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*Lost in the Wild to Find Identity*

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” This direct quote from [Helen Keller](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/helen_keller.html) accurately describes one of the present time’s biggest dilemmas. As a product of our over-indulging society, far too many people today are weak, defenseless, and live their entire life safe inside their zone of comfort. Fortunately, as the majority slips into routine, some are awakened to reality and try their best to seek a separate route through their time on Earth. One of such pioneers was Christopher McCandless, who fought for his own personal development and individuality deep in the “fickle heart of the [Alaskan] bush”, one of America’s final frontiers (Krakaeur 212). As portrayed in Jon Krakauer’s *Into The Wild*, the act of ‘proving oneself’ can be exploited to establish many of the contributing factors of individual identity including appreciation, strength, and ultimately enlightenment. Through his primitive battle for survival in the face of sheer natural adversity, Christopher was able to shed his fragile childhood shell and grow into the man he was destined to become.

In the present day everything comes easily; with the dial of a phone or the click of a mouse, one can have almost anything they desire. An obvious downside to this condition is that, through immediate gratification, almost all appreciation is lost. When it becomes commonplace to experience pleasure, the body slowly grows accustomed and the mind reacts accordingly. The complete inverse of that statement can be observed in the character of Christopher McCandless. Almost as soon as he departs from the University of Alaska campus, Christopher begins to value the smaller aspects of life; “Some twenty miles down the trail from where he was dropped off by Gallien, he stumbled upon the old bus beside the Sushana River. It was outfitted with a bunk and a barrel stove, and previous visitors had left the improvised shelter stocked with matches, bug dope, and other essentials. ‘Magic Bus Day,’ he wrote in his journal,” (Krakauer 207). While reading this passage one can clearly feel the immense thankfulness Christopher describes in the words “Magic Bus Day”. It is clear here that after living the life of a tramp for months, the scarce aid provided by Fairbanks Bus 142 is enough to greatly impact the boy’s attitude. The same effect would almost certainly not arise in anyone else walking along the banks of the Sushana River.

Another instance when Christopher displays his heighted sense of gratitude is when the amateur hunter is able to take down a 600-700 pound moose. For weeks prior to this event, Christopher had been subsiding mainly on squirrels and small fowl, thus he was conditioned to eating small unsatisfactory portions of food. Upon the victory over the moose, the boy is described as “some unemployed janitor who’d gone to Reno and won a million-dollar jackpot,” (Krakauer 209). Krakauer’s purposeful use of descriptive wording in this passage is key to understanding Christopher’s emotional state after the killing. Because Christopher is portrayed as an “unemployed janitor,” the reader can visualize just how incompetent he really is and how much joy he would theoretically receive after winning the “million-dollar jackpot” through a pure stroke of luck. If McCandless had been a veteran outdoorsman, than this scenario, albeit joyous, would be met by much less ecstasy; it is only through his exposure to rough conditions that the boy becomes so greatly overwhelmed. If enough close reading is practiced, the reader can also draw some elements of foreshadowing from this quote. In reality, when most poor people win the lottery they have trouble grasping such enormous quantities of money and, within a couple years normally squander it on useless junk. Since Christopher is compared to someone in the lowest social/economical class, it is suitable to assume he may have trouble controlling such large masses of high quality meat. As can be expected, later in the text it is revealed “he gave up on preserving the bulk of the meat and abandoned the carcass to the wolves,” (Krakauer 210). Despite his clear mistakes, Christopher is quickly able to appreciate even certain aspects of himself, as he proclaims, “henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be,” (Krakauer 210). As a product of his immediate environment and struggle to keep himself alive, during his time in the wild Christopher has broken down his walls of mental expectation and learned to appreciate even the most insignificant fortunate events.

Through his determination and reaction to certain events, it is easy to witness just how McCandless built up his mental strength and endurance along his journey. This conclusion is evident throughout the text and the fact that Christopher survived for almost fourth months testifies to his mental toughness. “He had difficulty killing game, and the daily journal entries during his first week in the bush include ‘Weakness’, ‘Snowed in,’ and ‘Disaster’,” (Krakauer 207). If one were to read his words consecutively (weakness, snowed in, disaster) the only reasonable final event would be either death or failure. If McCandless hadn’t had experience enduring hardships in the past, these initial struggles might have proven to break down his willpower and convinced him to leave the wild earlier. Incomprehensible difficulties like this are the very things that make the wild so dangerous, but also define it as a perfect place to hone strength. Coincidentally if he had been driven out of his encampment at this date, he may have escaped with his life, as the Sushana River wouldn’t have been as big of an obstacle.

