

Risa Rushton

Jenn Ladino

English 316

23 October 2019

Testimonial

As soon as I was accepted into the University of Idaho's Semester in the Wild program, I dreamed about the millions of stars I would see in the unpolluted skies above the Taylor Wilderness Research Station. I have always been drawn to astronomy and couldn't wait to see the night sky so far from civilization.

The first night I arrived, I searched for the milky way before climbing into my wall tent that was to be my home for the next three months. The stars were beautiful and breathtaking as always. But between the trees and the mountains framing the area around Taylor, I couldn't get the full effect.

Later that week, eleven other students, one professor, and I ventured on a backpacking trip to a nearby ridge (more to break in our boots than anything). The first night of the trip, we sat together and looked at the stars. For over half the group, it was the first time they had ever seen the milky way. We sat in silence, in awe of the beauty, as shooting stars darted in and out of sight, contemplating our insignificant impacts on the universe.

I didn't know it yet, but those first days in the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness set a precedent for the rest of the semester. As a group, we bonded over the stars in the sky and even named ourselves after them. Personally, there was a song that became an anthem for my time in the wild. "Tiny Glowing Screens pt. II" by Watsky. The song seemed to find its way into my thoughts daily. Several lines. Over and over again.

“The reason there’s smog in Los Angeles is ‘cause if we could see the stars/If we could see the context of the universe in which we exist/And we could see how small each one of us is/Against the vastness of what we don’t know/No one would ever audition for a McDonalds commercial again/And then where would we be?/No frozen dinners and no TV/And is that a world we want to text in?”

Although the smog surrounding our cities blurs our view of the universe, there are still places natural enough to see the galaxies. Wilderness areas are the lenses that allow us to home in on what matters. And simply put, what matters is the people, the experiences, the memories, and the environment. All the things that individuals do to be part of the bigger picture. Wilderness grounds you. Wilderness shows you everything that you can’t control, but that you are very much a part of.

As someone who has seen the stars, who has traveled countless miles on foot along rivers and ridges, who has been immersed in a wild environment, who has been a key member in a small community, who has faced forgotten challenges of today’s world, I can tell you that if the stars were visible from more of the world - our “first world” problems might seem pretty damn insignificant, and maybe even irrelevant. The lack of phone service encourages us to write letters to our loved ones. The lack of roads forces us to walk anywhere we want to go (even forty-two miles round trip for breakfast). The lack of stores and restaurants invokes our creative side if we find we run out of an ingredient. The lack of TV and WiFi inspires us to invent things to do when we have free time. There is so much more to the world around us if we are willing to simply take a step back from the conveniences of the front country.

I have no doubt that I will be asked what I learned from my seventeen-credit semester in the wilderness. Although the answer to that question probably should be “I learned how to measure the impact campers have on a site” or “I learned how to analyze documents both through a writer’s and historian’s lens” (and I don’t think my sarcastic answer of how to Star Tip would be appreciated), the answer isn’t that simple. The answers I want to give are the ones that will stick with me for the rest of my life. I learned to notice what I’m neglecting. I learned there is never one simple answer to a problem. I learned it’s important to share experiences and connect with people. I learned that it’s never about what or how people do things, it’s always about why. And maybe most of all, I learned that it’s your responsibility to develop your talent and change the world. What you do matters – in every aspect of life.

“There’s 7 billion 46 million people on the planet/And most of us have the audacity to think we matter”

I have the audacity to think I matter. The wilderness has taught me that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. We may be small and insignificant to the universe, but to our communities and even to the world we are so important. What we do impacts not only our immediate friends and family – but the natural world around us. Our purpose here is to make a living, but it’s also to recognize our talents and share them with the world. It is up to each and every one of us to make the difference we want to see in the world. What we do in every day of our insignificant lives matters.