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Remembering Christopher McCandless 20 Years Later

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Jon Krakauer's nonfiction opus *Into the Wild* begins on the cover "In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invited a new life for himself. Four months later, his decomposed body was found by a moose hunter..."

While the cover gives away the plot contained within the book, the story behind McCandless' life and how he managed to spend two years traveling around the country as a modern-day vagabond is the story of an American explorer. Even one of McCandless' friends was quoted "[Chris] was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today's society gives people." The thrill of adventure I gained from reading *Into the Wild* and seeing where he traveled is inspirational. Wandering the country for more than two years with no phone, no car, no cigarettes, serves as a lesson that the material goods we all cherish and seek to obtain as status symbols are doing nothing but holding us back from doing what we are truly capable of doing. What is inside each of us -- the need to satisfy curiosity, to explore, to converse and think critically, all these are the lessons of Christopher Johnson McCandless, 20 years after his death.

Alexander Supertramp, the name that McCandless went by on his long journey around the country, made his way west from Atlanta, went up and down the west coast, ventured to South Dakota, Colorado and eventually made it all the way to Fairbanks, Alaska, from which he would set out on the last leg of his extensive journey. In another time, he would be called an explorer, much like founder of the Sierra Club John Muir, who wrote in his book *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* of his 1867 walk from Indiana to Florida, all for the purpose of taking the walk. McCandless walked because he was looking for something greater than what he had found in the 20th century, while Muir walked as an explorer in a century when the country was not yet fully discovered. Muir went on to great things because he lived, but had an unknown Muir died after undergoing one of his long journeys, would we know about him as we do McCandless? Likely not, for the ability to trace down information and the whereabouts of Muir would have been impossible in the 19th century, let alone much of the 20th century. But McCandless had his story accurately recreated by Jon Krakauer, then and now an adventurer and writer, who researched the circumstances leading up to his death, tracing him back across the country and over the span of 26 months of travel. Mind you, McCandless walked when he didn't hitch a ride, while Muir walked entirely. Adjusting for time and technology, the journeys are much the same, although Krakauer notes that rather than exploring nature and the world, as Muir did, McCandless did so to "explore the inner country of his own soul." This is a powerful purpose that Krakauer postulates, for in Chris' or your own adventure, you can discover this "inner country" in the way you explore nature in even the smallest of manners.

Said the explorer McCandless, in a letter to his friend Wayne Westerberg, "The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun." Chris was looking for something new, on a regular basis, because the new experiences led to happiness, as long as they kept coming. If they cease, so does the benefit of having them. McCandless had an addiction and it was to exploring throughout his life and constantly learning in the process. For all the addictions to have, this was a positive one, and it gives clarity to those of us who still seek to find new landscapes to explore, mountains to hike and places to see. But this was an addiction that ultimately led to his death, forgoing a map in Alaska, not planning in advance to leave the Magic Bus and hike back out from the wild. He was most assuredly planning to return to the world the rest of us inhabited,

Discussions of McCandless' life, either through reading the book, watching the film or hearing passing information about his life, have led to many reactions from friends. I have heard he was a flawed genius, a troubled 20-something, a spoiled brat, a selfish college kid who didn't know how good he had it. I can't say that these all have a little truth to them, because I can't see how he was spoiled, nor do I think that he was selfish, but rather he was an explorer looking for something and once he found it, self-preservation had taken enough of a backseat in his planning that it became the thing that prevented him from venturing back out to the rest of civilization. What his revelation was seems to have been inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, writing in his journal, "All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you." With this, Christopher McCandless packed up what he needed and prepared to head out of the wilderness, only to be blocked by the now-raging Teklanika River. Even though McCandless took risks in his journey, he didn't do something that might kill himself like navigate a glacial river. After all, finding his purpose in life after many months and years of self-discovery could not end with the taking of his life.

Although the mistake of trying to be self-sufficient off the unspoiled land of Alaska while searching for some inner meaning to his life may seem far-fetched to some, and not a popular vacation destination for most, he did find what he was looking for in the wild of Alaska, as well as on the rest of his trip. The continuous journey, new each day, provided him something to look forward to with great pleasure each day. When he finally did die, he did so having lasted 118 days in the Alaskan wilderness before expiring. See, this wasn't a short venture into the

woods where he was mauled by a bear or drowned in the rapids. Chris survived for almost an entire summer by focusing on survival as he looked for his inner purpose. While some find this in school or in a bar or at a job, McCandless went a long way to find what he needed to live a happy life. The saddest aspect of his life is that he didn't get to live more of his life knowing what was needed for him to be happy, beyond those last days he spent in the bus. But in the least, his journey netted a book that shares his story, warts and all, for others to be inspired by and learn from his mistakes, so that we may see what next step lies ahead for us if we can undergo our own journey of self-discovery.

Remembering his life and death evokes reverend pause, for he inspired me to stop wasting life and get off my ass and live. But I learned from his mistakes - to journey with a guide, a map, the thing he lacked in his cross country quest. This was his flaw and ultimately led to his downfall, but it proved to be the key thing that was needed to live a productive life. Had he lived, it would have been something to know him, provided there was a book written from the viewpoint of his experiences, for he provided the framework for an independent life that was not short on excitement. I imagine him leading an active life, seeking out new quests to undertake and sharing his tales in the process. The latter does not seem to be in his character as we knew him through *Into the Wild*, but for an educated college graduate and traveler who kept a detailed journal in Alaska, it doesn't seem like much of a stretch.

"He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others." - Tolstoy, "Family Happiness"

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