



Lost and Found in the Grand Canyon

By Ron McNeel, Volunteer Interpretive Park Ranger



When I first heard about the NPS Centennial campaign to FIND YOUR PARK, I was dubious about the slogan. Don't we keep looking for the next park, and the next, while hoarding memories of those we've already driven through, walked in, saddled up for, paddled down? In fact, bagged?

And the national parks are treasured as public lands. How does the possessive "your" figure in?

Maybe it does in a newly nostalgic story like mine. I serendipitously found a replacement slot on a raft trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. When I heard, in May, of an opening on an early July excursion, I snatched at the chance. The trip was with a national organization of scientists and educators who promote evolutionary theory and the story of a four billion year-old earth. Not exactly my tribe, since my career had been in the humanities, professing rhetoric and English literature. But I thought to fit in well enough—just another academic pedant. Also, another journal-keeper—but not so dedicated as some biologists and geologists. My account became sketchy, however, as I recorded 230 river miles of thoughts on waterproof paper with ordinary ink.

My own story and connection to the Grand Canyon goes way back.

I am Arizona born and raised. The Grand Canyon is the state's pride. I went to college in Flagstaff at Northern Arizona University. As an undergraduate, with outdoorsy college buddies, I hiked into the canyon four times down four different routes. The first trip took me down the main Kaibab Trail, across the Black Bridge to Phantom Ranch, and then back across the Silver Bridge, over the Colorado River, up the Bright Angel Trail. What names!

On this raft trip, I would get to sail under those same hand-crafted bridges, built only for hikers and mules. But on the trip's first day, the rapid at Badger Creek would bounce and bob me past the campsite of my second hike. That hike wound down Jackass Canyon to the upper Marble Canyon portion of the Grand. In our college guidebook, it was considered an "easy in"—easy except where the helping steel cable was frayed! But we young men helped one another in and out of the park. One of those companions is now gone.

Far below Phantom Ranch and its hikers' bridges, our rafting excursion planned to stop at Havasu Creek. I never made it down to the river when, all those years ago, we hiked into Havasupai to see its famous turquoise falls: Navajo, Havasu, and Mooney. One of those hiking buddies is now gone, too.

Finally, near the end of our raft trip, we would navigate the challenge of Lava Falls Rapids: rated 10+ on a scale of 10. I had hiked down with college buddies from the north rim to camp next to this rapid's roar so many years ago. And, two of those friends are now gone. People, loved ones, pass on, in the great river of time.

But it turns out that I had found my park, back in my days as an Arizona kid and a college adventurer. Here, at 62 years of age, was the opportunity to find my park again, to find those canyon places that remain special in my own little history.

But you don't just find your park. You have to also get lost in your park. And you have to learn how to leave your park.

As expected, I shared with my rafting companions some of the common root language of academics—even if our dialects and objects of attention sometimes differed. They proved to be good campers: quick to help unload, quick to pack up for the next day's thirty river miles or so. And, they abided with good grace my personal history and nostalgia--as I abided their faint fossil records and molecular details of 1.8 billion years of geology made gloriously visible.

But I was here to find my spirit, restored by nature. And maybe find the youth I'd lost. Even, to aspire to a new kind of lost.

At our college campsites and trails used so long ago, at Jackass Canyon and at Phantom Ranch and at Lava Falls, I could envision us again as young men and women. The places endure--after floods and droughts and invasions of Salt Cedar trees--as touchstones to youthful expeditions that were not at all drunken nor lecherous. We—I—had connected with that amazing landscape of stone, cut by water, filled by sky. Now I was immersed again in a landscape of dreams of a never-known home as the canyon's chronicler, Ed Abbey might say.

But I was also lost on the new

journey. The canyon, in my mind's map, travels east to west. In fact, the canyon, for some profound geologic reason, meanders where a river faced with so much rock should not meander. By just the second day, I could not determine the cardinal directions as the river twisted south for a long stretch, then back on itself north. Even in the mornings, waking up with the sun, I couldn't find east, for the sun would light only the high rock rims of its own choosing, or light the walls allowed by some twist in the canyon space. Sunset brought the same disorientation. The sun would paint the golds and reds of ledges thousands of feet up, in slow motion fireworks. But it would not reveal its western resting place. For direction, there was only up river, and down. And we were going down.

My often talkative companions would also find, at times, our silence to get lost in. In quiet waters we could stand on the raft, look up, and see the work of eons of wind and water in endless towering rock, and even the relatively recent work (geologically speaking) of the fires of the earth, uplifting continents and dumping boiling lava into the canyon.

But I got lost--in my own imagination—in the monuments carved on rim faces left by the ancient kings of civilizations of demi-gods. Those rock walls seemed to be the product of thousands of mighty hammers wielded by titanic masons—time-smoothed bas-relief of noble faces disappearing into the crenellated ramparts. Maybe some of the carvings were from alien settlements, colonies long evacuated to home stars, perhaps, but not departed out of boredom at this planet's potential. Swirling around all the faces of gallant knights and star-warriors, I imagined circles and arcs from the gods of the continents' native peoples, fainter carvings of the creatures of sky and river and rocky ledge. None of these markings were meant to communicate to us any specific tales or moral messages. Or, if there were heroic sagas embedded in

the towering runes on temple walls, they are forever lost, only to be felt in the forgotten language that overcomes the heart of small creatures on puny rafts.

Reveries like these would burst in the immediacy of thrilling cold rapids. An even starker reminder of the present: a rock slide in morning camp of the seventh day, when boulders allowed about 1,400 feet of air to decide their beach landing craters. One person grazed, one pontoon punctured, and we were ready sail on, to leave our park.

But when I mentioned learning how to leave one's Park, I didn't mean out of terror—though there were ten seconds there . . . I meant leaving with awe and respect for the place, for the Grand Canyon, cemented in the fiber of one's being. My park, Grand Canyon, elevates one's view to light and color, cloud and sky, elemental stone--and then the gaze returns to an immediate roaring river channel. In two glances, you take in as much of the eternal, and as much of the moment, as is humanly possible. Parks can change you.

That young curmudgeon Henry David Thoreau is not always easy to follow. Just what did he mean when he said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world"? In large measure, he meant, take some deep breaths of clear air on that river or trail you journey down, and know that, if you leave it wild, our young Americans can find what they need to clear their minds and renew their spirits for the unknown struggles they will confront. We can leave them good odds to prevail. So find your park, and leave it too.

