

**AFTERWORD:
PLACES
WHERE
THE WIND
CARRIES THE
ASHES OF
ANCESTORS**

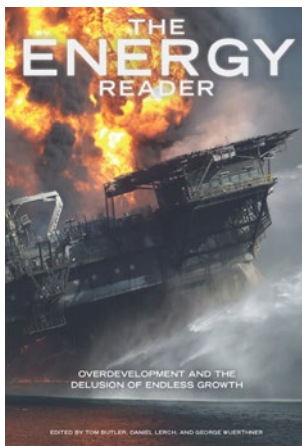
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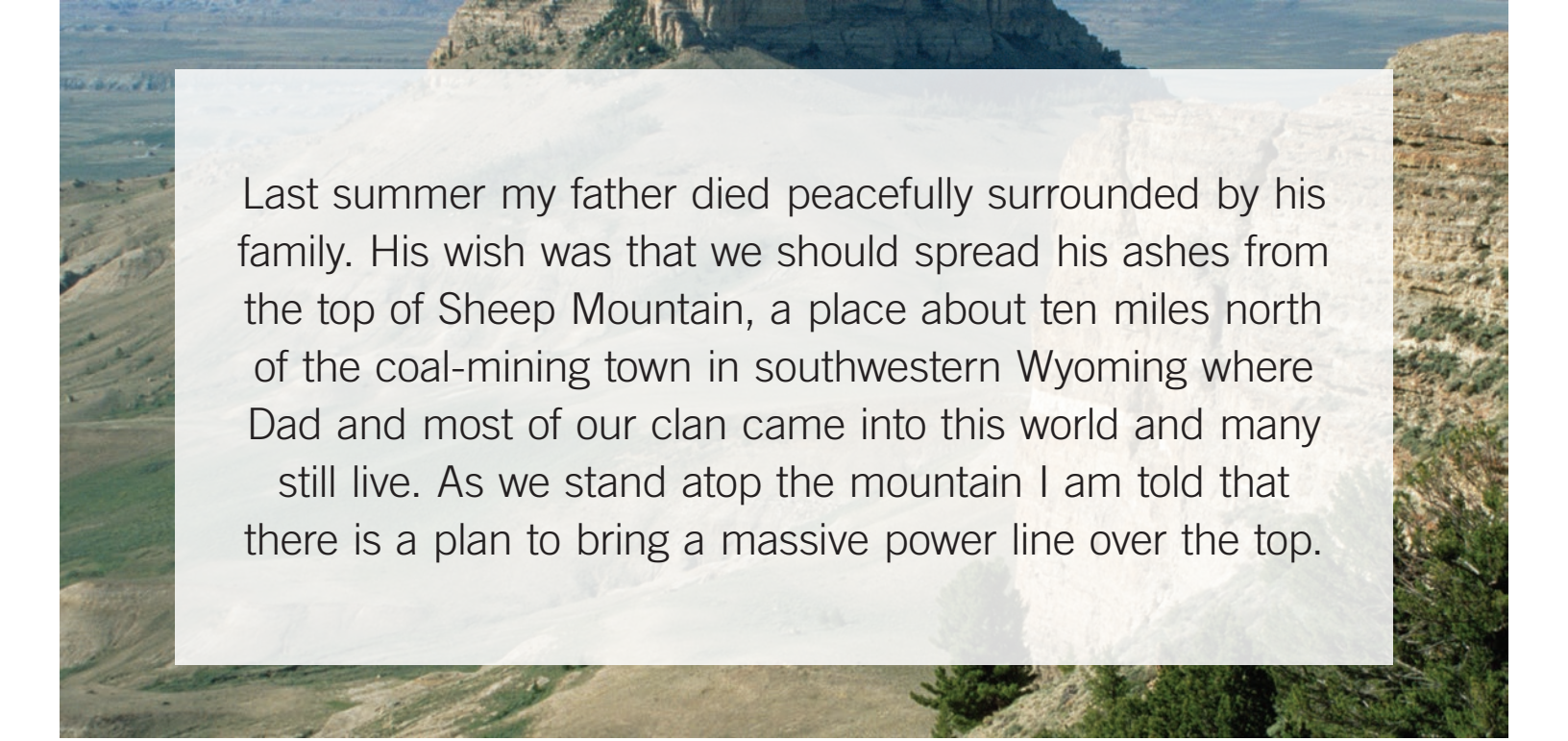
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Photo: George Wuerthner. *The seemingly endless open space of Wyoming's Red Desert country is being carved up by energy development.*



Last summer my father died peacefully surrounded by his family. His wish was that we should spread his ashes from the top of Sheep Mountain, a place about ten miles north of the coal-mining town in southwestern Wyoming where Dad and most of our clan came into this world and many still live. As we stand atop the mountain I am told that there is a plan to bring a massive power line over the top.

We can be sympathetic to Adam Smith's preoccupation with the wealth of nations. After all, if we were still in the undeveloped world economy of the late eighteenth century, with less than a billion people, his preoccupation might be understandable. We now stand in a different economic world, a world dominated by exponential growth curves, a "full world" in Herman Daly's vernacular. Energy consumption and production, population, carbon dioxide emissions, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, and many more barometers of our imbalance all grow explosively. Perhaps poverty too is growing exponentially, since there are more impoverished people on the planet now than were alive at the time that Adam Smith was writing his tome on capitalism. Clearly our economic experiment with increasing the wealth of nations has not been an unmitigated success.

