

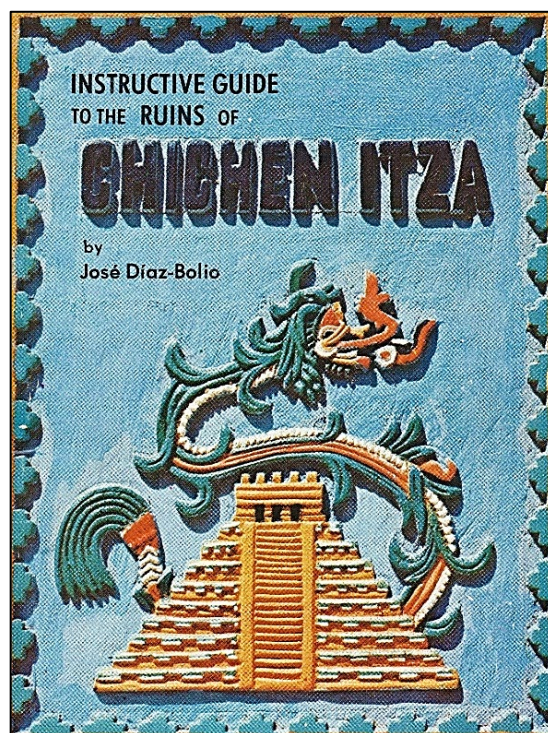
## The Jaguar's Teeth

When I was thirteen, I took a photograph that set me on a difficult path of questions and answers for the rest of my life.

It happened outside a stone building with a curiously rounded roof called *El Caracol* in the great ruined Mayan city of Chichen Itzá on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. It was the summer of 1974 and my parents had signed me up for a lengthy driving tour of Mexico organized by a private school that I didn't attend, most likely to get me out of their hair for five weeks. The tour had an archaeological focus and one of the main stops on the itinerary was Chichen Itzá. As usual, I separated myself from the rest of the group as quickly as possible, a guidebook in one hand and my sturdy Kodak Instamatic X-15 in the other. The camera was a small rectangle of plastic with a push-down lever for a shutter and a noisy dial near the eyepiece that advanced the film. A thin strap connected the camera to my thin wrist, which made the motion of drawing the Instamatic to my eye rather awkward.

But then, at thirteen everything I did felt awkward. I had already dropped the blasted thing twice. My heart leaped each time. I loved my little camera – after three long weeks away from home, it had become my best friend.

*El Caracol* means “snail” in Spanish and the guidebook described it as an observatory that the ancient Maya used to track the movements of celestial bodies. *Cool*. I hadn't experienced an observatory yet and I was eager to see one. I carefully threaded my way through the sprawling ruins, following the guidebook's map like a pro. By this point on the trip, I had explored temples, pyramids, damp underground vaults, vast plazas, spooky ball courts, jungle-encrusted arches, quiet palaces, beautifully colonnaded markets, and solitary, starling-infested structures of mysterious function. I especially liked to prowl the periphery of a site, where the line between order (the tidy, tourist-friendly grounds) and chaos (the jungle) blurred intriguingly. It was on these rough edges that a ruined city seemed most genuine and secretive. Exploring them stirred a romantic yearning



*The guidebook I used*

in my thirteen-year old soul, requiring that I literally wander off the beaten path, much to the consternation of our four chaperones. Not that they didn't try to stop me. When their early protests proved futile, however, they threw up their hands, letting me go where I wanted.

It was a sign of things to come.

The romantic yearning began during a visit to the first ruin on our trip, Tula, the capital of the Toltec Empire, north of Mexico City. Climbing out of our vehicles, I saw a wide staircase that



***Tula (my original photos)***

led to a flat-topped pyramid crowned with tall statues of human figures in elaborate costumes. I was instantly smitten. According to a guidebook, the Toltec Empire flourished a thousand years earlier. *Wow*. Back home in Phoenix, “old” meant anything built before World War II, including the feed store down the street that we frequented for horse supplies. I knew Phoenix had ‘risen from the ashes’ of a prehistoric village but so far I hadn’t discovered anything older than the feed store. Tula hit me like a freight train. I bounded up the steep stairs and wandered among the statues, whose martial bearing and vacant eyes fascinated me. Nearby, a human figure reclined on its back,

its knees bent and its head turned to one side. Resting on its stomach was a bowl, which its hands held carefully as if anticipating a delicate offering. It was a *chacmool*. What it anticipated was a bloody human heart. *Yikes!* Human sacrifice was part of the deal with the Toltecs, as it was for their imperial successors the famous Aztecs. I realized suddenly that I was a very long way from the feed store.

Exploring the pyramid, I felt jazzed for the first time all trip. Until then, I had been lonely and homesick, paying scant attention to the foreign sights that greeted me as we drove south. The tour consisted of two large vehicles, two sets of married adults, a dozen kids or so (of which I was the youngest), many cities, and near-constant driving. Only two stops had stood out. In Chihuahua, we met the ancient widow of Pancho Villa, who served us cookies in her living room. As we sat in stiff chairs, I gawked privately at a house that looked like a museum. Then in the charming town of Guanajuato, I deliberately broke away from the other kids, who seemed only interested in drinking and fooling around, and went on an impromptu solitary stroll down a narrow street. I





and tanks. A prehistoric temple, however, was something else. The beautiful scale model of the Temple of the Niches at El Tajín stopped me in my tracks. I scanned the map on an adjacent wall. Where *was* El Tajín? How could I get there? The museum's Mayan rooms were even better. "The models, pictures, maps and stele were great," I wrote enthusiastically in my journal. "I like very much the tomb of Palenque but I did not take a picture because I will see the real thing. The models helped me to figure out where to take my pictures."

