

Motivating the Hermit

It might very well be impossible to determine the specific factors that contribute to the directions we choose for ourselves throughout our lives. The roads some travel can, at times, seem downright incomprehensible to others. If we had the ability to walk in the shoes of those we were unable to understand, however, we would likely find ourselves enlightened by the countless motivations and experiences we might otherwise be unaware of. A good example is that homeless person you pretended not to look at the other day. Was the person just a lazy bum, as you assumed, and thus undeserving of your charity, or was his or her situation instead a result of a series of unfortunate events and choices that slowly led him or her onto the streets? After all, what could possibly motivate someone to live that way “by choice” (Krakauer 51)? Upon reading Jon Krakauer’s Into the Wild, I found myself amazed and intrigued by the paths Chris McCandless chose to take during the last two years of his life. I couldn’t help but wonder: what unknown factors, beyond those explored in the book, could have motivated McCandless to do what he did? Although one can only speculate, I would argue that a combination of factors, including McCandless’s upbringing and the “hypocrit[ical]” (122) expectations his parents imposed upon him, along with a genetic – possibly even pathological – predisposition to roam and explore, didn’t simply draw Chris McCandless “into the wild” (3); the course of his life literally repelled him into it.

In Krakauer’s work, Chris McCandless states to acquaintance Ronald Franz: “you don’t need to worry about me. I have a college education. I’m not destitute. I’m living like this by choice.” I’m led to wonder whether such a choice would have been so easy, had McCandless grown up in a lower-class family. Would his life, his security, have been so easy to give away

had there been no easy means of replacing them? It is clear that McCandless' journey was incredibly important to him; actions such as leaving behind the car that he "loved . . . so much" (Krakauer 31-32), instead of abandoning his travels to recover it, speak louder than any words he could have left behind. What he never directly explains, however, is *why* this "odyssey" (22) was so important. A simple explanation might be that McCandless sought out the one thing he never completely knew: instability. "Charlie," a man with whom McCandless stayed for a short period of time, describes: "[McCandless] seemed like a kid who was looking for something, looking for *something*, just didn't know what it was. I was like that once, but then I realized what I was looking for: Money! Ha!" (42). Money seems to be the one thing "Charlie" never had much of, and it might therefore be natural for him to seek out that seemingly missing quality to his life. Would it, then, be only natural for McCandless also to seek out that which he didn't have? It is possible, but I believe McCandless's motivations stem even deeper than that.

In a letter written to friend Wayne Westerberg, McCandless states that he "escaped from Atlanta . . . to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. . . . no longer to be poisoned by civilization [McCandless's alter ego, Alex Supertramp] flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild" (Krakauer 163). I find it interesting that McCandless chooses the word "escape," when referring to his departure from Atlanta, as if the city were a prison holding him against his will. McCandless also notes that by becoming "lost in the wild" he will "victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution." It is clear that McCandless perceives his journey as life-changing, perhaps even spiritually enlightening, but also something that would not have been achievable had he remained in Atlanta. Again, McCandless's choice in words is telling. It is not every day a person claims to be undergoing a "spiritual revolution," and in stating this McCandless implies quite a bit. Not only does he directly connect the wild with

spiritual change, but by using the word “conclude” rather than “begin” or “seek” to describe this important event also gives us the impression that his past journeys have already sent him well on his way toward his goal.

McCandless had a natural impulse to explore well before the days of his odysseys. As a fellow student in McCandless’s high school track team, Gordy Cucullu, notes: “[McCandless] would lead us on long, killer runs . . . and intentionally try to get us lost. We’d run as far and as fast as we could, down strange roads, through the woods, whatever. The whole idea was to lose our bearings, to push ourselves into unknown territory” (Krakauer 112). A single event, however could have been a major catalyst in sparking McCandless’s drive to push this need to its absolute extreme.

It seems that McCandless’s picture-perfect image of his father was shattered during one of his earliest “cross-country wanderings” (Krakauer 121). Krakauer explains: “Chris’s relations with his parents . . . deteriorated significantly that summer. . . . Chris’s smouldering anger, it turns out, was fueled by a discovery he’d made” (121). When McCandless found out about his father’s past infidelity, he became filled with more than anger; it seems that he became driven to distance himself as much as he possibly could from his father’s “hypocrit[ical]” ways. With that in mind he decided to graduate college, to “let [his parents] think that [he was] ‘coming around to see their side of things . . . and then, when the time [was] right . . . knock them out of [his] life’” (64). A payback of deception, perhaps, before his journey could commence?

Considering the life McCandless led up until college, can the behaviors he exhibited be considered normal? Even more, do “normal” people take off to the streets and the wilderness to commence spiritual journeys when they are in need of sorting out their lives – or might McCandless’s behaviors be considered abnormal, simply because they don’t fit into the societal

concensus?

