

The Desert Spirit 12-08-02

The Desert Spirit: a sermon by Rev. Joel Miller for the
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, NY.

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Offertory Joke

A man is riding on a camel through miles of the sun-drenched desert searching for some sign of life. His supplies are running low when his camel dies. Now on foot, he desperately seeks refuge from the heat, and, most importantly, a source for water. Suddenly, he comes across a vendor in the middle of the desert.

"Thank God I found you!" he cries. "Please help me. I'm in dire need of some water."

"Well," says the vendor, "I don't have any water. But would you like to buy one of these fine ties."

"What am I going to do with a tie?" the man asks.

"That's what I'm selling sir. If you don't like it, I can't help you."

He leaves the vendor and walks on for many more miles, praying each minute that he'll find refuge from the scorching sun. His eyes squint several times when he comes across a restaurant in the distance. Unable to comprehend a restaurant located in the middle of the desert, he assumes the place must be a mirage, but decides to check it out anyway.

As he approaches the door, his mouth opens in amazement, seeing that the place actually exists. He is about to enter when the doorman stops him saying, "Excuse me sir, but you can't come in here without a tie!"

Sermon: The Desert Spirit

Joel Miller serves the Unitarian Church in Buffalo, NY. He starts this sermon by saying, "To find my center, to get my feet back on the ground, I find that the weather in Buffalo works well for me. I look forward to the arrival of each Season, and winter offers me a calmness and comfort, and a Buffalo snowstorm is simple joy all its own: I like to know that nature still has more raw power than human-kind has, but I like to learn the message in 7 feet of fluffy stuff instead of earthquakes, vast forest-fires, tornados, or hurricanes."

He goes on to say that when he spent some time in the west, "the desert drew me when I wanted that calmness and comfort of knowing that nature is still in charge – it was an insight that I first discovered in writings by Edward Abbey, and later in practices of monks and nuns in nearly all the world's religions. These religious adventurers have looked to the demands of the desert as a spiritual refuge since the beginning of civilization."

The desert is a fierce place--as one environmentalist puts it, "Most forms of life [can't survive] the extreme temperatures--and extreme they are. A person [in the desert] stripped of clothing, water, and shade in the morning could be dead by evening." The essence of a desert is its lack of water. By definition, a desert receives an average of less than 10 inches of rain a year. I was mildly sur-

prised to learn that Silver City doesn't qualify. According to the climate data I looked up on the web, Silver City gets 16 inches of rain per year.

Edward Abbey was a writer from near Indiana, Pennsylvania who lived and loved the American West. He published his first book in 1954 and was still publishing in 1989 when he died at the age of 62. He was an environmentalist and a rebel, a "desert anarchist" who had something scathing to say about everybody and who would be owned by no one.

He worked several summers as a seasonal ranger at Arches National Monument. About his job he wrote, "I like my job. The pay is generous; I might even say munificent: \$1.95 an hour, earned or not, backed solidly by the world's most powerful Air Force, biggest national debt and grossest national product.

His novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, published in 1975 and based loosely on the exploits of real-life activists in the Southwest, inspired the "EarthFirst!" movement. Abbey himself probably never burnt-down any ski-lodges, nor did he invent the notion of monkey wrenching. It has a long and colorful history going all the way back to the founding of this country. The Boston Tea Party was an act of monkey wrenching.

Abbey did use his anger to write. He wrote so eloquently about the desert -- and knew he had done it well -- that in his introduction to *Desert Solitaire* he feels free to lecture his thoughtless readers:

"Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the Canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place you can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the...cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe."

"Maybe", he writes, because "There is something about the desert that human sensibility cannot assimilate, or has so far been unable to assimilate.... Transparent and intangible as sunlight, yet always and everywhere present, it lures [you] on and on, from the red-walled canyons to the smoke-blue ranges beyond, in a futile but fascinating quest for the great, unimaginable treasure which the desert seems to promise."

Kerry Walters in *Soul Wilderness* describes the human adventure into the desert as a "Zen Koan," a spiritual riddle.

I find myself suspicious of those who plan an adventure into the desert as if they knew how to rule it -- as if a visitor can truly plan an adventure into the desert and understand something about it. All writers call it "desolate" -- even Ed Abbey -- but desolate does not mean empty, nor dead. The desert is different -- and for humans, extreme. It is desolate, but not abandoned by life itself; it is desolate only of humanity. In the desert, the desolation is human -- consolation requires the adventurer to accept what is abandoned -- and to abandon his or her preconceptions and assumptions, to wait... wait without any ability to force or hurry the desert's own timetable.

Abbey, after a page of profane outrage at those who would drive through the desert and think they had seen it, recalls a conversation he had with some tourists at Arches:

“Where’s the Coke Machine?”

“Sorry... we have no coke machine out here. Would you like some water?” [no]

“Say, Ranger, that’s a [terrible] road you got here...when ... are they going to pave it?”

“The day before I leave.” Abbey says with a smile. The tourists laugh.