After lunch in the cafeteria, I charged into the Aztec room, home to the famous circular stone calendar, where I lingered so long that our chaperones grew irritable again. They probably couldn't decide who was more exasperating, the bored, ever-partying older kids or the nerdy, ever-



***Museum of Anthropology***

straying one in dorky glasses. When it came time to leave the museum and go back to the hotel, they granted me permission to stay longer, probably out of relief. Thrilled, I wandered around until closing time, fanning the flames of my curiosity, but also paying a price when I became lost briefly on the walk back to the hotel. Worse, the door to my room was locked and I didn't have a key. I had no idea where the group had gone so I drifted outside intending to find a bench where I could read a book on the history of Mexico that I had purchased in the museum bookstore, only to be badgered by a peddler until I agreed to an unnecessary shoeshine (for *mucho* pesos).

I managed to get lost again the following day, this time during a visit to the ancient city of Teotihuacan. It started with a nauseating exchange of flirtations at the foot of the Temple of the Moon between my roommate and a girl on the tour that he had an eye on. To demonstrate his virility, he hustled to the top of the steep staircase without a pause drawing exaggerated oohs from the girl. It made me sick to my thirteen-year old stomach, so I spun on my heel and headed for the other great pyramid in town, the massive Temple of the Sun, telling a chaperone I would be "right back." He didn't stop me, so off I went alone (those were the days). After climbing up and down the pyramid's huge staircase without the benefit of an admiring audience, I headed down the Avenue of the Dead to the lovely and mysterious Temple of Quetzalcoatl. To my delight, the sculptured heads of feathered serpents and round-eyed gods that festooned the temple were immediately recognizable – copies adorned our favorite Mexican restaurant back in Phoenix!

More ruined cities followed: Monte Albán, Yagul, Mitla, La Venta, Palenque, Uxmal, Kabah, Chichen Itzá, and lastly, Tulum, perched attractively on Yucatan's east coast. It was an unending feast for hungry eyes. I saw huge stone Olmec heads, lovely Mayan friezes, carved sarcophagi, and delicately-façaded temples. I climbed up broken stairs, crawled through dank tunnels, and stared wistfully at forbidding mounds of ruins in the verdant distance. I bought fraudulent artifacts from a local "farmer," pulled a dirty shard of pottery from the slope below a decaying building, ran my hand along thick Spanish city walls, prowled markets for souvenirs, fretted whether the crocodiles at a stinky zoo were dead or alive, swatted at a steady assault of mosquitoes (also a novelty), eavesdropped on English-speaking guides, and raised my eyebrows when I learned that one of the chaperones had to bribe a Mexican policeman to leave a traffic accident. In between, I read in my history book and ignored the other kids who seemed as relentlessly focused on beer and smooching as ever. I also took lots and lots of photos.



**Mitla**



**Palenque**

The traffic accident caused us to miss the Mayan city of Uxmal. We arrived shortly after closing time, which made me quietly angry (we were habitually late to things because the kids were such sleepyheads). Sensing my indignation, one of the chaperones kindly volunteered to return to Uxmal the next day, which they had scheduled as a layover in Merida, Yucatan's capital. Who wanted to go, he asked? I raised a hand, as did my roommate. Two other kids wanted to go as well. The trip was on. Stoked, the following morning I rose early and went searching through the streets of Merida for a tour company that would take me to the Mayan ruins of Labna and Sayil, which I wanted to see as well. I sought a half-day outing, figuring there would be plenty of time to see Uxmal in the afternoon as planned. I was certain the chaperones would let me go and if no one else wanted to come along, I'd go by myself. I found a guided tour and triumphantly beelined back to the hotel, where the chaperones scotched my plan *muy pronto*. I was disappointed, but the search itself had been very educational.

*I learned I could seek and find things on my own.*

Uxmal was amazing. Released from the car, I climbed straight up the towering Pyramid of the Magician, clutching the heavy chain that officials had placed on the stairs for us unsteady tourists. The view from the top was heart-stopping. Built during the Mayan Classic Period (circa 900 AD) out of lovely yellow stone, Uxmal became a major administrative center for the region with an architectural style that was both unique and beautiful. For a time, the city prospered and grew fat. Then it fell to conquering Toltecs (from Tula!) who subdued the entire region within a few decades. Soon, the entire Mayan civilization collapsed into nothingness. According to my history book, the reasons for the collapse were shrouded in mystery, creating one of the great enigmas of archaeology. Questions filled my mind as I wandered through the lovely ruins. *What happened to the Maya? What was the crisis? How could a beautiful place like Uxmal be abandoned like that? Where did everyone go?*



**Uxmal**

This was just the start. Uxmal mesmerized me with its mystery and quiet beauty, provoking more questions as I walked. *Why did Uxmal look different from other Mayan cities? Where did everybody live? What went on in these rooms? What happened after the Toltecs took over?* After taking too many photographs of the stately Governor's Palace, I decided to head over to the House of the Doves. I didn't make it. "I wanted to get over to some buildings," I wrote later in my journal. "I found a path, so I followed it. I did not have any bug spray and I was sorry. Bugs attacked me from all sides. It started to rain, so I hid in a temple in the cemetery group...The ride back [to Merida] was done in rain and overcast skies. They talked about beer most of the way."

Uxmal had pushed my adolescent yearning up a big notch. On the drive back, I closed my eyes and wished with every ounce of my teenage heart that the jungle would magically lift, just for a moment, revealing hidden ruins and answers to my questions. I squeezed my eyes tight, concentrating. I didn't want fame or fortune. I wasn't looking for Mayan gold or Spanish treasure. I just wanted to *know*. What had happened out there in the jungle thickness? I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. I tried again, praying earnestly to a deity, any deity, for a quick peek under the jungle, asking it to lift it like a vast green rug. I opened one eye. Nope. I tried again. *Nada*. I sighed. I knew I was being childish. I felt embarrassed and scanned my fellow passengers. No one had noticed my prayerful behavior. As I turned my gaze back to the leafy foliage zipping past us,

embarrassment gave way to disappointment. There were no shortcuts to answers, I realized, no accommodating deities available to lift jungle rugs. If I wanted answers to my questions, I would have to work for them. I settled in for a doze.

