

• *Notes* •

**20 Years Later:
Thoughts on the Folk Appeal of Christopher McCandless**

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On September 6, 1992, a group of hunters happened to cross paths outside an abandoned Fairbanks City bus, converted into a woodsman's shelter and rusting along the Stampede Trail outside of Healy, Alaska. Inside the bus lay the body of an unknown young man, dead for several weeks, and the beginning of a legend that would soon capture the attention of readers, filmgoers, students, wilderness enthusiasts, and romantically-minded wanderers around the globe. As decades unfolded after the incident, the abandoned bus became a familiar icon and point of destination for hundreds of modern-day pilgrims each year. Newsprint reports turned to word of mouth discussion, which in turn only grew after the publication of nature writer Jon Krakauer's bestselling book on the fate of the young man, titled—with rather intentional symbolic overtones—*Into the Wild*. Today, over twenty years later, after widespread circulation and the adaptation of the book into a critically acclaimed feature-length film by director Sean Penn, the story of the young man in Alaska—Christopher McCandless—has reached a larger audience than ever before.

This short essay examines the impact that his story, as emergent legend and focal point for vernacular discussion and creativity, now holds in the field of folklore and folklore studies. It presents a timely case study for not only a variety of folkloric genres as enacted in the American Northwest but for the means by which media forms can encourage and even *become* folklore in the modern age. McCandless' tale follows the arc of the hero narrative and the liminal voyage. His wanderings prior to his arrival in Alaska mirror those of other young footloose roustabouts, members of a traceable counter culture in North America. The abandoned bus, converted to a hunting shelter, represents a chain of material culture tradition in the north woods.

Yet over the past two decades, the commercial appeal of the *Into the Wild* book variant itself has become a source of lore. Considering the popularity with which the *Into the Wild* story is currently celebrated, debated, retold, and recounted in more formalized, static forms like print and movies, but also in more vernacular forms, including word-of-mouth discussion and online web postings, we see multiple folkloric elements developing before our eyes—from hero worship and legendary recollection to physical, secular pilgrimage and even evidence of a kind of modern American nature religion.

My personal interest in the case was first sparked when conducting a series of field interviews with wilderness enthusiasts in the Pacific Northwest during 2008. I was documenting what the wilderness excursion experience meant for those who frequented the deep woods of the Cascade Range, why they continued to visit such places, and what kinds of stories and meanings they attributed to the “wilderness” in their own personal experience narratives. Over the course of these interviews, I eventually noticed a series of patterns in the ways my informants described and valued the forest and mountain wilderness experience, but one pattern stood out in its particular consistency: nearly every one of the individuals I spoke with referred to McCandless and his story without being prompted. Of course, Penn’s film, produced in 2007, had just recently been released on DVD and hence the tale provided an easy and common point of reference, but the frequency and passion with which my informants discussed the tale made me curious to explore its appeal a bit further. Why, I wondered, had this story resonated so strongly with its audience? What was it that drew audiences to recount and discuss the tale over and over again? Even those who derided McCandless and thought him an example of everything a wilderness enthusiast should avoid seemed ever eager to discuss the tale. I turned my sights to the McCandless legend and the emergent folk culture surrounding its spread.

Into the “Liminal” Wild

Almost immediately, I could see that the folk appeal in the story of Christopher McCandless lay first and foremost in its familiarity. For those who retell the tale, McCandless functions as a hero, in the narrative sense. He is perhaps no Odysseus or King Arthur, but the young American wanderer’s romantic journey nonetheless exhibits elements of the typical hero tale and has gone on to capture the imagination of thousands. Though McCandless was indeed an actual individual, his story has developed through oral communication, circulated and expounded upon by outdoor enthusiasts across the country.

