Landscape Of Desire
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If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilization—or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become neurotic?

—Sigmund Freud

We leave Twin Corral early and cruise along the old roadbed at a good clip. The miles flow by as we hike along the Moenkopi bench while the river drops farther and farther below, cutting a narrow canyon through the dark-red formation. Everyone has quieted down and discovered that hiking doesn’t require constant banter. The mining track stays even with the Chinle, and we stroll past hunks of petrified wood. Entire logs of stone erode out from the loose clay. Each piece is another marvel, a rock so beautiful and so completely useless that people load it into their pickups and place it around their patios. Luckily no one could possibly get a truck or even an ATV in here. We pass an entire petrified tree trunk lying on the ground. Unlike the solid, black petrified wood, this is composed of thousands of beige and white splinters.

“If this all chert?” Sage asks as we examine a log.

“Essentially. Just like chert, the petrified wood is primarily silica. The logs were buried by mud or volcanic ash, and as they decomposed, their cells were replaced by silica. That’s why you see the tree rings, bark, and knots. Water that is slightly high in pH can retain silica, but when the pH changes by encountering volcanic ash, for example, the silica precipitates out.”

We hike past a spring surrounded with fresh bighorn tracks and fill our water bottles with the clear water. We break for lunch in the shade of vibrant orange blocks of Wingate. Although we still have a week left, everyone is running low on food. Seeker is down to one granola bar per day for lunch.
"I'd rather not eat for a week than go back a day early," he proclaims when others start talking about returning to civilization. We discover a fifty-year-old stash of blasting caps and tins of army food tucked into the crease of a boulder.

"Hey, do you think these are still good?" asks Bobofet, holding up an olive green tin of cheese.

"Only one way to find out," I shrug.

Bobofet pries open the can and tastes the orange substance inside. "Not bad. Anyone got any crackers?"

"This one says crackers on it," says Sage holding up another tin.

However, the tin has rusted, and water has seeped in turning the crackers moldy.

While Patience searches for a route down, I stroll along the cliff edge picking up and examining various pieces of petrified wood. I enjoy looking at these rocks. Each one is distinct with its own color scheme and pattern. Black and streaked with red, the centers often display a spiderweb of quartz crystals. I like their heft, the way the feel in my hand. I pop a piece in my mouth to heighten the colors. Black flares into grey, fades to white. Soon my hands are filled with treasures I am loathe to discard. I resist the temptation to slip them into my pocket knowing my proprietorship is temporary. Years ago after I'd filled my bookcase, table, shelves, and a box under my desk, I resolved to only keep rocks that would fit in my pocket. Nevertheless, when I reexamined these rocks at home, they seemed to have lost their luster. My memory of them was sharper than the actual object.

I see a piece of red chert and instinctively reach down, exchanging the petrified wood in my hand for an arrowhead. I look around. A strange place to find an arrowhead. A wide-open bench, extends forward and back as far as I can see. The Wingate rises sheer on one side and a three-hundred-foot cliff drops down on the other. Not exactly a place one would hang out and camp and make arrowheads—no water for one thing. Did a hunter drop it while he was walking along the rim, looking for a route down like we are? This spot is above the only reasonable route to the river. Or was this narrow constriction of the bench pinched between the Wingate and the cliff, a natural trap where a few hunters working together could drive game toward an ambush or even over the cliff?

Patience finds the route, and we drop off the bench. After slogging through the river, we pitch camp at a sandy wash at the mouth of Happy Canyon. The wind picks up as we cook dinner. The minute the wind dies down, the gnats take up the assault as if angered by the missed opportunity. The gnats leave a ring of small red welts along our hairlines. Then another
gust of wind drives sand into every pore, into eyes, ears, and food. Metta takes refuge under her sarong.

“I don’t mean to complain, but it’s times like this when I can’t help thinking I’d rather be somewhere else. It occurs to me sometimes that I don’t like backpacking. This isn’t fun,” says a muffled voice. “Do you ever find you don’t like backpacking?” she asks.

