

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Are You Strong? Remembering Randy Udall

Auden Schendler | Jul 5, 2013 | *Web Exclusive*

The following was previously published at [Think Progress](http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2013/07/04/2258411/are-you-strong-remembering-randy-udall/?mobile=nc) (<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2013/07/04/2258411/are-you-strong-remembering-randy-udall/?mobile=nc>).

Please also check out a list of links to Randy's essays for HCN, located below the post.

I'll keep movin' through the dark with you in my heart my blood brother.
—Bruce Springsteen

I think we will solve climate change, but to do it we will need each other, and we will need leadership and also companionship. Increasingly, over the years, the environmental community has become fractured on the issue of climate—in some cases struggling over best approaches, expressing our frustration and criticism. This is healthy, but it has to be understood in the context of a common struggle. We are in this together.

That is why I find it so deeply saddening to lose leaders and fellow fighters in this battle. I saw [Stephen Schneider](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/19/AR2010071905108.html) (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/19/AR2010071905108.html>) as nothing less than a fearsome warrior, like a Viking. A wonderful ally.

Now we have lost another brother in arms—energy analyst, innovator, deep thinker, and part time warrior Randy Udall.

I met Randy more than 20 years ago, when he was younger than I am now, and he chose me to join him on grueling and epic skis and hikes in the Sierras, the Wind Rivers, and the Colorado Rockies. He was one of the strongest humans on earth, both physically and mentally. As an Outward Bound instructor on winter courses, he was known to ski into camp in the dark, eat a stick of butter, dig a hole in the snow, and go to sleep. He once skied the entire 200-plus mile John Muir Trail in a week with his brother Mark. To hike with him was to be completely brutalized beyond exhaustion, into a new place. It required the kind of effort Randy and the rest of us are now putting into the climate struggle.



Environmentalist and outdoorsmen Randy Udall. Photo by Weston Boyles.

Udall was a pioneer and an innovator.

Among many of his important accomplishments was the development of the first utility green power pricing program in Colorado, a mechanism for utilities to bring clean power online. He was a brilliant and incisive writer, a master of metaphor who would spend days mulling a turn of phrase. As editor of Rocky Mountain Institute's newsletter, he brought wit and life to energy writing.

In his work at the Community Office for Resource Efficiency he developed likely the country's first carbon tax, imposing a fee on energy intensive development. Like much of Randy's work, the Renewable Energy Mitigation Program was oddly bipartisan. Many homeowners happily

paid the fee, expressing their own desire to help out, to not do harm, to be part of the solution. In the same way, Randy understood that cheap coal and petroleum brought Americans the prosperity we enjoy today, and our solutions must not

ignore that debt, and must not sweep the miners and the geologists and the utilities under the carpet. For this, Randy was beloved by coal miners and gas explorers, conservative utility CEOs and environmentalists alike.

His favorite way of speaking about hard challenges was to say: “It seems to make sense to...” What a wonderful turn of phrase. Together, Randy and I wrote one of the early critiques of LEED, a paper that we hoped would help reform the program. Randy and I can both be too critical and judgmental, but Randy wrote that paper, as he did all his work, out of love and hope. To build, not to destroy.

He was non-self promotional to a fault, and to me he often urged humility—what Ben Franklin called the hardest virtue. Despite having a famous name, a brother and a cousin who are senators, an uncle who ran Interior and a congressman father who doubled the size of the national park system, public spotlight and power were not Randy’s gig. When I told him he ought to radically expand his work at CORE, he said: “I have no interest at all in building an empire.”

Randy was above all a realist. “Like it or not,” he said of fracking, although “many of my friends seem to hate it, this technology has become one of the underpinnings of our civilization, as central to the way we live as the cell phone or computer.” That realism sometimes led to dark humor. Randy was known for his shit-eating grin, and it was never clear if you were in on the joke.

For the last decade, Randy had been relentlessly hammering on a key climate problem, and a key solution—methane leaking from coal mines. Destroy methane en-masse, and we can buy ourselves some time to address CO2. After endless denials and failures, he and partner Tom Vessels finally found a willing partner in Jim Cooper, the mine president at the Elk Creek Mine in Somerset. The company I work for, Aspen Skiing Company, was able to finance the project to convert waste methane to electricity, in partnership with another Randy ally, the utility Holy Cross Energy. With 3MW of installed capacity, we have a prototype of a climate solution that crosses partisan boundaries and represents the bleeding edge of cooperation in a divided America.

Who owns the Elk Creek mine? Bill Koch, who recognizes the value of the project and allowed it to go forward. If that political incongruity seems dissonant, it is also a way forward in a fractured time. As mine president Jim Cooper emailed me recently: "I owe you a conversation on climate change." Barriers come down slowly and painfully. Wisdom, or progress, Randy knew, often comes, to quote Aeschylus, "against our will ... through the awful grace of God."

