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PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

Call of the Wild: The Negative Tendency in the Nature Religions of American Youth

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Abstract The author argues that the paucity of options for sanctioned rebellion in contemporary American society drive an ever-increasing number of idealistic youth in search of isolation in nature, where they construct what the author here calls "nature religions." These worldviews focus on purification of falsehood, ritualized through enduring extreme physical pain, social isolation, and extreme weather conditions in hopes of experiencing reality more authentically. The author argues that unemployment, limited vocational options, and the homogenization of American society are among the major catalysts for this ever-expanding breed of seekers, each of whom struggles with a negative tendency (a theoretical term created by Erik Erikson). Furthermore, the author argues that the emphasis in the nature religions on connection to nature is constructed to compensate for the lack of community and sense of human connectedness in contemporary American society. A representative case study from Jon Krakauer's (Into the wild; Doubleday, New York, 1996) *Into the Wild* is presented to illuminate and justify the argument made by the author for more institutionally housed options for sanctioned, licit rebellion to manage the negative tendency.

Keywords Monasticism · Negative tendency · Erik H. Erikson · Jon Krakauer

Introduction and Thesis Statement

When Sean Penn released *Into the Wild* (2007) to the movie going American public, most people had never heard of the main character Christopher McCandless (a.k.a. "Alexander Supertramp") or knew why this young man aggressively sought to abandon all of his possessions and live in the Alaskan wilderness. Moviegoers were shocked to watch McCandless's character on screen do things like burn hundreds of dollars in American

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currency when he was in a survival predicament or watch him hunt for berries and sleep in homeless shelters across the country after he had received a bachelor's degree with distinction from the prestigious Emory University. Furthermore, they were unprepared to watch his character starve to death on screen. Part of the film's success, I would argue, was in its sheer shock value and the entertainment audiences found in McCandless's subversive and risky behavior—few knew that Penn's creation was built entirely off of a true story documented by a nonfiction book with the same title by Jon Krakauer (1996).

Unlike Penn's movie, Krakauer's book relentlessly searches for answers to why McCandless left a loving, if somewhat unstable, American home for life on the road and, in order to accomplish this task, Krakauer's book is in part autobiographical (Krakauer profiles his own tramping period in Alaska, climbing mountains in solitary isolation through his early 20s) and also profiles a number of other young, male characters—all highly educated, ostensibly coming from troubled families, and desperate in search of solitary isolation in nature either in the American west or in Alaskan wilderness.

Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007), which only tells the story of McCandless alone and in limited scope, is a superficial anecdote in comparison with Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), which ultimately offers no clear explanations as to why McCandless and others attempted such feats, risking (and sometimes loosing) their lives. What seems to motivate Krakauer, and what makes his book such an excellent read, is his identification with McCandless as well as Krakauer's attempt to understand Krakauer's own solitary wandering period. Krakauer (and some of Krakauer's friends) dialogues at the end of the book on the very plot of Alaskan wilderness where McCandless starved to death, talking about how much they identified with McCandless, but they were simply fortunate enough to find a way to survive and a means to return to society. They ultimately view McCandless and themselves as having fundamentally mysterious but totally shared, common motives for going into the wild and seem to think McCandless and the others who perish in the wild are just plain unlucky.

This article is, in some ways, a continuation of that conversation that Krakauer and his male friends were having, as they were trying to understand why so many young individuals leave American homes and American cities for whatever remains of the American wilderness. In keeping with the theoretical framework of the psychohistorian Erik H. Erikson, my argument in this essay is both historical and psychological. I argue that each of these individuals is wrestling with a negative tendency, which is the discretionary faculty of mistrust that in its totalized fashion is termed a negative identity (Erikson 1959, p. 139). I argue that specific historical factors and influences, such as spikes in unemployment, exacerbate the negative tendency in these individuals. I argue that there is a direct connection between the disintegration of communal experience in cities and developed areas of America (spurred by things like unemployment) that then exacerbates the negative tendency in these youth and propels them to seek an experience of community and intimacy with the natural world, unobstructed in the wilderness.

There, in what remains of the American wilderness, these individuals construct religious worldviews that emphasize connection to the natural world and the legitimacy of suffering within it, thereby creating a new religious worldview of their own which I am labeling "nature religion" in this essay. Salvation is, ultimately, a guarantee regardless of whether or not the individual lives or dies in their attempt to live in the wilderness; this experience of universal salvation is what makes the survival experience in the wilderness so much more appealing than the experience of American cultural life, since clarity of perception is achieved, success in life or death is a given, and the negative tendency is calmed in this experience of trust in the natural world. This experience of trust in the natural world is

precisely what an individual, such as McCandless, could not experience anywhere in American cultural life or in his own family life.

