

Chronicles of Diversity

Your leadership weekly



The short grass prairie and the forested hills of central Montana

Isolation, Solitude, and Silence

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In memory of William Paul (Wild Bill) Evanko

Before heading to Eastern Washington last Wednesday I had the pleasure of attending a memorial service for Bill Evanko, killed as a speeding motorist crashed into his car, while Bill was resting in a rest stop somewhere under the Big Sky of Montana.

Bill's earthly life was and amazing testimony of the life changing power of Jesus Christ, as Bill became a new man in his last few years. Changed forever by the love and the blood that took away his addictions and their accompanying complications of personal and interpersonal conflict. Also gone were the attempts to do better in his own strength, no more 12 step programs, and strivings to be a better person. Bill's life was transformed by a new power that overcame his personal weaknesses.

Bill grew up in the isolation of foster care. I think isolation is the proper term. Seemingly abandoned by his own family, not by his choice, but by the choice of others, either family members or the legal system, he learned to take care of himself, by his own wits and abilities to cope with the world beyond his ability to control. Most of Bill's life, long after he had out grown the foster care system, Bill continued to fight the demons he inherited during those early years. Only in his last few years did those demons no longer haunt his life, as a changed man, Bill was now able to use those many years of trouble for his benefit and for the benefit of the rest of mankind. Thank you, Bill.

Richard Manning is the author of the book I have been reading during the trip to Minnesota and afterward. It was in that book, "One Round River" that I borrowed the terms "solitude and silence" that I used last week. It was also in the source documents for one of his other books, "Grasslands" that I borrowed the concept of our (American') inability to successfully cope with the dry grasslands and deserts. This arid landscape will eventually cause turmoil when our populated areas of abundance are converted to urban deserts, unable to support our lifestyle to which we have so easily become accus-

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Jerry Bannon

Wonder Springs

7950 Seward Park Avenue South

Seattle, Washington USA 98118

phone: 206.723.7433

eFax: 425.675.8022

email: bannon@createleaders.org or chronicles@createleaders.org

Please forward prayer requests to: prayer@createleaders.org

Washington State Charity Number: 7529

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tomed. I will take some credit for adapting this to our spiritual lives, but it is really just a small obvious step, when you see the magnificent power of our natural steppes.

The inside of the dust jacket for "One Round River," has the following description: Richard Manning has been called "a gifted environmental writer with a refreshing sense of humor" by the New York Times.

Richard's religion is evolution, more specifically micro evolution as the primary means of change in all of life. What I would call simple ecological and genetic diversity, created by God and naturally expressed through simple adaptation, Richard spins as hopeful evolutionary progress. I think he would probably agree with me that solitude and silence, especially in the wilderness context, (as his means for evolutionary progress), changes the hearts of rational man. Therefore, we can see the folly in man's destructive ways, toward the environment and toward each other.

I also watched again last week a music DVD featuring John Denver and his "Wildlife Concert" to help raise funds to support wildlife conservation. This concert recorded shortly before his death is a compendium of not only much of his music, but also his thoughts on environmental issues. As the star of the movie "Oh God" this deist concept, that made America this great nation, permeates all his thoughts, especially of "Rocky Mountain High."

He speaks of his music as Western, not country. Music that in some small way tries to briefly capture a glimpse of the "spirit" of the American west. A place like not other on this earth. Towards the end of the concert he speaks of his "gift" as something not belonging to him, but must be utilized for the cause of bringing some sense, if only briefly through the words of his songs, to a world, to a people rushing towards chaos and insanity.

If John had the opportunity to put the thoughts of isolation, solitude, and silence into his perspective, he might say that isolation is the source of many of our troubles, solitude, again from that wilderness perspective is a source of peace and harmony, and silence as a means to "speak to God and hear His casual reply."

This brings us somewhat full circle, from Wild Bill, to Richard, to John, to Jerry. This strange evangelical Christian, that writes about diversity and arid lands, especially in the spirit. His hope, the only hope he sees, again in full agreement with Bill, is in the cross of Jesus Christ as the only hope for this fallen world, exploited by mankind, obsessed with himself and his illusionary manifest destiny.

In the solitude and silence of a Dodge Dakota, speeding 70+ miles per hour in air conditioned comfort along I-90 in Washington's sample of the great American desert, between George and Moses Lake, Jerry had this amazing thought.

Before we get to that thought however, keeping in line with the rich diversity of this week's article, it could have been a word from the Lord, or a point of micro evolutionary genius, or just an idea generated in the complexity of my God created brain. Whatever source you want to believe, it came to me out of the nothing of self imposed solitude and silence.

As I analyzed this expression, I quickly realized that this was not something I was regurgitating, refining, or ruminating from something I read or borrowed from somewhere, or someone. I could not see any link to anything I had in my experience, it was something completely new to my way of thinking. I was in awe, not of myself, but a thought that seemingly was born completely out of the solitude and silence of this traveling venture.

Now for the thought: Isolation, solitude, and silence are the mechanisms for changing the human personality. Did you notice the period.

As this thought evolved as I headed toward Ritzville, the ritz of this encounter with the unknown, achieved some refinement in the form a definitions.

Isolation, as in the case of Wild Bill, changed his personality by forces outside his control. For decades he was trying to adjust to those early years of forced isolation in foster care. It was only God who could change or recreate those years of destructive isolation, into a personality of love and service to others. But no matter how you look at it, Bill being alone with Bill, was the source of that ultimate blessing he was to those who knew him in his last few years.

