

Content With Nothing: Why I Spent a Year Living in the Woods

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When people hear that I lived in the woods for a year, the question I am always asked is: Why? The answer goes back farther than the beginning of this year's project. When I first came to Juniata College in central Pennsylvania, I started going on camping trips on my own. I took up primitive camping in which you carry into the woods a tool such as a pocket knife and maybe a blanket and build a primitive shelter. The discipline it took me to do that led me to interesting levels of comfort. I discovered I did not need a whole lot to have comfort. I realized that you can live like a king if you get used to having less, even a lot less. I realized that the less that I had, the more comfortable I was and could live more freely as a result.

The discovery really excited me, so I continued to push myself further to learn how primitive I could live. One winter I decided to not put on pants to see how long I could make it; I made it surprisingly far. Acclimation, I realized, was very powerful, and I got to the point where I was very comfortable even in temperatures well below freezing. I began to get attention for donning shorts all the time, and soon I really wanted to let others experience this profound sense of comfort. It is profound to me, at least; it came as a major realization that conventional ideas about clothing and comfort did not have to be followed.

During my junior year of college I lived in a cave and I kept all of my things in the trunk of my car. This was refreshing for me because I could watch everybody move all their stuff in and out of the dorms for every break, but I could just get in my car and go home and have everything with me at all times.

At that point I became thrilled with my new lifestyle. Life was very comfortable for me. I wanted to share that possibility with other people, but realized I could not share it with them unless they perceived the incentive to start simplifying their own lives. You cannot just pass on experience to others without effort on their part, so I decided to pursue the hut project and build a large shelter in the woods to

get attention, but not in the ordinary sense. I wanted attention so that I could be an example for others so that they might become inspired to try and experience this freedom for themselves.

To get permission I wrote a twenty-page proposal that dealt with the logistics of living in the woods. The administration's biggest concern focused on my safety; I would not be within sight of campus security even if they drove to the trailhead. Their second area of concern hinged on sanitation. When I gained permission it came with the trust that I would not heat my shelter with fire, and that I would use a portable toilet. More importantly, or perhaps most persuasively, I included an academic reason for living in the woods; "All of the authors and philosophers I will be comparing have followed their pursuit by enacting a form of renunciation and emphasized a life within the order (or disorder) of the natural world. Therefore, in order for me to make a decision on a method of achieving an authentic happiness that's compatible with today's society I must *experience this lifestyle for myself*. In other words, a simplified lifestyle within the natural world is my premise to a conclusion that can help in the search for our modern day happiness."¹ In addition, I agreed to take the shelter down and restore the area back to its original state at the conclusion of the project.

After I got permission from the college administration—a lengthy process in itself—I began to build on land owned by Juniata College near its Peace Chapel. The Peace Chapel is a circle of stone blocks cut into the ground at the top of a grassy hill, used for student orientation and special events. Only a century ago—like much of Pennsylvania—it was used as farmland. Even today, there are trees grown around barbed wire close to my construction site. There are roughly nine trails through the forest that are used for biking, jogging, or hiking. The area is plentiful in berries, grapes, and apples, and has a strong diversity of plants and animals. There have also been bear spotted several times along the trails. In the summer it can get as hot as ninety degrees with one hundred percent humidity, and in the winter it has dropped to negative twenty-five with one to two feet of snowfall.

THE HUT, OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS

Let us consider some of the technical aspects of building the structure during the summer of 2014. I only used a handsaw and I decided against the use of any power tools when I started cutting down timber because I wanted to discipline myself to find comfort in harsh circumstances; maintaining a stable sense of peace in the midst of strong manual labor is itself challenging yet rewarding (Figure 1). At that time I held two different jobs in two separate towns, which added its own challenges. Initially I became frustrated because I wanted to be in the woods for my project, but I found myself constantly torn between societal obligations.



Figure 1: Luckily, the area was abundant with dead pine. I never had to cut down living trees.