The experience of trust in the natural world demonstrates a connection between psychology and religion that Krakauer only guesses at in his book, though repeatedly. This is important to examine in this article because it shows the connection between the negative tendency, historical context, and the religious worldviews of the youth discussed that are just beginning to develop with the onset of their wilderness quest. In spite of finding himself and these other young male characters fundamentally mysterious, Krakauer does, however, put forward some conclusions that broach no argument and add to the complexity of understanding motivation: First, mental illness is not present among this group of seekers.[1] This is a point that Krakauer (1996) belabors (pp. 5, 70, 85, 155, 184) and, I think, marshals with success. Krakauer's wide sampling alone suggests that if one wishes to diagnose McCandless, one had better be prepared to diagnose a vast number of human beings to the point of absurdity—McCandless's mental illness, if there is such a thing according to Krakauer, is *ours* as well separated perhaps by a few degrees of superficial separation. A second clear conclusion Krakauer draws is the religious nature of McCandless's, and others' questing. This is, again, a point he belabors throughout the book (1996, pp. 97, 109, 112–115, 155, 163, 182). Krakauer refers to McCandless and the other solitary seekers as "monks" (pp. 97, 103, 115, among others), though of some unconventional sort.[2]

Like Krakauer, I agree that challenging family circumstances are among the motivations that drive these seekers into the wild, but this is not the focus of this article as I am focusing on the larger trend Krakauer identifies of young men who head into the bush. As with Krakauer's work, here McCandless's psychological traits and religious beliefs are only used as a representative example (this article is not a psychobiography of McCandless). This is what prompts my historical or contextual reflections and also why I chose Erikson's negative tendency as my theoretical choice for analysis. Culture and historical factors play a major role that Krakauer never tackles in attempting to understand McCandless and the other seekers he mentions in his book, and this is what I have chosen to analyze with Erikson's concept of the negative tendency—an analysis which implies reflecting on relevant historical, political, and religious events or issues that might contribute to the exacerbation or totalizing of the negative tendency in the form of the negative identity. American society has become increasingly hostile over the course of its history to provide forms or institutions of sanctioned rebellion that, when combined with a volatile economy, unemployment, an education bubble, and limited vocational opportunities, as well as an ever-increasingly homogenized society, drives these individuals into the solitude of whatever wilderness is left on the American landscape. There, in their solitude, they individually construct a religious worldview that is remarkably common to each of them surrounding spiritual and bodily purification through the pangs of wilderness survival that has soteriological goals that are met both in survival *and* in death. Regardless, salvation is inevitable and this provides a significant amount of psychological relief that could never be found in conventional society or, sadly, in many conventionally organized religions.

[1] This is a relevant and important point to make in terms of understanding motivation, since the negative tendency is often, if not always, associated with the experience of mental illness (Capps 2010).

[2] Krakauer never equates the teachings of any major religious tradition with any of the seekers' own beliefs; he emphasizes the seeker's unclassifiability, yet undeniably calls each of them "monks" and on a deeply religious quest. McCandless seems to come the closest to being classified as quasi-Christian with his identification with and idealization of Tolstoy; however, McCandless's journals contain no talk of Christ or Christianity, according to Krakauer.

Historical and Contextual Considerations on the Negative Tendency

The argument that sanctioned rebellion in American society and institutions is shrinking or becoming less and less possible is a well-documented argument (Pahl 1992, 2010; Kett 1977) and even an emerging trend in scholarly literature, particularly on the prison industrial complex (e.g., Travis 2005), and therefore need not be rehearsed at length. Nevertheless, in this article it would be worthwhile to note a historical example of an individual who engaged in sanctioned rebellion in American society at a time when it was ostensibly permissible and where there were social institutions that were constructed to house it, all for the purposes of comparison. The period I want to focus on is 1930s America, in the midst of recovering from The Great Depression and the entrance into WWII. Certainly, there are other periods where rebellious movements were tolerated (e.g., the 1960s), and even rebellious political parties (e.g., the populists), but arguably, this is the one period of American history that witnessed sanctioned, public institutions created for social deviants or rebels (often teenagers and young adults) that *also* coincided with a period of intense cultural, social, and economic homogenization and the beginnings of the military industrial complex in America.

An individual who resided in the Depression era as a socially licit rebel was William Stafford, a famous American poet. Stafford's autobiography (1947) describes similar personality traits and circumstances with McCandless, such as difficult family life that contributed to his discontent with American society. Stafford also appears to construct a kind of nature religion: His poems use images of trees, flowers, earth, and specific locales (such as Mount Shasta in Oregon) to address social and personal, psychological problems (cf. Capps 1993, pp. 7–38, 74–99, 144–174), as well as Stafford's belief that nature somehow heals wounds, teaches us how to live, and ultimately offers us a means to attaining personal peace. Stafford, like McCandless and many other seeker deviants who construct a nature religion, adopts a nickname or moniker to express his deviant identity (Stafford referred to himself as "The Wanderer" while McCandless changed his name to "Alexander Supertramp").

