

WAY DOWN YONDER IN THE PAWPAW PATCH

Resiliency in Appalachian Poverty

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“**W**hat is that smell in your room?” The “college prep” English teacher had walked over from across the hall after my “general” English students had exited my classroom. I noticed for the first time the familiar, though not unpleasant, smell of smoked ham. It was the beginning of November, and the families of my students had begun to heat their homes with wood furnaces. The students carried with them through the school day, clinging to clothes and hair and emanating from the pores of their skin, the smell of smoke and sweat. This was also the time of year when my high school students, often in charge of stoking the fire several times during the night, would fall asleep in class or fight to stay awake in many classes that seemed irrelevant to their immediate concerns.

As a fifth-generation Appalachian growing up in and around poverty, I have experienced many such contradictions between the expectations of the education system and the reality of children in Appalachian poverty. It is easy for us to buy into the stereotypes reflected by the White, poor, ignorant images of Appalachians that are perpetuated by the media and the resulting misperceptions about people who live in the hills and hollows of the Appalachian Mountains. While Appalachians share common history, art, music, and language, they also are diverse in fundamental ways. Conversations about poor Appalachian families rarely acknowledge our common thread of shared resiliency in coping with poverty and systemic barriers in health care, education, and the legal system. Looking at our lives through a lens of strength rather than deficiency can provide insight into how to capitalize on, rather than repress, the resilient qualities that Appalachian children and their families bring to the community.

Living in Appalachian Ohio, on the border of West Virginia, the only state that is considered totally in Appalachia, I have seen firsthand the damage that stereotyping and misunderstanding have done to children. Schools often unknowingly perpetuate a view of failure by not valuing the strengths poor children bring to the classroom. For poor students in Appalachia, the most discouraging image may be the one promoted by the media, depicting them as backwoods, ignorant isolates. From comic strips that once depicted feuding moonshiners in *Li'l Abner*

to the portrayals of ignorance among characters in the *Beverly Hillbillies* and the more disturbing portrayal of West Virginians as cannibals in the *Wrong Turn* movies, negative images of how people in this region live are burned into common perception. More recently, a disparagement on the popular television sitcom *Modern Family* demonstrated that while the show promotes acceptance of diverse families, it is still all right to laugh at Appalachians. In one scene, a gay couple, Cam and Mitchell, had agreed during a drunken tête-à-tête with Mitchell’s sister, Claire, to allow her to donate her eggs to create a genetically related baby for the couple. Once sober, the couple had second thoughts. But, as a parting shot, Mitchell looked at Cam, nodded knowingly, and said, “Too Appalachian” (Levitan, Lloyd, Higginbotham, O’Shannon, & Spiller, 2012).

This oppressive humor directed at Appalachians extends beyond Hollywood. I once had a national accreditation board member assessor who was visiting our Appalachian college tell me that the only thing he knew about Appalachia was from the movie *Deliverance*. He felt this comment was humorous and appropriate. I found it offensive.

What We’re Up Against

It is important in combating stereotypes to look at what in the political and economic systems have caused poor rural Appalachian people to react in ways that may appear different or unreasonable to outsiders. An examination of the political and economic systems affecting the daily lives of poor rural Appalachian people may explain some reasons for behaviors that are the basis of the stereotypes I would like to see eliminated. Appalachian rural poverty is marked by unique problems. Health concerns, for example, are exacerbated by a lack of medical personnel and a lack of access to the latest forms of treatment. A lack of reliable transportation to cities that might offer better medical treatment impedes access to the preventative measures that ensure a healthier life. In some Appalachian families, decades of coal mining or other work in which laborers are exposed to asbestos, lead, and mercury has left a generation of older people disabled and chronically ill. The cancer rate is particularly high in Appalachia (Wingo et al., 2008). Appalachians also experience a much higher rate of heart disease than people in all other areas of the United States (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2011).

As the economy tightens, children in Appalachia are the first to feel the pinch. The lack of close, convenient, or affordable child care can keep some young families from seeking stable employment and deny them access to safe child care. Traditionally, many families have shared the responsibility for free child care, but as women become the primary wage earners in minimum-wage jobs during this economic downturn, free care for children is disappearing. Unlike in more

populous areas where public transportation is available, local schools in sparsely populated areas of Appalachia cannot offer after-school programs because families have no way to pick up children after school bus routes are finished. There are also no youth centers or Boys and Girls Clubs in most rural areas. Some local schools are in such financial distress that busing for high school students has been eliminated. The result is that many students are now, and not by choice, “home schooled” or forced to attend an online school. The success rate for students forced into an alternative route to high school completion is far below that of their peers in the traditional school setting or of those who willfully choose alternative routes (Rasey, 2010).

