His will to make known.  
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing.  
Sing praises to His Name; He forgets not His own.

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**Christ of the Breadlines** (by Fritz Eichenberg)

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**God is Great, God is Good;**  
*Let us thank Him for our food.*  
*By His Hands we all are fed,*  
*Give us Lord our Daily Bread.*  
*Amen*

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**Oh Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ the King**

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**Joy To the World**
(by Isaac Watts, Lowell Mason)

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and heaven, and nature sing.

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**May this celebration of Christmas bless you with greater hope, joy, and peace!**  
....from all of us Christians For The Mountains