

ORIENTED SOUTHWEST

CURT MEINE

My house sits in the shadows of a hundred-foot-high ridge of bare sandstone. It is a south-facing slope, so snow melts more quickly here when the sun shines after a winter squall.

The soil here is sandy, relatively low in nutrients, and drains quickly. But the native grasses that dominate the landscape appreciate it.

When I step outside for a walk, I need to be careful about impaling myself on the spines of cacti.

I live in south-central Wisconsin, fifteen hundred miles from the Sonoran Desert, but I am oriented southwest. In this unglaciated driftless part of the upper Midwest, the sedimentary bedrock lies at the surface in horizontal layers. Squint your eyes when the sun rises, and you can imagine yourself along the San Pedro or Río Grande or the Gila River. Here we call the forms of sandstone bluffs *coulees* and *hollows*; were they a bit larger and drier, we could call them *mesas* and *arroyos*.

On the southwest walls of the main room in my house, I have four large and elegant portraits of native desert grasses. They are the work of Matilda Essig, who has devoted herself to capturing the fine-line forms of the Apache Highlands grasses. When Matilda offered me a can't-say-no bargain on her work, I chose side-oats grama, blue grama, hairy grama, and switchgrass—species

with ranges that stretch between and connect the Southwest borderlands and southern Wisconsin. When I look at them, I see way off beyond to the long rays of the sinking Sonoran sun.

And, yes, I can stab myself on either *Opuntia fragilis* (brittle prickly pear) or *Opuntia macrorhiza* (plains prickly pear). I know spots where you can breathe in the brisk coniferous air along Lake Superior with prickly pear at your feet.

I live along this continental axis of imagination, defined by its contrasts and gradients, tensions and connections.

By the standards of the flat Midwest, I live in a place of utter irregularity: the elevations in my county go all the way from 715 to 1,593 feet above sea level. Cochise County, Arizona, will take you from 2,419 to 9,763 feet high. In this part of the Midwest, we get thirty-four to thirty-five inches of annual precipitation, distributed along a neat bell curve across the year. The Sonoran Desert may get three to fourteen inches, spiking during the summer monsoon. The sun shines over El Paso 3,760 hours every year. Milwaukee makes do with 2,480 hours. We will go from average daily high and low temperatures of 26 and 11 in January to 82 and 61 in July. In Douglas, Arizona, expect 64/32 and 95/68. Wisconsin is flatter, wetter, cloudier, colder, and greener.

In short, the desert Southwest is rougher, drier, sunnier, warmer, and browner than what occupies me in the cheese-making hinterlands of the Midwest that my friend Gary Nabhan calls “Curdistan.”

Across such differences, I find myself always wanting to emphasize continuities, to feel connected across the contrasts. We both had Pleistocene megafauna vulnerable to the business end of Clovis spear points. Wisconsin has its unique concentration (alas, much diminished) of ancient effigy mounds; the Southwest has its cliff dwellings, many dating from the same historical period (a thousand years ago, give or take a couple hundred). Both landscapes hold hard stories of tribal perseverance, determination, and resilience. I like to ponder if native Lake Superior copper ever made it across the continental trade routes to New Mexico's pueblos.

Both landscapes sit along the edge of the bison's historical range. Both still have many bovines, albeit dairy cows in Wisconsin and beef cattle on the semiarid ranges of the borderlands. German immigrants contributed to

Wisconsin's polka tradition and to the *conjunto tejano* of the border country. These days, beef cattle and Midwest dairy cows respond to Spanish voices, on the range and in the milking parlors. Some years ago, neighbors of mine in western Wisconsin created a small nonprofit group, Puentes/Bridges, to foster better understanding between farm owners and operators and immigrant dairy farm workers from Mexico. Every year farmers from Wisconsin go south to visit their employees' home communities, exploring the differences between their cultures and landscapes.

I keep wondering whether these connections are coincidental or more substantial. Here are a handful of particular connections and connectors that I often ponder.

John Wesley Powell came of age on a farm in southeastern Wisconsin, long before he charted the arid canyonlands of the Southwest and documented the region's Native languages and cultures. What mind-set did he bring from better-watered lands to the drier lands beyond the Hundredth Meridian when he proposed that any new development in the West should be organized around watersheds and designed to deal with water scarcity?

Frank Lloyd Wright moved along this Midwest-Southwest axis. His Wisconsin home, Taliesin, is about fifteen miles away from mine as the sandhill crane flies. He built his "natural house . . . native in spirit and the making" of the "yellow sand-limestone" that "lay in strata like outcropping ledges in the facades of the hills" (Wright 2005). Drawn in part perhaps by the comparable geology, Wright began in 1937 to spend his winters at Taliesin West in Scottsdale. I am writing in October. The students in the Taliesin School of Architecture have just made their annual migration to Arizona.

Georgia O'Keeffe was born and grew up in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. In the late 1920s she first came to her Faraway and found there her "beautiful, untouched lonely feeling place" (O'Keeffe 1976) at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiú, New Mexico. Her imagination absorbed desert rock and flower; her vision filled the American imagination in return.

Aldo Leopold grew from midwestern roots and, after schooling in forestry in the East, went to work in the arid Southwest. He married Estella Luna Otero Bergere of Santa Fe. The desert landscape and the cross-cultural marriage contributed to his evolving view of conservation, from a narrowly economic enterprise to a broad cultural aspiration: the "unfolding of a new relationship between people and land" (Leopold 1940).

