

Why go into the wilderness?—A Cacophony of Voices Merge into a Grand Symphony ([Provided by: HighCountryExplorations.com](http://HighCountryExplorations.com))

I'm content not to fully comprehend the joy I find in the wilderness; to try would be a fruitless task, like chasing the end of a rainbow; and the goal, if ever realized, would only disappoint.

—Chris Townsend, *The Backpacker's Handbook*, 2005, page 2

Perhaps it does not matter much the why at the start of the trip, but it will matter at the end. And then you can sit contemplatively and answer for yourself.

—Buck Tilton, *Trekker's Handbook: Strategies
To Enhance Your Journey*, page 9

Philosophical Questions Addressed in This Article

Probably the most philosophical question that can be asked related to hiking and backpacking is that of “Why?” Why go into the wilderness (mountains, high country, backcountry)? Why expend the extra effort to get off the trails and onto the high ridges and summits?

Even more philosophical are these phrasings of the same basic question: What kinds of meanings do you give to your experiences in wilderness? What motivations underlie your passions for hiking and backpacking? What subconscious drives might be operating in choosing this form of recreation?

Introduction

I have no intention of looking for universal answers to these questions that might be true for everyone. In fact, it is just the opposite. As you will see, there is much diversity, individuality and variety. In this article, there are pages and

pages of different answers—enough to make one’s head swim. Hence, the title phrase, “A Cacophony of Voices” in the title.

But also consider that what first appears as a cacophony of voices and unconnected answers and motivations can easily be seen as a movement toward one harmonious chorus of feeling: a true joy and passion for hiking and backpacking. This feeling would be obvious if we were to meet the speakers (“philosophers” might be a better term in most cases) in person. Hence, the other half of the title, “Merge Into a Grand Symphony.” Let’s begin listening to the multitude of voices expressing their motivations: a symphony in three movements.

First Movement: Tongue-in-Cheek Motivations

The conductor of this symphony has come on stage. The applause dies down. Let’s tune in to the first movement—a lighthearted and mostly playful piece.

- Build roaring fires and drink lots of booze.
- Track down and kill the wildlife.
- Practice my survivalist skills.
- Show Mother Nature who is boss.
- Have great stories to tell my kids and grandkids.
- Provide memories for my old age.
- Jump-start my physical conditioning program.
- Eat what I want, when I want and not gain weight.
- Justify my craving for that big, greasy meal on the way home.
- Prove that I can still keep up with the young bucks.
- Prove that I am the biggest and baddest of hikers.
- Prove that I am superior by hiking the most miles, climbing the most summits, carrying the biggest loads, and so on.
- Get a good night’s sleep.
- Cell phone coverage sucks out there and there is no Internet service.
- Sort out my crazy and mixed up life.
- Get away from family members.
- Impress my girlfriend or boyfriend.
- Impress my friends and family.

**WELL, I WASN'T PLANNING
ON GOING HIKING OR ANYTHING
LIKE THAT. I JUST WANT TO
IMPRESS MY BOYFRIEND!**



JIM MORRISON

Second Movement: Familiar and Recurrent Themes

In researching this subject, it quickly became clear that humans have many different reasons for going into the wilderness (highcountry, mountains, backcountry). However, they also have a lot in common. In this second movement of our symphony, I attempt to capture the more familiar and recurring themes. Even though there is no way to fully capture the different perspectives in words, these sketches should provide some tantalizing hints.

[Note: When quality quotations are available, they are inserted along the way. Sketches without quotes are paraphrased renderings of the different voices I have heard, read or have felt myself. For symmetry, I usually express them in the first person.]

The conductor is back on stage and ready for the second movement of this wilderness symphony. Let's tune in.

Indescribable Beauty: I go to the high country for the sheer beauty. Seldom are cameras able to capture what I see and feel there. Sometimes it is being overwhelmed by the scope and ruggedness of the mountain ranges. Sometimes it is a particular place or a special moment. More often it is the overwhelming beauty of the whole scene. Sometimes it is a stark and austere beauty that seems foreboding and unfriendly. This motivation is expressed in a quote an unknown author, "The quality of life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

Titillation of the Senses: Besides the visual beauty of the high mountains, there are the more subtle titillations of other senses: the smell of fresh air, the taste of pure untreated water, the musty smell of rotting and fermenting plants, the sweet smell of wild strawberries, the sounds of water bubbling and crashing over rocks, the wind in the trees, the buzz of the insects. Sometimes my senses get overwhelmed. Sometimes my emotions get overwhelmed as well. With some solitude and silence, the immediacy of my experiences comes in loud and clear. Buck Tilton (*Trekker's Handbook*, page 9) expresses this motivation in the following way: "The goal is to be here and now, and here and now is the only place I am. To trek, for me, has come to be synonymous with living [in the here and now]—and there is my motivation."

