

Some concepts can be hard to understand. Like the classical dynamics of spinning tops. Or quantum mechanics.

Only You! is pretty easy. It's seven letters and two words, an adverb and a pronoun, and when paired together, they convey a simple message that's nondenominational. Yet, the fires keep burning and history keeps repeating itself.

The fires are part of the life cycle. We all understand that. But when it comes to the numbers, Mother Nature would be much less aggressive on her own — almost 90 percent of the wildfires in Arizona and the American West are man-made.

Human carelessness is the main culprit, but there are other serious issues. A decades-long drought and a century of fire suppression have bred forests that are ready to explode. The pine needles are nitroglycerin, so we have to tiptoe. But not everyone complies. And just like that, another beautiful landscape has been hit.

Two years ago, Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument turned 90. That summer, in June 2020, we published a story about the alluring trees that grow there. It's titled *Rising From the Ashes*, and it came out as the uncertainty of the pandemic was unfolding and our state was in lockdown. In my column, I wrote:

"Sunset Crater might be the perfect place to go when we get to the other side. In addition to the natural wonder of the national park, you'll find a parable in the backcountry. Rising from the ashes of the old volcano, which blew its top several centuries before the Black Death erupted in Eurasia, is an unlikely forest of ponderosa pines. They're not like other ponderosas. Instead of tall and majestic, they're stout and gnarly. More Jack Elam than John Wayne. But they're there. A testament to survival. And a powerful reminder that no matter how bleak the landscape might appear, life resumes."

It's ironic looking back, because some of those trees — maybe all of those trees — may be gone. Erased from the landscape by the Tunnel Fire, which began on Easter Sunday. As I write these words, the cause of the fire is still under investigation, but there was no lightning that day. And even if there had been, there's no mitigating the despair. The hopelessness is compounding with every one of these violent fires. We see the flames and wonder what, if anything, will be left.

I remember that anxious feeling as the Bush Fire was burning nearly 200,000 acres in the Tonto National Forest. There was a lone cottonwood that rose from a deep ravine in the Mazatzal Mountains. If you knew where to look, you could see it from the Beeline Highway. I'd watch it year-round. In the spring, it was the color of a Mountain Dew can. In summer, chlorophyll. In

autumn, an electric marigold. In the winter, it let go of its leaves. On its own terms. I prayed for that tree, but it wasn't enough. The fire, the spawn of man, took it out. Just like the Wallow Fire took out my favorite trail in the White Mountains — the first trail my twin daughters had ever hiked. Wallow, Rodeo-Chediski, Rafael, Rattlesnake, Aspen, Schultz, Woodbury, Bighorn, Horseshoe Two ... I have indelible connections to all of the places altered by the recent megafires. And too many to count in Sunset Crater. I know I'm not alone.

As the wildland firefighters were heroically closing in on containment of the Tunnel Fire, I shared a few photos on Instagram of what's been lost. "Heartbreaking" is the word that Anna Timney used in her comment. "This was my backyard. I grew up looking at Sunset from my living room window."

"So very sad," Jeff Maltzman wrote. "And frustrating. Selfish, careless behavior continues to devastate the West. Habitats are destroyed. Recreational spaces are lost. Firefighters' lives are risked. Enough already. A campfire isn't necessary to enjoy camping."

Many people liked Jeff's comment. They liked Sara's, too.

"We were just out exploring Sunset Crater three weeks ago, talking about what a unique and beautiful place it was," Sara Wittenberger wrote. "I'm heartbroken over this, but sadly not surprised. We live near the Superstition Mountains, and the burn scars from at least three separate fires are visible from my home. Whenever I

take a trip to a special place now, it's in the back of my mind that I may never see it again that way."

I'm in the same place. After a hike, I take a long last look before I say goodbye. There's always perspective in the headlines, but it's agonizing to look around and imagine what might occur. I feel the same sadness when I flip through old issues of the magazine. Those landscapes made famous by Ansel Adams, Esther Henderson, David Muench, Jack Dykinga ... so many of them are gone.

My friend Jonathan texted me the other day, sharing his grief about the Tunnel Fire. He wrote, "*Arizona Highways* may end up being a memorial to 'The Way the West Was.'" I hope he's wrong, but he might be right about those incredible trees around Sunset Crater. And he's definitely right about that lone cottonwood. And my favorite trail in the White Mountains. And on and on and on.

Ashes to ashes.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

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Writer Tyler Williams scans the landscape surrounding Sunset Crater in a photo from our June 2020 issue.



I finally made it to Quechee Gorge.

