

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

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Abbey, Edward (1927–1989)

Edward Abbey spent many seasons in the wilderness as fire lookout, back-country ranger, explorer, river rat, self-styled “follower of the truth no matter where it leads.” He was the author of twenty-one books and scores of articles that collectively express his lifelong commitment to the principles of anarchism, and his deep, abiding love for the flow of Nature. With the publication of his classic book of essays, *Desert Solitaire* in 1967, he became recognized as both a gifted writer and an outspoken advocate for the natural environment. And with the publication of his best-known novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in 1975, Abbey became the earliest and perhaps most influential voice of the newly awakened radical environmental movement.

Abbey was born on 29 January 1927 and grew up in rural northwestern Pennsylvania which he felt imposed upon him a sense of intellectual and spiritual myopia. He required the vast, arid landscape of the American Southwest wherein his mind and soul were free to soar as he explored the hidden slot canyons, climbed countless mountains, ran exquisite rivers, and hiked the boundless Colorado Plateau and Basin and Range provinces. He arrived in New Mexico shortly after World War II equipped with a brilliant mind, a powerful sense of intuition, and a finely honed body well suited for any adventure. He loved to read, write, listen to great music, make love to beautiful women (“I never made love to a woman I didn’t love, at least a little bit”), and wander the back country alone, or with a good friend or two. He placed supreme value on friendship, honor, and a lifetime free to explore the mysteries of nature.

While both an undergraduate and post-graduate student at the University of New Mexico, Abbey was mentored by Professor Archie Bahm who specialized in Chinese philosophy. Professor Bahm introduced Abbey to the works of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Daoist philosophers in whose works Abbey was able to perceive the well-springs of anarchism.

In May, 1951, Abbey was invited to speak on anarchist philosophy at the University of New Mexico by Professor Bahm. In this lecture, the notes from which I have in my collection of Abbey papers, Abbey provided early evidence of what would become his great philosophical contribution to Western culture, a meld of anarchism and radical environmentalism. He went on in the lecture to define many types of anarchism and styled himself a bare-footed anarchist.

I hate cement. I have never seen a sunflower grow in cement. Nor a child.

Now even Aristotle recognized the vegetative element in man. It is that which enables us to grow. A man *is* a plant, fundamentally, and if he is to grow he must grow like a cottonwood, upward and outward, exfoliating in air and light, his head in the clouds, perhaps, but his feet rooted in Mother Earth. Now if we insist on sealing ourselves off from the Earth below by cement and asphalt and iron and other dead and sterile substances, and from the sun above by a dense layer of smoke, soot, poisonous gases, skyscrapers, helicopters, I do not think we will survive as human beings . . .

For these reasons, I must advocate bare-footed anarchism, anti-urban, anti-industrial, anti-housing development, anti-land improvement anarchism. I look forward to that happy day when shoes will become obsolete and all of us can run around squelching our toes in the mud of April (Author’s lecture notes).

Ultimately, Abbey was awarded a master’s degree in philosophy. His thesis was entitled “The Morality of Violence” and focused on the points of view of five libertarian or anarchist thinkers including Proudhon, Bakunin, Godwin, Sorel and Kropotkin. He remained a self-proclaimed anarchist throughout his life, an anarchist at large within the flow of Nature.

Edward Abbey was a great outdoorsman. Much of his writing was inspired by recollections of wandering through desert wildernesses where encounters with fellow humans were infrequent. He told me that once, while living in Death Valley, he had what he regarded to be a natural mystical experience wherein he perceived himself to be integrated within the natural world around him, able to perceive an interconnective energy between all animate and inanimate objects, all the while immersed in a level of joy never to be repeated during his lifetime. His quest to return to this state of consciousness is revealed on page six of the original edition of *Desert Solitaire* published in 1967.

The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself . . . I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities . . . I dream

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of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate.

In 1975, Abbey delivered a lecture entitled "In Defense of Wilderness" at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which I recorded and subsequently excerpted for my biographical memoir of Abbey entitled *Adventures with Ed: A Portrait of Abbey*. This lecture includes one of Abbey's more imaginative speculations on the nature of reality.

Is it not possible that rocks, hills and mountains, and the great physical body of the Earth itself may enjoy a sentience, a form of consciousness which we humans cannot perceive only because of the vastly different time scales involved? . . . Say that a mountain takes 5,000,000 of our human or solar years to complete a single thought. But what a grand thought that single thought must be. If only we could tune in on it. The classic philosophers of both east and west have tried for 5,000 years more or less to convince us that *Mind* is the basic reality, maybe the only reality and that our bodies, the Earth and the entire universe is no more than a thought in the mind of God. But consider an alternative hypothesis. That Buddha, Plato, Einstein and we are all thoughts in the minds of mountains, or that humanity is a long, long thought in the mind of the Earth. That we are the means by which the Earth, and perhaps the universe becomes conscious of itself. I tell you that God, if there is a god, may be the end, not the origin of this process. If so, then our relationship to Earth is something like that of our minds to our bodies. They are interdependent. We cannot exploit or abuse our bodies without peril to our mental health and our survival . . . As mind is to body, so is humanity to Earth. We cannot dishonor one without dishonoring and destroying ourselves (Loeffler 2000: 127-8).

