

LATROBE

A black and white photograph capturing a scene of destruction on a road. In the foreground on the left, the front of a severely damaged car is visible, partially buried in a large pile of dark, loose earth or debris. A sign on a wooden post stands prominently, displaying the word "LATROBE" in bold, capital letters. To the right of the sign, a railroad crossing with two sets of crossing arms is visible. Further down the road, several utility poles with cross-arms are spaced out. The road itself is a mix of asphalt and dirt, with a dark, possibly wet or muddy patch in the center. In the distance, a few more vehicles are visible on the road. The background shows a line of trees, some of which appear to be bare or damaged. The overall atmosphere is one of desolation and the aftermath of a disaster.

Flood damage in Latrobe, one of the coal-mining communities along Buffalo Creek that was completely destroyed in the February 26, 1972, disaster in Logan County, West Virginia. Photo by Don Stillman.

The capsule biography **Dee Davis** posted to our online dialogue group began by situating his home region of Appalachia on the world continuum of rich and poor:

I grew up in Hazard, Kentucky, a small town in the coal mining region of the Appalachian Mountains. The region I am from is a place like many others in the world where the culture is rich and the people are poor. It is very rural, and apart from the environmental destruction of the mineral and timber companies, it is quite beautiful.

As a member (and until recently, executive producer) of Appalshop, his work over the last 25 years has involved hands-on cultural production—producing and

distributing documentary videos in Appalachia and other rural regions of the United States—but also cultural entrepreneurship and deep thinking about the challenges of cultural development in a relatively isolated, distinct and impoverished region of the wealthiest nation on earth.

Recently, he cofounded a new organization, the Center for Rural Strategies, with the aim of using what he learned at Appalshop to make the case for rural life and culture through the mass media. This essay explores the challenges and opportunities involved.

Center for Rural Strategies
46 East Main Street
Whitesburg, Kentucky 41858 U.S.A.
Telephone: (606) 632-3244
Fax: (606) 632-3243
E-mail: deedavis@aol.com
Web site: www.ruralstrategies.org

Full Faith and Credit

by Dee Davis

My home is in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky in the southeastern United States, a region known by others for its coal mining, bluegrass music and—since the days of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty—for being persistently poor amidst America’s abundance. Growing up and making a life here has taught me a good deal of what I know about cultural survival. As the process of globalization imbeds itself throughout the layered framework of local rural life, I have come to imagine how regional messages of cultural resilience and culture’s mobilizing power might serve a greater purpose, if they could be made global as well.

It is with this thought that after 25 years as part of Appalshop, a cultural cooperative for our part of the world, I have changed jobs. At Appalshop, I had been working with a group of performers and media producers who used a variety of artistic forms to celebrate local heritage and to address issues of inequity and privation. The work was wonderfully satisfying, but I wanted to see if applying what we had learned working together in the countryside of Appalachia might be useful in other rural regions of the United States and maybe even beyond our borders. The idea is that by describing rural life differently, by framing the stories of rural people differently, new approaches and new ideas will emerge and help reshape a rural policy that now fails on nearly every hand.

In rural regions of the United States, times are noticeably bad. The rates of poverty, illness, drug addiction and educational attainment are measurably worse

than in the rest of the country and stack up just as poorly when compared to the rest of the industrialized world. As rural economies based on export agriculture and resource extraction falter, communities seek extraordinary measures to make things better. Many places have opened themselves to interventionist economic strategies that redirect available public money to subsidize private industry, most often hoping to re-create disappearing local jobs by enticing private businesses to leave their current location and move where the wage scale is lower and health and environmental regulations looser.

In this pursuit, small towns and local governments find themselves caught up in a devil's bargain, using the limited capital available to capture some other community's means of support—enticing a factory or other business to relocate—thus injuring that community and participating in a race to the bottom where wages and health and safety standards plummet. This activity among rural American municipalities has its parallels in the developing world where lending institutions like the World Bank provide precious development capital, but then exact commitments for repayment and participation that lead to similarly diminishing standards for workers and communities.

