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Killing the Inner Thoreau

They say that religion was born in Israel, but if you ask me, I would say it was formed in the Vishnu Schist. Although religion was laid in front of me in the form of wafer crackers and eight AM confessionals, this concept did not strike me as integral to my life until I wandered deep into the Grand Canyon. I was taken aback by the “God-like” grandeur, overwhelmed by the shapes and colors of the different layers of rock, all formed carefully by the providing earth over millions of years. My connection with the landscape has unintentionally transformed into one characterized by selfishness. How foolish of me to compare my admiration for the Southwest to practicing piety in a church pew. If my admiration truly ran deep like the Colorado River within me, then like preachers of modern religion I would shout my love from the rooftops, inviting all to join and share in the bounty.

Growing nauseous from the thoughts of self-doubt racing through my head, I decide to stop thinking entirely. I focus instead on the trail winding beneath my feet. Glancing up, the tattered wooden sign reads “Plateau Point, 1.5 Miles”. The trail ahead feels as familiar to me as the hallways I used to wander in my childhood home. The dirt squishing between my bare toes begins to tint my pale white skin with hues of burgundy and orange. I am relieved to have reached the Tonto Plateau. An area that, although heavily trafficked, is not swarming with tourists obsessed with Instagram photos and irresponsible recreation. The deafening silence of being alone on a trail is a luxury that is becoming increasingly rare.

Here in the Grand Canyon, tourists flock to the corridor trails to experience Arizona's very own "wonder of the world", but few ever delve deep enough to ever really witness the beauty that lies beneath the rim. As I traipse further down the narrowing trail, for a moment I am transported into an era when the world could flourish unfettered by human imposition. To witness such a thing is a blessing. In this moment, the land feels as though it has a precious secret that is being shared with only me and for that, selfishly, I am grateful. In my heart I fear that if this secret is widely known and whispered among the masses that I will lose the intimate feeling that overtakes me while I walk here.

Sitting in my bedroom, chilled winter air pouring through an accidentally cracked window, I recall this experience of wandering in the canyonlands. Eyes shut tight; I find myself wishing that the moments I have spent in the canyon would remain experiences reserved just for me. Atop the coffee-stained white comforter lies an open laptop, glowing with a half-finished essay on the screen. I'm analyzing Thoreau, and the gears in my brain grind with anger at the very notion of environmental elitism. How dare Thoreau be a self-proclaimed naturalist and strive to push the masses further away from environmental connection. I read an excerpt from *Walking*: "It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker.... I think that they [shopkeepers and mechanics] deserve some credit for not having committed suicide long ago" (Thoreau 227). Although infuriated that an author of such privilege would make a statement of critique towards those with whom he shares no common traits or hardships, I feel my stomach turn with a grim personal realization. Glancing up from the computer screen, hazel eyes meet themselves in the mirror; Thoreau had just verbalized the exact environmental attitudes that I have long attempted to force down.

In everyday life, it seems as though humankind becomes increasingly disconnected from the natural world which sustains us with every technological advancement. I preach on my digital page that this is of no fault of the citizens themselves- societal expectation has shifted in the modern day. Productivity is valued over all else, connection be damned leaving little room for ordinary individuals to have the time, resources, and opportunities to learn how to responsibly recreate and develop intense connections. How can one take the time to walk uninterrupted for days when also tasked with putting food on the table for multiple helpless hungry young mouths? In my rational brain, I know this to be the gospel truth. Not everyone who chooses to recreate in the natural world will do so with reverence, not out of disrespect, but for a lack of understanding. In my heart, however, I am still wrestling with the fact of personal choice. How one could live a life of contentment without feeling a hunger to explore breeds a lack of respect- “aren’t you drawn to the Earth which gives you purpose” I am tempted to scream in the faces of those who choose to take a photo with the signs at national parks and monuments rather than diving beneath the surface.

My tent is pitched, comfortable and warm and yet I lie still, shivering under the moonlight. Bathed in silence and perched atop a rock I had to struggle to climb I realize that I am completely alone. Well, *almost* completely alone. I feel a small indistinct insect scurry over my outstretched hand and settle into the dips of my fingers. Gazing up, I am mesmerized by the dark night sky. Lacking the light pollution one would find common in the city, the twinkling lights of the heavens shine upon me. In this moment I question why anyone would choose to keep experiences like this under wraps- isn’t the wilderness best experienced when shared? Noticing the contradictions between my thoughts now and earlier in my journey, I consider why my attitude has changed. Those I met on the corridor trails, although obnoxious, were attempting to

learn. By taking the first step, getting out of their vehicles and beneath the rim they are professing a desire to delve deeper into the exploration of the wilderness. Without proper guides on etiquette and demeanor, I too would have approached experiencing the canyon with loud joy, stumbling steps, and selfie sticks.

At Horn Creek Campground, the air tells a story of human arrogance. Upstream, the abandoned Orphan Uranium Mine although long since shut down continues to share with the public its gross history of pollution, contaminating the water with radioactive material even decades later. To clean up the damage done by the careless operators of Orphan, the American government paid approximately fifteen-million dollars, dozens of activists risking their wellbeing to assist in the cleanup as well. Signs posted along the trail shout “CAUTION!”- I heed their warning. I am not protective over the wildness due to selfish intention. I am protective because I do not wish for those who do not love the environment enough to protect it to destroy it. The human quest for resources and advancement often outweighs the hunger to learn and develop connections with things that at surface value do not hold a beneficial purpose.

On page four, lamenting about the importance of environmental equal opportunity, I can feel a bead of sweat form above my brow. Do I subscribe to the same genre of elitism as an author I have long and openly opposed? We can be so quick to judge those that choose to experience the world in ways that differ from us. Perhaps if those that erected the Orphan Mine had the privilege to witness the grandeur of the Canyon and the complexities of the cultures within, they would have chosen to forgo the calling of greed and side with the preservationists in opposition.

As I fold my sleeping bag and stow my tent, I gaze upon the plateau as the first beams of morning light make their way across the expanse. The brilliance of the colors never fails to bring

me to my knees. Continuing along the Plateau, I recognize that I was not born a “walker”- I was privileged enough to become one at an early age. Had my father before me not blazed these same trails, I would have never been aware of their existence. This rings true for every connoisseur of wild spaces. To be a “walker” is not a birthright. It is not something that one can possess or lack. It is a conscious choice based upon privilege and potential.

The problem with irresponsible recreation is not a lack of appreciation, but a lack of opportunity. When environmentalists and naturalists gaze upon the general public with an attitude of disgust and write about how one must be previously endowed with a love for the wild, they are breeding contempt instead of consideration for the places that they claim to love. Guilty of this myself, I vow to make a conscious effort to draw others in, rather than scoff at the attempts of non-“walkers” to explore the wild. Although it may be too late for Thoreau, it is not too late for me. I did not want to acknowledge the deep connection that I had with *Walking*. For years I had denied that the rage I felt towards its author was truly rage directed at myself. I was not self-aware enough to grapple with the fact that the elitism I had condemned was an elitism that I had let fester within my own heart. Lying beneath the Southwestern sky, breathing the crisp autumn air, and yearning for the company of other human beings, I am able to defeat my inner Thoreau. I thought I had found religion when I first wandered the trails of the Colorado Plateau. I was mistaken. True reverence came to me once able to shed an attitude of closeted selfishness- I know that I must use this energy to preach the splendor of the Southwest to all with open ears and open hearts.

Works Cited

McKibben, Bill. (2008). *American Earth*. The Library of America.