

A Quaker author, Chuck Fager, chose 11 people he considered as having lived amazing lives to write for an edited book he did in 2019. I was honored and wrote a piece about our amazing upbringing. Paula can attest to that!! She is the only person alive that was there in my life since I was two. Mary remembers a lot of this, I think. Dee, have you heard these stories?

**Home as Coming and Going on the Hillbilly Highway
Dr. Jennifer Elam**

**Appalachia is a wound, a joy and a poem.
--Silas House from the documentary 'hillbilly'**

Appalachia is a wound deep in my soul, a joy deeper in my soul, and a poem deepest in my soul that brings together the extremes my Appalachian heritage have been for me.

Introduction

I was **born** in Kentucky. I have spent my whole life **leaving and going back** to Kentucky. My Mama always said of her heritage, "You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em." Dang! She had that right. Then I face the **stereotypes of Appalachians by both those in and out of the region**, and I say, "You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em." So, here I am - still comin' and goin', my whole life back and forth.

Home has been an elusive concept for me. Appalachian author, Wendell Berry writes extensively about the importance of "place". Although I have always felt a deep sense of belonging in the universe and a deep faith in my standing and place with God, I have lived in many physical spaces on this earth and traveled the world widely. More than place, "home" has come in moments: as a child in Sunday School, early life with family, in school, times of growing and learning, times with friends and lovers, sitting in Silence among Quakers, but less so in a place. My theme song for my life is more like Trio's song "Wild Flowers Don't Care Where They Grow." **Home** includes the moments of transcending the ever-present stereotypes of "hillbillies" that have threatened to rob me of a sense of home and equality on the earth.

I want to introduce you to some of my ancestors. I hope that will help you understand some of the complexity that makes up the joy and the wounds, the coming and going, and now what I call my Appalachian heritage identity crisis that has demanded reckoning as I get older.

My Mama and Daddy were two of the most hard-working people I have ever known as well as two of the most committed to their family. Daddy was incredibly smart (a measured IQ of 150) and Mama was the most faithful follower that Jesus ever had. They fought about religion ever since I can remember but they made it work for just three months shy of 70 years. They had something going for them. And I learned so much from both of them!

Mama's daddy died when she was 11 so I never knew George Penn and never heard a lot about him. But, Mama's mama, (Emma was her real first name that she never used) Forrest Penn (Nana), was an amazing woman, loved and respected by all. Daddy called her Mrs. Penn out of respect. She cared for elderly people that she called her patients to make a living and raise her five children after George died. She and her youngest daughter, Nancy left KY for Dayton, Ohio when I was five so Nancy could go to

school to be a dietician. So, we visited Ohio often when I was young and I stayed with my Nana during the summers for much of my young life.

I loved Dayton and Nana was the best. She was very dignified, called her many friends Mrs., was faithful to her Methodist church, loved to travel the world and visit family (it was always closer for her to visit them than them to come see her), faithfully watched the daytime soap opera "As the World Turns" Monday thru Friday at 1:30, and was the president of the WCTU (that's Women's Christian Temperance Union that worked against the use of drinking alcohol). She wore nice dresses and took her Bible most everywhere she went. Her upstairs was always rented out to her "boys," renters (Bill, Tom, Henry, and Mr. Gesell) that stayed with her for decades and became my friends too. She also sent postcards every week to every family member, including nieces and nephews.

To me, she was the BEST! When I need to feel stability in my life, I can still picture us sitting at her little table with the red and white checked tablecloth, telling each other about how our day went, eating pork chops and brussel sprouts (vegetables she only ate "for health's sake"). And every night before bedtime, she had her black cow (Pepsi and vanilla ice cream) and prayers.

Daddy's family was more complex. His mother's family, the Beattys were land wealthy, owning land that had been in the family for several generations, since the 1790's. They were also very dignified and (unheard of at that time) moved to town for a period of time so that their daughter Mary Elizabeth (my great grandmother, Mammaw Beatty) could go to college where she became an artist and a "proper lady." Interestingly, I did not hear about her stories until I was an adult.

Daddy's father's family was from Morgan County, eastern KY mountains of Appalachia. My great great grandpa worked the coal fields in PA to save the money to buy their land in KY and that land has also come down through the family. My two nephews just inherited pieces of that farm. Daddy had 48 first cousins on his father's side and one of the strongest values in Appalachia is loyalty to family. There was so much family that we had to celebrate Christmas for four days just to get in the visits.

