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### Nature, Writing, Living

Brita Alley  
*Regis University*

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**NATURE, WRITING, LIVING**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors  
by**

Brita Alley

May 2016

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### Introduction

Scraped knees and calloused hands, grass-stained palms and freckles from head to toe, scraggly, uncombed hair and constantly smelling like sun-stained skin and salt from sweat. This is how I remember myself as a kid; stumbling in for dinner with the evidence that I had been outside for a long time, crawling or running or jumping or yelling, getting bruised, and making believe. Each day was a new adventure, a new way to be wild even though I grew up in a series of different houses on the Western foothills of suburban Denver surrounded by housing, roads, constructions, other humans. Yet, despite the fact that I was confined to fenced-in green belts or the small patch of grass outside, the minutest setting could have been an expansive forest, for all I knew. The world was huge, and even while I write I come to realize that it still is that big, with plenty of opportunity—no matter where it is—to engage with the green grass and the blue sky and those trees that are impossible not to climb and the hills that are meant to be ran down, laughing.

My experience being immersed in nature began as a child. At camps, on fishing trips with dad, or hikes with mom, the infinite wonders of this beautiful planet were revealed to me from a very young age. But it wasn't until I became a camp counselor at Keystone Science School that I was able to name my love of nature for what it was. Not only do I find peace, joy, beauty, and solitude when I go into the wild woods of Colorado, New Mexico, Montana, France, but I find something holy. The more that I go outside, the more I become aware that there is something divine in the natural world that can only be exposed to me through meeting it on its own terms. Yet as a philosophy major, it has become increasingly critical that I take my human experience and analyze why it is so meaningful. In other words, I take my love of the outdoors and attempt to answer the question of how we ought to live.

Yet, along with my philosophy major, I am also a lover of English and a student of this discipline as well. Thus, the love of literature that I have, coupled with this enjoyment and holiness that I find outside, has forced me to become a reader of nature writers. When I

was about to lead one of the most extensive programs at Keystone Science School—a ten day backpacking trip with teenagers -- I found Edward Abbey's *The Journey Home* in a closet. I became immediately aware not only of how sacred nature is to me, but how precious and increasingly important it is to talk about and write about. Abbey taught me that my idea of “home” was wrapped up in the idea of Lodgepole Pines and Blue Spruces, not a physical structure like a house. As my last summer at camp, it also woke me up to a sense of appreciation for the gifts that KSS had given me.

And finally: I love being alive. Waking up and greeting each day is something that will never cease to be not only easy, but amazing. “We are alive,” Dr. Hicks once said, emphasizing each word with a sort of incorruptible passion while teaching *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. I find it so very valuable to remind myself and those around me again and again the absolutely amazing thing it is to be alive, in bodies, with the opportunity of engaging not only with the outdoor world but also with the literature that talks about it. Yet we *cannot* live an unexamined life. If we do, I'm sure we are bound to fail at giving our heart and soul whatever we are doing. We will look into the trees and rivers, oceans and glaciers and see not goodness and intrinsic value but resources, fuel, development opportunities.

This thesis is not just about the power of the natural world on our philosophical understanding, nor is it only about nature writing and why we ought to read it. Rather, my senior thesis attempts to answer the question of how we ought to live, especially knowing that the natural world is incredibly important to us. To attain this goal, this project attempts to answer that question with a series of evaluations of American nature writers from Thoreau to Dillard, tracing influential philosophical implications they The four themes I will be addressing in each author's works are the construction of physical boundaries in nature, the idea of wilderness/wildness, spirituality, and the ways which we identify as Americans through nature. Following this evaluation will be an academic reflection regarding what I've

learned from these authors, and how this process has impacted my learning as a student and lover of both literature and philosophy.

Finally, this project is strewn throughout with a series of personal essays regarding my own experiences in nature. If I am going to love nature, writing, and nature writing, I might as well try my hand at the craft. My intention in adding personal essays to this academic project is to add a creative perspective, as well as embody ideals the authors I am studying argue for. Moreover, I believe it is the best way—these writings—which my own nature ethic will become apparent, rather than write a traditional argument.

Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Abbey and Dillard each articulate important arguments regarding how we ought to treat nature, how we ought to write about it, and how we ought to live with it. I acknowledge here and now that the group which I have selected is by no means a full representation of American attitudes toward nature. This cohort of American nature writers is entirely an entirely White, and predominately male group of people and I recognize the inherent difficulty in this set of voices because of these characteristics. Yet this group does an adequate job of sampling major themes in American nature writing.

Thus, my current job is to read, listen, write, observe, and live, arguing that without literature we cannot understand our responsibility to fulfill a genuinely “good” environmental ethic.

#### Acknowledgments

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## May: Running Wild with Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) *must* be with whom we begin this incredible adventure into the beauty and complexity that is the American nature writing cannon. Thoreau is not only known for his career as a writer, his reputation as an explorer, avid hiker, and lover of the wild, but he also recognizes how loving nature makes you a morally good person—he is indeed a philosopher. Of course, we might have started with Ralph Waldo Emerson—the man known for bringing transcendentalism into the forefront of American philosophical thought, as well as Thoreau’s personal and literary predecessor and mentor, but due to personal preference as well as the fact that so many later authors I will go on to evaluate look back on Thoreau, we will simply start here.

By looking at two of his major works—*Walden* as well as “Walking” we can come to understand the themes of wildness as well as American identity. Obviously, for the purposes of this senior thesis and its scope, it would be downright impossible to cover absolutely everything in regards to these major themes throughout these seminal works. Thus, it must be admitted that although these works will be written about in a professional, academic way, by no means do I claim expertise regarding all the nuances of them. In fact, I would beseech the reader to take this essay on Thoreau and the following essays as brief introductions to their work, not in-depth dissertations, leaving a certain degree of mystery in place. Therefore, the following pages are my own hikes through the trees and shrubbery and weathered reality of Thoreau’s mind.

I will begin with wildness in nature, and discuss Thoreau’s interest in this idea, particularly as it informs humanity’s interactions with and treatment of the natural world. In other words, Thoreau is asking the following question throughout his work: how ought we to understand wildness in general, but especially in juxtaposition to civilization? Thoreau addresses this inquiry in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden*. Thoreau claims here that

there is a major difference between the civilized life and the natural life of humans. For instance, he writes, "... I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented..." (198). Here Thoreau illustrates the woodchuck as a being which is wild, and he as a human as *prone* to wildness, but not necessarily so from the start. Something has tamed us along the way, out of our wild ways. This taming, perhaps, is why the woodchuck's wildness is so tantalizing to the speaker. Yet while Thoreau establishes a difference between civility and wildness, humans and woodchucks, he complicates this binary, arguing that humans are inherently called to a spiritual life—one of philosophical or "higher" contemplations—as much as they are lured by wildness. Thoreau continues his observations of the woodchuck, saying, "The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (Walden 198). There is something inherent in human nature, according to Thoreau, which compels us toward the good and the wild.

And yet, what I find most interesting at this particular juncture is that he views them different from one another; good and wildness are not the same. Thoreau's strong inclination to be like the woodchuck, or rather to *consume* the woodchuck, due to the "wildness he represented" elucidates Thoreau's affinity to all things outside of civilized life. We must pause at this notion of consuming wilderness. Perhaps the reasons Thoreau views the good and the wild as separate is because one can function as fuel to find the other. Perhaps one way of interacting with the natural world, Thoreau suggests, is by consuming the wild around us. This interpretation makes nature a commodity which might be ingested or used. However, I do not think Thoreau meant exactly this as he wrote, but rather wished to demonstrate the



*insatiability* that accompanies escaping civilization. Sometimes, we must get out of town and into the mountains. Further, this relationship between higher thinking, wildness, and civility, exemplifies that the natural world acts as a setting for Thoreau to understand and work through his various philosophical opinions. Not only did Thoreau observe the woodchuck for what he actually was, but also what he represented, and how this might complicate our understanding of humans' bond to nature. In this way, Thoreau's act of writing about the nature substantiates my claim that in nature we are the best philosophers, writers, and thinkers. Only in the open air, surrounded by woodchucks, might we find the solace and quietude necessary in evaluating our roles as human beings in both the physical wild, but also the spirituality in this natural space.

However, one might argue that Thoreau is using the woodchuck as a way of imposing human ideals and language to a non-human and therefore non-lingual entity, creating problems of relation and ethical representation. This raises the question of anthropomorphization, and what that might say about our ability—and the limits to that ability-- to write about nature. Ought we to do it at all? Nancy Craig Simmons argues in "Speaking for Nature: Thoreau and the 'Problem' of 'Nature Writing'" that those who write about nature sometimes forget that although nature deserves a voice, by writing about it in a poetic or descriptive way, the authors are removing the *natural* voice and replacing it with a human appropriated one. Simmons asks whether or not "the... writer [can] relate ethically to the nature she observes" without speaking the same language (223). We might therefore ask whether or not Thoreau's voice is *consuming* the character of the woodchuck as well, merely by voicing his observations. Simmons suggests that although Thoreau is writing about nature *for* nature, he is also using it as a justification for his way of life in the woods, something many people didn't really understand (227). This argument suggests an utilitarian approach by Thoreau. And yet despite Simmons' assertions, I'm disinclined to agree that Thoreau's

writing does not demonstrate valuable perspectives on the natural world. In fact rather than consuming the nature around him and finding Thoreau's approach strictly utilitarian, I believe instead that he offers us a genuine description of witnessing the wildness inherent to our human nature.

Thoreau's response to Simmons' argument is exemplified in the main claim in "Walking," which is to go out and hike with oneself, as well as the main idea behind *Walden* which might be best stated in his own words: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 86). Here, the natural world is not a place to be utilized as either justification or as mere fuel for his philosophy, but rather the best setting for a certain degree of reflection to take root. First and foremost, Thoreau is suggesting here that only in the wild is the individual capable of facing life as it is. Further, this activity is best achieved individually, without the distractions of society. Words such as "deliberately," "essential," "learn," and "discover" portray a mindful and humble attitude toward the natural world. Also, it is apparent in this passage that Thoreau is concerned with how nature can help explain his humanity. Yet, one might see all the "I" statements in this claim to be anthropocentric, rather than ecocentric. But I believe that Thoreau's relationship with the earth and the wild spaces he fought for in his writing cannot be labeled anthropocentric. Indeed, Thoreau goes to Walden in order to organize his moral and human character, but he is only able to achieve such lofty goals because he views nature as a valuable entity in itself. If he was merely using the natural world, we would see evidence of this in his writing and he would not be the example so many later nature writers look back on.

Moreover, we understand things different from us—like a wild woodchuck—through relationality, and this is how Thoreau tells his story of that moment. It is seemingly

impossible to me that we can relate to anything in the world, especially something that doesn't share our language, without telling a story. Furthermore, this story-telling desire is as ingrained in us as the desire to exist beyond the confines of civility, but instead freely wild in the natural world. Thoreau goes on to state in "Higher Laws" that, "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers" (Thoreau 206). Human nature according to Thoreau, though extending to the heavens and philosophical contemplation, is also consumed by an irresistible wildness. This is an interesting way of turning consumption on its head, definitional and contextually within this short passage. Thoreau is suggesting that because wildness is so compelling, we can do nothing but bend to it; the wilderness consumes us until we are (again) a part of it. In short, the reason the natural world is so valuable is, in part, because we are so entrenched in its identity. We *are* wild. And, based on the fact that Thoreau finds so much value in even writing about this, suggests that the act of writing itself, especially about natural interactions, is a way of navigating this compelling and wild call to the natural world, and the necessity of existing within a civilized sphere. We are able to articulate, through story-telling and words, what our wild experiences are.

The theme of wildness—and how humans relate to it-- is also present also in Thoreau's 1862 essay "Walking." In fact, this particular piece is revered by many environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, as *the* most formidable literary manifesto on the salvation of wild spaces. In fact, the piece starts out with an incredibly bold statement about this idea: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and *wildness*, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil..." (Walking 627). This juxtaposition between wildness and civil culture is very similar to the one we see in "Higher Laws," except that now Thoreau takes into account this idea of "freedom." Extremely important to Thoreau is the "absolute freedom" the wild allows him. In the wild, we can be and do things that the civilized or

village life constrains us from. He writes, “My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to the outward dreariness [“labors, citizens, human art”]. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!” (647). Such a libertarian point of view, dictating independence and individual freedom, is connected to the concept of exploration and travel. Thoreau believes that the individual needs independence in walking, and only with confidence and an affinity toward the unknown and wild can one be successful at this activity. Of course the immediate reaction to this type of “absolute freedom” argument comes at head with colonialist attitudes. Did Thoreau, whom came from European decent, have any right—let alone “absolute freedom”—to be trouncing through the largely unsettled wild of the U.S. in his time?

Yet Thoreau’s response to this critique would probably be that not only is an individual called to walk, but it is part of his *wild* nature to do so. Human nature dictates we roam, no matter who or where you are from. We see this concept embodied as Thoreau compares the adventurous man to a wild antelope: “I would have every man so much like a wild antelope, so much a part and parcel of Nature, that his very person should thus sweetly advertise our senses of his presence, and remind us of those parts of Nature which he most haunts” (645). It is interesting Thoreau chose an antelope, and I believe it has something to do with an antelope’s grace and poise. The animal demonstrates movements effortlessly. Indeed, when watching an antelope walk, this gracefulness makes it difficult to discern where the earth stops and movement begins. The antelope’s haunting presence then, is best described by his fluid movements, in the same way that Thoreau wishes wildness and humanness to no longer be distinct. Thoreau means to redefine humans as *inhabitants* rather than *citizens* of earth. Unlike the woodchuck, where the wildness found in is distinct from *civilized* humanity, the antelope represents a collapse of this opposition. Thoreau goes on to write in “Walking,” “I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty... miles... without going by any house, without crossing a road except where the fox and mink do” (633). Although this same activity would be

distressingly difficult today, with urban sprawl and the rise of industry, Thoreau is stating here that wildness is not about *getting to* the wild world, but rather embracing it along the way. Moreover, as an adamant defector from expansionist policies, Thoreau's philosophy might not be directly colonizing, but rather very much implying this problematic sentiment.

Now that we have talked about the wild for Thoreau, I briefly wish to return to the theme of American identity and its place in Thoreauvian texts. We can see it especially in the essay "Walking," where connection between American identity and wildness is explicit, as mentioned before in terms of citizens' freedom and "absolute freedom." In this first declaration of "Walking" we become aware that the "absolute freedom" which Thoreau juxtaposes with "civilized freedom" is unavailable in the confines of his local New England village. He cannot find—or rather, is not allowed to have—what he needs in order to be a good, moral, person, and so he must walk. These walks teach him something about the world, of course, but also about himself in that world. Thoreau ruminates on the justice system in America throughout "Walking," arguing that being outside allows, "more air and sunshine in our thoughts," suggesting that only beyond the confines of civilization are we "more susceptible to some influences important to our intellectual and moral growth" (631). *Walden* becomes relevant again as we recall the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" where he laments "The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which by the way, are all external and superficial, is just an unwieldy and over grown establishment..." (87). This "establishment" for Thoreau is dangerous as it does not listen to its people as it should. One of Thoreau's major life events, his staunch opposition to the Mexican War in 1812, landed him in jail and martyred him as a model for civil disobedience everywhere. Connecting this context back to his nature writing then, we might also define wildness and its absolute freedom as a place where Thoreau—and others—might be able to have their democratic voices heard without fear of incarceration or general prejudice.

