

A Song for the Asking
The Electronic Newsletter of
EarthSong Photography,
America the Beautiful Photography Workshops,
and
Photography with Heart Workshops: Walking in Beauty

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Hello to All

“When you say ‘hill,’” the Queen interrupted, “I could show you hills, in comparison with which you’d call that a valley.”

“No I shouldn’t,” said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: “a hill ca’n’t be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense---.”

“The Red Queen shook her head. “You may call it ‘nonsense’ if you like,” she said, “but I’ve heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!”

Through the Looking Glass
Lewis Carroll

We’re all just trying to make it real; but compared to what: and that’s where the labels come in. Labels help us to make sense of our surroundings – the landscape at hand, or so we have come to believe. Labels tell us what is what, and who is who. We know that a river is a river, a tree is a tree, and a rock is a rock because our labels tell us so; and we accept them, usually at face value and without question, because it helps us make the world more real, or so we have come to believe. Yet what if a river is merely a line, or a tree is just a shape, or a rock is but a texture? Then what? Are they any less real, less certain? We apply labels just as



readily to people, as well, and in so doing can explain who they are, or so we have come to believe; as if, in the act of labeling, the object of the label becomes known, understood, concrete, predictable, and therefore real. We have, in fact, raised the act of labeling to an art

form and have come to believe that in that art we have answered the puzzles of the individual, and can, at last, place everyone in the appropriate descriptive box.

What happens, then, when, in our compulsion to label, we act as if we are both of the two blind men attempting to describe the elephant while standing and feeling with our hands at opposite ends of the creature? The elephant may be no less



real, but our comparative descriptions become relatively meaningless in terms of their accuracy in explaining a single elephantine reality.

For me, those who would, likewise, seek to apply a single descriptive label to the life of

Edward Paul Abbey place themselves in a similar precariousness. As Edward Abbey appears to me, you may love him, or you may deplore him; but the one thing you may not do is dismiss him. And regardless of the category in which you may place yourself with regard to him, his life exists without label with respect to you, me, or anyone

else. He had, to be sure, a stable of epithets which he readily applied to himself, yet I've never been certain that he actually believed most of them, but instead merely offered them as shock troops to try to nudge us to think about the world we are creating with our



industrial-military complex society. For me he remains the irascible, iconoclastic, and otherwise lovable curmudgeon, who in the act of pointing his finger at the foibles of our species never forgot the other three fingers that were pointing backward at himself in that same gesture. My sister has long been a great fan of the *Peanuts* characters of **Charles Schulz**. She once had a poster in her room of **Snoopy** lying on his doghouse, above which the caption said, "I love mankind, it's just people I can't stand." Edward Abbey always comes to mind when I

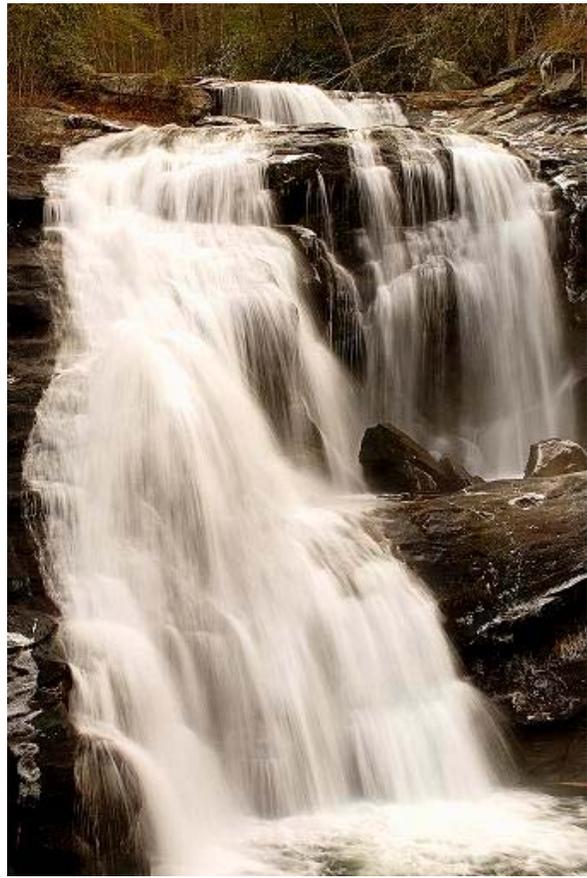
consider that sentiment, for even as he lauded and was uplifted by individual and collective acts of nobility; he was deeply distressed by the general lack of concern and inclination toward environmental destruction that has become the hallmark of our culture. I have been meaning to say some words over Ed Abbey for some time, yet because he is so special in my memory and so polemic in the view that most of those who know of him have toward him, I have been reluctant, wanting to ponder the way that I might best offer him up for your consideration. I have in my library, and have read, most of the published works of Edward Abbey; and while I find myself regularly arguing with him vehemently over this point or that - just as he would have wished - I find for the much greater part that I agree with him wholeheartedly. Perhaps that makes of me an iconoclastic



