Landscape Of Desire

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We think of them as pictures of reality, but they are actually talismans which twist our psyche in one direction or another. Maps create the situation they describe. We use them hoping for help in finding our way around unknown territory, hoping they will take us in the right direction. We are hardly aware of the fact that they are proscribing the way we think of ourselves, that they are defining large pieces of our personal identities.

—Freeman House

The next morning we walk downstream to have class under a big cottonwood. Metta leads the group in a short meditation to which Yucca takes exception. We follow with a guided meditation.

“Lie down, close your eyes and feel the earth beneath your body. Sink into the ground and let the sand cradle you,” I say to get everyone fully relaxed and in a slightly hypnotic state.

“Now, recall the very first nature memory that enters your mind, not necessarily the earliest memory, but simply the first one that pops up without rejecting it. Concentrate on that memory. Recall the smells, sights, sounds, feelings, and emotions evoked by that memory,” I suggest.

I allow several minutes to pass. “Okay, when you are ready, open your eyes and write down everything you can recall about that memory.”

When the students finish, I ask them to unpackage their writing. “Look at your memory like a medicine bundle, take out different pieces, turn them over, and examine what you wrote and why.” Thus, we use writing as a method of exploration of our personal relationship with nature. Hopefully

This is the oldest exposed rock in the San Rafael, formed by the sand dunes of a large barrier island in the Permian sea. To the east, the on-shore white beach sands mixed with red silt, creating the maze-like canyons and slickrock ledges of the Cedar Mesa formation. To the west, the sea produced the Kaibab Limestone, a stratified yellow rock that erodes in pillars like statues of Egyptian pharaohs. Muddy Creek cuts along the cusp where the land once met the sea. Here the White Rim Sandstone forms a deeply incised slot canyon called the Chute.
this will become their final essay after substantial revision. All too often college students crank out writing assignments the night before they are due. Students who are smart and good writers are rewarded by receiving good grades on papers hastily written. To negate this tendency, I require a minimum of three drafts. The first draft is peer-edited, the second receives feedback from me, and the third is the final. The difference between the first and last is profound.

“Make this the best thing you’ve ever written,” I implore.

“Oh, no pressure there,” responds Seeker.

“The difference between great writing and mediocre writing is not just in the words. Anyone can play a series of notes. Some people are masters of wordplay, but they’re just putting words on a page. It’s fast food writing, easily digestible, but not very memorable. With other writers you can sense their integrity; their words come from the heart. Authenticity permeates their writing. Great writing comes from within, a place of deep honesty and awareness. Great writing is from one soul to another,” I suggest.

Because it is about them and their experience, the students have a personal stake and interest in making it excellent. Once they get untracked, they work diligently and produce some amazing work.

After lunch we split into two groups. The women all elect to return to camp with Metta. By unspoken and perhaps unconscious agreement, the men and women often segregate themselves. I suppose there’s just too much male and female energy bouncing around. When separate, both groups mellow out.

The male students and I scramble up the Moenkopi to a wide bench where one could walk for miles. We find ourselves in another world, an enormous canyon encircled by Wingate cliffs standing like a rigid line of stoic soldiers, arms at their sides, grimacing outward, squinting into the sun. Below us Muddy Creek slices through the brick red Moenkopi and buff Cedar Mesa like a jagged knife cut. A canyon within a canyon. Broken slabs of sandstone lay strewn about like a couple of giants squabbled and broke all their dishes. We encounter a claret cup cactus in full bloom, defying its barren environment. The thick green stems of the cactus huddle together, while from the apex burst forth scarlet flowers the shape of wine goblets. We marvel at the cactus made even more stunning by its bleak surroundings. A few sparse grasses mingle with blackbrush, a member of the rose family superbly adapted to arid climates.

We spread the topo map out on the ground using rocks to keep it from blowing away. We attempt to make sense of the mass of squiggly lines that signify the landscape. Besides being the first to float the Grand Canyon, John Wesley Powell also served as chief of the U.S. Geographical Survey.
and began a systematic topographical survey of the U.S., a daunting task which remains unfinished. A red grid lies superimposed over Mussentuchit Flats and the west side of Muddy Creek. Each section contains a number from one to thirty-six. A crosshatch on the map marks the physical corner of the section where the survey sunk a metal post. We notice that the land to the east of Muddy Creek is unencumbered with the red grid. With a labyrinth of convoluted canyons, it was simply too rugged to survey.