Solitude, is different from isolation in that it is a result of choice. You can choose your solitude to some degree. In fact, in many cases, as with wilderness solitude, you must work to achieve it. Sometimes these choices are made by others for your benefit, but for lack of a better concept, they are made in tough love, to make you a better person. Solitude is a good thing. Isolation, along somewhat of a continuum, is a means only to get rid of a problem, with the least cost, emotional, cultural, or financial, as in the case of foster care or imprisonment.

Silence, is that mechanism that forces you inward or outward. Inwardly you are forced into self doubt and mistrust of everything external. Our world calls this as poor self esteem, overcome by good self esteem, or thinking you create your own reality (as your own God). This is a bad thing. Outwardly, however you define the religious experience, it is through prayer, or as John so famously sang, "to talk to God and hear His casual reply." Your concept of prayer is a very good and fruitful occupation.

So where do you come down on my grand revelation?

If you are thinking, "There he goes again." then I would venture to say you were, or are a city kid. You have a sense of isolation among the masses, but not truly the sense of peace that comes from solitude, especially in the wilderness. The solitude that Jesus, the Christ, needed in the desert of the middle east, what we each need to truly develop the sense of community and culture to make a difference in a world headed rapidly to self destruction.

My take on the wilderness is somewhat different than that of Richard or John, in that I believe that God can make that wilderness anywhere He chooses, by His tough love. My deepest wilderness experience has been in southeast Seattle. For economic necessity, that was where I was pretty much forced to live, to scratch out a subsistence living, similar to the way most people live in much of our rural lands.

Now, I have known for years the reason for this in God's provision, is that I grew up as an only child, knowing solitude and silence, not only in a loving home, but also in the wilderness beyond the lasting influence of mankind. The true wilderness, that terrifies many, I do not find at all threatening, sometimes challenging, but still less of a jungle than urban streets. So to be blunt, if my wilderness experience had been in the real wilderness, I would say, "To hell with you, reap the fate you so selfishly seek!"

So to try to tie solitude and silence in the urban and suburban wilderness together with the remote wilderness, I recount an episode that occurred two days after my encounter with the old growth forest on my trek around Mt. Rainier's Wonderland Trail.

Hiking the west side of Mount Rainier is about a three day trek. Just before lunch on the second day, I stopped as I crossed the North Fork of the Puyallup River to get a snack and change some clothing to prepare for a hike to the summit of a ridge before descending to spend the night at Golden Lakes.

For the first time during the trip the sky sort of looked as if it might possibly rain. I dismissed this possibility as just a passing shower. As I adjusted my pack and headed up the trail, within a few minutes the sky opened up with rain like you only normally see in the tropics (and the west side of the highest peak in the Pacific Northwest). Within seconds everything was soaked. Even if I had prepared for the rain, all my gear would have been drenched. It rained that hard, but the down pour lasted for about thirty minutes total.

As I neared the top of the ridge, the now passed rainstorm had left a slight covering of snow of perhaps an inch maximum. This transformed the gloomy soggy climb, into a beautiful decent through a white wonderland. As I followed the track of a solitary bear down the slope to Golden Lakes, I knew that my hopes of finishing this trip that year had been eclipsed by the breakdown of the North Pacific High. The annual high pressure atmospheric condition that keeps the Pacific Northwest free from significant rain during the summer months.

From my wilderness training I knew that the first thing you do when you get soaked in the wild, is to start a fire and dry everything out. In my wonderful decent in the solitude and the silence of this first taste of winter on the mountain, it never crossed my mind that fires were outlawed in the National Park, and as a consequence I did not really bring anything to start a fire with anyway.

I spent that night using my body heat to try to dry out a down sleeping bag that was pretty much useless except as a windbreak. True to my wilderness training, the wool clothing that I was wearing and my plastic tarp protected me from the effects of hypothermia. Hence, a night that could have been quite serious was only just very miserable. I was also content in the fact that the God who created me and the magnificent natural surroundings, knew where I was, and was not finished with my life.

I shared the Golden Lakes camp that night with four women from the Sammish plateau. For those of you unfamiliar with the Seattle suburbs the Sammish plateau is now the City of Sammish east of Lake Washington and Lake Sammish. It is the area where many of the professional sports celebrities live.

To complete this story, these women had the outdoor gear to bring this affluent suburb to the mountain. Gore-tex rain suits, designer packs, tents, and other gear I had only seen in catalogs or on the floor of REI, were being utilized a few yards to my north. As I shivered in my few dollar plastic tarp, I was total secure in the knowledge that I was truly facing the wilderness challenge in solitude and silence, not secure in the price of my outfitting.

To put it in terms of the end of this week's discussion, I was secure in my solitude and silence, protected by my God. The women were isolated from this wonderful experience by the price of their gear, the insecurity of suburban life, and the company of compatriots who shared entirely the same lifestyle.

So your homework for next week is cutting to the core of the matter. What is your experience with isolation as it has been defined here? Are you still trying to cope, as Wild Bill did, with these consequences that have changed your life?

Have you ever spend a night or more alone, out on your own, trusting in your concept of Providence or your own evolutionary wits to get you through? Would you ever through your own choice decide to take that step beyond your understanding of reality and move into the life changing opportunities available to only those who have experienced true solitude and silence?

Seeds for Prayer

I am in Spokane trying to get motivated to clean up the house in Reardan. It still looms as too big of a task to accomplish with a pending operation to fix my little finger in just a week. Therefore, I have been looking at long term possibilities, perhaps procrastinating a bit. Please intercede for this time and for the operation next week.