We live in a mature capitalist economy where the dynamic and logic as well as the internal contradictions of our economic system are fully developed and revealed. The logic and imperative of growth, punctuated with cyclical and secular stagnation, inequality, and unemployment define our economic landscape. Our method for solving these systemic problems is to encourage growth. Yet at the same time we have hit a biophysical wall. Clearly we confront economic contradictions with no easy resolution.

It isn't surprising that with this daunting situation we focus our hope on the technological possibilities of green energy and the belief that well-informed markets will provide it. We understand that there is an intimate dance between market capitalism and energy; clearly they are inextricably connected. The problem is that the cheap availability of fossil fuel which accommodated the full flowering of industrial capitalism has given us a distorted picture of what is possible and has set us on an unsustainable path. In order to keep our immense economic machine moving, the historical oddity of abundant cheap energy has now become an economic necessity and an expectation for the future.

The reality is this: We are making the transition out of fossil fuel later than we should, because *the vested interests* find this the best course for business—but it is clearly not the best course for society. The interest of business is to extract every morsel of fossil fuel that can be economically retrieved, no matter what the ecological consequences. And we should remind ourselves that it isn't clear that green energy will satisfactorily fill the void. In the final chapter of our use of fossil fuels we will commit ourselves to the messiest, dirtiest, most socially and economically disruptive transition we can possibly muster unless we are willing to change course. We now retreat behind our dominant ideologies—the promise of the entrepreneurial spirit and technological prowess—for guidance, and we fail to see that these are no longer

the solutions to the problems of our civilization. They are palliatives at best.

We might consider whether we are simply in need of closing the final chapter of our grand experiment with excess and the relentless domestication of the planet that requires ever-increasing amounts of energy. This would necessitate something more fundamental than a technological energy fix forged by entrepreneurial motivations. Perhaps the real question of progress is not how to forge a new energy frontier, but how to forge a different model of economic organization and purpose, a model that isn't predicated on never-ending growth and a belief that there are no real biophysical limits.



LAST SUMMER MY FATHER—son of immigrant and homesteader parents, World War II and Korean War veteran and patriot—died peacefully surrounded by his family. His wish was that we should spread his ashes from the top of Sheep Mountain, a place about ten miles north of the coal-mining town in southwestern Wyoming where Dad and most of our clan came into this world and many still live. After my father's memorial service, my extended family gathered in the parking lot of the Jubilee grocery store to load into the available vehicles and make the pilgrimage to the top of this sacred mountain. It is a ridge sitting at about 10,000 feet where the wind could be relied on to carry the ashes of my father. The top is bare, craggy, and weathered, and a few ancient and resilient limber pine hang on the edge that drops off into the vast Wyoming landscape. The exposed sandstone, the remnants of ancient seas, is covered with orange, gray, and black lichens. Nothing survives here without steadfast purpose.

I can look out and see for hundreds of miles into the high desert steppe of southwestern Wyoming and the places my father roamed for over ninety years: Whiskey Basin, Cow Hollow, the Fontenelle Basin, the Hamsfork drainage, the Wind Rivers off in the distance. These are the places that defined his life, and he always felt privileged by his destiny. But this place is also part of the Wyoming overthrust belt and so, looking out, I

can see the once great expanse of wildness dotted with gas fields. The air is filled not with the clarity of the past but with the dust and ozone of the present. The empty spaces are now punctuated with the indelible markings of our energy diet. And not simply gas and oil wells and all of their paraphernalia, but windmills too—they're popping up everywhere, further altering the once empty horizon.

As we stand atop the mountain I am told by my nephew, Phil, that there is a plan to bring a massive power line over the top of Sheep Mountain. In the push for energy this sacred ground will be sacrificed. The world is littered with the sadness of such choices. People everywhere, the Ogoni of the Nigerian Delta, the Aysen People of Patagonia, the Aihuar of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Mashpee Wampanoag of Cape Cod, the Aquinnah Wampanoag of Martha's Vineyard, the Marcellus Shale People of Central New York, the Mountaintop-Removal People of West Virginia—and us too, the High Steppe People of Southwestern Wyoming—we all experience the violation of our sacred places. The list goes on and on. The cost-benefit analyses indicate this is our best option. I am sick to death of it.

Here where the wind blows, green energy will not stop the process of this violation—because to get the energy of the wind out of here will take great disruption, just as taking the gas and oil and coal have. In this full world I think maybe we should set aside our cost-benefit analyses and simply stop the violation of sacred places.

Herman Daly invoked the words of John Stuart Mill a long time ago when he started to think about the wisdom of ending economic growth on a biophysically limited planet. Mill was confused about many economic questions, but he at least understood how to pose the important ones. Here is one that hit the nail on the head: "If the earth must lose the great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a happier or better population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels

them to it.” Energy will eventually compel us to be stationary but we should take Mill’s words to heart. Perhaps it would be wise to stop growing long before we are forced to do so.

There is a collective voice gathering force, wisdom forged out of the connection between humans and the particular places they inhabit and know to be sacred; a wisdom in contradiction with the economic forces of our time. It is necessary to find a way to let this wisdom challenge our present economic arrangements. The real question of progress is whether we can construct an economy that doesn’t defile the sacred; the resting places of the ashes and memories of our ancestors. This isn’t a question of economic value. Instead it is a question of the value of embedding ourselves in the all-sustaining and resonant magic of the Earth. It is a question of the value of greater purpose and less human hubris. It is a question of the value of appreciating that it isn’t all about us. Our energy challenge should be the catalyst to step back from the brink of this abyss before the waning hours of the fossil fuel economy alters our sense of place so irrevocably that we no longer see ourselves as Earthlings.

