

**Washington
County News**

P.O. Box 609
Bristol, VA 24203

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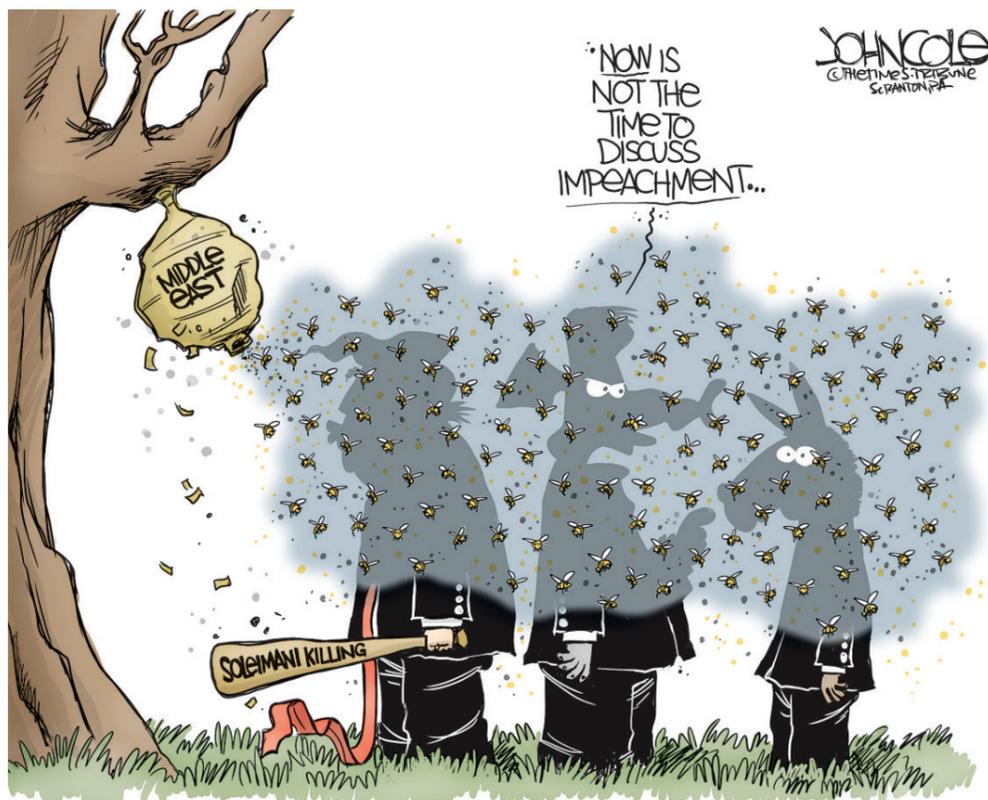
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JOHN COLE/THE SCRANTON TIMES-TRIBUNE, PENNSYLVANIA

There's actually some good news even though new proposal doesn't include Bristol in Amtrak's plans

Don't give up on the idea just yet of passenger rail service coming to Abingdon and Bristol, despite the news that a new passenger rail plan for Virginia announced recently does not include the extension of Amtrak trains from Roanoke to our region.

In fact, the proposal unveiled by Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam and executives of CSX Transportation should help end an impasse that has been preventing any consideration of expansion of service that would bring our region and perhaps even East Tennessee onto the Amtrak route map.

What the new plan eventually will do is end a railway congestion problem at the Potomac River just outside Washington, D.C., that prevents further passenger or freight rail traffic expansion because the only railroad bridge across the river is already operating at nearly full capacity.

State transportation officials have been telling us for the past year that until the rail traffic jam over the Potomac is resolved, there's essentially no hope that we'll see regular passenger service extended here.

The remedy is at hand: Northam and CSX announced that there is an agreement in the works for a \$3.7 billion project that includes money to pay for a new state-owned rail bridge over the Potomac that would be dedicated to passenger trains entering the busy rail gateway that trains into D.C. and northward must use.

