



It is late May, and final exams have ended at Northern Arizona University. The van is crammed with sleepy college students heading from Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon's North Rim. The high desert is blooming after a recent thunderstorm. Patches of orange Globemallow and yellow Primrose dot the landscape. Our destination is Kanab Creek Wilderness. My first trip, nine years ago, was as a student; now I am the instructor. We zip past the flowers while distant rusty cliffs float by.

I thumbed through memories of my first Kanab Creek trip, practicing leadership skills while carrying heavy packs. The canyons were our classroom. My first impressions were of the convoluted drainages and towering red cliffs that were foreign to this boy from Philadelphia. Yet, somehow, it felt like a homecoming. The memories were comforting; my eyes closed and I fell a sleep.

Ruts in the washboard road jar me awake. My eyes open. A new landscape spreads out before me: a maze of windswept walls, rocky knobs, potholes, and alcoves. The van stops and its doors swing open. We are at the top of Jump Up Canyon, our entry point into Kanab Creek, the largest drainage on the Grand Canyon's north rim. Kanab Creek cuts a network of gorges hundreds and thousands of feet into the Kaibab Plateau. It is the largest and most beautiful office a person could work in.

Now, I facilitate students on their own adventures in Kanab Creek. I make sure nobody gets injured, initiate discussion, assign grades, prevent students from burning their food, and patch up the predictable blisters. I facilitate the learning of many lessons; however, I certainly don't provide the most important lessons students receive during these adventures.

The real lessons are delivered by Kanab Creek. Here, I am both teacher and student. The poet William Stafford says, “The earth says have a place/ be what that place requires...(2011).” My place is Kanab Creek, and I am always learning what it requires me to be.

Kanab Creek requires visitors to enter a new “headspace.” Grades, girl/boy friends, cell phones, social drama, appearances etc., are no longer significant. What matters is finding water, eating enough calories, and sleeping on a flat surface. Void of usual urban distractions, the canyon country opens itself up to careful notice.

After signing the Ranger Trail register, we begin cutting down the switchbacks into Jump Up Canyon. A hawk screeches. I know that hawk. It greets me at the beginning of every hike into this canyon.



The bare walls are sun-baked, and clear of vegetation. Signs of early human use are everywhere. We pass cold water spilling from a rancher’s pipe and some pictographs painted on a smooth rock canvas. I stop to pick up a familiar spearhead lying below a panel of rock art. The white spearhead is the size of my palm, made of opaque chert. I run my fingers along the chipped, serrated edge, before hiding it under a rock. Pausing, I contemplate sharing the spearhead with my students. I decide to keep the experience for myself and hurry to catch-up with the group.

While hiking in the rear, I try to imagine the long-gone peoples of this place, and the infinite number of human moments—births, deaths, love affairs and wars—that have played out here. I want to know their connections to the land. Is that even possible?

I have never known any place as intimately as the locals of Kanab Creek knew theirs. My childhood connections with place are strong. I can easily recall smells, feelings, and details of growing up in Philadelphia, but the early people who lived in Kanab Creek surely had deeper and more complex understandings of place. The familiar daily routines of family and community were probably similar then and now. But the old-timers and ancients had more stores of knowledge about the natural environment--weather, geology, the life cycles of plants, and the habits of animals. They needed this knowledge to survive. Early people experienced a deep harmony with their environment. It was their home.

People nowadays rely on modern convenience, and approach nature as tourists. Kanab Creek seems to forgive us as we head further down canyon. A yellow clump of Cottonwood leaves outstanding in the red and brown desert backdrop welcomes us. Soon we reach the Esplanade, a red slick rock bench that outlines the sub-drainages of Kanab Canyon.



Red slick rock allows for quicker travel. I break a healthy sweat. Our group shades up under one of many mushroom-like mounds of red rock. I sip water and marvel at the view: a bowl of land, the shear sides of which plummet down to form slot canyons. The sun has dropped to just twenty degrees above the horizon; less than an hour and a half of daylight remains. It's time to move on.

We choose a camp at the head of a slick-rock drainage. Two 40-foot mushroom-like rocks stand side-by-side, casting shade in the center of a slick rock depression. Packs hit the ground with a thud. A Canyon Wren lets out a descending crescendo, as if laughing at our vulnerability. The group sits in a circle to divide up camp chores and talk about the day. I take time to read Lao Tzu to the students:

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise him...But of a good leader who talks little when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, 'We did it ourselves (2011).'

After the reading, students disperse and I remain sitting, drifting into thought. We practice outdoor leadership skills hoping to model Lao Tzu's quote. Kanab Creek easily accomplishes this by teaching both firmly and silently. I have experienced this many times. While visiting these canyons, life lessons are subtly slipped into our minds, left to germinate over time. After our adventure, my students and I will eventually have a feeling of personal growth and increased maturity. The complexities of life seem simpler. Students rarely know whom to credit for such a learning experience, sometimes saying, "We learned this ourselves." Other times, they credit me. I no longer fail to recognize nature as teacher. The grace in her delivery of knowledge amazes me.

A student interrupts my thoughts, asking me where to fill the water bottles. I direct her down canyon where seasonal potholes of water sit silently in the soft red sandstone. Floodwaters and rocky debris have sculpted these holes. Pebbles trapped in small holes -- over geologic time-- scour progressively larger holes into the rock. I decide to walk down canyon to check the supply of water.

Thirsty animals from all over the Esplanade rely on this water, just as we do this evening. This shared dependency brings a smile to my face. I feel a part of this place. The air cools as I walk down canyon. I smell water.

I kneel next to a full pothole, feeling the silence and my solitude. Small critters—tadpoles and "boatman bugs"--swim in the water. In a few days or weeks, the smaller potholes will evaporate and the critters living in them will have to adapt or die, just as I do.

Nature teaches experientially, providing direct feedback for your actions. The lessons learned in Kanab Creek are applicable to the moment. If water bugs fail to

adapt to their environment, their offspring will not survive. If I don't drink enough water, I will become dehydrated, feeling the effects immediately. Discomfort and death stare at you more intently in this place, the consequences are real. These types of lessons are hard to find in the front country -- it takes a long time for the signs of dehydration to set in when sitting on the couch - and are seldom applicable.

Classroom education is mostly intellectual theory not seen in practice. Experiential education—staring at tadpoles in Kanab Creek Wilderness, say—affects me on many levels—mental, physical, and emotional. I hold dear the lessons I receive here. They progressively shape my character, ethics, and philosophy.



The sun is going down. I walk back to camp sure that there will be plenty of water. My solitude is slowly lifted as I approach our little band of travelers. Steaming pots and the clanking of kitchenware alert me to start cooking.

I eat a big bowl of Mac and Cheese and crawl into my sleeping bag. I am the last to go to sleep. A clear sky means this will be a cold night; I stare at the stars. I am happy to be back in Kanab Creek. I am honored to have the opportunity to apprentice under such a wise leader and to learn from such a perfect teacher. I think about the days ahead, hoping for more of the pleasures and insights today has delivered. I catch my mind drifting toward the future and try to reel it in. The effort costs me what's left of my consciousness. My eyes fall shut and the dream world welcomes me home.

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Bio: John Lynch lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, where he works in the Parks and Recreation department at Northern Arizona University (NAU). His passions include guiding others and himself towards a more ecocentric and soulcentric way of being. He also enjoys wondering and wandering in both the inner and outer wilderness. He strives to integrate ecopsychological themes in every class he has the honor of instructing in hopes of making a small contribution to shifting social consciousness towards a more mature and sustainable future.