A notable difference I observe in comparing McCandless to Stafford is Stafford's ability to resolve his profound ambivalence toward remaining a part of society. McCandless certainly feels this ambivalence, and this is part of what confuses Krakauer about whether or not to refer to McCandless as a "monk." Krakauer (1996) writes:

> McCandless's personality was puzzling in its complexity. He was intensely private but could be convivial and gregarious in the extreme. And despite his overdeveloped social conscience, he was no tight lipped perpetually grim do-gooder who frowned on fun. To the contrary, he enjoyed tipping a glass now and then and was an incorrigible ham. (p. 115)

Stafford's ability to resolve his ambivalence toward society is, I argue, hinged upon society's willingness to construct and house an institution to use his and other's deviance for what society viewed as social good, namely building roads, draining ditches, and performing other tasks of menial labor. Stafford took immense pride in such tasks, not to mention the fact that he was able to publicly show his disapproval for the war and for the direction America was headed in—I believe this is most clearly shown in his opening chapter of his autobiography where he poetically describes how close he and his rebel colleagues came to being lynched by a "patriotic" mob of Americans who did not approve of the rebel, anti-war stance (1947, pp. 13–23). Stafford seems to be saying that part of what it means to be an American in his own mind is to be able to tolerate such radical

diversity of opinion without bloodshed. He is grateful to have his pacifist resister stance defended by society not only because it allows his voice to be heard but because he believed he was educating other Americans, such as the blood-thirsty lynch mob, that being American meant tolerating opinions that one happens to find abhorrent.

Stafford's ability to resolve his ambivalence toward remaining a part of society is also seen in his quality of relationships with others. While he goes by "The Wanderer" and is shipped by the US Government from work site to site across the country, he is still in the company of other rebels and ultimately becomes married (and remained married to the same person his entire life). Krakauer's description of McCandless's relational life is much more tinged with an unresolved ambivalence and transience. While he actively seeks out friends on the road (and, I would argue, substitute father and mother figures), he never remains in their company for long and wounds and shocks his temporary companions by how close he gets only to seemingly abandon the relationship entirely. Additionally, in sexual relations, McCandless "was drawn to women but remained largely or entirely celibate, as chaste as a monk" (Krakauer 1996, p. 65). Krakauer continues:

> Chastity and moral purity were qualities McCandless mulled over long and often. Indeed, one of the books found in the bus with his remains was a collection of stories that included Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata," in which the nobleman-turned-ascetic denounces "the demands of the flesh." Several such passages are starred and highlighted in the dog-eared text, the margins filled with cryptic notes printed in McCandless' distinctive hand…. Like not a few of those seduced by the wild, McCandless seems to have been driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire. (1996, pp. 65–66)

We have reason, however, to believe that toward the end of his stay in the wilderness, McCandless was beginning to resolve some of this ambivalence toward the society of others. As Krakauer (1996) notes, McCandless hints a few times toward the end of his stay in Alaska that he would like to settle down and marry a woman (p. 169). Perhaps, his most significant note in his journal, quoted by Krakauer (1996, p. 189), was written in large block letters as he neared his starvation: "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED."

This insight is comparable to Stafford's guiding theory that accountable connection to a group of human beings is essential for knowledge of what it means to be truly free. And, very importantly, without that kind of freedom one cannot know how to be a contributor to social and cultural systems. That McCandless began to come to this insight on his own is a testimony not only to his courage and willingness to go to his grave in search of this truth, but his life and horrid death is a witness to how our society has and is failing our youth today who deeply desire to be part of communities that help them become accountable to each other's needs without developing any kind of punitive conscience or need to entirely exit society by venturing into the wilderness (real or metaphorically speaking). Authority, of the secular and religious variety, failed McCandless, and the man had every good reason to go into the bush for some serious soul searching. Perhaps, in his death and with this interpretation here along with Krakauer's, some good for what McCandless fought for shall be done and his horrific death will not be entirely in vain.

Stafford's theoretical insights into human freedom and community stem from his context. They are certainly his ideas, and he expresses them with a poetic hand that has earned him a place he deserves among America's best poets and writers. Nevertheless, his insight is also very much a product of his historical context—a context that had recently emerged from the enormous tragedy of The Great Depression. This great tragedy gave birth to modern liberalism, and the movement Stafford participated in adopted that

common credo. Stafford was just as patently lucky to be a part of that group as McCandless was patently unlucky to have no such group. Context, in some ways, conditioned both of their fates and the quality, timing, and variety of their personal insights on their own negative tendency.

According to Krakauer (1996), McCandless was no political liberal. In fact, he was "a vocal admirer of Ronald Reagan" (p. 123) in spite of McCandless' aversion to poverty, hunger, and class conflict—issues that haunted him until his death and were part of why he retained such strong ambivalence toward being a part of society. For McCandless to pay taxes, to participate in society was to be complicit with a system that fostered and actively promoted mass poverty, mass hunger, and global inequality. It was for these reasons that his first act before heading to the bush was to donate the twenty-five thousand dollars in his savings account, which his parents had intended him to apply toward attending Harvard Law, to OXFAM, an organization that fights global hunger.

