CONTEMPORARY SELF-RELIANCE AS SOCIAL ACTIVISM

by

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A THESIS

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To find our way back to sobriety, responsibility, and hope in a culture burdened by "the crisis lifestyle," individuals, as citizens of a community, must develop a contemporary self-reliance not as a romantic ideal, but as a practical, unifying, and aware way to live in the world. Where classic self-reliance focuses on a set of skills, attitudes, and perceptions largely independent of one's community, contemporary self-reliance relies on diverse experiences, both individual and community, that allow a person to perceive and participate in a reality that bridges subject-object duality in daily life. Using works from literature, philosophy, history, and lived experience, this thesis will examine development of classic self-reliance within the context of the frontier mentality, investigate the development of the crisis lifestyle that threatens the liberty of citizens and the value of community, and show that the cultivation of contemporary self-reliance relies on embodied, empowering daily action.

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DEDICATION

To all of my teachers.

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Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes
of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

Walt Whitman
From "Song of Myself"

The Culture of Self-Reliance

"My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than it should be glittering and unsteady. I wish it to be sound and sweet, and not to need diet and bleeding."

Emerson

The venerable Wallace Stegner in a lecture titled *The Twilight of Self-Reliance: Frontier Values and Contemporary America* takes issue with a world he feels growing away from its base, out of control, selfish and preoccupied with itself. He bemoans the fact that American culture has forgotten the culture of self-reliance and individualism that was responsible for the Anglo settlement of the North American continent and the creation and maturation of The United States of America. Dismayed by lethargy and evidence that the American people lost their capacity to do for themselves Stegner asks,

> How did we get there from here in little more than a century? Have the sturdiness of the American character and the faith in America's destiny that Thoreau took for granted been eroded entirely away? What happened to confidence, what happened to initiative and strenuousness and sobriety and responsibility, what happened to high purpose, what happened to hope? Was the American future, so clear in Thoreau's day, no more than a reflection of apparently unlimited resources that begot it?[1]

Stegner was speaking in early 1980 and almost a quarter century later, Stegner's questions are still valid. Stegner concludes, after a historical sketch of the effects of classic self-reliance up to the twentieth century, that the American consciousness and our history of frontier values of self-reliance will ultimately

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[1] Wallace Stegner, *The Twilight of Self-Reliance: Frontier Values and Contemporary America*, p.196.

provide us with the example that will help us answer some of the questions he posed. Stegner's conclusion that we must look back to our history of classic ideals of self-reliance, however revered by our culture, is only a partial beginning. This is not to speak poorly of one of our greatest Western writers. His was a generation that matured in the early twentieth century when much of the Western United States was largely wild. Born in 1909, nineteen years after Fredrick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" postulated the end of the American frontier, Stegner nonetheless grew up in the frontier landscape of Eastern Saskatchewan and Montana. He saw his generation end up on the winning side of two world wars and climb out of the Great Depression. His contemporaries such as Scott and Helen Nearing returned to the land in rural Maine and provided for themselves and their community in anticipation of many of Stegner's questions. No wonder in his later years would he feel a sense of despair of what was known as the "yuppie generation."

"Give us time," Stegner asks. "Half a millennium is not enough. Give us time to wear out the worst of the selfishness and greed and turn our energy to humane and socially useful purposes." Now in the first years of a new millennium, we are not yet out of time, but we must not waste the time we have left. While Stegner's questions are still valid, a sense of urgency must be added. If the culture of narcissism and selfishness just emerging in the early 1980's caused Stegner to worry, today we might add to that worry the entrenchment of a "crisis lifestyle" that grips our entire country and includes a deteriorating standing among the world community. This crisis lifestyle not only envelops our own country, it has already bled into other countries

with the import of Western free-market economy values into other cultures. We need to utilize the resourcefulness and belief potential that enabled the settlement of the continent and rediscover the initiative and sobriety of spirit that Stegner asks us to recover.

It is impossible for all of us who are disheartened and disempowered to move to the woods on our own, private forty acres, live a life apart from our communities, and solely live by the physical work of our own hands. The life of the pioneer, of the rugged individualist, romantic notions and all, is gone. Most people in our modern society do not have the desire or the skills necessary to live the often brutal and short lives of our early ancestors and it probably would offend the practical sensibilities of those brave people. To daily live that primitive of a lifestyle is certainly a "going back."[2] Nostalgia for things and lifestyles past will not help our culture approach the questions posed by Stegner and those that face us today. But the fundamental human skills required to live in the wilds of the frontier are the same skills required to fully live in present and future human culture, and this is the way in which we can bring life to cultures and ways of knowing past. The way to find our way back to sobriety, responsibility, and hope requires the development of a contemporary self-reliance not as a romantic ideal, but as a practical unifying way to live in the world. Contemporary self-reliance honors its history, works in the present to improve one's

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[2] Although it is important note that contemporary homesteading is not contrary to community activism. Scott and Helen Nearing experienced it in their time, as has Gary Snyder his. Today contemporary homesteading in its classic definition is less possible, mostly due to access to affordable land. Thus, the idea of "homesteading" needs to be reimagined as well. Perhaps "reinhabitation" would be a good way to think of it.

self-efficacy, and relies on a diverse community from which to learn and to teach. Where classic self-reliance focused on a set of skills and attitudes on the way to tangible change in one's physical environment which then led to a change in one's perceptions, contemporary self-reliance relies on presenting oneself to diverse experiences one might not have in modern society: solitary, community, wild. The skills once necessary to our ancestors will come as a result of an active, intentional search for experiences that are not out of the norm of daily, modern experience, but square in the middle of it.

The Making of a Myth

The culture of self-reliance began not with the "discovery" of America in the fifteenth century, but only after early attempts to plunder the continent had passed. The real story of the rugged individualist began, much as it is now, as a myth. This myth finds its roots in the wide-open spaces of early America, already populated by numerous Native people who had their own myths, communities, and relationships with the landscape. The promise of open and free land to a Europe full of peasants under the foot of a feudal system that offered no opportunity for movement, physically or psychologically, immediately became the goal. Land existed for the taking. "The opportunity to own land not only freed men, it made labor honorable and opened the future to hope and the possibility of independence, perhaps a

fortune."[3] The open-ness of early America (at least to Anglo men) shaped the mentality of all who dreamed of coming to America and was the reality to those who actually made it. The contemporary psyche of the United States of America locates itself in the idea that opportunity equals movement. If settlers were dissatisfied with their position, a new opportunity was just over the rise. All one had to do was pack up the family (or leave them altogether), move over the hills and clear a wilderness that did not seem to belong to anyone.[4]

Eventually, this physical open space and the rugged skills required to live in it – the independence of movement and lifestyle – translated into an independence of mind and attitude that caused great consternation to those in Europe, particularly the Throne in England. In 1776 a group of elites proclaimed their independence from the Throne and a nascent country of commoners risked their lives for the promise of physical, political, and personal space and for the opportunity of self-determination. Following its independence, the young country wasted no time in asserting its need for the space to move and grow. In 1803 The Louisiana Purchase was formalized and the young country acquired 828,000 square miles, almost doubling its size and made it one of the largest countries in the world. Later that same year, the Lewis and Clark Expedition embarked on the journey that would take them across the continent and back again.

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[3] Wallace Stegner, p.202.
[4] *Ibid.*

As the new country was covering more physical territory, its thinkers were challenging the citizens to be more self-reliant intellectually. In 1839, the former minister Ralph Waldo Emerson put into people's minds what they had been expressing with their physical stretching out and tramping over the continent. Emerson spelled out the aspirations for the country that was establishing its identity beyond the relatively newfound freedom of movement. "The power which resides in [an American] is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, not does he know until he has tried."[5] Emerson captures the hope and opportunity that America can provide. America as the new hope in the world, a beacon of freedom, is not so much modern political hyperbole as an idea that has its roots in Emerson, nourished by the soil of Jefferson's "Agrarian Ideal" a little over fifty years before Emerson's essay.[6] One of the points of Emerson's essay was to remove the gaze from England and English thought and on to the open frontier of the newly emerging American mind.[7]

Another message of Emerson's thoughts was not only the shunning of the privilege of the nobles in Europe, but the value of non-conformity and individualism of thought and action. Emerson's message rejects of a way of thinking bound by institutions that in their day had lost the capacity for genuine thought and action: "If

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[5] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," p.148.
[6] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787, p. 141.
[7] "In our history our imagination plays us false. Kingdom and lordship, power and estate, are a gaudier vocabulary that private John and Edward in a small house and a common day's work; but the things of life are the same to both; the sum total of both is the same. As great a stake depends on your private act today as followed [the great lords of Europe] public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with original views, the lustre [*sic*] will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen." Emerson, p.155.

you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party wither for the government or against it, spread you table like base housekeepers – under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the man you are.... A man must consider what a blind man's-bluff is this game of conformity."[8]

Some may fault Emerson for planting the seed of individualism and non-conformity that is the bane of community building efforts in the 21st century. Emerson's world was far different from our own today. The country was still very young, had recently survived an attempted invasion by the English in 1812, and although growing rapidly, still unsure of its place in the world. Many still looked to England for standards of practice in manners and quality in the arts. Emerson was just as much encouraging citizens to cast their gaze west to the frontier as much as turn their backs on the customed and cloistered world of early 19th century English society. Emerson being the philosopher that he was, he probably knew that to build a self-sufficient country out of a continent of wilderness, its people would likewise need to develop a new set of intellectual skills and unique attitudes to survive in it.

Perhaps more famously that Emerson's philosophy, which can be dense and difficult to navigate, Henry David Thoreau lived "alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house I built for myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my own hands."[9] His example of some of Emerson's philosophy intertwined with his own is legendary in American

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[8] Emerson, p. 151.
[9] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, p.1.

culture. Thoreau was a person of action as much as he was a person of thought. His life on Walden Pond provides the model for our thoughts and desires for a self-reliant life. Many trapped in cities and suburbs want to flee to the country and build their own home (or have someone do it for them) on a lake and live the contemplative life. This has caused the flight of (now mostly wealthy people) to the country. And once they arrive, have no idea about how to care for the land or for themselves on it. All they have is a vague idea of what such a life is *supposed* to provide.

Despite the image of a lone Thoreau living life for itself, simplifying and simplifying, there was also the point, not so subtle, that he was trying to "wake" his neighbors. The epigraph from *Walden*: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up." This was also one of the intentions of Emerson's essay. Emerson provided the frame and through his life on Walden Pond, Thoreau added the walls and roof. The finish work, the interior, is up to each person to craft according to his or her own actions in the world, preferably the common ones. "The first year I did not read; I hoed beans," writes Thoreau.