Furthermore, Thoreau's fear of an "over grown establishment," of bureaucracy demonstrates that the wild must also be defined by what it is *not*. First of all, the wild is not part of the actual United States, or rather directly under the control of the government. Any individual can be free from American power structures while he hikes because nature has not been bureaucratized, yet. For example, Thoreau writes, "Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph... whether *they* do or not" (Thoreau 87). By implying society identifies more as a national entity than an individual one, Thoreau further defines the wild and the beauty of the nature experience by being caught up not in superficiality but in representing the *real*. Though we are part of a nation, we are not the nation. While bureaucracy and government superficially control society (Concord), Thoreau finds that the Nation is not a feasible substitute for the individual; one must still learn self-sufficiency. This too, must be part of what it means to be wild and to exist in wildness: to be unconcerned with humanly contrived problems but rather worry only about the essentials. In fact he invokes in "Where I Lived" from *Walden* memories of Plato's *Republic* by stating that the typical citizen has no idea he resides in his "mammoth cave" (89). Like the statement in "Walking" which reads "No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession [walking]" (628), we must remember Thoreau's sense of wildness is very much wrapped up in what is decidedly absent when you go into nature. Rather than be concerned with what to wear, Thoreau is saying, be concerned on how to fish or hunt a woodchuck.

Beyond Thoreauvian politics, we cannot leave this author and go onto our next without recognizing the impact that his writing had on the spirituality of nature. Perhaps the first thing one thinks of when we hear his name is Thoreau's transcendentalism. Much of his writing encourages individuals to go into nature to avoid society and to embrace wildness and American freedom, but to recognize the divinity of what it is to be outside in nature. One of

my favorite examples of such an experience is in *Walden*, when the author describes his daily ritual of waking up at the pond:

“Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself... I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things I did... Morning brings back the heroic ages... The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour” (84).

Here, Thoreau defines a simple routine as a “religious exercise,” and denotes nature as “Nature,” indicating an almost omnipotent, omniscient being. He regards the morning as the holiest of times throughout the day, and demonstrates that the moments of quiet reflection, and actions taken out of necessity (bathing) rather than extravagance, are those which invoked his spirituality in the natural world the most. Furthermore, by saying that “Morning brings back the heroic ages,” Thoreau implores his readers to connect this scene to those regarding the bravery of knights, or perhaps the kindness of Jesus. Thoreau is saying in this passage that holy experiences occur in everyday living and paying attention—remembering the “awakening hour”—is what is most important. Finally, this passage exemplifies that a lot of spiritualizing of nature, at least in Thoreau and the authors I chose to read after him, are particularly interested in the aesthetics of religion. Thoreau finds the morning bathing experience holy because it is beautiful, and therefore divinely created

Thoreau also suggests that part of being a spiritualized individual means that one is both detached and mindful at the same time. He embodies these sentiments when he argues that, “If you are ready to leave father and mother... and never see them again... if you have paid your debts, and made your will... and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (*Walking* 628). Invoking the image of the disciples, who leave the fishing nets to go fish for men with Jesus, this image of walking indicates a life-long dedication. Moreover, according to Thoreau, one must be detached from worldly possessions to truly enjoy the fruits of being

outside and in the wild. A simple bath in Walden Pond is important to Thoreau, not excess. Finally, Thoreau places great value in the act of engaging with the current moment. He writes in “Walking,” the problems that come from existing beyond the present: “The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is... What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?” (Thoreau 632). We cannot experience truly, according to Thoreau, the beauty of being in the wild if we do not let go of trivial human affairs and act mindfully. He finishes this same essay with, “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present moment” (662). This ideal of mindfulness, of presence in the current moment, will become increasingly important in the spirituality of nature throughout the later authors I have chosen to study, but also in the preservation of this nature. Through mindfulness we actually engage in the world around us, with all our senses. And when we find ourselves engaging with something, we make it easier to find value in it.

Thus, we have spent a good amount of time ruminating on the rugged paths through Thoreau’s mind. From wildness to freedom to spirituality, this author will come back time and time again in this project, as well as any hike through the canon of American nature writers.



### Ursus Arctos Mountainous: Grizzly Bear Mountain

During my last year of working summer camp, I was fortunate enough to be part of a two week program. Two weeks at camp is, surprisingly, substantially different than just one. The bunks start to feel like home (even more than they already do) and people you met not fourteen days before are those you can't imagine your life without. You start leaving your dirty clothes bag at the end of your bed like you do at your real home, instead of underneath the bottom bunk. Your toothbrush has a spot. Some girls even hang posters of Justin Bieber and the like from Tiger Beat with scotch tape.

And this particular group of kids had been going to camp with me, as a fellow camper or as a counselor, for about ten years. I knew most of them by name, nick-name, how many tacos they ate last year on Taco Tuesday, their favorite colors. So right before this week started with those familiar faces storming the gates on the east side of campus, I ruminated on the fact that I was watching this group of humans grow into adulthood and I couldn't be more psyched about continuing to be part of that epic journey.

My co-counselors were Jake and Gabby. Co-counselors, like the campers in your cabin, become the people you rely on, the ones you dream about several months into winter, cold and longing for the campfire again. Jake's grandfather died during the first week of this crazy camp session, but nobody knew. He kept singing songs, playing games, making s'mores. He told Gabby and I later beneath mountain stars, as we were debriefed our weeks together, crying saying only, "I miss him so much."

Then there's Gabby. When she finds a giant moth that has died in the tent she buries it beneath the soil and lines the grave with rocks; holy ground here, it says. She will compliment your beauty when there is dirt all over your face, your right knee is bleeding from tripping in the sage brush when playing tag, and you haven't had your seven cups of coffee required for a day working as a counselor.

They both smile with their whole body, warmly and welcoming you into their hearts. They know exactly what to do in an emergency situation, and keep smiling through it, so the kids don't notice anything (usually everything, actually) is wrong. But I've also seen them both cry and held their heaving bodies. I probably won't ever forget Gabby's hands, or the color of Jake's eyes, though I haven't spoken to either of them in years. Memory, its roots firm in the sacred soil of Keystone Science School's sage brushed acres grow strong, unmovable and gorgeous trees that have become my stories.

Every Discovery Camp session spends at least one night in the wilderness and goes on what we call a "Challenge Hike" the next day. Kids pack up their sleeping bags and flashlights, share the weight of food, cookware, and shelter between themselves, and trek to an overnight site. This is absolutely terrifying for anybody, whether you are ten or twenty. There might be bears, mountain lions, or the mythic skin walkers of the Southwest crawling anywhere through the night. So after every successful overnight, despite possible altitude sickness or equally dangerous and disturbing home sickness, I am extremely proud of the kids who endure, thrive, and become alive in the backcountry.

The cabin group we lead was hesitant and afraid when they arrived at camp. They were Tipi Town: a set of two Tipis that was advertised as something fun. So here we were with a group who either wanted to be in Tipi Town (which included exactly two two wild seven-year-old boys from Chicago), or like Simone who at thirteen, thought it was the absolute end of the world she wasn't in the dorms with her friends. Wary and watchful, these kids did not trust one another to sit together during a meal at the campus dining hall let alone help one another up a 13,000 foot peak. There was a silent, but decided wave of dissent against forming any sort of camaraderie among them. We won't do it, their body language said, you can't make us, said their glares.

Thus, we left campus and headed for the trailhead, a little concerned that this far into the session— Day 3-- our cabin still didn't feel like "family." It's strange and unnaturally cultish, but camp is on hyperspeed when it comes to getting close to one another. By the end of staff training—only a two week period—forty adults come together to become brothers and sisters. And at the end of a camp session it is much the same for the kids, and that's what really counts for us leading the trips, taking the photos, creating the lesson plans. It doesn't really matter if every kid climbed a peak, or enjoyed rafting, or even if they participated in the talent show. What reminds you of WHY you do it, during months of sleeplessness and near overdoses on caffeine, is when they come into this crazy experience alone, they leave feeling part of something bigger than themselves. Or at least every kid has someone who at the end of camp, they will call when they feel lonely, missing this place between pine trees and rivers that we all call home for a week or two.

The drive up to Chihuahua Gulch was actually *silent*. And for a group of counselors trying to bridge the gaps between kids and have them like one another, okay maybe not even like, maybe just tolerate, silence is bad. The nerves drifting from the back of the van could be felt in the air. Some of this tangible insecurity had to be of my own, also, even though I did my best not to show it. One of the hardest things about leading a group of people, especially children, is pretending like everything is okay when it actually seems all is lost. But I do believe that is what makes you worthy to lead: if you can keep it together and figure out a solution to whatever problems you encounter all while the kids are playing hide and go-seek.

I tried to break the icy silence by talking to the campers about Grizzly Bears, not *Ursus Mountainus*, but the real, big, scary bear-version. I told them that Grizzly Bears are native to North America and can be found in forests, near streams, in subalpine communities or roaming the salmon streams and ocean coasts of the Pacific Northwest. I said that there are

only about 1,500 grizzlies left in the lower U.S., which I learned from the National Wildlife Federation. And the last time a grizzly bear was found in Colorado was in 1979, when a female was killed after it attacked a bowman. All of the kids responded with grave sympathy, and began talking about how terrible, awful, bad, habitat destruction is. They started discussing ways to protect species like the Griz, and I took a deep sigh of relief and pride that these kids were talking, and they were talking about something that *matters*.

But I couldn't stop over-thinking the difficulties that lay ahead of us. So during the long van ride to the upper trail-head, I put together a mental list of all the things which might come up against us, in order of likelihood, telling myself it would calm me down. I came up with the following obstacles:

- 1) This was a trail I had never hiked before, and neither had either of my co-counselors. We aren't going to get lost, but we might get turned-around. Very different. Lost is hopeless, turned-around requires a distracting game and some patience to regroup and proceed left or right.
- 2) The trail winds around the backside of our challenge hike goal: the tallest mountain on Loveland Pass, Grizzly Peak. Some of these kids have never hiked in their life, could they get up to 13,000 feet?
- 3) Our campers didn't trust us, or each other.
- 4) Snow had only recently been melting in great quantities, frozen water means frozen toes, frozen toes means hypothermia and lots and lots of tears.

I remember by the time we stopped for lunch on the way to our campsite the kids were laughing together. They were frustrated we hadn't reached a decent place to sleep yet, because this meant they had to keep going, but were happy to be outside. I love that when you decide to play outside everything becomes a whole lot simpler. Simone did not have to deal with the politics of girls-at-camp drama and could have fun among the trees and streams.

Breckenridge, a younger camper, was not allowed to complain, or sigh despondently, she was forced to put on her pack and walk. She got tougher. And Ross, a shy boy with a heavy crush on Simone, could laugh and talk to her without the fear of getting rejected. For some reason, being wild means being free. And being free means becoming a community without fear.

By the time we reached a decent campsite, snug between intimidating but somehow friendly peaks, beside a cool and soft-sounding alpine stream, they had made up a group chant, got to know one another's most embarrassing moment, and decided who they were going to sleep beside under their tarps. Jake and Gabby taught a group of the taller campers to put up the tarps, which after learning how they did themselves. Isn't it nice to sleep under a shelter we make ourselves? I took another group to pump water in the stream. I let them take their shoes off and walk around on the soft moss-grass on the bank, dipping their toes in. Surely, and slowly, we were becoming a community in the backcountry. One of the most important lessons we try to get across to campers on these sorts of trips is that agency and responsibility for oneself is of the utmost important in the wilderness and this bond includes your team members also. I smiled next to the stream, realizing that only a few hours before this our campers were prickly cacti in the wrong biome, but that now they were growing together like aspens in the Rocky Mountains, caring and sharing water, food, and soil with each other.

Upon the starry and silent nightfall of five miles into a mountain trail, and after a macaroni dinner, and hanging a bear bag together, we all huddled around a headlamp-lighted Nalgene for a Candle Chat. These Candle Chats are the most sacred of the Keystone Science School rituals. The community each individual has fought so hard to create sits down together—either in a dorm, beside a campfire, or sometimes even on the summit of the hike—and opens heart and soul to the others, the cragged peaks, and the boundless stars above. In this particular Candle Chat, our group began by discussing hopes and fears for the

challenge hike. What are you scared for? What is our collective goal? Are we going to be upset if we don't summit, or upset if we don't try? These are the questions we ask before the night of the big hike. And it was during this important discussion that the kids decided they wanted to do a sunrise summit. Jake, Gabby and I were honestly astounded; we hadn't put this idea in their heads, because waking up at 2 AM is not really all that "fun," but they were adamant that they see the golden celestial body climbing with us, and feel its warmth at the top of Griz.

And even though waking up so early isn't super enjoyable, climbing a mountain with the rising sun is one of the most beautiful things I have ever done in my whole life. As the stars fall away and the moon says goodbye, we climb higher and higher, a crescendo of an incredible song. The birds began to awaken and welcome us to this incredible space. Perhaps this is what we humans were meant to do. Be alive and alert at the most critical times of change, like the Solstice or Equinox, or the early dawn. We are not here to sleep our days away. We are here to bear witness.

So that is exactly what we *tried* to do. In fact we hiked through six inches of snow-melted ice-cold water, off trail into shrubbery taller than me, and tried scrambling rocks to maneuver around the soggy, sad path, before abandoning the thought of making it up by sunrise. Seeing that a summit from this side might be entirely impossible, the counselors started talking about what to do. But our group, seemingly entirely changed from the ambivalent and uninterested group of the day before beseeched that they hear what is going on. So we don't make the choice. Instead we leave it up to the kids: go back to bed until light, or hop in the van and drive down and around to the Loveland side, starting again from there.

We race down the trail back to the van at 6 AM, carrying most of the campsite in our bundled in arms before us, rather than on our backs in packs. Hastily, we throw the gear into the van, make sure 1, 2, 3... all the kids are there and race off down the dirt road, Jake

driving, Gabby and I making cream cheese bagels, and the kids singing to one another so they stay awake and alert. By the time we get to Loveland Pass Trailhead, the sun is beginning to peak over the horizon, meeting us with glorious rays of warmth. The campers, rather than be disappointed for missing their window of a sunrise summit, are insatiable to begin the climb. After getting hats and gloves on, because despite the sun we are in chilly wind at ten thousand feet, we begin the steep incline to the top.

Jake, Gabby and I were extremely skeptical—though not outwardly-- about reaching the summit before afternoon summer storms rolled through and got stuck at the top of Griz, something they tended to do in the middle of July. As we crested each new peak on the top of Loveland, we peeled off layers, embracing the infinite blue sky above and the beautiful views below. We could see the bottom of Chihuahua Gulch, pretending to sight our camp spot through the pines, and spied a couple of fat marmots sitting on rocks watching us watch them. Singing, Simone and Ross lead the charge as the oldest and most apt leaders. They began to need us counselors less and less, and besides having one counselor in front and one in back for safety, we did little to nothing to keep them going, because they were doing it all themselves. When Brandon wet his pants from being so scared at the top of a steep drop-off, it was Ross who coached him through it emotionally. Jake was of course there to help him change before we kept walking, telling him not to be embarrassed, but Ross as his peer was the one who got the smile back on his face.