In most forms, the story contains the same essential elements and themes: After graduating college in 1990, fed up with vices he saw in American society, the privileged young McCandless left his home and embarked upon on a personal quest “into the wild.” He shed his former identity, destroyed his Social Security card, and adopted the nonsense moniker “Alexander Supertramp.” He wandered alone through the American wilderness—camping in the California desert, hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, and kayaking the Colorado River—relentlessly pursuing the most marginal of nature experiences. By 1992, he’d reached his ultimate wilderness: a remote and mountainous corner of central Alaska. It was here that the young adventurer encountered the mysterious transit car and dubbed it the “Magic Bus,” camping inside in complete solitude for almost four months with only a small bag of rice and his own resources to keep himself fed.¹ At first, the experience was a joyous opposition to the life he’d left behind, filled with incredible direct experiences with nature. By late August, however, things had suddenly and mysteriously gone horribly wrong. Bound in by floodwaters and unable to leave the valley as he had intended, the young man slowly and painfully starved to death, and Chris McCandless the man began to give way to Chris McCandless the legend.

It’s a relatively simple tale, and one to which audiences seem eager to relate. Krakauer notes that McCandless’ appeal stems from “a wanderlust that everybody can identify with” (quoted in Roberts 2007). At the same time, though, the tale

includes an element of mystery and, thus, intrigue. In a perceptive *New York Times* review of Krakauer's book, Thomas McNamee wrote of McCandless, "His contradictions . . . do not illumine but rather obscure his character. In death, he passes beyond the reach of mortal comprehension" (quoted in Roberts 2007). Chris McCandless—or, "Alexander Supertramp," if you like—therefore, becomes a character who represents both immediately identifiable ideals among many if not all audiences, and that intangible, superhuman experience so often linked to heroic figures.

Yet, we, as folklorists, can see that McCandless fits the mold of hero in another way as well. In his separation from society, rejection of former identity, and journey into the most marginal of mystery landscapes, McCandless' tale mirrors the path of countless folktale heroes, whether by Proppian, Cambellian, or Turnerian standards. Furthermore, there exist particular parallels between McCandless' journey and that of the symbolic initiate in the traditional rite of passage. For over a century now, folklorists and anthropologists, following the lead of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, have recognized the structural pattern of the "rite of passage," a culturally potent developmental milestone, marking the fundamental transition of an individual from one state of being into the next. We have traced the pattern of separation from former self and society, journey into some mysterious space or time, and return to community with new personal and/or social identity in ritual and in narrative time and time again. Van Gennep and Turner both identified the middle stage of this transitional journey as the "liminal period" and considered it to be the crux of any ritual or rite (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1982). The liminal period places the individual in a temporary state of flux and uncertainty, betwixt and between identifiable states. It is a singular point of contact and transfer between two otherwise distinctly separate spheres, a puzzling and murky borderland, ambiguous, appealing, and frightening by its very nature. To enter the liminal period is, in a very clear way, the same action as to venture "into the wild."

In folktale and legend, we often see this liminal stage echoed (as what Turner might call a “liminoid”) in the journey away from home, as the hero plays the role of the individual in passage, experiencing the incredible through supernatural encounters at marginal locations.² The legends, memories, and personal beliefs that people recount to one another abound with *symbolically* liminal, marginal, or “betwixt and between” ideas and images. Hybrid beasts skirt the boundaries between man and animal. Ghosts and demons cross the usually impassable lines between the heavens, earth, and underworld. Ordinary objects become extraordinary and magical tools. Wilderness locations, as distant, unfamiliar, and generally uninhabited environments, find frequent association with spiritual qualities and otherworldly encounters. Thus, from Gilgamesh and Hercules to Paul Bunyan and Luke Skywalker, the hero seeks out the wilderness as a liminal-type landscape, traveling to various heights and mountaintops, deep forests and desert expanses. Chris McCandless, through our retellings, joins them.

To venture “into the wild,” then, is a familiar concept for folklorists and common audiences alike, with the hero separating from society before a return with his or her new identity—often as ruler, spouse, or victorious warrior. In the case of Chris McCandless, we see a hero who failed to return from his voyage and reap the benefits of reaggregation into the community but also one who set off on that voyage all the same.³ Strikingly, McCandless himself seems to have been fully aware of the liminal overtones that surrounded his every step. After erasing his identity and taking on his (arguably ludic) new name, he entered into a state of non-being and, just like the Turnerian initiate, set off in search of communion with the divine and the elusive sense of “Other.” Before leaving for Alaska, in a postcard to Wayne Westerberg (quoted prominently by both the book and the film versions of his story), McCandless dramatically announced his liminal intentions, stating, “I now walk into the wild,” and, upon arriving, carved a particularly potent message inside of the “Magic Bus”:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS *THE ROAD*. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOUGH SHALT NOT RETURN, 'CAUSE 'THE WEST IS THE BEST.' AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS HE COMES TO THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME *LOST IN THE WILD* – ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP 1992⁴

