

BRIEFING FOR ENTRY INTO A MORE HARSH ENVIRONMENT

People always talk about what you can't take home after a wilderness course. You can't take home the backpack, or at least it has no place in your daily life. You can't take home the rations, and if you did your friends wouldn't eat them. You can't take home the mountains. All our connections to this place and our experience here we seem to have to get rid of. It's frustrating and it can be depressing.

This essay is about what you can take home. What you can take home and what, if you work at it, can be more important than any of those things you have to leave behind.

Let's look at what we've really been doing out here. We've been organized. We lived out of our backpacks the whole time, and mostly we knew where everything was. We've been thorough: we counted every contour line on the map and put every little bit of trash in a bag. We've been prepared: at this moment everyone knows where his or her raingear is. We've taken care of ourselves. We've been in touch with basic survival tasks. We've taken chances with other people, entrusted them with our lives and seen no reason not to grow close to them. We've persevered and put our minds to things that never seemed to end. We've learned to use new tools and new techniques. We've taken care of the things we have with us. We've lived simply.

These eleven things are the skills you've really learned out here and they will serve you in good stead in any environment in the world. These are the habits to live by. If anyone asks you what your course was like you can tell them, "We were organized, thorough, and prepared. We took care of ourselves in basic ways. We entrusted people with our lives, learned to do without and persevered at difficult things. We learned to use new tools and took care of what we had with us. We lived simply."

These are the things you can really take home. Together they comprise the set I call "mental hygiene," as if we needed to take care of our minds the way we take care of our bodies. Here they are again one by one.

1. Organization. The mountains are harsh, so you need to be organized. But that other world is much more complex, and even harsher in ways that aren't always as tangible as cold, wind, and rain. Being organized can help you weather its storms.
2. Thoroughness. Here it was easy to see the consequences of leaving things only half done. That other world has so many interruptions, distractions, and stimuli that it is easy to leave things half done, until you find yourself buried under a pile of on-going projects with no direction.
3. Preparedness. Out here you've only had to be prepared for every eventuality of weather; but in that other world you have to be prepared for every eventuality - period. There are no rules, shit happens, and only the prepared are not caught off balance.
4. Take care of yourself. and do it even more aggressively than you do it out here. The environmental hazards in that other world are even greater; crowding, noise, schedules. Take time to be alone and think. Never underestimate the healing power of being near beauty, be it a flower, music, or the sound of rain.
5. Stay in touch with basics. Continue to cook your own food and consciously select the place you sleep at night. Take care of your own minor injuries and those of your friends. Learn about how complex vehicles and the tools you use work. The other world is far more complex and seeks to draw you away from the basics.
6. Keep taking risks with people. Your own aliveness is measured by the aliveness of your relationships with others. There are many more people to choose from in that other world, and yet somehow we get less close. Any reasons that seem to crop up to not grow close examine very carefully.
7. Remember you can let go without seemingly critical things. Here it has only been hot shower, forks and a roof overhead. But anything can be done without. Eventually for all of us it is a person that we have to do without. Eventually for all of us it is a person that we have to do without, and then especially it is important to remember that doing without does not rule out joy.
8. Persevere at difficult things. It may not be as concrete as a mountain or as immediately rewarding as cinnamon rolls, but the world is given to those who persevere. Often you will receive no support for your perseverance because everyone else is too busy being confused.
9. Continue to learn to use new tools and techniques. Whether it is a computer or an ice cream maker, you know that simply because you haven't seen it before doesn't mean that you won't soon be a pro. Remember that the only truly old people are the ones who've stopped learning.
10. Take care of things. In that other world it's easy to replace anything that wears out or breaks and the seemingly endless supply suggests that individual objects have little value. Be what the philosopher Wendell Berry calls "a good materialist." Build things of quality, mend what you have and throw away as little as possible.
11. Live simply. There is no substitute for sanity.