Wilderness Experiences: I go into the backcountry for quality wilderness experiences, to get in touch with nature up close and personal. Put in a negative way, I go to get away from civilization and the hassles of everyday life for a while. I thrive where there are few rules, regulations or restrictions except those provided by Mother Nature. But what really is a quality "wilderness experience"? There turn out to be many answers on this question,

answers that are detailed in the article [“What are true wilderness experiences?”](#) One quite unique expression of this motivation is the following:

“You feel a connection to Mother Earth. Call it nature; call it relaxation. You simply feel at home. Kinda funny when you think about it, because it is wilderness and wild. We feel free there. Home.” (“Call of the Wild” by an unknown author)

Silence, Sounds and Solitude: These three “Ss” are quite important to me. True wilderness involves many opportunities for solitude and quiet time. True wilderness experience involves a profound sense of quiet undisturbed by the always present background hum and noise of people and civilization. When I experience this kind of solitude and silence, it gives me the opportunity to fully tune in to the delicate sounds and smells of nature. One expression of this motivation comes from Gordon Hempton and John Grossmann’s book, *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man’s Search for Natural Silence in a Noisy World*, “Silence is not the absence of something, but the presence of everything.”

Exercise and Get In Shape: Hiking and backpacking is my favorite method of sustained, cardiovascular exercise with the added benefits of lots of fresh air and great scenery. Workouts at the local health club or in my basement just don’t do it for me.

Relief From Stresses and Concerns of Civilized Life: I often go into the mountains to relax and get away from it for a while. No one has stated this motivation better than John Muir:

Climb mountains and get their good tidings; Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine into flowers; The winds will blow their freshness into you as sunshine into flowers; The winds will blow their freshness into you and the storms their energy, and cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

Another well-articulated expression of this need comes from Glenn Randall (*The Outward Bound Backpacker’s Handbook*, page one):

Backpacking is an antidote to industrialized society, where the pace of change accelerates constantly and buzzing swarms of tasks multiply exponentially, yet must be fitted into days that never grow longer. Every day, newspapers recite an endless dirge of war, poverty, oppression and environmental disaster. Backpacking provides an escape, temporarily, from life's complex and seemingly insolvable problems. In their stead, backpackers need only deal with a far more manageable set of concerns, each elemental in its simplicity: finding the easiest route, summoning the energy to walk that last mile, selecting a good campsite.

Developing An Inner Peace: Echoing some of the themes above, but adding a new element is William Kemsley, founding editor of *Backpacker* magazine (quoted in the April 1993 issue of this same magazine):

We go out to the backcountry to return ourselves to a more primal rhythmic relationship with nature. We open our senses to get a simple unhurried perception of colors, shapes and sounds of the natural world As we let ourselves perceive nature in the raw, we experience a growing inner peace. We need that inner peace to put quality into our lives and quality into our work.

Researching, Planning, Dreaming: I can get quite excited by the whole process of researching, planning, organizing, fantasizing, and dreaming about a future trip. It gets my adrenaline pumping, especially when the weather is foul and unpleasant outside. Sometimes, I think I get as much enjoyment out of the planning and dreaming as I do from the actual journey.

Curiosity and Discovery: Remember the child's song, "The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain to see what he could see, to see what he could see" Well, I often feel just like that bear. I love to explore new places and experience the infinite variety of mountainous terrain. I enjoy going back to favorite areas, but even more enticing is getting into new areas. When off trail, I occasionally experience the sensation of being where no human has probably ever been. Hope Michaud expresses her curiosity in the wilderness:

My curiosity makes me need and want to see what is around the next bend or up the next hill, and it doesn't matter how many times I do the same hike every time it is different, the same things won't be around the same bend each and every time, sometimes the bend is even in a different spot.

Long-Term Friendships: It is the camaraderie! Going into the high country is a highly social experience for me. It is a good way of being with people I enjoy. Being with someone for twenty-four hours a day, for days on end on a backpack trip is to get to know him or her in a unique way. It is a way of developing long-term friendships with those of similar interests and values. It is developing memories of shared experiences. Jim Wickwire, well-known American climber, expresses this motivation this way: "I've climbed with some of the best climbers in the world, more importantly, to me, they are some of the best people in the world. That's another reason why I climb."