This passage is also quoted prominently in both the book and film versions of McCandless' story and, for many, sums up the spirit of McCandless himself. He has become a central figure of discussion and passionate debate amongst those who would venture into the wild for themselves. Some deride McCandless as an arrogant fool, unprepared and receiving a death he deserved. Others empathize with his quest and celebrate his journey as a valiant test of man. Both, however, find the story itself quite fascinating.

**In Alex's Footsteps:
Celebration, Denigration, and Emulation of Chris McCandless**

In conducting my 2008 field interviews with wilderness enthusiasts, backpackers, and self-described "nature pilgrims" in the Pacific Northwest, I heard many opinions on McCandless and his life. Ray Cole, a backpacker and excursion leader familiar with the story, book, and film, for instance, noted, "It was his mistakes that . . . killed him in the end and . . . his unpreparedness that ended up being his demise," but Cole's wife, Heather, forgave McCandless' errors, dwelling on the symbolic import of his journey. "I guess I've always associated . . . wilderness

with Alaska,” she said, “because in the American landscape that’s like . . . one of the last stands of wilderness for us.”

After looking into the story more closely, I expanded my search for accounts of McCandless to the Internet and found even more celebration of and heated discussion over the man and his motives. Online, one finds some of the most ardent declarations of faith and inspiration in Alexander Supertramp’s journey. One poster on a page dedicated to McCandless writes, “I personally am engaged by people who let the universe truly guide their every move . . . once you honestly tap into the REAL reality and UNDERSTANDING of this type of travel . . . or, this book, only then will you appreciate the honest sacrifices [of] Chris, and people like him” (“Chris McCandless”). At the same time, a handful of posters wrote that Chris was “no hero,” but an “ill prepared nut job,” and point to others who have lived in the Alaskan bush for years without incident (“Chris McCandless”). One poster noted, “while tragic, he presents himself less [as] a folk hero and one to admire than someone whose almost childish mistakes should be avoided at all cost” (“Chris McCandless”). Following such posts, however, the anti-McCandless commentators become the target of furious rebuttals and personal attacks. “Dear @byrd968,” writes one poster, “I have to disagree with your . . . criticism . . . [Christopher McCandless] was not uneducated . . . He chose a life that took him on a journey that he chose personally. There’s nothing in the world that’s wrong with that.” Recounting a fairly thorough list of Chris’ travels, this poster continues, “I don’t think too many people I know could even fathom that reality, let alone do it themselves,” while another writes, “I don’t judge him, but rather, admire him for living the life he desired” (“Chris McCandless”).

McCandless has become a figure for people to rally behind, a personification of certain ideals. They seek to place themselves closer to him, as if to glean whatever knowledge he may have gained on his pseudo-rite of passage. For some, mere discussion of his tale provides this sensation, as one online poster writes, “This simple post . . . brings me one step closer in my [journey] to what Chris and all of us

are searching [for]" ("Chris McCandless"). For others, however, a more physical passage provides the means for drawing close to McCandless. In fact, celebration of the McCandless story has inspired actual, physical enactment. *National Geographic* writer David Roberts notes that not long after *Into the Wild* was published the "Magic Bus" became a "shrine" to which hundreds of "pilgrims" now "annually make their way by snow machine, ATV, mountain bike, or on foot" (Roberts 2007). This news, I found, was quite remarkable. Following up on such reports, I discovered that the *Into the Wild* tale and its appeal had developed even beyond retellings and online discussions. For some, indeed, it serves not only to inspire emergent legend and narrative traditions but also an emergent folk practice of secular pilgrimage, not unlike journeys to Jim Morrison's grave, Steve Prefontaine's rock, or Elvis Presley's Graceland.