“I can think of no greater pleasure than shlepping a sixty-pound pack for untold miles across a barren wasteland,” I reply. “Still, it beats sitting in a cubical in front of a computer screen.”

“With a nice latte and croissant,” I add wistfully as another blast of wind pelts us with sand.

“It’s times like this when I’m hungry and grumpy and miserable and it’s windy and they’re sand and bugs, or I’m cold and wet, that I find I’m truly present in the moment. I find that I’m grounded and really focused, and I have to simply attend to the task at hand. A bit twisted, I suppose,” I say.

The wind continues all night. I scrunch down in my sleeping bag trying to avoid the sand, but then I get hot and claustrophobic. I drift in and out of dreams about cliff-climbing horses and cowboys drinking warm Budweiser and women tragically out of reach. I wake up thinking I’ve taken the wrong path in life.

The students have just finished reading Marshall McLuhan and Paulo Friere. We discuss how to relate their theories to environmental education.

“What is it about being outdoors that engenders liberation? What is the message of the medium of environmental education?” I ask.

“You learn to think for yourself,” says Seeker.

“You see that everything is connected,” adds Sage.

“Actions have consequences,” says Yucca.

“Resources are finite,” says Huckleberry.

“Community is important, if someone doesn’t have enough food or gets sick, you have to take care of them,” says Seaweed.

“You see what you’re studying and can interact with it and ask questions,” adds Patience.

“Learning doesn’t stop when you leave the classroom,” says Bobofet.

Mud says she has learned more out here than all her years at college. I’d like to take that as a compliment, but I know it’s not me. It’s the place—the magic of the rocks and springtime in the desert. It’s being removed from the confines of institutional learning. Here the mind can wonder and ask questions, propose answers. Free of distractions, we learn about ourselves in ways that are impossible at school. Through direct sensory experience, we are able...
to follow Bertrand Russell’s dictum of achieving knowledge through experience, rather than knowledge by acquaintance.

The students have finally accepted that “Is it required?” is no longer a relevant question. I refuse to give grades, permitting the students to take responsibility for their own education. Given free license to screw off with no repercussions, they don’t.

“This is the first quarter I’ve actually attended all my classes,” says Mud, a graduating senior.

“I think before we can address the problems in our educational system, we have to ask, ‘what’s our purpose in being here on earth?’” says Sage, shifting gears.

“Is our purpose to try and live sustainably or to make a lot of money?” asks Seeker.

“Our educational system is training us to be corporate consumers who spend our lives going from one cubicle to the next,” adds Huckleberry.

“Why are we even in college?” asks Yucca.

“So we can get into grad school and get good jobs. How else are you going to survive in the real world?” asks Seaweed.

“So like, this isn’t the real world?” says Seeker, throwing his hands skyward.

“Not really, this is just a fantasy. None of us are going to live out here. We all have to go back,” she continues.

“Can’t we just live here forever?” asks Mud.

“You can just leave me out here,” adds Patience.

“Dude, there’s gotta be fish in that river. If we could catch fish we could just stay here,” says Yucca.

“Except that we’d run out of canyon.”

“What’d ya mean?”

“Lake Powell, remember.”

“We can’t just keep going?”

“Nope, the canyon is flooded downstream.”

“Civilization is just an experiment, a thin veneer placed over nature, a religious belief system we all must subscribe to in order for it to work. But if we stop believing in it, it will collapse,” says Metta.

After class Huckleberry and I sit on the riverbank and watch a white-faced ibis probing its long, blue bill quickly into the mud and roots for small crustaceans and worms. The ibis sports a white mask, a glossy brown body, dark iridescent green wings, and bright red legs. This waterfowl seems rather incongruous in the desert, but it looks like it’s finding plenty to eat.

Somehow our conversation turns toward change, and how could it not, sitting by the river. Huckleberry confesses that he fears change, “I stay in the
same pattern I've always been in. It's my way of fighting impermanence. All my life I've been told, this is how things would be, then they would change.” He breaks off a reed and tosses it into the water.

