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## Dominion, Dressing, Keeping

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# Dominion, Dressing, Keeping

by David Thomas Sumner

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In early June of 1989, I was on my first trip down the Colorado River's Cataract Canyon as a paid guide. On the first evening of that trip, we set up camp, fixed dinner, did dishes, and watched the sun turn the surrounding cliffs from the pale oranges of midday to the deep reds of sunset. At dusk, I found myself across a driftwood fire from a man with thick black hair and cheeks shadowed by two days growth. His beard was coarse, growing from just below his eyes all the way down his neck. He was squat and thick and a professor of something somewhere. And as the fire cast excited shadows on the cliff behind us, we talked of the beauty of Cataract Canyon and the Colorado River. We discussed the Glen Canyon Dam and the stagnant water of Lake Powell that we would encounter in a few days. He commented on how much of the beauty of Glen Canyon is now lost under the man-made lake. I told of how wildlife downstream now had difficulty accessing the river because the sand bars and beaches were eroding away and the silt that should replace them was trapped behind the dam. We complained of the loss. I told him my father had seen the canyon as a Boy Scout, but that we never would. I then qualified one of my statements by saying, "I'm not an environmentalist, but..." The vacationing professor questioned my hesitation. "What's wrong with being an environmentalist?" he asked.

That night, across that fire, there were plenty of things wrong with it. I was brought up in Utah with the sagebrush rebellion, the Central Utah Water Project and wilderness issues in the news. The conservative Mormon community I come from sees environmentalists as running counter to our pioneer roots, as radical hippies standing in the way of progress, standing in the way of "God's command" to make the desert bloom. To be put in this group, to accept this label, was, in a way, to be alienated from my community, alienated from my culture, from my history. On both sides of my family I have ancestors who trekked west by handcart and covered wagon with the Mormon pioneers. The religious ideology of

these people led them to abandon home, country, possessions, and often other family members, in the hope that they could forge a utopian community out of the howling wilderness of the American West — a place where they could practice their religion without persecution and impose Old Testament ideas upon the landscape; a place where they could create a garden from the desert. To be labeled as an environmentalist was, in some way, counter to what my ancestors had worked and sacrificed for, to go against what they dreamed of for me. But the professor's question struck a deep chord, and as the summer progressed the river worked on me, changing me not only physically, but spiritually. Its thick waters carved my body and shaped my soul.

The Colorado River melts out of the Rockies and winds its way through the rusted canyons of the Southwest. The clear, cold, liquid snow turns taupe with silt, taking on the colors of the desert as it descends out of the mountains. The river continues to excavate the sandstone canyons, just as it has for millions of years, slowly carrying red earth seaward. I am comforted by the river. I am comforted by such consistency, such deliberate sustained effort. The river is a constant—changing and causing change on that which it contacts.

As I spent the days at the oars of my raft and the nights on sand bars under the stars, the unrelenting desert sun lightened my hair and darkened my skin. My body took on the colors and hues of the landscape. My back, shoulders, chest and hands spent four months learning to work with the river, discovering that they could not work against it. The river hardened my body during these lessons, defined it; my back, shoulders and chest became stronger. Calluses squared off my fingers. At the end of the day my hands, arms, shoulders and back would ache the dull satisfying ache of physical labor. On the river's edge, I would sleep deeply to the sound of water running over rocks. I bathed in the cleansing water in the evening and in the daytime the river's thick coolness

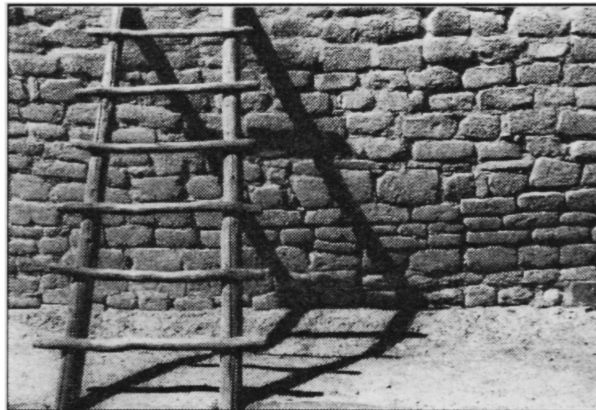
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gave me relief from the desert heat.

My eyes became sensitive to the story told by the water, watching for rocks, logs and snags hidden just underneath its opaque surface, looking for angle waves, holes, sleepers, rollers and keepers. I developed a deep reverence for the harsh beauty of the desert canyons — a respect for the deliberate nature of the plants and animals that clung to life there. A respect for the struggle of the juniper, the Mormon tea, the black brush, the salt and sage brush, the willow, the maple and the scrub-oak, against the arid climate, and against the imported tamarisk that threatens to choke all others out of their native strong-holds. I marveled at the resourcefulness of the mule deer, the acrobatics of the desert bighorn, the survival skills of the coyote against a century of poisoning and hunting by sheep and cattle men. I savored the shelter offered by the Cottonwood and the Box Elder, seeking their refuge in the worst heat of the day.