Our next stop was Chichen Itzá. Resupplied with film and burning brightly again with curiosity, I headed into the heart of the magnificent, ruined city, aiming for *El Caracol*. Every building that I had seen so far was square so when the round form of the observatory came into view, with its roof eroded at a rakish angle, I knew I needed a photograph. Excitedly, I snapped a quick one, climbed the stairs to a large platform and snapped another. Satisfied for the moment, I looked around, drinking in the marvelous view of the great city. Walking to the edge of the platform, I saw a square-shaped building a short distance away, which my map identified as the Nunnery. It was pretty, so I lifted my little Instamatic to my eye, framed the image carefully, groped for the shutter lever with my finger, and...hesitated.

Something was wrong.

I peered again through the X-15's tiny viewfinder. I suddenly realized what it was: the picture was boring. I had snapped this photo a hundred times. I needed a new angle. Craning my neck, I looked around for inspiration. Suddenly, I spied what looked like a life-size stone jaguar nearby, its mouth stretched wide in a silent, defiant roar. This gave me an idea. I walked over and bent down behind it so I could frame the Nunnery in the middle of the jaguar's gaping mouth. Looking through the camera's viewfinder, I saw the teeth of the jaguar about to close ravenously on the hapless edifice. *Chomp!*

I pushed the lever down.



***The Jaguar's Teeth***

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The photo of the set me on a difficult path because it established a pattern of responding to left-brain questions (science) with right-brain answers (art). Although I had fact-based questions about the world – lots of them as it turned out – I knew early on that I would never be a scientist or an academic. I also knew I couldn't be 'just' a creative person, focused on shape, color, words, or other forms of interpretation and self-expression. I wanted to do both. How? Answering *that*



question has occupied me since my visit to Chichen Itzá. Making matters more complicated, I also knew early on that I wouldn't be content in any single genre or mode of expression. I wasn't sure why I knew that exactly, though I probably detected early signs of the creative restlessness that would become a big part of my journey. My right-brain responses needed to be as diverse as the left-brain questions that motivated them. For instance, I decided early on that I wanted to write a novel someday. I knew that fiction was a way to get at certain truths inaccessible to nonfiction. I wanted to challenge myself to see if I could write a readable story. I could never *be* a novelist, however. I had too many questions that were better addressed by nonfiction. I knew it was crazy to do the left-brain/right-brain thing in different creative modes, but that's how I felt. I faced a steep hill, as I quickly discovered: how does one make a *career* creating right-brain answers to left-brain questions? I had no idea. Only one thing seemed certain, there wasn't a prepared path.

I had to make my own.

***First up for the left side of my brain was archaeology, fired by my Mexican adventure, followed closely by my right-brain responses: photography and filmmaking.***

Shortly after returning home from Mexico that summer in 1974, I signed up with the local chapter of the Arizona Archaeological Society, a well-respected amateur organization. I became an active member, attending meetings and participating in an archaeological dig they directed at



***Digging at Pueblo Grande***

Casa de Piedras, a prehistoric ruin on the northwestern edge of Phoenix. I soaked up everything like a sponge. I even tried to decipher scholarly articles in their journal. I especially enjoyed the digging. Arriving at the ruin, I would be assigned a 1m x 1m square of unassuming dirt and handed a sifting screen, bucket, dustpan, brush, notebook, and line level. Digging in 10cm increments followed. I had to bring my own trowel, which was possibly the coolest tool in the world. At the end of the day, covered in dirt and sweat, I'd wait patiently for my father to fetch me, feeling exhilarated. The following summer I volunteered at Pueblo Grande, a city-owned archaeological park on the Salt River that protected a remnant of the prehistoric Hohokam civilization. I

joined a professional archaeological team digging in the ruin, reassembled prehistoric pots in the laboratory (similar to a 3-D puzzle), helped construct educational displays, observed the oddball staff at work, and had the pleasure of wandering the grounds during breaks, casting my imagination back to a long-lost era before the mythical Phoenix was consumed by fire.



A cascade of archaeology followed, starting with a volunteer gig in the ceramics laboratory of the Anthropology Department at Arizona State University, where the staff was more than happy to have an energetic fifteen-year old wash thousands of broken pieces of pottery for them – and I was happy to do it. Next came a summer of volunteering on ASU-led excavations of archaeological sites in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona in 1978 where I had the educational experience of observing graduate students at work and play for the first time, including drinking contests, water balloon ambushes, noisy broken hearts, and even a brief fist fight. I comported myself well enough through it all, apparently, to be hired by ASU the following summer. The project was a multi-year archaeological survey of watersheds around Phoenix, an important step in the controversial process of picking a site for the construction of a dam and reservoir for the city's ceaseless growth. The bigger picture aside, I was thrilled to become an actual paid archaeologist (at the eye-popping rate of \$3.33 an hour). When my first paycheck arrived, I was seriously amazed.

I took a camera along with me on the surveys that ensued over the next two summers. I had replaced my trusty X-15 with a 35mm Pentax halfway through high school so I could take photos of nature and friends during camping and backpacking trips. Inevitably, I caught the photography bug. I bought lenses, filters, different types of film, a sturdy tripod and began to experiment with each for fun. I didn't have big questions in mind, though the Pentax was often pointed at people in nature, capturing our relationship with land. For the surveys, I decided to shoot in black-and-white, partly out of an artistic impulse but also because I felt a like I was a photojournalist recording the activities of the archaeologists I had joined. The two summers became a grand adventure. We hiked and camped in remote and rugged country, swam in lakes and rivers, rode horses, 4-wheeled down rutted roads, and took boats to reach distant survey locations. The project's goal – recording previously unknown prehistoric ruins for posterity – felt secondary at times to the quest itself. We worked from sunrise to sunset, walking long transects often under the relentless desert sun. Shade was sparse. Water runs were infrequent. We endured sore muscles, flat tires, wrong turns, dead batteries, broken axles, a stolen boat, and lost tempers. I loved it. I was enraptured by the people and the land. We saw amazing sights. I took lots of photos.