For the Challenge: I go into the wilderness for a higher level of personal challenge and risk and uncertainty than walking in the city or hiking established and populated trails. Sometimes it is the question of whether I am up to the physical challenge. Sometimes there is doubt that a route planned on the map will be passable on the ground. Sometimes it is the challenge of getting found after being temporarily lost. Sometimes it is the challenge of getting up a difficult summit. Sometimes it is the challenge of dealing with an unforeseen emergency. Sometimes it means getting too close to potentially life threatening situations. Whatever the challenge, I love the adrenaline rush that comes from pushing the envelope a bit. I seek out adventures that challenge me physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Achieving Difficult Goals: An important part of my chosen lifestyle is focused on setting challenging goals and achieving them. My trips into the high country are an extension of this personal focus. Here is a sample of the goals I am talking about: climbing all the summits or walking over all the passes in a select area; thru-hiking one or more of the long-distance trails; trekking in the Himalayas; getting out into the wilderness 100 days of each year.

Observing the Wild Life: I live for seeing wildlife in their natural setting. To see animals, both large and small, in their natural habitats is a real thrill. I

often take a good pair of binoculars and a camera with a long lens on my trips. To observe the wild life, I often need to go off trail. I need to slow down and not be in a hurry; I need to be quiet and move stealthily. I need to get up in the early hours and go to bed late when the animals are out and about. The animals are there for the viewing if I am up to the challenge. As one backpacker phrased it, “I love to perform CPR (capture, photograph, release) on reptiles and amphibians.” Another backpacker expressed it this way: “I love listening to and hopefully seeing the many animals (or signs of them) and creatures of the forest. I am thankful to them for sharing their homes with me.”

Scientific Curiosity: I am a scientist at heart and I love to get an up-close-and-personal look at my subjects. Whether it is the plants, the animals, the geology or the whole ecosystem, I want to scientifically understand the wonders of nature. What better way to truly understand the natural world than to be out in it.

Self-Knowledge and Personal Growth: Freed from the distractions of civilization and of my daily life, there is much opportunity to get to know myself better, especially the facets of myself I haven’t explored very much (even those aspects I would rather not look at?). The longer and more challenging the trip, the more opportunity there is for personal growth and self-knowledge. Since this is one of the more common themes in the literature, here are three thoughtful quotes that give voice to this motivation. First, from a more mountaineering perspective,

Mountains also reshape our understandings of ourselves, of our own interior landscapes. The remoteness of the mountain world — its harshnesses and its beauties — can provide us with a valuable perspective down on to the most familiar and best charted regions of our lives. It can subtly reorient us and readjust the points from which we take our bearings.

—Robert MacFarlane, *The Mountains of the Mind*, page 275

More psychologically,

I found the mirror [into my own demons] in the wilderness; I realized that raw, untamed land is the best reflector of a person’s strengths and

character, but also of his weaknesses, flaws, and insecurities. Spend enough time Out There alone and you'll see things about yourself that you can hide while in a crowd or with a hiking partner.

—Tom Shealey, executive editor of *Backpacker*, December 2000 editorial

Indulge me with one final expression of this motivation about personal growth:

I do believe that the longer the trip into wilderness the greater the opportunity to walk deeper into yourself. There is a passage the human spirit goes through that only opens after an extended period of time in uncluttered wild places. How much time? It varies, I reckon, with the individual depending upon how thickly 'civilization' has coated you.

—Buck Tilton, *Trekker's Handbook*, page 9

Appreciate the Comforts of Home: I often take the comforts of home for granted. These comforts are greatly enhanced, at least for a few days, after I have spent some time in the wilderness.

Building Personal Outdoor Skills: I enjoy refining old skills and developing new skills. Sometimes my skills and knowledge are pushed to the limits where it becomes a matter of survival.

The wildlands teach us to be smart, practical, resourceful and observant. To hike ten hours through scabrous terrain, cross a brawny river, stay warm in a snowstorm, and navigate your way out of tangled woods tests and builds your best faculties.