Back in 1785, the Land Ordinance divided the U.S. into six by six mile blocks called townships. Each township was further segmented into thirty-six square mile sections. Each section comprises six hundred and forty acres; each quarter section is one hundred and sixty acres, the size of a homestead. Starting in 1803, upon statehood, section sixteen was granted to the state to generate revenue for the school system. In return the state waived rights to federal lands. By the time Utah became a state, the land grant was increased to four sections: two, sixteen, thirty-two, and thirty-six. These school trust lands would become a land management nightmare in the years to come.

The state often leases its sections for grazing, mining, or natural gas wells. Although only .03 percent of the school system's budget comes from these lands, the Utah Supreme Court ruled that the state is obliged to generate maximum economic returns from its school trust lands. Court rulings held that "the BLM must grant a holder of a state oil and gas lease access to a school state parcel wholly surrounded by federal land in a WSA." This caused huge problems when Clinton created the Grand-Staircase Escalante National Monument. Eventually, the Interior Secretary Babbitt and the Governor of Utah agreed on a land swap, trading 376,739 acres of state sections within the monument, as well as national parks and national forests for fifty million dollars in cash and one hundred and forty-five thousand acres of more profitable federal sections near developed areas.

Without a map we perceive a world of rock and sky. With the map before us we see that these canyons and buttes have been named, that a jeep trail and a mine lie just a few miles away. We acquire the notion that a nearby canyon must be accessible since it has a name. No longer looking at the land, we are focused on the map. We find our location by triangulating off Tomsich Butte as if we didn't already know that we are directly over the center of the earth. We pick out a mass of tightly parallel squiggly lines representing a tight canyon that we can't see. We find a bearing for the canyon.

"Okay let's head over there and see if we can find it."

The guys look out across the flat, desolate mesa incredulously.

"You mean just walk out there and find a canyon?"

"Yep."
Here's the adventure they'd been waiting for. Random exploration, just walking off into the void.

With nothing to shoot a bearing for, we have to use each other. Yucca walks off toward the horizon while Seeker directs him to the right bearing. He signals left and Yucca shakes his head. We hear a faint, “I can't.” When we reach him, we see a deeply incised canyon that doesn't show up on the map. A few more bearings and we reach the rim of another canyon.

Everyone but Yucca decides to head back. I cringe for a moment. He'd been getting on my nerves lately. But maybe it would be good to spend some time one-on-one and try to establish a connection. I ask him how he came to be named Alfonso Levy.

“I was born in Chile, but I was adopted and brought back here. My real parents were too poor to keep me. It's kinda weird when you think about it. My dad pulls in a million bucks a year. He's a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills.”

We scramble down loose blocks of rock into a canyon we hope will take us back to Muddy Creek. The contour lines indicate it might be tight, but we hope for the best.

“I think my parents got my sister and me to save their marriage. Probably some stupid shrink told them it would be a good idea. My mom's always listening to stupid shrinks. It didn't work though; they got divorced when I was seven.”

“So did you live with your mom, then?”

“Yeah, she's one wacky bitch. I can't stand her.”

“Why's that?”

“She's totally neurotic and overprotective. She didn't even want me to go to college. All her shrinks told her she should let me go off to college, but she just kept changing shrinks until she found one that would tell her what she wanted to hear.”

“But you left.”

“Yeah, what was the bitch gonna do?”

“Do you get along with your dad?”

“Okay, I guess. He works all the time and his girlfriend's wacked.”

We stop at some tracks. Bighorn and wild horse. Encouraged by this we continue on.

“Do you ever think about going back to Chile? To check it out, I mean?”

“Yeah, I thought it might be interesting, but my mom told me if I went back they'd put me in the army.”

We suddenly hit an eighty-foot pour off. We edge out over it on our bellies and laugh at the real life verification of what the map told us, but we refused to believe.
We retrace our steps back out of the canyon to the Moenkopi bench where we part ways. Yucca heads back to camp while I attempt another route.

