UNCONFORMITY

According to geologist Donald Baars, “A major interruption in the normal deposition of sediments.”

You are here commencing anew. The soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness. Strive to preserve the elements from being contaminated by the filthy, wicked conduct and sayings of those who pervert the intelligence God has bestowed upon the human family.

—Brigham Young

Set in the former Mormon settlement of Fruita, the campground at Capitol Reef National Park is laced with cottonwoods and surrounded by orchards. Deer nap contentedly under the trees. Songs of robins, warblers, and finches drift through the foliage. A weathered barn and old farmhouse accent the pastoral scene. Irrigation from the Fremont River supports this incongruous fecundity in the middle of a redrock desert. The greenery provides a welcome relief to our eyes as it surely must have to the pioneers who created this oasis after decades of hardship and a seemingly endless array of religious persecution. Built by the settlers to keep their livestock from wandering, a fence of large basalt boulders circles the hillside above the campground. I contemplate the sweat equity in this fence. They must have expected this to be used for generations. Established in 1889, this community peaked in the 1920s with ten families and faded when it was absorbed into Capitol Reef National Monument in 1937. What would these hardy pioneers think about the RVs lined cheek to jowl in their former village?

In the 1820s a series of revelations led Joseph Smith to uncover golden tablets in upstate New York, which he translated into the Book of Mormon. With that text he founded The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Because of their unorthodox religious beliefs, close-knit communities, and practice of polygamy, the Mormons were regarded as a dangerous cult by other Christian sects. They were driven out of New York and migrated to Ohio, then to Missouri, where they were attacked by the state militia. They fled to Illinois where the prophet Smith was lynched.
Brigham Young assumed leadership and ushered the faithful west to escape persecution.

They reached Salt Lake in July, 1847. Considered the promised land, they settled with religious fervor. Within days, they laid out home sites and began irrigating, damming City Creek and diverting water to the fields. Within five years, seventeen thousand had gathered in the Salt Lake valley, making the arduous journey from the Midwest. Too poor to purchase horses or oxen, many Mormon pioneers made the thirteen-hundred-mile trek pulling their belongings behind them in handcart. The next forty years saw more than eighty thousand immigrants arrive although some six thousand lost their lives along the way. The Mormons had 263,000 acres under irrigation and were supporting two hundred thousand people. During this time the potato harvest increased by a thousandfold and wheat by 1,500 percent.

Mormons approached the West differently than the miners and land speculators. They came not to get rich but to settle. Brigham Young opposed mining, insisting that it required more effort than it produced. “The world is after riches. Riches is the god they worship,” Young stated. It’s possible that he wished to keep the saints away from that which accelerates desire. Gold could be just as addictive a substance as the forbidden tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine.

Two years after their arrival, Brigham Young proclaimed the state of Deseret, stretching from the Continental Divide in Colorado to Los Angeles, from southern Idaho to the Grand Canyon. Seeking to expand and buffer Zion from the influences of the gentiles, Young launched tentacles of settlers to the north, south, and west. By 1900, more than five hundred Mormon communities were established, some as far away as Mexico and Canada.

Although the empty heart of Deseret, the rugged interior of the Colorado Plateau, was long considered uninhabitable, Young selected church members to establish settlements to head off the ranchers from Colorado, who were beginning to graze their herds in southeastern Utah and the miners who were beginning to prospect the region.

Not all who were “called up” were thrilled about their exile to these barren wastelands. However, as Wallace Stegner wrote, “Mormons obey because their whole habit and training of life predisposes them to obedience.” The faithful persevered against incredible hardships and founded a smattering of towns in an area that hadn’t seen permanent human habitation since the Anasazi left five hundred years earlier. The church not only organized the founding of towns, but also devised a highly organized system of water allocation that allowed for irrigation. The Mormon village was a model of self-sufficiency with the community controlling its own water, food, grazing forage, and firewood. Several of these villages practiced
communitarianism, holding the land and possessions in common, allocating grazing and water usage according to individual need. But this gradually faded away.