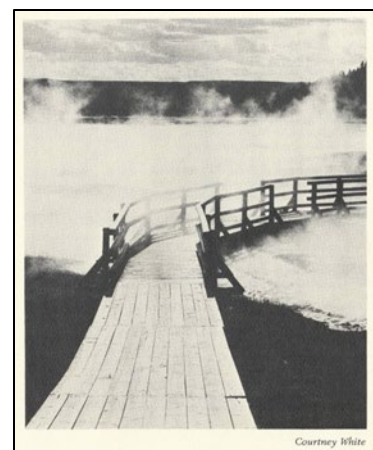


*On survey with ASU (I'm on the left)*

Everything went up a level during my final stint with ASU. After graduating from college, I spent a year on the crew of ASU's excavation of La Ciudad, a sprawling prehistoric Hohokam village near the Phoenix airport destined to be obliterated by a new freeway on-ramp (the growth thing again). My black-and-white photographic goal this time was more artistic than documentary, focused on composition, expression, and capturing the personalities of people involved in the dig. It must have impressed someone in charge – a selection of photos that I donated ended up gracing the walls of the Department of Anthropology for a time!

The many left-brain questions about people, prehistory, and the desert generated by all this archaeology propelled me apply to Reed College, in Portland, Oregon. It was a long shot. My high school grades reflected a record of academic underachievement, to put it mildly. They let me in anyway – and it changed my life. At the time, Reed was proudly iconoclastic. It imbued students with a healthy skepticism of authority and pushed them to challenge all things doctrinaire, which I took to heart. Alas, the intellectual goals of this philosophy were harder to achieve. Teachers encouraged dissent in the classroom, creating lively, weekly Socratic slugfests that bewildered me. Pushed into the deep end of the academic pool, I struggled to stay afloat. I was saved by my major: Anthropology. A challenge with archaeology is that everyone is dead and gone, leaving us with scraps of their lives, often literally. Anthropology, in contrast, is alive. It's full of people, places, cultures, traditions, songs, and food, some exotic, some not, but each vastly different from the all-white, post-war suburban world I grew up in. I dived in. My archaeological experience pushed me to pursue one interest in particular: the relationships between people and land. Questions came quickly: How did people make a living on the land traditionally? Why are western cultures so hard on the natural world? Are there different ways to express what we've learned? This last question led me to ethnographic film – and a big leap. For my thesis advisor I chose the most intimidating professor in the department. What ensued was the most nerve-wracking year of my life. In the end, I earned an 'A' for a 100-page thesis on anthropological film that was praised by my committee for its originality.

Meanwhile, my right-brain was busy with photography. At the start of my Junior year, *Exile*, the student-run literary magazine, published three black-and-white photos I shot on a cross-country sojourn with Gen. That led to a volunteer job as a photographer for Reed's yearbook, *The Griffin*, which led unexpectedly to a promotion as the publication's editor. I found myself



taking photos all over campus and spending many, many hours in the campus darkroom (to the detriment of my grades). Piling on, I brought my father's vintage 16mm movie camera to school, which led to a spate of amateur movie-making, including a spoof called *Gidget Goes To Reed*. Intrigued by filmmaking, I spent the summer before my Senior year in Portland making a kind of music video, shot on black-and-white film and set to the music of J.S. Bach (I learned later that MTV debuted that August). Later, I made a sequel. Both were artistic, right-brain endeavors with no purpose other than pure expression. Enthralled now by the world of cinema, I took a class in Japanese cinema, enrolled in a film editing class at a downtown art school, hit the indie movie halls, and cracked books on film theory.

It pointed in one direction: graduate school in filmmaking. Enamored of Australia's New Wave of cinema cresting at the time, I searched for a school by travelling Down Under but ended up applying to UCLA's well-known film program instead. To my surprise (again), I was accepted.



***Mostly Ash and Pottery***

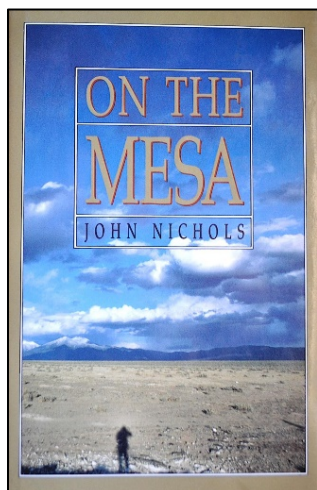
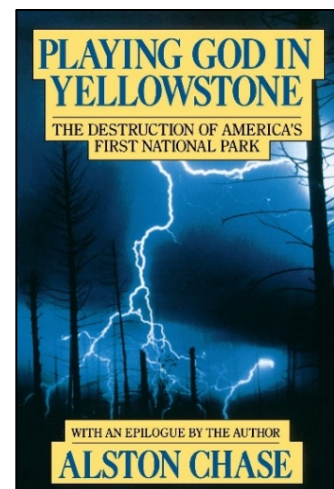
I packed eagerly and left for Los Angeles in the fall of 1983, launching an exhilarating and exhausting two-year marathon. I intended to make documentaries addressing left-brain questions about people and nature, but the strong gravitational pull of nearby Hollywood combined with the meager career prospects for nonfiction filmmaking meant a quick switch to drama. Energetic and overeager by nature, I took too many classes and spent too many long days in Melnitz Hall, mostly in darkened rooms. My advisor was Lou Stoumen, a decorated photographer and documentary filmmaker. We became friends and he helped me stay sane. For my final project, I poured every ounce of left-brain thinking and right-brain

creativity I had into writing and directing a too-long dramatic film about archaeologists on survey titled *Mostly Ash and Pottery*. The effort nearly killed me. The remote desert shoot was logistically taxing and emotionally draining (complicated by a volatile cinematographer). It also wiped out my bank account. Long nights in an editing room followed. When it was all over, I was pleased with the film. I had done a pretty good job of answering left-brain questions in a dramatic film format. But it had come at a big cost. Exhausted on all levels, I dropped out of school two classes short of an MFA degree (which I regret) and took a desk job in the basement of the UCLA's main library in an effort to recover my spirits and my finances.