Construction involved some guess-work and improvisation. For example, I nearly ran out of timber. One the rules I followed was complete reliance on dead trees or logs that were around the area because the hut is supposed to be an impermanent shelter. When I began building in early June, I constructed an octagon by digging holes and setting posts into the ground and started layering sticks in between them for the walls. I did not know at the time if this construction would suffice as I was taking an educated gamble at best. Eventually over the next month I slowly built the walls up enough to frame four windows. I constructed a two-layer wall, with a vertical wall on the outside and a horizontal wall on the inside (Figure 2). My design called for shoving leaves in the walls after the framework was done for insulation, which I hoped wouldn't be too far down the road. Everything depended on how much "free time" I had in a given day; this is truly the most important variable in any endeavor in the modern world. At this time, I often just slept by the fire and picked up work in the morning before I had to start any other work shifts. There were owls that lived on the hill that were drawn by the fire. I could see their still silhouettes on the branches as they called while the wood cracked in the fire.



Figure 2: This is the completed foundation, using dead logs from the area.

As I hinted earlier I became upset that I did not have as much leisure time as I had expected. I held the romantic idea of being in a hut in the woods, having a lot of time for the joys of an introverted life: to read, write, and contemplate. For example, Thoreau bathed in his pond every morning and talked about the religious implications of that according to Grecian philosophy, but I did not have the time to do those things because I was a student and I had a part-time job. In Thoreau's idyllic account he recorded:

I got up early and bathed in the pond: that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings.²

Unlike Thoreau, however, I realized that I had actually made myself immensely busier rather than increasing leisure time. My life in the woods had not become the ideal that I had envisioned and the course of the project changed dramatically as a result.

The approach of winter only magnified the alteration in the project plan. Winter lasts as long as we think about it, and I thought about it as soon as the leaves began to turn. I had been in a honeymoon phase where I did not want to work on the shelter anymore. Like any other college student, I procrastinated. At that point the pace of college picked up and I was frustrated with having all of this

work to do and then self-reliance tasks to complete. A lot that we do in society rests on the expectation that we use modern appliances. When you give those up, it takes more time to do necessary things and you consequently have less discretionary time.

I had midterms and finals to study for, but at the same time I saw the forest come alive with frenzied preparation, and I realized I had to be a part of it this year if I were to be comfortable and safe for the coldest months. Many times I had to skip classes to haul leaves out of a nearby valley to put in insulation. I filled over thirty industrial garbage bags with leaves to install in the roof and walls. Winter finally hit and life in the woods became a little calmer. Waking up in the woods in the morning is refreshing, but I did not keep my heater on at night. I would get out of my sleeping bag and it would be thirty degrees in the shelter. It was also always very dark inside, as it was sealed up to prevent heat from escaping. I kept a small propane stove in the hut for nasty days when I couldn't light a fire, and candles were my source of light. One time I fumbled around to make tea or something hot and I could not get the lighter to spark because it was too cold, so I flipped the lighter in front of a lit candle, and it blew a ball of flames into the wall. Luckily the leaves did not completely catch on fire. One or two did, but I could pull them out of the wall and stamp out the fire. That was the closest to disaster I have come. So far candles have not been a problem (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Candles were my main light source, especially in the winter when I had the windows sealed off and I was always in darkness.

INTELLECTUAL CONTENT(MENT)

This effort always had an academic purpose, as I mentioned earlier. In my proposal, I described this dwelling and living experience as an experiment in intentional living. Not that what I have done is truly original, of course. The living conditions are not original and neither is the idea. If you think about it historically, this is the way people lived up to 200 years ago, and they would have had whole families living in a structure similar to mine. Although seventeen feet by seventeen feet is not large by present-day standards many people have lived with that much space.