My paternal grandfather and grandmother (Mammaw and Fifi Elam) met at the University of KY and the marriage (and the family wars) of the rural bluegrass and mountains began. I never visited them once they were not fighting viciously; they even threw dishes at each other across the kitchen. Fifi bought land from Mammaw's father and started the Rosemound Farm (a dairy at that time). Because of the fighting, I really hated going to the farm.

When my mom and dad married, my dad had just gotten out of the service, WWII. He and Fifi did not agree on many things (how to treat women, how to treat people from different cultures and races, and more). They had words and Mama and Daddy struck out on their own.

These early family influences on me were significant and contribute greatly to the complexity in what I am calling my identity crisis. Much of this piece focuses on the farm and Daddy's family but both sides were instrumental in the complexity of my life.

There are writers who portray Appalachian people as deprived (Deliverance), entertaining and ignorant (Beverly Hillbillies). There are also writers who romanticize Appalachia, focusing on its natural beauty and the incredible music and dance. I have experienced the extremes and as most stereotypes do, they represent pieces of the whole but they are incomplete portrayals of the Appalachia I have known and do not represent the Truth of the region.

My early years were spent on farms in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. We left KY when I was 12 and that is when I learned I was a "hillbilly." I spent my whole life dealing with hillbilly stereotypes, especially in trying to get educated and have a career despite them.

My daddy always said, "just be proud of who you are and where you are from, then they have nothing on ya." He held his Appalachian heritage dear, and held it for me. He wanted so much for me; he

wanted me to have what I wanted: to go to college, travel the world, and realize my deepest heart's desires. So, all my life, when I encountered the bias, the discrimination, the loss of perceived IQ points as soon as I opened my mouth with my Southern/Appalachian accent, I just declared that such a reaction was the other person's problem and it had nothing to do with me.

I spent much of my life outside Appalachia, assimilating into whatever culture I found myself. To do that, though, I unconsciously turned my back on my heritage as well as a piece of my own soul. I took on whatever accent I needed, talked and behaved in ways I needed to in order to fit in (well, as long as it did not go against my values then). I wanted more for my life than was possible as a hillbilly.

My strategy worked for most of my life until it didn't.

Now I feel called to better understand that Appalachian heritage and its meaning for me. It is time to do that work that goes way back, even to exploring the lives of my ancestors in new ways.

Recently, I was having a conversation with Silas House, an Appalachian writer, telling him about my identity crisis. He said, "Jennifer, it sounds like you feel guilty." I felt the truth deeply, and quickly responded, "NO, not guilt, it's LOSS." Even as a respected academic, Silas has refused to give up his Appalachian accent and calls it "Accent as Activism." I SO admire and respect that.

I

I grew up on five different farms in Kentucky. My paternal grandparents (Mammaw and Fifi Elam) had a farm that had been in Mammaw's family since the 1790's, the Rosemound Farm.

Fifi's parents from the mountains had passed before I was born. Fifi was a hard-working farmer but something always felt WRONG or OFF, even abusive when I spent time on the farm."

On the other side of his family, my father loved his maternal grandparents, the Beattys, dearly. As a young child, his parents got divorced (and later re-married) and during those years he lived with Grandma and Grandpa Beatty. Everything I ever heard about them was wonderful – not a negative word about them anywhere. One day my father was telling me how great his grandparents were. Then with a sad look on his face, he said, "Grandpa Beatty and I only had one disagreement in our whole lives but it was a big one. We did not agree on how to treat black people."

II

That was all I ever heard about it. So this much is guesswork. Someone recently asked me if there were slaves on the farm. I never heard any stories of slaves on the farm. My impression was that this part of my family took the side of the north in the Civil War, supported the Union. Kentucky was a border state, caught in the middle.

When I was growing up, there was a black family, the Millers, living on the farm. Hugh and Nannie Miller had nine children and Huberta was the oldest in their family and was only a few months younger than me, also the oldest child and grandchild in the family.

Hugh and my dad grew up together. My dad caused a commotion in the family because he asked questions like, "Why does Hugh have to ride a different bus from me to go to school?" My father asked for integration and equality in many ways, even as a foreman later at International Harvester. He had many disagreements with his father and this was one.