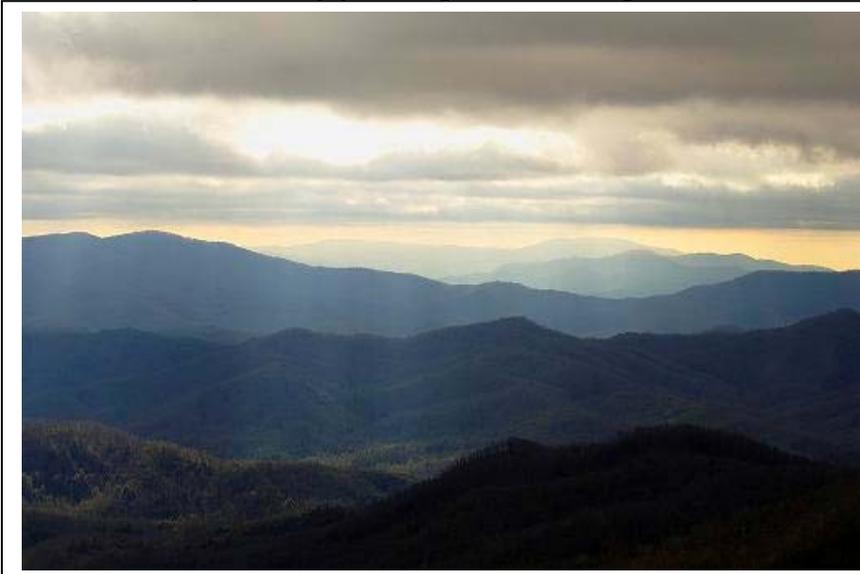
curmudgeon as well, but I will leave that for the labelers to decide. The thing that finally tipped the scale in favor my mentioning Mr. Abbey was an article in the February issue of ***National Geographic*** entitled "Drying of the West." You see, the one thing I know for certain about Edward Abbey is that he dearly loved the land, all land: your land, my land, his land, our land; especially the Red Rock land of the Southwest, the deserts and the mountains of the American West, and that magical expanse called the Colorado Plateau. He loved that land as much as I love the Great Smoky Mountains land; and when someone loves a part of this Earth that much, I just can't help but be awed by it. The *Geographic* article, however, would have saddened Cactus Ed a bit, even though he had seen it coming and had been writing about it for years before his untimely death in

1989 at the age of 62; had seen it coming when the only bandwagon in town had been filled to busting with all of those folks who could think only to glorify the way in which the West was being raped and pillaged by the developers and mega-business interests. The main thesis of *Geographic's* story is that it usually, unfortunately, takes a crisis to get the attention of most folks; that what we have blossoming today in the Red Rock is a full-blown crisis over the interface between the development that continues and the realities of the region's diminishing stores of water in the face of a sure 'nuf drought that is becoming even more severe as global warming ushers in the planetary changes that it portends. Consider this: The Colorado River and the plateau that it drains supply 30 million people in seven states and Mexico with water. Among other things, that water irrigates four million acres of farmland, much of which, without that irrigation,

would be desert. That farmland annually produces billions of dollars worth of agricultural crops. The year 2002 was the third consecutive dry year in the region and in that year the water of the Colorado fell to one-quarter of its long-term average flow. Based on tree ring research and analysis, which gives a pretty fair indication of precipitation/drought patterns in an area, the 20th century was the wettest in the past millennium, but that precipitation pattern has ended, and this from sober scientist-types not typically given to exaggeration and hyperbole. Yet from 2000-2006, five million more people moved into the Colorado Basin and development continues. To give you some idea of the geographical scale involved, consider that the flowage volume of the Colorado fairly closely approximates that of New York's Hudson River, yet the Hudson gathers its liquid from a watershed that is about one-twentieth the size of the Colorado's. And to exacerbate the whole thing, remember that the majority of the people who depend on the Colorado for water don't even live in the Colorado River Basin;



they can be found in places as far flung as Denver, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Edward Abbey saw fifty years ago the development trends that were occurring,



and because he loved the land with such a passion, it was not very difficult to put land and development together and see where things were headed if something did not change. So far, nothing has changed and the primary loser

seems to be the land. For Abbey, growth for the sake of growth was the "ideology

of the cancer cell.”. The Great Seal of Georgia, my dear home state, contains three words: Wisdom, Justice, and Moderation; and it occurs to me that neither of the first two can exist without the presence of the third, but in the Colorado Basin, like most other places in modern society, moderation seems to be in short supply.



Sometimes, on the appearances of the surface, our bodies would seem to have no innate connection to the place our souls know as “home.” Edward Abbey was certainly of this truism. He was born in 1927 in Indiana, Pennsylvania; yes, there really is such a place, about 55 miles east and a little north

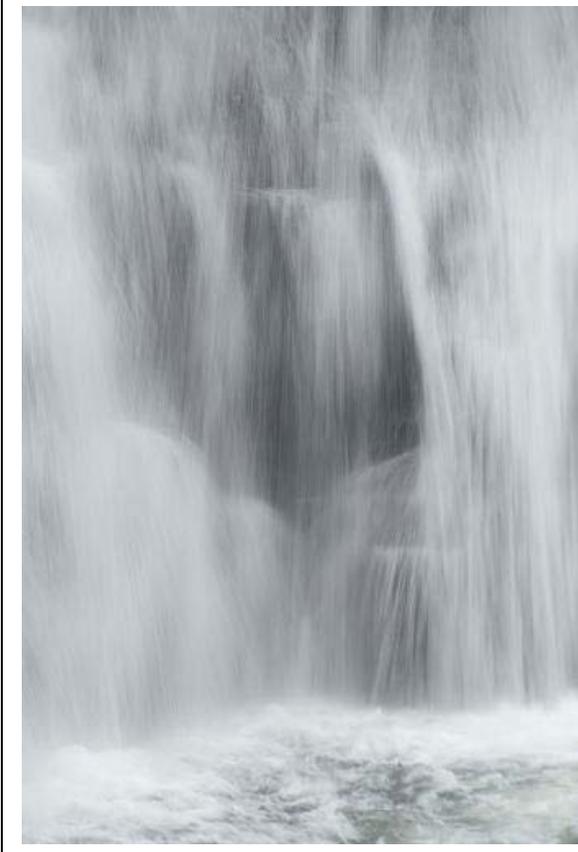
of Pittsburgh. Indiana has at least two other native children who have achieved some wide-ranging renown: it is also the birthplace of **Jimmy Stewart**, who went to Washington under the pseudonym of Smith, and opera’s golden soprano, **Renée Fleming**, who went to the Met under her own name. Indiana was home for only a while before his family moved to nearby Home; yep, it’s a place, too.