— Mark Harvey, *NOLS's Wilderness Guide: The Class Handbook*

Freedom and Independence and Self-Sufficiency: In the words of Jonathan Dorn, editor-in-chief of *Backpacker*, "Heading into the mountains with your life strapped to your back is the ultimate expression of freedom." In the words of my close friend, Jim Morrison:

It is, as the Mountaineers Books title says ‘Freedom of the Hills’. It is a chance to be on our own, do as we please and to suffer the pleasure and consequences of being independent, to rely solely on ourselves and our equipment.

An unknown free spirit expresses this motivation as follows:

I am a free spirit. When I go into the backcountry, I like to make my own decisions, and follow my whims and fancies. There is so much open space out there that my spirit wants to play and sing and dance. The backcountry is an invitation for the child in me to come out and play. This is especially true on longer trips when I have more of a chance to emotionally let go of the rules and restrictions of ‘adult’ society. Hiking is a favorite way of being spontaneous. I love to take make quick decisions and take off on some adventure without a clear goal in mind. When out in the field, I often go where the spirit moves me.

Third Movement: Highly Philosophical Motivations

Philosophizing and being philosophical can mean many things. One is the search for deeper meanings. The reasons and motivations collected below express many of these deeper meanings (at least deeper from my perspective). Some are spiritual and metaphysical in nature; others more naturalistic; others are not easy to categorize, but are still on the philosophical side of the ledger. The conductor is now coming back on stage. Let’s tune in to the third and final movement of this symphony.

Feeling of Aliveness and Well Being: The steady striding, the deep breathing, the pounding of my heart and the circulation and cleansing of my blood — all make my body feel so alive and strong. It is so pleasant at night to drift off to sleep after a good day of exploration and heavy exertion. Waking up little stiff from the previous day’s exertions is soon replaced by a new sense of energy and aliveness and well being. With each new day of rigorous exercise, my body settles more and more into its new routine. It feels so good to be alive — to feel really alive! In the more poetic words of a famous mountaineer, James Ramsey Ullman,

A man climbs the mountains because he needs to climb, because that is the way he is made, Rock and ice and snow and wind and the great blue canopy of the sky are not all that he finds upon the mountain-tops. He discovers things about his own body and mind that he had almost forgotten in the day-to-day, year-to-year routine of living. He learns what his legs are for, what his lungs are for, what the wise men of old meant by refreshment of the spirit.

Learn What It Means to Be Human:

Ironically, by providing access to places that are not completely dominated by humankind, wilderness offers us a chance to encounter what it means to be most potently human. So much of the manufactured world we surround ourselves with serves to distract us from self-knowledge and, ultimately, from the human community itself.

—Matt Colon, *Backpackinglight Magazine*, Issue 5, pages 18-19

A Natural Being in an Uncivilized Environment:

Backpacking allows a human to enter the world of nature and remain there for some time without essentially changing that world or affecting that world in real time because of the backpacker's presence. For example, when I ride my mountain bike, or if I ride a horse, my concentration is on the trail and my physical performance (and in the case of the horse, on it's performance). I'm also quite noisy. That is a trip that does affect my surroundings. It's still fulfilling, but it's a serious compromise. If I enter the world with a 4 wheeler, or SUV, or other motorized vehicle, I am an artificial presence. My noise changes everything. My entrance is totally about me and my conveyance [sic]. The natural world is merely my stage. I backpack to be a natural being in an uncivilized environment.

—“stormking,” May 2002 message thread on unknown web site

Maintaining The Primitive Arts: In the wilderness, I am forced to get back to basics, to get back to an almost primitive mode of living. I love the simplicity: hiking, exploring, setting up camp, relaxing, eating and sleeping. Then getting up to do it all over again. I love the rhythm of getting up at sunrise and going to bed at sunset. Here is a more philosophical expression of this primitive need:

We enjoy going back to the woods and a primitive state of mind. We seek old, traditional ways of organizing ourselves and our lives, turning away from hierarchy to tribalism. We are a tribe. . . . ‘There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot,’ naturalist Aldo Leopold noted. We cannot so we venture deep into wilderness—sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel I suppose some will wish to debate whether it is important to keep these primitive arts alive. I shall not debate it. Either you know it in your bones, or you are very, very old.

—Excerpted from May 2001 *Backpacker Magazine*
editorial, “Going Tribal” by Tom Shealey

And yet another voice (unknown) giving expression to this basic philosophy:

I go into the wilderness to respond to my deepest and most primal urges, to follow the inner drives of my evolutionary past. Thousands of years of humans fighting for survival in the wilderness has made its genetic imprint on me. Why do I go into the high country? I go because the forces of natural selection have molded me to be on the move, on foot, to be nomadic. I feel most at peace when walking steadily with a light load on my back rather than tied down by my possessions in the city.