Emerson and Thoreau were writing in the early middle of the nineteenth century and their intellectual effects mirrored the physical effects of the Lewis and Clark expedition in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Lewis and Clark demonstrated to the people of the United States the immensity and richness of the frontier to the Pacific Ocean – even though the country could not lay claim to all of it. What the country could claim was the *idea* of the frontier and Emerson and Thoreau

helped translate that frontier idea in to an intellectual frontier. What the country needed to match its physical potential was the realization of its intellectual potential. Thoreau's two-year sojourn on Walden Pond was a lucid and poetic narrative of the life a "self-reliant" individual in the mid-nineteenth century that does not provide an accurate picture of 19th century self-reliance. His hardships were few. This was quite a different life than those that actually lived on the frontier. A.B. Guthrie, Jr's classic novel *The Big Sky,* set in the same time Emerson was thinking and Thoreau was living on Walden Pond, presented a world much harsher that that of life in Concord, Massachusetts. Boone, the protagonist of the novel, leaves for the wilds of the frontier, only to find it rife with killing, near starvation, brutal winters, and, occasionally, cannibalism.

Somehow, the image of the free-thinking Thoreau building his cabin and the often short and brutal life on the physical frontier were melded into the idealistic form of the self-reliant frontier life with freedom to move and behave as one wished. Individualism, the freedom to say and act as one wished without regard to historical custom and the abandonment of the "old" for the "new" for progress became the cry of the industrialists, who saw the frontier and the willingness of Americans to capitalize on freedom of opportunity and found both the natural resources and a governmental and intellectual environment prime for development.[10]

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[10] For an excellent discussion of this moment in American history see *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England*, by Theodore Steinberg, (1994).

The young nation had plenty of land. This directly influenced the psyche of the United States in that if one were not satisfied with one's position, there was plenty land and opportunity to be found. After the brutality of the Civil War and the pains of reconstruction, the nation was once again to assert itself on the vastness of the country and thus began the rapid pace of industrialization that made it the powerhouse of the world. The optimism was contagious. America found its way into and out of two more wars, this time on a world scale, and came out as a beacon of hope and opportunity for the entire world. In this time as well, much of the country became populated and settled from shore to shore, thus realizing Jefferson's dream when he sent Lewis and Clark off in 1803. Although Jefferson's dream had been realized, the desire for classic self-reliance that enabled the dream still lurked in the shadows of every American's belief of the individual life.

The last gasp of the classic frontier myth came in the 1930's when the Great Plains was decimated by the Dust Bowl. Migrants from the Plains took to the highways in search of the promised land of California and the West much as they had for over a hundred years. This time, however, the circumstances were much different. There was no more free land to be found. Woody Guthrie summed up the attitude and desires of many of the migrants:

> Lots of folks back East, they say, is leavin' home every day,
> Beatin' the hot old dusty way to the California line.
> 'Cross the desert sands they roll, gettin' out of that old dust bowl...
>
> California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see...
> You want to buy you a home or a farm, that can't deal nobody harm,
> Or take your vacation by the mountains or sea....

Guthrie's thoughts conclude, however, with:

> Oh, if you ain't got the do re mi, folks, you ain't got the do re mi,
> Why, you better
> go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.[11]

The rub of the modernized classic self-reliance myth in the 20th century was the necessity for the "Do Re Mi;" the money that was firmly established as the medium of exchange in the Industrial era. The widespread use of paper currency, in addition to roads, automobiles, and wage-earning work were the fundamental difference between the frontier up to the 20th century and the one after. In Jefferson's, Emerson's, Thoreau's and even Walt Whitman's time, one could escape to the frontier with nothing more that a horse or wagon, a firearm, a little bit of knowledge, and the belief in the opportunity the frontier provided. During the Dust Bowl, however, the migrants moving West in search of the Promised Land did not find the promise of the frontier. Instead they found day labor in oppressive conditions and encampments of impoverished migrants like them.[12] The inability of people to provide for themselves and their families from the land and the move to a money and wage-earner economy marked the closing of the frontier ideal more the Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Still, the myth of classic self-reliance and the promise of the open sky and land persisted.

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[11] Woody Guthrie, (If You Ain't got the) DO RE MI. From *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1937).
[12] See Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (1996).

Many persisted in their belief in the frontier, but they began to tweak it to fit the new circumstances in which mid-twentieth century people found themselves. And always there was the quest for the openness inherent in the frontier mentality. One group of these people was the literary "beats" who sought their liberation from the increasingly homogenous 1950's on the open road, even though most of the wide-open space in the country was gone. Jack Kerouac's famously penned book, *On the Road*, exemplifies this attitude. Much of *On the Road* takes place in cars, pickup trucks, and on the side of the road in between rides. Shortly on the heels of *On the Road*, came *The Dharma Bums*, written by Kerouac in 1957-58. *The Dharma Bums* follows a parallel path to *On the Road*. The story of a New England man, Ray Smith, disenchanted by the dearth of vitality and creativity in the East strikes out on bus, boxcar, foot, and thumb as a self-styled religious wanderer in search of the truth of the *dharma*, a Sanskrit word meaning "the teaching."

Out West, the Promised Land for over 150 years, Ray encounters the Natty Bumppo of the 1950's "frontier," Japhy Ryder. [13] Japhy Ryder possess all the skills of the frontiersman, able to survive and thrive in the mountains, yet with the intellectualism of and prescience of Emerson or Thoreau, or as the example in the novel, Han Shan, the Buddhist hermit who lived in the mountains alone in a cave in c. 650 CE, more than one thousand years before Thoreau built his cabin on Walden Pond. Much as Thoreau did, Japhy makes his attempt to "wake up" his friends and others as well as engage in a little soothsaying:

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[13] See James Fenimore Cooper and the Leatherstocking tales.

> [S]ee the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least certain new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to the mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad.... [14]

Just a few years after Kerouac wrote these words, the nation came to. The 1960's was the decade, it could be said, that many in American culture "woke up." The world they woke up to was one of discrimination, somewhat prudish, and full of action. Many of the actions and activism of the 1960's were in reaction to the constriction of the physical world they found. The activity in the 1960's seemed centered on the reaction to a natural world that was under assault, the violation of human rights and the culturally divisive Vietnam War. The reaction is a famous one in American history: young people for the most part fulfilling the predictions of Japhy Ryder and moving back to the land as inspired by the example of Helen and Scott Nearing, early 20th century homesteaders who, being "outcasts of a dying social order" desired to "exist, frugally and decently and at the same time have sufficient leisure to assist in the speedy liquidation of the old social order and its replacement of a more workable social system."[15] What the Nearings had in mind was something a little more radical; the overthrow of the oligarchy they believed that was driving America to economic destruction and war.

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[14] Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p.97.
[15] Scott Nearing, *The Making of a Radical: A Political Autobiography*, p.210. See also *The Good Life*, by Scott and Helen Nearing.

The example stuck if the message did not completely penetrate. Young people moved to the country, set up communes, and took to Kerouac's "open road" in record numbers. The surge in the newly liberated "baby boomer" generation once again created optimism in the country. Hundreds of thousands joined in the March on Washington in support of equal rights. The Environmental Protection Agency was officially founded in 1970, and perhaps most amazingly, America sent astronauts to the moon and returned them home safely. To many, "open space" was a state of mind that manifested in a limitless personal opportunity to find the freedom of the mind. Timothy Leary's "turn on, tune in, drop out" drove many to do just that, shun the prevailing social order and create a new reality based on communitarianism and compassion.

For some, saving open space literally meant doing that. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962 to wide acclaim and indignation. Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act in 1964 and in 1968 a writer named Edward Abbey finally finished a book called *Desert Solitaire*, which made him famous. In 1969 the poet Gary Snyder began writing and publishing the poems that would eventually form *Turtle Island* and win him the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Writers and thinkers like Rachel Cason, Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder came to the table with ideas that were intellectually challenging, playful, and passionate. Their message was clear. In order to save have any quality of life in the face of encroachment on wild and open places, people must love, explore, and completely protect them and their natural inhabitants. These contemporary intellectuals and cultural pioneers managed to get the culture to

attempt to fashion a world that strived to be more compassionate and equal to all of its members, human and non-human.

Despite all of the different players in the development of the classic frontier mentality, one thing remained constant – the decline of physical open space. As the continent became populated, tied up in private land, townships, cities, and large federally-owned landscapes, the ability to actually move to the frontier and create a life with one's own physical labor (difficult, but free) became less and less available. A money economy, wage-earning work, and modern technology almost eliminated the need to use one's physical body to meet one's daily needs. As people saw their opportunities narrow to a relatively few (and fewer) specific choices in the industrial and post-industrial economy, they still clung to a romantic notion of classic self-reliance: alone, solitary, self-sufficient, and able to hurl stones at one's contemporaries from a safe distance.

Unable to achieve this image (unless one was independently wealthy), the culture's emotions "came out sideways." The ability to fully express oneself in the world, on one level, was blocked, and spilled over in manifestations; some good and some bad. The culture still had the aspirations of Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Emerson, and Thoreau but no longer the physical acumen and space necessary to carry out those opportunities.

Toward Contemporary Self-Reliance

In his essay, Stegner suggests that we recapture the intangibles of the classic self-reliant lifestyle: "sobriety, responsibility, and hope" based on the actions of those hungry for the opportunity that open space promised as well as the freedom it granted – if one's farm in Oklahoma did not work, one could move on to California Territory.[16] But the frontier has been gone for over one hundred years and movement, while still possible, is becoming less an option for those burdened by debts, jobs, and fear in an increasingly closed world. Opportunity today is less a promise than a physical expression in the world as the promise of space.

All of us sit in the middle of experience; it whirls all around us. The middle of our experience is essential to begin to recover opportunity as the promise of a contemporary self-reliance. The middle of experience puts us, whether we like it or not, in the middle of day-to-day life: ordinary, daily, and sometimes when seen through a cynical eye, terribly mundane. For most of us in the modern world, fully participating in everyday experiences such as waking, making the coffee, feeding the dogs, getting to and from work, cooking food, cleaning up, and going to bed have been taken away from us. Some of these activities machines do for us and some we do mindlessly because they seem irrelevant to "the important" parts of one's day. To perform these activities mindfully and intentionally enables us to practice embracing all aspects of our day. Once learned, intentional action becomes a habit and we begin to view our day not as a collection of fragmented experiences, but one continuous

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[16] Stegner, p.201.

experience. The things during the day we do are just stops along the way that enable us to put our practice to use in a variety of ways.