In my effort to conceive the academic purpose, I pulled from a wide range of sources, but the intent of this project is to explore simplicity and the effect that it has on the mind, and to relate it to contemporary society (Figure 4). In service to that goal I chose to live close to campus, on the trail, still participating in schoolwork and having a job. I wanted to explore this combination of life elements because it is so important that we start to simplify our lives and our habits of consumption. As I wrote in my proposal:

I realize the responsibility that rests on my shoulders in accomplishing this goal, in that I must represent an authentic path worth travelling and sacrificing for. Much that the average citizen in a consumer society has become accustomed to must be parted with in order to tread the path I will be representing. Therefore, in order to have any faith in this path to authentic human happiness I must be a living breathing example. Again, the ideal outcome is that I live up to this responsibility and gain a positive recognition within the community.³

Let me explain why we need to simplify.

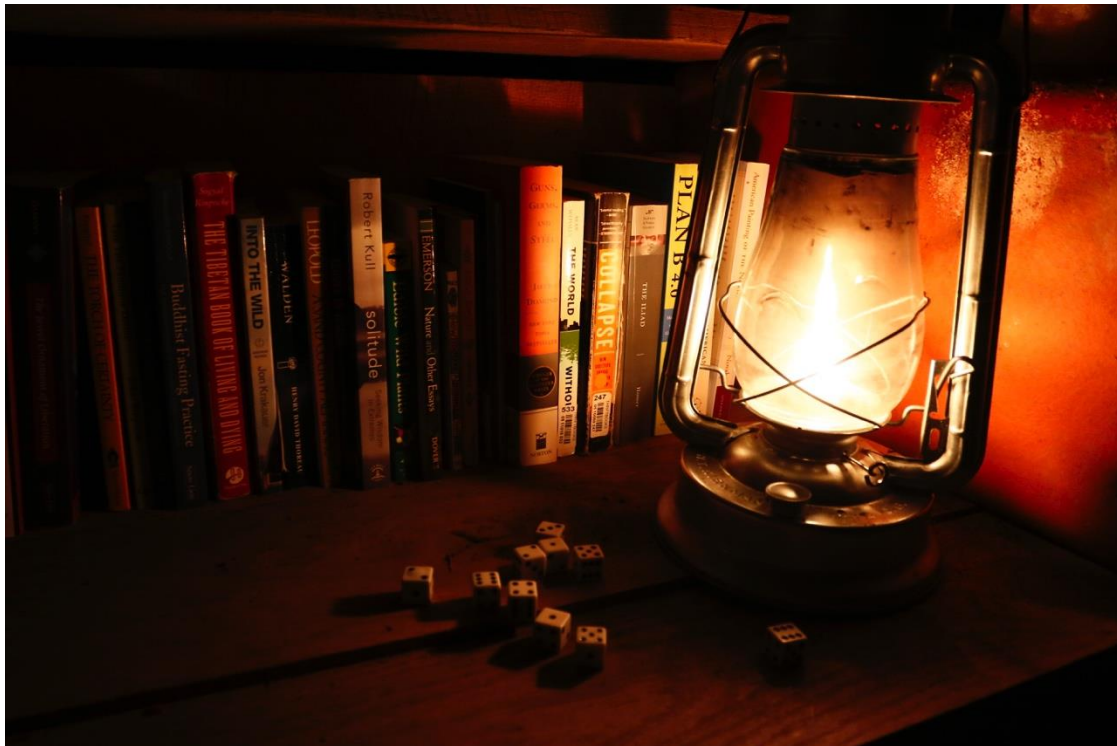


Figure 4: I kept my research books in the hut with me, reading whenever I had time.

CONTENT WITH NOTHING

I came up with the title “Content With Nothing” at some point over the summer. It made me ecstatic when I realized that this title had a double meaning. One meaning of “Content With Nothing” refers to the problem that we cannot be content with anything, so we are always looking for something else to satisfy us. We think that with the next purchase or the next meal, that happiness will outlast the moment. This is not the case. We constantly chase after our desires, wandering around, searching. That is a big problem. Although it seems like basic human nature, with the current state of the world today and with so many people on the planet it is really taking an environmental toll. I do not disagree with the basic American maxim of liberty. Do what makes you happy as long as it does not harm anyone else, but with so many people on the planet, it is the latter part of the phrase that is questionable. Much of what we do does harm other people even though we do not intend to do so, or are not even aware of it. I really do think that simplicity is a lesson that we need to learn.

