

Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes

Robert Kull

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At some time in life one may be called, by feelings too strong to deny, to pass time in solitude. Author Robert Kull first felt this call as a young man in his twenties who was then living the “macho” life of a logger on the west coast of Canada’s Vancouver Island. Answering that powerful call, he equipped himself for a three-month stay and canoed into British Columbia’s wilderness, where he found himself filled with a feeling of “aliveness” so strong that he felt his life would be forever changed.

He almost didn’t survive. Even though shorter solitary wilderness trips had been part of his life since his teen years, Kull was not psychologically or spiritually prepared for the rigors of a longer stay: before two months had passed, the deep solitude of the North Country had worked its way into his soul, breaking down his identity and washing away his feelings of self-sufficiency. The universe seemed enormous and threatening, and death loomed incessantly. He was deeply afraid, and knew that one of two things had to happen: he had to return to the safety of civilization and its “meaningless distractions,” or “face the darkness alone.”

Kull walked into the woods and, lying down, waited until a bear approached his body, now frozen into immobility by terror. He turned within and called for help, and found himself floating in a pool of clear light, filled with a sense of aliveness so deep and strong that he knew, beyond any doubt, that there was no separation between himself and the world. Moreover, he knew that there was “something else out there, too; something nonphysical and beyond description,” and that he was part of it and it of him.

It was the fading of that inner light with its certainty and radiant aliveness that, after more than twenty years had passed, moved Kull, now an Interdisciplinary Studies PhD student over forty years of age with a prosthetic right leg, to seek another wilderness experience. This one would last a year, and *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes—A Year Alone in the Patagonia Wilderness* is his record of that two-fold journey.

The outward journey—the physical experience with its terrors, injuries, pain, loneliness and fear as well as adventure, courage, exhausting yet fulfilling labor, and scientific observation—was the easier journey to record. Kull’s descriptions of the landscape that opened out in front of his shelter and the activities of its non-human inhabitants range from the rhapsodic to the prosaic depending on both the outer and inner “weather.” The spiritual journey was much more difficult to record, requiring objective self-observation and evaluation that at times might appear brutal in its honesty. Kull states that “We each have a social identity, a persona held in place by our interactions with other people. In solitude, without others to mirror this persona, it begins to lose solidity and to dissolve. The process can be terrifying, and one powerful aspect of solitude is that there are few easy escapes from such experiences. There is opportunity and necessity to face inner darkness. Emotional cycles, usually modified by social engagement, can become extreme.”

Although Kull’s intent was to explore the individual (himself) in solitude through a “purely secular lens,” as his observations were to become the basis for his PhD dissertation, he found that he could not “fully live nor write about what was happening without using spiritual terminology.” He also found that the most important psychospiritual tool to

deal with the effects of long periods of solitude is “the capacity to experience with equanimity (or to ignore) whatever arises in the mind.” The ability to detach from one’s most intimate companion, the mind, is most effectively learned through the practice of meditation.

Kull, originally from California, moved to Canada in his twenties. Wandering through North and South America for years, he supported himself with a range of jobs including scuba instructor, logger, community organic gardening teacher, bartender, photographer, and professor. In his forties, he resumed his undergraduate studies and has since earned a doctorate from the University of British Columbia. Writing this book has given Kull the opportunity to guide others to reflect on what it means to be alive, part of the greater whole, and to live with compassion and equanimity. He offers this work with the statement that, “Sharing this experience of freedom with others is the only really worthwhile social contribution I can make.”

KRISTINE MORRIS (August 15, 2008)

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