Krakauer (1996) views McCandless' political convictions as absurd given the pragmatic ends he sought,[3] and Krakauer blames this on McCandless' aversion to any kind of authority in general. The prospect of working with or under authority was simply too much for McCandless to bear. Krakauer also connects McCandless's love for Thoreau and the Transcendentalists with his love for less government and his difficulty dealing with any kind of authority.[4]

Krakauer's work on McCandless has received an outpouring of response from the public, much of which Krakauer documents in his (1996) work. According to Krakauer, by far and away most readers found McCandless to be reckless, arrogant, and stupid (p. 71). Even those who McCandless grew close to on his journey became furious with him once they learned of his death. Wayne Westerberg, who I believe served as a surrogate father figure for McCandless to idealize, stated baldly:

> If Alex (Supertramp) were here right now, I'd be tempted to chew him out good: "What the hell were you thinking?" Not speaking to your family for all that time, treating them like dirt! One of the kids that works for me, fuck, he don't even have any goddamn parents, but you don't hear him bitching. Whatever the deal was with Alex's family, I guarantee you I've seen a lot worse. (Krakauer 1996, p. 64)

A narrative of performative American masculinity emerges from these types of criticisms, as though growing a bigger set of testicles would solve the psychospiritual riddles of

[3] Here, of course, Krakauer is revealing of his own political stripes, yet this is an interesting historical issue to consider in relation to McCandless' struggle with authority and the negative tendency.

[4] There is also a substantial amount of scholarship (e.g., Sklansky 2002) that argues that Emerson and the Transcendentalists supported strong government that intervenes on behalf of its poor and needy, necessitating heavy taxation of the wealthy and large government interventions to provide roads or police, for example. More than anything else here it is important to note that Emerson and Thoreau lived prior to the American Civil War, the establishment of a federal, unified currency, and the birth of a modern economy that would make big government inevitable regardless of whether or not one favors it. Modern liberalism was no consequence of a fringe movement that wanted to see oppressive divine rights reinstated to an abusive and authoritarian crown, but rather an ideology brought on by cultural and economic catastrophe with the stock market crash of 1929 after deregulated speculation left the entire nation awash in total utter fiscal catastrophe. The only reason why Emerson and the Transcendentalists ever appeared on the fence about this sort of thing is that in spite of the economic collapses of the early republic, none were nearly as calamitous as the crash of 1929 because it was the first major crash after the establishment of a federal, unified currency. That the bright McCandless was unable to consider these contextual considerations in relation to his own plight shows that psychological and spiritual needs blighted his intellectual curiosity; that society was and has been unable to identify the need to satiate these psychosocial/spiritual needs for the sake of preserving and reforming our republic to meet the exigencies of the day is irresponsible.

a turbulent adolescence. Another writer tells Krakauer (1996): “McCandless’ postcards, notes, and journals…read like the work of an above average, somewhat histrionic high school kid—or am I missing something?” (p. 72)

Indeed, I would contend that this reader and others are missing something of grand enormity, namely the fact that these seeker rebels such as McCandless were all after a religious worldview that society could not provide for them, as well as a social location where their voice could be heard as equals (again, society could not provide this, in a large part due to the death of modern liberalism that sanctioned such institutional locales that Stafford inhabited). McCandless and the other rebels did not go into the wilderness to simply survive alone (as these reader-critics assume they did)—if they did, they certainly would have brought along expensive gear, food, company of friends, etc. Rather, they were acting out of a deeply religious impulse, a psychodrama of youth, which Krakauer does not appear to understand, but thankfully he at least picks up on it (the mystery of this religious impulse plagues Krakauer, in fact, even though he fails to make much sense of it). Krakauer, in this sense, writes with the same kind of courage he had when he was a young mountain climber—he takes risks, yet does not overstep himself.

The majority of contributions Krakauer received regarding McCandless are revealing of individuals who value personal protection, individual survival, and refusal to even consider their complicit role in McCandless’ death. Nevertheless, the perspectives contained within the letters Krakauer received on McCandless show their own lack of social connectedness, their own failures in empathy, and their lack of intellectual curiosity (that was, in all likelihood, blighted by psychological need) to consider social or contextual forces that contributed to McCandless’ death. McCandless’ story, originally published by Krakauer in an article in *Outsiders* magazine, “generated more mail than any other article in the magazine’s history” (1996, p. 1).

Krakauer remarked that some writers noted they were drinking while they wrote their correspondence to Krakauer to criticize McCandless, possibly showing that McCandless’ story is universal and hits close to home, especially for those of us who never were brave enough to take the crazy adventure, to risk in the name of a meaningful way of life with deeper sense of connectedness to community without losing a sense of personal authenticity, to hope rather than succumb to despair. The criticisms of McCandless are only revealing of the depths of depression faced by large numbers of the population who never risked the journey that could, conceivably, end in physical death. Krakauer and several of his rebel friends who camped out at the site where McCandless died seem to agree with these statements. Quoting one of his friends from that night of camping, Krakauer (1996) wrote:

> I just can’t help identifying with the guy…. I hate to admit it, but not so many years ago it could have easily been me in the same kind of predicament. When I first started coming to Alaska, I think I was a lot like McCandless: just as green, just as eager. And I’m sure there are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here, too, including many of his critics. Which is maybe why they’re so hard on him. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves [that they gave up on, abandoned, or “murdered” metaphorically speaking]. (pp. 185–186)

In sum, the responses to Krakauer’s work show a hostility toward the expression and resolution of the negative tendency in McCandless’s context that Stafford did not experience in his context. This evidence stands to justify the literature previously mentioned by Pahl (1992, 2010), Kett (1977), and Travis (2005), among other scholars who all contend

that sanctioned rebellion by large social institutions has collapsed, leaving in its wake an entire generation of youth who have no guidance in their attempts to make sense of their negative tendency. In the next section of this paper, I will explain how Erikson's writings on the negative tendency and negative identity apply particularly well to McCandless and the other rebels Krakauer documents in his (1996) work. I explain the psychological needs behind McCandless's and others' quest for a nature religion and what it is about that religion that meets those needs. To facilitate these ends, I will compare McCandless again to another famous historical figure, that of the monk, Martin Luther.

