

Abbey in the Anthropocene

Serendipitously, a scrap of notebook paper comes forth just in time for this assignment. I remember writing it, but had long since lost track of it, had no idea where I might have filed it. I rummage around for it, but cannot find it. And then, while not looking for it, it surfaces.

Edward Abbey would have scoffed at the hint of Zen in that. But then again....



March 15, 1989. (The Ides of March – what would he have made of that?) I am living in a small carriage house in Madison, Wisconsin, on Lake Monona, a few blocks from the university campus. The sun rises over the lake, and the morning news comes on NPR. "Writer and environmentalist Edward Abbey has died." That's how I remember it, anyway. Beyond that, I don't recall what they said, how they described Ed or his writing or his influence. I bet the word *iconoclast* was in there somewhere.

The news rocked me off my feet and into a chair. I didn't know Abbey. I didn't know anything about the health problems that had finally caught up with him. I didn't know much about the actual Abbey at all. I knew he wrote books that I enjoyed, that made me laugh, that blew the staid cover off of nature writing. I knew that his words provided consolation as the nation turned away from uncomfortable self-criticism and toward blustering triumphalism and mindless consumption of the world and of ourselves. I knew that he was a provocateur, inspiring those outrageous Monkey-Wrenchers and Earth Firsters, inflaming those threatened by the suggestion that humans are not the center of the universe, nor the only object of value within it. I knew that something in his *cri de coeur* contributed to my own attempts to make some small difference with actions and with words. I had half-memorized his essay "A Writer's Credo" after a few lines of it brought me to tears in the bookstore aisle: "I write to entertain my friends and to exasperate our enemies. To oppose, resist, and sabotage the contemporary drift toward a global technocratic police state, whatever its ideological coloration.... I write for the joy and exultation of writing itself. To tell my story."

I sat dumbfounded for a few minutes and then felt the need to write something. Reading it now, my little private commentary seems a bit lugubrious—a good Abbey word there! It began:

We learn today that Ed Abbey has passed along (there is no "away") to his next life. Gone, I hope, to meet up with his old, familiar pals—Jefferson, Thoreau, Emerson, Krutch, hosts of brilliant, forgotten women, too—the souls whom he embraced, and who could hardly fail to welcome their kin. Gone, I hope, finally, to get some answers from "the old Bastard." Good, funny, joyful answers.

Yeah, well. I don't know if Abbey believed in a "next life." He did write, "If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture—that is immortality enough for me. And as much as anyone deserves." As for that awkward "...brilliant, forgotten women, too": some over-compensation on my part going on there. I suppose every Abbey reader knew something of his predilections in that area.

Then some appreciation of the writer:

Abbey, for all that made him difficult, was the one voice one could always turn to for solace, comfort, companionship when one questioned one's own instincts. When your own aspirations and dissatisfactions, yearnings and outrages, demanded resonance in the deep, recessed thoughts of another human being, Abbey was there. When one extrapolated the

trends in which history has swept us along, and tried to face the situation with dignity, humor, and humanity, Abbey's the one who made it seem meaningful, without seeming Meaningful. If you know what I mean. Truth, courage, and democracy have lost their voice tonight.

I suppose that says more about me, then, than it does about Abbey. But I do think he would have liked that last line.

Then I addressed Ed directly:

Aw, Ed. How could you leave just as this story is reaching its climax? Just like you to get us all worked up, and then absent yourself? You have stripped the human race naked, and forced honest men [where are those "forgotten women?"] to face the image, and now you take away your voice.

If there is crying in the desert, it is that of your friends and family, and that of the wild winds that didn't much care about you one way or the other. And you knew it. Now, finally, you've rejoined the wind, and the animals, and the plants, and the soils and waters and hard, awful bedrock of the world. Now they're free to care for you again. And you're free to assume the place of the...what was it? Vulture?

A little melodramatic, but also a little more like it. Vultures and such.

So there is the biological process of decay and decomposition and recombination and some manner of reincarnation of the elements. Then there is the cultural transmission, the absorption of the words and symbols, the stories and mythologies and meanings, into the ongoing flow of human civilization. (Yes, sayeth Abbey, get your terms right: "Civilization is the vital force in human history; culture is that inert mass of institutions and organizations which accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life... Civilization flows; culture thickens and coagulates, like tired, sick, stifled blood.") So I ended my 1989 lamentation:

And we are left to face our own journey, still confined, still obligated. But still able, and still capable of love. There can be no letting up, no letting go. The core of our humanity, and the health of humanity's home, require attention. Yet allow us this moment to exercise our prerogative, and mourn our friend.

