

Coal Miners and Confederate History
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Since we were on vacation last week, I had the advantage of perspective that comes from following the news from a distance. And, in Virginia, there were two things which dominated the news, the West Virginia Coal Mining Disaster and the Governor's Confederate History Month proclamation.

From the news that I saw, the question for so many miners is, why? Why do they do such dangerous work? And the recurring answer is that mining is something that must be done if you want to remain at "home" – to stay near a land you love.

This dedication to place is almost foreign in our strip mall world where a Chi-Chi's burger in Seattle is guaranteed to taste the same as one in Hoboken. For much of America, lives and careers are spent trying to be the same as every other place. Outside of rural America, people will move from one community to the next exactly because it is similar to the place they left.

For many coal miners, they bury in their mind the dangerous reality of their work. It is a testament to their dedication of a place that is different – where the accents or culture varies from one valley or hollow to the next. They ignore death out of dedication to the land.

The central conflict which surrounding much of Southern literature is irony of loving a place and hating what it stands for. And, there is much about the South to love – everything from blues to bottle trees, from grits to gospel music, from family to farms. It is a heritage that is marked and made richer for the very reason that so much life in the South has been affected by grinding poverty.

All of these things are tied up in the land and our connection to it – it cannot be explained to outsiders anymore than an Eskimo can explain snow to a desert nomad.

Dedication can be admirable, but dedication to place and former times by focusing only on the aspects of history that suits one's needs is deeply misplaced. As the governor has acknowledged, it was wrong for him to sign a proclamation that contains only half of the story.

Coal miners who stay where they are out of dedication to the land shouldn't ignore the real dangers. Southerners shouldn't celebrate history without acknowledging the legislated hate and human trafficking which created that history.

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