Home and its environs was home until Ed left home in 1944, heading west, looking for the home of his heart. He found it in the Red Rock country, where it had been all along, just waiting for him to arrive. The first visit he made was to be only temporary, interrupted by a stint in the United States Army from 1945-1947,



after which he returned for a while to Pennsylvania and the East. The seed, however, had been sown, and in the latter part of 1947 Abbey returned to the Southwest, entering the University of New Mexico to major in literature and philosophy. He graduated with honors in 1951, earning a Fulbright Fellowship to study for a year at the University of Edinburgh. With him to Scotland went his wife, **Jean Schmechel Abbey**, whom he had met as a student and married in 1950.

From the stories that survive of this period it seems evident that Ed and Jean enjoyed a rather stormy relationship from the beginning, so that, being young and full of themselves, it is, perhaps, not surprising that within a short while after they arrived in Edinburgh, Jean returned to America and filed for divorce.



Ed would go through other divorces and breakups scattered over the years, including the loss of his third wife, **Judy Pepper** to leukemia, until, in 1982, he wed **Clarke Cartwright**, who would be with him when he died, and by whom he would father the last two of his five children. If relational success is measured by marital longevity, then Edward Abbey was an utter failure; but I have begun to suspect that there may be larger forces at work in lives such as Abbey's that are just as powerful as our society's compulsion toward marriage and can override the notion that one's achievements in relationship are best shown by the length of the encounter. It would be wonderful if we could all find our ideal life-partner on our first attempt, but our culture and our life-style conspire greatly against it. This is, however, not a tale of relationships; it is the simple story of

a complex man who sought to live sanely in a complicated and often, seemingly, insane world; and who, in the process, gave us some of our best thoughts on what it means simply to be alive and to be connected to the land that sustains that life. Following Jean's departure, Ed continued at Edinburgh, managing a month's time-out for a sojourn to Spain by way of France. At the end of his year of study he returned to America, but only after an extended vacation to the Scandinavian North. He was restless, uncertain, and anxious. This much can be readily gleaned from a reading of portions of his journals. Abbey was a prolific journal keeper; and although three of his journals were destroyed by flooding in the basement at the Abbey home in Pennsylvania, there survive at least twenty volumes of his "scribblings" as he called them. **David Petersen** did us all a favor by editing the scribblings into a single volume entitled *Confessions of a Barbarian*, a title suggested by Abbey in the context of the journals themselves. "*Confessions*" gives us a marvelous insight into the inner workings of the curmudgeon mind, from the youthful, testosterone-crazed brain of a twenty-four-year-old to the mature rants and raves of a full-blown desert anarchist – a label that Abbey was quite willing to acknowledge. On that matter he said this, "Anarchism is founded on the observation that since few men are wise enough to rule themselves, even fewer are wise enough to rule others." And further that, "Anarchism is not a

romantic fable but the hardheaded realization, based on five thousand years of experience, that we cannot trust the management of our lives to kings, priests, politicians, generals, and county commissioners.” While I realize that such a lack of faith in officialdom may not hold me in good stead everywhere, I must admit



that I find little to quibble with as Mr. Abbey has expressed it; and while his definition of it may not exactly square with the political science texts with which I am familiar, what is a text label in comparison to the history of the living of human lives? Actions, for

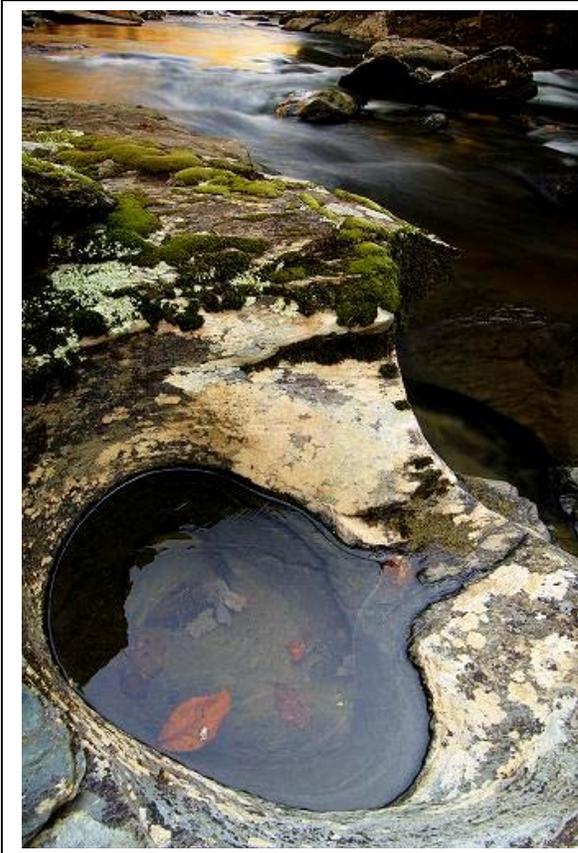
Abbey, always screamed at the silence that words could only quietly attempt to breach. Philosophical anarchism was, for Ed, an antidote for despair. What are

we **doing** with our lives to make a difference, he asked. Following his return to the United States in July 1952, he spent the next few months trying to decide what he was doing before finally realizing that it was the Southwest whose siren call he had to answer. Forever fighting his dire inner sense of being alone and



always in quest of companionship and love, Abbey married for the second time, **Rita Deanin**, another eastern-born child of the desert and an artist. For nearly thirteen, often stormy years, Ed and Rita would struggle through a relationship, filled in almost equal measure with intense affection and bitter acrimony, as well as the birth of two sons. During that time, they would never have survived on what little money came from Abbey’s initial literary efforts - the early novels ***Jonathan Troy*** and ***The Brave Cowboy*** included; and so for most of it Abbey spent working as a seasonal park ranger in several of the iconic western

national parks, Arches, in particular, punctuated by forays to both east and west coasts, sometimes in search of reconciliation - when Rita would return to New Jersey to be nearer to her family, and sometimes in search of employment.