The obstacles, in other words, are many.

Culture and Resiliency in Appalachia

I remember my own childhood in rural southeastern Appalachian Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Commonly shared values among my family and friends included the love of land and a sense of place-belonging. There was and still is an attachment to nature among many Appalachians, to the hills, the creeks, the fields. We widely share a profound respect for the awesomeness of nature. The uncontrollable factors of nature in this part of the United States—floods, droughts, and snowstorms—make weather a constant topic. It affects everyday life in a way not experienced in other modern settings. Sometimes the lack of central heating, spotty electrical systems, the scarcity of air conditioning, quickly rising water, and the threat of crops being destroyed by early frost or lack of spring rains dominate the day-to-day lives of people who are geographically isolated from their nearest neighbors. One natural catastrophe can financially wipe out a family for many years. This is when resilience among poor people in Appalachia is most clearly observed.

A combination of self-sufficiency and a healthy suspicion of government programs increases the support Appalachian families provide one another. Many communities, while geographically dispersed, are very tightly knit emotionally. It is expected that neighbor will help neighbor. This independence from outside help leads many communities to recuperate from loss with little government assistance. Because of the history of exploitation of Appalachians by outsiders, there is a prevailing mood that only family and community can be counted on in times of trouble. Our collective memory holds the lack of government support at Matewan. It includes the use of government subsidies to mining corporations who defrauded families of their farms as they kept them in abject poverty and dangerous working conditions. It is no secret that the coal-mining companies with “company store” policies forced families into producing illegal moonshine for money, operations that federal agencies regularly

shut down. We remember the unfulfilled promises during the Great Society and how our grandparents watched as the government took over huge sections of land to build hydroelectric dams. In our own lifetimes the land has been taken for nuclear reactors, national parks, and interstate highways. This abuse by both corporations and government entities has led to a mistrust of those who come to our communities professing a desire to help. Unfortunately, this same attitude also leads many families to avoid applying for government assistance in the form of food stamps and parents to frequently refuse to sign their children up for free lunch programs. Although free and reduced-price lunch programs are widely available, one recent study found that one in four children eligible for free meals (23%) was not enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program (Burghardt et al., 2004).

The reliance and loyalty to family is also why a phenomenon that is perplexing to many health, business, and education system professionals occurs. Often, when an Appalachian family member seeks health care at an emergency room, the whole extended family accompanies the patient. Generally skeptical of the medical profession because of the high doctor turnover in remote areas (Coyne, Demina-Popescu, & Friend, 2006), the patient’s family members will miss work and school, sometimes for lengthy periods of time, to assist the ill kin. Many times family members are offended by negative repercussions brought about by these sorts of absences.

In Appalachia, it is always family first because family will be there in tough times even when government services are unresponsive. When institutions like schools fail to recognize this, many Appalachians will simply get out of the system. One example of this is when university professors who teach in, but are not from, Appalachia do not understand how simply applying the attendance policies of their courses might force first-generation college students to drop out of higher education. This is in part why rural poor people often grow to feel more and more disconnected from schools—not because they don’t care about education but because they learn that they are invisible to the education system.

Despite the fact that some sociologists, and particularly those who have endorsed the “culture of poverty” mentality, have identified this traditionalism or familism as a deficiency (Lewis & Billings, 1997), most Appalachian families see it as a way to collectively protect themselves in response to social ills. Generally speaking, in my experience, Appalachians do not resist change, but we do resist relinquishing the value of family first.

A similar misunderstanding is the assumption that rural and Appalachian residents do not value education (ARC, 2012), as evidenced by their lower attainment of postsecondary degrees. In a survey conducted by Ohio University in 2009, most of the Appalachian high school students surveyed greatly overestimate the cost of attending postsecondary education (ARC, 2012). Furthermore, both parents and students indicated a lack of knowledge about financial

opportunities and the process of applying for financial aid (ARC, 2012). This lack of information can prevent Appalachian families from even applying for college.

