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RETURN TO ABAJO PEAK...

AN AUTUMN'S VIEW

In the blink of an eye, summer has left us. The maples are turning red below South Peak, the aspens are on the cusp. The mornings are cold and crisp. The most poignant and melancholy and lovely time of the year has arrived in all its mystical Autumnal glory

It seems like only yesterday that I was complaining about the heat and the no seeums. Time just isn't what it used to be.

A few weeks ago, I stepped outside at 3 AM and saw, in the eastern sky, the constellation Orion, rising again after a four month absence. It is a portent of shorter days and long nights and cold weather.

For better or worse, my life is steeped in tradition and hopeless sentimentality, and the fall always aggravates that condition. Everything I do triggers some distant memory and almost every date on the calendar is an "anniversary," a commemoration of some event that is utterly meaningless to anyone but me...

I remember when and where I drank my first Dr. Pepper (traveling to Florida with my family on our first 'big vacation.' We'd stopped for gas near Nashville. I was seven)

I own a small jewelry box that belonged to my grandfather that was given to me after he died. Decades later, it still contains the same piece of Dentyne gum that he put there a few days before he passed away.

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When Bill Bengé died, almost six years ago, he'd just given me a pot of his famous shrimp remoulade...I still can't bring myself to finish what remains in my freezer.

A 1963 Volvo that I bought in 1981 and which was, for years, my only mode of transportation, still resides in the back yard. It is slowly rotting into the ground and has become home to living entities I normally set traps for. But I can't seem to part with the old car. It's a familiar and

needed component of my comfort view shed.

I save gasoline receipts from 1973 and I have a champagne bottle cap that a girl who I was hopelessly and secretly in love with stuck on my thumb at a college dance.

For better or worse, I seem to remember the most trivial details of a life that has had its ups and downs, but which has never been dull. My life is full of mementoes and memories.

Every summer I make the hike to the summit of my favorite mountain. I scribble an addendum to the cluster of notes I have hidden in a film can, 17 paces from the register box. I ponder the magnificent view for a while—it is an unobstructed panorama that stretches a hundred miles or more in all directions. I eat my traditional artichoke hearts and sip a bottle of Dr. Pepper. Finally, reluctantly, I head back down to the pass—it's easier going down than up.



I've made twenty-eight trips to the top since that first hike on September 3, 1985, with a friend who died just four months later. This year I returned, exactly 24 years to the hour. Remarkably, it hasn't changed much from year to year. Even my lungs and legs functioned almost as well as they did so long ago, for which I am most grateful.

Though a few of my friends know the destination of my annual pilgrimage, I can guarantee this...it's NOT Abajo Peak.

I visited that summit last month as well, though the experience is not quite the same.

No walking is required; a two wheel drive gravel road hugs the flanks of the Blue Mountains, just west of Monticello, winds around the base of South Peak and finally approaches the summit from the west side. The view is partially obstructed by a stunning array of radio and tv towers, microwave dishes, concrete bunker buildings and an assorted selection of warning signs that tell the "peak

bagger" of this particular mountain that touching just about anything on this mountaintop is a federal crime..

The view is still spectacular, but very different from my anonymous summit, where even at night, it's almost impossible to see signs of civilization. Besides the communications jungle, the land below Abajo Peak is more developed. I can see Monticello, of course, though to its credit, it has changed very little (so far). I credit its timeless nature to the complete absence of bars, brew pubs and bike shops and that its biggest tourist attraction is the Mormon mini-temple.

The land to the east was once called The Great Sage Plain; now it's mostly agricultural, dominated by pinto beans and winter wheat and alfalfa. The giant sage is mostly a memory. Looking north I can spot some of the new SITLA residential developments, and at night, the glow of Cortez, Colorado and even Moab 55 miles to the north, is clearly visible.

