

Lessons of the Hermit

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The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit by Michael Finkel Knopf

The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative by Florence Williams W. W. Norton

Solitude: In Pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World by Michael Harris Thomas Dunne

In the 27 years he lived in the Maine woods, Christopher Knight said a single word. Because he never spoke to himself and avoided humanity with the guile of a samurai, he went decades without using his voice. In his hidden forest encampment he laughed silently and he sneezed silently, so fearful was he of being discovered. The only time he spoke came at some point in the 1990s, when he was surprised by a hiker during a walk. "Hi," Knight said. The hiker barely looked up, not realizing that he was face-to-face with the legendary hermit of North Pond.

Since his arrest in April 2013, Knight has agreed to be interviewed by a single journalist. Michael Finkel published an article about him in *GQ* in 2014 and has now written a book, *The Stranger in the Woods*, that combines an account of Knight's story with an absorbing

exploration of solitude and man's eroding relationship with the natural world. Though the "stranger" in the title is Knight, one closes the book with the sense that Knight, like all seers, is the only sane person in a world gone insane—that modern civilization has made us strangers to ourselves.

Finkel first wrote to Knight at the Kennebec County jail after the hermit's capture became a national news story. Hoping to ingratiate himself, Finkel sent several of his articles, including one in *National Geographic* about a hunter-gatherer tribe in the remote Great Rift Valley of Tanzania. Knight responded to Finkel's letter with one of his own. It contained a photograph ripped from the Tanzania article, a portrait of a tribal elder named Onwas, who had lived his entire life in the bush. Though Onwas camped with his family, he passed vast reaches of time in silent isolation, measuring his days by the cycle of the moon. For more than 2 million years—or nearly all of human existence—this was how our genus lived. "This," writes Finkel, "is who we truly are."

In the course of their fragmentary, troubled relationship, Knight helps Finkel grasp the profound implications of this statement. If, deep down, we are all Onwas, then what, God help us, have we become?

Finkel calls Knight's case "almost certainly the biggest burglary case in the history of Maine," which may be a touch too fine. A year after Knight's arrest, for instance, two 19-year-olds stole more than \$200,000 from a house in the island town of Vinalhaven (Maine fishermen tend not to trust banks). Knight, by his own estimation, engineered 40 break-ins a year, or more than 1,000 in total, before he was caught stealing marshmallows and Humpty Dumpty potato chips from the commissary of a camp for kids with disabilities. This was a typical haul; most of his break-ins netted loot like boxed macaroni and cheese, Mountain Dew, propane tanks, tarps, and novels. Knight stole what he needed to survive. He accumulated \$395, most of it in singles, in case of an emergency, but he never spent a dollar. Some of the bills had become moldy.

Knopf

Knight's successful string of burglaries is among the least astonishing details of his story. At the age of 20, after earning a high-school diploma and a vocational degree, he quit his job as an alarm technician and took a road trip down to Florida. On his return, he drove past his childhood home in Albion, a small village northeast of Augusta, about halfway between China and Freedom, and continued 100 miles north until he nearly ran out of gas on a small dirt road. He entered the woods like a suicide, leaving his keys inside the car. He had no destination, nor a map; he carried a tent but had never spent a night in one before. Most of his family members and friends assumed he had died. In one sense they were right.

He drifted for weeks, walking south, stealing food from people's gardens. By the time he discovered an ideal site—shielded by boulders and dense forest, between two ponds, steps away from the nearest of several dozen summer cabins in the area—he was just 30 miles from his parents' house, though he didn't know it. The site, Finkel notes, has good cellphone reception. (He has an eye for ambient details that reflect his subject's character. The geological term for the kind of boulders that shield Knight's site is *erratic*; the lines of writing in his letters are "crowded together as if for warmth"; the car he abandoned at the edge of the forest is "by this point as much a part of the wilderness as a product of civilization.")

