

On the Slow, Gurgling Death of Recreational Solitude

By Scott Thompson

Every March I'd drive west from the Roaring Fork Valley in Colorado, up to the massive Island in the Sky in Canyonlands National Park. Driving up there on Utah 313 I felt like a fly climbing a whale's back. Standing at the Green River Overlook, the cold wind blowing through my face, I'd stare at the white-rimmed shoulders of red rock looming above the Green River. It was a pilgrimage, a holy site, a silent breaking through into rough, open space.

This was in the late 1980s, when I worked in an upscale drug and alcohol treatment center overlooking Aspen, beneath the Buttermilk Mountain ski slope. It was in a rambling, gray house up a long, graded driveway above Maroon Creek and was an unorthodox, energetic place. A red fox hung out on the steep, wooded bank fronting the creek. One day on an Aspen sidewalk I walked right by columnist George Will.

Somehow he didn't recognize me.

In April, 2007, I went back to Moab. On our first morning, up on the Island in the Sky, Gail and I stood at the Grand View Point Overlook, studying the single file of spires and steep, sharp-sided buttes down in Monument Basin: the latter's three terminus canyons eroded into the table of the White Rim like



three curving fingers on a Gray alien's hand. At Shafer Canyon Overlook a shaft of sunlight lit the leading blade of a mesa, its edge plummeting to the canyon floor. Beneath the rock rim of the overlook the switchbacks of the Shafer Canyon Trail curved down at severe angles, before striking out through the canyon in a thin, dust-colored line.

All these gruesomely beautiful views on the Island in the Sky, what people travel from all over the world to see, were as vivid as ever. But the gigantic vibrancy I'd always known up there, the whale's back in the wilderness, was gone.

A couple of days later, almost as an afterthought, we drove early through the empty streets of Green River and found the turnoff to the Horseshoe Canyon Unit, an isolated fragment of the Park lying west of the main body. A well-graded dirt road led 50 miles south, running straight or gently curving until it vanished into the horizon, through largely flat, spread-out terrain with no recreational designation.

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An insignificant place compared with the Island in the Sky.

Here and there as we drove we saw small, red and white layered badlands streaking the landscape. Rust-colored outcrops of sandstone curved down subtle ridges above burnt-orange, sand-covered slopes, stippled with brittlebushes. To the west across a vast expanse of Blackbrush lay a remote desert mountain range covered by snow as surreal as a layer of cotton. The hulking mesa north of Green River stood behind us like a supernatural purple freighter.

Half an hour down the road I felt the shift into solitude. What hadn't happened at the Island in the Sky.

While it's elusive to describe, we can say that solitude is a spiritual bond with the landscape, typically occurring in wild, isolated country, usually when a person is alone but sometimes in the company of one or two trusted people. In the history of our species the phenomenon goes back many, many thousands of years, and was considered fundamental to human spirituality and well being at least until agriculture became dominant. Its robust significance is still appreciated in cohesive indigenous cultures.

What follows is a plausible description, if there is such a thing, by Kathleen Norris, a writer who moved from New York City back to her tiny hamlet of Lemmon in isolated northwest South Dakota: "The silence of the Plains, this great unpeopled landscape of earth and sky, is much like the silence one finds in a monastery, an unfathomable silence that has the power to re-form you. And the Plains have changed me. I was a New Yorker for nearly six years and still love to visit my friends in the city. But now I am conscious of carrying a Plains silence within me into cities, and of carrying my city experiences back to the Plains so that they may be absorbed again back into silence..."

...

"Among the simple pleasures of Dakota is driving where there's no traffic. One moonlit night late in the fall, my husband and I left Rapid City and traveled the two hundred miles home seeing fewer than fifteen vehicles and well over a hundred antelope. Most days I take a long walk at sunrise, and sometimes I'm greeted with a spectacular moonrise as well, the western horizon on fire. There's no sound to speak of except for wind and birdsong. I can hear a car

coming from miles away." (Dakota, pp. 15, 35-36.)

It's possible, though less common, for solitude to go beyond bonding with the landscape to a life-altering experience of non-separation, which Edward Abbey had as a young man and many years later struggled to describe to his old pal Jack Loeffler: "...there was a time back in Death Valley where I had what I guess was as close to a mystical experience as I've ever had. That was years ago. I was a young man. I've never had anything quite like it since. As close as I've come is after I've been out camping somewhere for at least two weeks. It takes at least that long for me to really get into it and leave all the baggage behind."

...

"Well, it's not something that's easy to remember intellectually. It was more the way I felt. As I recall, I felt like I wasn't separated from anything else. I was by myself at the time. It was as if I could perceive some fundamental activity taking place all around me. Everything was alive. Even the rocks. I was part of it. Not separate from it at all. I wept for joy or something akin to joy that I can't

really describe. It was a long time ago. It's not something that can be remembered in the normal way. Or at least normal for me. The only time I can get close to it is out camping. I don't get to do that enough. Not nearly enough.