Reading back on it, I see the Abbey influence in my Abbey commentary. He did have that effect. But we all grow up, grow older. We see the heroes and inspirations of our earlier selves in new light. I am no longer in Abbey's thrall, but neither do I disavow that particular personal growth ring, now embedded within later layers of life. It remains part of the core, providing shape and structure and support to whomever I've become, and whomever I will yet be.



And so is he embedded in our evolving civilization (if not culture). Or maybe not quite embedded. His is still *coyote*, resistant to domestication, coming into the interstitial wilds, even in our cities, yipping from out beyond the circle of our campfire lights, away from our hearths. He is not always tolerated, much less welcomed. His same old adversaries, the high priests of the Growth Religion, the drivers of the global techno-industrial machine, still roam and rule, their motives unchanged, their tools sharpened, their wallets fattened, their footprints enlarged, their consciences unburdened, their damages bequeathed, content (*contra* Aldo Leopold) to "live without wild things."

Lately Abbey has drawn other fire. For at least some in the brave new Anthropocene world, Edward Abbey represents all that the baby-boomers' environmental movement got wrong—a loner in love with an illusory wilderness, a purist with a deaf ear and blind eye toward human suffering and injustice, a radical hypocrite unable to abide, or abide within, the world as it exists. (How I wish Abbey were here to provide this caricature himself! He'd do it so much better: "You see before you an affront and abomination, a romantic amid the rot, a passé poseur. While you calculate your ecosystem services to the sixth decimal point, I speak the quiet wild voice that whispers from your heart of hearts. Your youthful fling with me and my words embarrasses you, and now you must warn your children. But don't worry. They now exist in a state of constant hypnotic, electronic rapture. They will pay no attention to the cussed old lout wandering into town from the desert." C'mon writers... embrace your Inner Abbey!)

There are fine ironies in all this. For both his "classic" and post-modern critics, Abbey is an ultimate environmentalist (despite his protestations on this point), a misanthrope in the Anthropocene. He is supposed to be a standard-bearer for a movement, but the only standard he could bear was his own. He was held, by friend and foe alike, to be the voice of the sacred wild; but, as Wendell Berry so tightly comments (in "A Few Words in Defense of Edward Abbey"): "[Abbey is] a great irreverencer of sacred cows."

When I stop regarding Abbey the writer, and begin to review Abbey the conservationist, I can join in the post-mortem assessment.

I wish Abbey had lived on and written more—much more—of home; of his home in Home, Pennsylvania (now at the heart of the Marcellus Shale frack zone); of the semi-wild places that buffer—and extend—the big wild. I wish he had given us more on reconciling his anarchism and his communitarianism. I wish he had addressed at greater length the state of agriculture and the cities, joined in the conversation that Wes Jackson (among others) seeded: "If we don't save agriculture, we won't save wilderness."

Some of my favorite passages of Abbey's now are those in which he wrote against type: his rant on (among many other forms of American junk) "acid-injected tomatoes and hormone-polluted beef shipped from 3,000 miles away"; his call for "good fresh healthy food for all... food that's fit to eat"; the "shiver of pleasure" he sensed—the tree's he meant, but more his, I think—when he planted a "young budding cottonwood," knowing that he himself would never see it reach maturity. I could make an argument that the most radical of all his essays is "Thus I Reply to René Dubos":

Who would deny the beauty as well as the utility of well-tended fields, close-cropped pastures, barns, farmhouses, stone walls, small dams, waterwheels, winding dirt roads lined with poplars, any and all things built with care by human hands, nourished and nurtured into fruitfulness by human love? Who would deny it? ...I cannot imagine any conservationist so "pure" as to object to farming—by freeholders—in its traditional style.

The comforts of home and the vitality of the wild, all held within an honored Earth. He knew it, it's where we are now, and, since he can't do it himself, I will amplify those passages now. He once wrote to an interviewer, "If most Americans eventually decide that they want to surround our national parks with an industrial slum of strip mines, power plants, trailerhouse cities, there's not much that people like me can do about it except complain." Maybe not, Ed. But many of those who read you have been doing much more than complaining, have been hard at work buffering and sustaining the "protected" places by connecting them, conserving the lands and waters beyond their boundaries, revitalizing the degraded places (wild, rural, urban), and challenging the cultural and economic forces that threaten them all, and all they contain.



I don't write often to my inspirations anymore, especially after they die. I am more likely to seek inspiration in the steady commitment of nearby and everyday friends, to acknowledge them by buying them a drink, and to toast them rather than eulogize them after their demise. Yet I still hear Ed's quiet wild voice. I always will. It's embedded. It still calls me to outrage and laughter and mischief, but also to making the difference I can, where I can, while I may. And to make a difference, one needs many voices, and many tools.