The poet Gary Snyder calls this "checking the dipstick" because it allows us to experience the condition of the inner workings and know what action to take to correct any shortage. Daily, routine experiences are not distractions "from [our] more serious pursuits" or "a set of difficulties we hope to escape from so that we may do our 'practice', which will put us on a 'path' – it is our path."[17] Our path back to hope, sobriety, and responsibility lies in our ability to reclaim our day to day life from which we have been distracted from by out of balance work lives, technological optimism, and from great organizations, both governmental and private, that have lost their capacity for compassion in the fog of free market objectivism. Wendell Berry, as he often does, puts it best, "A change of heart or of values without a practice is only another pointless luxury of a passively consumptive way of life."[18]

The challenge in Gary Snyder's and Wendell Berry's ideas that we should master our current reality before moving on to another resides in the call for daily, bodily *action*. The desire "to win hearts and minds" is hollow at best if the physical body that is the vessel for these political trophies is unhealthy, misplaced, and misunderstood. A contemporary self-reliance is a form of activism that is non-violent, constructive to both the individual and the community, and compassionate. We would be well advised to follow Gandhi's advice, "Be the change you wish to see

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[17] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, p.153.
[18] Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, p.64.

in the world." This is the simplest, yet most challenging instruction one human can give another. It also embodies the way to a contemporary self-reliance. Before wider action can occur one must first manifest one's desires through individual action. This does not imply disengagement in our communities or reality; instead one must fully participate in "the flesh of the world" in all of its joys and pains, individual, familial, community, and global.[19] Gandhi, I'm sure would agree.

[19] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible*, specifically pp.130-162. See also chapter 3 for a discussion of participatory reality as it relates to contemporary self-reliance.

The Crisis Lifestyle

In a May 8, 2004 *New York Times* editorial, the columnist David Brooks posits that the United States suffers from a worldwide "crisis of confidence" due to our actions worldwide, particularly in the Middle East, and specifically in a certain prison in Iraq. According to Brooks, the people and government of the United States of America are burned by our tarnished image in the world community and among those in the world we are determined to "liberate." Brooks states, "We still face a world of threats, but we're much less confident about our own power. We still know we can roll over hostile armies, but we cannot roll over problems. We get dragged down into them."[20] Brooks determines that the United States will be reluctant to involve itself in major world flashpoints, thus leaving the world with a vacuum of international leadership.

Despite what one thinks of Brooks' comments and politics, his "crisis of confidence" is the international manifestation of a phenomenon that has made its presence evident in the United States for many years. His is yet another voice in cultural crisis rhetoric pervasive in our culture. Crisis rhetoric, used by both government and private enterprise, has a profound effect on the way Americans perceive and behave in the social context that shapes the way communities, families, and individuals approach issues of language and action, relationships with the

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[20] David Brooks, "Crisis of Confidence," *The New York Times*, May 8th, 2004.

elements of daily life, and the degree to which the elements of society are able to be self-sufficient.

The proliferation of crisis rhetoric used as a call to action, a marketing tool, and a way of approaching solutions embeds itself so firmly in our culture that we have become accustomed to using it as a primary means of communication. A point of extreme distress, a crisis in turn requires extreme or radical action to solve it. Problems manufactured by public and private institutions and organizations often require as a solution to the "crisis" the same or similar behavior that created the crisis in the first place. Therefore, instead of chaining one's habits and behaviors tied to obesity and underachieving students these institutions propose overly objective and abstract solutions that do not address root behaviors.

The use of crisis rhetoric convinces citizens that the solutions to the crises are outside of themselves, and can be solved through action that is often violent, involves disenfranchisement of a group of people, or through monetary or consumptive activity. Soon after the attacks of September 11th, the President of the United States, declaring a crisis, did not ask for citizens to conserve and come together in unity of family, community, and country; he asked Americans to shop and travel to keep the economy afloat. Somehow, spending money equated with patriotism, as if one purchased a dishwasher, a new car, or airline tickets, then one was engaging in a supreme action. Similarly, during the "energy crisis" of 2001-02, the Vice President of the United States called energy conservation "a valuable virtue…but not a serious approach to solving the problems of energy shortage." The solution, he claimed, did

not lie in the daily, habitual actions of people, but more development of energy sources by giant international corporations.

The proliferation of crisis rhetoric and the movement away from individual citizens and communities as agents in the solutions of the proposed crisis results in a "crisis lifestyle" where citizens, feeling disempowered by their perceived inability to be a part of the solution, have only exacerbated the problem of shortage, debt, and disengagement in public life. The crisis lifestyle undermines personal preparedness and community sustainability because it teaches us, just as the rhetoric we hear suggests, that the solutions to our personal and community challenge or strife are outside the realm of personal responsibility or community unity and rest in activity devoid of meaning and reciprocity with community and personal belief. The proliferation of crisis rhetoric, which has led to the crisis lifestyle, is not a crisis of economics, education, or war mentality; these are simply generalizations that allow obfuscation, abstraction, and over objectification of the "crisis" situation we approach. The real crisis is a crisis of character and engagement in the underlying habits and responsibilities of life as it is, not simply as we wish it to be. "This said," the mountaineer-philosopher Jack Turner writes, "we falter, for it remains unclear what, exactly, is the crisis of modern character and, since character is partly determined by culture, what, exactly is the crisis of modern culture."[21] Turner

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[21] Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild*, p.20. See also the works of Wendell Berry. It is also important to note that Turner is discussing the nature of the ecological crisis in our culture and indeed the world. Tuner continues, "This question is important for anyone who loves the natural world, but the answer will not be found in the writing of Thoreau, Muir, or ecologists – deep or otherwise." The answer, I argue, can be found in ourselves and our capacity for daily, habitual self-reliance.

believes that the crisis focuses around our angst, which has resulted in and because of the destruction of our ecological home. We act, Turner continues, "as though the catastrophe [is] happening *to* us, not caused *by* us."[22]

Indeed, the ecological crisis is caused by us, as is the energy crisis, the education crisis, war mentality, and the widening gap between rich and poor, which could be called the crisis of the middle class. The widening incongruence between our cultural truths and beliefs and our situated reality causes the real crisis: a crisis of self-reliance and a stripping of pride in action performed with quality. Our historic cultural values are inherently noble and respectful of the necessity for human free will to be exercised in a community of fellow citizens that reciprocate *action* in the world, not passivity, individualism, and fear. The nobility in our culture is not based on blood inheritance, but on each person's obligation to improve and maintain themselves so that they may take those skills to the community and the nation.

Crisis Rhetoric, War Mentality, and Corporate Language

Crisis rhetoric has been a part of our landscape of communication for as long as we have been a united people. Thomas Paine used it in the 18th century and Emerson and Thoreau used it in their works, as did John Muir, Walt Whitman, and even Rachel Carson. Crisis language is one of the primary fundraising motivators for

[22] *Ibid*, p.21, emphasis in original.

environmental non-profit organizations.[23] Environmentalists predict the razing of forests and effects of global warming. Advocates threaten the loss of choice or a clean environment unless "YOU act NOW and provide a donation" to whatever organization is sending you mail. This is not to demean the efforts of these groups. But, "in order for crisis rhetoric to work, it must continually solicit an adequately agitated response from its audience."[24]

Yet, among the competing crises used to raise money and attention for interest groups, crisis rhetoric found its way out of the woods and into public discourse. Public and private governmental and for profit organizations frame many of our current, public problems in the language of crisis: the economic crisis, the education crisis, families and communities in crisis. Historically, the solutions to these crises are cultural war on the problem. In the late 1960's and early 1970's President Johnson declared "war on poverty" and President Nixon declared "war on drugs." These have been followed up with the "war on terrorism," which is both a geographic, cultural, and ideological war that has devastating effects to our culture, the cultures of the people of the Middle East, and to our country's standing in the world community. The message is that only the decisive action is overwhelming and, in many cases, violent. Messages delivered in the language of war also admit failure in every effort at diplomacy and social contract. A "war" on any aspect of one's own culture, no matter how nefarious, will only prove to more destructive than

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[23] For a discussion of crisis rhetoric and environmental communication see Kerry Case, *Beyond Crisis*, 2003.
[24] Case, *Beyond Crisis*, p.21.

constructive and drives home the message that blunt power takes preference over local, properly apportioned action.

Corporate language, the language of selling, also finds its roots in crisis rhetoric. In fact, it often piggybacks on the institutional language of crisis and war one must first sell (and sometimes create) the problem before one sells the solution.[25] The proliferation of drug ads and the language associated with them provide a telling example as well as show the over-reliance of technological-optimism for problems that are habit-based. During a broadcast of the nightly networks news, three in four advertisements in a given break were for a drug. During this broadcast, which had 3 breaks, 9 drug advertisements were aired in a half-hour time frame. These ads can also be found in nearly every mass-market print publication as well. They all follow a similar formula. First, the advertisement must convince the viewer of a problem, or a heath crisis, and then convince the viewer that their product will provide the solution. Pharmaceutical companies first ask the viewer if they experience a particular symptom, and then show them how this problem is an objective, medical problem, and how the solution is technological or pill-based, not habit or action based. Suddenly, nicotine addiction or one's penchant for spicy foods becomes a disease – an objective condition with an objective solution. Curiously enough, many of these drugs, according to the manufacturers and the Food and Drug Administration, have many side effects, many of which can be "solved" with another pill. Fortunately there is a pill for that, too. This system can also work to sell an

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[25] See Noam Chomsky.

SUV or a new computer, all one must do is plug into the formula of: create crisis + manufacture solution = opportunity to sell solution.

By elevating this example, I do not intend to make light of the problems of depression or any disease that finds complementary treatment with technologically based solutions. But solutions that certainly work for the few truly ill people do not necessarily work for people whose troubles, whatever they may be, are habit-based, and caused *by* us not *to* us. This holds for the environmental crisis as well as the epidemic of obesity, which, in 2000, rivaled only tobacco as the leading cause of death in the United States.[26]

In powerful language, Wendell Berry, equates with war the encroachment of industrial technology on independent farms and communities in an essay, "Standing by Words:"

> The enlargement of industrial technology us thus analogous to war. It continually requires the movement of knowledge and responsibility away from home. It thrives upon the disintegration of homes, the subjugation of homelands. It requires that people cease to cooperate directly to fulfill local needs from local sources and begin instead to deal with each other always across the rift that divides producer and consumer, and always competitively.[27]

These words were written in 1979, when there was a protracted battle for farms and independent rural life, and Berry's language reflects it. While the cultural context in which we can place Berry's words changed they still ring surprisingly true. We need only equate "home" and "homeland" with our own "selves" and our ability to

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[26] National Center for Health Statistics May, 2004.
[27] Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words*, p.58.

exercise free will as active citizens in a community.[28] Crisis rhetoric, the war mentality, and the rhetoric of selling all find themselves inextricably linked and all dependent up the ability of the words and images associated with them to move their subjects away from their own individual locus of control. By convincing their subjects that a particular crisis has a cause outside of our daily actions, these modes of communication (and manipulation) likewise move the solutions to a realm usually not in the present, but in the distant future. By moving *both* problem and solution away from ourselves, a dual "rift" opens beneath us in the way we interact with not only one another but with the way we interact with daily life in its full presence. [29] With nowhere to begin to approach the crises – no center from which to operate – no wonder that many people feel disempowered, depressed, and willing to medicate themselves with food and synthetic substances.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their vast and challenging work *Philosophy in the Flesh*, make the case for "embodied realism," or, that we are the environment we inhabit. Embodied realism "relies on the fact that we are coupled to the world through our embodied interactions."[30] If we are "coupled" to the world and embody that world and its environment, then our crisis communication jumps the rift and results in our culture living a crisis lifestyle that mirrors the world in which we

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[28] See Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations* for his discussion of the circles of "home" which includes the self at the center, the point of moving out into world. Wendell Berry also discusses this in *Standing by Words*.