At various times Albuquerque and Taos were home. Often when he was working, he was separated from Rita and his children: she unwilling to embrace his quasi-self-imposed, semi-nomadic existence; or they, simply at odds with each other. The real truth is, perhaps, that, more than anything else, Abbey was in love with love; a wanderer at heart; and more capable of sustaining commitment from a distance rather than close at hand. Always, though, there were the desert and the red rock country; and in them Abbey found both substance and sustenance, nourishment for his heart and soul; and in the time he spent roaming them, he saw readily the devastation that was already beginning to occur, even in the remote places, such as was Arches in the '50's. For several years he had dreamed of it, but it was not until June 1959, as the construction of the loathed dam and

its impoundment moved forward, that Abbey and a good friend, **Ralph Newcomb**, would float the Colorado through the disappearing **Glen Canyon** - **Eliot Porter's** "place that nobody knew", described by many, including Abbey, as the most beautiful stretch of water on the river and soon to vanish under the rising tide of Lake Powell.

Now fast forward forty years to 1999. In every year but one since then, the inflow from the Colorado into the lake has been below average. I mention this year, 1999, because it is the last year in which Lake Powell was full. As I write this today, it stands at 50% of capacity and dropping. The times, they are a changin'. Perhaps, you say, if Abbey had been willing to be a little more of a politician, a little more conciliatory and less abrasive, he would have been able to accomplish more, would have been able to draw more positive attention to the cause of conservation. Perhaps; but Abbey's road as he conceived it was to tell the truth as he saw it, and to let the chips fall where they would; and because he saw his proper role in that way, that is what he did. Sometimes the emperor is merely naked and needs to be so told bluntly because he doesn't seem to hear it otherwise; and to Ed Abbey the emperor seemed to be chronically, habitually, and intentionally without clothes.

As his writings make abundantly clear, no matter where he was on the planet, no matter what mini-drama he might be involved in at the time, no matter how

grievous the straits of his despair or melancholy, the land of the red rock was never more than a couple of steps from his consciousness. When he was physically



there he seemed to be more at peace with himself; and when he was somewhere else, he wanted to be there. It wasn't that he could not appreciate other places, he just missed the desert. And from that intense love and connection has come some of the most lyrical,

passionately descriptive literature ever produced to invoke the beauty of the Southwest and the tragedy of its ongoing destruction. *Desert Solitaire* in 1968, three years following his divorce from Rita and three years into his marriage to Judy (A journal notation in September 1965 says, "Divorced August 25, 1965 – Married October 16, 1965 (Idiot!)") has been hailed as one of the "finest nature narratives in American literature." And, of course, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in 1975, the distillation of Abbey's personal politics, which is oft-cited as the philosophical underpinning for **Dave Foreman's** founding of the radical environmental organization, **Earth First!** I must admit that the first time I read "...*Monkey Wrench* ..." I was sorely tempted to turn all the billboards into candles myself; but I quickly ran the numbers and realized that if I were to do it, the entire East Coast would be nothing but a giant smokestack and the cure would be as bad as the disease. As for the Glen Canyon Dam, well the 21st Century Drought may solve that difficulty all by itself. I digress.

With "...*Solitaire*" and "...*Monkey Wrench*..." Abbey's reputation and legacy were, at long last, fairly secure; but that was certainly no reason to stop writing or living. In between the two, sadly, Judy would succumb to the ravages of an acute and deadly form of cancer; and Ed would celebrate his fourth marriage, to **Renée Downing**; Abbey was forty-seven, Renée, eighteen. The success of those two books, as well as others, in addition to numerous articles for various publications, speaking engagements, and a teaching position at the University of Utah, began to offer him a lifestyle of relative economic security that he had never known. There were also continued seasonal ranger opportunities and the only full-time ranger position he ever held, on the staff of a Defenders of Wildlife Preserve in southern Arizona's Aravaipa Canyon.

Yet once again the specter of failed relationship would haunt him, so that even as his writer's star continued to ascend, with the publication of such efforts as *The Journey Home* in 1977 – considered by many to be his best collection of non-fiction essays, his marriage to Renée foundered. She left Ed in Moab, Utah in

early 1978 to return to the University of Arizona as a full-time student. In a last attempt to salvage the relationship Ed moved (back) to Tucson, but the damage done by his “always exposing the worst aspects of (his) character, (his) melancholia, (his) volatile irritability, (his) jealousy and suspicion...” was too great. The marriage ended, throwing Abbey into one of the deepest depressions of his life. However, it was during this first part of his return to a city for which he did not particularly care, that he would meet the woman who would become his fifth wife and with whom he would have his most successful and, quite likely, his most meaningful relationship.

For Clarke Cartwright it was not love at first sight when she met Abbey. She found him quiet, gentlemanly,



and interesting; but there were no violins and fireworks. The second time they were together, he was grumpy and she was wary of their age difference; she was twenty-six, Abbey, fifty-two. After their second contact she spent nearly a year pursuing other interests; and even when they resumed, she was cautious. She knew of his reputation with women and relationships and she let him know she would tolerate none of it if they were together. Apparently Abbey acquiesced and in May 1982, after being together for a year-and-a half, they were married; and here’s the interesting part: From all accounts, from the time they were first together until the day he died, Ed Abbey was a changed man; no more affairs, he was no longer habitually grouchy or ornery, he became a devoted husband and father. As Abbey’s biographer, **James M. Calahan**, notes in his excellent work, *Edward Abbey, a life*, “It seems that, in his mid-fifties, he had finally begun to grow up – and had finally met his match.”