Huberta is still one of my closest friends. She now lives in the house her parents bought in Jimtown, still a "black" neighborhood, when they left the Rosemound Farm. Her family has struggled as has ours, in different ways. Now, when I go to Kentucky, I stay with Huberta and am very happy about

that. When my parents needed care, she had just retired and became a caregiver, a faithful caregiver and dear friend. I don't know what we would have done without her.

In recent times, Huberta and I have talked about racism and how it plays out in her life. She said she has been very lucky (I would say Huberta is exceptionally kind to people, white and black). She did tell me about an incident with police; she was stopped and harassed by the Lexington police because they said there is no way she could afford to drive a nice vehicle like she has. They, of course, could not acknowledge that, like me, she has worked two and sometimes three jobs most of her life to make ends meet and to have the things she now has.

I asked Huberta if she ever heard of their being slaves on the Rosemound Farm. She said no and that it would be hard for her to believe that there were. Then my sister found a bill of sale for a human being in my grandmother's possessions; my heart shattered.

The greatest gift given to me by the Millers and by my father is that, according to a friend, I am one of the slowest people I know to "other" people for their racial or cultural differences.

III

As I said, when my parents got married, my father was recently out of the service and had many ideas that were different from his father. Their divide was somewhat along the lines of the Republican and Democratic party divides of today (differences about racial issues, women, people who are different, and more).

To clarify though, as extreme as it seemed then for a son to disagree with his father, nothing resembled the hate that divides today's world. Loyalty to family is one of the deepest Appalachian expectations and that was not broken in the disagreements.

Anyway, my dad struck out on his own. He was my model for independence and critical thinking that has been so important in my life. He earned his independence from the limited thinking of his father, relating to those who are different and relating to women in more respectful ways. And he always said, "we are not poor, we just don't have money."

When I was born, babysitters were not common. My parents worked together through long hard days on the farm. While they worked, as a toddler, I stayed in the play pen and my dog, Lady, stayed with me. She was my closest friend and companion. A lot happened while I was in that play pen.

As a young child, I have many childhood memories of going with my mother to pick up black walnuts and pop bottles on the side of the road for money to buy food. Back then when a person bought a bottle of pop, a deposit was paid on the bottle. So, when we turned the bottles back in, we got some money. Hard work was important as were habits of thrift, spending our money only for priorities.

Other than weekly visits to family and going to Sunday School, my family lived a fairly isolated life on the farm. Socializing was not something we had time for. When I started to Trapp Elementary school, I was in shock to see so many kids. I had no idea there were that many kids in the world. There must have been at least a hundred. I had no idea how to socialize or what to talk about with them. I ended up not talking in school and many people thought I could not talk at all. Today I would be called a "selective mute." (Nobody can believe that now.)

When I was about four, my uncle who was my father's youngest brother was killed in a car accident. We were never to speak of him again. Then when I was ten, Lady, my best friend and companion, died violently, when a neighbor poisoned her. Those shocks became lessons where I learned to feel grief but also learned that we don't talk about feelings. It took me a lot of work to overcome those unhealthy lessons.

But some feelings were spoken, even shouted. My daddy always told the story of me while working in the tobacco field one day at age 8, raising my arms to the heavens, saying, “God, I don’t know what it is, but I want to go to college.” We moved to Illinois when I was 12.

My prayers were answered and I did go to college.

IV

But college came much later. In the fifth grade, my family went into crisis. As the first-born child on both sides of the family, I was loved and adored, spoiled even in some ways. I was also given large responsibilities for house cleaning, cooking, caring for the younger siblings, driving the truck or tractor for the men to pick up hay bales, and working in the tobacco patch. We could not make a living on the farm, despite the hard, never-ending work. We ended up living in the housing projects in town. I loved having so many kids around and it was a very different life. But soon, we moved again.

My Daddy, my Mama, my three sisters and two dogs all got on what I later learned was the “Hillbilly Highway,” and moved north to a working-class town, Carpentersville, Illinois, northwest of Chicago. My parents got jobs in factories; my Daddy worked at International Harvester and my Mama worked at Revcor and made blower wheels for fans.

In Carpentersville we all learned we were “hillbillies.” My daddy always said, “Just be proud of being a hillbilly, and they have nothing on you.” But that was harder than it sounds and I acquired a habit of assimilating blindly, and not talking much. I struggled in Illinois and at age 16 went to live with my mother’s mother, Nana, in Dayton. I went to college there and got my Bachelor’s degree in Psychology at Wright State University, then a master’s degree in Sociology/Criminology at Miami of Ohio, and later a master’s degree in Psychology at Eastern Kentucky University.