Other communities, more positively, have looked to renewed investment in education, retraining and technology to take advantage of changing opportunities that the new economy presents. These opportunities may include marketing or service-industry jobs that emerging telecommunications technologies have made possible, or they may mean training displaced workers for jobs that they must find in distant metropolitan areas. Nevertheless both responses are attempts to reimagine specific home communities in order to retrofit them into a transforming global economy that seems suddenly to have changed the rules for rural people. Irrespective of which of these paths is chosen, implicit is a willingness to change the work force, the work environment or even the character of the community in order to seek a place at the table. The danger however is that when communities abandon their cultural characteristics in order to save the local economy, they risk assets that could be as serviceable in the long run as the business strategy of the moment. When farms are subdivided, wilderness strip mined or old forests clear-cut, that momentary commerce generates income, but it also undercuts the possibility of more benign and renewable use of the land later and it inalterably changes a culture that has been defined by a relationship to land and earlier land use.

My concern here is that as hard-hit communities seek to make themselves over, attempting to appear more attractive to a world economic system, they not lose track of the values that have kept them together through good times and bad, and that they do not squander opportunities for more meaningful and potentially more beneficial development later.

RURAL PROSPECTS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

If an overarching principle of globalization is that an open and competitive global marketplace tends to make the world's products available to the most consumers at the best prices, then the rural corollary is that globalization commodifies rural life, then seeks to obtain those commodities at bargain rates. By and large, rural enterprise produces the raw material and basic products processed by others. As a rule, food leaves rural communities to be processed and packaged elsewhere, wood becomes furniture elsewhere, coal becomes electricity elsewhere, oil becomes fuel elsewhere. Rural communities export their resources raw and value is added further up the economic food chain. The work that has underpinned rural life for the last century—farming and extracting natural resources—has become integrally linked to a world economy that commands the lowest commodity prices, values technology over human power and exploits wilderness for short-term market value. Rural people who previously made a decent livelihood in a less efficient economy are now more likely to be vulnerable to the machinations of a dynamic global market.

For example, in my home region, where coal mining remains the largest economic force, small coal companies have been bought by larger ones that have in turn been bought by energy conglomerates listed on the international stock exchanges. Because a single firm now may be able to supply energy to the market from a multitude of sources—from South African coal mines, Canadian gas fields or Venezuelan oil wells—it can exact pressure to keep labor costs down and health, safety and environmental regulations in check. Such large firms can even afford to bank their resources when the market is soft and build reserves for when trouble breaks out.

Global corporations that have the capacity to shut down production in a community without suffering in the marketplace essentially usurp labor's power to strike and the community's power to resist corporate intention. When the private sector has the ability to shut down and devastate local economies, elected officials who might otherwise attempt to challenge industry's authority are more easily deterred. One miner interviewed for a 1978 Appalshop documentary had a theory that when the industry started calling coal "energy," that's when the local trouble started. One can imagine similar explanations coming from farmers, fishermen, ranchers and hard-rock miners when they discovered that the language had changed for them—that as with coal, their livelihoods had become part of a global marketplace and that their competitors were increasingly likely to be distant corporations speaking a different language and working at a different scale.

As rural economies have struggled, rural communities have similarly been challenged to maintain a critical mass of citizenry and a purposeful direction. In the United States as in much of the world, prevailing economic forces are pushing people away from the countryside and into metropolitan areas where they are more hopeful of finding the means to earn a living. As Thomas Friedman writes in “The Lexus and the Olive Tree,” “Globalization also has its own demographic pattern—a rapid acceleration of the movement of people from rural areas and agricultural lifestyles, to urban areas and urban lifestyles.”¹

¹Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 11.

Wendell Berry puts it more dramatically in his essay “Conservation and Local Economy”:

For a long time, the news from everywhere in rural America has been almost unrelievedly bad: bankruptcy, foreclosure, depression, suicide, the departure of the young, the loneliness of the old, soil loss, soil degradation, chemical pollution, the loss of genetic and specific diversity, the extinction of species, the depletion of aquifers, stream degradation, the loss of wilderness, strip mining, clear cutting, population loss, the loss of supporting economies, the deaths of towns. Rural American communities, economies, and ways of life that in 1945 were thriving and, though imperfect, full of promise for an authentic human settlement of our land are now as effectively destroyed as the Jewish communities of Poland; the means of destruction were not so blatantly evil, but they have proved just as thorough.²

²Wendell Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy,” *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York and Canada: Random House, 1992 and 1993), p. 5.

³Joel Kotkin and Fred Siegel, “Attacks Threaten Future of Cities,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 14, 2000, M6. Online posting at www.latimes.com.

