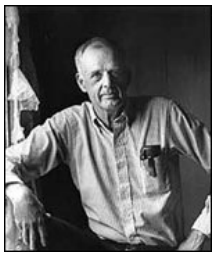
Wendell Berry: Not a Vision of Our Future, But of Ourselves

The High Cost of Coal



Attempting to deal with an enormity so staggering as the human destruction of Earth, it is difficult to resist the temptation to write out a "vision of the future" that would offer something better. Even so, I intend to resist. I resist, not only because such visions run the risk of error, but also out of courtesy. A person of my age who dabbles in visions of the future is necessarily dabbling in a future that belongs mostly to other people.

What I would like to do, instead, if I can, is help to correct the vision we Kentuckians have of ourselves in the present. In our present vision of ourselves we seem to be a people with a history that is acceptable, even praiseworthy. A history that we are privileged to inherit uncritically and with little attempt at rectification. But by the measures that are most important to whatever future the state is to have, ours is a history of damage and of loss.

In a little more that two centuries – a little more than three lifetimes such as mine – we have sold cheaply or squandered or given away or merely lost much of the original wealth and health of our land. It is a history too largely told in the statistics of soil erosion, increasing pollution, waste and degradation of forests, desecration of streams, urban sprawl, impoverishment and miseducation of people, misuse of money, and, finally, the entire and permanent destruction of whole landscapes.

Eastern Kentucky, in its natural endowments of timber and minerals, is the wealthiest region of our state, and it has now experienced more than a century of intense corporate "free enterprise," with the result that it is more impoverished and has suffered more ecological damage than any other region. The worst inflictor of poverty and ecological damage has been the coal industry, which has taken from the region a wealth probably incalculable, and has imposed the highest and most burdening "costs of production" upon the land and the people. Many of these costs are, in the nature of things, not repayable. Some were paid by people now dead and beyond the reach of compensation. Some are scars on the land that will not be healed in any length of time imaginable by humans.

The only limits so far honored by this industry have been technological. What its machines have enabled it to do, it has done. And now, for the sake of the coal under them, it is destroying whole mountains with their forests, water courses and human homeplaces. The resulting rubble of soils and blasted rocks is then shoved indiscriminately into the valleys. This is a history by any measure deplorable, and a commentary sufficiently devastating upon the intelligence of our politics and our system of education. That Kentuckians and their politicians have shut their eyes to this history as it was being made is an indelible disgrace. That they now permit this history to be justified by its increase of the acreage of "flat land" in the mountains signifies an indifference virtually suicidal.

So ingrained is our state's submissiveness to its exploiters that I recently heard one of our prominent politicians defend the destructive practices of the coal companies on the ground that we need the coal to "tide us over" to better sources of energy. He thus was offering the people and the region, which he represented and was entrusted to protect, as a sacrifice to what I assume he was thinking of as "the greater good" of the United States – and, only incidentally, of course, for the greater good of the coal corporations.

The response that is called for, it seems to me, is not a vision of "a better future," which would be easy and probably useless, but instead an increase of consciousness and critical judgment in the present. That would be harder, but it would be right. We know too well what to expect of people who do not see what is happening or who lack the means of judging what they see. What we may expect from them is what we will see if we look: devastation of the land and impoverishment of the people. And so let us ask: What might we expect of people who have consciousness and critical judgment, which is to say real presence of mind?

We might expect, first of all, that such people would take good care of what they have. They would know that the most precious things they have are the things they have been given: air, water, land, fertile soil, the plants and animals, one another – in short, the means of life, health and joy. They would realize the value of those gifts. They would know better than to squander or destroy them for any monetary profit, however great.

Coal is undoubtedly something of value. And it is, at present, something we need – though we must hope we will not always need it, for we will not always have it. But coal, like the other fossil fuels, is a peculiar commodity. It is valuable to us only if we burn it. Once burned, it is no longer a commodity but only a problem, a source of energy that has become a source of pollution. And the source of the coal itself is not renewable. When the coal is gone, it will be gone forever, and the coal economy will be gone with it.

The natural resources of permanent value to the so-called coalfields of Eastern Kentucky are the topsoils and the forests and the streams. These are valuable, not, like coal, on the condition of their destruction, but on the opposite condition: that they should be properly cared for. And so we need, right now, to start thinking better than we ever have before about topsoils and forests and streams. We must thing about all three at once, for it is a violation of their nature to think about any one of them alone.