But for me, within this panorama is where most of my life has played out. For years, my Abajo Peak view was my dream and my ultimate destination, a place I obsessed over from the distant green trenches of Louisville Kentucky. It was down there that I met Ed Abbey and many of the people I still treasure as friends today. It's where my beloved dogs lived out their lives chasing jackrabbits and ground squirrels (in violation of federal regulations) and where they died old and happy. And it's where my cats were born and where they lived into ancient age, sleeping and eating and living a life most of us can only envy. One of them still hangs on, at 100, still doing nothing at an undisclosed location.

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A few years ago, convinced I was moving into the final chapters of my life, I penned much of this, thinking there would be little to add as the calendar spun relentlessly forward. Expecting a future that was more introspective and sentimental than dynamic and changing, my expectations failed to appreciate the unexpected. And then came Tonya and a life I would never have imagined, just a few years before. I am grateful beyond my ability to express it.

Still I am always drawn back here. This is where I lived and worked and played and grieved and wandered and watched, and where I became hopelessly lost and found, again and again.

Down there is much of my life. And somewhere, from another peak, is yours as well. Wherever the future takes us, we will all have our memories. From this vista, on a crisp autumn afternoon, they seem particularly clear.

SEARCHING FOR SILENCE ON THE SUMMIT

I made my 28th trip to the top of a nearby mountain last month. But who's counting? I hadn't missed a year since 1985, and then my own procrastinations and an early snow storm stymied my efforts to make the summit in 2000. I was mortified.

This year I almost failed again. I wasted much of the summer, whining about the drought and the heat, convinced that it would never rain or snow again. Plenty of time, I figured, to make the hike. But the rains came in September and as a particularly gnarly storm moved into Utah, I figured it was time to go. Now or never.

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Despite rain and sleet and 80 mph winds that almost swept me off the ridge, I made it to the summit and the perfect vantage point for all those spectacular unobstructed views of the canyon country. The ascent was nothing technical or dramatic; it was simply a long hike above timberline where the air is thin and clear (if also a tad turbulent), to a place I've come to regard as my own in a way. It's difficult not to become territorial about something you love.

In another way, however, it is a meeting place for everyone who has climbed the peak. The summit provides a solitary opportunity to share thoughts and feelings during the moments spent in the brilliant isolation of 12,000 feet.

Wedge between a pile of ancient rocks is an old mailbox. Inside the box, hikers have been "signing in" on the summit register for years. In fact, until 1991, the old logs carried entries that went back almost three decades. In June of that year, however, my heart sank as I reached the summit and saw the front lid of the mailbox wide open and fluttering in the wind. I peered warily inside and saw my worst fears realized. Varmints had taken 30 years of history and chewed it into a fine mulch.



A year later, I made the same hike, and discovered that no one had replaced the register. But I came prepared with a blank spiral sketch book of my own. And so I made the first entry, noting my disappointment that the BLM had not been up there to replace it themselves. And as is my habit, my mantra, I waxed melancholy about the "sunny slopes of long ago."

Since then, hikers have filled that register book and more. I'm not sure how many have made the climb, but I never cease to be amazed by the extraordinary variety of people who find their way up this isolated Utah mountain. The entries are poignant and idiotic, serious and whimsical, compassionate and bitter. Yet we're all drawn to this high windy spot. For instance...

A young guy, I guess, had this exuberant observation to make on August 18, 1992:

"This is what it's all about. To experience the adventure. Not to experience it vicariously through the pages of a magazine. Or through the screen of a cathode ray hypnotizer. I can't stop & I won't stop looking...I don't know what I'll find. But I know it's waiting for me...Keep on searching.

"RAVE ON!"

I hope that enthusiasm never leaves him and I hope that someday he won't end his entries with "RAVE ON!" But his heart is sure in the right place. I wasn't so sure about this next kid, part of a high school outdoor course from Aspen.

On August 27, Marty left this bit of brilliance in the log. "FUNNY QUOTES..."

- * I'll show you hormones.
- * Hey, just look at the sunny side of the egg.
- * Scratch the Lonesome Beaver
- * Where is the east coast?

Marty...don't come back up here. Stay home and watch TV. Don't leave the house...we'll bring you food and beer. On the other hand, I wish other well-meaning conservationists wouldn't get so intense...