Pilgrims to the "Magic Bus" document their visits with photographs and videos. Many pose in a chair beside the bus, emulating Chris' pose on a now widely-circulated self-portrait found undeveloped in a camera near Chris' body and belongings. Visitors also camp out nearby or inside the bus, muse upon Chris and his fate, comment on a sense of peace they feel at the location, and record their thoughts in registers that now stretch to multiple volumes; "His monument and tomb are a living truth whose flame will light the 'way of dreams' in other's lives," writes one pilgrim; "Alex [Supertramp], you have inspired me and changed my life forever," comments another.

These hero tale and pilgrimage links become, perhaps, ironic when one realizes that the bus itself, though symbolically remote, is not necessarily that difficult to reach. Only twenty miles from Healy and just outside Denali National Park, it has become something of a tourist attraction, despite skepticism and concern on the part of local residents. And yet the pilgrims come, to a place that increasingly resembles what Jack Santino (2004) has dubbed the "spontaneous shrine." The visits began with McCandless' siblings, who flew to Fairbanks to collect Chris' ashes. Later, while composing his book, Krakauer visited the Magic Bus along

with McCandless' parents, who installed a plaque quoting their son's final message, scrawled upon a journal page. Since then, even before the film by Sean Penn (who, incidentally, has also made the journey to the bus multiple times), the site has steadily grown in its attraction. Associated Press agent Rachel D'Oro notes that "the film adaptation . . . only cemented the mystique" for those hoping to retrace Chris' last steps and cites an informant who explicitly notes that the bus is "almost like a Jim Morrison grave site, where people just want to go see it" (D'Oro 2007). The phenomenon caught the attention of National Public Radio's Michele Norris, who noted that, since 1992, the bus has become a "makeshift shrine. A place of pilgrimage for those who felt connected to his story" (Norris 2007). And, as with any shrine, the bus provides a site for sacred objects. McCandless' jeans stay in place and, until recently, so did a pair of his boots. David Roberts notes that, while some of Chris's last belongings have been pilfered (including the bus's instrument panel, which sold on eBay in 2007), others remain, including a used toothbrush, in his words, "like the relics of a medieval saint" (Roberts 2007).

A Larger Phenomenon: McCandless and American Wilderness Religion

As with perspectives on Chris and his story itself, opinions on the pilgrimage practices vary. Many of McCandless' fans have decried the theft and various forms of desecration to their pseudo-shrine, but others have criticized the pilgrimage phenomenon for other reasons. One online forum poster points out that, "In a way [it is] so strange how he has been idolized . . . I think that would go against everything he said" ("Chris McCandless"). Others argue, more critically, that, "the real tragedy here is you can be sure someone else will idolize this idiot and go off to do the same thing," hoping that some American mother "doesn't have to deal with the overwhelming grief of a phone call . . . telling her that her . . . son is dead from similar circumstances because that kid idealized this guy and followed in his foot steps" ("Chris McCandless").

Yet while many have set out “into the wild” in explicit emulation of McCandless,⁵ perhaps *Into the Wild* fans are but one sub-set of a much larger group and a much larger wilderness pilgrimage tradition. In fact, young middle class Americans like McCandless have sought to journey “into the wild” for decades, if not centuries. In Krakauer’s initial piece on McCandless, an article-length treatment for *Outside Magazine*, he notes that even by the time Chris ventured into Alaska, he was one of many such “pilgrims” in the state.⁶ One native Alaskan, in a response to Krakauer over McCandless’ sudden popularity, wrote, “Over the past 15 years, I’ve run into several McCandless types out in the country. Same story: idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country, and ended up in trouble. McCandless was hardly unique; there’s quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they’re almost a collective cliché” (Krakauer 1996, 71).