“I really liked going to church. My dad thought it was stupid to have to say the Lord's Prayer, but he was listening to the words. I didn’t care about the words; it was the ritual of saying them again each time. Then they’d go and change the priests on us and each one would do it differently. How can you have ritual without consistency?” he continues. “I like the ritual of packing up and hiking every other day. I like packing my pack the same way each time. It’s something I can count on.”

Seeker and Bobofet pass by and wade into the middle of the river. Barechested and holding spears carved from willow, they stare intently at the water. A trio of whitefish scuttles up the river.

“Get it Seeker,” cries Bobofet.

Seeker stands poised. “I just don’t know if it’s necessary.”

“It’s never necessary, Dude.”

“I don’t know.”

“Dude, I’ll help you eat it.”

“You do it.”

“Dude, I can’t. You just gotta do it.”

I’ll let them work out the morality on their own. Although I consider mentioning minimum impact, I think it’s important for people, especially young men, to kill and eat their own food. To realize and fulfill the dreadful violence we are capable of. To feel remorse, regret, guilt for the taking of a life. To give thanks, to understand, even symbolically, that our food is alive, that we are sustained by living beings.

Two ravens caw, soar, and chase each other among the cliffs. One gurgles, like only a raven can, and the other responds. I’ve noticed that ravens will make different sounds to communicate different things, distress, play, teasing, hunger, anger. In fact, ravens may have a greater variety of sounds than any animal besides humans.

One raven goes into a barrel roll while the other tries to catch it from below. According to raven researcher, Bernd Heinrich, “Acrobatic flight may also serve to show off and attract mates by weeding out poor flyers and lazy birds.” This pair keeps disappearing into one particular crack in the cliff on the south side. I suspect they are planning a nest there if they haven’t already built it. Like their cousins, the jays, ravens mate for life and will suffer bereavement at the loss of a mate.

I almost always see ravens in pairs, although sometimes they appear in small groups caroling on the air currents, hanging motionlessly on updrafts,
or chasing each other. Biologists point to this play behavior as a sign of intelligence and an ability to adapt to different habitats.

An immature golden eagle soars overhead. A raven shoots out of the cliff quickly overtaking the eagle and begins to attack it. Feathers rise off the eagle as the raven berates it and drives it from its nesting territory.

In Norse mythology, the god Odin had two ravens called Thought and Memory who kept him abreast on world events.

After many days of hiking, my feet are sore and blistered. My body wants to rest, to remain in one place, yet Happy Canyon summons me. Mountains provide perspective while canyons lead to introspection, a focusing down and inward. A mountain is to achieve, to look out, to ask "why?" A canyon brings us home, soulward, asks "how?" Mountains pull me up, canyons pull me in, deeper until they either spit me out or trap me.

Each curve of the canyon draws me deeper into the earth’s labia where the under sea walls glow with a diffused light. Dried mud on the stream bed curls up like papyrus. The opposite walls zigzag in and out as if playing keep away with each other, never quite touching, teasing each other with their proximity like uncertain lovers. Now only an arm’s length apart, the walls begin to close, threatening to suture this jagged incision in the earth’s surface. I run my fingers along the scalloped sandstone awakening ghosts of rushing floods that polished and sculpted the canyon and left tree trunks wedged in the chasm high above.

I can hear the wind, but only a slight mummer of air can be detected down in the canyon. A hundred feet up, wind-blown sand trickles down from the undulating strip of sky. The canyon lies in perpetual shadow except in those rare spots where it’s penetrated by a beam of sunshine like the 4:00 P.M. light in a French cathedral.

The quality of the late afternoon light that fades too quickly evokes lost loves. I cannot pause, stop, replay those moments any more than I can pause the approaching sunset. A canyon wren laughs mockingly at my attempts to capture this moment, this place. I cannot stop; I must see what is around the next bend, and yet I want to scale the walls, behold it all from above. I want to know it all, every secret cave, every curve. I want to know where the waters come from. I want to wrap my arms around this land and hold it inside my heart forever. But I cannot. It slides through my grasp as the light shifts its glow, and my heart nearly bursts for yearning.