Even before his marriage to Clarke, Abbey had accepted a teaching position at the University of Arizona; and along with his steady rise as a respected and best-selling author, this afforded him the opportunity for a secure life materially, as well a platform from which to express his wide-ranging views on conservation, the environment, politics, and culture in general. Yet a man’s fate is an interesting thing. Only three months after the wedding Abbey became quite ill. From the medical tests that were done, doctors advised him that he was suffering from pancreatic cancer and had but a few months to live. As it turned out those doctors were wrong; it was not a cancer. Exploratory surgery revealed a portal vein thrombosis, which, Abbey was told, meant that he could die at any moment of a massive internal hemorrhage; however, the most accurate diagnosis was esophageal varices, a condition which brought on periodic, severe hemorrhaging. “An old wino’s disease,” as Abbey put it. Indeed, related to drinking, it was the

thing that would eventually kill him. With typical Abbey resolve, he noted in his journal when he thought it was cancer that he “would hold out as long as possible, settle my affairs, do what literary work I could, and as the pain and



debilitation became too much, I would take a walk.” The change in diagnosis did not change the resolve. In the end, he would considerably outlive the expectations.

For the next six years Edward Abbey would live as he had always lived, only better; his relationship with Clarke, though occasionally strained, would be close and loving, his work would be creative, filled with the thought-provoking, incendiary pronouncements that only Abbey at his iconoclastic, curmudgeonly best could make on the whole range of subjects that captured his interest and concern. He continued to tell the truth as he saw it and to invite others to agree, or not, as they would. He continued to believe in the appropriateness of citizens acting in the defense of nature, even to the extent of committing violent acts against the technology used in the

destruction of the natural world when they felt that they had exhausted all other avenues of redress. Compared to whatever, he sought to make it real. He looked at the hard questions that we as a culture were facing then and with which we continue to struggle, and he gave the answers that to him were sensible and practical, given the principles that he had come, over the course of his life, to accept and to believe in. And it seems to me that those answers were rooted first and foremost in a love of the land. Perhaps, they went back to his childhood days in the Appalachian hills of western Pennsylvania; but they were drawn from and expressed through his love for the deserts and the red rock of the American Southwest. They were drawn from the earnest realization that for the land to speak, it is we who must be her voice; and the understanding that if we do not, no one will.

On March 14, 1989, following several days of internal hemorrhaging, Edward Abbey died peacefully at his home outside of Tucson, Arizona. Clarke, his daughters Susie and Becky, and a few close friends were at his side. As per his long-standing instructions, he was placed in his old sleeping bag, laid in the back of a pick-up truck, and taken to a location in the desert known only to a small group of family and friends. He was placed in the hole that was dug, and the hole was filled in and covered over with boulders, so that “brother coyote” could not dig him up and scatter his bones. On a small boulder nearby was etched:

“Edward Paul Abbey”

1927-1989

No Comment

The desert thus welcomed home one of its best friends; and those of us who dearly love the land lost one.

What's Now?

As I sit here in the 50°, blue sky, wafting breeze that is today, I can watch disappear the last vestiges of the snow and ice that were yesterday's weather gifts and be reminded that the season of change is almost upon us. Overnight it was 19° here. Of course, the weather for most of this winter in these old mountains



has been reminiscent of the graph of a sine curve, but still, overall, temperatures have been generally cool enough to keep us reminded of the season that it is supposed to be; but the day before it snowed, it was above 60°, so you know the schizophrenia is just Mother Nature's way of tipping us off to what is ahead and not far away.

There are numerous other signs of spring's advent as well, some of which do not necessarily bode well for the coming of the flowers. You may recall the spring of '07 and how the mildness of the previous winter had encouraged the early bloomers to bloom even earlier; then in early April the mountains were visited with a severe cold snap that devastated those early blossoms, turning what had looked like a wonderful season for first flowers and incipient green into an interval of carnage and loss. It

wasn't so much that there was a late chilling, those events are common; but rather it was, in my humble opinion, due to the fact that the winter had been so mild that everything was so far ahead of schedule that many species were much further advanced in their annual renewal than they would normally have been and thus unable to withstand the sudden frigid reversal, succumbing more easily to the weather's downturn.

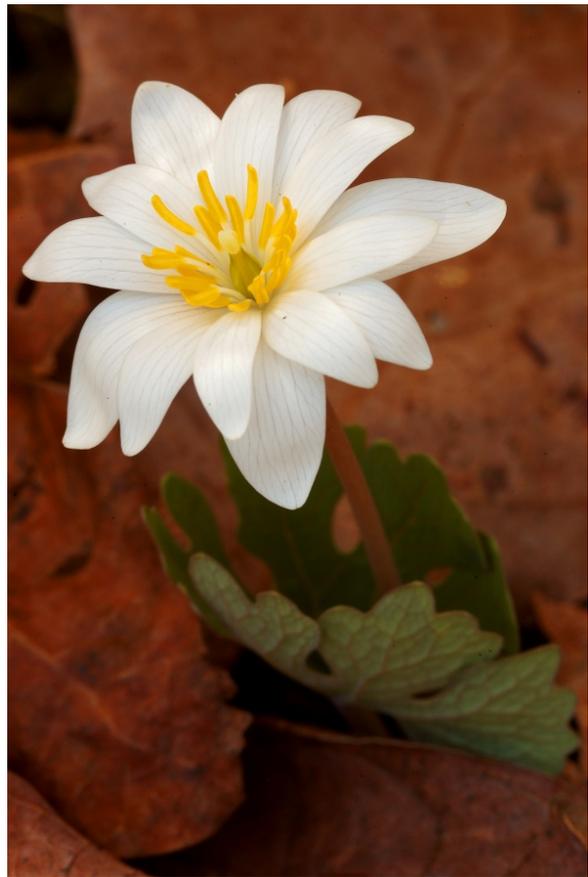
I mention this history lesson now because the same seems to be happening again, at least as far as the advance of the season is concerned. A week ago I was in