[29] This idea originally surfaces in Karl Marx's work around the "metabolic rift" between nature and society. See Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* and John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* (2002), specifically, pp.141-177.

[30] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p.93. See also the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the notion of intersubjectivity, discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

live and with which we interact. Much like our government and culture, in order to maintain a certain lifestyle and conception of ourselves, we consume more that we need, work more than we should and thus neglect the daily life that sustains our families and communities. Thus, in order that we maintain our consumer lifestyle we place ourselves in a cycle of debt, wage-earning work, and "leisure" activities that sever the reciprocity of an embodied reality. Television, certainly, does not represent reality, nor do video games or consumptive activity, such as shopping or industrial tourism. These activities merely simulate reality or provide the user with manufactured experiences that cannot accurately simulate genuine experience. In fact, they fool one into believing that manufactured experience can substitute for actual experience – that one can live vicariously, but "intimacy with the fake" cannot emulate the real.[31]

The crisis lifestyle manifests itself in day to day activities where one focuses on escaping their current situation in the hope that a future situation will prove more entertaining or provide some quality that eclipses current reality. It is not uncommon for one to rise in the morning, rush out the door and put in a day of work where one only thinks of getting off so that they may return home to watch television, play on the computer, or shop for cheap items that do not provide any solace from our current cultural maladies, then be faced once again with the work one dislikes. Burdened by debt or the desire for wealth or power over others and reality, person after person finds themselves in the situation of wage-earning work, much of it low paid, in order

[31] Turner, p.35.

to service a debt. The workers of the United States are in danger of becoming Orwellian proles, searching for any element of authenticity in a reality that has become burdened with simulacra, obfuscation, and manipulation.

Crisis Lifestyle and the Idea Continuum

Crisis communication and lifestyle, of course, is not sustainable. It is not sustainable because it possesses no fidelity between ideas, beliefs, words, and, ultimately, action.[32] Ideas *become* action and their becoming and subsequent being in the world relies on the steady relationship with beliefs: religious, cultural, communal, or personal.[33] Our current unsteady relationship with the idea continuum results in (1) a tendency to oversimplify and abstract problems (as well as their solutions) and (2) an escapist attitude toward the reconciliation of belief, truth, and action.

Our lack of primary and authentic experience in the world allows us to be duped into the abstractions and oversimplifications offered by crisis-based, black and white language. We attempt to demonize our enemies and proclaim our actions as virtuous and battle the evil of the Other with the goodness of America. Many Americans and certainly all of the policy makers and sellers of goods believe that growth is preferred over stability, and that even the social "bads," such as war, divorce, litigation, and medical expenses are economic "goods" because they

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[32] See Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words*, p.29 for a brief discussion of the necessity to "mean what we say and say what we mean, without obfuscation or manipulation, thus the title of his essay and book.

[33] See Aristotle, specifically, the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* concerning the linage of *becoming* and the relationship of potential, action, and *technē*, loosely translated as "art."

contribute to the greater economy. And, perhaps most disturbingly, we allow ourselves to think of destruction of the natural world, the disintegration and disappearance of rich world cultures, and even our own political and cultural apathy as subjects of a cable television program. We then think of these things happening elsewhere in grand landscapes and exotic cultures when in fact it is happening right outside the front door and to the person passively lying on the couch watching the spectacle unfold.

Just as they creep into the problem (and often create or exacerbate it), abstractions find themselves in abundance in the solutions. If we never venture out into the world, embrace reality, and *live* the problem, then the solutions can be found in telephone calls to politicians, petitions on the corner, or money deposited in an envelope. These actions, part of our duty of citizenship, still remove the petitioner or donor from the actual problem, the increasing disengagement with daily life. Jack Turner writes, "[Abstractions] correct neither the cause not the effect. We end up feeling helpless, and since it is human nature to avoid feeling helpless, we become dissociated, cynical, and depressed."[34] We therefore act according to the feelings propagated by the crisis lifestyle. Turner nicely sums up the legacy of the crisis lifestyle and its stake in our lives.

At its roots, the crisis lifestyle inhibits the reconciliation of the relationship of ideas, beliefs, words, and actions, what I will call the "idea continuum." The 19th and

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[34] Turner, p. 25.

20th century philosopher William James provides a perspective on the on the "idea continuum:"

> Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself.[35]
>
> Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action.[36]

The division of ideas, beliefs, and actions began with the rise of rise of industrial, technological modes of thought and production where ideas became malleable and able to be forecasted far into the future. Of course, this requires abstraction of ideas from their situated, daily reality and into a future where certain "outcomes" can be predicted. Applying the free market model to the idea continuum to achieve an "outcome" requires that each component be judged "according to its own individual merits," as if we intend to give each new idea a multiple-choice exam or that ideas all by themselves can be exchanged like money. When ideas have objective merit "all by themselves," then their existence in the world likewise exists independently of established cultural belief and modes of behavior.

Separated from their context in the idea continuum, ideas morph into *ideology*, which in turn creates *ideologues* in their nastiest conception. Stripped of belief, the line that moors an idea to its social context, the place in which belief occurs, the ideology *becomes* the belief and it loses the ability to be true with any

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[35] William James, *Pragmatism*, *The Works of William James*, p.97.
[36] William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," *Pragmatism*, *The Works of William James*, p. 259.

longevity. The manipulation of the idea continuum remains one of the hallmarks of totalitarian regimes and movements across history and into the modern day. Manipulated ideas also create "cultures," where none existed before, such as the culture and approach of technological-optimism. Thus, this culture can argue that, for example, "more computers" will improve student performance or computer-based, objective testing will enable greater tracking of school performance.

The manifestation of our ideas and beliefs happen in two ways, through our words and actions. David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, speaks lucidly about the link between our words (both spoken and written), breath, and the air:

> The invisible air, the same mystery that animates the visible terrain, was also needed to animate the visible letters, to make them come alive and speak. The letters themselves thus remained overtly dependent upon the elemental, corporeal life-world, and could not be cut off from that world without losing all of their power.[37]

Traditionally, our words, both those we speak and write, relied on their embodiment by the speaker; one could not separate words from speaker and thus ideas and beliefs. Unable to separate speaker from speech, "standing by words," means exactly that: we should mean what we say and say what we mean, one's words should *live* in the world through the speaker's actions. In the free-market application of words, however, we encounter publicists and spokespeople for our leaders and from the giant corporations to reduce accountability for their words and actions. To have an intermediary speak for another person, especially a leader, allows one to distance

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[37] David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p.242.

oneself from a message. If the words do not resonate with the public or create controversy, then one can distance oneself quickly, claim no responsibility, and manufacture a new message with expediency. When leaders and businesspeople appear only in highly controlled and scripted situations, then the spontaneity and cross-pollination of ideas through generous exchange of authentic words become isolated and disembodied and cut off from the world and deprived of power.

Hope lies in action. When we create "habits of action," we take the first step in reclaiming our words and the beliefs and actions that lay behind them. When one works deeper in to habits of action that form in the daily actions that underlie many of the problems we encounter, environmental, cultural, and political, begin to change *at that moment*. To put it another way, habits of action could be thought of as "mastering the twenty-four hours."[38] It is just as difficult and important to engage ourselves in the stuff of daily life as it is to go to work or engage in pursuits we consider more important than developing our habits of action. When we root our habits in the business of daily life and our household economy, our health and well being as individuals, families and communities as priorities will rise to the top. Our beliefs about home and community can be based on those same elements and words, then actions and ideas contrary to our lived community will be rejected. Action, too, relies on developing our selves and our skills in way in which benefit out community

[38] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, p.153.

and the generous sharing and teaching of those skills. The more one knows, then the more one owes to the community.[39]

Our ideas, beliefs, words and actions comprise our social context and the degree to which we actively participate in their creation determines the sharpness and clarity of our cultural truths. Sharpness of truth through rigorous examination of and participation in the creation of ideas and beliefs allows citizens to know if the truth is being manipulated, or at least recognize it. Building a firm foundation through unity and interaction of every component of the verity process also allows steady, reasoned movement within the idea continuum. The cross-pollination of ideas, beliefs, words, and actions rely on the ability to migrate between themselves, just as bears need room to roam not only in the wilderness, but in *between* them, ideas and beliefs interchange likewise require the same freedom to stay healthy, flexible, and responsive, not reactive. When healthy action based on shared belief occurs individually and as a community, the first step to the difficult, slow work of reconciliation with the idea continuum can begin.

Quite some time ago, there was little difference between words and actions. David Abram again provides a few words and thoughts:

> Prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like "virtue," "justice," and "temperance" were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited. .... "Justice" and "temperance" were thus experienced as living occurrences, as events. Arising in specific situations, they

[39] See Chris Wright, The Sufficient Community, (1998).

> were inseparable from the particular persons or actions that momentarily embodied them.[40]

When a person, or group of people, begin to idealize and abstract a way of being, a concept, a social movement, or, as Abrams says, an "ethical quality," they lose sight of "the persons or actions" that "embody" those ideals. Words simply become words, stripped of the underlying essence that caused people to don those causes in the first place. When ideas (and ideals) begin to distance themselves from the human sphere, they become abstractions that enable all types of people: politicians, homemakers, carpenters, and even people concerned with the natural world, to separate these ideas manifested in daily life from the sphere of daily living. This causes people, on one hand, to compartmentalize those concerns, and enables them to set them aside as ancillary, only worthy of attention when they have the time or the resources to devote to them, if at all. On the other hand, it can consume people and drive them to act in ways that are equally as pernicious as apathy. The activities of groups who advocate violence and wanton destruction in "defense" of the environment suffer from a lack of legitimacy, for violence usually is a measure of desperate hopelessness.