Some days I want to walk forever. I don’t even want to stop and eat or drink. I want to walk all the thoughts out of my head. With each step the jumbled thoughts that comprise my consciousness settle out. They line up like quartz in schist and I can examine them one at a time. Sometimes I think if I can walk long enough my thoughts will be ground to dust and blow away.

I follow the twists and turns as the canyon cuts through the Moenkopi. The walls grow higher with each bend, and the late afternoon shadows grow longer. It will be a long walk back in the dark if this doesn’t work. Finally I come to the drop where the Cedar Mesa begins. Often a pour off marks the boundary between formations. As the water cuts through the soft Moenkopi, it erodes steadily, then it encounters the much harder Cedar Mesa. This pour off I can easily scramble down.

I notice a bull snake lying in a vertical crack in the sandstone. The lower half of his body is wrapped into a small pocket about halfway up the pour off. Using his tail, the snake pushes himself up the cliff, slowly sending a muscle ripple through his body. His head inches upward. Soon he can no longer use his tail but somehow clings to the rock, gripping the uneven surface of the sandstone with the scales on his belly. Ever so slowly, he pushes against one bulge in the rock, pulls against a crack, and inches higher. The snake lies exposed, stretched out along the cliff face. A perfect meal for a raven, I think. A second later a raven flies over and circles back. The snake senses something (me or the bird?) and freezes amid a difficult five-ten move. The serpent looks up and flicks out a long, black tongue. Maybe the raven sees me or isn’t hungry. Nevertheless, it circles again and continues up the canyon.

The snake resumes his laborious climb. What would cause a snake to climb up this cliff? Albeit a small one, it sure looks like a barrier to snakes. I can’t help being impressed by this fellow’s slow determination to summit. Finally his head crests the top. As he begins moving along the ledge, a sudden gust of wind blows him from his precarious position and back down where he started. He seems somewhat defeated. As I gather my things to go, I glance back and see that he has resumed his climb.

The next morning Sage volunteers to lead our much anticipated hike through the Chute. I try to hide my apprehension. This is our longest hike thus far, and Sage has struggled physically. But I resist the temptation to suggest another leader. That would undercut the entire principle.
The previous two days had been overcast, and I'd watched the creek rise with trepidation, knowing that high water would make our journey through the Chute difficult, if not impossible. Today, however, dawns clear and warm, and the water level has dropped significantly overnight. The water has even cleared, becoming an opaque green instead of mocha. Just past camp, Muddy Creek begins to cut through the Permian Sandstone. As the creek drops, it erodes down but not out. The result is a long stretch of narrows without banks of any kind.

As we enter the Chute, we cross from mud outpost to gravel bar, weaving back and forth across the creek, working our way downstream with agonizing slowness. Salt deposits form a bathtub ring along the canyon wall and indicate the high water mark. We find virtually no plant life here, just an occasional rabbitbrush on some of the higher benches of sand. A boulder, freshly fractured in two, lies indented in the mud, peeled back like the crater of an asteroid. When did this rock fall? Yesterday, the day before, a couple of hours ago?

The hundred foot high canyon walls begin to close in, trapping us in a world of mud, water, and sandstone. A narrow ribbon of sky above reminds us that we are still on earth. Should a flash flood occur, we would be swept downstream for miles, unless we could somehow scamper up the sheer walls like lizards.

Coming around a bend, I find the students huddled in a tight circle staring at the ground. A small bat, probably a Western Pipstrelle, lies flopping around helplessly in the mud at their feet. It flaps its wings but can't lift off. I pick it up with a handkerchief and place it in a rock crevice, but it continues to flop about as if its back is broken or it's having a seizure. It slides off the rock and back into the mud. It seems that it is gasping for air, its tiny mouth opens and closes and just gets full of sand. For a moment it quiets and tucks its wings into its body in a pitiful gesture, as if it is about to curl up and die. We debate whether to let nature take its course or put it out of its misery. I hate the idea of taking its life needlessly. What if it isn't rabies? The incidence of rabies in bats is no higher than other mammals, only half a percent.

