

From the Western Slope

by Frank Young

Eating our Cake

Almost nothing causes some of us to focus on our modern

“lifestyles” more than being without the contrived comforts we’ve come to take for granted. Recently my wife and I and our two sons and their families and the entire community of Ripley and most of larger Jackson and Mason Counties, along with parts of other adjoining counties, spent three days and nights without the “utility” of electricity. A mid-February snow and ice storm brought ice laden trees down into power transmission lines causing short circuits, downed lines, broken poles and untold miseries to our modern lives- so dependent on this invisible energy we call electricity.

Many people went without this modern “convenience” for 10 days or more. During those days we fretted about keeping our homes warm, our refrigerators and freezers cold, the lack of hot water, computer, a usable microwave oven to defrost a TV dinner- there being no power for the television anyway- and which dinner was already defrosted because the storage freezer was powerless.

During the course of some of this I began musing about how ridiculous this all seemed- can’t freeze, can’t thaw, can’t keep the shower water hot nor the drinking water cold (fortunately, due to a good water storage system and frugal usage we had water throughout the “outage”). Finally it dawned on us to put the water, milk, cheese and other “fixins” in a “cooler” outside to stay cool. Well yeah- duhhhhh.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, our organization and the larger world struggled with how and how not to keep a supply of energy, mostly in the form of electricity in the “local” debates of today, flowing endlessly to meet our insatiable energy appetites.

We produce electricity by burning fuels- mostly coal in West Virginia, with a sprinkle of natural gas and hydro-power. Fuel burning creates heat that turns water into steam; that steam drives turbines that in turn drive electrical generators. Hydro turbines put the energy of gravity powered water directly onto the turbines that spin the electricity generators. Wind powered turbines put the power of the wind directly into the electricity generators.

To harvest the power of gravity powered water a stream or river is usually artificially ponded with a dam that restricts the natural flow of the waterway, with all the accompanying ecological disruption, and the churning turbines themselves can chop creatures that live in the water into mincemeat.

To harvest the power of wind we must construct turbines where the wind blows. In West Virginia that’s usually on the tops of high mountains.

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To burn coal it must first be mined- a demonstrated horrific ecological disturbance by any method or measure.

And of course, in burning coal, natural gas or other “fossil fuels” there is produced prodigious amounts of ash residue, airborne particulate matter, carbon dioxide and myriad numbers of other by-products of the combustion.

But we valued the beauty and the ecological resources of that free flowing stream that we interrupted so as to operate the hydro-turbines. We valued the majestic mountain tops the coal mines destroyed or that the wind turbines marred. We valued the streams and rivers that flowed from the mountains from which the coal mining induced acids and other deathly wastes now flow. We valued the life forms whose lives and habitats are snuffed out and disrupted or obliterated by these destructive pursuits of more and more energy.

All these things- the natural world of clean streams uninterrupted in their flows and teaming with the web of aquatic flora and fauna, of majestic mountains and their wider vistas unmarred by artificial contraptions taller the trees, and of clean air and clear skies free of breath strangling noxiousness and the looming specter of yet unknown degrees of runaway climate changes- all these things we value and celebrate as the best of what nature offers to tantalize our senses and to provide the basic ingredients for enjoyment of life- and yes, of even basic survival. All these are things we treasure. They are what the good life is about. They are the cake of life.

In demanding more and more and more of the nebulous but costly commodity we call “energy” we are, with current mass energy production technologies, voraciously consuming the resources of life.

We are eating our cake. Where are we going in this handbasket together?