Worried about Mormon expansionism, Congress thwarted Deseret by creating the Territory of Utah in 1850, and statehood was delayed for another forty-four years. However, Brigham Young became governor of the territory. The federal judges soon discovered that Utah was a religious theocracy. Complained one judge, “Mormons look to Brigham Young and to him alone, for the law by which they are to be governed: therefore no law of Congress is by them considered binding in any manner.” Convinced that Utah was an outlaw territory, in 1857 President Buchanan deployed the army against a church and community composed of U.S. citizens. For the next year, the Mormon militia fought a nonviolent guerrilla campaign against the occupying federal troops, burning supply trains, turning livestock loose, and wreaking havoc.

Brigham Young avoided open war by agreeing to accept a federally appointed territorial governor, settling the issue of secular authority. However the issue of polygamy remained unresolved. The Mormon practice of plural marriage was particularly repugnant to Congress, which went so far as to seize church assets and make polygamy a felony, punishable by up to five years in prison and hefty fines. From 1884 to 1889, U.S. marshals conducted raids throughout Utah, encouraged by a twenty-dollar bonus for each polygamist arrested. Federal agents broke into houses in the middle of the night and raided weddings and funerals, driving otherwise law-abiding and hard-working citizens into hiding.

Many fled to the desert. Early settlements along the Fremont River were in large part induced by the persecution of polygamists, increasing the pressure to settle on marginal lands. One of the first to arrive was Ephriam K. Hanks, a leader in the Mormon militia and a scout for the original Mormon wagon trains. A former polygamist, Hanks divorced all his wives and remarried the youngest before starting a remote ranch south of the Fremont River in 1882. This stalwart pioneer ran an underground railroad for fugitive polygamists, many of whom settled in Hanksville. Eventually, of the six settlements scattered along the lower Fremont River, all but Caineville and Hanksville were washed away by floods.

Polygamy opponents insisted that Mormon women “must be set free whether they wanted freedom or not.” In response, the Utah legislature gave women the right to vote, the second state in the country to do so. “Antipolygamy reformers were thus in the peculiar position of fighting female suffrage in order to keep Mormon women from voting for their own oppression,” wrote historian Patricia Limerick.
Finally, in 1890 Mormon president and prophet Wilford Woodruff received word from God, and the church denounced polygamy. One could make the case that polygamy, or rather the reaction to it, is responsible for much of the antiwilderness sentiment in southern Utah. The federal government could not ask for a more dedicated group of settlers. Mormons, more than any other group, were industrious, devoted, peaceable. The Mormons were the only European people who managed to survive, indeed thrive, in an arid and hostile land, largely through church-sponsored irrigation.

Distribution and allocation of water required a system of hierarchy and resources beyond what the individual could provide. Thus the church furnished: unified development, resource exploitation, peaceful water rights, capital, and security. The church stated that water belonged to the community rather than the individual. And of course, the need for water also bound the people to the church hierarchy. However, with the threat of the federal government redistributing water to gentiles, Utah modified its laws in 1880 to allow for individual ownership of water.

This changed everything. In Caineville, the largest settlement along the lower Fremont, disputes over water often lead to beatings and hangings. Indeed, old timers say that “more men have killed over water along the Fremont than over women.” One resident related the story of how a man named Grainger originally homesteaded upstream and had a spring on his place. He eventually moved down valley to better farmland but left his spring running to supply the irrigation ditch with the provision that he’d receive the water. Whenever the water failed to arrive “old man Grainger” could be seen heading up the ditch, not with a shovel over his shoulder but a rifle.

Although infused with cultural relevance, the land itself remained in federal control. “It is surely hard to think that a country where so much of your intimate family and community and church history has taken place is not yours, and that strangers tell you what to do with it,” wrote Wallace Stegner.