At lunch time, after we had been hiking for nearly 10 hours with short road-trip detour in between, we still seemed to be at least an hour away, which doesn't bode well in the face of afternoon thunder storms nearing 12 thousand feet. But none of the campers wanted to stop, except maybe Breckenridge, but no one was actually going to let her—she wasn't actually too tired or sore-- just sick of movement, motion, continuing the battle against gravity. So on

we went, up the most strenuous part of the hike, in a last sprint effort for the summit. And one of those moments you never forget happened right then.

As Jake and I hiked in the back of the group, and we thought out of earshot, he turned to me and said, “I don’t think we are going to make it today.” He wasn’t disappointed, in our kids or our performance, just realistic about the current speed they were going and the amount of trail we had to cover before things got actually dangerous. Because it wasn’t just that we had to get up to the top of Griz before the threatening thunderous clouds spread into our horizon, but also down to a low enough altitude where it wasn’t as foreboding. This is extremely hard on Loveland Pass, where the entire hike is above ten thousand feet, and tree level, meaning all of it is basically a safety hazard when it comes to summer afternoon storms.

But Ross turned back to us before I could even respond, stopping in the middle of the trail, letting the rest of the group go on, saying, “We are making it up today, Jake. We can do this.”

Ross turned right back around with this one line and trotted to catch up to his group, his family. In the thin mountain air, and clear July day, Jake and I were ashamed but also humbled. Even though I hadn’t responded, I was thinking the same thing. And yet we *could* still try to make it to the top, we had to. Quiet Ross, who hadn’t said 25 words to anyone before this overnight, had reminded Jake and I what it meant to be a camp counselor, a part of a community, and a backcountry adventurer. We won’t leave until we have to, and we won’t say we can’t, and most importantly it is a “we.” Ross, nor Simone or Brandon, Breckenridge or Calvin was going to make it to the top of that mountain without the others. So we picked up the speed and put one foot in front of the other.

And we did make it. The top of Grizzly Mountain elicited the most incredible views, jagged mountains to the right and steep valleys to the left. At each deep breath I thought I



might die right there of beauty, because nothing on earth could be this magical, joyous, just to look at and breathe in. And the sound! The sound of holy silence ringing in my wind-blown ears. This must be what it means to be wild, free, a true lover of the natural world, I thought: to be perfectly content staring into a glorified nothingness of boundless trees, streams, rocks. Right as fluffy pearl clouds began to transform into harmful cumulonimbus, and the air got a little chillier, we sat together giving quick but powerful dedications on the top of this seemingly impossible peak. Jake dedicated the hike to his grandpa, and I to my own late mother. Ross dedicated the hike to Jake and my co-counselor began weeping with pride and gratitude. We all did, actually. Every kid and every counselor cried for the success of that day; not that we climbed a mountain, of course that was part of it, but that we could now never forget one another, we were embedded in each other's consciousness in a most profound way. So like aspen trees, which grow at a much lower altitude than the one we began our descent at, we became rooted to the ground upon which we stumbled down and one another. Even today, my roots are connected always and forever to Jake, Gabby, and those incredible and mighty eleven campers, who couldn't be stopped.

### June: Dancing through Cloudland with Muir

John Muir, inventor, farmer, naturalist, hiker, writer, and conservationist, was perhaps one of the most formative influences on the course of environmental philosophy as well as nature writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What is most important about Muir's biographical history is that he traveled extensively, wrote obsessively, and discovered and argued for new ecological theories such as the glacial formation in Yosemite Valley. Moreover, Muir might be best known for his work in the National Park system, fighting for deliberately protected land. In fact, founding the Sierra Club in 1892 and leading the efforts to create, "Yosemite National Park... Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon national parks... Muir deservedly is often called the 'Father of Our National Park System' (Sierra Club).

The only primary texts I will discuss in this chapter about John Muir's nature writing and his philosophy are *My First Summer in the Sierra* and a few of his unpublished journal entries from a 1932 collection, *John of the Mountains*. Muir's wonder, awe, and general veneration for beauty in the natural world, and his ensuing attempts at conservation, are evidenced clearly in both works. Likewise, the informal tone of his unpublished journals as well as the notations he makes in *My First Summer* read as insightful glimpses to Muir's everyday life as he works as a shepherd for a summer in the mountains. Furthermore, this form offers an opportunity to question why we write about nature, and whether this is an effective medium for continuing a tradition of engaging with, and bonding through nature, or if one has to actual experience herself the outside world to grasp its value.

Finally, it makes sense to follow Thoreau with Muir, as they both tend to discuss the natural world as a supremely holy space, wild, free and beyond the confines of cultural and social influences. Likewise, the two men deliberately structure their works in a very natural, organic way. Whereas *Walden* follows the course of a year via the seasons, Muir employs

this sort of organization in *My First Summer* as it follows the rise and fall of a summer. On this same note, my edition of Muir's full text doesn't have page numbers, as if to suggest that this book is not a linear history but a cyclical and ever recurring natural phase. Furthermore, they are both working forward, as time marches on in the science and act of conservation which-- both contemporaneously to their respective times, and right now—is an incredibly important notion, literarily, philosophically, and in actuality. Muir too, has posterity in mind. Moreover, as a leading naturalist and transcendentalist in early colonized America, Muir must be looking back to Thoreau, tipping his hat, as he writes his entries about cloudland, geology, heaven, and earth.

In regards to the four themes I address in this thesis, I believe it would be most fitting to begin with Muir's spirituality and how he expresses it in his endeavors in the natural world. Throughout journal entries, Muir's exclamations of glorious days are continuous exultations to God. Muir describes the Sierras as "blessed" (Muir 6/15), and that his days in their beauty are open "windows to show us God" (Muir 6/23). God is around every corner in the Sierras, and the days Muir spends in the pines and surrounded by deer and woodchuck and bear strengthen his faith. This attitude resonates with an aesthetic view of divinity, suggesting that evidences of natural beauty substantiate the theory of a creator-God. Looking always heavenward, Muir mentions repeatedly observations of "cloudland," depicting the sky as if it was the kingdom of heaven itself. Furthermore, Muir writes in "The Yosemite" of *My First Summer* that he has "never before... seen so glorious a landscape, so boundless an affluence of sublime mountain beauty" (Muir 7/15). Again Muir invokes spiritual description when he suggests in the same section, "Yonder stands the South Dome, its crown high above our camp... a most noble rock, it seems full of thought, clothed with living light... all spiritualized... steadfast in serene strength like a god" (Muir 7/20). Laden with words and phrases such as "crown," "high," "living light," "noble," "spiritualized," and "steadfast... like

a god,” this passage emphasizes Muir’s affinity to see the landscape around him as a representation, or production of a god’s. The beauty, in particular, and the ways in which balance—the way the light embraces the rock, for example—are found so effortlessly in nature, are ways in which Muir explains his spirituality in and by nature.

This sort of god-centered attitude in regards to nature was initially very difficult for me to read. I became worried that this point of view might come close to valuing nature *only because* God/the gods created it. As I read, I wondered, “Can’t nature exist without God’s influence? What are the repercussions if the answer to this question for Muir is no?” In other words, if Muir is right, and “everything [is] glowing with Heaven’s unquenchable enthusiasm” (Muir 7/11), could an atheist or anyone who doesn’t have a strong relationship to God be able to relate with nature in a valuable way? Upon forming this critique of Muir, I read a little bit more about his conception of God alongside my primary texts, to see if his notion of the divine was damaging in anyway, or limited his ability to connect with others through nature. Brian Anthony argues in the article, “*Nature’s Cathedral: The Union of Ecology and Theology in the Writings of John Muir*” that a lot of Muir’s spirituality began not with his relationship to nature, but rather the influence of his Presbyterian background and a demanding, zealous father (74). Anthony suggests, “Though he [Muir] didn’t share his father’s austere view of God and religion, he...tapped his Christian faith while finding God in nature” (75). Perhaps this is why then, Muir turned away from conventional religious traditions for the most part, instead choosing to engage with the divine in nature. Knowing the context from which Muir wrote became increasingly important in my study of his journal entries. For when he writes, “Earth hath no sorrows that earth cannot heal, or heaven cannot heal, for the earth as seen in the clean wilds... is about as divine as anything the heart... can conceive” (Muir 99), Anthony’s words resonated with me. He suggests that Muir’s religion was not “lofty” but rather grounded in the reality of nature (76). Thus, my critique of his

religiousness demurred and became unimportant realizing that this was *Muir's* way of connecting with the natural world, and it did not need to be everyone's. Furthermore, this perspective is not damaging, but in fact incredibly helpful in appealing to the ways in which we see Nature—as Muir refers to her-- as a holy subject, needing to be protected.

In this way, Muir's religion of nature is more complex than I originally believed, as it is a beautiful natural theology, intertwining scientific advancements like glaciology, geology, and Darwin's theories along the conception of a benevolent, beautiful creator. We can see this in several points of Muir's writing, as in "Mount Hoffman and Lake Tenaya" from *My First Summer*. Muir observes here, "The radiance in some places is so great as to be fairly dazzling... sparkling in glorious abundance, joining the plants... brave beauty-work—every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator" (Muir 7/26). This passage illuminates a clear synthesis between Muir's scientific background—as he recognizes the complexity of botany, rock crystals, snow, and the intricacy of their interconnectedness—as well his Christian upbringing, for he mentions the "Creator" and her influence on this complexity. A little later, on this same July afternoon, Muir expresses his admiration for the pika, a small high alpine mammal. He writes, "These little haymakers, endowed with brain stuff like our own-- God up here looking after them-- what lessons they teach, how they widen our sympathy." Comparing pika to humans, and arguing that God is looking down on both species, further connects nature, theology, and humans in Muir's writing. He suggests here that witnessing pika is an astounding chance to witness ourselves: both of which are God's creation, but that exist materially in a real natural world. Anthony argues in regards to this characteristic of Muir's writing and philosophy that "science did not present Muir with a cold, mechanical world..." but that it "he used science as a tool... to grasp a higher order," that "evolutionary theory affirmed... Muir's wilderness theology" (77).

And in 1899 Muir writes in his journal about the formation of the Sierras through glaciation, erosion, weather patterns etc., exclaiming, “Science is divine!” (Muir 438).

Therefore, Muir’s spirituality hinges on this idea that Nature is an opportunity to witness the divine, and is not here for human consumption or misuse, Muir links himself with Thoreau. Thoreau, as a leading transcendentalist, and a student of Emerson, whom Muir considers “the most serene majestic, sequoia-like soul” (436) must have been an equally prominent influence on Muir’s thought. For example, on June 13, Muir writes, “Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward... Life seems neither long nor short... and we take no more heed to save time or make haste” (Muir June 13). Very much like Thoreau’s stance on mindfulness, Muir’s natural theology is wrapped up very much in being present in the current moment. In A.D. Hodder’s article, “The Gospel According to the Current Moment,” he suggests both Thoreau and Muir’s nature spirituality is a conceptual tool to help us return to the wildness inside us (475). In order to do this, Hodder asserts, we must be comfortable existing in the actual, material wild, in the present. Be here now, Muir and Thoreau both say—as if part of the problem with those who cannot and chose not to truly appreciate nature can’t appreciate the present moment.

Furthermore, Muir’s spirituality—his natural theology—is incredibly critical of civilization and its industrial influence on the natural serenity that is the evidence of a god. For instance, Muir ruminates on the magnificent order with which the forest plants seem to be planted: “So trim and tasteful are these silvery, spiry groves one would fancy they must have been placed in position by some master gardener” but goes onto complicate this theory, by suggesting that, “Nature is the only gardener able to do work so fine” (Muir 7/27). Thus while Nature can’t exist without God, it can without humans. Rather than take an anthropocentric point of view, relating all nature in its use to humans, Muir makes sure to

demonstrate the value of nature is not utility driven but like a gift, evidence of God. Perhaps then, one need not be a fervent advocate for God and religion to worship outside, but rather be open to the experience of finding divinity—or at the very least, beauty-- in each natural thing.

Thus, we can see how Muir's spirituality greatly aided in the fight for the protection of natural lands, connecting to another of my chosen themes: construction of boundaries for natural spaces. Muir laments in *My First Summer* that, "We saw a party of Yosemite tourists to-day... most of these travelers seem to care but little for the glorious objects about them, though enough to spend time and money and endure long rides to see the famous valley" (Muir 7/12). Wholeheartedly in love with all of God's creation, Muir could simply not understand why his fellow people would come from so many different places to witness the "glorious" manifestations of Nature, of God, of Beauty, and not recognize it for what they were: astonishing. Deeming all the travelers "pilgrims" in the same entry, Muir reveals yet again his affinity to understanding the natural world as a materially accessible heaven on earth, a mecca: respect the holy. He later writes in a journal entry from 1913 about his disgust for the potential damming of Hetch Hetchy: "A great political miracle this of 'improving' the beauty of the most beautiful of all mountain parks by cutting down its groves, and burying all the thickets of azalea and wildrose... two or three hundred feet deep" (Muir 437). Here it is clear that Muir finds the natural beauty of the Yosemite Valley to need absolutely no human intervention. We cannot "improve" the beauty of Yosemite if it is already "the most beautiful of all mountain parks," and Muir thinks it is foolish to claim otherwise—dangerous to the livelihood of our natural spaces and thus our ability to commune with the divine.

Therefore, after reading about Muir's role in the preservation of wildness and the creation of national parks, my interest in these matters grew. I picked up the book *Wilderness in National Parks* by John C. Miles from the Regis library and began to read more and more

about the national park system as well as the role Muir played in its construction. Mills writes that, “In Muir’s thinking national parks, and even for a time forest reservations, were the means to *protect* wildness” (13, own emphasis). Considering the tourist attitude toward places like Yosemite and Yellowstone now (and according to Muir, even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century)—filled to the brim with traffic and tour buses—I was concerned that Muir had fought for this system. Wasn’t Muir just disdaining this “stop and look attitude” that doesn’t really see the reality of God’s gloriousness in nature? And yet, the national park Muir imagined is indeed much different from the one that currently exists. In fact, while Muir’s main goal was “wilderness protection” (Mills 13) many others involved in the historical process of establishing the national park system were much more oriented to the goal of maintaining some degree of utilitarianism—essentially changing the language of wilderness preservation or protection to wilderness conservation. Mills suggests that a lot of the politics surrounding park formation expressed worry about a loss of resources, but also the opportunity for a capital gain, if the parks were marketed correctly (Mills 15). But for Muir, it was about protecting the naturally and spiritually important space around him; the natural landscape which brought him to his knees expressing its beauty: “Nothing is more wonderful than to find smooth harmony in this lofty cragged region where at first sight all seems so rough” (Muir 94) inspired his philosophy into changing the system for enjoying natural places.

On a different note, at an early point in his journals, Muir denounces writing as a profession and almost as a valuable thing to do at all. He writes, “I have a low opinion of books... no amount of word-making will ever make a single soul know these mountains. One day’s exposure to mountains is better than cartloads of books” (Muir 94-95). This raises the questions: why write about nature, indeed why write at all? I’m not sure I have a complete answer to this early argument by Muir—one which he demonstratively went against when he



began publishing his works—but perhaps I can offer a partial one at this point. It is clear, via Thoreau and Muir, as well as my latter authors, that it is necessary to write in order to have experiences heard. Muir has a good point, I’ve never been to Yosemite or the Sierra Nevada Range, and I found it extremely difficult to imagine what it must have been like for him, without substituting his imagery with my lexicon of Rocky Mountain images—which are not the same in the slightest to what he was talking about. And yet we must write. It is clear, just through Thoreau and Muir’s engagement with their daily thoughts in a worn notebook. We are called toward expression, and what better to express than our natural surroundings and the ways in which we think about it. Therefore, while Muir’s claim that “Nature’s literature is written in mountain-ranges” (Muir 98) has a great deal of truth to it, we can’t forget that the fact we study this material, that we take copies of Muir on camping trips, and assign them in environmental philosophy courses, is because there is something about the natural world that demands articulation through language.