...

"...In a way, that was one of the most important experiences of my life so far. I've tried to get back to it, but I don't know how..." (Adventures With Ed, pp. 242-243.)

For the vast majority of humanity's history the experience of solitude was an integral part of life. Everyone had ready access to isolated, wild areas; it was an elegantly simple connection. Solitude fostered a universal and unquestioned love for the landscape and the critters that lived upon it.

The situation today is reversed. Within the mainstream society the experience of solitude is well understood by a minute percentage of the public, and also by traditionalists within Native American cultures (so glad they're around). Within the former this includes people who have gone far enough out on the

land for it to come alive for them, and also many of those who are rooted in deeply rural or frontier communities, provided they haven't become financially dependent on tearing the land apart.

I also suspect that people who live in monasteries often taste solitude, as Kathleen Norris suggested, as well as others who meditate diligently and long - both processes seem to deepen sensitivity to the natural world. One reason I included Edward Abbey's experience is that it sounds similar to spiritual openings that can occur in week-long Zen meditation retreats, typically after several days of intensive meditation.

The point I'm getting to is that by and large so-called developed societies have jettisoned solitude. Instead they have become progressively skillful, especially here in America, at utilizing stimulation and distractions as emotional pacifiers.

Maybe it's also helpful to grow up surrounded by woods or other open country, as Jim Stiles has said. I was fortunate to spend my childhood in the 1950s in a small Virginia town beneath the Blue Ridge Mountains. There were wooded lots all over our neighborhood and my friends and I were always out playing in them with our cap pistols. There were open lots nearby, too, superb



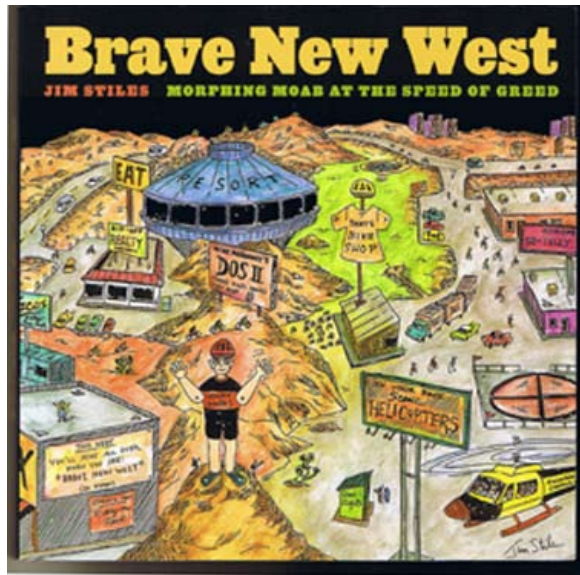
for finding praying mantises and other fine bugs. We learned early that most spiders and snakes aren't poisonous; the fear so many adults seemed to have of them never made sense to us. For awhile I had a pet black snake.

The point I'm getting to is that by and large so-called developed societies have jettisoned solitude. Instead they have become progressively skillful, especially here in America, at utilizing stimulation and distractions as emotional pacifiers. Consider the progression in the last century: radio, telephones, television, advertising, consumerism, muzak, e-mail, internet browsers, MP3 players, video games, cell phones, texting, smart phones, iPods, iPads, and on and on. These are all effective in both distracting people from what's going on inside them and also calming them (up to a point), and we're addicted to that habitual flow. If you doubt this consider how well the idea of an electronic Sabbath, a weekly day of rest from all radio, telephones, television, movies, advertising, e-mail, computers, MP3 players, video games, cell phones, texting, smart phones, iPods, iPads, and so on, would go over with the public.

I think the response would not be a pretty sight.

The experience of solitude is now alien to most people's lives; therefore they don't advocate for opportunities to experience it; therefore the larger society is indifferent to protecting it. And is at best scornful of those few having both the cajones and the long-term insight to write or speak in protest.

They protest because they know, from direct experience, that unbounded openness of the landscape is fundamental to human identity, and that once that spark of wildness is gone we are diminished creatures, no matter how much money or power we accumulate, or how many creature comforts and entertainments we have access to, or how much alcohol we drink, or how many excitements we know how to lose ourselves in.



"Jim Stiles holds up a mirror to those of us living in the American West, exposing issues we may not want to face. We are all complicit in the shadow side of growth. His words are born not so much out of anger but a broken heart. He says he writes elegies for the landscape he loves, that he is 'hopelessly clinging to the past.' I would call Stiles a writer from the future. Brave New West is a book of import because of what it chooses to expose."

-- Terry Tempest Williams

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