This is in keeping. Randy was known for a shocking irreverence that he balanced with a gentle, caring way. He would feed you chunks of muffin from his hands if he thought you were hungry; leave tomatoes on your porch; hand you red licorice on the trail, then be incommunicado for a month. I call him a part time warrior because Randy fought and then recharged, engaged in pitched battle, then disappeared into the woods.

He lived Ed Abbey's rule: "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."

In the climate fight, Randy reminds us of the importance of our friends; of that fact that we are all cantankerous and difficult people, but we need each other desperately.

As he said to me not long before he died: "Auden, to the extent I was able to make friends, you have been a friend for a long time. You deserved more from me; others deserved more from me; I deserved more from me; and, above all, I needed others more than I ever suspected. As for the work I did at CORE, that you are doing at Ski Co, that needs to be done... It's difficult and endless and exhausting and sometimes lonely. I read Romm's blog and look at China's emissions and try to make sense of where this is going to leave Tarn and Torrey and Ren, not to mention Willa. And the politics of it drive me nuts, McKibben holding hands with 12,000, picketing purportedly the most progressive president we've had, staking out a Democrat!"

The question Randy would ask of us is one he asked of me many times. “Are you strong?” This quality meant so much to Randy, but it was more than physical strength. He would ask us if we are strong enough to win this thing, to persevere despite our own doubts and limitations. Randy knew we could only do this together, as he said: “Dozens, hundreds of people chipping away at the iron glacier.” Randy would want nothing less of us than that we follow through with his life’s work.

If there is one quantum of solace, it is that Randy appears to have died very quickly, of perhaps a heart attack or stroke, mid-stride, outward bound on a flat high bench, off trail in the Wind River Range, his favorite place on earth. Just as we ought to be, he was girded for battle. He had his pack on his back, hiking poles in hand, certainly feeling the lightness and joy we all feel heading out on a new journey.

Under a vast, clear and blue Wyoming sky, he came to rest on his side. He was finally, to quote Stanley Kunitz, one of his favorite poets:

... absolved and free
of his burdens, those mottoes
stamped on his name-tag:
conscience, ambition, and all
that caring....
Peace! Peace!
To be rocked by the Infinite!
As if it didn't matter
which way was home;
as if he didn't know
he loved the earth so much
he wanted to stay forever.

Auden Schendler is the Aspen Skiing Company Sustainability VP and was friends with Randy Udall for many years. Schendler is also a previous High Country News contributor.

Randy Udall wrote several essays about energy and life for HCN over the years, including:

[No thanks, Estonia \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/no-thanks-estonia\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/no-thanks-estonia): Estonia can keep its Stone Age, oil-shale technology, along with its air pollution.

[High Noon for solar \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/high-noon-for-solar\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/high-noon-for-solar): Why does solar power development lag in the United States when it has taken off all over Europe?

[Fracking is the big new gun \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/fracking-is-the-big-new-gun\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/fracking-is-the-big-new-gun): Hydraulic fracturing is changing the energy industry -- and the entire nation -- in ways we're only beginning to understand.

[The big bonfire \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.22/the-big-bonfire\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.22/the-big-bonfire): The economy is stuck in a ditch, but on climate change the U.S. is finally moving in the right direction.

[Chill, baby, chill \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/a-new-mantra-for-the-oil-patch\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/a-new-mantra-for-the-oil-patch): The largest drilling boom in Western history is ending as new technologies make it easier to get shale gas from other parts of the country.

[Renewables: The Final Frontier \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.11/renewables-the-final-frontier\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.11/renewables-the-final-frontier): Vaclav Smil is a historian who exemplifies Vulcan-style logic and skepticism when it comes to easy solutions to energy problems.

[Mission critical \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.14/mission-critical-can-natural-gas-save-the-world\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.14/mission-critical-can-natural-gas-save-the-world): With global warming threatening the planet, even environmentalists are looking more kindly at natural gas.

[The little island that could \(http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.4/the-little-island-that-could\)](http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/41.4/the-little-island-that-could): The small Danish island of Samsø runs entirely on renewable energy. The West could do the same.

It's time to call the gas industry's bluff (<http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/17507>): Randy Udall says it's high time the gas industry paid its fair share of severance taxes in Colorado.

Falling off the heat ladder (<http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/366/17584>): In the Rocky Mountains, a cold and snowy winter reminds Westerners that the best way to stay warm is by conserving energy.

Oil shale is still a pig in a poke (<http://www.hcn.org/blogs/wotr/16197>): The writer can't believe oil shale is back

We are the Oil Tribe (<http://www.hcn.org/blogs/issues/215/10873>): Within the American Oil Tribe, oil matters so much and yet means so little that we refuse to even think about the fact that we are going to run out of it.

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