In my own fieldwork with wilderness enthusiasts in the Pacific Northwest, I heard dozens of stories about such memorable characters and encounters with them along the Cascade Range. Geoffrey Vallee, a helicopter pilot and major in the Oregon National Guard, told tales of wilderness recluses and modern day “mountain men.” He described these people as “anybody who just chooses to live by themselves and take care of themselves out in the woods, completely and totally,” the “renaissance men of the 2000s who are pitting themselves against nature because they have nothing else to challenge themselves with.” Craig Smith, a river rafter and wilderness excursion guide, remembered leading a group of teens through Eagle’s Passage and meeting a particularly hearty and inspiring young man. He explained:

We were actually laying over a day just off the Pacific Crest Trail because it snowed six inches on us one night in July and so we decided not to move and I remember us hanging out that day and really working hard to keep everybody warm and you usually don’t build fires in the wilderness via a fire pit or anything but we made one to keep people warm ‘cause some of them got really wet that night. It

dumped. And we remember at dusk that night, we were there, just eating whatever silly food we had and huddled around the fire and this guy just comes cruising out of nowhere in nothing but a light little day pack and some tennis shoes [...] and he was just gnarly looking. Young guy, though—young in the concept of twenties. And he stopped, said hi, talked to us for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, said, “Oops! I gotta make this next trailhead”—which was about six miles away! . . . [He] just zipped right on through and it totally blew these kids away. He was traveling light. I mean, he was, he . . . the story was he was hiking the whole thing and moving fast and he looked like he’d been on the trail for a few months when he zipped through there and it just blew these kids away.

Other informants, like Ray Cole and Tom Powers, saw *themselves* as pilgrims to the wilderness. In fact, with only a little bit of research, it becomes clear that despite all of his insight into the liminal condition that surrounded him and all of his legend’s appeal, Christopher McCandless is not in any broader sense terribly unique. One might, for comparison, consider Everett Ruess, a 20-year-old artist who disappeared in the Canyonlands outside Escalante, Utah, in 1934, to see that the McCandless story is a recurrent motif, despite its basis upon actual events.⁷ One might also consider pilgrims like John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, or countless others. A look back upon Euro-American history reveals that educated, white, American men have almost always sought to emulate the wildman or mountain man in hopes of attaining some understanding of the cosmos beyond immediate perceptions. Thoreau, in his self-sufficient retreat to Walden Pond, perhaps represents the most celebrated example, but others have set off “into the wild” as well. Primitivist New Hampshire lawyer Estwick Evans conducted a 4,000-mile trek in a buffalo robe and moccasins in 1818, writing, “I wished to acquire the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and

imperfections of civilization . . . and to find amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more correct views of human nature and of the true interest of man” (Nash 1973, 56). In 1803, Harvard scholar and minister Thaddeus Mason Harris traveled alone through the rugged Ohio Valley, claiming “there is something which impresses the mind with awe in the shade and silence of these vast forests. In the deep solitude, along with nature, we converse with GOD” (Nash 1973, 58). And in 1913, in a celebrated 60-day media event sponsored by *The Boston Post*, Joseph Knowles lived entirely naked in the woods, reporting, “My God is in the wilderness... the great open book of nature is my religion. My church is the church of the forest” (Nash 1973, 157).⁸

Perhaps combined with folk-level romanticism of the American woodland dweller as national hero—from Daniel Boone and Davy Crocket to Liver-Eating Johnson and Hugh Glass—the wilderness recluse came to represent a model to be emulated in pursuit of higher, more meaningful experience. While I have heard some of my informants refer to recent excursions into the wilderness by young, middle-class Americans as part of a “McCandless Phenomenon,” the roots of such “nature pilgrimage” lie much deeper than a single individual’s story. Mary Lawlor has written at length about the mystique of the wild for young Americans, in the face of a supposedly vanishing wilderness. A national history of conquering unmapped terrain, she claims, ultimately endangered the landscape’s symbolically liminal and spiritual thresholds. The western wilderness was mythologized as a final frontier; a special, separate realm of enlightenment and transformative energies. Increasingly over time, in leisure journeys into the American wilderness, visitors sought and expected to recover vitality and integrity from nature (Smith 2002, 39).