I also felt disappointment each time my raft came out of Imperial rapid into the upper reaches of Lake Powell. Here, where the power of the Colorado has been stopped by the Army Corps of Engineers, I would remember the discussion I had with the professor about the Glen Canyon Dam. I pondered what it meant to be an environmentalist.

Just as the beauty of the river upstream intoxicated me, the stagnant, man-made reservoir downstream angered me. The dam was completed in 1964, two years before I was born. The lake was already on its way to being full before I was even old enough to know there was once a river. I felt robbed then, and still do. I will never be able to experience the unique beauty drowned by the dam. I will never be able to run the 60 silenced rapids of Cataract Canyon that John Wesley Powell and his company ran. Nor will I ever float through the deep corridors of sandstone now filled with water. I am bitter.



*Leiserowitz*

I wonder about the displaced wildlife. I wonder about the countless Anasazi ruins that the water has buried—the pots, sandals, granaries, the kivas, the cooking and living quarters. I picture them in my mind, submerged, moss-grown, decaying, the walls collapsing. These lost artifacts of a mysterious culture are windows into a past that have been permanently sealed. Bricked over by a reservoir.

As the river worked on my body and mind, I began to care deeply for the desert landscape. Questions of environment became spiritual, moral questions rather than just questions about economics and lifestyle. But I found that the same religious tradition that caused my discomfort with the term environmentalist offered some hope. In Genesis, Adam is given dominion over the world, but he is also commanded to “dress and keep” it.

Although my pioneer ancestors changed the face of the West — cultivating, irrigating, and building — they did leave many places wild. I know this was not always deliberate. Often, simply, they lacked the technology to dominate their surroundings. Yet, there are also traditions in my culture of

restraint, of place, of awareness and of reverence. It is within these traditions that dressing and keeping can be seen. In early Mormon Utah there were cultural restrictions on mining and mineral extraction, and an emphasis on sustainable agriculture and communal living. These people dressed and kept their farms and homes and often left alone the canyons, the high mountains, the deserts. I like to think that they felt a part of dressing and keeping to be knowing human limits—knowing to limit human desire. Yes they made some mistakes, and theirs was not a perfect environmental ethic; but many of them reined in their desires, cultivated what they needed to live and left the rest alone.

**S**ome may find my attempt to locate value in dressing and keeping a weak one. After all it is still a human centered ethic, it is still an ethic

problems, but all enduring traditions have wisdom. Dressing and keeping is far from a perfect ethic, it is an ethic that needs to be discussed and refined, but it can be used in ecocentric ways. If we interpret it with sensitivity, dressing and keeping may be used to correct the idea of dominion.

**T**he Colorado no longer makes it to the Sea of Cortez. It is sprayed onto the golf courses of Las Vegas and fills the swimming pools of Phoenix. By the time it enters Mexico it has been diverted and dammed and sucked down to a trickle. Finally, short of its oceanic goal, it evaporates under the discipline of the southwestern sun. The giant sturgeon that used to swim the river's length — fish bigger than a man — are no longer; the squaw fish, the hump-back chubb, the razorback sucker will soon follow suit. In our quest for dominion, we have wiped out countless other plants, animals — even whole ecosystems. If indeed we have been divinely granted any type of dominion, a concept I find discomfoting, we must realize that dominion does not include the right to destroy what we did not create. I hope my culture can learn how dressing and keeping may correct dominion.

It is human vanity to think that we can forever impound the river that carved the Grand Canyon, or destroy a planet that was created over eons. We can, however, dam the Colorado river for my short lifetime and greatly deface the planet's beauty; we can destroy this world for our species and for many others. We must be responsible for our dominion, whether it has been assumed or granted.

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*Dominion, Dressing, Keeping continued from page 4*

that puts humans on top. It is still an ethic that grows out of dominion. And the critics may be right.

But it seems more productive to me, although perhaps more difficult, to reread and recuperate the positive aspects of our cultural traditions than to reject them outright and search for others. Other traditions, even with their wisdom and perhaps their greater ecologic sensitivity, would not have the historical and generational depth for me, nor would they have the power that depth provides. All enduring traditions have

**C**ontact with the Colorado River changed and shaped me. It sculpted and molded me as if I were a sandstone canyon. It forced me to ponder what it means to dress and keep, and taught me that part of dressing and keeping is to know that often we must leave things be. Modern life is the paradox in which I am caught. I am an environmentalist who is very much struggling with what it means to live ethically — with what it means to dress and to keep.