Reflection on Kristen Iversen’s “Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats”

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In Kristen Iversen’s memoir, *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*, Iversen tells us the story of her life growing up close to the Rocky Flats plant and the consequences of the secret work being completed there.

From cancer to poisoned farm animals to contaminated air, soil and water, and the clouds of radiation that were produced, this secret affected not just her family, but the lives of the entire community. A secret can have a powerful impact, this book being a clear example. But how can we know whether there is a secret to be told or not?

Around the same time frame, the public did not consider the consequences of pollution and health hazards as they do today.

My grandfather worked at a pharmaceutical plant, where he brought home the leftover byproducts of the production of drugs to fertilize his garden. The garden was very large and used to grow food to feed the family year-round.

My mother, my grandmother, grandfather, great-grandmother, aunt and great-aunt all lived under one roof, where they all ate the food that was grown from the garden. Years later, my grandfather developed Alzheimer’s, my grandmother had Alzheimer’s, my great-grandmother had dementia, and my aunt died of cancer. When I compared Iversen’s story with our family history, I started to question whether this was the result of the food they ate.

The food, after all, was grown in soil that contained waste products from the plant, which could have potentially been dangerous or harmful. It also made me ask myself whether the plant knew about the possible effects these byproducts could have on someone.
Iversen had to not only see others around her become sick, but she also suffered the effects of the plant, and was forced to get surgery to remove her swollen lymph nodes. The piece of information that I was shockingly disturbed by was the fact that, although the people in town may have known about the potential dangers of the plant, they chose to ignore the risks.

Even the many families who lived just down the road from the facility believed the series of governmental assurances that there was no need to be alarmed. “When plutonium escaped the site and endangered local populations, the government stonewalled and provided nothing but blind reassurances” (pg. 315).

It was evident that there were clearly environmental and health issues occurring in the town, yet many of the entities, such as Dow Chemical Company, neglected the evidence.

Iversen’s book makes it clear that a facility’s work with radiological elements is not just a local problem, but also a national problem.

A recent revelation about the Fukushima Nuclear Plant in Japan exposes a threat. As a result of the 2011 tsunami, water filled with radiation is being released into the Pacific Ocean every day. Will this radiation reach the west coast of the United States and Canada? Is it dangerous?

The government assures us that there is no risk; the amount of radiation is too small to be a problem. Those words sound very similar to the government conclusions revealed in Iverson’s story. The question remains – is there a dangerous level of radiation?

Iversen’s last line of the story reads, “to speak out or to remain silent is the first and most crucial decision we can make.” Iversen has showed what the possible effects could be if we refuse to acknowledge what is happening right before our eyes. We may be responsible for our own destiny. Should we speak out or remain silent? At what cost? Like Iversen said, “The cost of silence and the secrets it contains is high, but you don’t know the price until later.”

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