On 1 January 1983, Ed Abbey and I returned to his home in the Sonoran Desert after a camping trip in the Superstition Mountains of southern Arizona. Abbey had recently learned that he was afflicted with the malaise that would ultimately claim his life. I recorded Abbey reflecting on the nature of religion in today's technocratic world, which is included in my book, *Headed Upstream: Conversations with Iconoclasts*.

I regard the invention of monotheism and the other-worldly God as a great setback for human life . . . Once we took the gods out of nature, out of the hills and forests around us and made all those little gods into one great god up in the sky, somewhere in outer space, why about then human beings, particularly

Europeans, began to focus our attention on transcendental values, a transcendental deity, which led to a corresponding contempt for nature and the world which feeds and supports us. From that point of view, I think the (American) Indians and most traditional cultures had a much wiser world view, in that they invested every aspect of the world around them – all of nature – animal life, plant life, the landscape itself, with gods, with deity. In other words, everything was divine in some way or another. Pantheism probably led to a much wiser way of life, more capable of surviving over long periods of time.

. . . Call me a pantheist. If there is such a thing as divinity . . . then it must exist in everything, and not simply be localized in one supernatural figure beyond time and space. Either everything is divine, or nothing is. All partake of the universal divinity – the scorpion and the packrat, the Junebug and the pismire. Even human beings. All or nothing, now or never, here and now (Loeffler 1989: 14-15).

Abbey thoroughly believed in living life to its fullest and confronting the truth fearlessly. The following also appears in *Headed Upstream*.

An adventurous human life should be enough for anybody, and should free us from the childish hankering for immortality . . . If this life here and now on this splendid planet we call Earth is not good enough for us, then what possible pleasure or satisfaction or happiness could we find in some sort of transcendental, eternal existence beyond time and space? Eternity, in that sense, beyond time, could be nothing but a moment, a flash, and we probably experience that brilliant flash of eternity at the moment of death. Then we should get the hell out of the way, with our bodies decently planted in the Earth to nourish other forms of life – weeds, flowers, shrubs, trees . . . which support the ongoing human pageant – the lives of our children. That seems good enough for me . . . I think the desire for immortality is based on . . . a terrible fear of dying, fear of death, which comes from not having fully lived. If your life has been wasted, then naturally you're going to hate giving it up. If you've led a cowardly, or paltry, or tedious, or uneventful life, then as you near the end of it, you're going to cling like a drowning man to whatever kind of semi-life medical technology can offer you . . . Better by far to fall off a rock while climbing a cliff, or to die in battle (Loeffler 1989: 17-18).

For Edward Abbey, sauntering through landscapes both known and especially unknown was among life's greatest

pleasures. We sauntered together for many miles over the course of many years, and the act of walking and musing resulted in countless hours of boundless conversation. Often Abbey reflected on the meaning of existence. We discussed the role of the anarchist as environmentalist, and Abbey clearly revealed his belief that every species including the human species has a right to existence, but that the human species has no greater right than any other. He determined that the voices of other species, indeed that of the entire biotic community, were not being heard by humanity. Thus he concluded that humans sensitive to the miracle of life must assume responsibility for defending habitat against encroachers from within what he called “the military-industrial complex and their lackeys in government.”

He regarded sabotage against the tools of governmental and industrial terrorism as a supremely ethical act. He clearly differentiated between terrorism and sabotage, proclaiming that everything from the military strafing of villages in Vietnam to the chaining of trees to clear land for cattle grazing were acts of terrorism against life. Committing acts of sabotage against tools of terrorism was required if habitats were to be defended against indiscriminate pillagers who pursued growth for the sake of growth, a condition he regarded as the ideology of the cancer cell.

Abbey believed that causing harm to fellow humans was to be avoided unless one's self, family or friends were being threatened. He advocated sabotage but warned that under no circumstances must people be harmed as a result of sabotage. In a word, eco-terrorists are those engaged in acts of terrorism against the natural environment, and definitely not those who are defending the environment against the onslaught of eco-terrorism.

Abbey believed in the evidence of the five bodily senses. He believed in protecting every freedom that allowed his intellect to soar. He regarded himself as an absolute egalitarian. He also intuited a sense of the numinous in nature, and although he rarely wrote about that, it was not an uncommon topic for conversation. He was not frivolous in his speculations, but as with any intelligent philosopher, he constantly sought the underlying meaning of existence. He experienced one episode with a hallucinogen, LSD. It was an uncomfortable experience, not at all illuminating. He frequently reiterated that the only time he felt close to that numinous quality was after he had been camping for a minimum of ten days, or enough time for the flow of Nature to purge the “white noise” generated by day-to-day existence within the materialistic technocracy of American culture.