Naturally, a reconciliation of this magnitude is not easily confronted. Jack Tuner offers a beginning to this monumental task, "I believe a saner relationship to the natural world must end our servitude to modernity by creating new practices that alter our daily routines."[41] Before we can begin our "saner relationship with the natural world" however, we must go the core of our relationship with ourselves and

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[40] Abram, p.110.
[41] Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild*, p.xvi.

learn how to live with the desires, motivations, disappointments, and frustrations that come with daily life and routines. Many of our more destructive and apathetic acts toward the world and each other are a result of the tension that we create in an effort to either escape or fulfill these confused conceptions of ourselves and the crisis lifestyle. All of our actions flow out of the center of our being; the way we behave outwardly reflects the way we feel inwardly. This idea sheds light on our relationship with the human and natural world. In this view, there is no "right" or "wrong" action or worldview, but the challenge living our lives in our own bodies and reconciling idea with action.

Contemporary Self-Reliance in the World

"Then, on occasion, I am grateful for what unusual and fine personality I may encounter by chance, but I have learned not to look too avidly for them. I delve into myself, into abstraction and ideas, trying to arrange the other things harmoniously, but after that, taking them as they come."

Everett Ruess

A Voice Crying in the Desert

I met Sam at one o'clock in the morning at the end of a four-wheel drive road in the middle of the Utah desert. I remember seeing thick frost glimmer off my backpack in the light of the high beams when the truck rolled in. My headlamp barely penetrated the darkness that obscured his face, and through my tiny beam of light I could only make out the slumped shape of a person whose world had become very strange very quickly. Another Instructor and I had Sam sleep under our shelter for the evening. Although exhausted, Sam, like most kids on their first night, did not sleep at all. Neither did I.

I got my first look at Sam when he stumbled bleary-eyed and shivering out of his sleeping bag for his first of many mornings of granola and powdered milk for breakfast. He was tall, gangly kid with long face and a scratch of whiskers at the point of his chin. His immediate reaction was to scan the landscape to if there was any place he could run. Finding none on the top of the mesa where our tarps were tied a few juniper trees, he wobbled a bit as he slowly wheeled his head around to the nine of us huddled around the campfire. My partner Jeff and I approached him and offered him his food and attempted to explain the morning and the rest of the day.

There was no reason to explain to him why here was here. That, he knew. What he would do while in the desert would be largely up to him; he could run, but in the cold and often harsh world of the desert in winter, running would not get him far. Hiking day in and day in the desert and building a primitive fire every night for warmth and cooking was another option, but not something most kids considered very seriously on their first day. Many kids run only to be returned later that day or to leave permanently, never to return to the desert. Home was not where they landed.

Sam's world before coming to Utah pulsed in the bright streets and dark alleys of Los Angeles. Not really into drugs beyond the occasional reefer, his pleasure was the pure joy and adrenaline of the fight. A big kid for his age, he was the self-described "enforcer" who beat the snot out of other street kids for debts, drug money, or even over jeers aimed at him or his friends. Normally, our program did not accept kids with such violent tendencies, and I wondered why he was here, or what he would try to do.

Sam confirmed my fears when, near the end of his first day with us, and after a day of climbing in and out of gullies and crashing through sagebrush and greasewood flats, he let pop all the rage he carried in him from the time he was finally found in LA by his parents, flown to Salt Lake City and brought to our remote corner of Colorado Plateau. Joe, another new member of the group, sought to end the day early by sitting in the sand in a dry wash with no water and shelter and refusing to move. Sam conveniently moved in and told him that he would beat him silly if he did not get up and move, and he meant it. Jeff and I sat up most of the night, taking

turns between kneeling in front of Joe and trying to talk down Sam, who paced back and forth, fists clenched at the end of rigid arms that looked like posts. Every so often he would stop, wobble a bit, and yell at Joe about "later tonight," and then spit on the ground either in front of Joe, Jeff, or me. Much later that night as the moon began to set, Sam followed its cue and came to the point where the physical and emotional fatigue overtook him and he simply threw his sleeping bag on the sand and collapsed to sleep. The second night I knew Sam I did not sleep. The remaining few hours of the night I lay in my sleeping bag and watched his outline twitch and toss in its sleep.

The morning began with a call to the support staff to plea for the therapist to come out and meet us at bend in the creek known as Big Sandy Loop, our attempted destination for the day. I ended up hiking most of the day behind the group with Sam, partly because he did not want to hear Joe's whines and cries, and partly because I did not want him anywhere near Joe, so we were both reasonably happy, or at least satisfied. Although hiking was not what I would call what Sam was doing. Despite his assurances that in his world he was confident and assured, he walked with head down shuffle punctuated with a scowl directed at Joe. Occasionally he would stagger as he trudged through the desert, as if some invisible person punched him in the arm or he had somehow smuggled something past the intake folks at base. As the sun was dropping behind Capital Reef, the therapist met us near a road, and begged our patience.

One thing that Sam had going for him, his therapist informed us, was not only a boundless reservoir of energy (the kind he used in LA and wanted to use on Joe the night before), but also uncanny resourcefulness and self-reliance. The former I had seen, the latter, I had my doubts about. This was his last stop, his last chance, the therapist continued; the next would be "a secure residential placement." This, I knew, amounted to kid prison; I had visited such places and knew that for the next two years, Sam would live in a place that only sought to medicate him out of his fear of hurt and rage, not empower him to realize that he could steady himself and eventually stand. After kid prison, Sam would eventually find the door that would lead him to a life in and out of systems and bureaucracies that would seek to simply contain him from time to time. Play to his resourcefulness and desire for self-reliance, the therapist advised.

Sam made it through his first eight days in the desert, as did I with him. When I returned four days later, he had discovered how to build a shelter with his 6 foot by 4 foot blue tarp, and learned how to stay warm and dry. On my watch he would be taught, or at least shown, how to make a fire by a sagewood bow and drill, one of the primary skills in the desert.[42] This is usually the point where the kid's true nature bubbled to the surface. Lavoy, our education director and elder desert rat

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[42] A bow-drill fire set consists of a spindle (a straight shaft of sagewood about 12 inches long), a fire board (a flat piece of sagewood 12-14 inches long), a bow (a piece of tamarisk with a shoelace or piece of nylon cord) and a socket rock. The spindle is looped into the bowstring, then placed in a shallow depression in the fireboard, and spun by moving the bow horizontal to the fireboard. The friction of the spinning spindle on the fireboard creates "punk" and when heated enough by the friction creates a small ember. This ember is then placed in a nest of juniper bark and slowly brought to flame by blowing on it. An experienced operator can get a fire in less than five minutes, while a novice can take up to an hour or more.

provided the first introduction, but the teaching was done by trial and error or in Sam's case by swearing and throwing his fire set. This time however, the object of his anger could not be injured, and it could not hurl insults back at him. It landed where he threw it and coolly endured his glare. As he labored time after time, I expected him to direct his wrath toward others, but there was an element to being able to create the things he needed for his own survival or comfort. At the end of those eight days with him, Sam still occasioned verbal spats with the other kids in the group, and for the most part still remained sullen in evening meetings. A week later, the next time I saw him, he had discovered the art of fire. In the middle of that long week in January, after full a month of life day in and day out in the desert, I finally noticed Sam looking up, surveying bare magnificence around him.

I only stayed year in the desert. I was a victim of the high attrition the plagued the field staff of most the "wilderness therapy" industry. I qualify the industry with quotation marks because I always felt my job was not to be a therapist (which it was not) but a guide for kids – or at least a companion for – who were given the opportunity to find themselves. People don't last long, or they come and go; a month here, a month there. The job is such that it slides into your life like the sand that you find in your ears, between your toes, in your hair and beard, even when you are not there. Being around such hurt for weeks a month makes a person feel that the entire world has gone straight to hell. Some staff seem to thrive off it, and it seems that the most effective staff where the ones that themselves had demons on the surface of their lives. Others would run the other direction, and if a staff would make

it through their first month, much like a kid, one could safely assume that they would be around for at least a little while. Living in the desert with my little lost tribe of kids made me patient and it stripped me of any ideas about "healing" anyone.

And that's what it came down to, really. Sam was lost. The only thing I could do for him was to keep him safe and be patient with him and encourage him to do the same favor for himself. We didn't talk about his parents, drugs, money, or sex. Just like in the desert, there were no distractions. After Sam became bored with antagonizing Joe with no real effect, he was lucky enough to realize that there was nothing in the desert that was willing to push back. Instead he withdrew into himself, probably in an effort to isolate from everyone else. For three weeks Sam threw himself into the art of the bow drill fire. He found the sweetest heartwood and carved spindles, decorated fireboards and bows with carvings. In not long, he could have a fire from scratch in minutes. He then began to build the finest shelters of all configurations, drum tight, and all buttoned down. His pack slowly became the first one packed, and his bacon macaroni and cheese became legendary in the group. At the beginning of his third month we were sitting on a rock at Mud Springs when he looked over at me, squinted in the sun, and said, "I didn't know taking care of myself could be so rewarding. I guess all along I didn't even know that I could take care of myself." By the end of his third month he was the group's finest teacher on matters of the bow drill fire and its eldest member.

Sam was one among many, and of a rare few who actually make it through such programs; despite the good work of all who pour themselves into them. Sam

made it because he was able to clear his mind of all distractions, and others do not because they rely on something outside themselves in a way that keeps them from themselves. Most of the kids who do come to some realizations about themselves do so not because of all the talking done by them and directed to them, but because the time they spent with themselves, the desert, and the daily mindfulness that is required to take care of oneself there. For the first time in his life, Sam was faced with nothing else but his own behaviors and bare day-to-day life with no distractions.

The Real Work: Developing Contemporary Self-Reliance

Of course, Sam's case was unique among the many kids who came to the desert. Sam's case stands out because his was one of extremes, both in his behavior when he arrived and his degree of insight when he left. Most kids that came to the desert passed through so many programs and facilities that simply gaining perspective on any part of their lives was the entire goal of their treatment. Many had gained a capacity for manipulation to meet their needs and chaos and melodrama to entertain themselves. I highlight Sam's case because it is a perfect illustration of how a radical change in one's perspective can reveal overlooked folds in our reality and daily lives that enrich our dialogue with our community, our environment, and ourselves. Developing a contemporary self-reliance does not require that one live a primitive life in the desert. It does require, however, the same degree of mindfulness, careful attention to the tools and implements we daily use, and an ability to apply positive attitude and skill to develop a life full of wealth and fulfilling in any

environment. We can achieve these qualities through primary contact with the physical world as it is (not simply as we wish it to be), reimagining our relationship between "object" and "subject" along with knowing how to use equal amounts of both of them when approaching difficulties and joys.

