This August, my family and 4 other families took a trip to northeastern Pennsylvania to see first-hand some of the effects of fracking. There are so many stories I could potentially write about, but I want to provide a briefish sketch of our 4-day trip, with some details that I hope you find interesting! Joanna Macy’s description of the three dimensions of this revolutionary time seemed very fitting for this trip, and I feel like we experienced all three – resisting fossil fuels, building new systems, and changing of consciousness.

Building the new

Our first stop was at the Radix Center in Albany, NY (also within the blast zone of the oil trains). Scott, the founder/manager/farmer/visionary, gave us a full tour on a very, very hot & humid day (actually the whole trip was bloody hot & humid!). We picnicked under a big tree in what was once a big parking lot, but now hosts a micro-urban farm complete with goats, ducks, chickens, bees,
Styrofoam-eating bugs, silkworms, carp, and many microbes happily digesting compost and the various bi-products! We refilled our water bottles from the hose and also helped water the lush gardens that help feed the local community. It was a hopeful note to start on, and someone in my car afterwards asked, “Why can't we have a Radix Center in every neighborhood?!”

For the duration of the trip, we camped at Salt Spring Park alongside a gurgling stream and in a field perfect for star-gazing; however, we missed the Perseids due to rain & clouds. The landscape of this part of Pennsylvania is reminiscent of the foothills of the Green Mountains – small towns, rolling hills, gravel roads, old barns, many fallow fields, a bit run-down in some places. The places we saw did NOT show signs of wealth or prosperity, save a few new-ish McMansions that we suspected might be from gas profits.

**Living in Gasland**

Our first full day was led by Alex, a young, local organizer, and Vera, a retired fractivist of some fame, sadly because of the fierce vilifying she’s been subjected to by the gas companies, namely Cabot Oil & Gas. She’s been sued and threatened, but she is a tough cookie and continues to fight. The day started on a heavy note when we heard a local resident’s story about the gas leak in her well, which has finally resulted in her leaving her home, after years of living in fear of her house quite literally exploding. We saw her water buffalo, the outdoor water tank to store delivered water, and the vent on her well. She described the ways she had dealt with methane leaking into her house – showering with windows open no matter the season, opting to heat with space heaters for fear of igniting a blast if they used the furnace, and worrying about anything that might cause a spark, like cigarettes, cars backfiring, etc.

As we rolled on, Alex, at the head of the car caravan, would point out fracking drill pads, compressor stations, and pipeline routes (they make the hills looked shaved). Next, we visited a family with a hobby-scale sugaring operation, and as soon as we stepped out of the car, we could smell fumes. We learned there was a compressor station nearby, where the gas and fracking fluids are separated and vented. We didn't get a run down on the toxicity of the fumes, but
suffice to say it was pretty gross and disturbing. This family lost part of their sugar bush to a pipeline company that seized their land with an “emergency” eminent domain last winter. They welcomed us to their lake cottage for lunch and a swim before we toured the clear-cut. In bitter irony, the pipeline company was not able to procure all the permits for this pipeline, so all the dead trees are just lying there on their hillside, the pipeline sidelined for now. Heart-breaking.

We finished the day in Dimock, visiting two families who’ve been featured in the Gasland films. Their water is still not potable, and it’s likely permanently contaminated. One family reported developing rashes and scarring from exposure during showering. The other family is part of a community-owned water delivery truck. The father hauls water for his family once a week (but 6 trips!) from a local spring that has yet to be contaminated. He invited our kids to join his kids in the pool while we shared a poolside chili dinner. The deep generosity of that invitation, given that the pool water was trucked in, was not lost on me.

Looking back: the Industrial Rev

The following day, we decided to get a little historical and visit a coal mine in Scranton. Pennsylvania has seen extreme energy before. We all donned our hairnets, hardhats, and warm layers (nothin’ cuter than a 4 year old in a hardhat) before being lowered by cable car 300 ft under the surface to a welcome 52 degrees. We walked through the old coal mine and heard the gruesome tales of life in the mine – child labor, dead mules, dead canaries, and dark, dark, dark. I think we had a full range of reactions in the kids, from sign-me-up to get-me-the-hell-outta-here!

On Sunday, before heading back to Vermont, we closed our time together with a gratitude circle. People gave thanks for pool swims, new friendships, and mutual support in parenting during this challenging trip (did I mention it was hella hot & humid?). I don’t know if each individual had a change of consciousness, but, for me, my drive to create a fossil fuel abolitionist movement, to work against corporate take-over, and to fiercely give love and gratitude to all the changemakers was fully renewed.