A place that's been rattling around in my head for many years, like the lyrics to *Brand New Key*. It was one of the scheduled stops on a three-week family trip to Vermont, Quebec and the Adirondacks. I'd been to Vermont a few times before, but I somehow missed the prominent gorge. What's worse, I'd never even heard of it. Not until the fall of 2013.

The introduction came in response to something I'd written on the cover of our October issue: "Autumn in Arizona and Why It's

Better Here Than It Is in Vermont." Like John Lennon's offhand comment about the Beatles being more popular than Jesus, my words incurred the wrath of an otherwise peaceful people. *Blasphemy! How dare you? Arizona? Really? Are you out of your mind?* That was the consensus. And the outrage wasn't limited to our subscribers. Frenzied loyalists from all over New England came after me.

Among the many calls was a call from the governor's office in Montpelier. I think that's what got the attention of the Associated Press. After that, the story went viral. Even *Time* magazine weighed in: "It's a leaf-peeping smackdown. A magazine promoting tourism in Arizona (yes, Arizona) is boasting that its foliage season is better than Vermont's."

The best response, though, came from my colleagues at *Vermont Life*, a wonderful magazine that now rests in peace. They sent me a mocked-up cover featuring one of their state's scenic wonders. The cover line read: "Gorges in Vermont and Why Quechee Gorge Is Grander Than the Grand Canyon." It was a brilliant tongue-in-cheek comeback to a feud that never really was.

Turns out, Quechee Gorge is spectacular. It's 165 feet deep, it's nourished by the Ottauquechee River and it's surrounded by an expansive forest of hardwoods, a backdrop from the wildest dreams of Robert Frost. The trees in that forest — sugar maples, white ash, red oaks, yellow birch — are what make autumn in New England so special. For a few weeks, anyway. Until winter sets in.

Here in Arizona, autumn is less flamboyant, but it's more determined — thus the cover line. It unfolds for about four months, beginning on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon in September and ending as late as January in the riparian areas of the Sonoran Desert. There are dramatic differences in our state's respective ecosystems, but in either place — in any place, really — the allure of autumn is universal.

"That's one season I think I could do year-round," says writer Craig Childs, "except it wouldn't work. The appeal is the way autumn stands at the edge of change, balancing for just a moment."

My friend Annie likes autumn, too. She's the gifted editor of

Adirondack Life, another wonderful magazine. I haven't asked her, but I think she'd trade a few months of winter for a few more months of autumn. It's her favorite time of year. "For me," she says, "it feels like a beginning, like the start of something. It's an opportunity to press the reset button. Most people would say that about spring, but spring makes me think of mud and missed opportunity. All those things I didn't accomplish in winter."

There's a psychological term for what she's referring to. It's called a temporal landmark. Birthdays, New Year's Day, the arrival of autumn ... they're all temporal landmarks that can signal new beginnings and shift our way of thinking, says Eva Krockow, Ph.D., a research psychologist at the University of Leicester. "In many cases, they offer a motivational push for making life changes previously thought impossible."

But the allure of autumn is more than just a fresh start. In an interview with the Huffington Post, Kathryn Lively, a Dartmouth professor, explains that we're conditioned to think of fall as a time to get comfortable. A time to cozy up to a roaring fire, break out the boots and sweaters, and trade in the couscous and kale salad for butternut squash and shepherd's pie. It's an exciting time, too, she says. We're conditioned, early on, to associate autumn with the excitement of going back to school — new clothes, old friends. And the excitement of football, hayrides and Halloween.

So many of my best memories are linked to Halloween: Carving pumpkins with my brothers in the backyard of our boyhood home. Poring over costumes in the Sears catalog, like Edith Head on the set of *Roman Holiday*. Scarecrows, Snoopy, Charlie Brown and the anticipation of strangers throwing candy at us, the way old ladies feed pigeons in the park.

Every year, even if it was snowing — that happened sometimes in our small northern town — we'd come home with a pillowcase full of Snickers, Bottle Caps and Butterfingers. It would be late at night, with frost already forming on the pumpkins. As we'd stumble onto the front porch, the crisp October air would smell like autumn. Some combination of wood smoke, cornstalks and the musky redolence of decomposition — fallen oak and maple leaves settling in for a long winter's nap.

For me, that's the allure of the season. *L'arôme de l'automne*. The aroma of autumn. A few years ago, while hiking on the North Rim with some friends, I asked which of their senses they'd rather lose. There was no consensus, because it's an impossible question to answer. How do you choose between the song of a nightingale and the fragrance of fresh-baked bread? Or the touch of goose down and the silhouette of a saguaro at sunset? You could argue that our sense of smell is the least important, but I'd have a hard time hiking the West Fork of Oak Creek without it. Especially now. In October.