Abbey loved the natural world, and felt himself “out of synch” with the time into which he had been born. He told me he would have been at home in the Pleistocene as a hunter-gatherer; or as a Plains Indian riding bareback through the early nineteenth century. He regarded the

advent of agriculture as the beginning of serfdom and slavery. He contended that more harm had been wrought by the plowshare than the sword.

Abbey's great contribution to philosophy was the meld of anarchism and environmentalism. These two distinct philosophic persuasions conjoined in his mind. On the one hand, the anarchists Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin defined that spirit of resistance to government, human hierarchy and deadly immersion in the status quo that Abbey practiced his life long. On the other hand, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Robinson Jeffers and David Brower forwarded an environmentalist point of view that also prevailed in Abbey's mind from an early age. With the publication of his novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, he brought these two philosophic themes together. He told me that it was in this novel that he actually found his voice, a voice that must never be stilled.

Abbey believed that unless the current juggernaut of “growth for the sake of growth” can be forestalled, the higher vertebrates including the human species are in grave jeopardy of extinction. He calls for a much higher ideal wherein recognition of the sacred quality of life within habitat sets the standard for the human endeavor. A few days before his death, he gave a final speech before a gathering of Earth First! members, exhorting them to keep the faith with courage and dignity.

Edward Abbey died on 14 March 1989 at the age of 62 years and 45 days in his writing cabin in the Sonoran Desert west of Tucson. He lies buried in a desert wildness far from any human community. His grave is marked with a single stone that bears his name, the dates of his birth and death, and his epitaph, which reads, “No Comment.”

Jack Loeffler

Further Reading

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- See also: Anarchism; Death and Afterlife in Robinson Jeffers & Edward Abbey; Deep Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Pantheism; Radical Environmentalism.

Aboriginal Art – Warlpiri

Indigenous Australians produce rich and diverse art expressive of their relationships with the land and the cosmos. By way of example, this entry focuses on Warlpiri graphic art of the Western Desert region of Australia.

The Dreaming is the most powerful mechanism through which Warlpiri organize and understand the significance of places. The Dreaming has various levels of meaning: it is the mythological realm of totemic Ancestors; it is the embodiment of metaphysical potency in the land; it is the “Law” to which humans must conform; and it is the spiritual identity of the individual.

The Warlpiri conceive of landscape as a manifestation of the Dreaming. Like other Australian Aboriginal peoples, Warlpiri tell of a realm in which the Earth and animals do not exist in their present forms. In this realm, mythological ancestors emerge from a featureless Earth, transform it, and create the landscape. The clouds and hills, billabongs, grasses, and trees are created during this period, as are animals, and kinship patterns, taboos, and other tribal laws. When the ancestors complete their creative wanderings they change into Spirit Beings, and they continue to dwell in special places within the land.

The landscape is understood by Warlpiri as being criss-crossed with mythological tracks, each with an accompanying mythic narrative, song-cycle, dance enactment, and ritual caretakers. Each of these Dreaming tracks consists of a series of sacred sites and the paths between these sites. The myths associated with these tracks recount the actions of the ancestors; their subsistence activities, their fights, their love making, their ceremonies, etc.

Warlpiri art and myth can best be understood in terms of places, for it is the landscape which provides the most obvious and enduring evidence of Dreaming occurrences. But for Warlpiri, land is more than simple evidence, it is the actual transfiguration of Ancestral Being. The Land is the Dreaming. Each myth has an accompanying graphic map and a song, which refer to incidents and places associated with the Ancestors. To Warlpiri, myth, graphic design, and song reinforce each other and share in the virtue of the Dreaming.

Warlpiri art is concerned with mapping the mythological landscape. Paintings function as Dreaming maps of important places and events; charting the travels of totemic ancestors, and depicting sacred places they create. The paintings being done by Warlpiri today belong to a class of Aboriginal art that has come to be known as the Western Desert Style. The canvas paintings, executed in acrylics, are enmeshed in the larger system of Warlpiri social, political, religious, and ecological values. Derived from traditional designs, they are expressive of Warlpiri emotion, purpose, and place within the landscape.

The visual style of Warlpiri art replicates the narrative style of Warlpiri myth. Myths recount ancestral travels through the country; paintings depict these travels and the sites associated with them. This narrative style is evident in the interconnected circles and lines that are so prevalent in Warlpiri paintings. The circle/line composition is widely used to illustrate the journeys of Ancestral Beings and the places that they create; the sites represented by circles, the paths connecting the sites represented by lines. This site/path structure graphically maps the Dreaming and iconically illustrates the movements of Ancestral Beings across the land. It provides a structure that links Dreaming events to geographical places and life experiences.