The brief history of Fruita provides an example. On the heels of Hanks, other families arrived and settled at the confluence of Sulphur Creek and the Fremont River. Originally called Junction, the name was changed in 1904 to Fruita when the community acquired a post office. Early settlers realized the potential of low elevation and abundant water and quickly planted orchards—apple, pear, peach, plum, apricot, walnut, and almond. Within ten years grapes had become the basis of a thriving illegal industry. Fruit was also traded for grain to make whisky. While they were culturally Mormon, the residents of Fruita were more tolerant of spirited drink than other communities along the Fremont. Not only did the isolation protect the polygamists, it also thwarted the feds seeking to shut down the moonshine operations. In fact, many stills were not even concealed. Fruita never even
had any civil authority nor a church. Religious services were held in homes
or in the one-room schoolhouse, which was built in 1896 and served the
community until it closed in 1941.

In 1937 a presidential proclamation by FDR created Capitol Reef
National Monument, surrounding the rapidly diminishing community.
During the 1950s, the drive for national security proved overwhelming, and
Capitol Reef was opened to uranium exploration over the objections of the
monument’s superintendent. Consequently the AEC upgraded the road to
Hanksville. Yet, as late as 1961 it was a full-day’s trip to travel the thirty-five
miles to Hanksville along the “the blue dugway.” Travelers often had to wait
for days at Pleasant Valley for the road to dry out before they could continue
with their journey. Families would camp out and have barbeques and pic-
nics, and everyone would join in the carnival atmosphere.

In 1943 visitation to America’s national parks was six million. By 1950
it had exploded to 33 million, increasing to 72 million ten years later. The
pressure to develop visitor services resulted in Mission 66, a ten-year effort
to construct modern visitor facilities in the national parks. In Capitol Reef,
this led to the purchasing of the private inholdings. By this time most of the
original settlers and their descendants were gone, and the newcomers were
more than willing to sell out. Locals remembered Fruita both as “poverty
flats” and as “paradise.” However a few residents held out, and since their
properties were needed for the new road, they were condemned by eminent
domain. Eventually the hotels and guest ranches were removed from where
the campground is now. In 1957 the road from Torrey was paved, and by
1962 the highway extended to Hanksville.

While inclusion in the National Park Service spelled the end of the settle-
ment of Fruita, it ironically is now the best preserved example of Mormon
frontier life.

Survival in this harsh land depended upon religious devotion to production.
The name Deseret is the name for honeybee in the Book of Mormon, and
the beehive is the state symbol and industry is the state motto. “In Mormon
doctrine, earthly labors carried a direct connection to spiritual progress; one’s
exertions in the material world directly reflected one’s spiritual standing,”
wrote historian Patricia Limerick. Thus, wilderness can be viewed as anti-
thetical to Mormon philosophy, preventing industrious work such as coal
and uranium mining, oil and gas extraction, and power plant production. It
threatens livestock interests and can’t be exploited for tourism.

Leaving behind the pastoral lands of the east, Mormons were con-
fronted with a grey desert that “did not become beautiful until the second or
third generation when it began to be seen through the eyes of those with full
stomachs, reliable water supplies, comfortable homes, passable roads, and hearts buoyed up by hope,” explained Lyman Hafen, a fifth-generation southern Utah Mormon.

Possibly the isolated landscape informed cultural attitudes, just as the land itself was being affected by cultural values. This history, combined with a sense of ownership of the land, makes many Mormon communities suspicious, if not outright hostile to the idea of wilderness designation. While the church no longer appoints political leaders, it still exercises powerful influence over Utah politics. All of Utah’s congressional delegation is Mormon, as is more than ninety percent of the state legislature.