In order that members of his community see this perspective, Gary Snyder advocates crawling through the manzanita thickets and forests near his Sierra Nevada home. "The trick is to have no attachment to standing; find your body at home on the ground, be a quadruped, or if necessary, a snake. The delicate aroma of leaf molds and mycelium rise from the tumbled humus under your hand, and a half-buried boletus is disclosed."[43] Snyder calls this "the porous world," and is yet another approach to the necessity of change of perspective and a challenge to our "upright" vision; where we gaze toward the horizon, yet ignore and trample the present world beneath our feet. The porous world lives in the world right off the porch, in the sink of dirty dishes, and its evidence presents itself in the dirt on our hands and the stickers clinging to the cuffs of our pants. It shows its beauty in the Aurora Borealis on a clear night in the mountains, the feel of turning pages in a book, and the smile on a child's face. These things only reveal themselves in their fullest conception when we get down on our knees and crawl, dig, and work for them. Allowing oneself to become part of the porous world can be temporarily unpleasant, demanding physically and emotionally, and results seem to come slowly. It takes a good deal of

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[43] Gary Snyder, "The Porous World," *A Place in Space*, p.194.

time to become reacquainted with the porous world and requires equal amounts of patience as it does fortitude.

When he came in, Sam was all fortitude and no patience. None of the *people* there his first few months did anything for him. His greatest friend became a sagewood bow-drill fire set and a juniper tender bundle because it taught him that all strength and no finesse will only end up in extreme frustration and no fire. For more than two full months, Sam crawled beneath juniper trees looking for the driest tinder, crashed through tamarisk thickets looking for a new bow to replace the one he snapped in anger, and stopped in his tracks to cut a perfectly straight piece of sage for a spindle and fire board. Only after he could build a fire completely from scratch in less than five minutes did he begin to engage the group and even mentor younger members. The reason Sam only greeted the world with rage was that he had no idea what to give to it. When he found one thing, in this case the art of the bow-drill fire, the rest of the world began to open itself to him and then the dirty work of crawling around in himself began.

Another aspect of reshaping our perspective begins in the attitude we bring to our habits of daily life, specifically, the tools we use. Tools do not mean only hammers, chisels, wrenches, and saws; they mean communication, intellect, and relationships we use to interpret the world. An attitude of crisis attempts to use rusty wrenches and dull chisels as well as fragmented communication, disembodied intellect and consumption, and unstable relationships which yield the most suspect construction of community and personal responsibility. An attitude of *quality* will

yield the opposite: stable, open to outcome, and conscientious. *Quality* in this sense means approaching our actions as art, as a particular *technē*, or know-how.[44] Contemporary self-reliance does not result wholly from skills, such as a bow-drill fire or building a house. It is a skill that must be cultivated from the underlying quality of one's relationships with objects *and* subjects.[45]

Quality exists on many levels. First, quality of understanding requires knowing the physicality of function, or "how it works." This holds for a motorcycle, a bow-drill fire set, how a tree grows, or how a person breathes. This is objective knowledge. Sam could not understand the *why* until he learned the *how*. He learned that in order to create fire, he needed to keep his bow-drill set perfectly dry and have an abundant supply of juniper bark tinder. He also learned that proper amount of energy needed to "spin a coal" to place in his tinder bundle. Objective knowledge allows one to classify, categorize, break down into discrete parts, and perform work on those parts with the objective of affecting the whole. No ember to place in the tinder bundle? Try blunting the end of the spindle. Still no luck? Carve a deeper groove in the fireboard to let in more air. Nothing? Perhaps more down pressure, but not too much else the spindle will kick out of the fireboard. Sooner or later, after equal amounts fortitude, finesse, and patience, the ember comes.

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[44] *Technē - A* Greek word used in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to mean the know-how that permits any kind of skilled making, as by a carpenter or sculptor, or producing, as by a doctor or legislator. One should exercise caution with equating *technē* with technology, however, for while they are related their manifestations are different.

[45] For an exhaustive discussion of Quality and how it relates to objects (such as technology) and subjects (such as human relationships) see Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Objective knowledge becomes a problem when one begins to see it as the only way to approach problems and find solutions, or, when it begins "to be understood as the only valid metaphor for actuality."[46] When this becomes the case, one becomes stuck in the "how" and the why, or the consequences of the how, become unimportant. Too much objective knowledge is much like too much down pressure on the spindle. Eventually the knowledge one gains kicks out the ember into the sand and snuffs it out. Objective knowledge helps one know the tools and how to apply the tools, but too much tinkering with the machine will inhibit its ability to run smoothly and sharpening a knife too much will make it dull.

Quality also expresses itself as art and as solid construction. This aspect of Quality is as an attribute, as in doing something with quality. Quality as attribute resides in the middle of the larger meaning of Quality. Quality in this sense, however, goes beyond simply creating an object with "quality." Just as quality as attribute lies in the middle of our larger definition of Quality, Quality as a being lies in the center of our experience in the world. Quality as being is the bridge between subject and object, the parts and the whole. When Sam finally mastered the art of fire – when he figured out the how – he then began to express his experience with Quality. Coming to terms with the how allowed Sam to take the next step and search for the finest materials, prepare them with care, and construct his implements with delight. The delight in knowing the how and expressing his knowledge artfully allowed him to experience the desert and his time there with *pride*, something he had

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[46] William Kittredge, *The Nature of Generosity*, p.146.

not experienced much of up until that time. Until that moment when he made the connection, the how of things was an end to itself. Sam knew *how* to intimidate and get his needs met through a single-minded idea of objective knowledge. The art of doing things with delight and the resulting pride and empowerment from artful expression remained alien to him.

Coming full circle in the definition of Quality finds one back where one started, with one's own perceptions, which influences one's quality of experience. When one discovers the how, becomes comfortable with it, and expresses it with craft and art, then one can begin to approach the *why*, or how the activity transfers in to reality. When Sam made the connections between strength, finesse, and patience (a well rounded *action*), he was then able to bring intentional action and pride to his reality and begin to craft a comfortable day-to-day life in the middle of the Utah desert among a group of fellow wanderers who sought the same thing.

One must take caution, however, not to take the experience out of context and attempt to apply it where it does not belong. Crawling through the woods, turning wrenches, building a primitive fire, or washing dishes can inform Quality, but any activity in itself in any locale cannot create Quality on its own. Attempting to relate daily life in the desert to daily life in the city leaves one confused and frustrated. Fire, a tightly slung shelter, and knowing how to follow landforms to water mean nothing in the city and while interesting to friends and family for awhile, these skills become useless when one is faced with peer pressure, family conflict, or the seductive nature of consumer culture. Quality comes into being in terms of a particular set of

circumstances. Learning to perform tasks *with* quality (an attribute) leads to Quality as a being alive with reciprocity in one's own world. Experience moves, evolves, adapts, and is situational; it is a variable. Once cultivated and faithfully practiced in daily life, Quality remains and Quality experience is the root of contemporary self-reliance.

How we approach and perceive Quality relies on one's ability not only to move from one objective perspective to another but also to understand how those perspectives intertwine with one another and our experience with them. The 20th century phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* writes, "All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception."[47] Merleau-Ponty shows this idea by the idea of one moving around a hypothetical cube where one's perspective of the cube such as its properties as well as its place in space and the space it contains by its form. The opening of new "horizons" of perception lies in not the cube as "form," or as an objective idea removed from its context, but in our active participation in perceiving the cube. David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* puts it another way, but using an earthen bowl as the subject of his inquiry:

> This earthen vessel this reveals aspects of its presence to me only by withholding other aspects of itself for further exploration. There can be no question of ever totally exhausting the presence of the bowl with my perception; its very existence as a bowl ensures that there are dimensions wholly inaccessible to me.... If I break it into pieces, in hopes of discovering these interior or the delicate structure of its dimensions, I will have destroyed its integrity as a

[47] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.206.

> bowl; far from coming to know it completely, I will simply have wrecked any possibility of coming to know it further, having traded the relation between myself and the bowl for a relation to a collection of fragments.
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> Each time that I return to gaze at the outward surface of the bowl, my eyes and my mood have shifted, however slightly; informed by my previous encounters with the bowl, my senses now more attuned to its substance, I continually discover new and unexpected aspects.[48]

All of this talk about cubes and bowls may seem abstract and distance ourselves from the real work. The key to this philosophy relies on *participation* with "the object," the life-world, and the daily habits of action in our lives. Participation requires that one bring oneself physically, mentally, and emotionally to the table where the bowl sits. It also helps to have intimate knowledge of the bowl: its origins, what soup tastes best when eaten from it, how to wash it, where it is stored. These items are not trivial. They are the history of the bowl, and if we have paid adequate attention, the history of ourselves. Through participation, all of our objects (the objective world), no matter how small and all of our actions, no matter how routine (or extraordinary) find themselves inherently tied to one another and the life-world.

Of course, one can go too far in one's desire for knowledge of the bowl, or the lives of plants, or ourselves. At this point, breakage occurs and the contents of the container spill all over the tabletop. In one's desire "to see how it works," one can cause great harm if that is as far as one goes. This is where post-modern, post-industrial consumer culture has left people like Sam, and indeed all of us. In a desire

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[48] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p.51.

to examine each part of the world we find ourselves with a bag of pottery shards that resemble nothing. This examination began out of curiosity, much like a young person who takes apart the lawnmower to see the internal parts. If she's lucky, she can get it back together in some working form. Now we separate the parts not necessarily to see how it works so that we may examine the art of each one in relation to the whole, but to manipulate each one in hopes of creating another whole that can be commodified and placed in the marketplace, with no regard for Quality as an attribute or as a being in its own right. Inserting a gene from one being to another for commercial gain is a prime example. Our relation to the whole then becomes disembodied and our attitude arrogant and we begin to construct artifacts that have no quality and therefore cannot provide Quality to our experience. Experience has become just as manufactured and disposable as one-use paper plates. In a world surrounded by ideas, beliefs, words, and actions void of quality, no wonder we create lives (or great portions of them) void of Quality as well.

