First Person

MARK DeFOE

The Sago Mine Disaster: Another Way of Seeing

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Epilogue: The words below were written shortly after the Sago Mine Disaster. It's been almost six months since that terrible day. Other miners have died at the Aracoma mine in West Virginia and the Darby Mine No. 1 in Harlan County, Kentucky; miners have been rescued in Australia. Men and women continue to go down in the earth to dig coal to make our world work above-ground.

The one who did not perish at Sago—the Ishmael—miner Randal McCloy—continues to struggle toward recovery and a modicum of normalcy. The memorials to the lost miners are over; most of the public investigations and inquiries and hearings into the accident have ended. The vested interests politicians and bureaucrats and labor leaders and safety experts and scientists have had their say. The miners’ families have expressed their sorrow and outrage and dismay; some of them are going to D.C. to testify before Congress. Let’s hope someone listens. Sadly, when the economic bottom line is all that matters, it seems to take a loss of life to effect positive change in the coal industry.

“Tell all I’ll see them on the Other Side.”
Martin Toler Jr., Mine Foreman, Sago No. 1

“IT’s dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew
The danger is doubled and the pleasures are few
Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines
It’s dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.”
Merle Travis

At about 6:30 a.m. on Monday, January 2, 2006, in Upshur County, West Virginia, an explosion ripped through a section of Sago No. 1. I was up early that morning, and as I made my coffee I heard the concussion of several...
lightning strikes off to the south. We rarely have thunderstorms this time of
year. I just thought—strange weather—global warming—winters aren't what they
used to be.

The day got stranger—and more ominous. Before local channels were on
the story, CNN reported that 13 miners had been trapped at Sago. After what
seemed an eternity of waiting and heroic efforts by rescue crews, the miners
were first declared saved and then, cruelly, found to be dead, save one, Randal
McCloy, who as I write this, is in a Pittsburgh hospital. He may have permanent
brain damage. He may yet die from carbon monoxide poisoning. It is snowing
now, three days later. Outside, the West Virginia winter displays both beauty
and gloom. Everything is a shade of gray. It is very still. Occasionally, I hear a
police or fire siren. Ordinarily, I would pay little attention; now it is chilling.

I have been down in a coal mine—it’s dark and wet and full of massive
equipment that can crush you and electrical cables with 660 volts that can fry
you. Roof slate can fall. Methane can explode. Things can go terribly wrong.

I have lived in Buckhannon, the county seat of Upshur County, for 35
years, so I was closer to the scene than the millions around the world who
watched this bitter drama unfold. I did not attempt to drive out to the mine, a
scant six miles from my home. I knew they didn’t need more gawkers blocking
the road. I had no professional skills to offer. I teach English at West Virginia
Wesleyan College. I didn’t think those gathered near the mine portal to pray
for the trapped men and those rescue crews who came to pull them out of the
dark needed me to make sure their subjects and verbs agreed. My wife and I
delivered some food for the emergency workers, almost like what we do for a
funeral.

The road to Sago appeared to be clogged with “The Media,” who
descended on the area like an “eyewitness” plague. The Media seems to ignore
Appalachia, and West Virginia in particular, unless attracted by the bizarre or
horrific. They came to Upshur County armed with all their high-tech gadgery
and eager for a chance to capture candid, raw emotions in action. It’s not
nearly as dangerous as Baghdad and a lot less complex. And the natives speak
English—or at least some do, and subtitles can always be added.

The Media also came armed with Appalachian stereotypes and
oversimplifications. Actually, America’s electronic media tends to boil every
story down to a 30-second sound bite. It’s the nature of this extremely
competitive game—witness CNN, Fox, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, and every local
TV and radio outfit within 100 miles—on the scene, all of them gabbing at any
ghost of a story blowing by in the cold dark night outside the mine. In such an
environment, it’s easy to fall back on the basics, on what you think you know.
And when West Virginia is concerned, that often means the clichéd and the
stereotypical.

These reporters seemed to be trying hard to get it right, but most seemed
to have never been up a hollow before. Many needed a refresher course in
simple mechanics, physics, and chemistry. I’m sure some had covered wars and
famines. But except for a few seasoned reporters, most appeared to know little
about mining; most had never been down in a mine. The mining company
didn’t bring clarity to the situation by keeping the media literally in the distant dark during most of the ordeal. International Coal Group CEO Ben Hatfield (a famous surname in this state) looked like an executive barely holding it together, overburdened and in genuine anguish the entire 42 hours of this disaster.