Peak Experiences In An Unfair World:

I am as enthusiastic about the peak experiences available out in those special places as any other kind of activity I have experienced or seen others do in say book or films. If I was filthy rich and could buy or do anything else in this world would I still bother to go backpacking? Your damn right I would! Once one has a modest amount of gear and lives close enough to wilderness areas, the \$\$ cost is relatively cheap as sports or activities go. That in itself was a great draw to me. I as a peon born into this

overwhelmingly unfair world, dislike how the rich and powerful of this world flaunt their wealth and power in so many ways and thus welcome this activity I do which has great reward while in no way requiring any of those things.

—Dave Senesac, email on a backpacking website, June 2002

Essential to Happiness and Wholeness: Three quotes by famous proponents of wilderness and wilderness experiences express this fundamental human motivation:

“Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountain is going home; that wildness is necessity; that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

—John Muir, American naturalist

“For me, and for thousands with similar inclinations, the most important passion of life is the overpowering desire to escape periodically from the clutches of a mechanistic civilization. To us the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness.

—Bob Marshall, American conservationist, wilderness activist
and principal founder of The Wilderness Society

And finally, Colin Fletcher (*The Complete Walker IV*, page five) relates the following experience:

All at once, without warning, two men emerged from that impossible country. They carried packs on their backs, and they were weatherbeaten and distilled to bone and muscle. But what I remember best of all is that they were happy and whole. Whole and secure and content.

Spiritual Experiences

Here are two quite different quotes expressing touching on the theme of spirituality.

The mountains, forests, creeks, lakes, glaciers and snowfields are my temple, my church, my house of worship. The experiences I have there are often spiritual in nature. I feel closer to myself and my God in wilderness environments.

—unknown author

Jesus found his inspiration in the wilderness. Moses found his on a mountain. Buddhists consider mountains sacred homes of the gods, as do many indigenous peoples around the world. Whatever god, goddess, force, higher power, or creator you worship, backpacking can be a deeply spiritual journey because it puts you in direct contact with creation itself. If you do not believe in a divine intelligence, backpacking will put you in the midst of our infinitely complex, integrated and organized universe. . . . However you define the power behind creation, creation is powerful and inspiring to explore.

—Brian Beffort, *Joy of Backpacking*, page 4

Cleanse and Strengthen the Spirit: I go to the mountains to cleanse my spirit. The purity and unspoiled nature of the wilderness helps in this cathartic process. I begin to feel more like a spiritual being. Many go into the wilderness to strengthen their body. I go to strengthen my spirit. This theme is expressed in the following quote: “There is a rhythm that unites us with the natural world. The more we learn to feel that rhythm and get it into the mainstream of our lives, the stronger can be our spirit.” (Robert Rodale, as quoted in the *Essential Gear Manual*, produced by the editors of *Backpacking* magazine)

Contemplate The Deeper Questions of Life: When I have the solitude and silence found in the wilderness, my mind starts to ponder life’s questions and attempts to answer life’s riddles (e.g., Why are we here? What is the proper place of humans in the natural order? What is the best career for me? What is my priority role as a parent?). The high country scene is a real tonic for my brain; it stimulates my deeper thoughts and ideas and questions. Colin Fletcher, on page three of “*Complete Walker IV*,” says it this way:

Up there, alone with the wind and the sky and the steep grassy slopes, I nearly always found after a while that I was beginning to think more

clearly. Yet ‘think’ doesn’t seem to be quite the right word. Sometimes, when it was a matter of making a choice, I don’t believe I decided what to do so much as discovered what I had decided. It was as if my mind, set free by space and solitude and oiled by the body’s easy rhythm, swung open and released thoughts it had already formulated. . . . it seemed only as if my mind had slowly relaxed; and then, all at once, there was room for the ideas to fall into place in a meaningful pattern.”

John Muir, American naturalist, expresses the same philosophy as follows:

The clearest way into the Universe is through forest wilderness. The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thought and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains—mountain dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest and trees in Nature’s workshops.

Experience the Magic and Reality of Life: Two quotes, focusing on children in the wilderness, express a philosophy about magic and reality.