So after spending the entire of month of June in Cloudland with John Muir, I find it appropriate to move on from his natural theology and investment in the protection of nature for the later naturalist and writer Aldo Leopold, a man who furthered greatly Muir’s interest and ability in conservation and ecology.

## Hiking with God

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for my love of nature and my affinity for studying it both philosophically and literarily comes from the fact that I commune with the divine in open air. Going into the natural world is a little like going to mass and receiving the bread, or kneeling before an altar for me. There, in Rocky Mountain pines or New Mexico desert, summer or winter, I feel a divine presence of interconnectivity and wholeness pulsing through the electric air of being. Here, outside in the rawness of the world, I can *truly* feel what it is to experience the holy.

The first summer I worked at Keystone Science School I was 17. I came into the summer ready for freedom from my parents, a lot of fun, and the sense of community I had always felt going to camp. What I didn't know I would receive also was the gift of experiencing God each day. She was there throughout the summer, reflected in tie-die pools or in the Thank You from a parent. But mostly she dwelled in the wild world beyond the campus boundaries.

On this particular trip my co-counselor and I found ourselves leading a group of 8-year-olds and our counselor assistants up through Deer Creek Canyon past Montezuma, Colorado, to the summit of Radical Hill and Teller Mountain. The summer had been a rainy one, and at the height of July the hills and riversides were soggy with excess rain water. When you put a booted foot down to pump water in the stream a small flood began to grow around it. Pine needles sagged with dew or rain or both, though it was a sunny afternoon when we hiked in. And if you moved a branch to get past a section of trail, the water would drench the person behind you, creating a rainbow of water and light.

I remember this trip in greens and blues; of the grass, trees, sky, of the moss growing and the newness that accompanied by awakening. I think of the words satiated, alive, dense, and generous as I write. Montezuma Valley was crawling with thirsty mosquitos and campers

slapping their arms, learned how to cook dinner in a down-pour and keep their sleeping bags dry in the seemingly endless evening rain. That night we slept beneath indigo mountains crested with the silhouettes of spruces. Water dripped, bugs drowsily dodged rain drops, and the great silence rocked us to sleep.

What is important to this story in particular is not that we had an underdog success to the top of the mountain, or that one of the kids began to actually love nature as opposed to resent it for its various difficulties, but that I truly find God in the greens in blues, in the satiation and generosity She gives us. As we crested the peak, which stood only at something like 12,000 feet, but for the miniature population I was guiding seemed like Everest, we were greeted by a late morning azure sky and a fluffy cloud kingdom of pearl white.

On the top of Radical Hill, which was green from the rain and dotted with friendly, uninterested mountain goats, a 14-year-old counselor assistant turned to me and said, “You know, the only time I feel God is out here.” And that is what this is all about. For as long as I had known Olivia, which was quite a few years, she had never astounded me before. But in this particular moment, as I felt the grass become a part of me and I a part of those incredible clouds building themselves on the horizon, I felt drawn to the truth in her words. Of course, the only time I feel God too, is when I am out there.

And as I sit here and think back to this encounter, which, although so long ago, has informed my own relationship to nature, I think about the ubiquity of God in all things and people. I wonder, if God is everywhere, in you and me and the trees, then why is Her presence so clear in the great beyond of unknown wilderness? How can I feel God more so atop a mountain or in the depths of a Hawaiin valley or in the heat waves of desert air, than anywhere else crowded with cars and smog and industry? And if this is the case, then what in the world are we *doing* with all of these environmentally harmful practices other than destroying Her, our Mother and God?

### July: Community and Leopold's *Almanac*

Aldo Leopold, born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Iowa, and continuing his life and career throughout the American Southwest and Midwest, might be one of the most captivating influences in this journey through nature writing. During his lifetime, Leopold graduated from the Yale school of forestry and worked in the US Forest Service in New Mexico and in Wisconsin. In 1935 he and his family began an “ecological experiment” in restoration of a piece of land that had been subject to great erosion, general maltreatment, and neglect.

*A Sand County Almanac*—which traces this experiment—is structured in much the same way that Thoreau's *Walden* and Muir's *My First Summer* are, in that it follows his farm through the course of a calendar year. Beginning in January and working his way forward, Leopold continues to demonstrate, as have our previous authors, that the cyclical nature of the world and the fluid—perhaps recurring-- movement of time and seasonal changes are helpful ways to understand nature conceptually. The writing of these authors puts us in synch with the natural rhythm of time, as opposed to human-constructed clock clicking always, eternally, and linearly forward. In nature, there is a sense of pattern and habituation that accompanies this notion of time. For example, Leopold writes, “Each year, after the midwinter blizzards, there comes a night of thaw when the tinkle of dripping water is heard in the land... The hibernating skunk, curled up in his deep den, uncurls himself and ventures forth to prowls the wet world... His track marks one of the earliest datable events in that cycle of beginnings and ceasings which we call a year” (Leopold 3). By describing such a slight change in the weather and changes in animals, Leopold confirms his ability to observe, predict, and understand the land and inhabitants around him. And more so, this depiction which emphasizes a “cycle of beginnings and ceasings” introduces the readers to a notion of time, of existing in the world, dependent on these slight changes in weather and animal behavior as opposed to anything else. Furthermore, relating his human sense of time, “a year”

to the cycle of nature, creates a distinction between the human world and natural one. This dimensional understanding of time according to the changes in nature foreshadows that the rest of the book will be organized in a similarly organic way.

Furthermore, Leopold is linked to the traditions of Thoreau and Muir as he has a natural affinity for all things *wild*. By wild here, I mean that these authors are called by those spaces which are not dominated by human influence and industry, but rather exist as they were created—or became—and remain this way today. Moreover, however, this affinity must to engage with the outside world must—and does—lead to written expression. For although Muir lamented in his journal about meritless writing or literature, championing experience in the backcountry instead, we still find ourselves reading his stories. Furthermore, Thoreau felt compelled to describe his journey at Walden, though he was an intense individualist; there was an insatiable call to recreate the world around him for others. In this way, when Leopold begins his piece with “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot” (1) he is suggesting not only a need for the natural world, but also the need to describe it. This too, is why we write about nature: because sometimes our experiences are too good, too holy, to incredible, to be kept within us. We have a human desire to express, and I firmly believe this desire is stirred by beautiful vistas, towering trees, and deep valley gorges.

In regards to the concepts I have chosen to trace in this journey, I find that Leopold’s philosophy of interconnection and holism becomes important in how we understand not only wildness, but also our responsibility as U.S. citizens and global community members. Leopold argues, “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (203). Such a notion implies that we cannot understand our role in society—or perhaps even a biotic community-- until we understand the universe as “interdependent.” I am drawn to this immediately, as it supposes an ecological as

well as a moral community can be one in the same. And this is where I would consider Leopold's approach to nature as characterized by holism; things are not separate but constantly in motion, dynamic and in conversation with one another. Muir certainly writes about interconnectivity through the perspective of his Christian background and ensuing natural theology, and Thoreau demonstrates in his mindful balance with the natural world that he too views the world as a series of interrelated components. And yet Leopold's articulation of this concept is most appealing to me, as it maintains an ecocentric perspective, and is relatively secular.

In fact, Leopold goes onto argue that "a land ethic" essentially calls us to embody a different part of our humanity than he thinks that we have for centuries. It "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such" (204). This "ethic" that Leopold references here argues that we ought to "enlarge" "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (201). Thus, by changing the way we understand "Homo sapiens from conquerors" to "citizen," Leopold demonstrates that we cannot understand our existence in the world if we define nature and wilderness as something separate than ourselves. Thoreau might argue that "citizen" becomes a difficult word here, as it implies some sort of bureaucratic structure. And yet I find that Leopold's idea of a citizen and Thoreau's conception of a habitant are very similar, in that they both work to achieve a non-human centered way of viewing the world.

In fact, all things and beings for Leopold, are dependent on one another and function together; indeed he thinks ecologically. Max Oelshlaeger might explain the notion of holism in Leopold's writing the best in his essay 2007 "Ecological Restoration, Aldo Leopold, and Beauty." He argues that for Leopold, "wilderness or land aesthetic crossed the modernist divide between subject and object, and achieved a Thoreauvian unity of knowing subject (the

individual) and known object (nature)” (Oelschlaeger 236). According to this view, Leopold did not maintain the modernist approach to categorizing and dividing the world, especially through the lens of individual/nature. For Leopold, the two are one in the same. Following this argument, it wouldn’t make any sense for Leopold to find value in a dominative approach to nature, such as that of the conqueror as it doesn’t allow for an interconnected, whole world view. One ought not conquer that which she view as her own community, and intimately linked to her being.

Furthermore, if we understand the world to be intimately connected as a holistic community, without discernable differences in subject/object, then I believe that wildness becomes much less of a descriptor of the “other” as an identifier for the human individual’s ability to relate to this interconnectivity. In the section, “February,” Leopold begins with a description of the difficulty in heating and feeding a household, a most domestic task to be consumed by (5). Yet following this is a description of finding an oak, cutting it down, and using it as fodder to sufficiently achieve his goal (6). Leopold discusses the oak as if it is a civilized thing, naming it a “veteran” (9). By creating such juxtaposition, Leopold demonstrates that wildness is not in any sort of sphere besides that of *being*. In other words, the oak and society coexist rather than exist in opposite spaces of existence. Moreover, he describes the process of cutting the tree like going back through history: “Now the saw bites into 1910-1920, the decade of the drainage dream, when steam shovels sucked dry the marshes of central Wisconsin to make farms... Now we cut 1910, when a great university published a book on conservation... We cut 1908, a dry year when the forests burned fiercely, and Wisconsin parted with its last cougar” (10-11). The oak, a wild being, undomesticated and free, finds itself part of the “civilized” community while it is cut down. The tree rings keep track of its personal history, but also of the world’s history—particularly the history of nature destruction and conservation. This collapse of natural and cultural point

of views provides the idea that for Leopold, holism indicates not only an appreciation for the wild, but an admission that it exists everywhere, and not necessarily only in the confines of “nature.”

This perspective that wildness is everywhere can be further illuminated when we read on Leopold’s opinion of National Parks. Leopold was indeed one of the individuals who helped get the national forests started, along with John Muir. Yet the writer and conservationist found it hard to believe that the idea of wilderness could be confined to a set of arbitrary boundaries, obviously mobilized by his inability to compartmentalized the world into spheres. Leopold laments, “The National Parks do not suffice as a means of perpetuating the larger carnivores... Neither do they suffice for mountain sheep; most sheep herds are shrinking. The reasons for this are clear in some cases and obscure in others. The parks are certainly too small for such a far-ranging species as the wolf” (198). Here Leopold suggests that the creation of natural spaces—at least in the name of wilderness—is somewhat foolish, and inefficient and ineffective. But Leopold is also aware that although the national park system at his time was not entirely effective for protecting certain species, they aided in conserving totally natural spaces. For he writes, “Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow... the creation of new wilderness in the full sense of the word is impossible” (200). Thus, perhaps my argument about Leopold needs evolving. Even though Leopold insisted that the world was wholly wild, and interrelated, he also understood that realistically, people did not think this way. Therefore, for those who did not approach nature as something to coexist with, but rather viewed it as something to be conquered, national parks were necessary to keep their insatiable consumption in check. Furthermore, Leopold argues the “ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down... to a question of intellectual humility... it is only the scholar who appreciates that all history consists of successive excursions from a single starting-point” (200). Obviously calling upon the motif of the oak



tree here, he substantiates my argument that though Leopold himself approached the world holistically, he knew it was unlikely for others to do the same.

In fact, I argue that Leopold's faith in other people to have the ability to embrace a deeply ecological point of view regarding the environment, a tenant which emphasizes the connections between humans and other biotic life over everything else, was very low. Indeed, although he argues for a conception of wildness that is inclusive, and not driven by binaries which compare the "human world" to the "natural one," he does suggest that the individual must change before ethics can even be touched with any sort of revolutionary thought. In his section about the land ethic, he asserts that, "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions" (209). By this, Leopold demonstrates that this sort of engagement with wild spaces, not as conquerors but as community members, begins with a change in the individual. This argument is substantiated by both authors I have studied before Leopold. Both Thoreau and Muir, individualists who sought to make their lives about and for the natural world, did so alone. However, Leopold goes on to argue that, "The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial" (209-210). Here, I think Muir would disagree vehemently with Leopold's designation. Muir might say that of course religion has heard of conservation, as the Creator's gifts are always worth protecting. Furthermore, I would like to critique this point of Leopold's by suggesting that we best understand philosophy and religion through our relationship to the natural world, and that both produce an attitude inclined toward conservatism. Yet perhaps Leopold is arguing here for a rather dramatic turn in perspective. Perhaps the reason we make "conservation trivial" we must reevaluate *how* we engage with nature.

By interrogating how we ought to engage nature and also appreciating that the greatest change in both perspective as well as action begin with the individual, Leopold raises the question of what it means to be a decent citizen of the U.S., but also of the world. If change begins with the individual, then how can those fighting for conservation access persons hardened against nature? Most directly, Leopold leaves us with the suggestion that we consider ourselves ethical when we perform actions which tend toward the “beauty, stability, and integrity” of all biotic community members (208). By this, I believe he means that we must remember that our actions impact thousands of others, whether big picture, or simply within the ecosystem of our own backyard. To maintain a damaging ethical stance toward the natural world would be to undermine the ability of each living thing in the world to rise to beauty, stability, and integrity. Leopold is claiming here that everything in the world has a right to life and to a quality (beautiful, dignified) life, at that.

Yet I would also argue that part of the answer to this question regarding how we ought to live in a land-ethic oriented community is yet another reason to write, read, and teach nature writing. This unique and irreplaceable cannon of American nature writers acts as a vehicle for understanding how religion and philosophy actually *have* heard about conservation, how they are the ways in conversation with notions of environmental ethics, of land-oriented communities. Indeed, while Leopold supplies us with the right tools for reorienting our place in nature from the dominator to the community member, as well as provides for the ways in which we might embody this role more acutely, he has a harder time seeing that through nature writing, the philosophy and theology of nature, this change in individual “intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections” becomes much more accessible. While a lot of this has to do with his disgust at land ownership: “Land, like Odysseus’ slave-girls, is still property” (203), so too does it have to do with Leopold’s trust in human nature, which he sees as inherently greedy.

Thus, as we move onto the next author, Edward Abbey, who emphasizes action over philosophical contemplation—though he is apt at both—part of this academic inquiry becomes less of a question of how nature writing impacts our ecological awareness, as Leopold supposes. Now, it is a matter of how literature informs how we *interact* with the outside world. Has ecology become trivial? I argue that it depends on whether or not the individual is fully awake or not. Reading these authors does not mean that I have been riding my bike everywhere, or recycling everything I can or even eating a responsible diet, not because I don't try or care, but because I am not "fully awake" all the time. Even for me, a frolicker of mountain meadows and wearer of sun-kissed skin from being outside a little bit too long, cannot take ecology or the land-ethic seriously at all times in my life. And yet part of being awake is also being willing to enter the conversation, to make this understanding of a beneficial environmental ethic not individual, but communal. Just by reading nature writers, and by engaging their ideas, I find myself continually and always bathing in Walden Pond, waking up again and again to the conversation that is always happening about how we ought to live in respect for the natural world.