Leopold was not the only one to be transformed by the contrast. The Midwest's prairies and the Southwest's deserts have both played vital roles in the development of the science of ecology, and the application of that science in conservation. Across the last century, both landscapes served as laboratories for exploring core questions in community ecology. Are plant associations discrete communities of tightly interacting species that change in predictable ways? Or are they loosely organized collections of co-occurring individual species that are subject to unpredictable forces of change? We might cast the tension in that contrast in even broader terms: what is the natural relation between the individual and the community?

Frederic Clements, working in the mixed-grass prairies of Nebraska, was the exemplar of the view that plant communities are akin to superorganisms, following expected stages of development toward a stable "climax" state. Henry Gleason in Illinois and, later, John T. Curtis in Wisconsin looked at midwestern prairies and saw a less structured reality. Individual plant species exhibited their own evolved preferences and tolerances of soil and moisture

and other environmental factors, and they constantly changed toward no particular end.

Gleason had an ally in this scientific debate in Forrest Shreve, ecologist at the Carnegie Institution's Desert Laboratory in Tucson (where Clements was also affiliated). Shreve held that it was "nowhere possible to pick out a group of plants which may be thought of as associates without being able to find other localities in which the association has been dissolved" (Shreve 1915). Out of the desert Southwest, too, came revolutionary insights into the role of recurring disturbance—especially fire and drought—in structuring vegetation on the landscape. Such disturbances are not abnormal ecological factors but intrinsic to the character of the place.

It is tempting to map this tension between organismic and individualistic concepts in ecology onto our own human social relations. Are we modest midwesterners, cooperating on our farmsteads and in our small towns and neighborhoods, moderating our extremes to be good neighbors? Or are we ornery desert rats, individualists on the fringe, staying prickly and celebrating our libertarian leanings? I resist the stereotypes and the polarity. I strive for connection along the continuum. We are both and more. We are individuals, dependent on and nested within complex communities. Our lives are, as Aldo Leopold wrote, "conditioned by interwoven cooperations and competitions" (Leopold 1939).

It was Leopold's trail that first carried me into the northern extremities of the Chihuahuan Desert. As an adventuring youngster, I yearned to ground myself in the Gila Wilderness, the nation's first formally designated wilderness area, which Leopold had worked to secure from road development in the early 1920s. I hitchhiked eastbound out of Tucson into what was, for me at least, uncharted territory. Looking south from I-10, I saw for the first time in the distance the mysterious sky islands of the border country. I pledged then and there that I would someday return and enter those alluring blue portals on the far horizon.

My first experience of desert contemplation came on that same trip, along the roadside outside Lordsburg, waiting interminably for a ride on

the backroad to Silver City. I sat and stared in silence at the reality before me: roadside gravel and cigarette butts and candy wrappers, grading up and out into scrubby mesquite and ocotillo range, rising up into the higher and distant juniper-piñon green. My naïve desert desire had met its hard and mundane reality, and it stayed there for a few hours.

A ride came, finally, when a kindly latter-day hippie stopped and took me aboard. Across those forty-five miles I was given another desert vision. As we rode up and over the Big Burro Mountains, my driver treated me to a fantastic nonstop oral dissertation on the theme of desert pilgrimage, advancing human consciousness, and the intergalactic dispersion of fungal spores. It was unbelievable.

I had not exhausted my naïveté. I did not realize that I would not really be able to make it into the Gila Wilderness. I would barely have time to walk out of town and just across the boundary line into the Gila National Forest. I did not realize how chilly it could get at six thousand feet elevation on January nights in the desert. But walk I did, out amid the junipers, piñon, and yucca. And camp out I did, with no tent and no pad, shivering in my inadequate sleeping bag on the frigid ground, that first night in the desert that I had envisioned and dreamed of for so long. I was perfectly content to be there, to be connected, and to be cold.

What drives the desire for such connection across landscapes, between the high and dry desert and the mild lowland Midwest? I have to believe it is something much more than just relief from winter's cold (at one end of the axis) or summer's heat (at the other). Every time I trace that transect, in my mind's eye or across actual space, I figure it must have something to do with the craving for contrast, the fascination of diversity, and the need to stretch out. I am no longer a newcomer to the desert. I am a refugee and a returnee. A connector and a conduit. I pitch my tent with stakes sunk on one end into midwestern loam, and on the other into hard-packed southwestern sands.

The weather forecast says that the first frost of the year in Wisconsin is coming two nights from now. I need to go out to my garden and do some late chores. I do believe that, with my sixteen pepper plants thriving this year, I am once again, for the ninth consecutive year, the largest producer of Hatch chiles in Sauk County, Wisconsin.

References

- Leopold, Aldo. 1939. "A Biotic View of Land." *Journal of Forestry* 37 (9): 727.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1940. "Wisconsin Wildlife Chronology." *Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin* 5 (11): 6.
- O'Keefe, Georgia. 1976. *Georgia O'Keefe*. New York: Viking.
- Shreve, Forrest. 1915. *The Vegetation of a Desert Mountain Range as Conditioned by Climatic Factors*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution.
- Wright, Frank Lloyd. 2005. *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography*. Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate Communications.