Returning to camp I see all the women sitting around a small fire. Over the fire sits a pot filled with brown liquid and what looks and smells like dirty socks.

“Mountain mahogany,” Mud explains, “It’s supposed to make a red dye.”
The women twist cordage out of yucca as they chat. They move over, clearing a spot for me to join them. I pull a soggy yucca leaf from a pot of hot water and begin to separate it into thin strips.

“We were just saying how cool it is that we really feel at home in our bodies and at home being in nature right now,” says Sage, showing me how to hold two strips between my thumb and forefinger while twisting with my other hand.

“Things that were once a big deal are nothing now. Remember how when we first got to the Dirty Devil, we kept using a stick to see how deep the water was? Now we just splash on through,” adds Patience.

“Yeah, I can see when we get back, we’ll go out hiking and come to some big hill and we’ll just scramble right up it. We won’t even have our packs on!” exclaims Seaweed.

“Last quarter I’d be up on the upper campus and have to pee and then think I’d have to run and find a bathroom. Now I can just pee anywhere; it’s no big deal,” says Mud.

“Yeah, like, I’m totally relaxed sitting here in the sand with a smelly T-shirt and dirty hands,” adds Patience.

Sage examines my work. “You can even weave in a rock or something and make a necklace or bracelet. See I drilled a hole through this piece of sandstone with a stick.”

“Do you guys think landscape affects our self-perception? Do we view ourselves differently in the city?” asks Metta.

“Oh totally. I haven’t even looked in a mirror for . . . well, since Capitol Reef. And that was weird,” says Seaweed, pulling out another yucca leaf.

“Yeah in the backcountry we have no mirrors, no anti-perspirant, no hot showers. Our clothes are dirty, we smell, our hair is all tangled and unwashed. How can anyone love us?” laughs Sage.

“My face is covered with bug bites, and look, my hands and legs are full of scratches and cuts,” says Patience, sticking out a leg. “My lips are all cracked, and my skin is so dry it flakes off like the rock. But I feel stronger and more self-confident than ever before.”

“Yeah, there’s something about mirrors that totally undermines your self-image,” adds Seaweed.

“Out here, I don’t care what I look like,” says Mud, stirring the pot.

“You’re beautiful, Sister,” says Sage, rising and tying her necklace around Mud’s throat.

“Everyone has this glow to them. Their eyes shine bright,” adds Metta.

Gradually the others arrive, and Mud reads us her story. It began as a nature memory—the first time she’d been alone in nature, a hike she took by herself. As she rewrote the story, she began to realize why she’d gone on
the hike. It was something she didn’t want to remember, didn’t want to write, yet there it was. Gradually, she realized the flight into nature resulted from having to tell her parents she’d been sexually abused by her brother when she was eight. This became her story.

While not everyone harbors such tragic stories, I’m surprised how many of these normal college students do. When Patience mentioned she had an ear infection and wasn’t able to hear until she was six years old, I realized that all of us are in some way scarred. Yet we regard scars as ugly, something to be hidden and paved over. We shrink away from someone as tortured as a juniper—warped, old, providing little shade and bitter berries. We seek pastoral, unblemished soulscapes. We hide our mistakes, our age, our contorted, tormented selves under Panglossian veneers of false happiness. We become sterile, plastic trees growing under fluorescent lights in the Mall of America.

However, in the desert, weathering evokes beauty. The absence of rock mystifies and captures the imagination more then the actual sandstone. It’s the holes, the ellipses, the arches, and the pillars—possible only through emptiness—which give this place such character.

And so it is with the landscape of the psyche. Just as the juniper is more intriguing as it dies, it is our wounds that make us human. Are not our own deep fissures, cracks, and mysterious alcoves part of who we are, part of our own wildness? What happens when we forsake our empty spaces? Undoubtedly, inhabiting a world of strip mines, clear-cuts, strip malls, and industrial waste effects us psychologically, and we begin to mirror the landscape we inhabit. The question I wish to raise is the converse. How much of our dysfunctional relationship with nature is due to the impoverishment of our internal landscape?