Irrespective of how magnificent one may think our cities, or how economically sound our suburbs, rural towns and villages also contribute to our overall well-being. This value may not be immediately recoverable on open markets, but that does not make it insignificant. That people have the necessary skills to grow food, cut trees or make sausage should not have value to a nation only when those people are recognized as low-bidders. Who among us hungers for low-bid sausage?

Put another way, survival of the fittest is a beloved law among the fittest. But within economies as within species, no one remains the fittest forever—indeed, one is seldom the fittest for very long. Cities, nations and continents wax and wane within a world economic framework. As Joel Kotkin and Fred Siegel point out in the *Los Angeles Times*,³ the history of the world’s great cities is intertwined with the real costs of security. The great cities of Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C., and later Alexandria and Rome, flourished only when they no longer needed walls to ensure security. Similarly, modern cities such as Paris, London and New York could grow only when infrastructure that depended on long-term investment was not threatened by destructive anarchic forces.

Globalization depends on reasonably secure markets and safe metropolitan market centers. Economic models assume an acceptable ratio of investment risk to projected reward. In such models, when the costs associated with those risks remain within an acceptable range, there is an accompanying assumption of solid return on investment. But when those costs become unmanageable or when the threats to the marketplace become persistent, capital flees. In our contemporary history we have witnessed conflagration in cities like Belfast, Beirut and Belgrade chase away investment capital. We have seen political corruption in Indonesia and disease across the continent of Africa stem global investment. Now in the wake of the September 11 incidents, the United States, long thought an exemplar of market security, must fundamentally reassess what it will pay to keep its cities secure. Will the country in essence attempt to build walls of security around cities to hold back anarchic forces? And if so, what is the cost to the treasury and to America's concept of an open society? In the week following the World Trade Center terror, the New York stock markets, already enduring recession, lost more than one trillion dollars in equity. A trillion dollars in real wealth belonging to real people and chartered institutions evaporated. Suddenly safe and long-held business assumptions about how the markets would function and where they should be located were called into question.

That for most of American history the countryside has been integral to a strong and fecund economic system should not be forgotten after a half-century of rural decline and metropolitan ascendancy. At the moment the preferred response to a struggling rural sector seems to be *laissez-faire* abandonment. There is no national rural policy, let alone a plan to preserve rural life, and the scattershot laws and regulations aimed at rural regions are often written by the lobbyists of industries which profit most from the lack of comprehensive policy and planning. That is, the laws are written chiefly by those like corporate farmers who reap the largesse from federal agricultural subsidies, or mineral companies who are given huge tracts of public land to mine or drill. But before global governmental and monetary institutions embrace a *de facto* policy of economic Darwinism as natural law for rural communities, there is at least the obligation to anticipate the consequences: what is the cost of allowing our rural communities to continue to become dysfunctional and fail?

In a recent video interview with Frank Johnson, an attorney in Carrizo Springs, Texas, we were told the history of a 1920s land scheme there in South Texas where great expanses are populated only by rattlesnakes, cactus and mesquite trees. It had been an unkind string of harvests for Midwestern farmers who were additionally burdened by a succession of terribly hard winters. The land scheme involved chartering trains in the coldest, snowiest, most blustery part of the winter from agricultural states like Illinois and Wisconsin and transporting farmers down to the warmth of Texas to offer them broad acreages of farmland at attractive prices.



Remnants of homes on Buffalo Creek after the February 26, 1972, disaster. Photo by Jeanne Rasmussen, courtesy of the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

One farmer taken by the offer began to quiz the land agent to just see if the deal was too good to be true. He asked, “Now how do I know if I was to buy this land and move down here to get away from all the snow, that it wouldn’t turn around and start snowing here too?”

The land agent told the farmer not to take his word for it, but to wait and he would get independent confirmation. He then called to a young boy who had come out to see the trainload of visiting farmers.

The agent asked: “Son, how old are you?”

The boy said, “Eleven years old, sir.”

“Son, how long have you lived in these parts?” the agent asked.

“All my life, sir.”

“Son, would you tell this nice visitor if any time in your memory you have ever seen it snow in these parts.”

“No, sir, I ain’t never seen it snow,” the boy said, then thought for a moment. “I did see it rain once.”