attendance at the North American Nature Photography Association's (NANPA) 14th Annual Summit in sunny Destin, Florida. The day before I left for Destin, which was still several days before the end of February, I scouted some of my favorite early flower locations in the Smokies. There were daffodils (*Narcissus obvallaris*) blooming at several of the old home sites in Cades Cove; and, perhaps more telling, there were hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *acuta*) blooming along Cove Hardwood Nature Trail. Last year, on February 28, the last day of the month, I found hepatica buds along the same trail, but I did not see any flowers. I half-expected to find bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) blooming in the places around Oconaluftee Visitor Center where I customarily find it sooner, but I managed to find only a few very early folded leaves coming up. There should be some blossoms 'most any day now. Based on what I have seen, I think it's fairly safe to predict that the blooming season this year will be at least a couple of days earlier than it was last year. So if there is a late and fairly severe cold snap in early April, we may be in for something similar to last year; not a pleasant thought to be sure.

Before March has departed we will almost assuredly have seen trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*) on the dry, pine-oak slopes and trailsides that are its habitat. Fringed phacelia (*Phacelia fimbriata*) will likely be blooming in the lower part of its range, as will spring beauty

(*Claytonia caroliniana*), pussy toes (*Antennaria neglecta*), early meadowrue (*Thalictrum dioicum*), trout lily (*Erythronium umbilicatum*), and some of the early violets like smooth yellow (*Viola pubescens* var. *leiocarpon*) and halberd-leaved (*Viola hastata*). Some of April's earlier blossoms may even make an appearance: dwarf ginseng (*Panax trifolius*), large-flowered white trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*), squirrel corn (*Dicentra canadensis*), Dutchman's britches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), and bishop's cap (*Mitella diphylla*). Some of these can be found along Little River Road, and many can be seen along Cove Hardwood Nature Trail and Chestnut Top Trail near the Townsend "Y", two of my favorite trails for early blooms.

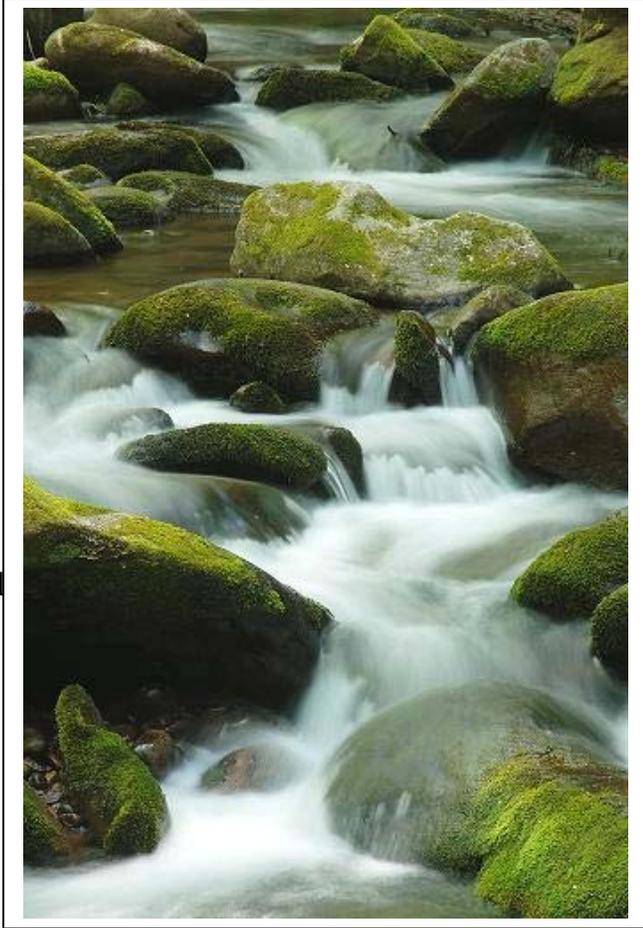
If you love to photograph the flowers of the Southern Appalachians, and you usually think of April as the month when it all begins, you may want to begin revising your estimation to the last week, or so, of March. From what I have seen



over the past 3-4 years, with milder winters seeming to become more of the norm, late March is becoming an excellent time to find many species. Even as the overall dry conditions continue to affect the water table in the mountains, recent rains and frozen precipitations have kept the apparent levels in the streams looking more like those to which we have become accustomed. I say “apparent” because it is still very

dry and there is a continuing need for moisture; but on the surface the water courses are running relatively high and full. Another benefit of the abundant water is the lushness of the moss, particularly in those streams known for moss: stretches of the Oconaluftee, Kephart Prong, parts of Middle Prong of Little, Middle Prong of Little Pigeon, Cosby Creek, Big Creek, Roaring Fork, and Road Prong. All have wonderfully lustrous places where the moss is verdant, and good images abound.

At the conclusion of March the road to Clingman’s Dome will reopen and the Dome’s parking lot will once again be a good location for both sunrise and sunset images. By that time, sunrise will occur at 7:20 a.m. and sunset will be at 7:52 p.m., and even though it will still be too early in the season for Morton Overlook to be a really



good sunset location, Luftee Overlook will be excellent for sunrise. In fact, Luftee is an excellent sunrise location right now, with the ball of the sun itself rising almost directly over the mid-point of the Smokies Crest ridge as it leads from left to right along the left, or east, side of the overlook. There have been some beautiful atmospheric events recently to lend to the absence of foliage on the hardwoods of the foreground. So don't let bare trees be a deterrent to your going. The light in March is exquisite for high-elevation landscapes. The air is still haze-free for the most part, making early morning and late afternoon images dance in the crisp keenness that the light imparts. Along both sides of Newfound Gap on US 441 the drama can be seen and photographed. There is also still the opportunity for excellent receding blue ridges shots from places like Webb Overlook, Swinging Bridge, and Newfound Gap parking lot. In the lower elevations of Campbell Overlook, Cataloochee Valley, and Cades Cove this same wonderful light can make early morning and late afternoon magical for landscapes and intimate landscapes. In Cades Cove and Cataloochee it can also