Although the Prophet Joseph Smith “taught the sanctity and unity of all living beings, and that plants and animals had souls,” the LDS Church is formally committed to inaction in terms of environmental positions. Yet, many urban Mormons actively support wilderness, including the new director of Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, a great-great grandson of Brigham Young. And in 1976 church president Spencer Kimball stated, “But when I review the performance of this people in comparison with what is expected, I am appalled and frightened. Iniquity seems to abound. . . . I have the feeling that the good earth can hardly bear our presence upon it. . . . The Brethren constantly cry out against that which is intolerable in the sight of the Lord: against pollution of mind, body, and our surroundings.”

We spill out of the van onto the lush grass of the campground. Everyone stands around in a daze as if they’ve just landed in some exotic country.

“Uh, where’s the water?” Mud asks.

“Over by the bathrooms, there’s a spigot.”

“Bathrooms?” says Seeker somewhat mortified. “You mean we have to use bathrooms?”

I shrug. “Suit yourself.”

“Can we drink the water?” Mud asks.

“I’m sure it’s liberally dosed with chlorine.”

Everyone returns from the bathrooms excited and full of stories.

“Dude, there was some guy in there washing his underarms,” says Yucca.

“These girls had blow-dryers and were doing their hair and putting on makeup,” says Sage as if this were truly bizarre behavior.

Huckleberry sits on a picnic table staring past the RVs, green lawns, and twenty-four hour sprinklers to the fujichrome backdrop of azure sky, towering orange cliffs, and purple Chinle slopes.

“It looks fake, like a postcard, or it’s behind glass or something,” he mutters.
“It’s almost too beautiful, but it feels like I can’t get out and explore it,” Patience concurs.

“That’s because it’s scenery, not nature,” Seeker adds.

“They have big metal signs telling you what to expect on your hike, how far it is, what the trail’s like, if it’s easy, moderate, or strenuous. Sort of takes all the fun out of it,” says Huckleberry.

“There’s a Coke machine over there. You can get your Coke and go and check out the wild animals,” Bobofet indicates the deer ambling through the campground munching contentedly on the green grass as they are stalked by an older man with a camcorder.

“I don’t know; I get the impression I’m not supposed to really interact with nature here. There’s all these railings and signs telling you to stay on the trail.” Huckleberry shakes his head.

“Can you eat any of the plants in a national park? Can we make Mormon tea?” Sage asks.

“Technically, yes, but it’s not encouraged.”

“I feel really constrained here,” says Seaweed.

“You know I think it’s great, all these old people cruising around in their RVs,” Mud joins the conversation. “Except for all the gas they use,” she adds. “I mean, at least they aren’t sitting at home in front of the TV.”

“I saw a couple watching TV in their RV,” says Seeker.

“Dude, this is like David Lynch meets the Brady Bunch,” Bobofet excitedly articulates the precise metaphor.

“I was just talking to this old lady, and she was great. She was telling me about all the national parks they’d been to and how she and her husband retired and sold their house and just live in their RV traveling around the country. She was really interested in what we were doing. She said she wished she could have done this when she was in college. It reminds me just how lucky we are,” Mud continues.

“Dude, what’s up with all the sprinklers?” asks Bobofet. “I thought this was a desert.”

“It is. The park ranger just told me Capitol Reef hasn’t recorded precipitation in eleven months. But remember, it’s use it or lose it with water rights. When it became a park, Capitol Reef acquired the senior water right of Fruita, and if they don’t exercise those rights by irrigation, they lose them,” I explain.

“Umm, seems like a national park should be keeping the water in the river. Or don’t fish count?” says Seeker.

Huckleberry declines the trip to the RV park for hot showers.

“Can I just jump into the creek?” he asks.

“Suit yourself.”
The ranger stops by, extracts himself from his air-conditioned patrol car and informs us that Banjo sleeping under the picnic table needs to be tied up, and if we continue to pee on the rocks at the edge of the campground, we will receive a citation.