Like the visiting farmer, perhaps it would not hurt to ask some hard questions before we abandon any more of the American countryside. Do we really want a nation without rural infrastructure? Do we honestly feel secure placing food production and related issues of biodiversity, pesticide use and soil chemistry in the hands of a few corporate farmers? Are our cities actually better off when poor country people are forced to leave rural areas and start over as poor urban people? Who pays the costs of food, shelter, health care and training to help new urban-dwellers get back on their feet?

I have come to believe that with the decline of our rural populations, something is being lost that is vital to our character as a people—something of value that is discounted at present, but irreplaceable at any cost. Put differently, there is unrealized value in rural life that can contribute to a more thoughtful calculus of global prosperity, well-being and security.

In the coal fields of the Appalachian Mountains some artists and producers have been attempting to use cultural strategies to address such questions of economy and purpose.

APPALSHOP

In my part of the country we are blessed with a rich culture and close proximity to challenge. The land is hilly and unsuitable for commercial farming. It is far from navigable water. Distant corporations with a history of environmental excesses own the abundance of coal, natural gas and timber. Furthermore, the pressures of a global market for natural resources create worldwide competition to keep labor and conservation costs to a minimum. This has meant that the people who live near the exploitable resources become increasingly marginal as new technologies create market efficiencies, reducing available jobs. In contrast with the recent past, only a few laborers are now needed to mine coal or harvest timber. In this environment, corporations have used their power as principal employers as leverage to keep their taxes low and the public sector deferential. As a result, our infrastructure, health care and educational attainment are among the poorest in the industrial world.

In 1973 I went to work for a cultural organization near my home. I had grown up as a child of merchants. As Mark Twain said, “My parents were neither poor, nor conspicuously honest.” I spent my youth engaged in political organizing, in community-engagement projects and more prosaically in delivering furniture for my father. At 22, I came to feel that the kind of direct political action in which I was involved was an inadequate response to the pervasive need I saw in my home region. I decided to abandon retail and go to work for an organization then called the Appalachian Film Workshop. Dad asked me to stay and help him out. He said that he knew he hadn’t been paying me very much. When I explained that he was paying a good deal more than I was going to get at the film center, a look passed from parent to child that perhaps only a career cultural worker can ever know.

The Appalachian Film Workshop had begun as an outpost of a government-supported program called Community Film Workshop Council of America. That national project was based in New York and modeled after a Canadian Film Board initiative to empower communities by placing motion-picture

cameras in the hands of youth. Our program began with 16mm film cameras, but after a few years it opened up to photography, recorded music, theater and literary publication. Eventually it would expand to include documentary television production, broadcast radio, media training for young people and a national cultural festival component.

The other film workshops were located in urban centers, where the idea was to train young people for careers in film and television. What distinguished the program at Appalshop (as it became officially known in 1975) was that from the beginning it sought to build community by recognizing local culture as an asset and seeking a place for that asset in a larger marketplace of ideas and aspirations. The young people who came to Appalshop to learn to be media producers and performing artists began conferring value on cultural practices and community members whose contributions were unrecognized and therefore undervalued. We wanted to document local issues and cultural practices like traditional music, church services, coal mining, herbal healing and quilt making, and then present that work to a broad public. In doing this, we found that in some small ways the value of the culture was raised.

Similarly to the way the value an unknown artist's early work increases as the artist becomes more widely recognized, Appalshop and the handful of national critics and prominent artists who championed the group's work could be said to have initiated a process of recognition and reappraisal of the value of Appalachia as an American place and as a rural culture. For example, motion picture director Arthur Penn ("Bonnie and Clyde," "Little Big Man") said at the time, "Theirs is the most alive use of film I know. The way they make films about the people in their local communities is what writing novels was about in days past."⁴ *The Washington Post* wrote, "Appalshop wrote the book on community based filmmaking. And did the film."⁵

⁴Quoted in *Newsweek*, Aug. 12, 1974.

⁵Desson Howe, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 14, 1984.