We, therefore, need to learn how to get to the solution, which is the other meaning of “Content With Nothing,” meaning we need nothing to be content; we are always happy. We slow down our consumption and our minds are more spacious, not filled with the concerns of luxury or entertainment. One now has more room to move about, for there are fewer thoughts to bounce off of. Time gives itself to the person who has simplified because of the decrease in “should I’s” and “what if’s,” and our child-like joy is “allowed to play” once more. Ironically, I think we have more individuality this way. One of the biggest oppositions to simplifying that I’ve come across is that a lot of people associate habits like what we buy, what we wear, and what we do as representative of our personalities. However, this is not really an individuality. In a sense it is a form of bondage and it does nothing to let us individualize, but merely follow the same consumptive patterns that others follow, even though the content of consumption may differ.

Learning how to discipline yourselves and learning how to become free of the mind’s constant nagging can give you a greater sense of individuality. It is your choice, and honestly it can be a lot of fun devising different ways to discipline yourself. My effort at wearing shorts in all seasons is an example. Obviously it hurt, but it led to an interesting place. This winter when it got to negative twenty I was not allowed to live in my hut because the college administration specifically said that I could not sleep in the shelter at such a low temperature. I walked back to campus in this horrid weather and I could feel the skin around my knees tightening up. It took about twenty minutes to walk to my friend’s house where I was staying that night. I definitely knew that I had to get inside; my skin was turning white. A strange thing happened at that time where I realized that the pain was not causing me any suffering. I knew that the

pain was certainly there, but I was still comfortable. I wanted to go inside for my body's health, but my mental health remained intact.

Contrary to what most people think, I enjoyed this project the most during the winter, because at that point I did not have to do more work on the shelter. I could finally find leisure time. I realized that the worst was over and I was still okay, and I really needed to ride it out until spring. I had the feeling of “it could not get any worse.” Well, it could, but the closer to the bottom the more relief I felt; I had made it and I was still very happy even in harsh conditions (Figure 5).



Figure 5: My hut in winter. I could usually get my shelter to a delightful forty degrees inside.

Around finals week of fall semester the conflict between my simplified world and my college lifestyle peaked. I realized then that the disciplines I pursued in the woods to fortify my mind and find peace within chaos had not made me immune to all struggles. The struggle that I faced to maintain a sense of peace was no different from what everyone else experiences, for chaos obviously exists in the “civilized” world. Therefore, I should apply these disciplines to the material world as well. The line between — for lack of a better word — the civilized world and the natural world started to dissolve for me around that time. I began to recognize that they were not so different. Rather, they are related and best seen on a continuum rather than as opposites. You could not find the exact boundary where the natural world stops and the material world begins. It should be possible to discipline yourself to find a stable sense of happiness in both worlds. In December I started exploring that, which became the focus of my project for the remainder of the academic year.

I have since developed that idea further, and I realized that the shelter right now has been my crutch, in a way, to realizing that the essence of the natural world and the civilized world are one and the same. Of course, there are still many differences in the way they are experienced, but I'm convinced that these are projections of the individual person. They differ in the relationships we have with them, but there is still impermanence and change in both, regardless of how much we try to glorify youth and beauty and permanence in our culture; decay is still there, even though it is often pushed aside.

Soon it only got more intense, always traveling between these two worlds. This is the trail from my hut to school (Figure 6). The more I wore this trail down, the more I bridged these two worlds in my mind. During winter, the path turned into a long sheet of ice and I had to tread carefully. I had to be vigilant of my actions and always consider their consequences. This is a lot like the process of simplifying the mind; when I discovered a sense of calm it is important to guard it with vigilance and consider the consequences of reacting negatively to that which I cannot control.

