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West Virginia Catholic Worker finds God in her surroundings

Sharon Abercrombie | Jan. 11, 2012 Eco Catholic

West Virginia's mountains are the sacred geography and heart of Jeannie Kirkhope's prayer life.

"I see God's face the clearest in these hills," she said.

They combine the vastness of big water and big sky of the Midwest, where she grew up, with the precious sense "of being held, tucked and secure."

"The plant life and wildlife here, there's just so much of it everywhere, every season," she said. "I can watch the cycle of birth, life, death and resurrection so closely. I can observe it with such intimacy in these woods."

The self-identified hermit lives in a tiny pre-fab cabin lit by one light bulb. The cabin is located in a Spencer, W. Va. "holler" (a patch of land between hills) she named Turtle Hill.

"Turtles were the first critters to greet me when I moved in," she said.

Kirkhope's immediate entourage includes an assortment of dogs, cats and chickens as well as her partner, Bill, whose work often takes him overseas to places like Doha, Qatar.

Kirkhope, 41, originally came to West Virginia in 1991 as a college student on an alternative spring break through John Carroll University in Cleveland.

"We volunteered at a Catholic Worker farm in Alderson," she said. "It housed homeless men from the affiliated soup kitchen in Washington, D.C. That's when I fell in love with the mountains, the Catholic Worker movement and living and working with the poor."

Years later, after teaching in the inner city and receiving a master's degree in theology from Seattle University, she moved to the Alderson farm to run it.

"Its founder, my mentor, Michael Kirwan, had passed away and I felt called to attempt to fill his big shoes," she said.

But two years later, Kirkhope started seeing doors closing. The men either drifted back to the streets or began getting on their feet. Rather than bringing more people from Washington, D.C., into an already poverty-stricken state, Kirkhope decided to see what she could do among the local folks. She settled in Spencer in 2002, and discovered the Turtle Hill site a few years later.

Kirkhope moves back and forth from her solitary, contemplative life as the day or week unfolds, connecting most with those around her.

"When my neighbors are in need, I'm there [for them] as they are for me," she said.

For instance, they've fixed her truck and helped it get out of the mud and off the icy hills. They give her gardening and canning tips and watch her animals when she's out of town.

"When I call them fretting that the coyotes are too close, [the neighbors] shoot off their guns to scare them away," she said. "They allow my students to help them with chores or projects -- not that they always want or need the help, but because I ask them to talk and teach."

Sometimes Kirkhope doesn't think she's doing her share, but she takes solace in knowing that her presence "is as much a witness to my neighbors as to the outside world that this land is sacred and the people here count."

Kirkhope also serves as a part-time educator and newsletter writer for the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, a social justice and environmental organization, and is the founding director of the Appalachian Catholic Worker and ECO Center. She hosts college students on alternative spring breaks.

The concern over mountaintop removal (MTR), a process of mining coal that involves exploding tops of mountains to loosen the earth and get easier access to the coal, is a draw for these college students.

Glenmary Fr. John S. Rausch, director of The Committee on Appalachia, said the price of MTR includes "flooding exacerbated by denuded mountains, cracked foundations from blasting and water polluted by mine drainage."

"The local ecosystem stands utterly destroyed," he said.

Throughout Appalachia, more than 500 mountains and 1.2 million acres of hardwood forests -- about the size of Delaware -- have fallen to MTR, he said.

So far, more than 1,200 students from universities all over the country have shown up at Kirkhope's Catholic Worker headquarters to begin their weeklong quest.

Two hours away from Kirkhope's pristine holy land is Kayford Mountain, where students can see for themselves the smudges and wounds that scar the face and body of God. They talk with local residents and perform service projects.

"Our most appreciated services have been listening to people's stories, giving their voices validity and a sense of worth and being in solidarity with them," she said.

During students' visits, Wess Harris, a former union miner and one of Kirkhope's colleagues, takes the students to the State Museum at the Cultural Center in Charleston to give them background on the coal industry. Kirkhope said that the museum's new multimillion dollar exhibit on coal history was paid for by special interest groups, friends of coal.

Most West Virginians oppose MTR, Kirkhope said, "but we're having a hard time doing anything about it, and we need outsiders' help, because our state government's politicians and judges are in the back pockets of Big Coal."

Mine owners and operators prefer MTR mining over conventional methods of extraction -- deep mining and surface mining -- because MTR is cheaper.

its peak employment period in the 1940s, Kirkhope wrote in an email, West Virginia coal employed about 130,000 mining jobs. Now, these three types of mining account for 20,000 jobs total.

While only 1 percent of West Virginia's work force makes its living from MTR, that percentage is beset with internal conflicts. Families are often split over the problem of environmental devastation versus jobs.

"It's been called a new Civil War," Kirkhope said.

Even people working in the industry sometimes feel torn.

"Most of them do care for Earth, especially that which is in your private property and neighborhood hollers," she said. "They know the hills intimately, love and learn from them, hunt on them with respect, garden them, protect them from trespassers and many definitely see the contradiction."

But the terrible reality is fear of losing their livelihoods.

"In holding on to their jobs," Kirkhope said, "they may feel the need to rationalize and compartmentalize. They do so, unconsciously or subconsciously, just to get by. Poverty, the fear of it, or the anger because of it, does that to some folks. Meanwhile the companies use propaganda and fear tactics to try to keep their miners loyal."

Company owners accuse the "green" people of being environmental extremists who don't care if the miners lose their jobs. Kirkhope points out, however, that those who oppose MTR never intended to become activists: "They are simply community members who live in the areas where MTR is happening. They've been forced to become active because they're losing their homes, clean water, family cemeteries and entire communities."

They are sometimes joined by a few former or retired miners. Kirkhope said she believes there are probably more miners who also agree but fear losing their jobs if they say anything.

Kirkhope said she doubts she has ever changed anyone's mind, but at the same time, "I want the Appalachian Catholic Worker to be considered safe space where these conversations can be had, and all voices are heard, including Earth's."

Can the mining be stopped? It can, if people are willing and available to help transition the miners into new work, she said.

So far, there have been a few successes along these lines, she said. One of them is a small solar installation company in Williamson. Some green jobs in solar energy are beginning to trickle into West Virginia, as well. Rausch, the director of The Committee on Appalachia, writes in an online article, "Prayer Can Stop Mountains From Moving," [1] that alternative energy jobs have increased and total wind-energy jobs now surpass those in

coal mining.

But there is still a long way to go, Kirkhope said. One feasibility study showed that Coal River Mountain was the best mountain left in the state for wind energy, but the site is being systematically destroyed by MTR. (For more information about the Coal River Mountain situation, check out this documentary produced by Uncommon Productions [2].)

At this point, it is more important than ever to keep the conversation going, think outside the box and not give up, she said.

"The future of the mountains, water and planet as a whole depend on it," she said.

Kirkhope has an idea for working toward a new age of energy consumption.

"How about reducing the amount of energy we consume in the first place instead of sucking ourselves dry of all our natural resources, one after the other?" she said. "That would get us to the root of a lot of our problems. After all, they say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

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