According to a report in the Washington County News, the proposal would include federal, state and regional partners — including Amtrak — to fund the new bridge. The story also noted that Amtrak's board of directors "has approved a memorandum of understanding with the commonwealth that outlines its commitment."

If all the necessary approvals are obtained, the agreement could be finalized by the second half of this year, according to the Northam's announcement.

So rather than be disappointed that the new passenger rail plan doesn't include expansion of service past Roanoke now, rail planners in our region can rejoice that the key obstacle to any expansion is about to be removed.

Although Northam did not mention Southwest Virginia Amtrak service specifically, his announcement alluded to unspecified future expansion, which could very well include our region.

"We have a once-in-a-generation

opportunity to make our rail system work better for everyone, both in Virginia and along the entire East Coast," the governor said in his announcement. "This agreement will change the future of transportation in Virginia, improving our ability to move people and goods across the state and opening up potential rail service in underserved parts of the commonwealth."

Our View

Now, the only rail link between Virginia and the Northeast corridor is the two-track Long Bridge over the Potomac, which often reaches 98% of its capacity during peak times. After the new bridge gets final approval, it would take about five years to get it built and operating, so passenger rail service here still would be on hold until after that happens.

But there's definitely hope for such expansion if the new bridge comes to fruition, even if we must wait awhile.

Passenger rail proponents in the Bristol area have visions of expansion of the Northeast corridor service beyond its current terminus in Roanoke all the way into Bristol and even south through Knoxville and Chattanooga, eventually connecting to Atlanta. A local coalition including the city of Bristol, Virginia, and the Bristol Chamber of Commerce has been actively pursuing the expansion from Roanoke.

Although she expressed disappointment that Northam's latest proposal does not mention Amtrak expansion to Bristol, Chamber President and CEO Beth Rhinehart said, "We are very pleased to see that passenger rail in Virginia continues to be a part of an ongoing conversation and budgetary priorities."

She added: "Opening the access to and through Bristol, and further into Tennessee and beyond, would make a huge positive impact on the economies of these communities and a great alternative for travel — for both business and leisure travelers across the commonwealth."

At least one challenge remains: Getting Norfolk Southern Railway on board with such an expansion. Amtrak trains from Roanoke to Bristol would have to operate on tracks owned by Norfolk Southern, which currently is not involved in discussions about that service.

Regional proponents of Amtrak expansion need to keep up their efforts to make that a reality, even if it's going to take longer than we might like. If we really want it, we're going to have to continue to show that to those who can make it happen.

Pay attention to one another

Consider it a New Year's hangover. Not from spirits sipped but from deep inhalation of the Spirit, inhaling and exhaling, pushing toward life, love and attention. Consider it a lingering, a longing, a possibility.

The winter season both slows and hastens us. Hurry up and accomplish all that is on your list. Hurry up and identify the singular resolution that will transform your life. Hurry up and claim whatever hours of light you are

Breathing Room

C.A. Rollins

what does not bring you joy.

Slow down and move toward the interior. Slow down and wrap yourself in blankets. Slow down and share stories. Slow down and eat comforting foods. Slow down and savor moments. Slow down and listen to your own soul. Slow down and attend to what is most true.

"My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since loves come from the Holy One.

Everyone who loves comes from the Holy One and experiences the presence of and connection with the Holy One."

—1 John 4:7

Attending to what is most true within our own selves and in others is a great gift to offer, to bear. I fear we have too often set aside the grace of attending to another or, for that matter, attending to our own hearts. Still, we can reclaim the craft.

Think of what it is like when a physician or nurse practitioner truly listens to your health concern, when you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have been heard and that together the two of you will work toward health and wholeness.

Consider how it feels when a counselor or clergyperson pulls up a chair alongside you to listen deeply to the joys and pains of your human journey. By listening, the joy grows. By hearing your pain, somehow they mitigate your suffering.

In her 2007 memoir, "Heart in the Right Place," Carolyn Jourdan wrote:

"I thought about how sometimes the only thing we can do for another person is simply to pay attention to them. Then it occurred to me to me this might even be the BEST thing we could ever do for anybody. Maybe the ability to confer attention on another person was not simply common courtesy but was the fundamental act of humanity."