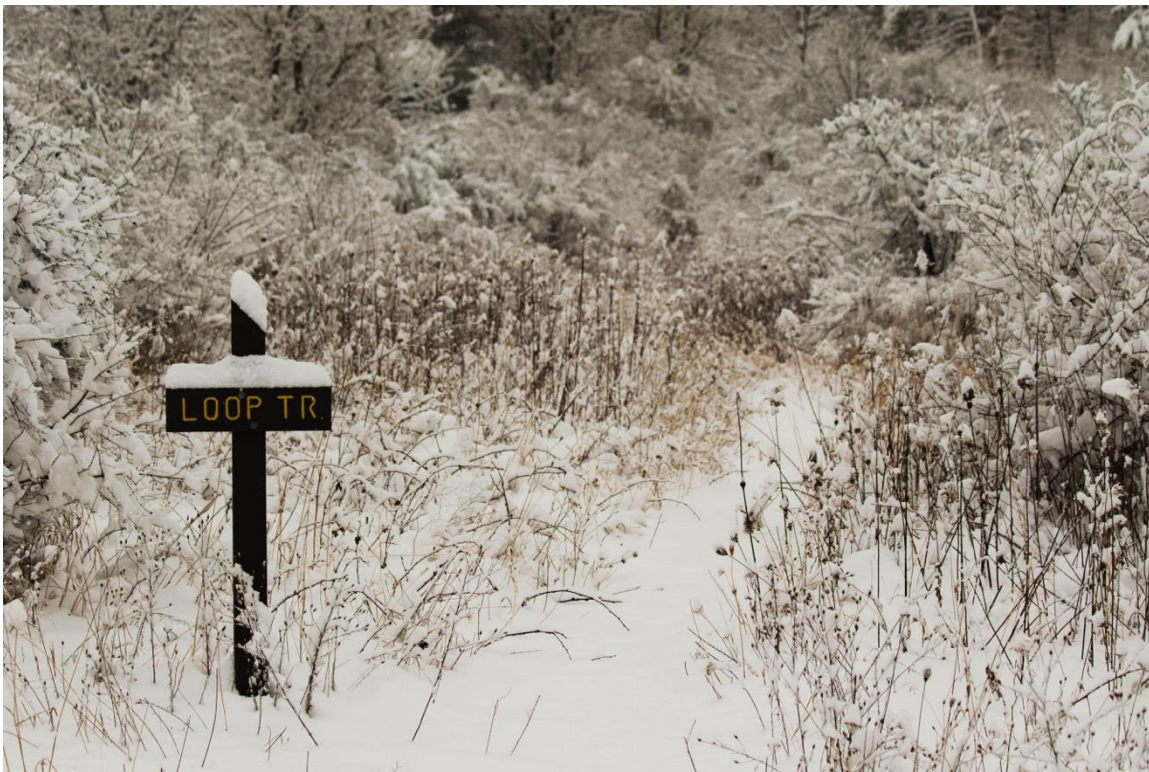


Figure 6: The trail after a fresh snowfall. When I packed the snow down after repeated trips the snow didn't touch my bare legs anymore, but it became comically slippery.

Reflecting on a number of important authors, I found a parting with Thoreau. Obviously Thoreau influenced me when I was much younger, along with others.⁴ That became the source of my dad's suggestion to do this project. He said, "If you like Thoreau, maybe you can live in a hut in the woods like

him.” He made the remark in passing and I am pretty sure he was joking, but I took it a little more literally. Thoreau went into the woods, and in his writings I think the language there condemns society in a lot of ways. It is likewise wearisome of the participants in society. I really think this is dangerous in a lot of ways because it breeds a sort of restlessness with people who are still living in society, and it breeds an expectation that moving into the woods will give you happiness and you can find peace in the woods, but you cannot do it in contemporary society. If you look at figures like Chris McCandless, who gave everything up to be a vagabond—not to disrespect him in any way—his move into the woods seems to be the kind of ideal engendered in a lot of people.⁵ They become dissatisfied with their own lives in the modern world and society and totally renounce it like it’s something to be totally removed. I don’t quite think that is fair, for although we need heroic figures like Chris to set an example, I am hoping we can all find a standard as well.