be used to create sensitive architectural shots of cabins, houses, barns, mills, and other structures. March is a great month for this magical light because the haze



that will begin to insert itself into the atmosphere as temperatures rise and the new foliage begins to unfurl has not yet begun to form. Once the haze is with us, it's a fairly rare day in which the air is sharp and clear. The "Windy Month" is also the last month for a

while to photograph the golden reflections in places like Little River and Greenbrier. As April spreads its carpet of green over the land, the tones of the reflections will change from gold to a golden green and then to emerald until the colors of fall return.

Before we write off winter completely, however, we should remember that it is still with us and that at almost any given time a cold front can come through unburdening itself of its frozen white stuff and returning us to the wonderland that can make a magic kingdom of this place of blue smoke. March is, indeed, a month of change; some of those changes have been a part of our cyclic awareness for so long that we have begun to consider them as permanent, even when reality is otherwise. Some of those changes we have wrought upon ourselves in our failing stewardship of this garden planet we have been given; and even if we reversed our habits completely today, some of the changes we have helped to usher in would remain with us for years to come, much like the patterns of an individual's behavior – they were not created overnight, nor will they disappear overnight either. What they mean in the long term may be impossible to assess in the present moment, but this should not keep us from trying to act consciously here and now in all that we do so that our impact is thoughtful and minimal. Is this too much to ask of creatures such as ourselves?

The most common form of terrorism in the USA
is that carried on by bulldozers and chainsaws.
It is not enough to understand the natural world;
the point is to defend and preserve it.
Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul.

Edward Abbey

A Tip is Worth...?

The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work and risk, and by not quite knowing what you are doing. What you will discover will be wonderful. What you will discover will be yourself.

Alan Alda

No less august an expert than John Shaw said, a number of years ago, that the most important element in making better pictures is a thorough understanding of exposure. I have found this to be true time and time again; and while the wonders of digital photography have given us marvelous tools in aid of that understanding, those tools have not absolved us from that same need Shaw implied nearly a quarter century back down the road. Given such marvelous



technologies as the histogram and the highlights tool in our modern, sophisticated camera bodies, why would I make such an audacious statement? After all, if I place my camera's meter on program, or even if I have it on a more

“manual” setting and make an exposure, I can always check the histogram and highlights tool to see if I've erred and correct it on the spot if needed. And I can always take a poor exposure into Photoshop and fix it, can't I? Perhaps, but what if you are shooting in quickly changing light, or in an intermittent but persistent wind; and your image in the most appealing light, or with the motion most controlled, is the one that's been poorly exposed. Now you're faced with spending additional time and effort in Photoshop “fixing” something you might have been able to adjust for in your camera in the beginning. Maybe you'll be able to repair the oversight and maybe you won't; and how long will it take to get it the way it could have been to start with?

Maybe you really are a computer freak at heart, and you just love sitting in front of your monitor fixing your images. That's fine. I became a nature photographer so that I could enjoy being in nature, not sitting at a desk. For me, that's where a thorough understanding of exposure comes in. When the day arrives in which a digital sensor can record the entire 15~to~17-stop range in which the human eye can see detail, then we can forget about exposure and shoot away; until then

there will always be special light situations that will require us to make decisions about how we set the camera's controls and why; and the more we understand about how exposure works, the more accurately – and sometimes more importantly, the more quickly – we can prepare for and adapt to those situations. Learning how to “read” the meter is the first step. Different brands of camera have different metering scales to give you information about what the “shutter speed” and “aperture” controls are doing. So the place to begin is by understanding from your owner's manual what the scale is saying. For example, the scale will have a mid-point, usually indicated by a zero “0”, and a plus “+” direction and a minus “-“ direction away from the zero. For some, the + is to the left, and the – is to the right; for others it is opposite. Some scales are located on the side of the viewfinder window rather than along the bottom, and so they are read from top to bottom, rather than side to side. The + usually means that the

exposure values in that direction are creating lighter and lighter images, or exposures; and the – means that exposure values in that direction are creating darker and darker images or exposures. Either way, it is essential to learn how to read the



scale in your own camera. The scale will always tell you, given the values for shutter and aperture that you have selected, whether the image – or the particular tone you have metered, if you are using the “spot” meter mode – is lighter or darker than a medium tone; or that it is medium, if the values chosen place the scale's cursor on the mid-point, or “0”.

The scales in most modern Digital SLR (D-SLR) cameras are incremented so that they read in values of 1/3 of a stop. Some of you can recall old film cameras whose metering scales read in full-stop increments; so you can appreciate the much finer evaluation of light values that modern meters provide.

Now that you understand what the scale is telling you, the next thing to understand is what you must tell it in order to create the exposure you want. Of course you have to remember that the sensor does not see what your eye sees, so what you create for an exposure is always bound by the limitations of what the sensor can record as the dynamic, or contrast, range of the composition you are working with.

About this time I always feel compelled to reassure students by sharing with them what Mr. Shaw shared with me, and has shared with many, many others over the

years, “It ain’t rocket science.” He meant it; it’s true; and I have never forgotten it.

Go back to what I just said about “the exposure that you want.” That’s the key. If the exposure in your file comes back from the sensor **in the way you want it to appear**, however that might be, then you have made a correct exposure. If it comes back in some other way – either lighter or darker than you wanted it to – then you have exposed your composition incorrectly and need to make an **adjustment of some kind. In order to do that you must change the overall**



exposure values to be lighter or darker, and you must do this by changing the aperture setting, the shutter speed setting, or the ISO setting, or some combination of two or more. Most typically, only one of them is changed.

