Daily Opinion

The Daily Campus

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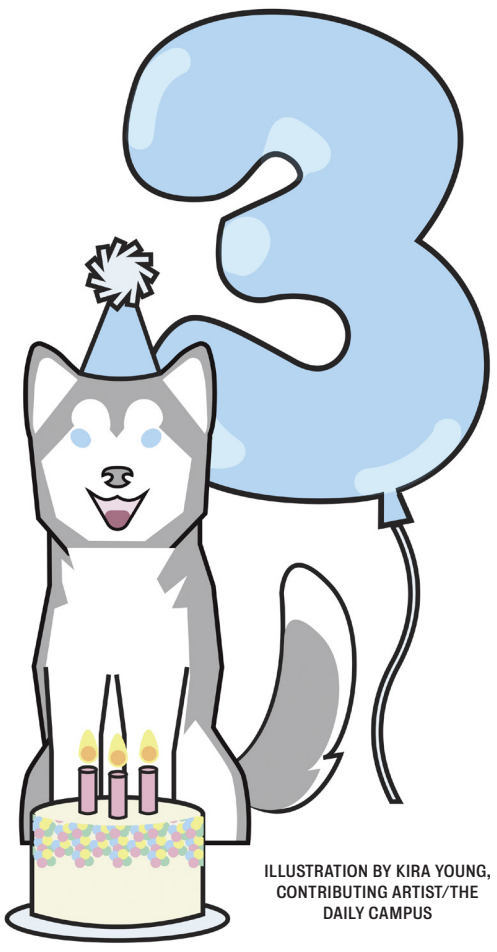


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To save the planet, all we need is...

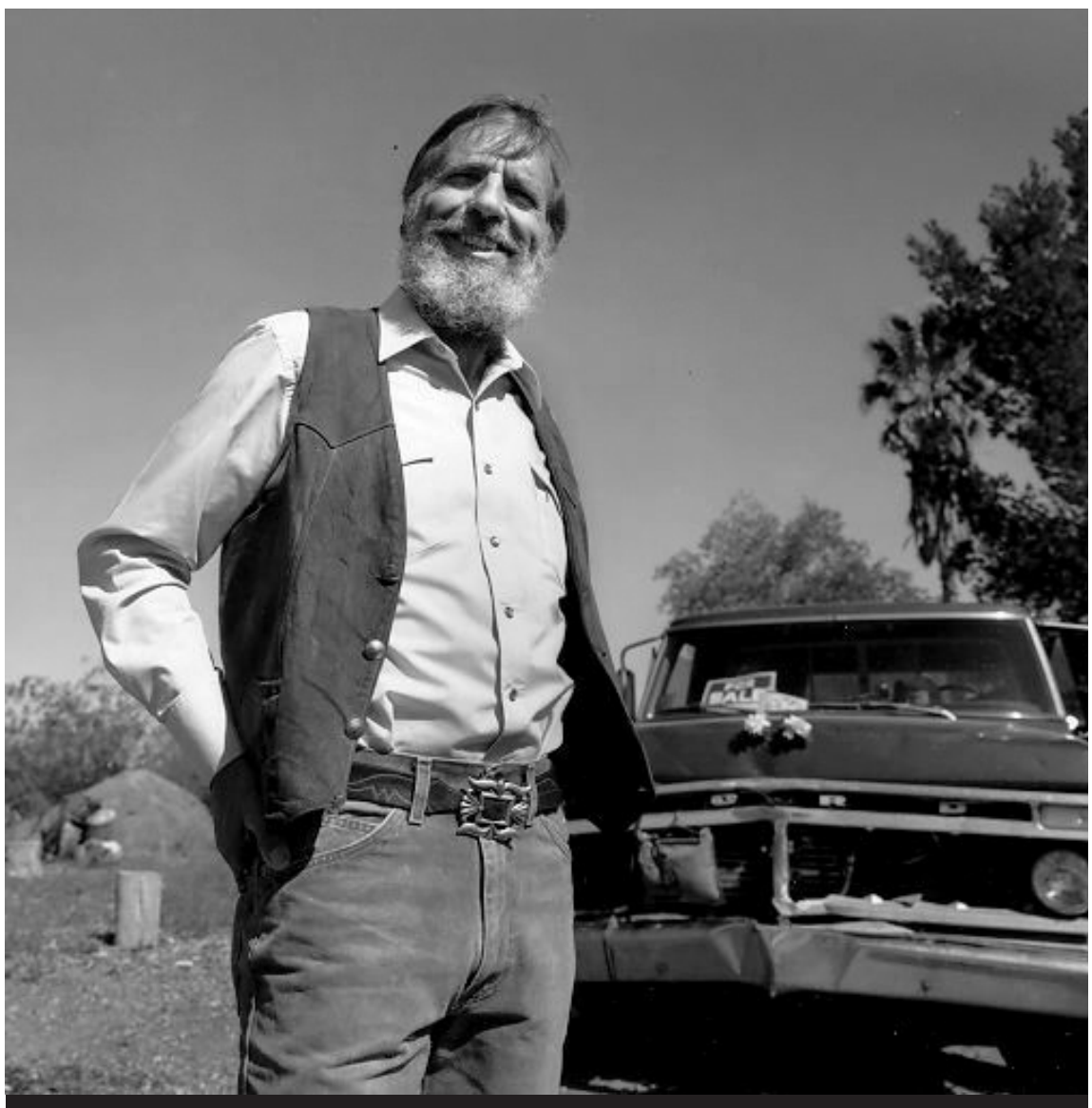
love?