I would like to think that, in a way, I understand McCandless's desire to "escape" from society. I've witnessed more than my share of society's hypocrisy and ignorance, and I'd be lying if I didn't note that I've fantasized about walking out on it more than once as a result of my experiences. Unlike McCandless, however, I could not fathom giving up a warm house, my friends and family, or the responsibilities I've taken on in return for such freedom. McCandless seemed to believe that his freedom was more important than such societal comforts and connections. With that, I can't help but wonder if McCandless might have been, even in the least bit, driven by some sort of neurosis?

Krakauer writes: "many aspects of Chris's personality baffled his parents. He could be generous and caring to a fault, but he had a darker side as well, characterized by monomania, impatience, and unwavering self-absorption, qualities that seemed to intensify through his college years" (120). It is important to note that the escalation of these behaviors could easily have resulted from McCandless's newfound knowledge of his father's imperfection, as even Krakauer indirectly implies. However, it is also important to consider that the behaviors are described as "intensify[ing] through his college years." There is no mention that the "qualities" did not exist beforehand, an ambiguity that may or may not have been intentional. The implications appear to grow, however, when we add Krakauer's quote of writer Anthony Storr:

'[A]voidance behavior is a response designed to protect the infant from behavioral disorganization. If we transfer this concept to adult life, we can see that an avoidant infant might very well develop into a person whose principle need was to find some kind of meaning and order in life which was not entirely, or even chiefly, dependent upon interpersonal

relationships' (61).

Although Krakauer does not formally investigate the possibility of a psychological cause for McCandless's extreme actions (beyond references to his own daring adventures and a handful of short investigations of various explorers and thrill-seekers), these implications do deserve some analysis. If McCandless did happen to exhibit some type of avoidance behavior, it would be easier to understand why he felt the need to distance himself from not only his family, but all of society. Krakauer points out in another possible clue from McCandless's journal, stating: "on February 3 . . . McCandless [goes] to Lost Angeles to 'get a ID and a job but feels uncomfortable in sociery now and must return to the road immediately'" (36). Being that McCandless makes an obvious attempt to reenter society in Los Angeles, only to retreat immediately, I am inclined to wonder whether or not McCandless may have suffered from some sort of undiagnosed social anxiety disorder. Although one could argue over whether these anxieties might have been a result of his long-term absence from society or pre-existing conditions that became amplified over the years, the possibility of either shouldn't be discounted. It is unlikely that McCandless would have wandered the country for nearly two years before traveling to Alaska, had the ability to function within society been a more prevalent part of his personality.

Or perhaps I am reading completely in the wrong direction; perhaps McCandless really was on a spiritual journey, his motivations sound and completely justified. A number of religions and spiritual leaders, for example, mention a great necessity for nature. Many native Americans still practice the centuries-old "vision quest" ceremony, in which young adults seek higher truths by meditating within nature without food or water. Teacher, psychologist, and self-proclaimed psychic, Ellie Crystal states, "[a vision quest] is a time of fasting - praying - and being in nature." Sri Swami Sivananda explains the similar Buddhist practices, which emulate

Buddha Gautama's intense spiritual revelation: "[the Buddha] plunged himself deep into meditation ... underneath [the] sacred Bo-tree ... [and] he attained Nirvana." According to legend, Buddha then spent the next two weeks dancing and meditating beside the tree (Sivananda). Jesus, who is a revered religious figure to many, sought his spiritual peace by going to similar, perhaps even further, extremes: "driven by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus remains there for forty days without eating; he lives among wild beasts, and angels minister to him" (Akin).

I sincerely doubt that there are many who would describe Jesus or Buddha as crazy for doing what they did, or that native Americans have no right, nor and validity, in practicing their beliefs. Considering these variables, might it be possible - even remotely - that Chris McCandless's journey through the country and up into Alaska truly was a legitimate quest for enlightenment, comparable to that of any other? I simply cannot help but wonder: if Jesus or Buddha were alive today, would society - would I - question the sanity of their actions, as well?

Be it through spiritual odyssey or psychosis, I have no doubt that Chris McCandless felt he had no choice but to do what he did, and that he did truly find what he was looking for in Alaska - regardless motivations might have drawn him there. Krakauer states, "one of [McCandless's] last acts was to take a picture of himself, standing near the bus ... he is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God" (199). The picture is printed on the inside cover of Into the Wild. McCandless's journey there, as well as his untimely death, might have been the result of several arguable factors and events, but he truly does look like a man who has found his spiritual peace. It is hard to say whether or not with that peace also came spiritual insight, or even if his choice to leave society wasn't anything more, really, than a naive, youthful mistake, given the fact that his

odyssey did end with nature ultimately taking his life. One's spiritual journey is a personal one, however. Given my own past and present beliefs and practices, I am hesitant to judge. I wonder if perhaps McCandless's motivations for leaving society and crossing the country to the Alaskan wilderness were meant to forever be an enigma to the rest of us. We will most likely never know the whole truth behind the last years of McCandless's life, but perhaps that is how it is meant to be. Had he not left the questions he did, his story wouldn't hold the significance that it does today.

Works cited available upon request.