“How... do you get out of here?”

“Same way you came in....”

“So we see the same scenery twice?”

“It looks better going out.”

“You must be awfully lonesome way out here.”

“No, I have good company.”

“Your wife?”

“No, myself.” (They laugh; they all think Abbey’s kidding.)

“Well, what do you do for [fun]?”

“Talk with the tourists.” (General laughter)

“Any dangerous animals out here, Ranger?”

“Just tourists.” (Laughter; tell the truth Abbey explains, they never believe you.)

Abbey knew that after the tourists left that he was not alone in the desert. There is life at home in the desert: the spadefoot toad is a persistent desert being. Projecting off of each hind foot is a digging tool. For much of its life, the toad burrows backward deep into the ground for estivation – estivation is a state like hibernation. The toad creates an underground cell, lined with a gelatinous wall secreted by the toad, preserving precious water. When a rare rainstorm saturates the soil, the spadefoot toad wakes-up and in a frenzy of activity eats and mates, and tadpoles hatch in a day or two in whatever pools of water persist long enough for the tadpoles to become adult toads – it’s not much time, there can be just weeks or even days before the rare and life-giving water caught in desert rocks evaporates.

Many desert plants survive the same way: across time, they persist only as seeds, ready to spring up when rains come, then flower quickly, produce another crop of seeds, and the cycle of desert life is a long waiting followed by a sudden burst of life.

To adventure into the Desert requires patience and respect – revealing the full meaning of the word adventure, itself. The word, Adventure, comes from the ancient Latin “to arrive.” Like advent, time in the desert awaits the arrival of the holy. Life in the desert that awaits the arrival of water is fragile – under the sands and rocks are sleeping desert-turtle eggs, estivating toads, or patient seeds of life. Enduring the sun, cactus armor themselves against harsh sandstorms and blinding light, preserving water within sharp, hard edges and thorns, flowering for a day after precious rains. The image of a thorny cactus is a little like Ed Abbey, ready to poke anyone who threatens what it holds in its heart: the water of life.

Roger Housden is another who writes about the spiritual adventure – he writes of his visit to the Sahara, where he spends three days under two great rocks. Housden finds a local guide – a desert trader, and he departs from the frontier of human existence into the desolation of the Sahara – “to be alone out there for a few days, far from all trace of humanity, and discover who it was who really inhabited my body.”

Housden’s guide takes him into the desert, leaving with a farewell and a “bemused smile”, agreeing to return in 3 days. After watching the desert trader leave, Housden wonders at his trust – or his foolishness – at placing his life into a stranger’s hands.

At first, Housden is exhilarated – he feels like the lead in a movie. But after a day of hot wind, heavy heat, relentless sun, and bare rock extending from Casablanca to Bethlehem – an area of earth larger than the entire United States, he discovers that he is bored. No visions, no apparitions. Just his everyday thoughts and assumptions – all of which seem as empty in the desert as the desert itself.

On his last day alone, Housden walks away from the shade of his large rocks. He walks for a long time – turns and sees that for all his effort, it seems nothing has happened. The rocks seem no further or closer than before, and the wind has already swept away his footsteps and all evidence of his presence. He writes that he feels “returned to proportion: true, authentic, and unashamedly small, without a story to tell.”

When the guide returns, Housden finds his adventure left him feeling as if nothing had happened. “In a sense,” he writes, “nothing had.” Alone in his desolation, Housden has no “ecstasy, no revelation, just the sense of being at home.” He is alive – but he returns to his life with eyes more open, a heart more compassionate, and a mind burdened with far fewer assumptions.

This is the anarchy – even the pragmatism – that the desert or a great snowstorm recalls for me. It’s that Humanist anarchy that rejects idolatries of the mind and spirit, that treasures the open places of the soul where the fiercest love can be born.

Like the ancient desert hermits, the unwitting founders of sacred orders, survival in the desert requires a trust among strangers – the nurturing of oases, storage and hospitality of precious water,

endurance of harsh conditions. Survival is trusting knowledgeable guides and bearing a simple patience that presumes no blame but instead waits with a soul open to a vast land with hidden meanings.

We may be now in our own sort of desert time – especially those who are Humanists. The quiet adventure of life in the desert offers a map through this desert that surrounds us, and with patience and endurance, that spirit that flows through our hearts will bring life-giving rains and shade the gentle, anarchic spirit in our souls.

"Benedicto: May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view. May your mountains rise into and above the clouds. May your rivers flow without end, meandering through pastoral valleys tinkling with bells, past temples and castles and poets' towers into a dark primeval forest where tigers belch and monkeys howl, through miasmal and mysterious swamps and down into a desert of red rock, blue mesas, domes and pinnacles and grottos of endless stone, and down again into a deep vast ancient unknown chasm where bars of sunlight blaze on profiled cliffs, where deer walk across the white sand beaches, where storms come and go as lightning clangs upon the high crags, where something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest dreams waits for you--beyond that next turning of the canyon walls."
Edward Abbey