After working in several national parks, I’ve begun to wonder about their role in our culture. We revere our national parks. They seem to lie somewhere between the sacred and Disneyland in our national consciousness. Even Wallace Stegner refers to national parks as “playgrounds and shrines.” Lacking a national religion or cultural identity, we look to the national parks to meet our spiritual and aesthetic needs, indeed the park service highlights the historical role the parks play in the development of our national identity. It is significant that the parks tend toward monumentalism—the deepest canyon, the tallest mountain, the biggest geyser, the oldest tree, etc. Yet the park service fails us by catering to the most base secularism, homogenizing our experiences into paved roads, tame animals, and crowded campgrounds. A national park has more in common with a feedlot or an assembly line than with a wilderness. Success is measured by the number of visitors served. Instead of reveling in the glory of God, we revel in clean restrooms.

Thoreau warned us about becoming slaves to our possessions. Ironically, in our desire to make nature more accessible, we’ve barricaded ourselves within our automobiles. We have sold our freedom and spirit for the convenience of the personal auto, which sucks the vitality from our souls.

When I worked at Canyonlands National Park, I once encountered a beautiful mandala someone had made in an inconspicuous alcove. Juniper berries, colored rocks, and swirls in the sand composed the mandala. When I casually mentioned it to my supervisor, she suggested I go back and destroy it. Clearly, a national park is no place for religion, especially an earth-based one.

Across the river from the campground, a wooden boardwalk leads visitors to petroglyphs incised into the sandstone cliff recording the presence of the Fremont Indians, who practiced a truly sustainable existence of small-scale agriculture supplemented by hunting and gathering. A national park that secularizes our experience in nature has supplanted Mormon villagers, whose efforts to transform the landscape into a pastoral vision of England assumed religious importance. Peeling back another layer of history reveals the indigenous peoples made no distinction between the land, their lifestyle, and their religion. Like the Spanish cathedrals of Cuzco built upon the foundations of Inca temples, we find strata of human passages piled atop one another in this one place, each formation revealing a distinct epistemology toward the landscape.
Perhaps the wildlife provide the most glaring example. The Native Americans hunted deer and bighorn through the area for thousands of years. However, within thirty years the Mormon settlers had wiped out all the deer in the valley, and the bighorn had been extirpated because of disease contracted from domestic sheep. Now the park service has begun reintroducing bighorn into Capitol Reef, yet the population remains small and isolated. But the deer have returned with a vengeance. The campground provides abundant, albeit unnatural, food and protection from hunting and predators. (Although mountain lions will occasionally venture down in the winter when the campground is empty.) The result is an artificially high deer population comprised of small and undernourished animals.

In the evening I take my sleeping bag down to the river to sleep.

"Is that legal?" Metta asks.

I shrug. "Doesn't matter; no one would ever know. Sleeping outside your designated spot, is outside the realm of their consciousness."

We spent the next day shopping at Red-D-Market, making a noticeable dent in their inventory and completely eliminating their supply of granola, dried hummus, dried refried beans, and bagels.

At the checkout counter, the proprietor hands me his card. "Call us next time and let us know when you're coming. Tell us what you want and we'll be sure and order it," he says.

At the campground, each student is surrounded by ziplock bags and three weeks worth of food. Empty boxes of granola bars, soup mixes, and instant rice fill several garbage bags. I cringe at all the packaging.

“You know you can buy this all in bulk,” I lecture. “One bag of rolled oats costs a fraction of buying it in these little packets.”

“Yeah, but then I won’t know how much to eat,” protests Mud.

The sky darkens, and it begins to rain, turning to snow by evening.

Lost in a netherworld behind a veil of Walkmans and raincoats, the students amble back and forth between the pay phone, the park service library, and their piles of food. News from home, preparations for the next trip, and researching their final projects fill the next couple days.

