



In the Wilderness ...

Any number of times during the telling of these little stories, I have mentioned that I dropped out of university at the end of my first year. As you might expect from such a major event, it changed the direction that my life would take, although at the time, it was impossible to see where I was going.

A student in school of course has his affairs scheduled pretty tightly, both on a day-to-day basis and for the period of the years that he is in the institution, but once you step away from that quite tightly organized life, it can seem like being in the wilderness. Which way to go? What to do?

Given such 'freedom' today, I would have no trouble at all finding things to do, but at the time, all I could see were the things *blocking* my path. Did I want to move out of my parents' home? Of course, but I had no money. Well, get a job ... but we lived in a semi-rural area, and there were very few jobs available, and the couple that I applied for turned me down because I had no car (nor license to drive).

I did 'work' teaching at a summer camp for classical music students for a couple of weeks, but that paid only a very small amount over and above room and board. Summer came near its end; autumn approached - the time when I 'should' have been getting back to school, and I still had no idea what to do with myself.

Sometime before this, I had had the experience of being taken on a short hiking/camping trip by some friends, using a borrowed (and extremely heavy) old backpack. I had staggered up the steep trail far behind all the experienced walkers (with their modern 'ultra-lightweight' equipment) but had enjoyed the experience nonetheless, and the idea now came to me that I could do some backpacking on my own.

I used the money from the summer camp job to pick up a few supplies - an inexpensive pack frame, some simple cooking gear, and a lightweight sleeping bag. Studying maps of southern British Columbia thinking about where to go, I came up with the idea of making a week-long 'off-route' trip, in an area where there were no established trails. I settled on Manning Park, a vast wilderness area larger than many countries, and after packing enough food and supplies to last me the length of the journey, off I went.

I took an inter-city bus to get there, having the driver drop me off at a spot I had selected along the highway. I then hitched up my extremely over-loaded pack, studied my map, and then turned my back on the road and headed into the forest, compass hanging from a cord around my neck.

I had never camped alone before, nor had ever done any orienteering, but I *had* read my Boy Scout manuals, cover to cover, and my head was full of 'advice': "Never lose altitude unnecessarily" ... "Never step on what you can step over" ...

The sounds from the highway behind me died away very soon, and for the next week, I would hear nothing but the wind in the trees and my own footsteps. I had mapped out a route that stayed mostly in the high country. Once out of the valleys, there was no underbrush to block the way, and I felt that there would be less chance of a sudden bear encounter. As it turned out, I met none, although I did see plenty of deer, elk, and various small mountain critters.

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I took no camera; I kept no notes. If I were taking such a trip now, I would set myself much more modest goals for each day's leg, and would spend much more time sitting and enjoying the mountain atmosphere, and pondering 'Life, the Universe, and Everything', but in those days it was all about how many kilometers I could cover.

The only lasting memory I have all these many years later is that I actually did do that thing; I made a solo journey traversing many miles of 'unexplored wilderness', successfully arriving at my planned destination.

Was this Dave's 'time in the wilderness' before he managed to find a path through life? That's an overly dramatic way to put it, but the experience was probably among those events that helped that very shy, and not particularly self-confident little boy grow up ...

... at least a little bit.

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