I am convinced that part of the incarnational love of being human and loving as the Holy One loves is first by being with one another and second by "hearing" someone else into being. Not neglecting, not ignoring, not listening on the surface. Instead, by attending.

For that matter, it becomes clearer to me that part of incarnational love is not only to listen to one another but also to listen to the earth, the wind, the water, the wood, to the freshwater mussels in the Clinch or North Holston rivers, to the honeybees hungering for purity rather than poison. Incarnational love is seeing not that a rock or a tree are God but, rather, that God is in all of it, expressing love and showing the rest of us how to join in granting attention and love.

As I read one more line of Jourdan's memoir, I felt a soul-level "Aha!" sort of recognition. "When it came down to it, all we really ever had to give each other was our attention. Wasn't that what love was? Paying self-less attention?"

Longing to breathe deeply and to walk with others as they seek to meet their longings. C.A. Rollins writes and invites you to reflect with her at carollinswrites@gmail.com.

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JEFF KOTERBA/OMAHA WORLD HERALD, NEBRASKA

Extension of US tax on mined coal is necessary to fund cleanup efforts

Cleaning up abandoned coal mining sites to stop pollution and convert the land to new, environmentally friendly uses will be a challenge to Southwest Virginia communities for a long time to come.

That part is clear, and so is the reason: economics. Communities already reeling from the loss of jobs and tax dollars from discontinued mining operations just don't have the money to step in and clean up the messes on their own.

One source of revenue to help with reclamation efforts — a federal per-ton tax on mined coal levied on the coal producers — is set to expire in September 2021 and can only be extended by an act of Congress.

While we may agree that such a tax is surely justified, considering just how many former surface mine sites have been left abandoned when operators shut them down and moved on without any remediation, it's also clear that the effectiveness of the tax is dwindling.

As less coal is produced, the less the tax receipts can cover — especially with mining companies also going bankrupt and out of business throughout the Appalachian coal-fields.

Still, it makes sense to continue the tax if it will bring in at least some of the estimated \$408 million in reclamation expenses that Southwest Virginia coal counties are facing, according to a recent story in the Bristol Herald Courier.

To that end, the story noted, seven Southwest Virginia localities have approved resolutions since October pushing for a 15-year extension of the tax, which supports the Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Program.

The program was established to help pay for reclamation of surface mining sites abandoned before 1977, which was when Congress began requiring mine operators to post bonds for reclamation in the event they left mines without cleaning them up.

According to the story, some of the resolutions endorsed a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives that would reauthorize the per-ton reclamation levy through 2036.

Appalachia, Big Stone Gap, Duggannon, Haysi, Norton, Pound and St. Paul have passed the resolutions urging the state's congressional delegation to find a solution, according to a news release from the environ-

mental advocacy group Appalachian Voices.

"There is clearly a major need for ongoing cleanup of AML sites, and these resolutions show that local leaders get that," Thom Kay, the senior legislative representative for Appalachian Voices, said in the release. "Not only will renewal of the AML program help address dangerous and polluting sites, it will create jobs throughout the region."

The story also noted that Virginia's U.S. senators, Democrats

Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, issued statements last week in support of the AML program and that they are co-sponsors of legislation in the Senate similar to bills in the House that would renew the levy for 15 years.

"Extending this program is necessary to continue the important work of cleaning up and revitalizing abandoned mine sites in our coal communities," Warner said. "This work will help improve the health, safety, and vitality of these communities for decades to come."

Even if the receipts from the tax continue to dwindle, it's still necessary to help communities hold coal operators responsible — at least to some extent — for the messes they have left behind.

Thankfully, there is also another federal program — this one not dependent on payments from coal operators — that supports economic and community development on former mining sites.

