

Leo Peyronnin
Alaska Theology
16 September, 2017
Final

Trip to ANWR (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge)

On the third day in ANWR, we climbed a mountain. I have climbed mountains before, but this climb was unlike any other I'd experienced; no map, no trail, no other people. We set out from our campsite with the Ribdon River valley stretched out before us. Like a meal spread out on the table, the various aspects of the climb were there to behold: the valley and its empty, wind-swept expanse; the river, rushing silently in the distance; the willow thickets surrounding it, and the imposing mountain that stood huddled over the valley like a great god, or a beloved, yet intimidating grandfather.

After we made our way through the willows lining the river we hiked alongside the creek that fed it from the fold of the mountain, ascending. The earth was at a forty-five-degree angle, the moss springy and unstable. Everybody had a tough time. We crossed a creek, hopping rock to rock as the cold water rushed below us. While some were able to cross easily, others had more difficulty. The sure-footed helped the people who had more difficulty across. I remember, in particular, being impressed with Jen (a member of our group). Seeing as she is shorter, she probably had the most difficulty of anyone. She fell, *hard*, got wet and cold, but didn't care about the bruises and pain - fought and did not heed the wounds. It may have been easy for me to cross that river, but in a circumstance in which I would have difficulty, I would like to possess the strength and will Jen showed.

After we crossed, we climbed. There were three knobs to the mountain. Being on its sheer faces, tired and burning, feels good. I climbed with others and alone.

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Each time I neared a knob, I thought it was the final summit until I reached it and saw there was another. This is much like life. Unlike movies and tales may lead us to believe, it is not possible to achieve perfect happiness. You cannot control all that life will fling your way; you cannot really even control yourself. There will always be another peak, another storm, another trial. This conundrum is one I have wrestled with since a child. While I grew from a baby to a boy, my parents' marriage grew apart. I watched as they lost each other, their family, their happiness, and even themselves. I watched them dip into deep lows, came to understand the line between sanity and insanity is more blurred than we like to believe. And always, I wondered about the dark, dark clouds that invariably form (and hopefully dissipate) over the expanse of a life.

How, then, to ensure this didn't happen to me? This question is the topic of millennia of philosophy, the work of years of psychotherapy, an answer sought by innumerable scientific studies. In short, it is a longer answer than there is space for in this paper. There is one answer, however, that relates to the experience I've recounted and our work in Ignatian pedagogy.

It seems a key to happiness is the ability to do without it. In the words of John Stuart Mill, nothing except that ability "can raise a person above the chances of life by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not the power to subdue him." Once felt, this frees one from excess anxiety about the evils of life, and enables one "to cultivate in tranquility the sources of satisfaction readily available to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration." (Mill, *Utilitarianism* pp. 16)

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What is an example of a source of satisfaction readily available? As we crossed the valley of the Ribdon, on our way back to camp, a thunderstorm raged. The dark clouds roiled in the sky like the stormy periods of one's life. Yet colliding with those clouds was the sun. God was speaking to me. It was a beautiful symbol, for the trials of life, for the duress of the climb and promise of the waiting hearth. I felt overwhelmed with something other than myself, and a few tears shook out. I see god in nature, in the flowers and the bees and their complex relationship which previous humans' work has allowed me to deeply understand. Everyday life, and the everyday things that make it up, are miracles. One of my most basic sources of satisfaction, then, is the beauty all around me and the mystery that runs whispering through it all. This insight became clear to me in Alaska

The earth is full. Full of us, full of our waste, full of our problems. It has never been a question to me that within my lifetime I will experience profound global crisis (and, honestly, already am). As theologian Thomas Berry said, it is up to my generation to find solutions, and to create a compelling vision that can provide the political will to find solutions.

I'm taking a survey course with Dr. Smythe exploring the nebulous concept of sustainability. Furthermore, I am doing an independent study as part of a research fellowship offered here at Xavier. In both, we are trying to find a solution and a vision. History shows that humans are capable of incredible things, but those accomplishments, unfortunately, are driven by fear and necessity. We have the means to develop sustainable energy, to reform the agricultural system, and to address the issues that contribute to the crisis we face. What lacks is the political consciousness and will.

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My goal with the survey course and the fellowship is to study the ideas, systems, and underlying factors that lead to the world we see. Capitalism, liberalism, the historical roots of our ecological crisis, the millennium vision – all are part of this study.

The next facet of the research will be technical and hands-on. I will go to Spain to study eco-communities that exist there, especially one called Sunseed. What sort of vision, technologies, urban design systems, and systems of social and political organization exist that can compose the fabric of solutions to our now and future problems? Is it prudent to hope for the best but expect the worst, and work to prepare cities for inevitable crises by developing things such as urban agriculture and localized energy systems that will guarantee cities some degree of stability by working towards self-sufficiency? Last, I wish to ponder the hardest, ficklest part of it all: how do we create the political will?