Both took a while.



I had careened from the ordered, left-brain life of Reed to the right-brain chaos of film school and hit a wall. It felt like a dead end. I needed a new mission, one with more left-brain/right-brain balance and less late nights. I found it in an unexpected place: at my day job. I worked in the Acquisitions division of the library which involved processing the many new books purchased by the institution every year. The diverse titles that crossed my desk daily was like having a private window on the world (in those pre-Internet days). Some books kept catching my eye and soon I realized they had a theme: the American West. My homeland. Two struck home. The first was *Playing God in Yellowstone* by Alston Chase, a journalist with a libertarian bent who castigated the National Park Service for mismanaging the land under its care. This upset me. I loved our national parks, having hiked and camped in many. I had caught the conservation bug in college, stirred to action by President Reagan's selection of James Watt, a radical anti-environmental lawyer, to be Secretary of the

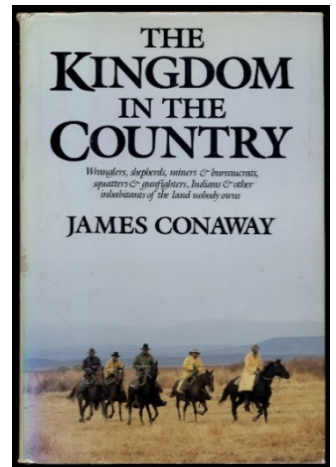


Interior. Our public lands were sacred places. So why was Chase attacking the managers of Yellowstone, our nation's crown jewel? Why did he think public lands were being destroyed? I checked out the book as soon as it hit the library shelves. The second was *On The Mesa* by novelist John Nichols. It was a slim, affectionate paean to a patch of cold high desert country near his home in Taos, New Mexico. Although nothing much happened in the book, I was hooked by Nichols' evocative descriptions of the land, the characters, the history, and the culture of northern New Mexico (shades of things to come). All of it was new and exciting. Reading it, I felt like I was breaking the surface of a dark lake and breathing fresh air again. His words filled my lungs.

I decided I wanted to know more. During breaks, I headed into the book stacks. The section on the American West was neatly organized, so I read systematically, state-by-state, in proper left-brain style. I read whatever I fancied. All sorts of questions came swimming off the pages. Many involved the cliches and stereotypes of the region that I had grown up with over the years. I knew they were propaganda, but I began to see more clearly how terribly injurious they were, especially to women and Native Americans. At the same time, I tried to square this corrected myth of the West with the fabulous one portrayed in Edward Abbey's deliberately provocative novels, which I ate up during my college years. Abbey evoked cliches too in his cause, including caricatures of

rural politicians, greedy developers, and overgrazing ranchers. And yet, his heroic self-righteous environmental activists were caricatures too. For help, I turned to Wallace Stegner. I had read one or two of his nonfiction books, but now I dug in deep. There were many Wests, he noted, each layered over the other in complex ways, raising anguished questions (I picked up this term from Stegner). Broadly, the West could be divided into Boomers (oil companies, tourists) and Stickers (settlers, ranchers). They often operated in conflict, with consequences for all. Then there was the land, glorious and inspiring, full of big dreams and hard truths. It was a land of mirages, including its apparently endless bounty. In reality, Stegner warned, the West is defined by its abiding aridity, a fact that was conveniently overlooked by nearly everyone and now looms ominously over the region under man-made climate change.

The clash between clichés, old and new, with the physical and historical realities in the region raised a ton of anguished questions for me. Why, for example, did the (white male) cowboy continue to dominate popular imagination when they were essentially extinct? I was sure there were more archaeologists at work in the region than cowboys. But where were archaeologists in words or imagery? Farmers? Tourists? Or Native Americans? Journalist James Conaway asked the same question in his 1987 book *Kingdom in the Country*, which I read and ate up. Conaway traveled around the West in a van exploring its diversity and dynamism with a focus on public lands. The subtitle said it all: *Wranglers, shepherds, miners, bureaucrats, squatters, gunfighters, Indians, and other inhabitants of the land nobody owns*. That was my West – the West I knew.



It all came together in early 1988, when I came across a book in the library about the West's (in)famous frontier. I learned that the U.S. Census Bureau declared the frontier closed in 1890, concluding a significant chapter in American history. In a mere two years we would be marking the centennial of this landmark event. Thinking about Conaway's book, my left-brain kicked in, asking: was the frontier actually gone or had it metamorphosed into something else? If it had, what was it exactly? What did it look like? My right-brain responded: let's buy a medium-format camera and find out! It was time to take photographs again. This decision netted two books and marked the beginning of my formal career in left brain/right brain work. The first book was a documentary look at a week-in-the-life of an archaeological survey titled *In the Land of the Delight-Makers*, published by the University of Utah Press in 1991. The second book was the frontier photography

project, *The Indelible West*, which garnered a Foreword by Wallace Stegner (I showed him the book and he agreed!). I wasn't a professional photographer or writer, having never taken a class in either subject. I just thought up the projects, took pictures, wrote words, and then prayed to the publishing gods. Unfortunately, they weren't listening. Despite strong reviews, *Delight-Makers* went straight to the out-of-print bins. The frontier project seemed destined for a happier fate. Boosted by Stegner's praise and assisted by an freelance agent/editor, the book netted a contract with an academic press and nearly made it into print. Nearly. A last-minute rejection by the press followed by a quick-as-lightning abandonment by the agent/editor, stopped the project in its tracks. I tried to find another publisher, without success. I put *Indelible West* on a shelf, next to my unsold copies of *Delight-Makers*. My photographic aspirations had hit a brick wall.