"American Wilderness...Love it or leave it! No compromise in defense of Mother Earth! Support Biodiversity! Love your Mother! Don't become one! Return the predators (This does not mean the white man!).

"Have a nice day. Peace."

Too many damn exclamation marks if you ask me! And

why is the Earth always assumed to be a Mother? What kind of sexist crap is that anyway?

Next on my list is Mr. Mayer, from the Front Range of Colorado, who arrived on the summit just a few days before my return in 1993. He had a bone to pick with me...

"Mr. Stiles, Thanks for the register. However, as to your whining about the BLM not doing anything about replacing the old register, grow up and shut up. I don't believe summit registers have ever been within that agency's jurisdiction."

I get yelled at, no matter where I go. Later, I found this entry which made me feel better...

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BLM PATROL...July 3, 1994

"We see no register is necessary since Mr. Stiles provided one."

(Signed) Bruce Babbitt

It was nice of Bruce to take time out from being pummeled by ranchers and environmentalists to climb a mountain.

But while "Bruce" came up here to get away from people and others come looking for solitude; some come to meet people. This man left his phone number...

"My name is Bob. I am from Easton, Mass.

I am 35 years old.

Call: (215) 262-**** (I deleted the number)

And tell me your Utah experiences. I like to jaw about it."

Sounded a little like Dial-a-Date to me. I hope he found true love awaiting him at the end of a collect phone call.

By October, the reasons for being in the high country had changed for some. This fellow, a local, was looking for something to shoot at when he spotted the register box...

"I am up here deer hunting. Saw the mail box. Opened it to find this notebook. WOW! This is one crazy place for a mail box but what the hell. We are all crazy. Well got to get hunting.

"Life's Great!"

Yes it is, Shawn. But right on his heels was this genius.

"Life is great. Utah sucks. California is the best!"

Another member of an "outdoor education" group, this one from California, but from the same state of mind as our friend Marty who left his "funny quotes" for us. Yes I agree with you completely. It does suck. I advise you and your friends to return to California immediately if not sooner. Send us a card from time to time.



The only disappointment I ever find on this mountain from year to year is the way these outdoor leadership schools insist on bringing Nintendo Nerds to the top of an otherwise lonely lovely spot. Start them out with a trip to Disneyland. Send them down a water slide. Winnow out the permanently de-sensitized. A place like this should be the ultimate reward, not some kind of punishment. Half the register is filled with complaints from high school kids who wish they were at the arcade. I wish they were at the arcade too.

If it were only possible, I also wish the previous writer could have been a witness to the next observation. Does

the word "abduction" come to mind?

"I am a witness to a UFO sighting. My uncle Mark and Aunt Robin woke me up about 5:20 AM and saw a bright light on the mountain east of camp. Mark ran over to tent, woke me up, and I did see the light. It was flashing red and green lights. Now I'm a firm believer in the extraterrestrials....Jason, 22 yrs. old"

I believe this guy. He had to be a fairly intelligent person because he spelled "extraterrestrials" correctly without Spellcheck.



My favorite entry was this one, recorded on May 28, 1994...

"My first time up here and since I'm only 8, I will have many more chances. It's beautiful! I brought my middle-aged parents.

Amanda, 8

Linda, 45

Alan, 58 (48)

Apparently Alan was not quite as old as Amanda thought. Despite his "middle age," let's hope he has the strength to make the climb a few more times as well.

And finally, on the last page, the familiar slogan, Abbey's prophesy, fiery words for the American West...

HAYDUKE LIVES!

Death to the Machines!

The Second Coming of the Monkey Wrench Gang

Followed by this addendum...

"Get a life. It was only a novel...sheesh. Ed Abbey put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us. Drove cars too."

I think Abbey would have enjoyed both comments, and agreed with the sentiments as well.

After a couple of hours on top, I cinched up my pack and headed back down the mountain. It's a difficult place to get to and even harder to leave, but my 'undisclosed location' gives me comfort, even when I'm not there. May it always be the windswept solitary summit for those who seek and understand the true meaning of Solitude.



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