

The Monkey Wrench Dad

*Dispatches from the
Backyard Frontline*

Ken Wright

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For Dick & Jean and Frank & Carol

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Preface

*The love of a man for his wife, his child,
of the land where he lives and works,
is for me the real meaning of mystical experience.*

Edward Abbey



Down the River with Edward Abbey

I am healed! Praise the Gorge!
Or the canyon, anyway. The canyon of the San Juan River to be exact.

We've been on the water for only a half an hour. Our four-boat flotilla has just passed under the forlorn steel span connecting the desert outback of Mexican Hat, Utah, with the butte and mesa way-back of Dinetah, the Navajo Nation. Once it's behind us, the arcing highway bridge swallowed by the canyon corner, we know we have entered the 65-mile-long meandering trench that will contain us for the next five days. And just this knowledge – no, this bodily awareness, this sensual sensibility – is enough to displace the accumulated detritus and flotsam of daily life, the ennui and tedium and fatigue of the routine tasks and distractions of our fussy times and fabricated world. Back there.

For me, there is no more powerful medicine for our civilized afflictions than the slow silty slide of the snaky San Juan through its great sandstone gorges. And those gathered with me here at the river – my teen-age son sitting on the front of my cataraft, my wife and daughter orbiting us in duckies, and our friends and their kids smattered up and down the river in boats and duckies of their own – know what I'm talking about.

Which is why we on this river trip today launch every summer together with a voyage down the San Juan River. It's a tribal celebration, a seasonal ritual, an annual rite of re-passage for all of us to remind ourselves what's important, what's really real. And for the kids, because we've been doing this trip every year since they were each a year old, the San Juan is their summer camp: that intimate place they revisit with their friends year after year, accumulating memories, ex-

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periences, challenges, confidence, tallying the most magical seasons of their childhoods.

Please note that in this case I mean “summer” as defined not by the calendar’s demarcation; or not even celestially, signifying the solar stand-still at its rolling apogee. I mean “summer” as a lifestyle, an attitude, a perspective, a way of being, or even as just a “way,” in the Buddhist sense: Summer-dō. I mean “summer” like how kids mean it – out of school. I mean summer as that time of year that must be devoted to those other, less civilized but equally vital and infinitely older chores: the toughening of one’s feet, the tanning of one’s torso, and the exploring of the world, out there, beyond the wall of our dutiful duty-full days.

This is a definition of summer that I never managed to give up when I grew up. Hence, though, ariseth my perennially farcical financial situation. Hence my perpetual poker-hand collection of seasonal part-time employments. Hence it is likely I will die with my boots rather than silk slippers on. Hence my and my wife’s having chosen to live where there is less job opportunity but more of the kind of countryside that others with more job opportunities consider fine vacation spots. Hence my family’s vowing to always and evermore partake in nothing less than absolutely ass-kicking summers.

And hence we begin each of those “summers” with a float into the wilds of the San Juan River, southeastern Utah, the Colorado Plateau.

Praise the Gorge!



I bring up these things – these “hences” to go with how Sarah and I have chosen to live the supposedly “mature” years of our lives – because this is how it’s been for twenty years now. And for that, I have to thank the other companion with me on this river trip: Edward Abbey, in the form of a galley-proof of his soon-to-be-released collected letters, *Postcards from Ed*. I brought this along ostensibly because I’m to write a review of the book; I am finding, though, that this new stash of Abbey’s writing is also making me review the lifestyle that I myself have written – in actions – over the last twenty years.

I keep bringing up “the last twenty years,” by the way, because it was exactly twenty years ago this weekend that my and Sarah’s paths

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first crossed (then entwined, then entangled). Two decades ago we were both ski bums in the same northern Colorado mountain valley. When we met, it was already ski-bum “summer”: I was between seasonal jobs, and was cashing in the fringe benefits of unemployment in the mountains: fishing daily to eat, and toasting those fresh Rocky Mountain trout entrees with pocket-change purchases of Schaefer beer (\$1.50 a six pack).

But work was on the horizon. I’d begun spending those high-country mud-season days training to become a river guide. Every morning our little assembly of trainees and instructors would gather to assault various chilly, thumping stretches of whitewater – the Colorado, Blue, and Arkansas rivers – where in trial-by-paddle fashion we learned to read the river; and when we didn’t read so good, to high-side, swim rapids, unwrap boats from boulders, and rescue other involuntary swimmers and their crafts from the many hazards of raging snowmelt.

I quickly knew – that bodily awareness and sensual sensibility thing – that I had found my place.

When I first saw Sarah, I was finishing one of those trout dinners on the front porch of the old post office building I was living in. Sarah pulled up driving a roofless Jeep CJ-7 with chrome wheels and a keg strapped into the back seat like a rotund friend. Sarah was the roommate of a fellow river-guide trainee, and she was stopping by to deliver an invitation to my friend’s birthday bash. I accepted promptly: I set down my plate, quaffed my Schaefer, jumped the five steps from porch to roadside and into the idling Jeep, which, she has told me often since, was not what she had in mind. No matter: I didn’t get out of that Jeep until she sold it three years and 20,000 miles later.