### August: Camping with Edward Abbey

Edward Abbey, best known as a naturalist, political activist, and writer, focuses primarily on the American Southwest in his work, specifically discussing the ethics of human-nature relationships in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Abbey takes particular issue with overpopulation, urbanization of natural spaces, and the desecration of land for human use and consumption. For the scope of this chapter, I will be focusing on two of his nonfiction books: *Abbey's Road* (1987) and *The Journey Home* (1991), addressing how the four themes I've identified fit into these pieces. Although Abbey actually touches on all of my motifs of interest, he discusses environmental repercussions in the context of American overconsumption more so than any other author I've looked at for this project. I suspect that this is because of the time period which Abbey is writing in. Both *Abbey's Road* and *The Journey Home* are published in the late 80s and 90s, respectively, a time of both urbanization, and growing capitalism in the U.S.

To start, I'd like to discuss the ways in which Abbey's work engages the ways we build boundaries around the natural world, constructing a space for "natural" things to happen. For Abbey, one of the most important ways in which this is illuminated a critique of how and why we use the national and state park systems. Abbey is greatly concerned with whether or not constructing a physical place for nature-fanatics to go to in times of wilderness withdrawal is an ethical way of perceiving the natural environment. For example, in Abbey elucidates the incredibly troubling situation in Yosemite Valley, circa 1977 in *The Journey Home*. He writes, "Yosemite Valley has been urbanized. It's no more a wild or natural area than Manhattan's Central Park," (144). By this, Abbey insinuates that nature ought not be a place where humans can consume and capitalize on the land. Abbey lets on his deep resentment for the contrivance of constructing a natural space here. This resentment, of course, stems from the fact that the natural space was destroyed and overrun by the exact

industrial and human forces we tried to keep away from it. The valley has been “urbanized.” I believe this distinction goes back to Muir’s regard for wilderness, and his claim that no new wilderness might be created. Once Yosemite has been urbanized, subject to capitalist and industrial foes, could it ever be Yosemite again? If the answer to that question is no, then there is a lot of land, water, air on this planet that has been sacrificed to humans, never to be wild again.

And this is an extremely concerning question, especially as it complicates the way in which we understand where wilderness is, and what it consists of. Opposed to Leopold, for instance, Abbey’s insinuation is not a holistic approach to the environment at all, but rather one which states wilderness is here, and humans over there. For if our action destroys nature, what does this make us? Indeed, Abbey suggests that *unfettered* human consumption of natural space makes an area less wild than it was before. For by comparing Yosemite Valley to a park in one of the largest cities in the world, Abbey seems to be making the argument that city parks are not “wild,” and that by bringing Yosemite down to this level, we are genuinely ruining the wildness of it. But I’d like to complicate Abbey’s perspective regarding national and state parks by arguing that perhaps only unregulated, insatiable, indeed greedy human consumption and use is truly detrimental to the wild. And that instead he is arguing for temperance, as opposed to compartmentalizing the world via human interaction and pure wildness (that which has not witnessed humans at all). Abbey goes on to say, “Yosemite Valley... is not the proper place for paved roads and motor traffic.... It is not the proper place for gas stations, supermarkets, bars, curio shops, barbershops, a hospital, a lodge, a hotel, a convention center, and a small city of permanent and transient residents” (The Journey Home 144). Significantly, though Abbey resists human overuse of natural spaces, he does not deny the importance of human interaction with the natural world. By listing activities and establishments which he does not believe ought to be part of the natural space, he implies

some things are acceptable. Though Yosemite has “improper” characteristics, it must also have “proper” ones. While the overt commodification of nature and manipulation of it as a place to profit from is wrong, Abbey suggests resting in places like Yosemite as the beautiful natural space is and not only good, but necessary.

In fact, Abbey compares the trip to Yosemite much like Muir would, in that he names it a religious experience. To support this claim we need not look further than the conclusion of this chapter in *The Journey Home*. Abbey beseeches readers to “Keep it like it was,” (145), “Yosemite should be... the kind of place where a person would know himself lucky to make one pilgrimage there in his lifetime. A holy place” (145). Abbey does not remain strict on a binary between humans and nature, but develops a thesis considering the complexity of being a human in the wild world. We ought to *experience* nature, Abbey argues, not cover it with comfortable capitalism. Moreover, there is an explicit claim for the religiousness of being outside. For Abbey, the capitalization of something holy is extremely unethical. And I fully agree. It is not right, nor beneficial to commodify the act of communing with nature. Indeed being in community with the natural world, such as Leopold argues for in the “Land Ethic,” rather than somehow situating ourselves above it, profiting from it, is the only way we can see how holy, divine, special, beautiful, it truly is. Therefore we must be careful to enjoy these wild spaces without creating a domino effect of urbanization and city sprawl. This, Abbey argues, is the worst thing we could do to our natural world.

Another manifestation of Edward Abbey’s sentiments regarding the urbanization of national and state parks is the *Abbey’s Road* chapter, “A Walk in the Park.” Here Abbey discusses the debate between building roads in national and state parks or leaving the masses to walk instead. Abbey elucidates the economics of park-keeping to his audience: the more roads, the more volume visiting, the more money (110). Furthermore, he describes great political distress between different parties when deciding where and how a new national park

ought to operate. Just in his example, of a road in Canyonlands National Park, the Park Service is up against local bureaucrats, who are up against mining companies who are up against each other. These sorts of details made me think how complicated the enjoyment of nature for *nature's* sake can be in a national or state park. Also, this type of discussion regarding the politics and bureaucracy which accompanies creation and maintenance of a national park makes me interrogate how wild this space actually is. If there are forces working to make the park an economic success, rather than a beneficial nature experience, then how wild are these places we visit on vacation with our families? Does the contrivance in constructed natural spaces make a difference in the quality of our interactions with natural spaces?

Throughout “A Walk in the Park,” Abbey depicts a trip in Canyon Lands which Abbey takes with his young daughter, Suzie. At the start, Abbey’s young daughter asks the question many do before engaging in nature on their two feet: why bother? She continues to lament her terrible fate of walking for the rest of the hike, but the initial question remains: what’s the point in hiking, walking, going outside at all? Indeed, this question seems to be at the forefront of all Abbey’s writing. In response to these incessant objections, “There is something in our automated American souls that cannot abide the dead-end drive; we demand that our scenic roads curve across the landscape in great winding loops, freeing us from the detestable necessity of motoring through the same scene twice” (108). According to Abbey, while the American dream for adventure is insatiable, but so is our desire for it to be easily accessible and instantaneously realized.

This chapter inspired serious self-reflection in regards to the trips I have recently taken in the National Park System. Several of them have been constructed in “loop” form so, as Abbey says, we never have to motor “through the same scene twice.” In fact, Volcano National Park in Hawaii, Mesa Verde in southern Colorado and Chaco Canyon in northern

New Mexico are all built so that you can drive *around* the nature, not through it. And while in all of these parks there are small drive-ways for stopping and looking out, sometimes it isn't even necessary to get out of the car for some. I witnessed multiple families gazing from behind their minivan windows, looking out to the landscape around them, but never exiting the vehicle. Abbey raises the question though: is seeing something behind the windshield of a big automobile *really* seeing it, engaging with it? Abbey would argue that this is not actually experiencing nature, but rather letting the experience brush passed you without any sort of interaction. The essay concludes with an admission by Suzie, claiming that it would not have been as fun to drive, because it wouldn't have been as real (116). Abbey presses her, saying that if there were no roads, there would be limited access for the old and less able to experience the natural, wild world. And Suzie essentially retorts with, "too bad." This might seem harsh, but for Abbey it is sufficient. We cannot, and should not, Abbey argues, supply roads for the demands of "nature lovers," but rather force the masses to *engage* with nature.

And yet we haven't entirely answered the question of *why* we walk, according to Edward Abbey. For the most part, the answer to this question lies in the way he views the concept of wilderness. Although I've noted above that this concept is very much wrapped up in the absence of human excess and overconsumption, this understanding can be complicated even more. First and foremost, the "wild" for Abbey is defined by things that it is *not*. For example, Abbey writes in "The Great American Desert" from *The Journey Home* warning words, trying to keep too many people from visiting this sacred, but fragile ecological space. Abbey successfully uses an interesting juxtaposition of tones here, for it is both playful and simultaneously anxious. Abbey voices major concerns about overpopulation and urbanization of natural spaces—in a very similar way he regards the park service. He asks, "Why the desert, when you could be strolling along the golden beaches of California? Camping by a stream of pure Rocky Mountain spring water in colorful Colorado? Why the desert, given a



world of such splendor and variety?" (21). Here Abbey takes already over-populated, urbanized, and tourist-attractive spots in comparison to his barren desert: Colorado and California are full of human overconsumption or impact. In fact, the words "splendor" and "variety" bite in this passage, for he employs them to depict the nature of the desert rather than what he claims to use them for. Thus, according to Abbey, part of being in the wild is recognizing the uniqueness of the space around you, the "splendor and variety" which the wilderness allows. This splendid and variety-filled space, moreover, is in general a place where many tourists do not go, for these places in Abbey's eyes are not *truly* "wild." They are the simulacra we enjoy, saying we engage with wild spaces while we exist comfortably in a car campsite. I'd like to argue that Thoreau would agree with this as well, as he found it necessary to leave his urban space in order to "face only the essential things in life" and to "live deliberately." Comfort and human luxury seems to, always, distract us from the reality of life: what it means to be a wild being in a wild world.

Again, Abbey defines his conception of the wild by what it is not when he concludes this chapter, focusing on the vastness of desert space, an eternal and infinite horizon. He writes that after he climbed to the top of a lonely canyon, he found an arrow pointing into the distance. When he tried to find what the arrow was pointing to, he found that "... there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world. *That's why*" (22). Abbey's wild here is a lack-- an absence of the "filler" we stuff into our days. No buildings or TVs or supermarkets or malls. The wild is empty and vast. Yet it is not without, or lacking in substance, but rather full of plants and animals, insects, blue sky and open air: those organisms and entities which would exist without fuel, or electricity, power plants and human corruption. The wild is where we meet the "silent world." This is the realm of Thoreau's cabin, of Muir's spiritual contemplations, and Leopold's ecologically driven land

ethic. Plus, the desert is Abbey's preferred habitat. Here we find beauty and solace in the emptiness. Here, in our habitats, we begin to access our inner wild.

This beauty then, the aesthetic value of natural landscapes, becomes especially important in accessing our own wildness in our habitats. Abbey breaks the wall between himself and the reader when he writes "The wildest animal I know is you, gentle reader, with this helpless book clutched in your claws. No, there are better reasons for keeping the wild wild, the wilderness open, the trees up and the rivers free, and the canyons uncluttered with dams. We need wilderness because we are wild animals. Every man needs a place he can go crazy in peace" (229). We, the wildest animals known, need a *beautiful* space to go crazy in, and those which are "open," "free," and "uncluttered." Indeed this passage encapsulates my own feelings in regards to wildness and nature, as I find that in order to be human I must go out into that "wild wild." I must, at least for part of my life, spend time amongst trees and rivers, the absolute vastness and yet incredible fullness that is the "silent world." Perhaps this might be complicated by the notion that increasing numbers of humans in the wild would increase erosion and impact the environment volatily. Yet I would suggest that with a respect toward nature not as a playground, or even a vacation destination, but rather a habitat—what animals consider "home"—we might adopt for some time, treating it with the same love as our own civilized home. In this regard, the beauty of nature invites us to comfort that wild, silent world, and to encourage Leopold's land ethic wherever we go.

Furthermore, Abbey argues for beauty's importance not only because we are wild beings, but we are spiritual as well. Therefore, Abbey believes that spirituality is a product of interacting with the natural world respectfully. Indeed, the way we commune with the natural world—as John Muir argues—can be a way (and for Abbey it is *the* way) which we commune with a higher power. He writes in *Abbey's Road*, "Over the desert and the canyons, down there in the rocks, a huge vibration of light and stillness and solitude shapes itself into

the form of hovering wings spread out across the sky... Not God—the term seems insufficient—but something unnamable, and more beautiful, and far greater, and more terrible” (120). It is clear that the aesthetic pull toward nature is also a pull to the higher laws Thoreau and Muir discuss. With phrases such as “light and stillness and solitude,” as well as “hovering wings” we hear echoes of Muir’s descriptions regarding Yosemite Valley, and those reflections Thoreau recorded after bath time at Walden Pond. All three of these writers connect the natural world explicitly with a higher power. And yet for Abbey the term “God” is not enough; for the ways in which nature work are more incredible, “beautiful” and “terrible” at the same time.

Nevertheless, we go on to read in *Abbey’s Road* we read about the magnificence of Glen Canyon, and the ways in which traditional religious language is subverted to attend to the natural landscape Abbey views as his church. He describes the river and its canyon as, “...wild, the beaches, the secret passages and hidden cathedrals of stone, the wilderness alive and sweet and charged with mystery, miracle, magic” (118). Here, the link between wildness and spirituality in nature is explicit. We see the “wild,” in the same phrase as “hidden cathedrals” as well as “wilderness alive... sweet... [a] miracle.” The cathedral is no longer—and can no longer be again—the place of worship for Abbey. It is out amongst the deep canyon walls and wild beaches of rivers that we witness the divine, commune with God, or that which is even bigger than God, the “unnamable.” This too, resonates with me, for the aesthetic of nature calls me back again and again, characterized by its intoxicating interrelation with the holy. This wild then, is not only an innate part of ourselves, nor the absence of human misuse of land, air, and water, but also the call to spirituality we feel when we go into nature. Clearly, Abbey’s impatience with human bureaucracy must be understood not only at a political, or social level, but also at a religious one. In this way, religious

freedom exists most clearly within the cathedral of the canyon instead of the human-constructed cathedral.

Though including religious freedom, the broader ideal of individual liberty present in Abbey's work is a function of American identity. This theme of American identity is extremely important for Abbey's writing about nature and how we ought to act as citizens of the natural world. He writes in *The Journey* "we can have wilderness without human life... but we cannot have freedom without wilderness, we cannot have freedom without leagues of open space..." (235). Therefore, wilderness is a place where individual liberty cannot be restricted for Abbey (as well as Thoreau and Muir, I'd argue). In fact, our freedom is contingent upon our ability to interact with the wilderness. Still, this political standpoint is problematic, for it raises several rights as well as duties questions. It demands who owns the land we hike and camp on. And it questions whether or not you can own land at all. Furthermore, what is our duty to this land, if no one is directly responsible for it, in terms of ownership? According to Abbey, "The earth, like the sun, like the air, belongs to everyone—and to no one" (88). We cannot claim rights upon the land. Implicit in this understanding of communal "earth," and "sun" and "air," though, is that we can treat it however we want. Because this liberty to experience the wild is inalienable to Abbey: "we cannot have freedom without leagues of open space." Yet I do believe that Abbey maintains Leopold's land-ethic in regards to ownership questions as well as suggested duties when he suggests that the "earth, like the sun... belongs to everyone—and to no one." We are a community, not a divided set of entities.