The mixed mesophytic forest of the Cumberland Plateau was a great wonder and a great wealth before it was almost entirely cut down in the first half of the last century. Its regrowth could become a great wonder and a great wealth again; it could become the basis of a great regional economy – but only if it is properly cared for. Knowing that the native forest is the one permanent and abundant economic resource of the region ought to force us to see the need for proper care, and the realization of that need ought to force us to see the difference between a forest ecosystem and a coal mine. Proper care can begin only with the knowledge of that difference. A forest ecosystem, respected and preserved as such, can be used generation after generation without diminishment – or it can be regarded merely as an economic bonanza, cut down, and used up. The difference is a little like that between using a milk cow, and her daughter and granddaughters after her, for a daily supply of milk, renewable every year – or killing her for one year's supply of beef.

And there is yet a further difference, one that is even more important, and that is the difference in comprehensibility. A coal mine, like any other industrial-technological system, is a human product, and therefore entirely comprehensible by humans. But a forest ecosystem is a creature, not a product. It is, as part of its definition, a community of living plants and animals whose relationships with one another and with their place and climate are only partly comprehensible by humans, and, in spite of much ongoing research, they are likely to remain so. A forest ecosystem, then, is a human property only within very narrow limits, for it belongs also to the mystery that everywhere surrounds us. It comes from that mystery; we did not make it. And so proper care has to do, inescapably, with a proper humility.

But that only begins our accounting of what we are permitting the coal companies to destroy, for the forest is not a forest in and of itself. It is a forest, it can be a forest, only because it comes from, stands upon, shelters and slowly builds fertile soil. A fertile soil is not, as some people apparently suppose,

an aggregate of inert materials, but it is a community of living creatures vastly more complex than that of the forest above it. In attempting to talk about the value of fertile soil, we are again dealing immediately with the unknown. Partly, as with the complexity and integrity of a forest ecosystem, this is the unknown of mystery. But partly, also, it is an unknown attributable to human indifference, for "the money and vision expended on probing the secrets of Mars … vastly exceed what has been spent exploring the earth beneath our feet." I am quoting from Yvonne Baskin's sorely needed new book, Under Ground, which is a survey of the progress so far of "soil science," which is still in its infancy. I can think of no better way to give a sense of what a fertile soil is, what it does, and what it is worth than to continue to quote from Ms. Baskin's book:

A spade of rich garden soil may harbor more species than the entire Amazon nurtures above ground… the bacteria in an acre of soil can outweigh a cow or two grazing above them.

Together [the tiny creatures living underground] form the foundation for the earth's food webs, break down organic matter, store and recycle nutrients vital to plant growth, generate soil, renew soil fertility, filter and purify water, degrade and detoxify pollutants, control plant pests and pathogens, yield up our most important antibiotics, and help determine the fate of carbon and greenhouse gases and thus, the state of the earth's atmosphere and climate.

By some estimates, more than 40 percent of the earth's plant-covered lands … have been degraded over the past half-century by direct human uses.

The process of soil formation is so slow relative to the human lifespan that it seems unrealistic to consider soil a renewable resource. By one estimate it takes 200 to 1,000 years to regenerate an inch of lost topsoil.

And so on any still-intact slope of Eastern Kentucky, we have two intricately living and interdependent natural communities: that of the forest and that of the topsoil beneath the forest. Between them, moreover, the forest and the soil are carrying on a transaction with water that, in its way, also is intricate and wonderful. The two communities, of course, cannot live without rain, but the rain does not fall upon the forest as upon a pavement; it does not just splatter down. Its fall is slowed and gentled by the canopy of the forest, which thus protects the soil. The soil, in turn, acts as a sponge that absorbs the water, stores it, releases it slowly, and in the process filters and purifies it. The streams of the watershed – if the human dwellers downstream meet their responsibility – thus receive a flow of water that is continuous and clean.

Thus, and not until now, it is possible to say that the people of the watersheds may themselves be a permanent economic resource, but only and precisely to the extent that they take good care of what they have. If Kentuckians, upstream and down, ever fulfill their responsibilities to the precious things they have been given – the forests, the soils, and the streams – they will do so because they will have accepted a truth that they are going to find hard: the forests, the soils and the streams are worth far more than the coal for which they are now being destroyed.

Before hearing the inevitable objections to that statement, I would remind the objectors that we are not talking here about the preservation of the "American way of life." We are talking about the preservation of life itself. And in this conversation, people of sense do not put secondary things ahead of primary things. That precious creatures (or resources, if you insist) that are infinitely renewable can be destroyed for the sake of a resource that to be used must be forever destroyed, is not just a freak of short-term accounting and t he externalization of cost – it is an inversion of our sense of what is good. It is madness.

And so I return to my opening theme: it is not a vision of the future that we need. We need consciousness, judgment, presence of mind. If we truly know what we have, we will change what we do.

Reprinted with permission from Missing Mountains: We went to the mountaintop but it wasn't there: Kentuckians write against mountaintop removal (Nicholasville, KY: Wind Publications, 2005).