Called the AML Pilot Program, it has already provided \$20 million to Virginia communities for reclamation projects, and there is more money coming. The aim is to redevelop the old mine sites to support outdoor recreation, recycling, waste management, technology and alternative energy projects (such as pump-storage facilities to generate electricity).

A key benefit of these projects is economic development through job creation.

Two new projects — in Wise and St. Paul — totaling about \$2 million were announced under the AML Pilot Program last week, and an additional \$10 million is expected to be awarded to other projects this year.

Southwest Virginia needs both of these programs to help overcome years of abuse the land has sustained from coal mining activities, and we hope the Congress will come together in a bipartisan effort to extend the coal tax, as well as continue to fund the AML Pilot Program.

Breathing Room

C.A. Rollins

Learning to breathe

Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out. Count. Inhale, 1, 2, 3 ... Hold, 1, 2, 3 ... Exhale, 1, 2, 3 ... Widen the spaces between.

Extend. Feel your mind, heart, air, spirit. Rejoin your whole being.

Breathing rejoins our organs to our limbs, restoring our physical and emotional balance, as well as the passions and instincts that move us all.

When I breathe with intent, it carries me through my base emotions of fear and my responses to fight, flee or freeze. Years ago, a parish nurse taught a small group I was in to sit with our feet flat on the floor, our backs upright, our arms positioned in relaxation on armrests, our shoulders at ease. We breathed in three deep breaths in a row, releasing each slowly, to lower our blood pressure when under stress. Physical, emotional, spiritual coping.

Imagine if we all were breathing more rather than reacting with aggressive emotion. The whole globe is in a tit-for-tat mentality. The archaic Code of Hammurabi, "an eye for an eye," is so very base and animalistic for a people so much more informed and developed. We may be simple folk, but we have so much more capacity than those centuries ago, and we can find more creative resolutions to conflict.

I began writing to claim a space for my voice. To share it. To name it. To extend it. My voice might connect with yours. My breathing might engage with yours. Together, we may expand a cocreative effort across our households, communities and region. Yes, I have a global vision, but I believe it begins here.

All this time, I thought that the reason I was writing Breathing Room was for inspiration for myself and for others. I learn by writing as I go and often find one essay setting the stage for another. Slowly, the Spirit teaches me and unveils a further message.

When I began writing, I thought that hope and despair were each other's complement. I have learned that it is as if these are sitting in a circle with one another. Hope sits on the right with her left hand turned downward. Despair sits with right hand open, receiving Hope's gift. Despair's left hand reaches out, palm down, fingers curled into Joy's open right hand. Joy and Hope both exist as responses, complements, partners to Despair.

Joy — who sleeps in the same bed with sorrow, according to an old proverb of the Czech people. Joy — the well of bliss, cheer and delight. Joy — who cannot exist without sorrow, grief and despair. Joy — sisters of revelry, comfort and mirth.

All this time, all these many years, I have been looking for peace, for room to breathe. Now, I learn, her name is Joy. And I inhale in a way I have not ... in nearly all my life.

Longing to breathe deeply and to walk with others as they seek to meet their longings, C. A. Rollins writes and invites you to reflect with her at carollinswrites@gmail.com.