If characteristics of the container change, the contents remain the same, whether in a pool on the table or soaked up in to a towel. Our potential for Quality and self-reliance, fortunately, can operate outside any given constructed container. Potentiality allows one to approach the bowl with a fresh perspective, bringing in not only previous experiences with the bowl but experiences after one's encounter with the bowl and before the next one. This "intertwining" of history, Quality experience, and potentiality creates an embodied situation that places one in a position to approach any object or situation with the ability to recognize difference of

perspective, which then allows us to move toward a unification of Quality with experience. Merleau-Ponty, in a remarkable chapter in one of his late works, *The Visible and the Invisible*, calls this intertwining, or "the chiasm:"

> We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only "shadows stuffed with organs," that is, more of the visible? The world seen is not "in" my body, and my body is not "in" the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it.
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> My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather, if, as once again we must, we eschew the thinking by planes and perspectives, there are two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naïvely, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other....
>
> We have to ask ourselves what exactly we have found with this strange adhesion of the seer and the visible. There is a vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body...nor to the world.[49]

In this substantial passage, Merleau-Ponty challenges us on several points. He asks us to consider the nature of perspective. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy requires rethinking the idea of "body" as container for our experiences. When Merleau-Ponty and David Abram speak in terms of a cube or a bowl, they are indeed speaking in

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[49] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, pp.138-139.

terms of a container. However, the containers of which they speak exist as objects in the world with which we interact. One of the hallmarks of the subject/object dichotomy has been the tendency to view the body as a container from which we view and act upon the world. This idea enables one to think of simply as human containers interacting with other tangible containers in the world.

When one applies a compartmentalized philosophy to the world, fragmentation occurs: ideas, beliefs, words, actions, and living beings then can be cleaved from their context, manipulated and commodified. Compartmentalization of experience allows one to approach reality in a dualistic fashion; thus, we can speak of work and play, wilderness and civilization, and good and evil in ways that cause one to think of one as more desirable than the other. Because the world, like humans, is composed of *flesh*, it breathes, expands and contracts, and interacts with us as much as we interact with it. Therefore humans are not of the world and the world is not of humans; humans and the world are *in* one another, and "surrounded" by on another.

We find both human and non-human bodies as flesh, as tangibles, within "the full spectacle" of the world. As such, the objective world finds itself hopelessly "intertwined" with the subjective world. When we view the two worlds as intertwined, then divisions dissolve between the dualities of work and play, wilderness and civilization, and good and evil. The conflicts between the two likewise dissolve and the linear, objective-based hierarchy of experience transforms into different vortices of experience that inform one another. Continuous, Quality experience then can express itself in its full potentiality, thus reciprocating ours. A

vortex of experience eliminates the desire to approach the world in a way that promotes separation of one "world" from another and undermines the free market approach to ideas, beliefs, words, and actions, thus crippling the crisis lifestyle.

Thinking about experience as vortex, or to use Merleau-Ponty's word, *chiasm*, necessitates that one approach the world and reality as reciprocal. Because of the reciprocal nature of the "insertion," one is required to give as much as one takes from reality. Creating fire with a bow-drill fire set certainly requires reciprocity. As one discovers the conditions required for fire (and provides them), then fire will appear. Likewise, if one seeks an empowering work environment, then one must discover the conditions that promote play and exploration at work. One cannot expect a part of reality to provide Quality without giving quality of attitude and action to it.

Making the Real Work Real

Among all of this talk about Quality, reciprocity, and vortexes of experience, our objective mind may ask, how do we make this *real*? With the proposed definition of contemporary self-reliance as quality, reciprocal experience, where are the instructions, the tools and the machine? There is no instruction manual for being human, just as there is no instruction manual for raising a child. Being human is situational, touch and go, playful, challenging, and relentlessly difficult because it requires unification of thought and action, where the subjective enables the objective. Sam struggled with his own subjective thought, feelings, and attitudes at the same time he struggled with the objective, physical nature of a bow-drill. Sooner or later

his attitudes and actions aligned and fire emerged. Fire then could be brought to the group and food could be cooked on a clear, cold winter night in the desert, *that* was where self-reliance manifested itself for Sam.

Enabling quality, tangible experience in reality must begin with reality as it exists in the physical world, or basic, gross contact with the world. By "gross," I mean immediately obvious, to take in the present in its fullest form. For Sam, the desert offered life as obvious, very physically real, immediate in its consequences, and slow to give up its treasures. Because of his particular personal history and situation – that of a juvenile at risk and in need of immediate intervention – Sam's time in the desert was a radical immersion. Our culture needs a radical change – a fundamental shift our perspective. For some, this shift reveals itself by crawling through the woods; others have found it in a bow-drill fire set, still others find it going "off the path" in their work, their home life, and discovering the inherent wild in everything.[50] By wild, we must not simply mean the wilderness, or that which is not human. In truth, ideas of *wild*, if properly moored to belief, words, and actions, exists as a being as part of everyday life and as "a project of the self."[51] There is of course wild as attribute, as *a* quality. The wild exists *in* reciprocity with civilization, one helps shape the other, just as work shapes play.

Expressing contemporary self-reliance in the world literally begins with attempting to express Quality in all spheres of one's life. If a person is going to

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[50] See Gary Snyder, "On the Path, Off the Trail," *The Practice of the Wild*, pp.143-154.
[51] Turner, p.86.

bother doing something at all, then one should approach it with Quality in mind. It is just as difficult and important to clean one's home with quality as it is to write a report or give a speech with quality. It is difficult to watch television, consume cheap plastic junk, or play a video game with quality, as these activities present no opportunity to reflect Quality because they have no quality inherent in them. Quality rarely provides instant feedback; it requires daily ritual and practice to see the value in washing one's dishes, and it is just plainly a lot of *work*. To garden with Quality, to learn the mechanics, appreciate the subtleties, and provide the soil and plants with care over time yields a head of lettuce, a bunch of round turnips, a basket of juicy tomatoes. These tangible and edible manifestations, then result in the same pride felt by Sam when he made fire.

The skill, pride, and crafted object created can then be shared with one's community. Failure to share one's creations violates Quality because while one offers the how and the attributes, the deliciousness of fresh-grown vegetables or the knowledge of fire, to deny the last step, the *why* we should do things, vacates the entire goal of Quality: to share it, not fence oneself in and keep it for oneself. Ultimately, contemporary self-reliance locates itself in the same tenets of classic self-reliance, but with a necessarily communitarian twist. Where classic self-reliance focused on the development of skills for survival largely of the individual and his or her family, contemporary self-reliance focuses on the development of skills not only for the products they produce, but also as a vehicle to discover and reclaim Quality, which can then be offered to the community for its survival.

As the words suggest, "self-reliance," largely takes into consideration the individual. The collective is secondary, not in a hierarchical sense, but as an attribute of the self. Many "selves" forming around a set commonly held beliefs form a community. In what individual ways they express those beliefs (in words and actions) form the richness of the community.

The Duty of a Citizen

"How do [members of the new tribe] recognize each other? Not always by beards, long hair, bare feet, or beads. The signal is a bright and tender look; calmness and gentleness, freshness and ease of manner."

Gary Snyder

Now that ideas such as "justice," "temperance," "sobriety," and "hope" have become disembodied due to their disconnection with Quality, only authentic action in the world will meet the challenge of making those words recapture their legitimacy as actualized beliefs. To do this, we must rediscover the old ways and discover new ways to apply them in our reality. Sadly, a citizen's ability to act upon these words is inhibited by the elements of the crisis lifestyle: fear, worry, and the strange and sometimes pernicious ways in which we exhibit it. The duty of a citizen is one's ability to give their skills, products, and mindful participation to the communities in which they live: wild, local, regional, continental, and global. This simple idea now circulates freely among intellectuals, activists, and progressive politicians. Not so simple is making "the ability" come to life – to live our ideas (like community) though belief (manifested through Quality) communicated with words (embodied in meaning) and expressed in action (such as actually being patient, behaving with fortitude, or thinking and acting wisely and intentionally). Personal *action* based on patience, fortitude, humility and wisdom in concert with the desires and needs of the community is the duty of a citizen.

Throughout my years of teaching and mentoring young people in the mountains and deserts, the most effective way to teach people techniques and ideas

foreign or lost to them is by example. Where do we find our cultural examples today? Religion? Politicians? Gurus living in geodesic domes miles from any road? Organized religion, for some the manifestation of belief, has been sadly hijacked by the ideologues that propagate the crisis lifestyle and politicians themselves are victims of growth is good global free market ideology, which is the cleaver that divides Quality. By their traditionally hierarchical nature, "institutions" cannot exhibit patience, fortitude, and wisdom; they can produce profits, encourage unrestrained competition, and make decisions that reflect either dangerously short foresight or irresponsibly long forecasting. The self-reliant guru miles from the road might provide advice steeped in the old ways and mildly entertaining, but it will not possess the freshness of a reciprocal dialogue with a contemporary community of livers, lovers, learners, and workers. "One's own obligation to oneself cannot be isolated from one's own obligation to everything else," writes Wendell Berry.[52] One has a dual (though not dualistic), obligation to oneself to behave with virtue as much as we have an obligation to society. In fact, sometimes one does need to leave the community temporarily to work on oneself and develop new skills to approach the *how* so that one may give to the community, thus coming full circle with the *why*.

The Trail of Wisdom

The best teachers are those steeped in the world, and perhaps the oldest cultures in the world are best suited to showing how to approach living with patience,

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[52] Wendell Berry, "Two Minds," *Standing by Words*, p.103.

humility, and wisdom, and, most importantly how to live and share those ideas with one's community. In the intriguing ethnography of the Western Apache in Arizona, *Wisdom Sit in Places*, Keith Basso recounts the story of Talbert, a middle aged man who lives in the village of Cibecue on a small reservation where income and food comes from cattle and the people live day to day on the land and depend on each other and the cattle for survival.

Talbert, normally a good horseman, worker, and friend, has been on a three-day drinking binge in a fit of grief over the dissolution of a romantic relationship. He has also made a general nuisance of himself by spreading rumors about his former partner, making lewd comments to other women in the village, and absent from the shared community of work on the range which they all share. This story comes to a head when Talbert suddenly arrives during a break in the heat of the day, near where the men have been herding cattle. He mentions that he has been sober for three days and asks permission to come back to work. Neither empathizing with him nor scolding him, they ask him instead a sequence of questions about how long he has been away from his community and if it is long enough to think about himself and reflect on the "merits of wisdom."[53]

As told by Dudley Patterson, an elder member of the tribe, any person beginning or practicing any enterprise in the world requires the development of wisdom:

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[53] Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, pp. 111-117. This entire work is revealing in the way it illustrates the reliance of individual relationships with the self, the landscape, and the community.