You don’t just take children to the wilderness to show them play, or make them feel good. You go to teach them the magic of life on earth. Wilderness is an encyclopedia that can show us where we came from, and where we are going.

—David Brower, founder of the Sierra Club Foundation, Friends of the Earth, Earth Island Institute and the North Cascades Conservation Council; as quoted in *Backpacker Magazine*, June 1998

I want my kids to know that wilderness is not a diversion. I don’t take them out there to show them recreation. I take them out to teach them real life. When I take my family and kids into the backcountry . . . we often bushwhack off trail. We do a lot of outlaw camping, going into places where we have to think about avalanches, and lightning strikes and grizzly bears . . . those things are part of wilderness that we need to protect the most. They’re part of wilderness that gives me that visceral interaction I want my kids to experience. In general, the outlook for real wilderness is bleak. My

kids will inherit less wilderness, and what is left will be the focus of increased recreation—more roads and trails. That’s a problem, because I’m trying to show my kids the kind of wilderness that represents the opposite of that.

—Doug Peacock, the man Edward Abbey reportedly used as the model for his character “Hayduke” in the *Monkey Wrench Gang* (as quoted in *Backpacker Magazine*, June 1998)

Humility and Modesty

Most of us exist for most of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed and controlled. One forgets that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the twist of a dial, which have their own rhythms and orders of existence. Mountains correct this amnesia. By speaking of greater spans of time than we can possibly envisage, mountains refute our excessive trust in the man-made. They pose profound questions about our durability and the importance of our schemes. They induce, I suppose, a modesty in us.

—Robert MacFarlane, *The Mountains of the Mind*, page 274-275

Expanding on this modesty theme, “. . . wilderness functions as an infallible reference point that provides us with tangible reminders of why humility has always served humanity better, over time, than hubris.” (Matt Colon, *Backpackinglight Magazine*, Issue 5, page 16)

The Search For Wildness: Gretel Ehrlich captures this unique motivation and philosophy quite well.

We use the word ‘wilderness,’ but perhaps we mean wildness. Isn’t that why I’ve come here? In wilderness, I seek the wildness in myself — and in so doing, come on the wildness everywhere around me because, after all, being part of nature, I’m cut from the same cloth.

—William Kittredge’s *Montana Spaces*

Another expression of the same philosophy:

As long as there are young men with the light of adventure in their eyes or a touch of wildness in their souls, rapids will be run. . . . The mist was all gone from the river now and the rapids sparkled and sang. They were still young as the land was young. We were there to enjoy it, and the great machines seemed far away.

—Sigurd F. Olson

The Essence of Being:

At the end of the passage though [of many days in the wilderness], however long, you become increasingly a part of the wilderness instead of an observer, an intruder. And when you see the wholeness of human and wild, when the myth of separation drops away, you see much deeper and more accurately into the very essence of being.

—Buck Tilton, *Trekker's Handbook*, page 9

Search For A New Way of Being:

Climbing upwards came to represent—as it still does—the search for an entirely new way of being. Experience was unpredictable, more immediate and more authentic in the mountains. The upper world [in the mountains] was an environment which affected both the mind and the body in ways the cities or the plains never did—in the mountains, you were a different you.

—Robert MacFarlane, *The Mountains of the Mind*, page 213

Prevent Ecological Catastrophe:

Living simply in the woods and mountains is good practice for living in civilization. If we can learn to see the wilderness for what it is—a precious, irreplaceable, fragile treasure—then perhaps we can learn to see the whole world in the same light, and so save ourselves from the threat of ecological catastrophe.

—Glenn Randall, *The Outward Bound Backpacker's Handbook*, page 4

Meshing With Nature/Living An Earth Philosophy: Three different expressions of this basic motivation are captured in the following quotes. First, listen to the voice of Ray Jardine.

More important is our presence in the wilds: how we carry ourselves, how softly we move upon the landscape, how aware we are of the patterns of life around us and how we interact with them. This ‘earth philosophy’ is the motivation behind all my lightweight gear, techniques and methods It is the bridging of the gap between human and nature, a bringing together for a greater awareness and deeper understanding — of the natural world around us in all its glory, of our relationship with that world, and of our own inner nature.