Affinities with *Young Man Luther*: Allness or Nothingness in the Negative Tendency

Luther puzzled Erikson in much the same way that McCandless puzzled Krakauer: Both writers found subjects that they personally identified with and who, they felt, the culture or society had misunderstood or misinterpreted. Luther and McCandless were both in search of a new worldview, which would inject new forms of communal meaning and self-understanding into their historical contexts; both were engaged in a kind of adolescent moratorium period, taking reprieve from the adult responsibilities of their given society. A first major difference, however, between Luther and McCandless, aside from their historical contexts, is that one managed to survive his moratorium period:

> It is probable that in all historical periods some—and by no means the least gifted—young people do not survive their moratorium; they seek death or oblivion, or die in spirit. Martin must have seen such death of mind and spirit in some of his brethren, and came to feel close to it more than once. Those who face the abyss only to disappear we will, of course, never know; and once in a while we should shed a tear for those who took some unborn protest, some unformed idea, and sometimes just one lonely soul, with them. They chose to face nothingness rather than submit to a faith that, to them, had become a cant of pious words; a collective will, that cloaked only collective impotence; a conscience which expended itself in a stickling of empty forms; a reason that was a chatter of commonplaces; and a kind of work that was meaningless busy-work. I am speaking of those "outsiders" who go their lone way…. (Erikson 1958, pp. 99–100)

In all honorable deference to Erikson, we *do* now know—in the case of McCandless—one who went on his lone, solitary way and faced the abyss of death and never came back. Additionally, because of Krakauer's award-winning journalism, we have been made aware of *droves* of individuals who have faced the same kinds of challenges and only some have lived through the experience. In each of their cases, they cite a kind of falsehood or, in Erikson's words, a culture of collective impotence in America that they could no longer bear to live in without at the very least experiencing a kind of psychospiritual death. In response to this situation, they risk their lives in order to establish some kind of new order of meaning and identity.

Like Luther as well, McCandless was not mentally ill but, as Erikson terms it, in a state of identity diffusion and coming to terms with his negative tendency. In such extreme forms of identity diffusion, there is a "mistrustful difficulty with mere living in time" (Erikson 1958, p. 100). We witnessed this in McCandless's disappearance and his need to move geographically, never staying in one place for long. We also see it in his need to completely isolate himself, and when he did work manual labor jobs, he totally disregarded

the exigencies of the time clock by working at a steady pace in spite of demands from customers and his bosses.

Other signs of McCandless's identity diffusion are in his "torturous self consciousness" (Erikson 1958, p. 101): "A person with this self-consciousness often cannot work, not because he is not gifted and adept, but because his standards preclude any approach that does not lead to being outstanding; while at the same time these standards do not permit him to compete, to defeat others" (p. 101). Such a description fits McCandless perfectly, as he is described as a wildly gifted entrepreneur and intellect. This was perhaps one of the points on which Krakauer and others found themselves most confused: How could such a gifted individual ostensibly squander their gifts? This puzzle is solved here when McCandless's case is considered under Erikson's framework.

Next, those experiencing identity diffusion and resolution of the negative tendency "must shy away from intimacy" (Erikson 1958, p. 101). Here, again, Krakauer was confused. As mentioned before, McCandless could be garrulous and jovial in social situations but maintained a seemingly celibate lifestyle, ambivalent about his own sexual attraction. This is precisely what led Krakauer to refer to McCandless and the other seekers he documents as "monks" who went off into the wilderness. Such a description by Krakauer is somewhat accurate and serves to justify the association I am making here between McCandless and Luther. Both took on a temporary monastic or solitary period in life only to later abandon it or suggest they would abandon it (in the case of McCandless) if they managed to physically survive their moratorium period. Physical closeness is impossible for such individuals because it "arouses at the same time both an impulse to merge with the other person and a fear of losing autonomy and individuation" (Erikson 1958, p. 101). Ambivalence toward one's own sexual desires—and desire, in general—is a classic symptom of identity diffusion.[5]

Lastly, McCandless alternated between "extreme self repudiation and a snobbish disdain for all groups—except perhaps, for memberships whose true roots and obligations are completely outside his reach" (Erikson 1958, p. 102). Here, again, Krakauer was confused by McCandless's refusal to associate with any one group for long without becoming completely abhorred by some kind of moral failing or error, just as he was equally self-loathing of any weakness or lapses on his own part. Additionally, this was combined with an unrestrained idealization of writers like Jack London or Tolstoy, who Krakauer points out had colorful lives that do not always sync with the images McCandless insisted on associating with them. Here, again, Erikson insightfully argues that this is precisely why the negative identity or negative tendency develops—under such conditions one must become or believe in values that are total, final, and "foreign to everything one has been taught" (1958, p. 102). Erikson (1958) writes:

> We will call all self-images, even those of a highly idealistic nature, which are diametrically opposed to the dominant values of an individual's upbringing, parts of a *negative identity*—meaning an identity which he has been warned *not* to become, which he can become only with a divided heart, but which he nevertheless finds himself compelled to become, protesting his wholeheartedness. Obviously such

[5] McCandless expressed this ambivalence toward desire more generally as well in his attitudes and obsession with foods. In preparation for and once in the wilderness, McCandless spent virtually every waking moment studying what foods were edible and once killed or caught, how to properly prepare his food. McCandless also went through periods of intense consumption, usually from generosity of strangers which he did not resist. At other times, especially in the wild, he went through the lengthy periods of famine that ultimately led to his physical death.