My parents worked in the factories until the International Harvester plant closed its doors, twenty plus years after moving to Illinois. Then he and Mom returned to Kentucky, with what they hoped were the resources to make the farm work. In Kentucky dad got a job working for the Small Business Development Center, helping businesses in eastern Kentucky. He had earned his master’s degree by then – one or two classes at a time over many years.

By then, I had also returned to Kentucky and was teaching in the community college system. I had studied different cultures and systems analysis and loved thinking about big picture institutional issues and how all the pieces work together. This way of thinking was helpful throughout my life. But, when I am with a detail-oriented person, sometimes we find it hard to communicate. I need to see the big picture before the details make sense to me.

I loved my job teaching. I coordinated a small program in Human Services and got close to many women who were coming back to school after raising their families. Dad loved his job helping small businesses to survive and thrive under challenging conditions. I will never forget his delight as he would tell simple stories of a woman running a little grocery store and making it work or a disabled man making a small business of his wood carvings. We both considered those years to be highlights of our lives.

That era ended in 1986 when my program was cut and a couple of years later Dad had a heart attack.

Then I did what I had always done – went back to college. At the University of North Carolina, I got a Ph.D. in School Psychology in 1990 with an emphasis in Early Intervention, working with three- and four-year-olds. I have come to deeply believe in the efficacy of solving problems early and preventing problems later. While in Chapel Hill, I had the distinct and unique opportunity to take a traditional family therapy class at the same time that I took a class on working with families of young children using a strength-based model of education.

The essence of that approach is not to ignore problems but not to focus on them either. The focus is on identifying and building strengths for a foundation resilient enough to hold the problems until they can be solved – not a bad way to think about much of life.

V

I studied, researched, practiced and taught psychology from 1969 until 2014. For the rest of my professional life after going to UNC and serving as a one-year faculty at Eastern KY University, I worked in some capacity as a School Psychologist for very young children. I worked on a collaborative grant between the University of KY and my school district, supervising interns, and worked for the last 13 years of my career as a School Psychologist with Preschoolers in eastern Pennsylvania. I had worked as a psychologist with all ages and with many disability groups but the early intervention work was my favorite.

Then, in 2005, I got a new boss, a Mainliner (that means a person from what is called the “Main Line” of Philadelphia – it seems to me that many such believe themselves superior to others) and proud of it. She was sure I knew nothing about psychology. Her bias was so evident – and I hear mine in this story. For the first time in my life, my strategy of considering the bias of others as not my problem did not work. She had too much power and wanted my work done her way. She had no training in working with preschoolers nor in psychology. She KNEW that the proper role of psychologists was to diagnose and support the use of medication. She had no knowledge of the potential negative impact of that on 3-year-olds nor did she know about a more evidence-based approach for that age group. She just KNEW...

That boss and breast cancer with complications brought an end to my career in 2014.

Even so, my work with young children and schools did not feel finished.

For a month after my retirement, I had to go on You Tube and listen to, “The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round...” If you are around little children, you have heard that song. I heard it every day for years and wanted to hear it a little longer.

VI

Throughout my young life, my Mama took us to Sunday School. There I learned valuable lessons that have served me well, though many lessons had to be fine-tuned later in life:

Honor your parents; but the translation became obey authority figures and all adults are authority figures.

Love your neighbor as yourself and everyone is your neighbor; but they forgot to tell me that I was supposed to love myself too. But I am still so grateful for the early foundations I learned in Sunday School. I was very close to my mother when I was young; we worked together on all aspects of feeding the family and farming. She helped me with my Arithmetic after I helped her strip the tobacco. As a teenager, I began to question aspects of her religion. But, when she was put down by others for her religion, I always supported her right to her religion, even though I could not expect that in return because her religion was not tolerant of others who believe differently. When we moved to Illinois, we attended a church in the Latino section of Chicago. Both my mother and my father invited friendships with people of all races and cultures. When I moved to Ohio, I attended Nana’s Methodist church for a while. Soon I quit going to church but my relationship with God remained important to me.