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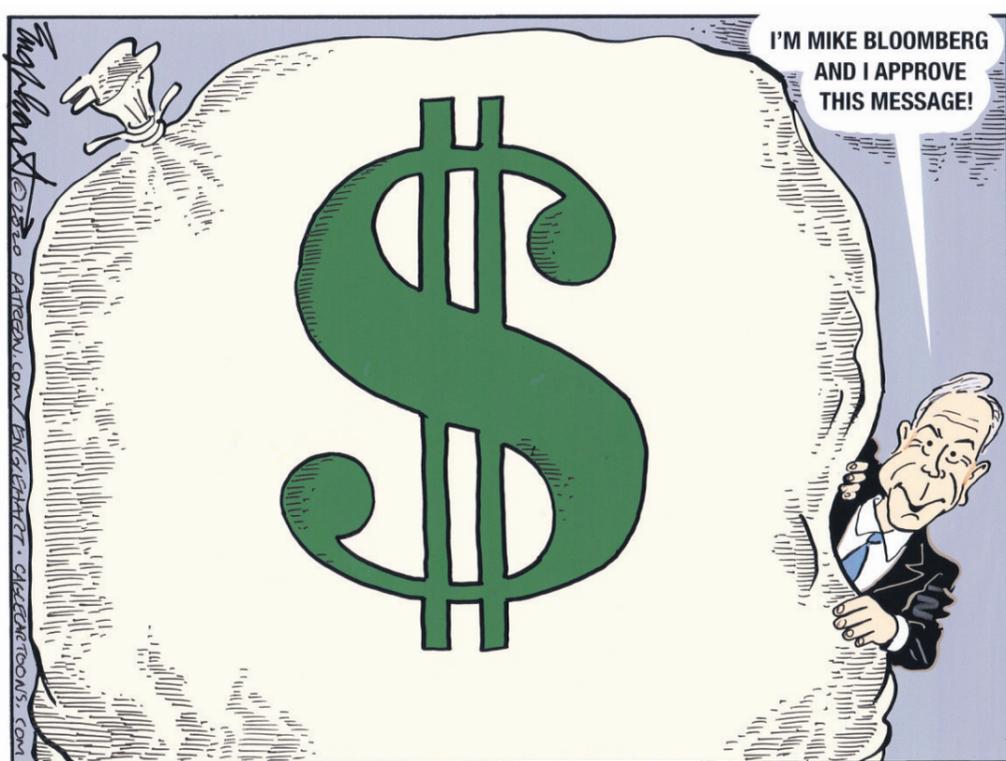
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BOB ENGLEHART/MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

Crosswalk safety is in the hands of both motorists and pedestrians

Let's talk about a real "Nightmare on Elm Street."

With the recent tragedy in front of the Barter Theatre in mind, and the city of Abingdon looking at ways to make pedestrian crosswalks safer, now seems like the perfect time to discuss crosswalk etiquette for motorists.

But "etiquette" might be too soft of a word to use here. It's not just plain polite to give the right of way to pedestrians in crosswalks, it's the law.

Anyone who has ever done any amount of walking around here, especially in downtown areas where vehicle traffic is a constant hazard, will tell you that a lot of motorists seem to believe they have a right to drive unimpeded by pedestrians, crosswalks or not.

For some reason, some people who get behind the wheel seem to lose all sense of their responsibility to share the road and drive with caution around pedestrians and even cyclists.

We've all seen that kind of behavior — it even occurs in the clearly marked crosswalks in front of stores like Walmart, where some motorists drive through without a thought to pedestrian safety, sometimes forcing shoppers on foot to jump out of the way to avoid getting run over.

Sure, we get it. You're in a hurry, and you have a right to get where you want to go without anyone slowing you down or getting in your way, right?

Wrong. Even in parking lots, pedestrians have the right of way over motorists. Why? Just think about it. A person getting run over by a car is similar in terms of physics to a car getting hit by a moving train. The car has no chance against the train, and the pedestrian has no chance against the car.

Anyone who has traveled much knows that in some cities, motorists are well aware of pedestrians and crosswalks and treat them with respect. In others, anyone on foot takes their life into their own hands when setting out on foot.

It shouldn't take the tragic loss of life for us to realize that pedestrians need motorists to be aware of crosswalks and to obey the laws meant to protect those who are out on foot. We shouldn't have to remind people to drive safely when there are pedestrians out and about — or have to figure out how best to get that message across.

But that's what's happening now in Abingdon, and it's a shame that the situation had gotten out of hand — especially in front of such a local treasure as the Barter Theatre, which draws visitors to the town from all over the nation and the world.

In the aftermath of the death of longtime Barter volunteer Philip A. Topa as the result of a crosswalk accident last November and a subsequent nonfatal accident involving a Barter patron in the same crosswalk three weeks later,

Abingdon finds itself looking for answers.