“Maybe we should just let it die in peace,” says Mud.

Sage decides we need to press on. She collects the group and departs. I linger, watching the bat writhe in the mud. It certainly looks like fatal agony. Finally I make up my mind and pick up a large rock. A quick smack on the head crushes its tiny skull. I feel its life quickly depart, flowing out with what feels like a sense of relief. Yes, I actually feel something come out of the bat, through the rock and into my hands.

Life is such an intangible thing, but you can easily detect its absence. We use death as a noun, but it seems to me a verb, a process, for once something
is dead, it is lifeless, inanimate. The quality that created its existence departs, and it is no longer a being, but a mass of tissue, a rock or shoe, a toenail clipping. It all happens so quickly. It’s either alive or it’s not. A human body weighs three ounces less than when it was alive. Some speculate that these three ounces constitute the soul—physical evidence that the soul has mass.

Why did I wait until the students were out of sight before committing my act? Was I trying to shield them from something? What? Perhaps I felt that this creature’s final moments should be one of dignity and not one of a spectacle, an experience, or a teachable moment. Ultimately it still had subjecthood, and I suppose I was afraid that I might turn it into an object, a lesson. So in the end, what transpired was between the bat and me, eliminated from virtue (“which by necessity must have neighbors”). No lessons, no right or wrong, just a human confronted with what must be done.

We stop for lunch at a large sand bar. Plastic jars of peanut butter, bagels, granola bars, and the last bits of cheese and tortillas spill out of packs. I watch Seaweed prepare her lunch, fascinated by the ritual precision. She places a small plastic bowl in front of her, ladles out three teaspoons of dried humus, thinks twice and puts one teaspoon back in the plastic bag labeled “humus.” Using the lid to her bowl and her pocketknife, she methodically cuts sundried tomatoes into tiny pieces, adding them to the bowl. She then slowly adds water from her water bottle, and sprinkles some salt over the mixture. She peels off three pieces of purple cabbage and sets them aside on her thigh. Taking a spoonful of humus, she spreads this over the cabbage. Meanwhile the other students have wolfed down their lunches and are busy picking M&Ms out of their trail mix.

As we prepare to start hiking again, Sage informs me that Patience is sick. Just downstream I find her sitting in the creek and looking miserable. Since day one we’ve battled a series of intestinal illnesses, no doubt due to the foul water. Although we treat the water with iodine, some invariably seeps in, a mouthful when swimming or a drop of water on a spoon. I give her a dose of the miraculous grapefruit seed extract and consult with Sage.

“I don’t know what to do. I looked at the map and it looks like we still have four or five miles before there’s anywhere we can camp,” she says.

“Let’s wait awhile and see if she feels better. If nothing else, we can redistribute her stuff among the rest of us. Better inform everyone else of your plan.”

No one seems put out. Yucca has been researching primitive living techniques for his final project and enlists everyone’s help in building a wickiup out of driftwood. The morning’s minor tension and strife soon disappear with the communal project. By the time Patience feels up to hiking, they’ve
built an elaborate structure, complete with entry path and mud sculpture. I weigh mentioning the impact of this against the positive impact it has had on the group dynamic. I say nothing, hoping the next rain will wash it all downstream.

Soon we enter a stretch with no mud banks. The creek water laps up against both cliff sides. Hemmed in by vertical walls less than ten feet apart, the water has nowhere to go but downstream. Neither do we. I watch those ahead of me wading deep and deeper. There are certain bench marks when hiking through water. We avoid water deeper than our ankles as long as possible and then once it tops our boots, it matters little, and we splash happily along until it begins inching up our thighs. As the water approaches the groin, we stand on tiptoes. But after that point, it doesn’t make much difference. Wet is wet.

A shaft of sunlight penetrates the narrow walls and illuminates the still water ahead, transforming the canyon into a cathedral, a place of worship where the laws of ordinary reality are suspended. We slow our pace and saunter quietly. The yellow and red and blue cross-bedding in the polished sandstone glows like backlit stained glass windows. The only sense of perspective is the five backpackers in front of me. Under this lighting, the creek no longer looks like water but absorbs the light like empty space, and it appears as if we are about to walk off the end of the world.