Years later, while a college student in Chapel Hill from 1986-1990, a friend, Dr. Glenn, said to me one day, “Jennifer, YOU are a Quaker.”

Well, knowing just about nothing about Quakers, I had no idea what that meant. But, after UNC, I came back to live in Berea, Kentucky and in 1991 my neighbor across the street invited me to Quaker meeting. I remembered what Dr. Glenn had said and accepted the invitation.

Once in the meeting, I felt at home in a way that I had not felt in any faith community in my life. I WAS a Quaker; the silence appealed to me. The social justice appealed to me. The contemplative spirituality fit.

In 1993, Parker Palmer, a well-known author, was a Lily professor at Berea College and joined Berea Friends/Quaker meeting. I did not know he was famous as a writer in the fields of education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change, or I would never have had the nerve to approach him, but he “spoke to my condition” as Quakers would say. I asked him many times to help me understand Quakers...and he did. As a psychologist, I had many questions about the overlap in the many fields of his expertise. He suggested more immersion in Quakerism by studying at Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania. I complied.

At Pendle Hill, I jumped in to learn about the early Quakers and how their lessons can be applied today, about the contemplative life, about the Gospels from a perspective different from the one I had grown up with, and much more.

Most surprising of all, arts and spirituality became a focus for me; not as a fun exercise with children but creativity as a core spiritual connection with the Divine – though children often know more about that connection than adults can know. Many adults, like me, learned at a young age that art was for “talented” people and that is not me/us. At Pendle Hill, with Arts and Spirituality teacher, Sally Palmer, I unlearned and re-learned the important lessons about the importance of creativity and spirituality. Creation Spirituality remains a foundational piece of my faith and Creativity remains the foundational core of my hope for the world. Creative expression and thinking are needed today in all areas: education, politics, religion, economics, all of it.

VII

In my early 40’s, I had many dreams about the play pen of my toddlerhood. I dreamed that a very large Jesus was helping me to step out of that play pen. Then, I dreamed I was on a beautiful beach with Jesus, after climbing out of the play pen. Each step of growth and independence has seemed like another step in the climb out of that play pen.

This led to a major research (listening to about a hundred people’s direct experiences of God) and writing project that I called “*Dancing with God through the Storm: Mysticism and Mental Illness*,” an integration of my spirituality and my profession.

As I was retiring, I heard a calling to care for my parents. During their last five years, they lived for each other, in their own home.

In 2012, my Daddy got sick, the first of four periods of time during which he needed extended care. I was on sabbatical and had career intentions that had to change. I spent four weeks in the hospital with him. I kept hearing a calling to care for my parents in their aging and also heard that it would be hard.

I said, “Yes” to this call, but had no idea how hard the hard parts would become, what was waiting for me. Being close to my parents my whole life and early on internalizing the rock-solid commitment to family, it seemed quite natural that I would care for them. My daddy needed me to navigate the medical system and run his farm business ...a great joy!

I felt that chance to be the greatest blessing of my life. Coming back into my parents’ household for extended periods of time, I learned that some major things had changed in my family. In 2009, we had bought a house for my parents next to the farm that had been family-owned since 1794. After his heart

attack and leaving his work at the Small Business Development Center in 1987, my dad had spent his last years pursuing his truest passion: farming the family farm and walking through his favorite pastures. In 2012, he continued to farm once out of the hospital.

In 2014, while mowing hay, the steering wheel broke and he was knocked off his vintage tractor. While falling he grabbed the steering wheel; with no safety catches in place, after knocking him into the mower, the tractor circled back around and ran over him. I cared for my daddy again. Amazingly, he survived but was back into the hospital for three weeks. Then after five more weeks, he was back to farming, baling hay in his pastures.

In the fall of 2015 and into 2016, Daddy got colon cancer with major complications. This time it was four months in the hospital and rehab. I, again, spent so much time with him there. Then he began supervising the farming rather than working it himself. I managed his business. In December of 2017, I got a call that he was unable to swallow. After a month of intensive hospital and hospice care, and a fierce struggle for life, on January 14th of 2018, he died.

My Mama and Daddy had been living for each other for the last five years. Mama died six days later. I was shocked but not surprised. Had they lived three more months, until Daddy's 92nd birthday, they would have been married 70 years. She was his birthday present when they married on his 22nd birthday.

