

On the Edge

When urgency confronts complacency

By John Rasmuson

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“Put the bug on the bubble line!”

The fly-fishing guide was impatient. It was windy and my inability to accurately cast the rubber-legged, foam-bodied grasshopper annoyed him. He wanted the artificial bug drifting along a frothy line in the water, 10 feet short of the bank. But it wasn't. Along that seam—an edge delineated by the collision of two currents—trout waited expectantly for insects to float by. You could cast your bug elsewhere on the Green River, but if you didn't deliver it artfully to the right place, you were going home empty-handed.

I had a similar lesson many years ago. At dawn, 25 miles east of Cape Cod, a commercial fisherman named Dennis pointed to a linear seam running through the swells of the Atlantic. It was hard for me to see the edge created by two contending currents, but when he swung a line through it, a big striped bass walloped the bait. Dennis plied that edge as the sun rose. He had a boat payment due and could not afford to go home empty-handed.

On that morning, I was in the company of my friend Tom Horton, then a columnist for the Baltimore Sun. He was tracking adult stripers as they migrated north from their spawning ground in the Chesapeake Bay. In the years since, he has written many books, but of all those words, none stays with me like these: "Edges have always produced phenomena that are the most interesting in nature—the great migrations of fish and fowl triggered by the intersections of the seasons; the abundance and diversity of wildlife known to any hunter who stalks the junctions of forest and field, and the fantastic habitats of the tide marshes at the merge of land and water."

I have returned to those words again and again. They come to mind when I see deer at the edge of a field; when I watch a big trout loitering at a river's edge waiting for a grasshopper to fall in; when a photographer waits on the leading or trailing edge of night for the mellow light it affords. For me, edges are more than merely interesting. They mark the interaction of competing forces, and in that interaction, I find potentiality. There is, for example, the potential of limitation—boundaries, in other words. Mormon dissidents Kate Kelly and John Dehlin illustrate the point.

They probably thought of themselves as being on the leading edge of change when, in fact, they had gone beyond the pale. There, they found the LDS Church had re-asserted the boundary on dissent, and they had crossed it to their detriment. I doubt the outcome surprised them, but I must say I was surprised by the outcome of Cliven Bundy's showdown with the Bureau of Land Management in April 2014. In front of a bank of television cameras, two contending forces appeared to reach a line-in-the-sand boundary. I was disappointed when it turned out to be elastic.

It may be that any edge—be it as literal as a shoreline or as figurative as marriage equality—is not so much a boundary as it is a liminal zone. By that, I mean a borderline of meeting edges in such a state of flux that change seems imminent. Like a fault line, the interface of two tectonic plates, where pressure mounts until one side gives ground. That moment does not have to be cataclysmic. Mount Everest grows more than two inches every year—an important lesson for rebels like Kelly and Dehlin.

Nowadays, imperceptible change—even equilibrium—may be the salient feature of liminality, the state of being "in between." That may be good or it may be bad. I am not sure. It is bad if it is traceable to our dysfunctional government; less bad if it is merely the result of most people's dislike of change; good if the subject is tectonics. I am sure that politicians focus-group liminal places and then tiptoe around the ones that offer no advantage. When a congressman says, "We need to have a national conversation on [pick your favorite subject—racism, gun control, income inequality, immigration, global warming, etc.]," he really is saying, "I intend to ignore this problem as long as I can." It is a shameless, self-serving strategy.

Unfortunately, we are caught up in a conversation about man-made changes to the biosphere. As the conversation drags on, year after year, the "fantastic habitat of the tide marshes" Horton describes is being inundated by the rising ocean. Thirteen islands in the Chesapeake Bay have already been swallowed up by seawater. Closer to home, in the parlors along the Wasatch Front, there is whispering about the water shortages to come, but for the most part, air pollution dominates the conversation in Utah's public square. To my mind, these environmental issues warrant a lot more action and a lot less talk. They all have plenty of liminal boundaries to study. On one skirmishers' line, climate-change deniers like the Cato Institute face off against people like me who believe man-made change is a real, existential threat. On another edge, urgency confronts complacency. The latter is so powerful that even the prospect of irrevocable harm causes no action.

Like my friend Horton, I find edges interesting enough to explore—none more so than the marriage fault line. Any dabbler in liminality was fascinated by the UtahPolicy.com poll in summer 2014 that showed that, while 60 percent of Utahns opposed same-sex marriage, they were equally convinced that it would eventually be the law of the land. And now it is (in Utah, anyway). The ambiguity there is much more interesting than the clarity of any bubble line, and when I want a guide, Jon Stewart never disappoints.