> rebellion can serve high adventure, and when joined to a great collective trend (as in the case of Martin) can rejuvenate as it repudiates. In malignant cases, however, the search for a negative identity soon exhausts social resources; in fact, no rebellious movement, not even a self-respecting delinquent gang, would consider taking such a member… (p. 102)

The above passage from Erikson effectively illustrates one more major difference between Luther and McCandless, namely that Luther's negative identity or tendency was linked to a great collective trend, which was the reform of the Roman Catholic Church. As a lone seeker, McCandless had effectively severed his ties to any major institutions or movements upon his graduation from Emory University. Unlike Luther or Stafford, McCandless saw no outlets or roles in contemporary American society where he could allow his negative identity or tendency to commit itself to rebellion. This fact, combined with the volume of cases Krakauer suggests (1996, p. 133 ff.), is revealing of a major crisis of the negative identity or tendency in American society—a systematic suppression of licensed youthful (and so often, innocuous) rebellion.

This argument is confirmed by additional recent scholarship and trends in the scholarly literature mentioned previously. Furthermore, Capps (2010) shows that acute identity diffusion is rising to the point of being described as an "epidemic" when viewed in its most extreme form of psychotic symptoms (p. 7). Readers may be confused here because Krakauer makes it such a stern point that McCandless and the other seekers were not mentally ill, as was cited earlier. This is true and, for the record, Erikson does not find Luther mentally ill either. However, as Capps (2010) and Erikson (1958, p. 103) explain, identity diffusion and the negative tendency both come in gradations and, at its most extreme form of totalism, may take on psychotic symptoms. Erikson attempts to take the gradations of severity in the negative identity into account by differentiating between the negative identity and the negative tendency.

In Erikson's *Identity and The Life Cycle* (1959), under the chapter "The Problem of Ego Identity" (pp. 139 ff.), Erikson shows there is a marked difference between the negative identity and the negative tendency. Taking on a negative identity implies, for Erikson, a much graver commitment to totalistic thinking—it implies the crossing of a Rubicon. Erikson (1959) cites the example of an African American daughter of an influential Southern preacher found among the narcotic addicts in Chicago (pp. 131–132) as a classic example of a totalistic commitment to become what one was not and assuming a set of values that are entirely foreign to what one was taught.

The negative tendency, however, is properly entrenched in every human person as their discretionary faculty that appropriates the right amount of suspicion in any given circumstance. I am suggesting in this article that McCandless and the other seekers described by Krakauer were treading on a careful line between the negative tendency and the negative identity, simply because they appear to have not made their minds up about just how totalistic their thinking would be and this lack of commitment was witnessed in the way ambivalence was fraught in all of their relationships and decisions. Sadly, society had no constructs to help them navigate this dubious psychological battle, and surely, this contributed to the death of McCandless, as well as the other individuals that Krakauer profiles in his book.

Capps (2010) makes a very similar argument in his book, *Understanding Psychosis*. In the second chapter of this book, titled "The Deinstitutionalization Era: Its Personal and Social Impact" (pp. 25–52), Capps argues that the steady increase in mental illness in America is largely attributed to the deinstitutionalization of mental health care facilities

and social supports. This is truly a point of irony in considering it in relation to the case of McCandless, for the very Republican president he admired (Ronald Reagan) assisted in this demolition of social and governmental supports for the mentally ill, as well as the concomitant building of the American prison industrial complex. As Capps (2010) puts it: "In the interests of protecting the mentally ill persons' rights not to be involuntarily confined in a state mental hospital, they were being involuntarily confined in county jails" (p. 32).

Such a connection in the evidence and historical context shows that the near ubiquity of suspicion of authority in contemporary America that I am arguing began with the death of modern liberalism has been used to promote the kind of dangerous seeking that McCandless and others have been doing on their own, not to mention the fact that a certain percentage of those seekers eventually do become mentally ill and are without any supports. Krakauer's protestations of McCandless being free of mental illness are, indeed, correct. However, these repeated protests are revealing of the very truth that Erikson and Capps elucidate: Such totalism ultimately can and does become intractable mental illness.[6] My contribution here is to show that contemporary American culture works to promote such extreme cases (such as McCandless) through its near totalistic suspicion of any kind of authority but specifically governmental authority, the origins of which are found in the death of modern liberalism. That McCandless himself bought into the conservative ideology that promoted his demise in spite of his refined and even extreme discretionary faculties is a testimony to the effectiveness of this insidious cycle of mistrust that brought about the death of the liberal class in America.