Abbey's respect for nature is also informed by another aspect of his political identity: he is a vehement advocate of structural disobedience in the face of environmental oppression. For example, Edward Abbey writes in *Journey*, "Always remove and destroy survey stakes, flagging, advertising signboards, mining claim markers.... And other such artifacts of

industrialism. The men who put those things there are up to no good and it is our duty to confound them” (19). Crucial to resisting the encroachment of technology and industrialism is the idea that structural violence is an effective tool against big government and big industry. By violence, we need to specify that Abbey is not suggesting using force against humans, but rather disrupting the status quo in ways other than peaceful protest. Specifically, Abbey means destruction of machines which move the earth and destroy it, the burning of billboards, and the structural and premeditated monkey-wrenching that comes with undermining forces which feed the abolition of nature: capitalism and industry. Finally, the destruction of nature occurs most often and most severely because of the encroachment of industry. To stop this, Abbey argues that wanting change and treating the natural world well is not enough. There must be a deliberate action attached to the ways in which we conceptualize our relationship to nature.

Intentional action, therefore, might be the best way to describe Abbey’s philosophical applicability concerning how we ought to live in the world, how we ought to treat the environment. In fact, in relation to Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, Abbey represents the ways in which undermining the system can be just as beneficial as working through it to change it. While Thoreau embodied civil disobedience in the face of unjust laws regarding the Mexican-America War, so too Abbey argues for disobedience as a means of altering the trajectory of unjust environmental practices. On the other hand, however, both Muir and Leopold worked through the government to help create and sustain the national and state park systems. Furthermore, Abbey’s tactic of violent disobedience against the machinery and evidence of industry is a quick solution to an immediate problem. In other words, Abbey targets the symptoms of environmental destruction, while Muir, Leopold, and to some degree Thoreau work toward fighting unjust systems which perpetuate the same end. And there is some value in attacking this problem on both levels: both in immediate action as well as

through systemic change. For as Abbey states, “I understand and sympathize with the reasonable needs of a reasonable number... But what is happening today, in North American, is not rational use but irrational massacre...” (*Journey* 208). How do we stop a “massacre” many people don’t see, or admit, exists? Well, according to Abbey we must act directly and swiftly in the face of injustices in against the wild. And yet we must ask if this sort of direct, violent action is a sustainable response to the wrongs occurring against the earth, or if they are too destructive to employ. Though this complication is of great importance, for the scope of this project I will have to leave that trail un-hiked.

So we move on, over the mountains and through the valleys to Annie Dillard’s small cabin at Tinker Creek. There we will learn about the connections the only woman writer I have chosen has to my previous studies, and learn about how God’s presence in nature is not only about the beauty, but also the terrifyingly hideous.

## Walking Home

Reading an Edward Abbey book is best done around a campfire or near a river, usually at the brink of golden hour, as the sun starts to go down in the back country and you realize that it is time to find kindling for a fire and figure out where that bottle of whiskey went. Just as having a campfire is not normally a solo activity, neither is reading a holy manuscript from Abbey. It follows, then, that this book is best read aloud to an audience—even if it is only one companion—slowly, with thought, giving ample time to discuss some of the best lines. Consider the entire activity something of a very serious ritual experience—Ed is nobody to fool around with.

The night before the day this story is actually about began in quite a similar way. Reading Edward Abbey's *A Journey Home* next to a fire (which took a very long time to start in this damp, buggy gulch) beneath first hints of stars and the sun's final adieu to the red rocks south of us, making the whole sky turn pink. We sat together, my partner and me. We read and drank and talked, feeding the fire in the ring and in the soul. We read what Ed writes in his essay entitled "Walking," where he tries to climb Mount Whitney for the hundredth time. He claims, "If God had meant us to walk, he would have kept us down on all fours, with well-padded paws," (203). Of course he says this because he doesn't make it up the mountain and yet we laughed at his grumpy attitude. He goes on to argue, "There is something unnatural about walking. Especially walking uphill" (203). Of course we laugh wryly at the silliness of a nature-lover like Abbey detesting walking. Of course he can't be serious, we thought. Sure walking is hard, but humans have been journeying by foot for thousands of years. It is quite the opposite of unnatural.

Fast forward about twelve hours from the moment we read this warning—when the sun said goodbye and Jim Beam and Ed Abbey said hello-- with these words in mind, and we will begin the story of *our* journey home.

We woke up at 7 A.M. to break camp, eat, and drink coffee with the rising of the sun. The beautiful twitters and tweeters from tiny birds sang through the crisp air as we packed the weight of our existence onto our backs for another—the third—day of hiking through Pike National Forest. At this moment, it was only mildly bothersome to us that we were already out of cliff bars, only had two apples and one packet of oatmeal left for the next day. As we drank our coffee, we considered the cloud cover above and the amount of trail we needed to get done during day. Perhaps the weather would hold out, and it would not rain until we made camp later. Trying not to give the growing blanket of grayish, white, clouds further thought, we hopped on the trail and began our day.

Hiking up and over the hills, jumping over creeks and watching as the clouds began to dissipate slightly, we laughed about Abbey's perspective on walking. We talked about the flora, which was green, full of life and movement. We talked about the idea that memory can be laced or imbued with color. I told my partner, in hiking and in life, I would remember this trip with greens, blues, and reds: green infinite pines, waves of endless firs, leaves of quaking aspens dancing in the morning breeze; the sky looked deep blue, probably the same color as Pablo's guitar, before becoming covered again; red rock in the distance, towering over everything and giving perspective to how small we are and how great the world is. Vibrant colors of beautiful hue and happy undertones flood my mind as I remember that morning. I said this all as we passed by a river flowing through a natural tunnel of rock, the perfectly shaped canyon walls revealing eons of erosion and weathering. The sound of water must be akin to what God's hair looks like in the sun. But that was just the beginning of this trek homewards.

We paced ourselves well, stopping only for two minutes every twenty. The trail was not extremely steep, or even very technical, but rather continuously challenging. I put my right foot in front of my left and stepped. I counted to twelve over and over again in my head. One,



two, three: a rhythm to keep my body moving, an incentive not to stop. My breath was short and keeping on became more and more difficult.

I stopped laughing at Ed's words on walking. Maybe we weren't meant to walk continuously with everything we need on our backs. Maybe it *is* unnatural. Sure, the idea of carrying everything you need to live is romantic and beautiful and ideal, considering the world of excess and material consumption that we now live in—have always lived in perhaps—but it is also so very difficult. Locomotion is not an easy task to maintain when the weight of cookware, shelter, water, food, clothing, rain protection, are all weighing you down with the constant reminder of how much you *do not* actually need. Moreover, hiking, physical activity in general rather, is much more difficult for me than it is for my sweetheart, and each time I stopped to catch my breath I turned and saw him smiling, seemingly unaffected by the miles and miles of hiking we had just done. We got lost near an Olympic size swimming pool made of river water, found the trail again, crossed the river with a rope tied to both sides, water running swiftly with a depth up to my belly button and saved my Chaco from sailing downstream to God-knows-where, all before lunch.

I'd rather not admit that the last twenty minutes before we stopped for tuna tortilla tacos and GORP were some of the most painful of my life, because I am afraid I would sound dramatic and out of touch. But they were. Feeling I was almost out of water, and that my blood sugar was dangerously low, I could not wait until I was finally told that we could stop and eat lunch. We had been going uphill for what seemed like—and what actually was, upon further verification—a couple of hours. Ed, you were right, I thought to myself. I'm sorry I doubted you. Is this proof given to us because of our disbelief? Are you laughing at our disregard to your so-true words about walking?

"Only ten minutes left," were the words that came to break through my pity party for one and I actually thought I would die: ten more minutes of this hell?

Right, left. One through twelve. Here we go. The switchbacks kept pushing us up, and my gravity and negative attitude kept trying to pull me back down. This isn't natural, I thought. We stopped on a steep slope and ate. We didn't get off the trail, not worried about people showing up as it was a Monday afternoon in the middle of a 25 mile loop. Lunch tasted fine dining, my body craving protein and calories and rejuvenation of any kind. We forgot a can opener, but opened the tuna with a knife and a rock. I've never tasted anything more succulent or rich than that canned tuna in my whole life. My love looked up to the sky, which was growing more and more concerning every moment we stepped up in elevation and the hour ticked into the afternoon and mentioned that it'd be best if we got back on the trail as soon as possible.

"It's not going to rain," I said, a little cockily, as if I was a meteorologist and knew exactly the rain patters of this unfamiliar territory we were in especially during an El Nino Colorado summer.

Honestly I was trying to convince him that we were fine and to take a little bit of a longer break. No avail. We packed up lunch and kept going. Up, up, up we kept walking. I kept wondering when we were going to descend, if ever, or if like Sisyphus we were doomed to an eternity of climbing an impossible slope. I began to become discouraged, never being able to truly see the top of this ridge, this Devil Mountain as we began to call it.

The rain started softly. So softly, in fact, that even while we continued to climb uphill, I was not concerned about lightning or elevation gain, or even about a wet sleeping bag and socks. About at this moment we simultaneously realized we were each out of water. That had been one liter of water per hour of climbing—a little bit of a designation of how intense this hike turned out to be. As we pumped water, at a convenient stream (nature always decides to play nice, sometimes), the rain intensified. We tied trash bags to the outside of our packs and got our rain gear on.

My love, companion, partner, was not well equipped for the rain. Whereas I was not expecting such a difficult trail physically, he was not expecting it to rain a Colorado bought of rain. It was cold; small drops of icy rain that only started falling faster and faster as the afternoon progressed. Recalling the backpacking trip I took in the Red Woods last year, I remembered that it could be worse. All of our stuff could be permanently soaked—with no hope of it ever being dry again—whether or not the sun were to surface from its cloudy sky-sea. But even though it wasn't Pacific Coast rain, it was Colorado summer rain, and the storm seemed to be stuck right above our heads. We went faster and decided it was officially time to be down and off the top of this God forsaken mountain—of which the elevation eluded us—as well as the top and the consequential descent.

Lightning has never been an actual fear of mine before this day. I've been in thunderstorms in the backcountry countless times before, but never at 11,500 feet, and never has the lightning been less than a mile away from me, so I've never been actually worried about it. But at this moment of constant incline and increased rain terrible images of fleeing down the mountain to find a higher qualified medical personnel and leaving my companion behind nightmarishly flashed across my eyelids. We need to get down, I kept thinking. Down and away. One through twelve. Keep going. Get away. Now. The instinct that has been ingrained in our humanity since the beginning to simply maintain, to survive, was screaming at me.

And that was when the flash happened, bright enough to force the nightmarish scenes out of my mind instantaneously and force my perspective to be entirely consumed with bright, white light. My partner had begun to say something like, "That was real—" when he was cut off by the loudest, most aggressive clap of thunder that I've ever had the misfortune of hearing. The amount of time between the flash and the boom had been milliseconds. I was

really only capable of expressing how I felt in that moment with the most useful and always applicable word: “Fuck.”

This Devil Mountain had summoned some sort of evil storm hell-bent on ending at least one of our lives. Michael’s visceral reaction to the noise hurts me more to think about than remembering my own fear. Hands on ears, he began to crumple in half. I’ve never seen him so scared, or so unsure of what to do or how to act. Still not on the top of this mountain, continually going up and up and up we stopped in our tracks, and I immediately went into camp counselor mode. We got off the trail and into a surrounding of equal sized trees about twenty feet from each other and kneeled on the top of our insulated ground pads, the typical lightning drill in times like these. I’ve only done one with kids, out of extreme precaution rather than actual fear. But this time was real, and it was possibly the most thankful I’ve ever been for having learned so much at that job. If you can be a camp counselor, I firmly believe you can do absolutely anything.

There we waited as the rain fell harder and our attitudes got worse and worse. Would we make it to a decent camp site today? How much longer would we have to hike to be in a safe zone? Will this mountain ever cease being an upslope and finally let us go down to the elevation made for humans and not for pika or mountain goats? Because I had no time to process the flash, boom, threat of death until the quiet moments of kneeling on my ground pad I now felt as if I would throw up. There was no second flash. No second boom. We got up, gathered our things, expressed our love and appreciation for one another as you always should in the face of death, and kept walking. We crested the mountain at an open meadow and raced down the other side. My companion, being in tennis shoes, was extra cautious of slippery rocks and slopes as we nearly ran down, down, down and away from the storm.

On the way down we made a decision to skip the third night in the backcountry—as most of our stuff was wet and the sky looked like it might weep forever—and instead to book it to

the car. What followed was an extremely in depth and intense lesson in topographical map reading and directional knowledge. We made it to the first trail split and instead of taking the higher elevation short cut to the trailhead, decided to gamble and go down the hill, toward clear thinking and less altitude though it was a longer route. Irresponsibly this added another five miles—at least—to our supposed eight back to the car. It was already 3:15. How likely was it?

The rain continued to douse us, but every once in a while we would be say something about how absolutely gorgeous this storm was. We were trembling with terror at the might of this storm merely twenty minutes prior to worshipping its equally great beauty. And that's when I realized that what is important to me in nature is the absolute immersion of being outside. You can't just take the fun, easy parts of the wilderness and call that a nature experience. Being wild means being scared shitless, not knowing where you're going sometimes and living moments out of pure instinct in order to not only maintain, but thrive. Wilderness is the idea that anything can happen and that one ought to be prepared, and even embracing of this. Life is never easy, nor fair, but rather always and only an *adventure*. And being human means being wild to me. So being wet and cold and mildly bitter about the lightning, as I watch rain dancing across golden pink meadows is being human. How ought we to live? We ought to live wildly.

At another trail crossing we decided to hike toward a different campground and parking lot rather than loop around to the one we started from. Our logic to going to someplace our vehicle was not was that somebody had to be camping there. And that somebody must have a car. And that car must be capable of taking us to Goose Creek trailhead, where our trusty Subaru and chagrin awaited us impatiently. Down we went, knowing that if we didn't find somebody for a ride, we would not only be spending the night illegally at a campground we

did not pay for, but also potentially (in our eyes eternally) stranded on the wrong side of Pike National Forest.

Up until this point in the day, I hadn't lost my cool. By that I mean, despite everything, I was okay. I was maintaining and I kept positive about the disappointing situation we had on our hands. But when we took a wrong turn a half mile away from this mystery campground and ran into multiple PRIVATE PROPERTY signs I threw off my backpack and exclaimed to my equally exhausted partner how I couldn't do it anymore. I threw a tantrum of about seven seconds. Then I picked up my bag, laced my fingers in his, and trekked on. Because whenever you think you can't do it anymore, somehow you can.

So when we made it to the campground, we only had to be brave enough to start inquiring where we were. Our topo map only showed mountains and stream crossings not towns and roads. Two blonde women with several crushed Strawberrita cans at their feet, speaking with a thick Arkansas twang were close to zero help, and we moved through the sites until a nice man, whose name we will never know, asked us to join him inside his camper. He was probably sixty and most certainly spouseless, whether from a recent death or a life of bachelordom my wild imagination continues to speculate. Nevertheless, with wineglass in hand, wearing an orange polo and khaki shorts, this kind old man told us how he lived in this modest camper. We sat quiet, exhausted, absolutely grateful for being out of the rain—which after stopping for almost an hour—came back with a vengeance, beating on the windows and reminding us why we had just hiked sixteen miles.

To the campground host he would drive us, no problem, no need to even ask, really.