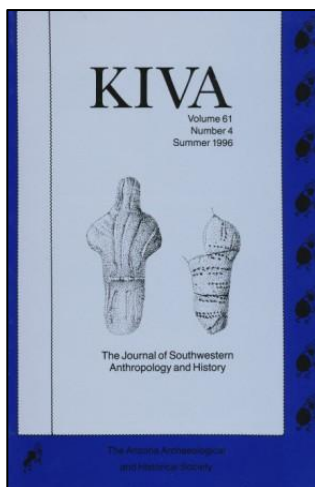
I took a bit of solace from a wholly different right-brain medium. After leaving film school, I poured a bunch of creative energy into writing screenplays, mostly on ecological themes. It began with an obituary I read in the paper about the suicide of Roy Sullivan, a National Park ranger who had been struck by lightning seven times during his life and survived! Haunted by approaching storms he became afraid to go outside. The story felt terribly Shakespearian and had potential for commentary about our times, but I never found the right tone or plot. I shifted to an eco-thriller set in a small town in southeastern Alaska with more success. Eco-radicalism was getting headlines at the time led by a group called Earth First! and I thought the destruction of a timber mill made a good cover story for the bad guy. The screenplay, titled *The Last Frontier*, netted me a colorful agent, a friendly producer, and a classic Hollywood meeting with a rising actor and the gruff head of a production company. We met in a fancy office high above Sunset Boulevard with a distracting view out a window. In the end, the view – and \$3500 – was all I earned from the meeting. I didn't give up. I camped out in my agent's office, chatting with his strange co-agents, and went with him on shoe-buying sojourns around town. Everything was surreal. It felt like I had discovered a tribe of people whose behavior was utterly foreign. We spoke English, but I didn't understand a word. I felt lost. I was far from my dirt-under-my-fingernails archaeology days. I liked the allure of Hollywood and the jazzy feeling I had driving around LA with the agent in his nice car, but I missed real things, like trees, creeks, horses, the desert. Land. Normal people. I liked exploring left-brain themes in right-brain screenplays, but I wanted to live in the real world too. Between the photographic brick wall and surreality of Hollywood, my lost feeling grew.

I decided it was time to move on.



***I now shifted to a new left-brain arena of work – conservation – expressed in right-brain mediums of writing, activism, and the Quivira Coalition, a nonprofit I cofounded and directed.***

In the fall of 1991, Gen and I relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, so she could accept a position as a research archaeologist with the National Park Service. Needing a job myself, the following summer I applied for a seasonal position at nearby Pecos National Historical Park as an



archaeologist. My duties involved documenting historical architecture in the park as they were worked on by the maintenance crew, principally walls in the Spanish colonial church and convento. I loved working with the crew, all locals, and spent many lunch hours with them swapping stories and eating fiery chile peppers. Happily, one season of work stretched into four. Inevitably, I stepped outside the boundaries of my assigned duties soon. I teamed up with Jake Ivey, an architectural historian with the Park Service, whose research aimed to detangle the complex history of the Spanish colonial buildings in the park. It quickly engaged both sides of my brain. The left-side created a typology of adobe bricks in the walls according to their size and color and linked it to the

architectural sequencing in the ruins, netting me a published paper in *Kiva*, a peer-reviewed archaeology journal. It also netted me a presentation at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (in New Orleans!).

To satisfy my right-brain, I wrote a short book about my experience at Pecos. I had intended to meditate on the mission of the National Park Service in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a serious topic of discussion at the time (provoked by a major report called the *Vail Agenda*). I loved our national parks. I grew up with them, hiking, camping, and singing their praises. Like many of my generation, I believed national parks stood at the apex of conservation. However, times were changing. New thinking and practices, especially around sustainability (a term just coming into vogue), were raising questions about limits to the old ‘fortress’ model of conservation represented by parks and wilderness areas. Lastly, lurking in the background was a new worry: climate change, a condition that challenged the very premise of ‘protecting’ land from harm. Fortresses no more. I decided to drop the meditation and write a history of the park instead from the perspective of an admiring employee, calling it *Knowing Pecos*. After finishing the short book, I put it on a shelf (with the other books). That’s because my life was suddenly going in a different direction.



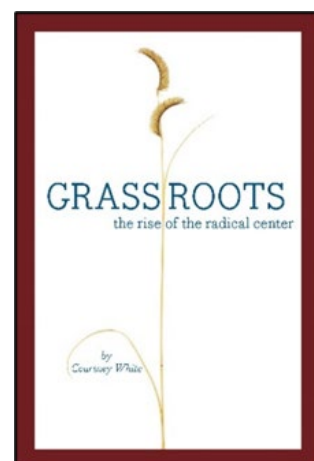
On November 8, 1994, Rep. Newt Gingrich led the so-called “Republican Revolution” in the mid-term Congressional elections for the House of Representatives, ending nearly four decades of control by Democrats. Among many outrages, they vowed to overturn a generation’s worth of



environmental legislation. Shocked and worried, I rang the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club the next day, signing up as a foot soldier in what I suspected would be a bruising fight. I had been a member of various environmental organizations since my Reed days, but I had not been active. That would change. Soon, I was lobbying legislators, writing op-eds, and organizing workshops. I also began to write. I asked Barbara Johnson, the editor of the Sierra Club’s New Mexico Chapter newsletter and a member of the Santa Fe Group, if I could author a regular column as part of the push-back against Newt and Co. She agreed and in September 1995, the first column appeared, launching my brief and contentious career as a Sierra Club activist.