—*Beyond Backpacking: Guide to Lightweight Hiking*

Now listen to Chris Townsend, a well-known backpacking author: “Only by living in the wilderness twenty-fours a day, day after day, do you gain that indefinable feeling of rightness, of being *with* instead of *against* the earth, that give the deepest contentment I have found.” (*The Backpacker’s Handbook*, 3rd Edition, page 2)

Meshing or engaging with nature in a wilderness setting is an extraordinary and powerful experience. It often happens to solo hikers out in wilderness for weeks, often off-trail where they do not have contact with other humans. Focusing on the concept of “engagement,” Ryan Jordan expresses this unique experience as follows:

Engagement is that state by which long distance hikers often realize after several weeks on the trail; that alpinists realize after passing the point of no retreat on a particular climb; and that soldiers realize once the first shot of a battle has been fired. Generally, wilderness engagement occurs as a state contrasting with one's normal urban affairs, and psychologically, is achieved in the greatest degree of depth when the awareness and perception of risk (not necessarily real risk) is heightened and barriers between the urban life and the wilderness life are maximized. . . . Maximizing engagement increases adrenaline response and endorphin release, contributing to the natural high well-known by endurance athletes,

adventure racers, long distance hikers, and mountaineers, and remains as one of the greatest rewards of the wilderness experience. . . . This is why it is often easier for someone on a two-week hike in remote wilderness to achieve a deeper psychological engagement with wilderness than a long distance hiker on a six-month journey who stops into towns every three to four days for resupply.

—Backpackinglight@yahoogroups.com; message thread titled, “Elegance,” November, 2004

Relationship With the Cosmos: D. H. Lawrence, a British novelist, carries the above “earth philosophy” to a cosmic level:

We must get back into relationship, vivid and nourishing relation to the cosmos and the universe. For the truth is we are cut off from the great sources of our inward nourishment and renewal, sources which flow eternally in the universe. Vitally, the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe.

Reader Participation: Priority Motivations and Reasons

To which of the multitude of symphonic voices did you respond most positively? Which jumped out and grabbed you? Which most resonate with your own passions? *First*, go back and circle no more than 8-10 motivations that grab you the most from all three movements of this article. In prioritizing, evaluate only the overall thrust or main point of each paragraph (captured in the subheadings?); try not get caught up in the unique phrasings and word choices. Where there are multiple quotations on one theme pick out one that says it the best. *Second*, circle up to four items you reacted strongly against (assuming there were some) while considering that we often learn a lot from looking at our negative feelings and emotions.

Final Thoughts

I hope you have enjoyed this three part symphony as much as I have enjoyed researching, writing about it and playing it out in the wilderness. I come away from the research/writing with total awe at the diversity, depth and intellectual

power of human beings, especially those who attempt to give answers to these kinds of philosophic questions. I have gotten much pleasure in dialoguing with friends about why they go into the mountains.

I can only hope that this collage of meanings and motivations will provide new insight and awareness into your own adventures. At the least, you should end up with more clarity as to why you and others go into the high country, why you and others feel so passionately about this type of activity. At the worst, it might replace current clarity with some confusion, especially confusion caused by such a variety of answers. At best, philosophizing on this topic will significantly enrich and enhance your future wilderness experiences and take them to higher and deeper levels.

Additional Issues for Reflection

Following are some interesting issues that are beyond the scope of this article.

1. Does writing and philosophizing about this entire subject take away some of the mystery, romance and excitement about being in the mountains? In other words, should I go out of my way to NOT verbalize and philosophize and contemplate on this subject?
2. Is there a definitive and final answer to the question of “Why go into the wilderness?” Is there a common thread or tie that binds lovers of the mountains together? Are we a true community or just a group of individuals with highly individual tastes?
3. How important is it to have clear and explicit answers to these questions of meaning and motivation? What if I really do not know why I go into the wilderness? What if I am quite confused on this subject? What if I got more confused reading the article? Is it best to start each journey anew with few, if any, expectations and motivations?
4. Will philosophizing about this subject really expand my outdoor experiences and take them to higher levels, as the author claims?
5. Do any of the shared motivations have a false ring to them? Are any just a bunch of words without the necessary personal experiences?

6. What about those who become fanatics, those who make hiking and backpacking into the high country travel a religion? What about those who forsake all else (career, marriage, friends, children—sometimes even their own life) for it? What if I become obsessed with traveling in the high country?
7. What is the relationship between the meanings and purposes that shape my life as a whole compared to those that shape my recreations? What role does wilderness travel play in my overall life and well being?
8. How can I best transfer my love and passion for the high country to my children and grandchildren?
9. How can this topic best be incorporated into backpacking courses and outdoor education, especially for young people?