> Do you want to live a long life? Well, you will need to have wisdom. You will need to think about your own mind. You will need to work on it. You should start doing this now. You must make your mind smooth. You must make your mind steady. You must make your mind resilient.[54]

Dudley's initial question not only addresses one's own physical life, but also the life of one's heritage, relationships, community, and natural environment. The qualities of mind (and the development of them) that lead to wisdom are the primary in their relationship to everything else in the world of the Western Apache. This approach provides the deepest approach to many, if not all of the problems in our own individual life and our relations with loved ones, community, work, and all the spheres of life.

It is important not to confuse a mindful approach to life with a *program* of self-improvement. Programmatic change limits itself with boundaries of beginning, measurement, and method. Methods are endlessly manipulative and tend to be wonderful distractions from the actual target of any program, therapeutic or otherwise. Sam defied any program of self-improvement, and his therapist's advice to "play to his sense of self reliance" was faulty. In the middle of a clear, cold evening of the desert, he made it clear that he was weary of people playing with any part of him. Sam's visions came to him when he was alone in the desert at night or absorbed in the daily necessities of life in the desert. The best thing for anyone to do was stay out of the way. Likewise for Talbert, his community needed him to temporarily go away to the "Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills," and think about

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[54] *Ibid*, p.126.

the smoothness of his own mind, how to reconcile his behavior and actions and how they affected his search for wisdom, which affected the entire community.

The crux of Dudley's advice about wisdom is that he does not offer any empirical instruction to how to go about fashioning one's mind to be steady smooth, and resilient. In our craving for definitions, the first question one might ask is, "what does it mean to have a steady, smooth, and resilient mind, anyway?" Dudley only provides the consequences as examples:

> If your mind is not smooth you will fail to see danger. You will trust your eyes but they will deceive you. If your mind is not resilient you will be easily startled. If your mind is not steady you will be easily angered and upset. You will be arrogant and proud.[55]

Although this advice may seem negative to our Western sensibilities, it is nonetheless itself steady, smooth, and resilient, for how can one person tell another how achieve such a state of mind? Dudley's advice recognizes the arrogance in attempting to instruct someone about how to become a person that is careful, thoughtful, simple, and compassionate. His advice also recognizes that becoming an aware human being precedes becoming the member of a community on any scale. When the people who comprise a society possesses steadiness, smoothness, and resiliency, then that society will likely mirror those qualities as well. This equation operates on any scale: governments comprised of people who are steady mind will manifest their presence in the world as and empowering force, not as an occupying force riddled with fear and conquest.

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[55] *Ibid*, p.126.

Dudley does offer a way to "walk along this trail of wisdom," although his instruction can leave one grasping for something to gather for use in an empirical sense. This trail however, is not a gathering expedition. Much to the dismay of our modern sensibilities, one does not emerge from the trail of wisdom with anything one can "show" to the world or turn into any kind of tangible gain. In fact, the old Apache man suggests that the best way to walk down the trail of wisdom is to "forget about yourself" (127). This is not as pessimistic as it may sound, and it is the one goal – if you can call it that – of the trail. It is also incredibly difficult.[56]

As incredibly difficult as it is, forgetting about one's self along the trail of wisdom is by no means a task unique to the Western Apache in North America. Another ancient wisdom, this time from the Far East, provides some advice, if not a few more riddles. Still, the images presented in the teachings of the Buddha bear remarkable resemblance to those of the Western Apache, a half a world away.

> If the mind is impure, it will cause the feet to stumble along a rough and difficult road; there will be many a fall and much pain. But if the mind is pure, the path will be smooth and the journey peaceful.
>
> One who is to enjoy the purity of both body and mind walks the path to Buddhahood, breaking the net of selfish, impure thoughts and evil desires. He who is calm in his mind acquires peacefulness and thus is able to cultivate his mind day and night with more diligence.[57]

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[56] It must be said at this point that carefully listening to these words of advice from the Western Apache in Cibecue and putting them in practice should not be considered appropriation of Apache values. These old ways can be brought out of the desert and into the mainstream of modern society and provide value to local, regional, and global communities. As sophisticated as the culture of the Western Apache is, they would be happy if more everyday people embraced the idea of *living* the virtues our country espouses. To mimic their ceremonies and physical ways of life, however, would be appropriation. As a society, we need to not only learn, live, and share the value of wisdom; we need to reconnect to our own rituals and ceremonies to express them.

[57] Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, ed. *The Teaching of the Buddha*, p.102.

Again these teachings, are not specific about what exactly a "calm mind" is, and it does not focus solely on rewards, but on only more daily, moment-to-moment practice, when one achieves calmness of mind (no easy feat in itself) there only appears to be more work, for then the "cultivation" of one's mind can then begin in earnest.

Home Economics

Finally, back at home in the reality of our lives in the 21st century, we still face the crisis lifestyle in all of its cruel manifestations. This is our starting point to realize Quality, embodied beliefs and words, and the daily habits of action. In our modern, American day-to-day life, the duty of a citizen reveals itself first in the maintenance of our household, whether one is a single person or the head or co-head of a large family household. "The economy" remains one of the most pressing issues on the minds of citizens in the United States and increasingly the world. Speaking of the economy in the larger sense moves the responsibility of the economy away from individuals and to the government and corporate behavior. With this model, we have an abstraction dealing with an abstraction, two containers interacting as two disembodied objects in the world. *Economy* as a word has its roots in the household; *economics* can thus be translated into "house hold management." We find this

interpretation in the titles of such contemporary work as *Earth House Hold*, by Gary Snyder and *Home Economics*, by Wendell Berry.[58]

Our first action should be to wrest control of our daily lives and actions from the behemoth of the "global economy" and literally bring it home to our families and local communities. By using the household as the foundation of the larger economy we can exhibit frugality, patience, and love with our families and friends and *share* those virtues with the wider economy of combined households. When we then inform our economic activity with virtue then ideally activity will involve spending money on well-made objects of which possess the qualities of longevity and fairness, such as a handmade shirt and food that does not involve massive amounts of pollution and transportation from distant places in unfamiliar packaging. At that point, self-reliance emerges into the world.

Our other commodity, our time, can be invested in activities that promote our personal longevity and membership in our communities to promote an economy that reflects our lived beliefs. Membership in the economic sense means not simply the sum of its "parts", but a joining of *people* "indebted to each other, receiving significance and worth from each other and from the whole."[59] Reciprocity comes alive through beings in the world engaging in commerce as members. Then "commerce" has the face and name of the neighbor next door and when commerce

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[58] See Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, (1969) and Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (1987). Although these are older works of these two thinkers, they provide an excellent introduction in to the emerging thought of Snyder and Berry. Early on, these thinkers realized the value in maintaining a healthy household as a precursor to wider change.

[59] Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," *Home Economics*, p.74.

becomes embodied, it becomes more difficult to "cook the books" in one's own favor, thus the virtue of honesty also lives in the world.

A necessary part of any economy, work, remains the most dreaded part of the modern economy because the type of work it offers removes one from one's own home. Some people have the luxury and the good fortune not to have to leave their home for work. The majority of the people who earn the money that finances household functions through wage-earning work sometimes do feel like they live their lives in unrelated compartments. They work in one to support the other, and according to Marx, this abstract notion of disembodied work turns people into nothing more than objects for the accumulation of capital.

Two options exist. The first requires the collective action of households to either not shop at large corporate stores and spend their dollars locally and purchase goods grown and made by their neighbors. Another element of collective action is political action, such as zoning regulations, progressive land-use planning laws, and proxy fights by the citizens of a community itself. This approach, however, does nothing for those who currently find themselves working jobs where they feel treated like objects, much like one of the products traded, sold, or manufactured. For one's household economics to discover true connectivity with one's world as one lives it, then some balance must be found between the income that provides for the home and activity that produces it.

Secondly, one could quit acting like an object. An object is passive unless acted upon. Advertisers, large-corporate employers, and popular culture love when

people act like objects because they can then provide the impetus for their audience to act in certain way – to be manipulated. The way to not act like an object at work requires that one do just the opposite – to play at work. To dissolve the work/play dichotomy would surely result in a radical transformation the way many view the world; a lot of people would certainly be a lot happier. One thing at a time. To find play at work, one needs to find one small thing and practice it with Quality and with amusement. "Quality destroys objectivity every time," Robert Pirsig tells us, and he's right.[60] One does not need to be in the desert laboring over a bow-drill fire set to discover and practice Quality and play at work. One can enjoy Quality and play through bagging groceries, stocking shelves, or changing the oil in someone's car. Discovering and practicing Quality and play at work on the small and routine things allows one to screw it up without too much consequence. Put the milk on top of the bread? That situation can be reconciled fairly easily with an apology and new loaf of bread. Once one learns how to experience Quality on the otherwise mundane level, then one can try it with the meaningful: family, citizenship, and resident of planet Earth.

Finally, there is the work of the home, the day-to-day actions that cause the household to run smoothly or not so smoothly. Here one finds a daily opportunity to practice frugality, patience, wisdom and intentionality in actions, and Quality in the wonderfully repetitive actions that make up the stuff of daily life. The domestic arts remain the last sphere of life where an individual or family can exercise self-

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[60] Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, p.351.

determination and see results that are immediate, gratifying, and empowering. The domestic arts include the "business" of the house: paying bills, budgeting money, purchasing and preparing food, cleaning up, one could call these the "classic" domestic arts. Then there is the other side: playing with one's spouse or partner or children, painting the bathroom purple, digging up the manicured lawn and planting perennials and vegetables, building a straw-bale studio in the backyard.

The harmony we seek is reciprocal and intertwined, just like all elements of the human and non-human worlds.

> The outward harmony that we desire between our economy and the world depends finally upon an inward harmony between our own hearts and the creative spirit that is the life of all creatures, a spirit that is the life of all creatures, a spirit as near us as our flesh and yet forever beyond the measures of the obsessively measuring age. We can grow good wheat and make good bread only if we understand that we do not live from bread alone.[61]

Wendell Berry reminds us that the duty not only of each citizen, but each person is to recognize and practice the intertwining of the objective and the subjective, the mechanical and the romantic. Our minds need the romantic to understand the mechanical. The *how* and the *why* are thus intertwined. The home and daily life is the perfect place to experience the intersection of work and play and to learn how to step out of "perspective-based" reality and into an immersed and intertwined one. When one gets the hang of an intertwined reality in the comforts of home, then one can bring it out into the world and try it here and there when the situation allows. Before one knows it, approaching the world with Quality becomes unavoidable

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[61] Wendell Berry, "In Distrust of Movements," *Citizenship Papers*, p.50.

because it infuses one's habits of action. Finally, back where we started, the duty of a citizen can be realized. When a citizen runs his or her household where frugality and performance are as important as play and spontaneity, then, hopefully, as citizens of a community, they will in turn expect their communities and governments to reflect and live those values as much the members of the household do.

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