At the time, activists and ranches and loggers were engaged in a decades-old blood feud over public lands. The upshot: Republicans were laughing all the way to the bank. Exercising my Reed training, I decided to ask anguished questions in my column that challenged cherished orthodoxies: Was environmentalism partly to blame for the political backlash represented by the ‘Republican Revolution’? Was the movement stuck in its ways and it out-of-sync with a changing world? Why was it so anti-rural? Why did environmental solutions to land use challenges such as overgrazing and logging always carry the maximum penalize for rural communities? Why wasn’t culture taken into consideration? Why did activists have a deaf ear to issues about poverty, race, and historical injustice? Why did they turn a blind eye to progressive land management strategies, such as holistic ranching practices that worked on ecological principles? Couldn’t we find common ground with rural allies? Was there no way across urban-rural divides?

For my impertinence, I was vigorously attacked by a small group of hard-core activists in the Club, some of whom tried to get me expelled. I persisted in my column writing, however, enjoying its right-brain satisfactions. I had discovered that I loved writing. It was just the start of what would be an outpouring of words. Over next sixteen years, I would write three separate columns, totaling 75,000 words, covering a wide variety of left-brain topics and questions, reflecting my evolving concerns about a rapidly changing world. I eventually collected the columns into a book, titled *Grassroots: the Rise of the Radical Center*.



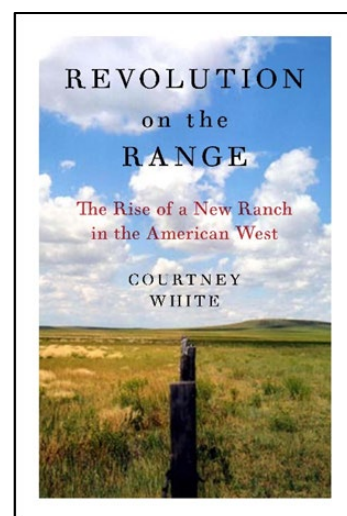
In 1997, I decided to walk my talk when I cofounded the Quivira Coalition with a rancher and another conservationist. Quivira was my right-brain attempt to answer an anguished question that loomed large at the time: how could conservationists and ranchers get along better? We had a



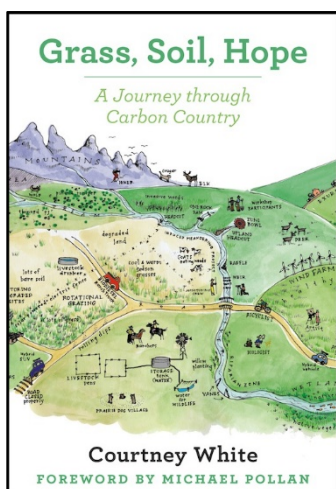
lot in common: a love of wildlife, a deep respect for nature, an appreciation for a life lived outdoors, and concerns for healthy water, food, and land. Quivira meant my left-brain now wrestled with a steady

stream of anguished questions: How do we heal damaged relationships and damaged land? How do we get beyond conflict? How can we energize the radical center and make progress? How can she share solutions? Bridge urban-rural divides? At the same time, Quivira was a creative endeavor that allowed my right-brain to write, take photos, give talks, organize conferences, and think of new projects. It was exactly like exploring a new land – which is what *Quivira* designated on old Spanish maps. Any exploration requires logical thinking *and* gut intuition and creative energy. In the beginning, we flew by the seat of our pants which was exciting and terrifying in equal measures. Eventually, we learned to fly pretty well. The view was amazing. Best of all were the incredible people we met along the way, including ranchers, conservationists, scientists, and agency folk, some of whom I tried capture in my book *Revolution on the Range*.

In 1998, Gen and I were blessed with the births of Sterling and Olivia, learning that parenting is the most challenging and rewarding left/right brain experience of all! Combined with Quivira, it was an amazing adventure: kids, cows, camping, fixing creeks, building relationships, growing an organization,

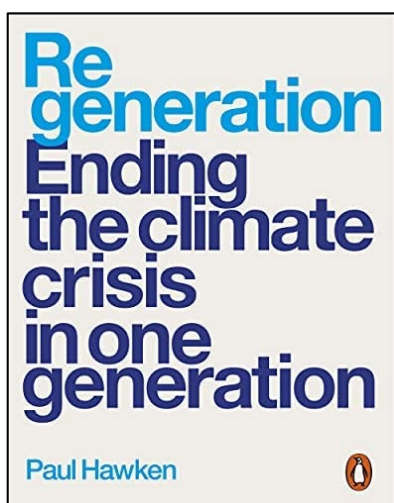


trying to make a difference. My left/right-brain demands balanced each other and the winding path of my life straightened out for a while. However, in 2010 I began to feel restless again, augmented by my impending fiftieth birthday. I decided to embrace an idea I had about soil carbon and agriculture, debuting the concept of a ‘carbon ranch’ at Quivira’s annual conference that fall. As it turns out, we were in the vanguard of the soil carbon movement that would soon be called regenerative agriculture. I decided to do my part by writing books and articles on the topic. This effort culminated in *Grass, Soil, Hope: a Journey Through Carbon Country* published by Chelsea Green in 2014.