VIII

During the years of parent care, our country became increasingly divided to a violent degree, as did Kentucky. Sadly, my parents' household became a microcosm of that violence. Coming back, I found myself targeted and labeled as "evil" for my religion, my politics, and my educated ways.

IX

When my parents died in January of 2018, I was dealing with major trauma. Since then, I have also spent a great deal of time learning to settle two complicated estates. For survival, I have done enormous amounts of writing, art and dancing. I have done two art shows called "Between Trauma and Redemption" and "Hidden Love Emerging/Healing Love Evolving". Mediating trauma through creative expression is now a passion. "Redemption" is a word I heard in church as a youngster, did not like and did not understand as I do now. Now, it is a bedrock piece of my faith. Although I have led a life of unbelievable blessings, I have also lived enormous challenges. Experiencing the dividedness then recognizing that dividedness had spread across the nation has been the greatest challenge of my life.

I KNOW that in the past when I look back on my life events, consistently, after something has happened that seems horrible at the time, something amazing has then happened that would not have happened if the challenge had not been there. I believe that will be the case now. I KNOW deep within me that I did not experience the Hell of hateful activities close up for nothing. Such HAS to have purpose in training me for something. This is my definition of redemption.

I am now fully out of the play pen. Since January, 2018 I have used all of the resources gathered in my life: deep faith and prayer, close community, education, creativity, therapeutic strategies, writing, sacred dance, and more to survive these major traumas. I am healing and I am listening. I now believe that civil conversations among people who are different are the best hope we have for our country.

And I just acquired a piece of that farm. The cows still roam the pastures. The barns and fences need to be fixed and painted. All around this shabby beef farm are fancy hobby farms. My daddy loved that farm but in his '80's and '90's, he was not able to keep it up. I must be his daughter, because despite

all my years in cities and the degrees and professional work, there is still something about walking across those pastures and seeing a calf has just been born that is unlike any feeling I get anywhere else in the world.

Are those barns and fences just art media waiting to be transformed into what is next? What is the creative/spiritual potential in that land now?

There is an Indian mound on the farm from 2000 years ago. I stand on that Adena mound and pray. I ask the land what is its desire for now. The land served the Native Americans of long ago. My family has served and been served there for over two centuries.

I recently inherited the farm with my three sisters. Two wanted to sell, one has built a house on it and wants her piece of the farm in her name. I am trying to buy 80 acres and my piece of the planet to seek healing for. The pressure is on. I don't want to sell, but the dilemmas are huge. We used to be able to get farm help fairly easily. But, not any more. Also, the labor of people from other countries needing work is gone. The people from Mexico have gone to Canada or been deported. These days most people will not do the kind of work needed to keep a farm going. The next generation appear not interested and appear to feel no responsibility or connection with their ancestors.

So, will I sell my part? I don't know yet but the options seem limited and this is a major factor underlying this "identity crisis." I recently found a good farmer and his son to work the land; I am grateful.

I had a nightmare recently. I woke up with an image of the farm. Everything was gone; no more barns, fences, cows, horses, sheds, tractors, nothing – just rolling hills of green grass. There was no hint that my family had ever occupied that land, even though they had been there for over two centuries. That is exactly what would happen if I sold it to the hobby farmers.

Could I bear that? Would my ancestors stay in their graves; or just rise up in horror? What is God saying? What is the land saying about what is next?

X

My father's desire to honor our heritage was one I have come to highly respect. I have not seen such hard work and loyalty to family anywhere else in the world. When I asked Daddy about what is Appalachian culture, his answer was brilliant. He said, "there is no such thing. In the mountains, the force most likely to affect one's behavior is the family and the groups that the family is a part of; they used to be called clans. There is nothing that anyone could identify that would be the same across Appalachia. Even the geography of what is considered Appalachia incorporates many different backgrounds, many different countries that people came from, different everything." In the bluegrass, there are rural and urban differences; dissertations have been written about that. And now within the bluegrass, there are huge differences between hobby farmers (those who have beautiful spaces with horses for tax write-off purposes) and real farmers.

"Well, Papa, what is a hillbilly?" I then asked.

"I don't know," he said. The only thing we could come up with was that a hillbilly is what people elsewhere called people with southern accents in order to put them down (and feel better about themselves) – all based on stereotypes and not much we could identify as real. Depictions of people as ignorant, lazy and drug-addicted can be found everywhere in America. I call them Soul of America problems. And where those conditions exist in Appalachia, there are deep historical influences that have led to the poverty underlying the dysfunctions.