Many of the media were out of their element. The road near the mine became a “street.” Reporters repeatedly referred to the “town” of Tallmansville and the “town” of Sago. Neither, at least the last time I drove out that way, had a commercial establishment of any kind. Maybe Tallmansville (frequently mispronounced “Tall Manville”) has a convenience store. But it is really over the mountain about five miles away from Sago. The media picked up the name “Tallmansville” because that’s the P.O. address. The post office is closed at Sago.

Sago is on the Buckhannon River. One of the reporters had her cameraman pan out at the river, and she remarked on its beauty. But she didn’t know the river’s name. Unknowingly, she was onto something. The state’s fastest growing industry is tourism, not coal mining.

Few of the on-camera personalities knew mining terminology. At various times the doomed miners rode down into the mine in “man cars,” “man buses,” “dollies,” “little trains.” The term they wanted was “man trip.” They groped for the word for the mine’s entrance—“portal.” A five-minute Google search turns up all these words.

Where they were covering the story suddenly became “the coal fields of West Virginia.” North central West Virginia is a long way from southern West Virginia’s Logan, McDowell, Boone, Kanawha, Wyoming, Mingo counties, the real traditional coal fields. Mining has been limited in north central West Virginia in the last 25 years. Two mines in the north of Upshur County, once owned by Bethlehem Steel, have been closed for at least a decade. Two other small mines in the county are shut down. Sago No. 1 had been typical—closed and open, boom and bust.

The truth is that before the explosion, even in West Virginia, coal had ceased to be an obsession. I’ll bet 75 percent of the local populace didn’t know the Sago mine was open. In a state of over 1.8 million souls, only about 14,000 are coal miners. Yet according to the reporting, we all suddenly became members of a “close-knit mining community,” as if everyone around had a coal tattoo. Only one miner had a Buckhannon address. Four were from Philippi, West Virginia, a town 25 miles to the northeast. The rest of the miners came from the area, but they were putting in some serious miles getting to and from work.

Another example of media myth-making occurred with the fact that Sago Baptist Church was continually shown on TV as the epicenter of all local faith. One miner’s relative said on camera she never sat in a pew in that church until that day. No discredit to local Baptists, but most West Virginians are Methodists. A good many are Roman Catholic, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.
And if Buckhannon is a coal town, it sure isn’t a stereotypical one. The college here where I teach was founded in 1890. The English department does have a course in Appalachian literature. Most of the townfolk work in education, health fields, retail enterprises, state and local government, and light industry. In and near the town are plants that make high-temperature kiln brick (owned by a French company), aluminum products, plastic pipe, split rail fence, and composite wood products. The timber industry is strong around here. Oil and natural gas companies work out of Buckhannon.

The town has at least five banks, lots of law offices, antique stores, and some houses that would sell for $500,000. It has a good local hospital, two bookstores, a Chinese restaurant, a Mexican restaurant, and several more that are far from “greasy spoons.” It has a slug of franchise food spots and an organic food store that sells sushi. It has a good many bars and maybe even more churches. There is a cell phone store and a store that sells swimming pool equipment. The phone book lists five computer businesses. The county has a new airport that will accommodate small jets.

The point of all this Chamber of Commerce spiel is that this is not exactly the backwoods. We do have some nice woods all around us, complete with deer, bear, turkey, and bobcat. But everyone is not a hunter. Gardening is big. The town has painters and sculptors and poets. Writers Jayne Anne Phillips and Stephen Coonts are from Buckhannon. State poet laureate Irene McKinney taught at West Virginia Wesleyan for years. Fiction writers Denise Giardina and Breece Pancake both went to West Virginia Wesleyan.

As in many small towns in America, citizens are involved in community service and club activities. Buckhannon has a choral society and a Rotary Club and a Moose Lodge and a Lion’s Club. People here get out of the house. They travel—to Europe and the Far East. They have been to New York City, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, D.C., Seattle, and Atlanta. They come home because they like it here in Appalachia. Some move away. Some return, driving those last few miles on those country roads John Denver sang about. He lived in Colorado. His real name was John Deutschendorf.

The media that descended on West Virginia came with a picture of the state in their heads. Maybe they got it from watching the Beverly Hillbillies. Maybe The Waltons. Maybe from Gary Cooper in Sergeant York. Or The Dukes of Hazzard. Or Deliverance. A great bottomless reservoir of cultural clichés exists in American pop culture. Appalachians are the white trash version of the American Indian—noble savages, primitive children of nature, a people doomed to sorrow and suffering, supposedly speaking Elizabethan English.