To further substantiate his assertion to the boy’s strength, Krakauer includes excerpts from Henry David Thoreau’s “Katahdin”; “Nature here was something savage and awful… Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandselled globe… it was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites, -to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we,” (Krakauer Thoreau 212-213). This quote serves to portray Christopher as rough and ‘nearer to kin to wild animals’ which at first might seem draconian but in actuality is proving his evolution from a weak city-dweller to a man capable of surviving in the wilds of Alaska. Along with this description, Krakauer also includes his own narrative on Christopher’s choice of location:

I’ve spent a lot of time alone in the country over the course of my many visits and usually relish it… Now, however, I am grateful for [my] company. There is something disquieting about this Gothic, overgrown landscape. It feels more malevolent than other, more remote corners of the state I know – the tundra-wrapped slopes of the Brooks Range, the cloud forests of the Alexander Archipelago, even the frozen, gale-swept heights of the Denali massif. I’m happy as hell that I’m not alone. (Krakauer 215).

When compared to Thoreau’s account, one can derive many key similarities that are important to understanding Christopher’s condition in Alaska. Where Thoreau used heathenism and superstitious rites, Krakauer used Gothic and malevolent. Similarly both authors attested to the roughness of the situation; Thoreau’s use of the statement “unhandselled globe” can be compared to Krakauer’s “overgrown landscape”. The fact that Krakauer used similar adjectives to Thoreau to describe the wild validates the difficulties faced by the boy.

As evidenced by the prior quote, along with his strength over the elements of nature, Christopher also must deal with the strength to overcome his loneliness and the mental wilderness that develops alongside the lack of interaction with any human beings. “For all practical purposes McCandless was cut off from the world. He spend nearly four months in the bush all told, and during that period he didn’t encounter another living soul,” (Krakauer 209). This same sort of condition is forced upon prisoners for punishment. The use of solitary confinement is commonplace in prison and is meant to break the inmate down mentally. Ironically Christopher is forcing this upon himself with to intent to become stronger. Without anyone, Christopher must make all of his decisions unadvised and is unable to receive help of any kind during his stay. The most difficult aspect of the situation to grasp is how the boy is literally ‘cut off from the world’ and in case anything terrible happens; he has no one to run to. The fear instilled with this idea and the serious physical challenge that Christopher must endure, combined, are fortunately still not enough to break through his self-developed vigor.

By surviving in the wilderness of Alaska, Christopher was able to develop himself in many aspects but his late sense of enlightenment was one of the most powerful. It is evident that this outcome was clear and important to Christopher as he claims early on; “AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE,” (Krakauer McCandless 207). In contrast to many in the past who have set upon religious pilgrimages searching for understanding, Christopher decided to neglect any predetermined path and instead blaze his own trail to mental freedom. By choosing to live off the wild, Christopher is forcing himself to stay focused on his immediate environment or risk losing the fight for survival. The state he has put himself in is very similar to the longstanding practice of meditation for they both require attention to surroundings and neglect of unnecessary thought. In the way an enlightened one would declare a list of commandments, Christopher actually documents his own method in the context of instructions; his declaration on ‘deliberate living’; “Deliberate Living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns, example – A job, a task, a book; anything requiring efficient concentration (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you),” (Krakauer McCandless 210). The easiest part of this passage to understand is the first proclamation; paying conscious attention to the basics of life. Christopher has realized that while residing in modern society, humans don’t normally think about their immediate environment. Instead people tend to ruminate on events of the past or look forward to the future. In some cases these habits can be beneficial but as the boy has come to realize while struggling to fend for himself; normally it is better to be in the now, in the moment because that is the best way to actually absorb the beauty of the world. This is his subtle allusion to meditation and it is through this practice that Christopher has been able to develop himself.

The second realization Christopher arrives upon is shortly after he finishes reading Tolstoy’s ‘Family Happiness’. He inscribes in the book:

He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others… I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one’s neighbor – such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps – what more can the heart of a man desire? (Krakauer McCandless 211).

This passage may very well be the most important statement in the entire selection. Once again Christopher refers to the importance of books and being in the moment but the most surprising view represented here is his declaration that the only happiness in life is found through living for others. This is the clearest evidence of Christopher’s reformation and enlightenment in the face of hardship. Before entering his journey into the wild; the boy is dead set on the importance of being alone and living a life ‘off the land’; in a sense being completely self-sufficient. The fact the he realizes the key to joy is to be with others, while living in a bus in the middle of nowhere, is extremely ironic and beneficial to Christopher’s final transformation. When he realizes his mistake, Christopher decides to pack up and head back to civilization. His exact agenda is unknown but one can speculate that he was planning on rejoining his family and friends in Atlanta. Unfortunately he was unable to make it out alive so the only records of his thoughts are what he has written. It is crazy to think that one must endure such hardships to just understand what lies between their ears.

Throughout his fight for survival in the Alaskan wilderness, Christopher McCandless faced hardships that served to develop his personal sense of character and establish his individual identity. He began to appreciate small bouts of luck, was strengthened mentally and physically, and achieved a profound sense of enlightenment. “NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE [FLED], AND [WALKED] ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD,” (Krakauer McCandless 207).

Works Cited

Miller, Richard E., and Kurt Spellmeyer. *The New Humanities Reader*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012. Print.