Knight took extreme precautions to defend his isolation. He never lit an open fire and he devised trails over rocks and roots to avoid leaving any footprints. Taking advantage of his alarm-system expertise, he disabled surveillance cameras, spied on homes for days to learn their owners' habits, and restricted his raids to weeknights, when the cabins were most likely to be unoccupied. Once inside, he looked for spare keys and stashed them elsewhere on the property to enable future break-ins. When he borrowed a canoe to paddle to properties across the pond, he made sure, upon returning it, to sprinkle it with pine needles to give the impression that it had not been moved.

His actions were so stealthy, and his bounty so niggling, that for decades residents believed that the North Pond hermit was a myth. There was willful ignorance on both sides. Knight did not learn the name of the pond he haunted until he was arrested, or the name of the nearest town (Rome). He claims to have been ignorant of the year and even the decade. He kept time like Onwas does. "The moon was the minute hand," he tells Finkel, "the seasons the hour hand."

What kind of man does a thing like this? What kind of man talks like this? An autodidact, for starters, with the attendant traits: overly formal speech (asked about his survival methods, Knight replies, "I have woodcraft"), narcissism ("You're my Boswell," he tells Finkel), and quaking insecurity (in a conversation about literature, he defiantly tells Finkel that he refuses "to be intellectually bullied into finishing" *Ulysses*, despite the fact that he has not encountered an intellectual or a bully in 27 years). One can have a genetic predisposition to solitude, Finkel notes, and Knight came from a family of loners; he tells Finkel that he had missed "some" of his family "to a certain degree."

But genes cannot explain the extraordinary rigor of Knight's renunciation. Finkel plumbs the history of hermits for a similar case, considering Lao-tzu, the anchorites of the Middle Ages, the tomb-dwelling Saint Anthony, and India's estimated 4 million sadhus, many of whom file their own death certificate before commencing a life of monastic bliss. He does not mention Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, who lasted less than four months after disappearing into the Alaskan taiga, but McCandless had no cabins to

break into. Finkel concludes as he begins, with the theory that Knight entered the forest because there was no place for him in modern society. “I wasn’t content,” Knight says. Before he left he was shy, socially inept, anxious. After, he says, “I was lord of the woods.”

Knight’s hermitage was not entirely pure—he stole processed food and a twin-size mattress, listened to talk radio (a lot of Rush Limbaugh), played handheld video games, and even watched a miniature Panasonic black-and-white television, charged with stolen car batteries (an admission that draws into question his claim that he did not know what decade it was). And it was not easy—he had to endure Maine winters when temperatures sank to -20° F, pacing across his site at two in the morning to fend off frostbite. But the forest granted him freedom, privacy, and serenity. And it transformed his brain. He developed photographic recall, a proclivity for deep contemplation, a limitless attention span. One of his favorite pastimes was hiking before dawn to a rise and watching the fog gather in the valley.

Finkel quotes a handful of recent scientific studies to argue that Knight’s camp “may have been the ideal setting to encourage maximal brain function.” In her new book, *The Nature Fix*, about the growing field of environmental-health research, the journalist Florence Williams reports on dozens of studies that find that exposure to nature is “good for civilization.” A few days in nature yields a 50 percent improvement in creativity, increases attention span, and lessens hyperactivity and aggression. Proximity to the ocean correlates with one’s happiness, and mortality rates drop in greener neighborhoods, while traffic noise increases the strain on one’s heart. Put another way, our growing alienation from nature is killing us.

W. W. Norton

Most people intuit that it’s healthy to exercise outside, to visit a park, to walk in a forest. Poets and artists have preached these values for millennia, as have planners since at least Frederick Law Olmsted, as Williams acknowledges. But intuition is not enough for the scientists she interviews. “We have to validate the ideas scientifically through stress physiology,” a Harvard lecturer says, “or we’re still at Walden Pond.” Williams agrees. “I was feeling pretty mellow,” she writes after walking through a national park in Japan, “and scientific tests would soon validate this.”