Also, sometimes families fear the prospect of higher education taking younger family members out of the community. When success is measured by the quality of life rather than the size of a paycheck, having family close by is important. When adult children move away to accept a job, they frequently return to the nuclear family. It is not uncommon for many young family members who move to a city a few hours away to come home every weekend to be with their family (Coyne et al., 2006; Lewis & Billings, 1997). Another stressor is unfamiliarity with navigating a system that contrasts with the experiences and, sometimes, values of Appalachians (Howley, 2006). In many cases, Appalachian parents who want the same happiness and fulfillment for their own children as all other parents want believe that higher education is out of reach financially for them and do not actively pursue that goal.

It is easy for anyone not living in poverty to be insulated from the realities of people in poverty. It is easy to misinterpret others' actions. I can remember reading in our local paper one winter that our town council had flooded the basketball court on the "wrong" side of town to make an ice skating rink. My husband grew up in that neighborhood. The local kids smashed the ice with cement blocks. The town was outraged by the "vandalism." I commented on it, and my husband looked at me in amazement. He said, "Those children don't have ice skates!" They did have basketballs. The idea that they were clearing off *their* court had not occurred to me. People in poverty are not unlike anyone else. They make choices based on what they think is in their own best interests. This is called resilience.

Growing Up Old in Appalachia

Often poor Appalachian children are expected to grow up and assume adult responsibilities at young ages. The pleasures of childhood can be short-lived. Their lives often are invaded by the sharp realities of navigating a larger world that often looks upon their circumstances with disapproval and disrespect. Systems and circumstances frequently create barriers to success and, in some cases, survival.

One of my students died from what my other students called a "weak" heart, found too late by doctors. A lack of transportation had delayed the family making a 30-mile trip to the doctor when the boy initially became tired and listless. By the time a doctor saw him and sent him to the big city hospital two hours away, it was too late. During his brief stay in the hospital, his classmates wrote him letters. I gathered them in a big envelope and sent them to

his mother. I did not share with my students that he probably had died before the letters reached him. When several of his friends returned from his private funeral, I asked about his family. His best friend described his final good-bye with tears in his eyes: "We took him from the church and walked down the big hill by the Pawpaw Patch near his farm and buried him. I helped carry him, but I just couldn't shovel the dirt on his casket." Then he broke into sobs. "He's home now," he choked.

Knowing the common religious language of most Appalachians in the region, I wasn't sure if he was referring to his friend finally going to heaven, which many identify as their true "home," or saying that his friend was back from the stress of a big city and safely "home" in his own backyard. He probably meant both. It was one of those times I was proud to be an Appalachian. I admired so much the deep sense of responsibility felt by somebody so young to "take care of our own," to ensure that his friend was home again after others had failed to protect him. This is what happens when you grow up fast, a common phenomenon in Appalachia.

Many Appalachian children are expected to be independent early in their lives. It is an economic necessity for most families to stretch the parent paycheck as far as possible. Most Appalachian and rural children work as soon as they are able to do so. Children as young as 10 or 12 years old work on family farms, in family businesses, or in jobs that cannot be tracked by overseers of employment laws. I was babysitting for cash by age 10. Many of my friends spent summers earning less than a dollar an hour packing tomatoes for local farms. The first time I earned five dollars for babysitting was the last time my parents bought my school clothes. I have shopped for and purchased my own clothing since I was in fifth grade. By the time I was 16 and could legally work, I became self-sufficient.

This sort of self-reliance is common in poor Appalachia. Children are expected to take care of many of their own needs and certainly the needs of younger siblings. Parents teach children the necessity of contributing to the survival and success of the family. Parents frequently talk to their toddlers in much the same way as they speak to other adults. The expectation is that they will become contributing members of the family unit as soon as possible. All parts of the unit work together to help the unit as a whole. Children rarely question the expectations of their adult family members to shoulder the responsibility for "taking care of their own business" such as doing schoolwork, acquiring food when hungry, and entertaining themselves when bored.

Unfortunately, too many educators interpret this lack of adult involvement as a sign that the parents just don't care about school. As is the case in every economic bracket, some parents don't care, but most do. The lack of school involvement certainly does not reflect a lack of caring. In addition to the challenges that people in poverty face in becoming more involved with schools such as a lack of transportation, a lack of affordable child care, and long working

hours, a lack of on-site involvement among some Appalachian families might reflect parents' views that school personnel are more qualified to be responsible for learning than they are. In addition, many parents have not had positive school experiences, so they might avoid interacting with teachers and administrators. Finally, the expectation that the child is responsible for his or her learning may influence the amount of parental involvement in the day-to-day involvement in school assignments.