Appalshop came of age during a moment informed by both the cultural discourse brought forward by the American civil rights movement and the challenging of national assumptions that followed in the wake of the Vietnam War. The country was in a mood to put aside its grander, more nationalistic mythology and for a time examine its component cultural parts. Appalshop, along with a contingent of other cultural and activist institutions like the Highlander Center (a labor and folk school in eastern Tennessee), Broadside Television (an early cable access producer in Johnson City, Tennessee) and the Council of the Southern Mountains (an ecumenical social-justice organization and magazine publisher located most of the time in southwest Virginia) all became "brokers," so to speak. The organizations began to celebrate and promote Appalachian culture in forms like string-band music, handicrafts and storytelling and, through their media, champion the lives of the people living in these impoverished communities as if they were the heroes of their country.



Members of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth rally in the state capitol to support legislation outlawing the Broad Form Deed. From "On Our Own Land," © Appalshop Film & Video, 1988

This recognition and reappraisal began to occur not only within the national discourse, but also to a modest extent within the Appalachian communities that were the focus of Appalshop's work. By illuminating lasting cultural traditions, profiling members of the community who were exemplars of mountain artistic disciplines, such as music and storytelling, and making visible the cultural bonds of community, Appalshop joined what was becoming a larger movement that included regional writers, scholars and journalists who were engaged in the business of making the Appalachian mountain region aware of its assets and its virtues.

Early in the organization's development, this process of community cultural awareness and reflection brought filmmakers, actors, musicians and producers into direct contact with a variety of economic and social issues. When Appalshop began its work, there was virtually no Appalachian study material in any local school curriculum in the region. The idea that those three million or so people who lived within the central Appalachian mountain range shared a common history or purpose was apparent mostly in negative portrayal, reflected in the way that the mass media characterized the region's people as poor, backward and victimized by circumstance. But beginning in the '70s—at first on college campuses and later in public schools—groups of teachers and student organizations began working in loose collaboration to build a cultural awareness movement that would reframe the identity of Appalachian Mountain people. Appalshop's work became available as a tangible classroom representation that could inform the movement first through documentary film, then later in the form of preservationist recordings, publications and Roadside Theater's touring performances of traditional tales.

As this work began to gain acceptance in schools, organizers involved in the political struggles of the region began to employ Appalshop's cultural materials in their community-development work. This cultural material of music, dance, handicraft and folk tales emphasized common bonds across the region, giving organizers a common language with which to speak to communities isolated from each other by terrain or regional borders. In addition to documenting regional culture, Appalshop also had begun early on producing media and performances about social and political issues facing local communities. Films about the destructive practices of strip mining, workplace health and safety, corrupt officials and unionization were shown at rallies and community gatherings. Appalshop's record label issued music to support environmental and labor activists; the theater company performed for union rallies and for benefits; and the literary quarterly published the work of activists alongside that of poets and fiction writers.

As Appalshop worked to use cultural means to address social issues, the organization in turn set out to attempt to influence broad issues that affected the regional economy. A good example can be seen in a range of artistic activity dealing with the coal industry. No one concerned about the future of central Appalachia—certainly no community-based artist—could long ignore the coal industry, the largest employer, the principal repository of the region's stored wealth, the driving force behind the region's politics, and historically the creator of most local infrastructure, such as water systems, medical clinics, retail stores and schools.

How well employees were treated varied from company to company. But economic relations were typically feudal. To understand the extent to which coal companies dominated life in the coal camps, the small towns they built to house the miners, one needs to know that through the 1930s, '40s and into the '50s many of these companies issued their own currency. Miners were paid in company scrip that was only redeemable at the coal company's own retail store and for the prices the company elected to charge. Shopping elsewhere was often grounds for termination. Those coal camps and the mining operations answered to corporate headquarters in far-flung cities. At one time in Letcher County, where Appalshop is located, county residents were living in three different time zones, because the camps were kept on the same time as their parent company headquarters located in distant cities.

Early on Appalshop began working with citizens who wanted to create a more equitable tax on the mineral holdings of large corporations. A region-wide ownership survey had documented that the vast majority of the area's resources were owned by large outside businesses. At that time it was not unusual for a large corporation with thousands of acres of mineral rights and millions of dollars in coal reserves to be paying less in taxes than a local resident might pay on a house trailer or an old pickup truck. A grassroots group,

the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition (KFTC), began mounting direct organizing projects to inform citizens about these inequities. Appalshop artists played a small role in assisting that effort. At the same time, those same artists were able to broker relationships with constitutional rights attorneys who assisted in filing a successful State Supreme Court challenge to the tax code, bringing millions of new dollars to local governments in low-income counties. It changed the base support for education, infrastructure, economic development and other aspects of the common good.