Lawlor and others, like Richard Slotkin, have written at length on the import of “post-frontier anxiety” at the turn of the 20th century—especially in art and politics—but such anxiety seemingly continues to inspire all kinds of various approaches to the wilderness up into the modern day. Beat poets like Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder sought “to re-create the natural state of the wilderness in the

mind,” and inspired a later generation of counter-culture romantics and “hippies” to travel westward, emulating an imagined Indian lifestyle and seeking to live in harmony with nature (Johnson 2007, 290-291). These new inhabitants of the West created and continued a whole canon of folkloric legends and superhuman experiences across the remaining liminal landscape. The mountains, forests, and deserts of the American West set the scene for encounters with spectral gunfighters and wagon trains, Bigfoot-like monsters, extraterrestrials, and UFOs (Milligan 1990; Johnson 2007, 338), but also for communion with the divine through the breathtaking, liminal majesty of the natural world. And, of course, Van Gennep and Turner themselves recognized the importance of wilderness to the concept of liminality. Van Gennep went so far as to suggest that many (if not all) ritual rites of passage had originated as physical passages into the wilderness.⁹

After all, “wilderness” is by definition an unknown terrain and the word applies to any place in which a person feels lost and confused, separate from and therefore alternative to all aspects of society. It remains a liminal and marginal space, making it an open arena for the rite of passage experience in a secularized, homogenized culture in which fewer and fewer ritualized rites of passage take place.

This declaration suggests that individuals who venture into wilderness spaces do so in an attempt—whether consciously or unconsciously—to enter a kind of liminal state. Catherine Albanese argues that Euro-American history therefore abounds with religious, philosophical, and social movements holding nature and the wild frontier in particular regard.¹⁰ In fact, on the folk level, the American wilderness is often likened to a church. I often saw this symbolism echoed in my own work. One of my key informants, for instance, kayaker Tom Powers, liked to joke, “I go to church every Sunday . . . [the] . . . Church of the Holy Whitewater . . . I think that the closest I get to a spiritual experience in my life is through my experiences in the outdoors” (see, also, Sanford, 2007).

In this way, the wilderness or “wild” presents a source of what Leonard Primiano (1995) has called “vernacular religion.” Many of my informants over the

years have pointed to spiritual, self-exploratory sensations when venturing into the wild. One wilderness enthusiast, Melanie Drake, explained, "Deep woods to me is . . . a place where you can . . . hear your inner voice." Heather Gordon Cole claimed, "I . . . get out of it a sense of well-being and . . . a sense of myself in the world . . . [I think] it becomes almost ritualistic." Craig Smith noted that "the whole concept of being alone out there . . . makes you face yourself," and Geoff Vallee claimed, "Sometimes, it's overwhelming, and it's not hard to see why people believe there must be a God."

Granted, outdoor enthusiasts do list other motives behind their attraction to nature,¹¹ but the similarities between the nature voyage and the rite of passage persist. Even Sean Penn, director of the *Into the Wild* film, openly notes the importance of liminality, stating in a 2007 interview, "I really think that we shouldn't just accept rites-of-passage opportunities as they come, because what we'll find is that they don't come in our world anymore. And we shouldn't look at them as a kind of luxury or romantic dream but as something vital to being alive" (quoted in Grossman 2007).

Thus, for Chris McCandless and countless others like him, the American wilderness holds an enchanting, beckoning mystique. Furthermore, as has been expounded upon by Peter Jan Margry (2008), Daniel Wojcik (2008), and others in their work on spontaneous shrines and memorials, specific points associated with specific stories or celebrated, empathy-inducing individuals can provide particularly potent pilgrimage experiences. Chris McCandless and others like him represent a mystical figure for the American population at large. By escaping from society, they are privy to a kind of extra-human experience. Sometimes this experience is described as mere pleasure and ease, while other times it represents something more, but among those who frequent the wilderness, the quest to escape becomes a goal for which to strive.¹²

Conclusion: Coming Back Out of the Wild

Regardless of their ultimate judgments about McCandless in particular, my informants expressed a unanimous admiration for the extreme wilderness adventurer and recluse in general. Geoff Vallee explained, "It just seems wonderful that I could walk out into the woods and live and stay there. That seems like it would be just really exciting." When discussing individuals who remove themselves to the most distance wilderness environments, Elizabeth Spaulding confessed:

I could see where they would want to do it because, you know, I could see in a lot of people an apathy or a sense of hopelessness with the way society is continuously focused on certain consumerism, destruction of the nature, and perpetuating certain ideals that don't necessarily ring true for everyone and, so, disconnecting with that and being out in woods, where you are completely connected with nature and connected with your roots and free to be whatever you want to be, I could see where that would be very alluring or attractive.