At the end of 2015, I left the Quivira Coalition to write full-time. By this point, my left-brain questions had become both bigger and smaller: bigger because the challenges confronting the world continued to grow in scary and anguished ways, and smaller because I had reached a point in my journey when focusing on helping others tell their stories and get the word out had become important to me. To this end, I embarked on a co-authorship project for Chelsea Green focused on innovators in regenerative agriculture. Between 2017 and 2022, I worked on three books. The first was *Dirt to Soil: One Family's Journey Into Regenerative Agriculture* by Gabe Brown, a pioneering farmer in North Dakota. The second was *Fibershed* by Rebecca Burgess, a visionary nonprofit director and activist based in northern California. The third was *The Great Regeneration* by Dorn Cox, a brilliant farmer in New Hampshire working at the interface of open source, digital technology, and carbon farming. These were wonderful projects, and I was happy to help. There was one downside, however: the writing process proved to be time-consuming, complicated, and unexpectedly stressful at times. Co-authorship is not for the faint of



heart, I discovered. Nevertheless, in 2020 I entered another co-authorship relationship when I agreed to be the senior writer for well-known author and activist Paul Hawken's new book titled *Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation*, which was published in September of 2021.

I loved all these books and projects and good people, but privately my heart was sinking. Things were getting worse in the world, not better despite everyone's hard work. The climate crisis continued unabated, growing more calamitous by the month. Fires, floods, heat waves, and human suffering filled the headlines. Meanwhile, the sixth mass

biological extinction in history was spreading hand-in-hand with climate breakdown. These weren't casual opinions – I read the science every day as part of my work. Then there was the COVID pandemic, followed by the attempted political coup by President Trump – culminating in the shocking assault on the Capitol Building. Then came the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in early 2022. Combined, it created a bleak portrait of the future. Some days it was hard to keep up the fight. What was I doing, I wondered?

On a hike in the Swiss Alps in July 2022, I decided to close out not only this chapter of my work but leave the save-the-world work behind altogether. Call it career. I wanted to tell stories – stories I had put on hold while trying to save things. Stories of my life. The ranch mystery series. A novel that had I completed but not published. A family saga. On my sixtieth birthday, I had begun researching my family roots. I knew that the Lacy side of my family reached all the way



back to Lassy, Normandy, circa 1020 AD. Two de Lacy brothers, Walter and Gilbert, both fought with William the Conqueror (another ancestor) at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 before becoming major landowners and barons. That sounded intriguing! It was just the beginning, as it turned out. There was so much more: vikings, kings, earls, crusaders, countesses, murderers, warriors, scoundrels, bastards, explorers, settlers, slave-owners, preachers, and rebels. They sought plunder, power, and wealth, enduring loss, love, death, and redemption. My family! This is what I wanted to do now, tell stories. Leave the anguish alone – I had plenty of that in my own life.

Unhappily, I had gone to the Alps solo. I had accepted an invitation from my cousin Meg Stuart, a successful choreographer based in Berlin, to attend two performances of her work at a dance festival in Bolzano, Italy. I had never been to Switzerland, so I decided to see the Alps beforehand. Gen would have gone too, side-by-side on another travel adventure together. No more. Her health had taken a major turn for the worse in the spring. Her recovery from heart surgery the previous year had gone well, but during the winter her cancer spread. She became progressively weaker. She kept her chin up. Bravely, she fulfilled a commitment to act in a production of Hamlet in May, doing an incredible job. But it used up precious reserves. I wanted to stay home, but she insisted that I go on my trip without her. That was hard to hear and really, really hard to do. I cried my eyes out in a Swiss parking lot. The week before my departure, she heeded her doctor's advice to stop her cancer treatments, knowing perfectly well what that meant. After more than forty years together, I suddenly faced a future without her. It was too much anguish. I didn't need to carry the world's burdens too. It was time to seek a new path, wherever it might lead.



Not long after visiting Chichen Itzá in the summer of 1974, my little journal fell silent for the remainder of the journey. Thumbing through it, I was puzzled at first then I remembered why. After our group arrived at a small resort on the coast of Yucatan, not far from the lovely Mayan

ruin of Tulum, I came down with a high fever after snorkeling in the ocean and spent two days sweating profusely under a mountain of blankets in a thatch hut. I don't remember ever learning what caused the fever, but I do recall faces peering down at me, their expressions etched with concern. "Great," I probably thought to myself, "the dorky kid in glasses has found another way to be a nuisance." I don't know how serious the illness was, but apparently I recovered sufficiently to visit Tulum. I have photos as evidence. I do remember feeling subdued for the remainder of the trip, which likely explains the silent journal. I recall getting fired up only once. It happened when I broke away from the group in downtown Puebla and went for a roaming walk on my own – a walk that resurrected the yearning I had first encountered at Tula. It was still there, I realized, somewhere deep inside, burning brightly. It would never go away.

By time we reached Guadalajara, however, I just wanted to go home.



***My fellow travelers in 1974***

I am grateful to my parents beyond words for sending me on this summer adventure. It was a unique opportunity that had a profound impact on my life. I don't know if I would have spent four decades creating right-brain responses to left-brain questions without its provocation and inspiration. I am also deeply grateful for their support in all my endeavors that followed. Although my budding interests – archaeology, conservation, photography – didn't overlap very much with theirs, they cleared a space for me to become self-propelled, as good parents should. And I was wrong about their desire to get me out of their hair for five weeks. Looking through my journal from the trip, I discovered a short poem that my mother had tucked into the back, directly across from the all-important Clothes Checklist (she was always doing things like this). Her note to me



said it was a prayer uttered by an Aztec chieftain upon his elevation to a position of leadership. I don't know why she chose it, except it reads like a blessing for anyone setting out on an adventure. Perhaps she suspected I was heading out on a memorable journey. Maybe it was her way of saying that she wanted to go on a trip too. Either way, many decades later the words still ring true:

*Grant me, Lord, a little light,  
Be it no more than a glowworm giveth  
Which goeth about the night,  
To guide me through this life,  
This dream which lasteth but a day,  
Wherein are many things on which to stumble,  
And many things at which to laugh,  
And others like unto a stony path  
Along which one goeth leaping.*



*I still have my Kodak X-15 from the trip*

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