The press can be excused for some of the misunderstandings. Many of those covering this trauma were young. However, when the false report spread before midnight that 12 miners were alive, some of the reporters lost all semblance of detachment. They got involved in the story, slapping backs and shaking hands with the temporarily ecstatic families; like so many of today’s journalists, they want to be one of us, not just conduits for the dry facts.
Reporters took every opportunity to get interviewees to tell us how they “felt.” Hell, do we have to be told how someone feels who just heard that a husband, grandfather, son, uncle, fiancé is dead? It was almost comic to see the person with the mike nearly pleading with stricken family members to share their emotions. But most people who work hard at dangerous jobs don’t blather. Tough knocks come with the territory. West Virginia miners and their families certainly aren’t eager to spill their guts to outsiders. They value their privacy and their dignity.

When the news came down that all the celebration was premature, an awful mistake, the emotions did turn raw. Many had been convinced by local pastors that the prayed-for miracle had occurred. Angry and confused relatives turned on the mine owners and officials. Bitterness toward the mine owners was predictable; in this state, labor and management have literally broken into open combat in the not-so-distant past. The grieving families said they had been lied to—again.

The anger toward the messengers—the Media—was more subtle, but still real. “You may think we are dumb, but we love our families,” said one of the distraught women to the camera. West Virginians know how they are often portrayed—as foreign as the citizens of Albania. As crude rustics. As Bible-toting, uneducated rubes. As violence-prone rednecks. As half-witted good ol’ boys. As snake handlers. As rural degenerates. Naturally enough, West Virginians are suspicious of people who display their ignorance and insensitivity by calling them “Virginians.” Who think Richmond is the state capitol. It is West—by God—Virginia!

Who is to blame for what happened? There is enough blame to go around. Why did the state let this mine open without a permit? Why did the state and federal mine safety officials permit International Coal Group, the mine owners, to control all public information and rescue operations? Where was the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA)? Why was a mine with so many safety violations allowed to operate? Why is it so easy for wealthy men like Wilbur Ross to purchase bankrupt companies and turn a profit? Some people call him an entrepreneur. Some call him a bottom feeder. Why is mine rescue equipment so primitive and outdated? Why do the rescue packs not seem to work? Why do miners carry only one hour of oxygen? Why is the notorious Omega Block being used to seal off potentially dangerous mined-out areas? Where is the UMW?

The upshot is cruel, gut-twisting, and soul-wracking pain. It is a story of confusion and delay and misunderstanding—and yes, maybe greed and malfeasance. The explosion itself may have been the result of a sequence of natural and manmade incidents and interactions—lightning and gas wells and coal mines. Others think the mine was “gassy,” and that the fault lays with the company, not God. The ultimate tragedy may be that the miners didn’t have to die, that with foresight this deadly accident could have remained a non-fatal incident.

All of these recent events seem to me a sad, contemporary version of the old days of mining. Men still go down in the earth because they have to feed a
family. Some of them take pride in the work. Some of them grow to like the life. Most tolerate it. They go every day where I would not have the courage to go. They keep my lights burning, obviously, at a human cost. My heart does ache, cliché though it may be, for their grieving families.


In the next few days and weeks, the investigations and inquiries will begin, delving into what and who went wrong. Funerals and memorials will be held for the lost, as is just and proper. The old hymns will be sung—“What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Old Rugged Cross,” “How Great Thou Art,” “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” “Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “Faithest Lord Jesus.”

The media will move on to another story. Quiet will return to the hills. Life as we know it will go on. West Virginia is a good place to live. It was a good place to raise my children. However, it is a terrible shame that 12 good men had to die to remind us who we used to be and who we still are. The truth is evasive. God waits to tell.

I hope there is a reckoning. If mining is coming back, I hope it won’t take another Blair Mountain, another mine war, to bring justice and change. West Virginia has seen too many years of exploitation by powerful outside interests. We have yet to free ourselves from those who desecrate our land and harm our citizens.

The press tried to cover the tragedy at the Sago mine. But they need to do better. They need more journalists and fewer pretty faces. They do harm when they fail to see people as complete human beings, whether the people are in Louisiana or West Virginia. They need to start discomforting the comfortable instead of comforting the distraught. If they want to be grief counselors or heroes or just regular guys and gals, they need to change jobs. We don’t need the press to give us a hug. We need them to tell us the truth. The hero role is taken—by 13 men who went down in the dark. And by others who still do the same dangerous, thankless work.