In another example, Appalshop produced “On Our Own Land,” a video that detailed the lives of mountain people attempting to protect their land from the abuses of strip mining. This is a controversial and often destructive mining process that removes the earth and trees, and reroutes surface water in order to extract coal from below. Examining deeply held cultural beliefs about the value of a land-based heritage and documenting the cultural cost to the community of losing the very hills that sheltered their way of life, the video showed ordinary citizens standing up to tremendous economic and political power to eradicate an oppressive legal instrument called the broad-form deed. These longstanding deeds, quite often foisted on illiterate landowners in return for token payments, allowed coal companies to destroy surface lands through strip mining without compensating landowners. The video, which won a DuPont Award from the Columbia University College of Journalism, was a major part of the public-awareness campaign and a citizens’ movement joined by KFTC and others that led to a Kentucky constitutional amendment outlawing strip mining under the broad-form deed. As a result of this campaign, landowners who wished to preserve their lands now had the legal right to do so.

Thus an intervention in community cultural development played a critical role in realignment of hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of assets. Local landowners took some measure of control of assets that had before been controlled solely by large corporations. Though the value of local culture would have been nearly impossible to assess, before or after the amendment passed, clearly, its influence figured into a massive recalculation of corporate wealth.

The examples of restoring a sense of the value of local culture that I know best are those associated with my home in the Appalachian Mountains and with Appalshop. There, recognition of cultural value is embodied in training programs that encourage youth to remain and contribute in the region, multi-cultural community education that champions diversity and history projects that chronicle community resistance to industrial plundering. But far beyond the Appalshop and Appalachian experiences, similar initiatives that combine economic development with cultural initiative are growing throughout the rural United States.

For example, development activities at the Llanogrande Cultural Center in Edcouch, Texas, seek to build communities in the *colonias* along the Mexican border by infusing traditional development approaches with Spanish-language education, media broadcast and training, oral history and literary publications. There, school-based programs that started as classroom exercises in culture and creativity have developed into a movement engaging young people to use their culture as the lens for educational attainment and community-building. In the Southern California desert, the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition builds homes for farmworkers, shelters for people with AIDS and survivors of domestic abuse, apartments for the disabled and health-care facilities for rural communities without doctors; yet they also offer mariachi, art and technology classes as key to their development approach. Their purpose is to empower poor people by helping them build communities of civic participation and cultural respect.

In these places, culture in some way informs the price of land and the preparedness of the local community to build homes, produce marketable goods and services and face adversity by pulling together. Nonetheless you won't find cultural life on a list of global economic indicators. Although crafts and regional music may be sold in some form to passing tourists, the principal value of local culture is in personal and community expression. Through such expression, culture reaffirms community values, reinforces identity, undergirds resistance and satisfies the soul. But it nevertheless goes unmeasured by the national and international policymakers who guide development and the corporations.

Traditional crafts that in an earlier time and a less connected world served a utilitarian purpose—hand-stitched quilts, hand-woven baskets, homemade musical instruments, clay crockery—linger in rural societies even though department stores can provide goods that do the same job at a fraction of the cost. Why? Because they retain some sustaining value for the owners that transcends mere usefulness. A community's handcraft can be appreciated as an object of aesthetic beauty, as a representation of a cultural identity and as a repository of shared memory. The current market value of such an item may only be measured in the price a tourist pays today, but the market reality is that underlying cultural values help maintain a modest market for such goods year after year, long beyond the shelf life of most produced goods. Similarly, while a global telecommunications infrastructure measured in stocks, bonds and licensing agreements suffuses the planet with commercial music, drama and 24-hour news programming, throughout small towns and villages, traditional music, dance and storytelling persevere in practice as well as community memory. Why? Because again such practices have real value to please, inform and keep communities together. They may remain unrecognized by the systems created by advertisers to measure audience size and chart brand recognition.

FULL FAITH AND CREDIT

In “The Mystery of Capital,” a book subtitled “Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else,” Hernando de Soto points out that throughout the Western world:

[E]very parcel of land, every building, every piece of equipment, or store of inventories is represented in a property document that is the visible sign of a vast hidden process that connects all these assets to the rest of the economy. Thanks to this representational process, assets can lead an invisible, parallel life alongside their material existence.⁶

⁶Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 6.