Some scholars seem to agree with my Papa's lived observations. The Appalachian historian Richard Drake wrote:

I am reminded of a survey I made of colleagues here at Berea a few years ago when I asked the resident regional experts—about twelve of them, as I remember—how they defined “Appalachia.” No two definitions were alike, and the two sociologists in my survey, in fact, came to opposite conclusions about whether or not there was an Appalachian culture.

But, just because I can’t find identifying characteristics of the culture beyond the beauty of nature and the music, there are things about being from Appalachia that have affected me much of my life. I left Kentucky and came back many times, as did my father, as did my grandfather, as did my great grandfather – for economic reasons, for college, for the army, for adventures, and more.

And I’ve had the experience of repeatedly being judged negatively for being from Appalachia, for being a “hillbilly,” whatever that exactly is.

My being from Kentucky always gets reactions from others – from talking about the Derby to not talking but assuming a lot about who I am, how smart I am (and am not), what I like to do, and much more. I have repeatedly encountered anti-hillbilly bias even among those who verbalize a great commitment to equality and a great political correctness about people of color (but it is not a contest). In many circles I’ve been in, where bias toward most others is not OK, bias against “hillbillies” is just fine. Sometimes the stereotypes are so accepted that they are not even recognized or talked about.

Appalachian people like everyone else are doing the best they can with what they have. They go left, right, left, right through the day, through the years, wanting what is best for their families and especially for their children.

America is having a crisis of faith, a crisis of meaning, a crisis of purpose, a crisis of humanity, a crisis of leadership in the world...

America is in crisis. It is not just Appalachia. The poverty that Appalachian mountain people have endured has been going on since the Civil War.

I asked my Daddy about the economic difficulties in the mountains. He summarized centuries of history in this way: In the Civil War, Kentucky was a border state. The North came through and took the horses. The South came through and took the cows. The people were left with no way to live on the land. Just as they were about to recover from war, the coal companies came in and took the land. Economic troubles have a long history there.

And what is unique about Appalachia that is not true of America? I can’t find much. I struggle with these realities.

XI

I love old-time Appalachian music with banjos and flat footin’ or clog dancin’. That is the best of Appalachia.

I know that in my own experiences of living and traveling many places in the world, I have experienced some of the smartest, most well-read people in the world in Appalachia. I have encountered people who have the most amazing ability to do a wide variety of things, not just their professions but can fix the car, fix the furnace, fix the plumbing, fix anything, kinds of folks. I have not encountered that quality to the same degree anywhere beyond Appalachia.

I have encountered people of the deepest faith and those with the most alive sense of creativity in Appalachia. I have seen women can food and practice habits of thrift in ways I have never seen elsewhere. I heard the phrase “waste not, want not” a lot when I was growing up. Today, in Kentucky and all over I see an American problem with waste: waste of health by eating processed, unhealthy food and smoking cigarettes because these are the cool things to do and youth feel invincible, waste of gasoline

because big pick-up trucks are cool, waste of talent needed so badly because skipping school and involvement with drugs and the multitude of “screens” is cool.

This list could go on and on. There are so many incredible gifts among many Appalachian people, habits of thrift, learning and growing, serving self and others, and faith need to be embraced as the new cool.

We need a “new cool.” Could we start it here? There is the talent in Appalachia to take this bull by the horns.

XII

The extremes as described in the media are out there but most of Appalachian life is represented by the pictures of families having dinner, a child going to school, a kid on a bicycle, a man chopping wood, a mom making dinner, and all the ordinary amazing things that people all over the USA/world are seen doing every day.