"You must be the host," I said to a man who was heading toward a golf cart decked out in Bronco paraphernalia and leading a young blind girl with a large white bucket in hand, a big brown dog at his ankles. He affirmed my suspicions and within seconds of offered us a ride to our trailhead, Goose Creek. After helping him unload his truck and organize the contents in

his lot, we were in the truck driving toward the end of our day. Once in the car, our chauffer introduced himself as J.C., his daughter as Cassandra, the dog as Rope. Come to find out, Rope's full name is Rope Snare, and Cassandra usually goes by Monkey. Making little conversation on the way, the ride was a relief in that we no longer had to walk—that devil some and unnatural activity that Abbey warns us against—and a little bit sobering. Could we have made it? Should we just have stuck it out for one more night, with wet clothes and little food all the same? Abbey even admits, “There are some good things to say about walking... The longest journey begins with a single step, not with a turn of the ignition key” (205). And yet that is exactly how our journey on the Goose Creek trail began, this is how we began to learn. We started walking. I agree wholeheartedly that when it is a viable option, always pick motion by feet rather than wheel. But on a hard, long, wild day, sometimes it is best to cut your losses and get back home no matter how you do it.

And home is a big word anyway, isn't it? Every hike I took as a Keystone Science School counselor brought me back to the bunks at night. Home. Every hike I take with Michael leads me further into love and security. Home. Every walk I take to the Regis Library to write and hike through my thoughts takes me back to books and learning. Home. Abbey says, “That's the best thing about walking, the journey itself. It doesn't much matter whether you get where you're going or not. You'll get there anyway. Every good hike brings you eventually back home” (205). Meeting people like the man in the camper with a glass of wine and nothing to do and J.C. and Monkey are all part of life's adventurous, fearsome, beautiful and unpredictable journey. Every turn we made that day, each decision we were forced to make, every step toward the uncertain was still a step homeward.

When we got into the car after J.C. and Monkey and Rope Snare had drove off, Michael turned to me and said, “J.C. Jesus Christ,” and we laughed. But as I looked out the window, the speeding wilderness passing us by and an encroaching storm validating the entire

afternoon, when we might've been walking through it and living in it for just another night, I began to wonder. I don't know about Jesus but after today I *do* know about angels and love and light and I know that they all come together to make things easier and less heavy and downright beautiful. Maybe that was Jesus who drove us home. Maybe it was an angel drinking wine who talked about how we were his first visitors in his new place. But I think what really happened was just another day walking home. That day I learned that wherever you go in this big wild world, if you are grounded on your two feet you're bound to encounter some absolutely wild and beautiful things. And no matter what, you will end up, as Abbey says, "Right where you started." Walking, though perhaps unnatural, is the best way to start *any* adventure in this one life we've got.



### September's Beckoning: Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard, the only woman I have chosen to write about in this project, is someone I read at midnight, when I look in the mirror and am unsure of whom I've become. She is the author's whose books I crack open hoping some of the Truth or truth or love at least will spill out into me. Perhaps the most important books she wrote in regards to nature are *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) and *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982). We will begin this chapter with the former title, and talk briefly about both. Dillard's contributions to shaping my intellectual and personal endeavors cannot be downplayed too much, and it is here that we find a fitting culmination of my work in this project, between her pages of honest prose.

Beginning with form yet again, Dillard presents her year at Tinker Creek exactly as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold do in that it tracks a calendar year. There is a natural syncopation to the form and pace in all the works I've written about for this project. But whereas Thoreau organizes his narrative via the changing seasons, Dillard does so through the calendar year, very similar to Leopold's structure, as well as Muir's. These authors find much importance in writing with the pace of the natural world, as opposed to the constructed clocks and ideas of time that pervade and perverse our lives. Furthermore, Dillard utilizes motifs in the beginning and end of *Pilgrim* in order to embody the cyclical nature of time itself. For she begins the story describing an "old fighting Tom" (5) that wakes her up, clawing her chest until it's bloody in the morning and ends the narrative with a similar story about the same cat. Finally, this novel fits with the rest of the works I have read for this project because it is a narrative which follows the course of a year and is organized via individual essays. These essays of course, resemble greatly those found in the work of my previous authors, and it is clear just from the form of these works that they are conversing together, all part of the same tradition. This is also the reason I've structured this particular

senior project as I have: the chapters follow my learning and engagement with particular nature writers over the last year.

Firstly, the theme of wilderness is especially important for Dillard, as she applies it to the ways in which we can be morally good. Essentially, Dillard is writing about the world of humans, good, evil. She tries to find reason in creation and the presence of divinity through the material and physical interactions she witnesses in the natural world. For example, Dillard describes an incredible encounter with a giant water bug devouring a grown frog: And just as I looked at him [the frog], he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed” (5-6). Dillard reveals to readers the importance she finds in not only observing the natural world but also in interpreting it with regards to what individual, singular interactions might mean beyond their seemingly simple significance. Right in this moment, she finds the natural world abhorrent as well as beautiful and mesmerizing. Furthermore, she wonders how on earth she managed to witness a giant water bug consume a frog, how she might be in that particular place at that particular moment. She raises this same inquiry of chance versus fate towards the end of *Pilgrim* when she witnesses a copperhead, lazing next to her, get bitten by a mosquito. “It was ridiculous,” (226), she notes, that this might happen right before her eyes. There is something crucial to be said about Dillard’s observations of witnessing wildness. Dillard’s awe implies these sort of “wild” or incredible things are happening all the time, whether or not we are here or there to see them occur. Such a sentiment brings me back to Abbey’s words that, “we can have wilderness without human life” (236). And yet the idea of a pilgrim is all about this witnessing, of coming to a place to pay homage. So even though wilderness would go on without human life, we can learn about how we ought to live just by observing it around us.

Dillard takes these moments of witnessing, observances of singular events, and applies them to how we understand the world to define wilderness as well as humanity; two

things very connected for her. Indeed, the frog and the water bug as well as the copperhead and the mosquito had all been wild creatures, one devouring the other. But these events were recorded not for the worthiness of the actual event only, but also for the way they made Dillard feel in regards to the world of humans, morals, and consciousness. The mosquito landing on the copperhead, the frog devoured by a water bug: these are results of natural predation. And yet, Dillard asks in these sections, how do we humans prey on one another in a very similar way? On the other hand, Dillard records in a later work, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982) a very different interaction with a wild animal. “Weasel,” Dillard writes, “I had never seen one wild before. Our look was as if two lovers or deadly enemies met unexpectedly... If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don’t. We keep our skulls” (Stone 67). The fact that she and the weasel were able to share this moment of total connection, despite being different species with different levels of consciousness, evokes another aspect of wildness, and how it might be reconnected to the idea of humanity. “We keep our skulls,” because we cannot imagine what it is to be physical and raw and wild with one another. The way Dillard and the weasel looked at one another was more honest, perhaps, more skull-splitting than any two humans could muster. Dillard feels as if this link between wildness and humanness has been broken or at least damaged quite a bit and this look is the bridge that brings them back together.

However, Dillard continues this motif about the disconnection of humans from their inner wildness and the physical wilderness when she discusses the inherent differences in species and our functions and goals. For example, Dillard ruminates in *Stone* that, “I don’t think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular... but I might learn something of mindlessness, of the purity of living in the physical senses without bias or motive” (68). She admits here then that interacting with a weasel, no matter how skull-splitting it might be, cannot teach her “how to live in particular.” By this, I gather that Dillard believes being wild

is being attuned to the gripping wildness in us, but not to act like wild animals. This seems rudimentary but I believe it needs saying: applying human characteristics, such as she does to the weasel, might be unfair. Indeed, I find attributing value due to human likeness to wild creatures particularly anthropocentric. And yet Dillard does not assert we do this, but rather find a relational way of being in the wild: we are inherently different than those species around us, but we do have our *own* way of being wild. Furthermore, I would argue that only when we embrace this wildness can we truly be human. And this is exactly what Dillard finds our society has lost track of: our way of being wild in the world. Not in a way which connotes incivility or abandonment of inhibitions, but in a way that is truly “mindless” and conscious of the physical “without bias or motive.” For by asserting humans rely too much on bias and motivation in our actions, Dillard suggests the wild in the world implores us to reengage our sense of wildness, to be able to look at another person the way that she looks at the weasel: whether “like lovers... or deadly enemies,” but with vulnerability, always.

The final example I will employ regarding Dillard’s idea of wildness is focused on how suffering can be identified and partially explained by experiences in nature. Dillard relates this idea through a story in *Stone* about a deer the villagers she resided with in the Amazon caught to eat. She writes that though the deer was trapped in the early hours of the morning, it wasn’t going to be eaten until dinner, leaving it enslaved in misery all day. The deer struggled against a tightly tied rope around its neck, tangled itself up, and bled to death (81). Her companions, three men, could not be more surprised at Dillard’s stoicism in the face of the deer’s suffering. As the only woman and youngest member of the group, they expected her to react emotively, dramatically, pleading for the rope to be thrown off. Thus, Dillard interrogates this expectation, “These things [sufferings in the world] are not issues; they are mysteries. Gentlemen of the city, what surprises you? That there is suffering here, or that I know it?” (82). Suffering is a natural phenomenon for Dillard, despite the fact that it is

also “a mystery.” Rather than respond to the deer’s death by wishing it didn’t happen, Dillard is more interested in the ways in which her travel partners thought she would react. Here she reveals how easy it is to lose the “mindlessness,” or forget to attend to “the physical,” as the men in her group have been found guilty of. They forgot to listen to their wild instincts and remember the village had to eat that night. Again I hear the ghosts of Abbey’s words as he writes, “I understand and sympathize with the reasonable needs of a reasonable number,” as Dillard argues one deer will not be missed for a meal for a small village. She realizes that responding with a demand to let the deer go would expose “bias and motive” in her reaction to the deer’s suffering. Perhaps this is crass, but Dillard suggests through this narrative that part of being wild is realizing that suffering is real. And yet there are many different ways in which pain and suffering takes form, but I would argue that what is most important to Dillard is how we *respond* to it, especially the kind that just seems to happen, that exists naturally. Dillard finds no “issue” with the deer suffering because for her, it was something that had to occur. Now this “had to” becomes difficult when we start talking about people dying, doesn’t it? And yet, just as the deer must die—at one point or another—as does every living being.

But while we *are* living and breathing, some of Dillard’s most important spiritual tenants require visual and visionary sight, intentional mindfulness and living in the nowness of the moment. We can see this sort of spirituality rooted in the examples previously given which dictate a necessary awareness to the movements around us. Dillard’s intentional mindfulness gave her the space to witness the deer, copperhead, frog, all suffering and find meaning in that suffering. Similarly, Thoreau accomplishes a similar feat throughout his argument for mindfulness, as he dedicates time to write about his woodchuck interaction, and his morning moments in the pond. Furthermore, the wilderness Dillard became so much a part of offered her the physical requirements needed to be in the nowness of the moment. It can be incredibly difficult, downright impossible it seems at times, to engage in the moment

here and now in the current status of fast-paced daily life. This, Abbey vocally articulates in his essay “The Great American Desert” as well, wherein he describes how valuable it is that the desert isn’t cluttered with meaningless human constructions.

Nevertheless, as I said before, Dillard believes that combatting suffering requires a good sense of vision. Dillard discusses this both in terms of actual eyesight—the physical ability and furthermore willingness to observe—as well as the visionary eyesight which questions what these daily observations might mean. Dillard writes that this kind of cosmic and conscientious sight is necessary for truly understanding the reason for creation. She notes in *Pilgrim*, “I live for it [seeing], for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in space through the crack, and the mountains slam” (34). This sight is not the ordinary visual experience, but rather an awe-inspiring view into what it means to live. She relies heavily on describing the lives of individuals who were once blind being granted—via medical advances—the beautiful gift of eyesight. Upon being able to see, these individuals wept for joy, refused to open their eyes because of the beauty, made exclamations to God. It seems to be then, that being able to see, and the act of seeing itself, can be a vehicle to witnessing the divine. In fact, most of Dillard’s observations are those employing her eyes. One might argue that she can’t possibly be experiencing the nowness of the moment in the way in which her depictions are generally focused on what we see. Much of our time sight is taken for granted and becomes glazed and inactive. Yet Dillard requires that sight is not just vision but visionary. She also reminds us in *Pilgrim* that, “The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price... although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought” (33). Our ability to see comes through experience, then, not necessarily from reading books about those experiences, no matter how powerful the words are.

Perhaps then, part of the bridge back to the natural world and re-recognizing the wildness in all of us must be the reengagement with the act of sight. Now this seeing cannot

be glazed over or mindless, as Dillard suggests echoing Thoreau, but looking at what is before us intently and with an active mind. This sight, also, leads to the ability to be mindful of the world around us, to see the interconnectedness of all things, and reevaluate the world based on changing sentiments of the natural world. For example, in one of my favorite chapters in *Pilgrim* entitled “The Present” Dillard evaluates her present world, demonstrating how crucial it is to be in the now. She questions, “What else is going on right this minute while ground water creeps under my feet... hundreds [of solar systems] burst into being as I shift my weight to the other elbow” (97). Dillard recognizes that part of finding spirituality in the natural world is much like being totally mindful of the present moment. In this particular line, she is able to elucidate that the moment swells full and entire, and as the world spins on, our particular and individual lives are part of something whole, large, cosmic and great. She goes on to say in this chapter, “Catch it if you can. The present is an invisible electron; its lightning path... is fleet, fleeing, gone” (79). Here Dillard echoes Thoreau’s sentiments when he discusses his mind being one place and his body another in *Walden*. This argument, that the moment we think we are in the present, steeping ourselves in the beauty of nowness, that moment is already gone and again we are living in the past. Dillard gives voice to those filing grievances that living in the now, even when you are in nature, is indeed terribly difficult.

And yet despite its difficulty, Dillard, as well as the rest of my previous authors argue for the benefit of the now, and for the divinity that can be found when you are present in the space around you. Indeed, as I finish my discussion on Dillard there are so many things about her writing that I have missed or glanced over. Yet what is most important to me in this project with her in mind is the idea that the world can be aesthetically beautiful, as well as horrible and terrifying—there is suffering in the world, and I know it. Yet nature—the place without human consumption and domination—is the setting for understanding suffering as something natural, as opposed to evil. It keeps the world in balance, this knowing of

suffering. Furthermore, suffering opens the door for visionary sight; for we are forced to look at what we do not want to see in the face. We must look at the things that make us uncomfortable in the natural world and learn to negotiate their meanings, for as Thoreau says and I believe Dillard would suggest also, we must get out of our mammoth caves and live in the real.



## Je suis le vent

I learned to walk in France. Thoreauvian walking—hiking—took on a new meaning to me in a place where I was the outsider. I learned to walk around my city—Grenoble-- because I had no idea where I was going or how to get to where I wanted to go. I had to learn how to walk to the tram station, to my school, to the bus stops, the train stations. I had to learn where Jardin de Ville was, how to meet my friends at Parc du Victor Hugo. If I didn't know how to walk there, I couldn't go. I couldn't use Wi-Fi and I was forced to figure it out with maps and French street signs and the help of friendly citizens not too impatient with the lost American girl to help.