In contrast, perhaps, to people from other cultures, Appalachians can experience praise for their accomplishments as a source of embarrassment. Calling attention to one's own accomplishments is fodder for ridicule. My friend often refers to this phenomenon as the "whack-a-mole" attitude. Just like the popular game at the county fair, when a child thinks he or she is superior enough to rise above the crowd, someone, including parents, might verbally whack him or her back down. Generally, Appalachians pride themselves on maintaining an egalitarian community. It is often seen as distasteful for someone to imply a hierarchy in which some people deserve better treatment than others. Respect is earned and mutual. Using "title" antecedents may imply superiority, so many Appalachians will not use them. So, it is no surprise when adults expect Appalachian children to "wait, obey, and be grateful for adult praise" that the children are confused. Teachers often perceive this resistance and self-reliance as being noncompliant. These same teachers could, by indicating trust in the child's judgment, find themselves teaching a loyal, hardworking, and pleasant student.

Appalachian parents do, at times, speak with pride about their children. Often it is in referring to the times they see their own children standing up for themselves or resisting bureaucracy. Appalachian pride tends to be focused on the admiration of strong individualism. This is the pride, for instance, that Appalachians feel in their own music and art. Appalachian art is generally created from something natural and familiar. Being able to create something new from what is available is a source of pride. It is the pride of resourcefulness and creativity.

The Challenge of School

School can be a challenge for any person in poverty. Frequently, the cultures of home and school collide. It is no different for Appalachian poor youth. One example would be the hygiene lessons taught in school. Schools teach the importance of being clean. It is very difficult for many people in rural poverty to meet the "clean" standards taught implicitly and explicitly in schools. Access to facilities that are taken for granted by most teachers often are not available to people in rural poverty. For example, poor families who must depend on their own water wells have to dole out measures of water for the week, and laundry often is not the top priority. Children may wear the same clothes for many days without

washing them, not because they don't want their clothes to be clean but because the families can't afford to keep them clean. When I was growing up, I was not allowed to use the family's washing machine because of the fear of it breaking and the family not being able to afford repairs. Many times I went to school in clothes I wore multiple times before washing them.

It was at school, actually, that I was "outed" as poor by a substitute teacher. Like many rural poor students, my home life and the expectations of school were in direct contrast to each other, and I learned to lie and hide the ways that made me different from what schools taught I was supposed to be. When I was in seventh grade, a substitute teacher baited me by asking if I had put on clean clothes that day. I, of course, said yes, lying through my teeth. She called me on it, saying, "I know you are lying. You wore that shirt last week and the same spot is still on it." I was so ashamed. Caught between not being able to do anything and the lack of clothes I had to wear, my only recourse was to transform from being a child who had not missed a day of school in 7 years to being a child who missed school as frequently as I needed to in hopes that people would not notice my lack of wardrobe options.

As a teacher in Appalachia, I recognized that some of my students did not even have running water for parts of the year. Outside pipes would freeze during the winter, especially for families living in trailers. Many homes burned to the ground as residents tried to thaw the pipes with blowtorches or other open flame devices. A shower was not worth losing a home. Covering their own smell was a delicate tightrope many high school girls walked. Too much perfume was worse than the body odor. For students lucky enough to find a ride to school before the school day started, gym showers were available, but often they would have to put on dirty clothes over their clean bodies. Many students adopted my own philosophy and just stayed home. Sometimes missing out on an education is easier than being humiliated.

There were other times school taught me I was poor and unworthy. A program in my elementary years allowed poor students to work for their lunches. So, in sixth grade, while my classmates enjoyed an extended recess after lunch, I was eating alone and washing pans, scraping food off trays, and spraying boiling water onto dishes. Needless to say, the whole school could identify who was in poverty very quickly. We were identified, as well, in the lunch line through a sign-in process for those of us who qualified for free lunch. It has been many years since I was in elementary school, but this kind of process remains at many local schools. I also have seen office doors with publically posted lists of students still owing school fees. I am amazed to realize how little has changed.