In the first quoted passage of this section, I quoted Erikson's comment on how these seekers are often times some of the most gifted and talented people in society and that there is some kind of correlation between their giftedness and their inability to develop or sustain faith in the values of their time, context, or group; this is what leads to their moratorium experiment. In the case of McCandless, this connection is very clear in his ostensible boredom with the pursuits of his age. Of his youthful entrepreneurship, Krakauer quotes a family member who talks of the various businesses and jobs McCandless had, impressing all around him with his ease in making a lot of money:

> He made a pile of money. I remember he'd come home every night and do his accounting at the kitchen table. It didn't matter how much it was; he'd figure out how many miles he drove, how much [gas he had used], what gas actually cost, his net profits for the evening, how it compared to the same evening the week before. He kept track of everything and showed me how to do it, how to make a business work. *He didn't seem interested in the money so much as the fact that he was good at making it. It was like a game, and the money was a way of keeping score* [my italics]. (Krakauer 1996, pp. 120–121)

This passage is illustrative of McCandless' boredom with the prospects of making his work meaningful, and this was apparent to other family members—as they called it, it was a "game" for him. The accumulation of cash nor the efforts involved in making it offered any kind of satisfaction or meaningful worldview to McCandless. Krakauer seems to grasp this himself, at least by identifying that the other seekers he profiles—including himself—mostly worked dead-end manual labor jobs even though they were often highly qualified

[6] Capps (2010) devotes an entire chapter to elucidate this very point. It is chapter six, titled "The Emergence of Psychotic Illness: The Role of Acute Identity Confusion" (pp. 131–157).

for other positions, for the sole reason that no job ultimately offered much meaning or supplied a rich worldview.

Escaping into the wild allowed these individuals to construct alternate identities (such as the Wanderer or Alexander Supertramp) that show their protestation against the hallowed or pious acts of their contexts. In the case of McCandless, they are furthermore faced with a real challenge of survival where the stakes are much higher than the "games" they were playing of making large sums of money. McCandless and the others desired much more than money—they wanted a means to survival that provided them with a rich worldview where every action was fraught with significance (such as in a monastery) and where such significant action is then applied to one's sense of self-worth and identity in their community. The bush, or the wild, appears to have become the chosen context for contemporary American youth in search of such a meaningful and challenging situation; in the case of McCandless, his search appeared to prove fruitful.

In spite of his rocky relations he had with companions along the way, by the time McCandless arrived and got settled in Alaska, he begins to learn the lessons of being accepting of human error (Krakauer 1996, p. 167) when he kills a moose and after following all the rules of how to properly clean and store the meat, he ends up loosing most of the carcasses to infection and is forced to abandon it. McCandless refers to this in his journal as one of the greatest losses of his life, ostensibly because he followed all the proper measures of cleaning the meat and, nevertheless, tragic circumstances still set in. This teaches him, in his own words from his quoted journal: "Henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be" (Krakauer 1996, p. 167). This is a lesson that, I would argue, only nature itself could teach him as no other authority could. Almost on queue, after his willingness to accept error on his own part, Krakauer notes on the same page that McCandless had begun to think about returning to human community, the prospect of marriage and adult commitments. Nevertheless, McCandless had seemingly particular thoughts of returning to a blue collar community that meshed with the simplicity of life he desired, another sign his moratorium was successful in that he had managed to sort out his own values and what kind of an identity he wanted to assume.

McCandless's and the other seekers' willingness, however, to risk their life indicates not only their level of bravery but also the peace they found in a kind of moratorium or worldview where they knew they could not fail, whether they lived or died. Krakauer (1996) quotes McCandless's critics as saying he was consumed with apathy or carelessness, and this is what explains his risky, seemingly suicidal adventure. My analysis here, however, has attempted to show that individuals such as McCandless found the perils of American society far less forgiving than what they could find in the wild, for in the wild death was an accepted part of life. In the wild, one could have detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself.

In American society, however, unless one plays "the game" (as McCandless's family members call it) well and accumulates the money, one suffers a kind of loss of self-esteem—a kind of social death one is forced to then endure until they physically expire. McCandless of all people was acutely aware of this "living death," as he did a copious amount of charity work with the homeless in the Washington, DC, area throughout high school (Krakauer 1996, p. 113). There is, therefore, a critical difference between how salvation is socially, religiously, and culturally construed in American society compared to the wild and the nature religions of Stafford, McCandless, Krakauer, and the other seekers. Trust and autonomy were, additionally, major problems that McCandless and the seekers witnessed in American culture that drew them into the wild where they could feel a sense of total freedom, trust in the land to provide what they truly needed, and acceptance of

personal responsibility for their own mistakes (which was ultimately what spurred McCandless to attempt to return to human community in American society). McCandless and the seekers found in American society a vacuous and despair laden culture that ultimately would have meant a psychospiritual death if they did not first risk death in the wild in the hopes of acquiring a sense of identity and life cycle virtue. Thus, they set out on their perilous (and sometimes deadly) monastic quests to resolve their crisis with the negative tendency.

