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Going to Tent Rocks

An encounter with the edge of understanding

Sally Manikian

I feel cluttered when there is no time to analyze experience.

—*May Sarton*



KASHA-KATUWE TENT ROCKS NATIONAL MONUMENT PRESENTED itself to me as unremarkable. It is roadside, a shortish drive off the main highway, and the acreage was small. There was only one trail in the canyon, and it was less than three miles long. It would not take a lot of time to go through the canyon, up to the ridge, see the sights, and be back to Santa Fe, where I was staying, in time for dinner. In short, unremarkable.

Thus, I tacked Tent Rocks onto the end of a day trip to the Petroglyph National Monument, where I enjoyed the sun on my shoulders and the blue sky above, but remained unmoved. After spending a morning in flat sandy basins, looking for drawings on rocks, I felt like an empty underserved vessel. Sleepy-eyed, thinking about returning home, I turned off the highway toward Tent Rocks.

And then I woke up.

The canyon walls were what struck me first, standing tall and clean in the desert sky. There was some kind of energy at work here. I pulled the car over and stared.

AFTER THIS AWE-STRIKING START, I COULD HAVE BECOME DISAPPOINTED, and almost was as I left the parking lot and approached the canyon itself. As roadside monuments can be, the first half-mile was sandy and flat, and sometimes paved. I watched lots of people and big plastic signs. The routes were chosen for us, numbered as easy, moderate, and difficult. There was no sense of wildness and difference, or silence and calm, walking along that well-defined and wide treadway.

As someone who has stewardship work, the work of designing sustainable natural areas, as her profession, I notice recreation management techniques, I notice erosion, I notice the language in signs. So much of my experience in the outdoors is affected by the perceptions of a trail worker; it is another lens in the wildlands that is hard for me to stop peering through. It is hard for me to shed all the roles I play, and just be.

I left the parking lot and entered the trails. I didn't feel deflated, and I didn't feel terribly curious, but I did continue. I continued through the first half-mile because I had open time in front of me. Nothing more immediate than the path underneath me needed my attention. I followed the path to the canyon that led into the heart of Tent Rocks itself.

Something happened when Sally Manikian entered the canyon and sensed the movement that had created this place. SALLY MANIKIAN

Something started when I entered the canyon.

It was the walls, the curves of the rocks, and the light, shifting with clouds. Waves of rock and light, a narrow space. The walls glowed. Globular formations of rock, striations, and ridges. The textures were smooth and loving. I know nothing about geology, but I began to sense the movement that created this place. It was clean.

Everything felt new, and I felt outside myself. The shock of the strange. The break that is precipitated by an encounter with the edge of our understanding. The rocks were different, the light was different, I was encountering an energy in the world that I did not know or feel before.

I couldn't stop staring, as I fully said aloud, "Oh my god." That feeling of a clean break, of smooth movement, continued when I left the slot canyon and the trail began to climb. Steeply at first, but then a switchbacked path, smooth and constant and at a grade steep enough to erode.

I looked back and saw the pointed hats of the tents, the rock formations that gave this place its name, and I felt something. I felt the awe at the way the earth chose to express itself in the canyon, in those rock formations. I felt openness and power.

I REACHED THE TOP QUICKLY. I HAD BEEN CLIMBING EAGERLY, enjoying the steeper pitch. I had been waiting to be challenged all day, as I had wandered around the flat basin desert around Albuquerque that morning.

The path followed the ridge out to an outlook. The path out was fairly unremarkable, as I skirted the top of the canyon and the rocks beneath. At the outlook itself, there were a handful of youths there, but they left as I approached, taking their chatter and their city clothing with them.

I had the outlook to myself. I sat for half an hour. I watched the clouds move, I measured the curves and formations of rocks against the high mesa and mountains behind. The place I was at was part of a large system, of space and history and time. Clean brown and white striations in rock, spots of green growth, and even higher ridgelines crowned the horizon.

I felt presence, in self and in landscape. Everything felt intact, unblemished. I felt whole. I was smiling, a relaxed and confident smile. That feeling, that view, was exactly what I had been looking for. It was a feeling I had felt on mountaintops, on lake sides, and at the edge of rivers before, no book or phone or notebook. I would just sit and watch, and listen. My mind becoming a place not of task-setting but of a gentle processing of what's happened, what's happening, and what's to come. A meditative place.

So, at the time, in the moment, I just felt good. I did some mild hiking math, considered what time I thought I'd be back in Santa Fe, and then I sat and settled into my bones. Silent.

THE TIME TO GO BACK DOWN CAME ONLY when I felt satisfied—so rested as to become restless.

The walk back down was simple, and a cooling down. I idly counted trash, I tried taking pictures, but the lighting had shifted, and I couldn't capture what I was seeing with my camera. So I stopped doing, stopped forceful action, and just watched, as I walked. Watched the canyon walls shift, as I moved. I felt small, I felt open. I felt connected and alive.

While still descending through the canyon, I had the distinct and palpable feeling that I wished I wasn't going back to a building, a car, a road, to electricity and water and lights. I wanted to stay out there, stay in the canyon.

Wake up in the morning and see how the light is different. I wanted to live that landscape, give over to its life cycle. I wanted to understand it by experiencing it. Like the way we want to learn more about new people we meet, I wanted to ask so many questions: What did the rocks feel like in December? What sort of light comes through the canyon in July? Do flowers bloom at the edge in March? What small creatures make their home here?