Sarah soon joined our guiding crew. And so began the hences of our life together.



I was doing this, by the way – this learning to run rivers, yes, but also the ski bumming, the inhabiting little mountain hamlets, the (mostly) voluntary poverty, the fishing a lot, the roaming the West, the country, the world, etc. – in no small part due to the influence of Edward Abbey. His books, I mean; I never actually met the man. But that was quite powerful enough.

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Three years before meeting Sarah I had migrated West as a sort of back-road detour from the trip-tic route in life I'd been navigating – academic to professional to homeowner to family to beer gut to loss of body pigment to mid-life muscular attrition to pension retirement to hip-replacement surgery and, then, if not sooner, unto death. Or something like that. Or so it seemed. Or so it would've gone if I hadn't stalled out somewhere between the "academic" and "professional" segments of my journey. Fortunately. Hence, a friend-motivated diversion West for a season with the aim of refocusing enough so I could get back onto the mass-cultural interstate.

Fortunately, again, my aim was poor. For it wasn't long after my first purifying, hypnotizing, baptismal Rocky Mountain snow-fall that I stumbled onto *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey's rhapsodic, poetic, philosophic treatise on living in a landscape. Which turned out to be just the appetizer, for I quickly acquired an appetite, and soon devoured Ed Abbey's books – *Down the River*, *Abbey's Road*, *Beyond the Wall*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, *Black Sun*, *The Brave Cowboy*, and *Fire on the Mountain* – like the fat guy at a pig roast.

Hence ...



Back in the early '80's, soon after I came West and before I met Sarah, my mountain-town girlfriend of the time and I decided to write Edward Abbey a letter telling him just how much we'd been inspired by his words. (Meaning: we were living cheap, exploring much, and speaking out loudly about the waste, stupidity, and greed we could already see devouring the West, like we'd seen it gnaw away at the East.) We didn't expect much – by then, Abbey already was a larger-than-life legend, and we figured he had better things to do than respond to groupie fan letters.

We were amazed, then, when, less than a week later, an index-card reply arrived in our little mountain-town mailbox with the return address of "Oracle, Ariz."

"Dear Pam," the handwritten salutation said, followed by, "Thank you for your kind and generous words ..."

The rest of the card was filled with words I don't remember – following our breakup, my former love wasn't about to hand over that prize ("It's addressed to *me*," she reminded me) – but it wasn't meaningless drivel. In the space available, Abbey had responded to

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and discussed our letter, thoughtfully and sincerely.

And at the end was that signature: Ed Abbey.

It's an event that has stuck with me. That prompt, sincere, and personal postcard from Ed I took as tangible evidence of the character of a man who otherwise was merely mythic to me, affirming my initial sense of someone who put his convictions into action. A small act, but it was, I believe, a manifestation of his personal philosophy of both honor and action. It was his own way of living out that philosophy.

Abbey himself in a letter to an interviewer probably best describes the underlying stream of consciousness running through all his work: "What I am writing about, what I have always written about, is the idea of human freedom, human community, the real world which makes both possible, and the new technocratic industrial state which threatens the existence of all three."

Or, more concisely, perhaps: "If my books have a common theme, it would be something like human freedom in an industrial society" – a concept to which he appended elsewhere: "The conflict is ancient; only the technology has been improved." These statements, in my mind, best represent the least-understood aspect of Edward Abbey's writings. For those with a cursory sense of his work, he is perhaps most recognized as the author of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, his ribald comedy about a very serious topic: the sabotage – for which he coined the term "monkey wrenching" – of the machinery of development in defense of the land.

But I think it's somewhat unfortunate that he is best remembered for this book, as delightful and fun and funny and provocative as it is. Because it seems to me that when Abbey's work is taken as a whole, a deeper, more powerful, more meaningful, more valuable – and, for most of us radical folks disinclined to the Molotov-cocktail approach to improving the world – more applicable yet no less revolutionary path to action, to fighting in that "ancient conflict," reveals itself.

"Heroes?" Abbey once wrote, answering a friend's query, "I've known a few. People who do good, useful work, who succeed in raising a couple of decent children, who can stay in one place and become citizens of a working community."

This, to me, is the real radicalism of Edward Abbey: Where you are is who you are. That the latter depends on the former. That this yin-yang dance of geography and living well – an unavoidable real-

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ity encoded in our human genome – is also action. Also, though, he pointed out that in the world we live in today, the defense and survival of the former – the earth we stand on – depends upon the integrity and courage of the latter, of how we do our living.

We must fight – yes – and Abbey made that point sword-sharp; but, he also entreated us all to remember to live good lives. To remember *how* to live good lives. To *live*. To live *well*. Where we are. How we are. However things are. And not just for ourselves: but for our kids, and their kids, and for the earth that sustains us all now and then – for all those it is vital we remember to live well. That we study those skills, remember those skills, practice those skills, teach those skills, and pass those skills on.