Of course I knew how to walk before I left for France, but I didn't know how to walk with the sort of mindfulness that comes with not knowing. Unfamiliarity breeds observance. Stop, breathe, look around. Droit ou gauche; right or left? Putting one foot in front of the other on those cobblestone, Grenoblois sidewalks became my tutorial in how to really *live* in a city. Turns out you can't see a thing from the blur of a car window. Getting to know Grenoble on foot was much like getting to know a lover with fingertips or tongue—intimate, alluring, not easily forgotten. I can still take you to Jardin de Ville, where we drank celebratory champagne our last night there and climbed the statues when we were too drunk on three euro wine or ate lunch of baguette and some camembert. I can lead you by hand through the back corridors of downtown to the best tacos place in the whole city. They called me “USA” there.

But I didn't learn how to walk right away.

I am back in September, my first few days in Grenoble, nervously shuffling among hurried French students, men and women rushing home to dinner, some on bikes, most on foot. The Isere river flows ceaselessly beneath my feet and I close my eyes to the cotton candy clouds and setting sun. My hands rest on the cool railing of this bridge and I miss my

home. I miss knowing where I was going, both on my daily errands and in my life. The skyline looks like Denver; small city surrounded by mountains. But it is *different*. I'm so homesick being here feels like being a puzzle piece that doesn't match. I am a woman lost and unsure. Though I've felt this unpredictability before, I've never felt it so immediately every day of my life. I am so scared. Is this what being in the wild feels like?

Chantal and Valery, my host parents, more like host grandparents based on their age, take me on a hike to their favorite spot outside the city the day after I arrive in Grenoble. It is a giant rock formation bursting out of French green country side. We hike for a while, Chantal taking on the trail lithely without any problems, Valery lagging behind. We walk together for the most part. Step, step, step. What are these people about? I wonder. I don't say much because I managed to forget all seven years of French instruction I've ever had the minute I got off the plane in Lyon. But I'm not expected to talk, just to observe. Valery speaks to me the vocabulary of nature. I look around with him as he points out things and says their nomenclature for me. Pointing to a running squirrel, he exclaims, "Regarde! Un écureuil!" Chantal makes me slightly nervous, but Valery's excitement to teach begins to break her iciness. We snooze in a field after eating sausage and apples, cheese and bread. The bells of cattle ring in the distance. It smells like transition: autumn is in the air. French climbers make their way to the giant rock, chatting about the beautiful day. We walk together back to the car. Awe struck wonder reminds me how lucky I am to be abroad, in a field with incredibly kind people, walking with them and learning from them.

Now I am hiking through the Chamrousse ski resort on a cloudless day in October. I spoke with a German who had been to Colorado once, says it's nearly as beautiful as it is here. I'd have to agree. There are alpine lakes around every bend, the water bluer than anything I've ever seen and a babbling brook following the trail on our seven mile hike to a maison du montagnes. Mountain sheep graze on mountain sides, massive herds of them

heeding to some unseen individual, bleating the whole way. We stop and eat lunch next to a crystal clear lake. As always Chantal, lovely, French, bird-like, has packed me too much food. But I don't complain. Bread, cheese, an apple, a sandwich, and a homemade slice of tart du pomme are eaten quickly. We doze. A breeze gently rocks me to sleep. The sun is near. I remember not knowing where the warmth was emanating from: within or without my body. The trees whisper in my afternoon dreams I am unlocking secrets of living a good and whole life. Here I am entirely infinite, unafraid, and free. I am the wind. I am the sun. I am the trees.

I am walking around Paris at the beginning of November. Montmartre. Here is where Van Gogh walked and I follow his lumbering—or were they lithe?—footsteps. Stopping to catch my breath on one of the famously steep hills of that neighborhood I see him standing there. Disheveled, he wears a dirty white smock of a shirt, brown trousers. The artist leans against a faint yellow building with a red door, smoking a hand rolled cigarette. He looks distraught, as if he had been weeping, so I try to catch his eye and smile at him. But he flicks the cigarette and walks inside the building without looking up, and I keep going. Boldly, I weave alone through old brothels and galleries, unafraid of the unknown any longer. Here I am. I don't look back but I also don't look too far forward. I am exactly where my feet are in that moment. It is forever right now and I am happy to exist.

It's mid-December, so I grab my bags and leave the quiet apartment. The first hugs and bisos I received from my host parents were merely hours ago and now I am departing this place I have for three months of walking called home. It took a while to be able to say that about this fourth story apartment in downtown Grenoble, but now I can, and saying goodbye is not easy. Still drunk from our hedonistic and bittersweet celebration of not only living in Grenoble but loving and growing and *becoming* in Grenoble and exhausted from only a couple hours of sleep leaves me groggy for this predawn walk to the train station. I have all my things from the past months stowed away in my bag. Leaving the apartment key on my

nightstand—no not mine—what *was* mine, I go. The streets are the same, even in the twilight. I pass Kayla's apartment, where we ate the fondue and drank wine and danced. I pass the first hotel I stayed at here, before we were placed in our home-stays. I pass the place where Abbey waited for me at 4 AM to pick her up from the bus ride from Bologna, Italy. My footsteps echo through the nearly empty city.

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These are the places I won't be able to forget. They have been woven into my muscle memory, as automatic as walking through Regis University, or Lakewood, Colorado. It is going to be a beautiful sunrise, I can already tell. Students are still making their way back home from a night of rowdy fun as I start the walk back to Colorado. I pick up the pace, worried about timing. Don't want to miss my bus home. Or do I? I've been so homesick, but it just feels like I am starting here. I can make my way around the city, navigate the French train system, catch a taxi in Italy, and walk to my hostel alone, at night, in Barcelona. My host dad would always tell me I'd never learn if I didn't try. I did try too, for everything in France was an effort, difficult and worth trying for. I didn't speak a word of English with Valery, and he wouldn't speak it at all at dinner, either. I wonder what he's doing right now, in this very moment, as I write.

Finally, I breathlessly take my seat on the bus and try to fall asleep to make the goodbye easier. If I don't see the passing city, I won't be able to miss it, right? We will meet again Grenoble. Feet to stone, tongue to body, I will be back. Before I drown myself in half-drunken sleep, I look for the Bastille. The Bastille is a great architecture feat fortified in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It flows with the mountain side, and at the top you can see all three mountain ranges that surround Grenoble. You can even see Mount Blanc, the tallest point in Europe, from up there. But first you have to walk up it. It is a walk we did a few times, waving Bonjours to passerby. And the Bastille was the reminder that I am home—home in Grenoble.

Whenever I traveled away from Grenoble, I looked up to see the Bastille and upon sight knew that I was safely back. Sleep and the bus take me away and the Bastille, Grenoble, France, is all gone.

I wake up again in my dad's car. Twelve hours of travel, three airports, two train stops, two bus rides and one walk later; I look out and see Mount Morrison. The reminder that I am home—in Colorado. Whenever I leave Colorado I do the same that I did in Grenoble. The sight of Mount Morrison reminds me that I have made it back safe. I feel ambivalent and unsure. Where is the Bastille? I am exhausted from the months' long walk across the globe and back. But I know this is my home, and that I am glad to be here, despite the body-ache I feel to be back in my French city.

August greets me with warmth and hope. It is nearly a year after leaving for my experience in Grenoble, France. I walk in my tennis shoes to Berkely Park on Tennyson Street. The mountains are in the west, the city in the near south east. Blue bird sky engulfs me and Toy Story clouds rest on the horizon. This is my neighborhood. This is my home. I think about walking in Grenoble and how long it took me to feel this comfortable in that strange place. It all seems like a weird dream; did I speak French for three months? Did I navigate Paris at night, witnessing the Eiffel Tower lit up on a starry, clear night in all its grace and grandeur? As I walk, I consider how much I didn't even know about this Berkley neighborhood before walking it. I've lived around here for nearly three years and yet mysteries continue to be unlocked with ever walk. Did that house always have white shutters? When did that Et Cetera place shut down? Does anyone else realize the violent gentrification going on here?

I learned to walk in France, but I took that knowledge and began to walk here. I walk to the park to run, but I don't run to the park. I take Quitman, or Raleigh, or my own Osceola Street to 50<sup>th</sup> and walk along it to Tennyson down the hill. Sometimes, it seems like this

place, this life, values speed and intensity. But the colors get blurred and meanings lost when we don't walk slow enough to see them. It took me twenty years to realize this. Are they even homes if we don't know how to be so intimate with them as to walk in them, with them? How often do you walk to the store, or to your coffee shop?

Yesterday Michael and I walked around the same Berkeley Park together. It is important to walk alone, but it is also so very important to walk together. Taking steps together seems so obviously symbolic, but I can't even imagine the millions of people that don't stop and walk together. It is on that walk I began to piece together these ideas about home, Grenoble, walking, learning. So many big, future-like things had been flooding my consciousness repeatedly lately. Graduate school, big-kid jobs, paying Regis tuition. So many long, seemingly arduous paths sprout up, inviting and challenging me. But I thought of that infinity that comes with feeling safe, comfortable, but also having the courage to be unafraid of the path before your feet. That same feeling I felt in Chamrousse that lead me to be more brave in Grenoble, to be okay with getting lost and then found, to simply walk and stay with my feet. Je suis le vent. Je suis le soleil. Je suis les arbres.

## Concluding & Reflecting

“The Present: CATCH IT IF YOU CAN. It is early March.” (*Pilgrim* 77).

Nearly a year later from this project’s beginnings, I sit reflecting, gathering my thoughts, looking out an open window to Denver’s blue-bird sky. Indeed, I suppose this project, like all of the works I’ve spent time with this year, must end where it began. Like Annie, I grew up in a metropolitan area, learning my way around town on two wheels or two quick, laced-up feet. But unlike my last author, I was also raised in the pine trees of the Front Range, the perfume of sage, with an insatiable desire for adventure. This is how I was raised: amongst wildness. Some of the only pictures of my late mother I have from the last part of her life are images of her sitting in a bed of wild flowers, laughing. She never went to church on Sundays but to Lair O’ Bear to hike. And my father found my summer camp when making deliveries for his truck driving job through the mountains, saving enough each year so that I could continue going. Keystone Science School, where I lived and grew and became the woman I am today every summer for eleven years, is also where this all started. Deep woods and clear, crystalline stars seen with a bunch of wild, goofy, individual and so very beautiful little humans are the roots of this love of the outside world. So yes, in summer camp and childhood is the preservation of the world.

But so too is the salvation of the natural world tucked within leather bindings and used paper-back copies of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Abbey, and Dillard. As these authors sit together on my shelf, keeping one another warm on winter nights, I think about the ways in which I have grown and become the naturalist, environmentalist, woman, creator, and lover that I am today with them and through them. Where would I be without Thoreau’s individualism, or Abbey’s vehement call to action? This year has been one of incredible inquiry, beautiful challenges, and a test to embrace each and every moment, and through every step these authors have been there to teach and to guide me. Each time I go camping,

climbing, or just on a day trot through the foothills, I am thinking about their words on the page. Annie Dillard's wispy shape seems to be swaying in the aspens just ahead: do you see her?

I also began this project with the question of why we write about our time out in nature. What validates those authors I value so much? Maybe the answer to this is as simple as Muir makes it out to be with his relationship to books and writing: though the written word will never capture the experience, we must write our experiences, especially those which stop the heart. And yet as all of the authors I have engaged here argue, I do believe, that the written word is never able to grasp *anything* in its entirety, it is always and forever a simulacra of the real. The beautiful descriptions of Yosemite, or New Mexico, or Tinker Creek are at the end of the day just that: writings. We must go outside, on our own, and see waterfalls, hear birds' morning calls, and feel the rain to know why the natural world is so very important.

Perhaps this is why certain parts of my own narrative in nature are missing. Throughout this year I have tried to write short, creative non-fiction essays to supplement the analytical work I was doing. The purpose of these stories was to support, in action, the argument that we must have nature writing to express ourselves, describe our experiences, and raise awareness of the wild world we live in. And yet it was extremely difficult for me to put into words the exact moment of enlightenment I experienced in "Hiking with God," and I couldn't even begin to tell the story of my spiritual journey through Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, even though it was one of the most formidable nature experiences I have ever had. As time dwindled down for this project to be finished (for now) I came to realize that the number of stories I could write for this project was going to be less than expected. I couldn't imagine forcing myself to write about those moments of quiet, powerful revelation I didn't yet understand myself, like the moments in Chaco Canyon, or in the valley right outside



Canyon City, where Michael and I laid on a dirt road and watched the evening turn to night and pine trees become silhouetted ghosts.

And finally, we are brought back to the question of how we ought to live, and if this material has any bearing on that question at all. From Thoreau to Dillard, I find that we ought to live mindfully, with great appreciation for every moment. Right now, according to these authors and to my own endeavors in the world, is a holy and gracious gift. How will you spend it? Complicating this slightly, though mindful, we also ought to live with a sense of obligation to future generations. I believe that all of the writers I have engaged in this project have been very much attuned to the fact that they will probably not be the last people on the planet. Muir worked toward creating a space to interact with nature, so future peoples might be able to experience Yosemite Valley. Leopold expanded the idea of community, and fought for the protection of this land so that others might be able to experience its beauty and glory.

Finally, I'd like to argue that part of our responsibility as students at a Jesuit university is to read nature writing, environmental philosophy, and to always, always question the status quo of American natural space and our society's attitude toward all things free and wild. Thoreau writes in *Walden* that, "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep" (85). *Now* is the time, as it is *always* right now, to awaken from the slumber of our moral ineptitude at mistreating the natural world for exploitation, industry, and gain. Moral reform begins in the morning, when we renew ourselves again and again in the pond of mindfulness. As members of a Jesuit community, as people asking how we ought to live and what we live for, I'd like to argue that listening to voices as those I have discussed, and indeed those I have not but are still in the nature writing tradition, will we ever achieve Leopold's goals of expanding our sense of community. We must ask not how we are men and women for other people *only*, but how we are members of the land, soil, air, flora, fauna communities as well.

Nevertheless, this act of engaging, protecting, becoming community with the natural world, in all its wildness and spirituality is not only about moral reform in the individual, but also the social act of storytelling. We are compelled to speak about our incredible experiences, as Muir realized despite his ambivalence toward books, therefore we must always be willing to share our narratives—the ones we might be able to conjure into words. This human need for expression through language is why I have written about the nature writing canon for a year; this is what I have worked for. And so too: this is why I have written my personal narratives into this academic project. Our voices are powerful and they contain multitudes, as Whitman might say. And yet perhaps this speaking and story-telling must be complicated by the reciprocated activity here: simply listening. Because from this listening, reading, thinking, and being with these voices, I have learned that moral reform comes when we are open-hearted, open-minded, trotting through the mountains, the desert, the coast, anywhere, with an open trail ahead of us.

But where does this leave us? On an open trail to nowhere, to the unknown? Precisely. As I get ready to graduate, there can be nothing more liberating than knowing this big beautiful planet is wild and so am I, ready to go out and spend my life as an advocate for wild spaces, for the GOD I find there, and for the beauty and enlightenment which greets me when I step out of the car, without my phone, and walk into renewal. So as Abbey write in *Desert Solitaire*, a book I have not included in this project, I hope that this next year finds me with “something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest dreams... beyond that next turning of the canyon walls.” So, as this thesis is as much about *doing*—going outside and being wild—as it is about academics and intellectual adventures, that’s what I plan on doing, following something “strange... more full of wonder” than my deepest dreams. If you need me, I’ll be wandering through sage and aspen, listening to God’s holy hush in rushing waters.

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