Reading them now, her words recall, for me, those of a poster on an online forum, discussing McCandless' journey. The poster wrote:

As with many, this story has affected me deeply. I too left the comfort of my surroundings at 18 and headed west . . . The experience built character for me as I'm sure similar experiences have for others as well . . . Today, Chris is destined to be a part of American folklore for years to come. His death is almost martyrdom for those who desire to leave their comfortable and conventional surroundings but haven't the courage to do so. Like him or hate him, his saga is compelling and his memory will live on longer than any of us will. ("Chris McCandless").

In sentiments such as these, the American romance of the wilderness and its otherworldly nature—both as mysterious, awe-inspiring realm and as literal “other world” alternative to urbanized and city living—continues to thrive. Furthermore, the “pilgrim” to wilderness, in challenging and confronting the inherent limits to human existence, becomes a metaphorical wildman, a paradoxical entity, mysteriously mixing incompatible ideas.

Is this so-called “McCandless Phenomenon” new to Americans since the transmission of the *Into the Wild* story? In one of our conversations, a self-reflective Geoff Vallee summarized the situation nicely; “I don’t think it’s a new phenomenon at all,” he said “I think people are or have always been and always will be fed up with society . . . And they, many of them, as long as there are places that are wild, will choose to go there.”

By venturing “into the wild,” young Americans enact a pseudo-rite of passage for themselves, and by identifying their liminal zone with a specific individual or iconic hero who has tread the path before them—like Chris McCandless—they are able to project these sentiments onto a tangible, physical symbol—maybe a church, reliquary, sacred stone, or cemetery, and perhaps simply a “Magic Bus.” The appeal in the McCandless story is not only its structural familiarity but its ability to mirror the personal rites of any number of individual readers. Whether before or after McCandless, conscious or unconscious of his story, pilgrims embark upon a personal kind of pilgrimage, to the wilderness and to the “Magic Bus” itself, either physically or merely in their imaginations, emulating the modern-day folk hero with liminal motives not entirely different from those of the young Virginian who set off in 1992, lost in the wild of Alaska.

Notes

¹ In fact, Krakauer notes, the actual remoteness of the spot was only a subjective one. For the extent of his stay, McCandless was often no further than a few miles from civilization's outposts (Krakauer 1996, 165).

² Later in his career, Turner introduced the term "liminoid" to denote "the quasi-liminal character of cultural performances (e.g., theatre plays, music concerts, art exhibitions) and leisure activities in complex society" (Deflem 1991, 15). Turnerian liminal phenomena came to refer predominantly to "primitive" tribal societies, fully integrated into the totality of the social world, while liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, "takes place in the complex industrial world; they are the products of individual or particular group efforts and are generated continuously" often with the aim of subverting conventional and institutional behavior (Deflem 1991, 16; Turner 1992, 57). In short, Turner "referred to ritual outside the religious domain as liminoid" (Deflem 1991, 17), and eventually applied the term even to conventionally religious acts like pilgrimage, as it resembles the liminal but does not ensure a major change in religious state (Turner 1992, 37). The liminoid is "akin to the ritually liminal, or like it, but not identical with it," often secularized and less collective or calendrically based (Turner 1992, 56). While Dag Øistein Endsjø and others have followed Turner's lead and cautioned against using the term "liminal" as a universal in non-initiatory acts (Endsjø 2000), I have chosen to avoid use of the term "liminoid" for two reasons: first, to avoid unnecessary confusion on the part of the reader and, second, because the "symbolically liminal" remains a fairly novel point of discussion and does indeed adhere to the core qualities of "liminality" initially described by Turner and Van Gennep.

³ While some might claim that McCandless failed to return from his quest, others, noting that "Alexander Supertramp" began once again signing his writings with the name "Christopher McCandless" in the days preceding his death, might claim that he had returned, after the most important transformation—that from life into death itself—was made complete (Krakauer 1996, 198).