In search of validation, Williams visits with researchers in Finland, South Korea, Scotland, Utah, and Maine, submitting to diagnostic questionnaires, saliva swabs, heart-rate monitors, finger electrodes, and “crown of thorns” EEG helmets. She learns technical terms for familiar phenomena. The smell of earth after a rain derives from an aromatic hydrocarbon called geosmin. An environmental psychologist in Ann Arbor explains that observing falling rain puts one in a state of “soft fascination.” The Japanese word for “stress” is *stress*.

Williams's findings are eminently reassuring, and perversely specific. "Don't worry," she writes, "I'm not going to tell you to pitch your smartphone over a waterfall." Studies show that staring at a photograph of a forest is better than staring at drywall, though a window with a view is better, and a walk outside is best. Gazing at a eucalyptus tree for one minute makes you more generous. Your health will be improved by just a five-minute walk in a park, though 30 minutes will work wonders. Five hours of nature a month is all you need, though, as one scientist says, "if you can go for ten hours, you will reach a new level of feeling better and better." Williams tops out at a rafting trip that lasts a week, or about 1/1,400th the length of Christopher Knight's wilderness experience. For many of the war veterans with PTSD who accompany her, the rafting trip is a life-changing event, though one of her researchers isn't convinced. "We don't have the data," he says. "I want to see randomized control studies, bigger studies."

Thomas Dunne

Like Williams, the journalist Michael Harris senses that something precious has been lost in our submission to immersive technology. This was the subject of his first book, *The End of Absence*, and remains the focus of his second. He began writing *Solitude: In Pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World* after he realized he had never spent a day of his life alone, at least not without communicating electronically with others. "Why," he wonders, "am I so afraid of my own quiet company?" The main subject of his book is not solitude, however, so much as its destroyers—the addictive digital resources to which human beings turn in order never to be alone: social media, video games like Candy Crush, the incessant blips and nudges with which one's phone asserts its codependency. Harris notes that these distractions do not merely impair our brain function, dilute our sense of identity, and shrink our lives. They make us lonely.

Solitude, like *The Nature Fix*, is most depressing in its prescriptions, which are delivered in the language of the technological culture Harris dreams of escaping. When he writes that choosing mental solitude is "a disruptive act," yearns "to become my own algorithm," or imagines an alternative, "slower-growing Internet," he sounds like Williams extolling the virtues of various new nature apps, such as the one that uses visual-recognition software to measure a location's "restorative potential," or the one that collects users' personal data to determine whether a location makes them happy. Williams writes of the virtues, when walking in nature, of stashing your cellphone "at least deep in your pocket." Harris, on a tentative solitary walk, buries his phone in his back pocket. These are improvements, perhaps. But their phones are still in their pockets.

As Christopher Knight observes, "There isn't nearly enough nothing in the world anymore." Even the nothing of jail is too much for him. To his horror, his cell mates try to sell him on the glories of cellphones and text messages. "That's their enticement for me to rejoin

society," he tells Finkel. Why, he wonders, would a person take pleasure in using a telephone as a telegraph machine? "We're going backwards," he says.

After seven months in custody, Knight is granted some measure of leniency. He moves home with his mother and is hired by his brother to disassemble cars for his scrap-metal business. He ignores Finkel's requests for additional interviews, but Finkel persists, showing up at his mother's house. Nobody seems to be home. Finkel waits outside. Knight emerges from the bushes.

He is depressed, disoriented, lonely. He speaks of a visitation from the Lady of the Woods, a sylvan figure of death. Death seems better than enforced socialization. Even human faces, with all the information they convey, overwhelm him. "I miss the woods," he says, before urging Finkel never to contact him again.

Finkel is moved to tears at the sight of Knight, broken and trapped, exiled from his forest home. The hermit of North Pond feels this tragedy more acutely than most, but he is not alone. "He has known something far more profound," writes Finkel, "and that sense of loss feels unbearable." We have known something far more profound, and that sense of loss feels unbearable.

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