Too often, schools, and those of us working in them, simply do not recognize how students in poverty must transverse the most difficult circumstances even to attend school. A fellow teacher told me about her student who was the oldest sibling of three younger brothers. Her mother was addicted to meth, and she, as a high school freshman, was trying to hold the family together. Every morning

she would wake up her brothers and get them ready for school. She would walk them to a nearby elementary school. Her high school classes, of course, began an hour earlier than the elementary school day did. By the time she walked her brothers to the elementary school each morning, she was an hour late for the start of her own classes. Each day she would be given detention for coming late to school. That was the reward for her conscientiousness.

Similarly, I find that many schools, and far too many teachers, have lower expectations for children in poverty. In small towns in Appalachia, as in most communities, neighborhoods for the poorest of the poor are very well-known. A street address is a dead giveaway for children most likely to be in families struggling economically, with the least resources. My husband grew up in one of these neighborhoods. His home address often was enough to convince guidance counselors that he would be unsuccessful in school. Despite his outstanding math scores on standardized tests, he was placed in a remedial math class for the first few months of middle school. He ended up helping the teacher teach the class until she advocated for him to be moved to her advanced courses. This was too little, too late. He already had been denied a start in the "honor" track, which kept him out of the most advanced math classes until college.

As a teacher, I always have had to balance my desire to teach skills that would help my students be "successful" in the society outside the shelter of their Appalachian neighborhoods with my desire to acknowledge their realities and strengths. One incident clearly allowed me to see that even the most innocent request from a teacher might create serious obstacles for a child. One night, I stopped by a local discount store to pick up note cards. Two disheveled young men were in the school supply aisle. As I approached, I overheard part of their conversation. The older one of the pair was trying to explain to the younger one that he simply didn't have the money to purchase a five-subject notebook.

"But my teacher said I have to have a five-subject notebook," pleaded the younger boy as he eyed the name-brand, official-looking notebook.

"Look, I don't have the money for that, but we can buy five of these one-subject notebooks for 88 cents each. She won't care. You can put them together," the older boy patiently explained. There was no response from the younger boy.

In an attempt to find something cheaper, the two went up and down the aisle; however, the younger boy kept coming back to the five-subject notebook. I could only imagine what was going through his head as he picked up and put down the notebook. Would his teacher think that he just didn't care, that he didn't listen, or, worse, that he was being downright defiant? Would the substitution of cheaper notebooks color the teacher's perception of him? After all, who would imagine that this particular young man cared so much about what his teacher wanted? It was a big dilemma created by what the teacher surely imagined was a simple request.

After listening to the conversation, I offered to purchase the five-subject notebook along with my items, but my offer was met with suspicion. After

explaining that I had overheard the conversation and, being a teacher, understood how important it was to have what was required for school, the boys agreed to let me buy the notebook. As we were walking to the checkout counter, I learned that the older of the two boys had dropped out of high school. It wasn't hard to imagine the same fate for the younger boy.

Pride

For Appalachians, surviving the disadvantages of poverty is difficult but not devastating. Most of the time food scarcity and lack of medical resources can be survived. It is the rejection and blame placed on children by people in the very systems that should support them that create invisible scars that last a lifetime. Poverty doesn't diminish the values of family, community, independence, and faith. While no one wishes to be denied basic needs, that is not the worst part of poverty. Navigating a system that places us in a powerless situation is the worst part of poverty. Being made to feel less by overt or subtle actions is what keeps many Appalachians resistant to “outsiders.” I believe that Appalachian pride is a response to that degradation. It is worn like a shield to protect against the respect that is so often denied. It grows from a recognition that investing only in people who share the same values can give one self-worth.

Even today, I am sometimes caught by surprise by how much my roots influence my perceptions of situations. Not long ago, in response to a negative reaction to a child's behavior, I experienced Appalachian pride. It was an instinctive and primal reaction. I was standing in line at a family restaurant that kept crayons by the registration desk. Suddenly, a little two-year-old girl in ill-fitting clothes from a large family helped herself to the crayons and coloring page. The hostess raised her eyebrows and then frowned. My first thought was that the hostess was disrespectful. She obviously disapproved of the child's behavior. I knew that the child was not being rude. She was doing what she had always done. She was taking care of herself without the help or permission of adults. I smiled. I was proud of her. I was proud of our Appalachian independence and self-reliance.

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