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ENG 316

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Semester in the Wild Testimonial

It's dark in my childhood bedroom and I'm on Google Maps again. Brow furrowed and phone in hand, I scroll, swipe, pan, and finally zoom into a small, forested square, inconspicuous but for its contrast to the subdivisions of beige-roofed tract homes hemming it in on all sides. Encroaching roads wind and twist illogically and end in cul-de-sacs in order to cram as many nearly identical houses into the tract as possible, irrespective of navigability on foot. These homes are meant for cars and GPS navigation. The verdant quadrant in the middle of it all is small but undeniably important because of its rarity–it must be one of the last undeveloped patches of land in Dallas, Texas. To grow up in Dallas, like I did, is to either grow numb to or acutely irritated by the seemingly unstoppable progress of suburban development, which spirals out from the city center like a worsening rash. I find myself belonging to the latter. As a kid, I witnessed the some of the evidence of hockey stick-shaped curves of population growth and CO2 emissions firsthand in the strip malls, chain restaurants, and subdivisions that indiscriminately replaced the pastures and oak groves along the farm-to-market road that led to my grandparents' house. Eventually, their humble ten-acre parcel was completely encircled by tan brick veneer and privacy fences. The destruction and rearrangement of these once-wild places was unsettling: perfectly legal and desired by the hungry masses but somehow sinister in a way that escaped precise definition.

Musician Phil Elverum sang of wilderness, "the feeling of being in the mountains/is a dream of self-negation/to see what the world looks like without us/how it churns and blossoms/without anyone looking on". After living for two and a half months at Taylor

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Wilderness Research Station, nestled within the largest wilderness area in the contiguous United States, I've come to relish the feeling of self-negation–of seeing a world without people–that wilderness offers as a means of dealing with the visceral, traumatic changes occurring in the world today. Central Idaho's Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness Area is nothing short of vast, containing over 2.3 million roadless acres of sprawling ridgelines and rushing waters that deepen their wrinkled crevices. There, I explored new physical and emotional terrain. As I flew into the wilderness with eleven strangers for the University of Idaho's Semester in the Wild program, I looked on, forehead glued to the plane window, as all visual evidence of Western civilization gradually melted away from the landscape. The powerlines and pavement slipped from view. Twisting logging roads dead ended. National Forest gave way to Wilderness. Before me was something I'd never seen before–something most people never see–a natural area practically devoid of the human influence and modification I was accustomed to. When we landed, I exchanged sheepish introductions with my fellow students, who reflected my bewildered, smiling awe. It was clear that we would learn an entirely new way to live. Our goal was to understand as much as we possibly could about the landscape, its history, and our purpose in it in the three months afforded to us. A rotating cast of professors imparted their own unique perspectives on that special place while we grappled with these big questions.

Ed Krumpe, our Wilderness and Protected Area Management professor, told us that being in the wilderness is like coming home. He explained that all humans have an inherent connection to wild places tracing back to our deepest evolutionary roots; that the sounds, sights, and smells of rivers, mountains, and wildflowers access an often-untapped spiritual longing for

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wildness and a sense of place. My fellow students and I used the wilderness setting of Taylor and its relative isolation as a crucible for reimagining what home and place can be. Untethered from most modern conveniences, Taylor became the center of my universe. I witnessed changes in myself as I adapted to routines that were affected directly by the rhythms of the sun and weather. I drank untreated water sourced directly from a creek, used electricity produced entirely by solar panels, plucked salad greens from our small garden, and developed a relationship with the rugged landscape. Numerous backpacking trips dared me to reconsider and refine what possessions I thought to be essential, while rigorous classes in environmental history and environmental writing asked me to place myself and my experiences in the broader context of the Anthropocene. Through these challenging experiences in the wilderness, I gained a clearer, deeper understanding of what it means to live in this crucial moment in human history, where we must collectively decide to fundamentally transform how we live in order to survive in a dying world.

Zooming in further on my newly discovered tree patch, I notice that the creek bisecting the square is the same one that flows behind my parents' house. If I wanted to, I could slip off my sneakers and trudge downstream, feet numb and splashing in the lawn fertilizer-tainted water, all the way to that tiny wilderness, and experience peace and solitude there too, among the trees. While the concept of wilderness as realized in massive, unbroken tracts of land like the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness provides us a crucial window into the unsettled and unbuilt American past, it also fails to capture the reality that wildernesses are not just rugged, mountainous landscapes, compartmentalized and out of reach. Perhaps, wilderness could

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also be the patch of forest in the back of the neighborhood park or the overgrown abandoned lot across the street. My time at Taylor didn't make it any easier to accept the destruction and decay wreaked on our planet, but living in the wilderness did show me an ideal world, and filled me with hope that we might get there.