by Colin Hamilton
WEEKLY COLUMNIST
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I was introduced to Edward Abbey in high school by my then-English teacher, who had the peculiar habit of inserting entire paragraphs of Abbey's works into his emails. Juxtaposed against my teacher's notoriously short messages, the effect was often humorous — no more so because of Abbey's fierce reputation. In his time, Abbey was known (and rightfully criticized) as both an author and an environmentalist. His many books, including "The Monkey Wrench Gang" and "Desert Solitaire," provided inspiration to the countless groups that now dominate the activist sphere of environmentalism. Among those inspired were the infamous Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd organizations — radical groups accused of inciting ecoterrorism. Understandably criticized for his affiliation with these groups, Abbey provided a second, alternative doctrine of activism, overlooked by his proponents and critics alike: that being the remarkable power of love.

In a 1976 speech to environmentalists in Missoula, Mont., Abbey concluded with a piece of advice that has long stuck with me. He said, "do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am – a reluctant enthusiast... a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can."

It is an unfortunate truth that we live in a world dominated by climate fatigue: overwhelmed by feelings of exhaustion and disengagement resulting from constant exposure to dire climate change messaging, we can often feel powerlessness. Such, the fight for meaningful environmental change can often feel Sisyphean in nature: a tireless effort with no clear end reward. The obstacles in our way — corporate greed, legislative inaction, time and money — often appear insurmountable. In the face of such overwhelming odds, it is easy to lose hope.



Author and activist Edward Abbey. Abbey claims that one should learn to love the environment if they want to fight for its preservation.

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Pro-climate scientists, activists and policy makers have long grappled with how to overcome this barrier of moral inertia. They have published report after report in vain, detailing how bleak our future is, whose hands our planet's blood is on and why we must now rise up to strike down billionaire polluters. While important, these cries for help often fall on deaf ears for the simple reason that they misconstrue what it means to be an activist.

It was Edward Abbey who understood what these well-meaning do-gooders still do not: activism is a byproduct before it is a motive. It is love that rallies the average person to activism: not facts or statistics, or bold calls to action. As Abbey explained in "A Voice Crying in the Wilderness," a person's ability to fight for something is proportional only to their ability to love it. In his own words, "love implies anger. The man who is angered by nothing cares for nothing." Without passion, there can be no reaction.

The fight to save our planet is a marathon: if we ask only for bursts of vigor and action, we will ultimately fall, crumbling from exhaustion. To properly fight climate fatigue, we must reignite the love that Abbey described: the profound appreciation for the world around us that many seem to have lost. It is only this natural adoration for the outdoors that will provide the sustained fuel required for our long journey towards a greener world.

How, then, are we to remind the masses that the fight for our world's future is their fight as well? At its face value, shifting an entire culture's values back towards nature may seem an impossible task. Abbey, however, reminds us that this is a simple task — as thoughtless as any love is. To his readers, he asks only that they "get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with [their] friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely, mysterious, and awesome space."

The answer, he says, is elementary: in short, we need only to get outside. Everything else — the love, the care, the desire to protect and fight for what lies all around us — will naturally follow. It is ingrained in our very nature. Abbey only asks that we enjoy ourselves, staying mindful as we enjoy nature: so that we may never forget why we fight for it.

As the warmer months once again approach, there is no better time than now to heed Abbey's words. Now is the time to get outside, to soak up the sun, to run barefoot through the grass towards an invisible horizon. Now is the time to remember our love for the world. It is only then that we can reignite our love of what surrounds us: and be reminded why we must fight to protect it. Until then, as Abbey said, "be loyal to what you love, be true to the earth [and] fight your enemies with passion and laughter."