Conclusion: The Need for Sanctioned Rebellion

The comparison of McCandless with Luther is illustrative of the fact that the success of moratorium is dependent, to some degree, upon the chance of the negative identity or tendency taking the individual into a context where they can attach their own struggle to the identity diffusion and life cycle crises of whole societies. I surmise that Erikson, himself, was particularly fond of writing psychobiography on such characters because their plight, as he illustrated it, changed the way in which historical interpretation and psychology is perceived today. In writing those famed psychobiographies of Luther (1958) and Gandhi (1969), who lived through the transitions from premodern to modern societies and from modern to postmodern societies, Erikson was engaged in connecting his own negative tendency with that of a major institution, namely the halls of the academy and its enshrined virtues and laws of decorum. In his own life, Erikson counted himself among the lucky—like Luther—who managed to survive and capitalize upon their moratorium experience.

This article has been years in the making, mostly because I wanted to wait for the film release of *Into the Wild* (2007), to more effectively conclude—as I did previously when I first read Krakauer's (1996) book—that McCandless had been largely misinterpreted and the meanings of his life and death overlooked because the very culture that offered its assessment of his life was the very one that McCandless constructed his life and virtues to critique. American society, the academy, the church, and popular culture in Hollywood had absolutely no interest in considering the radical critiques of such an individual; it was much more easy to write him off as mentally ill and a quack and use his life for entertainment value than to actually perform an honest assessment of the critiques he was making and why he made them.

If one were to seriously consider the critiques made by McCandless and other seeker's lives, one would be forced to assume a proper degree of responsibility and connectedness to such lives and that this task has been left undone until this article has been written is telling the degree of true freedom (as Stafford defined "freedom") one can expect to experience in our society. Krakauer (1996) alone comes the closest to making sense out of McCandless's life, death, and meanings because it made him think of himself as a young man and his own quest for a nature religion in the wake of an experience of identity diffusion and the negative tendency. Krakauer's (1996) book therefore is a moving testimony of a free and responsible act, further supporting my thesis that institutions of sanctioned rebellion or moratorium are necessary for sustaining a free society.

Erikson's (1958) statement that "those who face the abyss [of death, in moratorium] only to disappear we will, of course, never know…." (p. 99) is close to the truth. This is precisely why I felt so compelled to write this work on McCandless after I read Krakauer's (1996) work more than a half decade ago: McCandless could be called the unknown soldier at the fictive temple that houses all of the dead youth whose courageous moratorium

adventures ended tragically and prematurely, without any recognition from society. As Erikson (1958) recommends, we should "once in a while…shed a tear…for those who took some unborn protest, some unformed idea, and sometimes just one lonely soul, with them" (p. 99) for they took up arms against an enemy so dubious that it resides in the realm of the most tragic dimensions of human life—identity diffusion does not even have the definiteness to have the distinction of being labeled "evil," though a great deal of evil can arise from mishandling it, as Erikson shows, for example, in the case of Hitler (1958, p. 105 ff) and Capps (2010) shows in the case of the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill.

We can honor these dead seekers by ensuring that we show the McCandlesses of the world that their protestantism has an affinity with ours and that they are part of a long legacy of American protest. This was, in many respects, one of the ostensible goals of Stafford's (1947) autobiography. As Erikson (1950) states:

> They [youth] do not want to be granted freedom; what they want is to be given the opportunity to grasp it, as equals. They do not want progress where it undermines their sense of initiative. They demand autonomy, together with unity; and identity together with the fruits of industry. We must convince the [McCandlesses] that—from a very long range point of view—their protestantism is ours and ours, theirs. (p. 402)

In this passage, Erikson importantly remarks that youth do not want to be granted freedom. One might ask how that applies to McCandless, since this seems to be precisely what he was after. Here Erikson's remark, when considered in conjunction with McCandless's life, shows that even in the life of one who feels their autonomy so intensely under threat (which exacerbates the negative tendency), there is still a strong desire to participate in the workings of human community. We must remember that it took McCandless years to work himself into the position that he felt he had to venture out into the wild. He was aware that he was taking an enormous risk,[7] but as I demonstrated earlier, he had carefully calculated how he could derive a sense of wisdom and life cycle virtue from ensconcing himself in the wilderness and no matter how hard he tried he could not make the same kinds of achievements in American society. Only one avenue was offered to him, and he knew it was the most perilous, yet he took it knowing it was the only way to work through the identity diffusion he was experiencing. His journals reveal that he was indeed correct about this and his horrific death occurred because of a tiny miscalculation—the kind of miscalculation that is usually avoided when one is able to undergo the moratorium experience with others in a socially sanctioned fashion.

Therefore, let this boy-man's life be a testimony to the limited options American youth have for sanctioned rebellion and experimentation with social roles that allow their negative tendency or negative identity to gain an institutional or social welcome. Furthermore, let this boy-man's life and death stand as a testimony to the perils of how close our democracy stands to the precipice of falling off when we deny our youth the ability to innovate as well as the sterility of American religious institutions to recognize and permit diversity of opinion so as to connect with new ideas and fresh experiences in a constantly changing historical context.

[7] On McCandless's final postcard he sent before heading into the Alaskan bush, McCandless wrote Wayne Westerberg the following message: "If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you are a great man" (Krakauer 1996, pp. 133–134).

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