When I left the canyon, I turned to the rock formations, the tall obelisk points, and said aloud, without thinking, "Goodbye, friends." That should have been a sign.

AS I EXITED, I DECIDED TO TAKE A DIFFERENT LOOP BACK TO MY CAR. It curved up, and I began to take breath again, in and out, a steady pace, a pace I've cultured for over a decade of work in the White Mountains, enjoying the feeling of climbing again. I thought the magic had ended, as I walked along the wide floor at the base, edged by the sentries of walls.



Slot canyon, Tent Rocks.

SALLY MANIKIAN

Although I had only a half-mile left, I was not done with this journey yet. I reached the corner of the loop, and before I descended into the ridgeline-cast shadow that led to the parking lot, I paused. I looked all around, looked out across the openness, with my back to the canyon, I felt overwhelmed, with love and emotion. I felt full and light and alive.

I sat down, and touched the ground. Both hands. As my hands reached the ground, tears came into my eyes. I felt open and free and alone, and also small and connected.

The first person I thought of was a good friend, Mike, a highly spiritual person who walks the woods gently to connect with the spirits of his American Indian ancestors. "He'd understand," I thought.

I stood in front of the cave on the Cave Loop Trail, a small indentation at eye level that was part of the lives lived by people long before me. I thought immediately of my friend Mike, about the spirit of the place—whether the "old ones" (in Mike's language) or the Earth's spirit (in mine), when I heard pipes. Native pipes, undirected and haunting and singing a melody.

It was an echo that couldn't have been better timed by a filmmaker.

I ran into the pipe player a few minutes later and struck up a conversation with him, to share what his music had meant to me, and to learn about him.

"Why did you play at that moment?"

"It was just so beautiful," he said. "The Indians believe that the pipe is praying with your breath."

The appearance, by chance, of the pipe player suggested that I had experienced something I needed to pay attention to.

I sat at a picnic table in the parking lot, furiously scribbling in my notebook the chain of events and attendant emotions I've described. I tried to identify what it was I was supposed to pay attention to. I started with the question, "When did I last feel this way?"

This answer came easily: I felt this way when I worked as a caretaker, a steward of the backcountry who maintains trails, campsites, and so much more, a person who lives and thrives in the interaction between humans and wildlands. I felt this way when I lived and worked at the end of timberline and the high boreal forest of the White Mountains in New Hampshire and the Mahoosuc Range into Maine.

The crying in awe at the beauty of nature, the alpine zone in winter, the blowing snow and feathery rime. The thaw of spring and the water left in its wake. Green buds of leaves, electric in May sunshine. Juncos.

The sense of suspended time, the sense of longer time, the feeling of lightness of a simple stove and a tent. Of a Gray Knob winter, cold and clear.

What all that means now is this: the need to experience difference and rare beauty, to find self in landscape, to let the time pass, and to blur the edges between. I find it still, during those longer times in the mountains, when morning light passes through rime ice as I push uphill, when the sky and clouds spread above me on a ridgeline, and when the forest glows green in the afternoon as I head back to my car after a day working in the woods. Those are the times when I know what I am working to protect.

At these moments, something resurfaces. A sense of space, a sense of self, and the relationship between them. Something passes between me, and the system of grass and trees and dirt and sky. The feeling of my body moving under its own power, a body in motion, and the openness that creates. Stopping to experience beauty, the rime on the trees and the light reflecting off it. Bright blue sky as you stand equal to the peaks. I recall one time, when on the way back down from a wintry summit on a sunny day, I fell on my back in the snow, laughing at the sky and the dog that jumped on me.

I will never value a place by the length or grade of trail again. I will continue to search for the edge of experience, the expressions of beauty, in simple and clean moments. Thank you, Tent Rocks. Thank you.

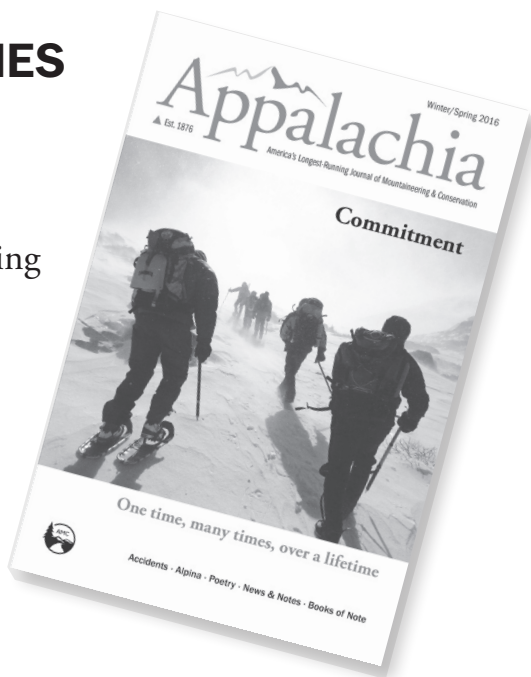
SALLY MANIKIAN is the author of essays for *Appalachia* that include “At the Edge of the Yard” (LXV no. 1), the story of losing her mother as she gained the mountains. She serves as the journal’s News and Notes editor and works as the Appalachian Mountain Club’s backcountry resource conservation manager. She lives in Shelburne, New Hampshire.

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