I have walked left, right, left, right through the extraordinary dailiness of commitment to family that the media’s extremes never speak of. And I left Kentucky to make and claim my own different life too. Now, the question is, what will be my legacy in this complex heritage. I don’t know the answer yet. But I am working hard every day to give the questions the discernment time and energy they deserve as I seek to clarify my own identity in this complex and amazing heritage I have been given. I translate my Daddy’s words: “Just be proud of who you are...then anywhere is home.” The time has come to heal the wounds, celebrate the joys and write/share the poems that Silas speaks of. I want Quakers and people everywhere to appreciate the beauty of my Appalachian heritage that I have come to love, through my complex identity crisis and a life-time of always going back to Kentucky after being elsewhere, a life of traveling that Hillbilly Highway. It is time for Quakers both inside the region and out to take up the huge social justice work needed to promote equality for Appalachians. It is time for the effects of the Civil War in which people who happen to be from the Northern part of the United States are seen as superior to people from the Southern part of the United States; time for that war to be over and all declared EQUAL. I pray for the day when we can keep our beautiful accents, be acknowledged as equal, and live in the strength of the values promoted in this special place called Appalachia. May this equality be the roots of blossoming in all other arenas including education, physical and mental health, and economics! I keep getting an image of driving through eastern Kentucky and seeing wind turbines and solar panels, everywhere...along with children playing, and parents chopping wood and hanging the clothes on the clothesline to dry, a deep integration of the best of the old and the best of a new Appalachia.

Life Lessons I Learned at a Young Age that have Served Me Well and Can’t Be Taken for Granted (Not that I Live Them Perfectly Nor Do You Have to Live them Perfectly to Live Them Well):

And all have had to be tweaked along the way for deeper meanings in their application

Ten Commandments

The ten commandments have their equivalent in all of the major religions and provide a good starting point in the commitment to quality life.

Sunday School with Tweaks and Nana’s Wisdom (with a touch of personal experience thrown in)
Early Sunday School made the elusive commandments more understandable for daily life.

Serve God, Self and Others well

Tell the Truth (knowing the complexities of Truth)

Honor your parents (and they don't have to know EVERYTHING you do as an adult); honor your heritage and ancestors
Listen to your teachers (teachers are everywhere)
Work hard (and don't become a workaholic so that it takes over your life)
Have big dreams and try new things
Keep your Promises
Develop Habits of Thrift (Know the difference between wants and needs; wants come and go)
Do your best; Know your best is good enough and know better is possible
Say please and thank you often and mean it
Remember you are loved; Listen to my Mama who always said, "I love you and don't you forget."
Laugh a lot; humor is important
Listen to Nana and eat your veggies and exercise; everything is a lot easier with good health
Think about (discern) what is good for you while not hurting others; aspire for win/wins
Accept others who are different from you as equals
Look for the good in yourself and others (equality for yourself and others)
Acknowledge and deal with addictions
Find healthy ways to express all kinds of emotions
Fall in love with mother nature; fall in love with something or someone every day
Sing and dance every day whether you think you can or not
Be aware and careful who and what you declare loyalty to
Let go of the cynicism that is easy to fall into
Pay attention to what you are doing and the ramifications of all you do
Pay attention to what is happening around (don't put your head in the sand when things are wrong; stand up)
The world is big; explore it; people in far places become more equal and like you when you get to know them
When you are afraid, say so; be careful who you say it to
Be a good deep listener in the Silence and with others
Share your life and connect with others
Be kind to self and others; learn what that really means beyond politeness
Honor integration and equality for all (even Hillbillies)
We all think in stereotypes; be aware of the stereotypes you use to understand the world, who they help and who they hurt
Say your prayers/meditate (and know that means something different for different people)
Be intentionally thankful (many times a day)
Listen and Follow your deepest knowings (in what you do with your life, big and small decisions)
The mysteries of the Universe are SO big; be careful what you KNOW...and be aware of who you impose your KNOWINGS upon
Walk your talk
Find the compassionate place in your heart and live there
"Anything worth doing is worth doing well" doesn't mean perfectly; desire for excellence is not perfectionism; perfectionism stifles real life
Live humbly; share vulnerabilities and discern with whom and how
Support with Accountability can work magic in moving life forward with good discernment
Know that opposites often meet and come to mean the same thing; that is the place where creation sparks (destruction can also spark there; choose wisely)

Both/ands often work better than either/or's
God is BIG enough to handle differences of name and beliefs about it all

Be sure all of these have ever-changing deep meanings and are more than words and clichés in your life.

Note: Appalachian Upbringing

My upbringing has served me well during the 2020 pandemic and the hard times. I want to honor my parents for helping to prepare me for this difficult time. Appalachian fierce Love is helpful in this time when everything seems so difficult. I heard that 2020 is the year that turned everything upside down. The lessons I learned as a young child have served me well. 2021 got harder. My upbringing helped me survive but there came some new ways of thinking and challenges I did not foresee. I hope I survive. I believe 2022 is bringing some NEW LIFE possibilities.