De Soto goes on to explain that the rest of the world, the vast majority, also have homes, crops and businesses, but without clear title or deeds or articles of incorporation, they lack the essential representations needed for capital formation. For them capitalism fails. He argues that without a way to make the invisible visible, that is without a system for converting intangible assets to real value, the non-Western world cannot succeed as practitioners in a global economy.

Perhaps it is possible to follow this line of thought to make the case that local cultural assets are also intangible but real, that they have estimable value; but like unchartered businesses, they lack the essential representations to make their value manifest. I believe that. However, the fuller value of culture is unlikely to show up on a ledger sheet no matter how enlightened the accountant or how convincing the case. Clearly the rural reality is that until someone can market the immaterial value of local culture—sell it like a used pickup truck—cultural equity will remain largely an abstraction. We know it’s there, it does something, we just don’t know exactly what.

Perhaps the question then becomes not so much how to calculate the value of local culture, charter it or weigh it, but more pertinently what is the cost of losing it? In the same way an insurance company indemnifies a homeowner for what it costs to rebuild a house lost in a fire, the next step for all citizens is to imagine literally and figuratively what it would cost to rebuild local culture lost because of inattention, poor policy, out-migration or land degradation.

Working backward one can consider prime rural destinations like Tuscany in Italy, the Loire Valley in France or California wine country. Those regions have stayed agricultural and for the most part remained divided into small farms for generations. They are each extremely valuable expanses of rural communities now, because for many years when they weren’t doing well, thoughtful policy prevented short-term market development from destroying the fields and the long-term possibilities. In essence no one could come in and strip mine the vineyards. Land-use policy favored the preservation of a cultural way of life that laid the groundwork for later rewards.

In the Appalshop film “Buffalo Creek Revisited,” we see a depiction of what happens to a community when its culture is decimated. A coal-waste dam in

Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, failed in February of 1972, releasing a torrent of water, mud and debris. That flood careened down the narrow 17-mile valley without warning. One hundred twenty-five people were killed, 4,000 were left homeless. In the community's despair, government emergency teams came in and condemned much of the creek, disallowing local residents the chance to return to their home site and rebuild. Community survivors were randomly placed in trailers and relocated alongside others they had never met.

In the film Ruth Morris says about the days before the flood:

Our children was raised together. They wasn't like neighbors: they was family. I've traveled over this old holler many a day with maybe two families in the car to the doctor. My next-door neighbor would take my carburetor and put it on his car. I'd take his tires off and put 'em on mine. That's the kind of neighbors we was. We didn't run and knock on the door and say "Can I do?" We went and opened the door and walked in and did do. We just worked together. I guess you could say we took care of one another. We joined everything. We belonged to the PTA, the scouts, all community affairs, the churches, stuff like that. And every morning to us was a sunny morning, a smile, a "Good morning," "Hi. How are you?" That meant so much to us. We don't get that no more. We don't see it no more. It's a loss. You know, a smile is like a million dollars sometimes and we don't get that no more. We get vacant stares. We get frowns. We get worries. It'll never have another homey atmosphere. That's the only thing I can tell you to define it—it was home.⁷

⁷"Buffalo Creek Revisited," film by Mimi Pickering, copyright Appalshop, Inc., 1985.

To create a different future for rural communities, we need to extend full faith and credit to the value of rural living. Right now, faith in the value of rural life is lacking in part because it has been so consistently devalued in the popular literature, in historical texts, in electronic media and in public policy.

One response that's needed now is a consistent chorus of global voices asserting the importance of rural living and knowledge, helping to create a framework that gives these realities context, respect and a sense that there's a culture there that needs to be examined on its own merits. Some like-minded colleagues and I have formed a new organization, the Center for Rural Strategies, to take a crack at it. Our aim is to take our own experience of addressing these issues in the Appalachian region and apply it in the interests of other rural regions, of rural culture as a whole. In my 30 years in community cultural development, I have observed that most successes are preceded by a string of failures. That's how we all grow and learn. In this endeavor, we expect to make mistakes, understanding that cultural development is an experimental enterprise. Our hope is that by paying attention to the lessons our communities have learned in both hardship and celebration, we can make a difference. The idea is that there is true value in local culture. It comes from a community's understanding of what's come before and faith that if you make an effort, things can be better.