Chukars, a type of partridge, patrol the campground scavenging dropped raisins and M&Ms. These clownish birds sport a bright orange bill and a black teardrop that extends down their necks. Bold black stripes contrast the light beige of their wings. Their incessant and guttural clucking doesn't help their dignity. Although capable of flight, they prefer to run, lowering their heads and charging forward. Like pheasants, chukars were brought from Asia for sport hunting. First introduced to the U.S. in 1893, they have
established populations throughout the West, consuming other aliens such as cheatgrass and Russian thistle. In Hawaii, chukars aid in seed dispersal and germination of native plants, occupying an important niche of extinct native species. Here however, they aid in the dispersal and germination of invasive species, especially cheatgrass, their primary food source. Cheatgrass, which increases with fire, drought, and overgrazing, makes possible the successful establishment of chukars. They also eat sagebrush and native grasses, switching to shoots and fruits in summer.

Although they compete with native quail, pheasants and chukars are considered naturalized rather than invasive exotics. I wonder how much of our terminology is determined by our desires. Chukars provide money to state fish and game agencies through hunting licenses. About six hundred thousand are harvested each year by hunters. Tamarisk and cheatgrass have no economic value.

Trout, however, are another story. Like chukars, rainbow trout were purposely introduced to the intermountain West. The Colorado Plateau and Great Basin host one hundred native fish species, half of which are threatened, mostly by competition from exotics. Rainbow trout have become such an economic mainstay, that the Utah Department of Resources recently dumped Rotenone into the Fremont River to eliminate whirling disease, a condition caused by a protozoan that makes trout lose their equilibrium and spin strangely in the water. The protozoan lives in the muck caused by increased turbidity and agricultural runoff. About twenty-five percent of the trout in the Fremont River suffer from whirling disease. Mortality from Rotenone is one hundred percent. After the trout (along with other fish and aquatic organisms) are killed, the Department will restock the river with disease-free rainbow trout.

Amidst all the chaos, we somehow manage to pull off a group potluck dinner while everyone plays tag team with the pay phone.

Bobofet confesses that he’s been having a hard time. “I called my friends and told them I was thinking of coming home. They said, ‘what are you, an idiot? There’s nothing going on here. We’re just sitting around drinking beer like always.’”

“My parents are so weird,” says Mud.
“Where’s Yucca?” Sage asks after a generous helping of seconds.
“Still on the phone,” Seeker says.
“We should save him some food,” she says.
Finally Yucca returns looking distracted.
“There’s salad and a couple nature burgers we saved for you,” Patience says.
“Oh, thanks.”
Yucca tells us that he found out his sixteen-year-old brother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia last week and had just been arrested for attempting to hold up a liquor store with a shotgun.

The next morning Patience is the only one besides me who is awake. I sit at the picnic table slicing fruit while she lies in her sleeping bag, writing in her journal and listening to her Walkman.

“I can’t believe my dog died,” she says. I assume she’s talking to Sage lying beside her.

“Everyone around me is dying,” she cries a moment later. I glance over and see Sage is still asleep. At first I think she’s talking to herself, but doesn’t realize she’s talking out loud because she has her headphones on. Then I understand she is speaking to the world, to anyone who can hear. I walk over and kneel down beside her.

“I just talked to my mom, and my step-dad’s tumor is getting worse. They can try chemo but that only works on twenty percent of patients, and even then it only gives them a few more months. I don’t even know if he’ll be alive when I get back. And my dad told me that my dog Sadie got run over by a tractor. She was only a year old,” she sobs.

“My mom said they were watching a movie and he tried to get her to dance with him, but he was too weak. He’s gotten all romantic suddenly. I was talking to him and he started crying. He said he’d pay for my college, that I didn’t have to worry about that. They just got married last year. He’s totally changed too. He used to be gung ho businessman, always working, concerned about making money. But he quit working when he found out he had a tumor and is just enjoying the time he has left,” she added, making no attempt to dry her tears.

I watch the chukars clucking across the campground. I grew up thinking every problem had a solution. I want to fix things, offer advice. Instead, I just sit beside her and listen.