⁴ Elsewhere in the bus, McCandless recorded similar ideas. Upon one of the books he had brought along in his pack, he wrote "I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun." (Krakauer 1996, 168). Beside the skull of a bear he'd found in the woods and mounted on the bus' walls, he wrote "ALL HAIL THE PHANTOM BEAR, THE BEAST WITHIN US ALL. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP. MAY 1992." (Krakauer 1996, 179). In the depths of the wilderness, Chris McCandless clearly expresses the continuance of long-held folk conceptions of nature and its paradoxical, transformative energies.

⁵ Consider, for example, the case of Sin Mong Xing of Singapore, reported upon by the *Anchorage Daily News* in 2011 (“Singapore man”).

⁶ Jim Gallien, the last man to see McCandless alive, wondered if Chris was “one of those crackpots from the Lower 48 who come north to live out their ill-considered . . . fantasies” (Krakauer, 1993).

⁷ Even in his book on McCandless, Jon Krakauer recognizes the similarities between McCandless and Ruess. Like McCandless, Ruess wandered the Southwest, occasionally working or joining a small community here and there, and adopting a nonsense moniker. In fact, he gave his old name, Everett, to his burro, in his own words, “to remind me of the kind of person I used to be” (O’Grady 1993, 13). And, like McCandless, before disappearing into the wild, he left a single, dated and haunting inscription, not inside a rusted bus but on the side of an Anasazi ruin. “NEMO” it read, Latin for no one, “1934.” If McCandless had escaped his liminal state before his death, such implicit lack of identity suggests that Everett Ruess did not. Michael L. Johnson, quoting from John P. O’Grady, wrote on Ruess: “[He] undertook a pilgrimage in search of ‘a sense of his identity’ he couldn’t find in the noise and sordidness of urban society. He sought a ‘wild within . . . inseparable from the wild without,’ crossed a threshold into enrapturing ‘strange territories,’ and committed ‘an abandonment.’ He fashioned for himself a rite of passage, ‘but he lacked the guidance, the cultural framework, that provides the context for successful passage.’ He entered the wild to be renewed, to become someone new, but he wound up being only nemo doomed in his freedom, without an appropriate community to which to return, people who could better appreciate what he was about” (Johnson 2007, 396).

⁸ In the same manner as Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Knowles’ account, *Alone in the Wilderness*, sold thousands upon thousands of copies in but a few short weeks.

⁹ “While Van Gennep saw the undefined, transitional areas as loaded with meaning projected onto it by the culture that contemplated it, Turner considered the culturally undefined space as a neutral ground that could only acquire a quality of liminality through some liminal ritual taking place there” (Endsjø 2000, 357).

¹⁰ Among these movements, we might count millennialists, Grahamites, Transcendentalists, New Agers, Green voters, and Western pupils of Native American traditions.

¹¹ Several of my informants noted that aside from its spiritual qualities, its inherent escape from society, and its ability to serve as mirror to oneself, nature provides a “slowing down” of the world and an arena for more open communal

sharing. At the same time, however, my informants also sometimes stressed the “separation” or “disconnect” that a journey into the wilderness provides.

¹² It’s worth noting that both Ray Cole and Geoff Vallee described what they saw as a key element of the McCandless-like wanderers among American middle-classed youth not discussed in great detail elsewhere. Those who cast off society and venture into the wilderness often do so from an initial position of wealth and/or privilege. Vallee explains, “The impetus behind [it], I think, is a challenge, ‘cause they’ve always had everything handed to them. For some of them it might be an opportunity to get known or to get seen by their parents or, you know, almost like a cry for help. For many I think they’re just challenging themselves and they want to . . . they have the romantic idea of taking care of themselves and that’s one way that they do it. Others, maybe, you know, decide not to take their inheritance. I mean, we just don’t read about those. They’re not that exciting, but he says, ‘You know what, Dad? I don’t want your money. I’m gonna go make my own money,’ or, ‘Mom, I don’t want that.’ And I think it’s the same thing, just in a different expression.” Cole adds to this, “When I think of mountaintops, I think of my own experience, really, and what a privilege it is that I’ve gotten to do those things. And you know . . . I don’t know if we want to go with . . . heading towards the idea of privilege, but that’s been a real barrier, something that’s been really hard for me to think of when I think of wilderness is I think that it does take a certain amount of privilege to actually get to wilderness.” Both men, in their work leading wilderness trips, seek to correct this inequality.

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