The song says that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. I'll look forward to that, too, but there's nothing better than autumn in Arizona. Like Quechee Gorge, it's spectacular.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

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The bad news came in a couple of waves. About an hour apart. First came the cactus. “I have some news, Bobby. The old saguaro on the Romero Trail came down. Too much rain, I guess. It just tipped over.” The next message was along the same lines. “Hello Robert. I wanted to let you know that Naurice Koonce passed away yesterday, at the age of 94.”

I never had the privilege of meeting the talented photographer, whose work helped launch this magazine into orbit in the 1950s, but I knew the old cactus in the Santa Catalinas very well — I’d hiked across its hallowed ground many times.

No one knows for sure how old it was, but it probably took root around the time Napoleon was dying on the island of Saint Helena. In the decades since, it survived snow and ice, blistering heat and invasive species. It made it through many monsoon storms, too, but not the emphatic cloudburst that flooded the Sonoran Desert at the end of August. Like the denouement of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, the old saguaro was overwhelmed and capsized, leaving behind a big hole in the sky. And a pool of sorrow on the ground.

In the Bible, Job offers a point of view that helps mitigate the mournfulness we feel about these things: “There is hope of a tree,” he wrote, “if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.” But it’s hard to reconcile the painful loss of Mother Nature’s handiwork. There’s a word for how it makes us feel. It’s called solastalgia, and it’s used to describe the profound despair that’s caused by environmental change.

Not everyone is affected, but most of us, to some degree, lament the loss of the natural wonders around us. We hate to see them go, because they’re familiar. And they give us hope in a world where the polar ice caps are melting and the Western landscape is being devastated by wildfires. Like a remora, we cling to the old saguaro because it nourishes hope and feeds a need to believe that our neck of the woods is somehow invulnerable. That what’s happening out there isn’t happening here, but it is. It’s happening everywhere. On every level.

A few years ago, the small town of Basking Ridge, New Jersey, lost one of the most impressive trees on the Atlantic coast — a 97-foot white oak that was more than 600 years old. Like one of the ancient trees in the Forbidden Forest, its twisting branches stretched over an old graveyard next to a Presbyterian church. When it died, the folks there were so distraught they held a memorial service. We grieve the loss of great things. Great white oaks, great saguaros ... and, on a higher level, the great men and women who touch our lives, either directly or indirectly.

Naurice Koonce was one of them. He produced a lot of photography for us, including a wonderful collection that became our cover story in June 1958. “We devote our pages this month to the Colorado River,” Editor Raymond Carlson wrote. “Naurice Koonce’s presentation is a notable one, and portrays the river better than we have ever seen it portrayed before.”

When he wasn’t on assignment for us, Mr. Koonce was busy

running the commercial side of the photography business he built with Ray Manley, another longtime contributor. “Dad had a diverse job,” Steve Koonce says. “He could be doing something at the Old Tucson movie studio one day, shooting advertising photos at a leather shop the next, and then taking photos at 2 a.m. for the Union Pacific Railroad.”

He photographed celebrities, too, including John Wayne and Santa Claus.

“Dad shot most of Coca-Cola’s Santa Claus images,” Steve says. Those photographs were used as a basis for the paintings featured in Coke’s annual holiday ad campaigns.

“He had so many talents,” says Carolyn Robinson, Mr. Manley’s daughter. “There will never be another Naurice Koonce.”

In the past few weeks, I’ve heard many stories about the loving patriarch who enjoyed crossword puzzles and eating ice cream. They’re the fond memories of a grieving family that’s



ABOVE, LEFT: The “old saguaro” along the Romero Ruins Trail. ABOVE, RIGHT: Naurice Koonce, a longtime contributor to *Arizona Highways*.

wrestling with the burden of letting go. That’s the hardest thing we do. Letting go and trying to fill the hole. Whether it’s an old saguaro or a beloved family member, it begins by embracing the blessings we carry forward. “Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you,” Emerson said.

November is the month we take inventory of those good things — it’s built into the calendar. Gratitude, however, extends beyond the national holiday. It does at this magazine. Every day we’re grateful for our readers around the world.

To each of you, we are sincerely beholden. When you fill out your subscription card, order our license plate, or visit our online store to buy a book or a calendar or a Christmas ornament, you’re helping this old saguaro live to be another year older.

On behalf of everyone at *Arizona Highways*, thank you. I wish you all a safe and happy Thanksgiving.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

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