This, too, is monkey wrenching.

This is the story woven through the writings of Edward Abbey. It's an ancient message – Abbey didn't invent it – and Abbey's writings were just another way of articulating what is ultimately a sense, a sensibility, for which there is and can be no One Way, for which there is only each's way. But, Abbey's writings argue, there is nonetheless a right way: if how one lives works to strengthen life, land, our unique individual senses of self, and the well-being of our families and communities.

For isn't that ultimately what we ache for? For meaningful and valuable things to do – skills and tasks and challenges that test and better ourselves? To find a place, a landscape, to love and to know and on which to write our own story? To get to know ourselves and manifest our personal styles of being, to be who we cannot not be? And for some symbiotic, synergistic bonding with others, forging greater wholes to devote ourselves to and of which we can each know we play a part?

Aren't those human needs that transcend any historical time, place, or culture? And aren't those the very things our present way of living – our mass culture of growth and development and marketing and coercion and accumulation of material wealth and power – devours?

I think so. And I think that's what Abbey was saying.



Needless to say, Abbey was, in a way, my literary life coach for a while, my anti-career counselor when I needed it most. Thanks to

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Abbey and the places his books sent me – philosophical as well as geographic – I never got back on that long and winding downhill road to economic success and domestic rigor mortis I'd begun to run in the city back East. And I bow to Ed Abbey for offering me that view of the topography off that map.

Hence, I walked away, even if I didn't wander so far away. Sure, I've still ended up with a home, a family, jobs, friends and neighbors. Yes. Absolutely. But those very things have become my own personal paths to action. I've learned that the mundane matters. Also, now, though, whilst en route to those things, I also wander the countryside around me that until I came West had remained only a scenic backdrop in my life, like the blur passing by my career-careening car's windshield.

Hence

Sarah and I continued to ski bum and river guide and travel for years after that first meeting. Somewhere along the way we got married. Then we settled in a little town on the edge of the Colorado Plateau ("Abbey Country," as he himself shamelessly claimed it). Then we had two kids whom we now raise in this place, running rivers, skiing, hiking, biking, exploring, sleeping out a lot. And we share all this with a band of companions and campeñeros who have made the same choices of how and where and with whom to travel their lives. And who salute all that by starting each summer with a float down the San Juan River.

Hence, twenty years later, I am monkey wrenching by parenting.



Our third day on the river, we are camped at Ross Rapid. Here the river is embedded in a narrow, steep, stair-stepping corridor of grey and golden bedrock. And here, where the river sweeps to the left, a slotted side-canyon spews in debris from river-right. The result is a big bench for camping; a wide, shallow, gently swirling eddy for playing; and a constricting of the river itself so it bunches into a swift series of standing waves as it passes by our beached boats. A much-favored and traditional campsite on the annual San Juan trip.

Much happens here: For hours, we all paddle and surf the duckies in the wave train, and the kids make dozens of life-jacketed plumbets through the rapid – scrambling upstream, jumping in again,

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bobbing the waves, then stroking hard to catch the eddy below. Good practice for river-rats-in-training. Later, the baseball gloves come out and some of us whip a ball around the knee-deep eddy's infield. Others wander up onto the limestone benches above camp to garner views over our impromptu village and to pay homage to Kenny Ross, the deceased Bluff, Utah-based river runner for whom this surreal, soulful spot is dedicated. (His sage aphorism, "Recognize, don't memorize!" is emblazoned on a plaque attached to a boulder above the river, and has become our group's defacto motto.)

Still later, as darkness fills the canyon, the cocktail flag will be raised, a red monkey wrench on a black field, my personal pirate flag. A filling river-dinner will be concocted and shared. Then chairs will then be encircled, toasts made, jokes and stories told, guitars brandished and songs sung until the first-quarter moon follows the sun behind the ragged canyon rim. Then, our little band of nomads will fall asleep under the stars.

And I will again pass another night doing just what I most want where I most need to be. Because it's who I most am.

Yes, after this river trip, after the adventures of another summer, we will still confront that ennui and tedium and fatigue of the routine tasks and distractions of daily life, even here in Abbey Country. Yes, there will still be the "hence" of the concerns and challenges of finances and jobs. Yes, I still will be likely to die with my boots on – or river sandals, if I'm lucky. Or barefoot, if I'm truly blessed. Such is price of living differently, of carving the life we want and need – a creative life in a beautiful place with people we care about – that is off our modern world's economic thoroughfare.

But that's okay. Because the mundane matters. It is the clay with which we shape our own culture for our own kinds of lives. And that raw material is right here, right where we live. Right how Sarah and I have chosen to raise our family. Right with these others on this magical, mystical, ancient river who have also chosen to make a stand and write their own story with us in this place.

Right where Abbey said it was.