What this all

leads to is the understanding that when you get back a file exposed correctly for you, it is because you have correctly evaluated what to you is the primary tonality of your composition: a tonality that is either medium, or is lighter than medium or darker than medium by some given amount that you chose. Or you have selected some portion of the contrast range present in the image and have exposed for the highlights and shadows present in that portion of the range as you wanted them to be expressed, again given the constraints of what the sensor can “see.”

From this we could get into a discussion of color tonalities and how to learn to evaluate a given color as being medium, or other than medium toned, and by how much. We could discuss the effects of the direction of the light on how the sensor sees color and contrast; or we might talk about how to read the contrast in a composition and make decisions about how to render the highlights and shadows that are present. These are all rather lengthy discussions that we can, and will, save for future newsletters.

From all of this, what I hope you have gleaned is that to understand exposure is to give yourself the most control over the image-making process. Yes, it is true: automatic camera settings can make excellent exposures some of the time; but in that multitude of instances in the real world of light and shadow where all cameras have some degree of difficulty in seeing like your eye sees, providing yourself with the tool of an understanding of the mechanics of exposure will give you that added measure of control over the creative process that can mean the

difference between not only getting the best image at the right moment, but also helping you to forego the necessity of sitting at your desk when you could be sitting in nature looking through a viewfinder instead of at a monitor screen.

As for Photography with Heart...

As I Walk with Beauty,
As I walk, as I walk
The universe is walking with me
In beauty it walks before me
In beauty it walks behind me
In beauty it walks below me
In beauty it walks above me
Beauty is on every side
As I walk, I walk with beauty

Traditional Diné Prayer



If you listen,
not to pages or preachers
but to the smallest flower
growing from a crack
in your heart,
you will hear a great song
moving across a wide ocean
whose water is the music
connecting all the islands

of the universe together,
and touching all
you will feel it
touching you
around you...
embracing you
with light

It is in that light
that everything lives
and will always be alive

John Squandra
from *This Ecstasy*

The words of the Diné prayer that I always cite at the beginning of this section have been coming to my mind with greater than usual frequency of late. Perhaps it is because **Photography with Heart** is off and running and in the busyness that has been created around it, the beauty of the world is constantly before me. The Snowbird workshop gave us a marvelous opportunity to experience how much fun winter photography can be, even in the absence of the snow we had all hoped for. What a day we had on the Cherohala Skyway in a sub-freezing wind working a wonderful hoarfrost that had formed in the clouds that hung low over the higher peaks; and the next day to have a mildness that allowed a special treat of golden reflections in the Tellico River. Wow! Beauty is everywhere you look.



Then there was the NANPA Summit I mentioned earlier. I can't say very many nice things about the rape that has occurred, and continues to occur, along the once beautiful Gulf panhandle coast of Florida; but I am in great awe of the talent of my partner **Nancy**

Rotenberg. Nancy was invited to deliver one of the primary keynote addresses at this year's convocation, a program she entitled, "**Let Your Light Shine Through.**" In the wake of the great beauty of her images and the deeply inspirational message of her words there were few, if any, dry eyes in the audience; and mine were certainly not among those that were. I am deeply honored to be able to share a part of my photographic journey with her and with my other partner, **Les Saucier**, as well.

For those of you who were not able to find an opening for the Charleston, South Carolina workshop, as well as for those of you who were, there remain a few vacancies for the **Smokies Spring Workshop, April 12-18**, at the **Comfort Inn & Suites in Cherokee, North Carolina.** Tuition for this workshop is **\$1200**, and includes only the workshop itself. Lodging and meals are not included. For additional information on this workshop, or to register, contact **Kris Morgan** at kris@naturaltapestries.com. The Smokies in April are a dream world for the wildflower and landscape photographer. For Les and me this is home, and we're successfully making a mountain woman out of Nancy, too. This workshop is a marvelous opportunity to share in the creativity that suffuses these old mountains and the very light itself that shines in them. This venue is right at the entrance to the Park. Come join us for the fun and the fellowship.

If a weeklong workshop is not to your taste, or if it's just a matter of not having the time to spare, the **Smokies Long Weekend Workshop, April 18-21**, also at the **Comfort Inn & Suites in Cherokee** is just what you're looking for. Tuition for this workshop is **\$595**, and includes only the workshop itself. For more information, or to register, contact **Kris** at kris@naturaltapestries.com. You might think of this event as a wildflower mini-intensive with streams, ridges, atmospheric, and light all thrown in.

As I have mentioned on numerous occasions, one of the folks with whom I enjoy traveling is **Kendall Chiles**, who is not only a great photographer, but a very good friend too. In 2006 Kendall and I did a workshop together in the Upper Peninsula that was a wonderful event. This year we've put together another workshop that I'm really looking forward to. It's not only a great deal, but it's going to be a great deal of fun as well: the **Acadia National Park in Spring Workshop, June 1-6** at the **Villager Motel in Bar Harbor, Maine**. The tuition for this workshop is **\$895**, and covers only the workshop. Lodging and meals are not included. There are eight (8) participant spaces total and four (4) have been reserved. Cadillac Mountain in Acadia is where the sun first shines on the United States each day and is the highest point on the eastern seaboard between Maine and Brazil. There is the beauty of Marble Beach and Otter Cliffs and the reflections of Bubble Pond and Jordan Pond, plus the wildflowers of Mount Desert Island. I'm excited just thinking about it. It's almost a full week of fun, fellowship and great images. For more information, or to register, contact Kendall at kchiles@esper.com, or me at mcgowan592@aol.com. Reservations for **The Villager** can be made at **(888) 383-3211**.

Until next month... may the Spirit of Light guide your shutter release.

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Sunrise, Snowbird Mountain Lodge