Thoreau went back to society after a year and he explained why, but what I really wanted to do is show that there is no distinction whatsoever, and life in the woods is a great learning experience but in the end the transformation is really in your own mind, finding comfort in chaos.

Part of this effort to live in both worlds was that I wanted to challenge myself to build a larger and more permanent dwelling. I also built it because I did not want to just live in a cave like I did last year for many reasons, but primarily because I thought it would get more attention and would become a greater opportunity for me to live as an example, which was the intent of the project in the first place. It was difficult — I should have seen this coming— but I really wanted to be a finger that pointed to happiness. However, people studied the finger and the hand after all the press and articles, not looking to where it pointed. That became a hurdle, and it’s not why I undertook my year in the woods. The project is not even really about the hut. The hut is the outward appearance of my inner endeavors; the essence of the project is really tracking my own progress, my own levels of dependency as they decline and distinctions start to blur.⁶

I mentioned that the hut became something of a crutch for finding peace in society, which is full of chaos and consumerism. Simplifying our lives is difficult without any physical renunciation. Many people expect that I gave up a lot of things to live in this way, but I did not really give up life in society. Contrary to what people thought, I gave up life in the woods. I began to live a little bit more comfortably, to live a little more luxuriously; compared to the cave, the hut is pretty nice (Figure 7). Giving up the reputation and pride that came with it as the student who lives in the woods was what I needed next, and the project and path to true contentment continues even after the hut is gone.



Figure 7: My hut was complete with a fold-out bed, a desk, a table, an oak floor, and a hammock.

To conclude, this project and life in the hut was my transition back into the modern world. The most challenging thing for me to do is to find a stable sense of happiness in the modern world. The reason I decided to work my way back into society is because few people can retreat into the woods for months at a time, let alone live there permanently. Perhaps I provided an example by living with the bare minimum, but I could never set the standard. I learned how to live moderately, but in modernity as well. I wanted to explore the possibility of finding the peace I knew that existed with life in the woods, yet remain in society. By building the hut close to civilization and bridging this long established gap, I really hope that I showed that — contrary to Thoreau and the ideal that he may have set forth —it is possible to find a stable sense of peace within modern society. Because, ultimately, there is no distinction between where we are now and in the woods.

NOTES

1. From the Introduction of my *Senior Project Proposal*.
2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Or Life in the Woods*, 13th ed. (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1995), 71. Thoreau is a well-known advocate of the Transcendentalist movement who lived in a small cabin by a pond for two years in the mid-1800s. His writings on the experience and insights into the state of society are very influential to this day.

3. Taken from the Conclusion of my *Senior Project Proposal*.
4. Influences include Jack London's *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild*, in Jack London and Frank Opperl, *The Best of Jack London* (New York City: Castle, 1984); Jean Craighead George, *My Side of the Mountain* (New York City: Puffin, 2004); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2009); and Tom Brown Jr., *The Tracker* (New York City: Berkley Group, 1979).
5. Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996). Christopher Johnson McCandless, who also took the pseudonym "Alexander Supertramp," cut up his identification cards after college to tramp across the United States for two years before living in the wilderness of Alaska for roughly six months in an abandoned bus.
6. A sampling of the media items (over 250) about this experiment in living includes: Bill Schackner, "A Juniata College senior, following Thoreau, is living in a hut in the woods," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA) November 30, 2014 <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2014/11/30/Independent-study-to-the-max-A-Juniata-College-senior-following-Thoreau-is-living-in-a-hut-in-the-woods/stories/201411300108> . Rachel Paoletta, "This College Student Made the Woods His Dorm —Here's How It Turned Out," MTVnews.com April 7, 2015 <http://www.mtv.com/news/2125951/dylan-miller-college-student-forest-dorm>. Katy Rushlau, "Student spends senior year living in self-built shack," *USA Today College*, December 5, 2014, <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/12/05/student-spends-senior-year-living-in-a-self-built-shack/>.