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OP-ED

Our origin myth is about 'rugged individualism.' It will get people killed in a pandemic.

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We make some sacrifices for the greater good. Most of us are doing that now. Some are resisting. That resistance makes no sense, but I understand the impulse. Like most of us here, I grew up with rebels and mavericks as heroes. We were reared to resist.

I remember, as a boy, walking up the creek to where the old still house sat. Just the foundation stones and a few old barrel hoops remained, but that was enough for my imagination. That was as far as my papaw would walk. He told the story of Stiller Bill Begley, a moonshiner, and I felt proud and powerful to come from such a family, with outlaws and characters. There was also Miller Bill, who ran a gristmill. We never told any stories about him.

If you hear a story about my grandfather, Joe Begley, it is likely to be the one where he stopped a coal train one cold winter in Letcher County and made them dump the coal out on the siding. Folks in town had run out of fuel to burn and were pulling up boards from the porch. He asked the coal company first, but when they refused, he pulled his truck across the track, held up his deputy's badge, and waited on the train. He delivered 100 tons of coal in his pickup. He did what he had to do to for his community. To me, he was Robin Hood, Batman, and Abe Lincoln. He was heroic.

I love those stories. I loved the anti-establishment and the anti-authoritarian slant, because it meant fighting for regular folks against an unjust system. I understood how empowering even little acts of defiance can be. I felt the energy, the conspiratorial spark, whenever somebody pulled out the jug of moonshine, or the outlawed ammunition, or bypassed the catalytic converter to get a few more horsepower. That feeling of defying the powers-that-be is natural to me. It is more than that. It forms part of my identity. It is American. It fits our idea of a country born out of revolution. Rugged individualism demands it. We are inculcated to love mavericks, and we want to be one, too.

But it will get some of us killed right now.

Faced with difficult mandates to minimize the looming disaster of the coronavirus, it is tempting, almost natural, to revert to a familiar stance. Subtly undermining dictates from above, certainly from the government, is fundamentally American. Don't tread on me. I fought the law. Rebel without a cause. I can't drive 55.

The mantle of maverick or contrarian fits so easily. Certainly, resisting, questioning, and rebelling are essential checks and balances. If we look more closely, however, we see it that the larger community is always the beneficiary of heroic defiance.

Our reverence for the rugged individual embodies many problems. The most problematic for me, is what it leaves out of our history. For every 'rugged individual', there were many more victims of genocide. It wasn't the pioneer who really built this country. It was enslaved people. We all have origin myths, and ours needs

revising.

Rugged individualism emerged as a concept during the Hoover administration, known for its disastrous handling of the Great Depression. Hoover promoted the concept to garner support for small government, and that strategy hurt most of the community. Now, like then, that concept will not serve us. Reactionary defiance that in the face of the current crisis is not heroic: it is selfish and self-defeating.

Gov. Andy Beshear is out there on the track, stopping the train, delivering coal to his community. He needs our help.

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