According to the Washington County News, in both cases, the drivers were charged with failure to yield to a pedestrian in the crosswalk. And "immediately, conversations began between Barter officials and Abingdon leaders about improving the safety of the crosswalk."

A recent story in the newspaper noted that "The Barter and town officials estimate that about 200,000 people use the crosswalk in front of the Barter each year," while "about 12,000 vehicles pass the Barter each day on Main Street, according to the Virginia Department of Transportation."

"There is action being taken as we speak to make it as safe as possible," Barter Managing Director Ross Egan told the newspaper recently, as town employees worked at the crosswalk site.

And Abingdon Public Works Director John Dew said that any time a pedestrian is struck in a crosswalk, the town takes a fresh look to see if anything can be done to make it safer.

Surprisingly, according to the story, before last fall, no pedestrians had ever been hit in front of the Barter.

Still, it's clear something went wrong, and now the town is working to fix the problem.

"We've made some changes at the crosswalk," Dew said, noting that vegetation has been cleared, lines have been painted on the pavement, and the town is relocating one existing flashing light and adding another.

Ultimately, though, crosswalk safety is in the hands of motorists who drive through them, and, yes, even the pedestrians who use them.

We can never assume motorists are going to stop for people using the crosswalk, so when we're on foot, we must make sure that we don't step out in front of a vehicle driven by someone who is blatantly breaking the law.

To that end, Dew told the newspaper that it's the responsibility of drivers, pedestrians and the town to maintain a safe crosswalk in front of the Barter.

The Barter is also working to make sure patrons understand the need to walk across Main Street safely, the newspaper said.

"I think we can keep adding additional measures to make it as safe as possible, including having our ushers outside to make sure that the button is always pressed when a patron is crossing," Egan said.

And when the Barter's 2020 season begins in April, Egan told the paper, visitors will be educated about safely crossing the street and using the crossing button.

It's all too little, too late for Mr. Topa. But we can hope that the town and the Barter's efforts can help prevent another such tragedy.

We are made of dying stuff

Darkness falls over the earth. Weeping, wailing and bitter mourning. Acid tears streak down the faces of the repentant and the willful wicked alike. We are all of us made of earth, dust, ashes and the stars. Boil off the water, empty out the breath, and there are dry bones and dust.

Wars and rumor of wars ...

Breathing Room

C.A. Rollins

but
we
will
not
be

alarmed. For such things must transpire ... but this is not the end yet. These are birthpangs.

News or fake news — who can tell anymore? A story circled online last week that incinerators were delivered to China to cremate medical waste. Only those with firsthand knowledge really know what is happening with those incinerators.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From earth were you made, and to earth you shall return.

This is a day of already and not yet. People wander grocery store aisles with charcoal grey smudges on their foreheads. They will go to lunch and come back to work with black crosses drawn. Mystically, they walk somewhere between still living but very much aware that they — we — will also be ash one day.

Psalm 51 pulls no punches with its poetry. The prophet confronts an adulterous king. The king — favored one of God — confesses.

Break me. Purge me. Wash me. Blot me. Teach me. Cast me. Create me. Deliver me.

With a pleading, confident, trusting voice, the king begs for a reversal — from utter brokenness to a new kind of restoration. It is almost as if David is dying ... dying from a past that must be left behind in order for him to become the new self God longs for him to be.

David didn't lose big like most of us caught in such unfaithfulness. He was not ostracized publicly. He was not stoned. He did not lose his throne. Nathan called him out ... and he turned.

All too often the religious and Pharisical utilize methods more like that of the Code of Hammurabi rather than the Law of Love. Beat people into submission with rocks and rages and ugliness posing as grace. Works for them: cultural assimilation.

Black smudges on our heads aren't about living our faith out loud in front of others. Rather, the humility of being marked with dust is shocking — in-the-mirror confrontation, over and over again: We are made ... not of perfect stuff. Rather, we are made of failing, falling, breaking, dying stuff.

Yet we are also made of re-birthing stuff. We are made of stardust. It has always been here since God spoke it into being. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, birth to rebirth.

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