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Three Years with Buffalo Bill

A Thesis Submitted

by

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Abstract

John Muir is the father of modern creative nonfiction in the outdoor adventure/nature genre. His passion inspired generations of Christian writers, especially within the genre, to draw connections between the God of their faith and His hand that they see in the natural world. Set in a forty-two-mile hike through northwest Wyoming's Buffalo Bill State Park and continuing in the example set by Muir, the manuscript *Three Years with Buffalo Bill* establishes that faith is an essential element of modern life.

Dedication

To my wife, Rebekah, for her love and support in our grand adventure.

Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to the Buffalo Bill State Park staff for willingly sharing their knowledge and answering endless questions. I would also like to express my appreciation to the professors at Liberty University who prayed for me at each step of this journey.

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Chapter 1

Artist Statement

"There is a river, the streams whereof make me glad. My tongue is inditing a good matter, my heart is the pen of a ready writer, unto God my exceeding joy. I write unto God—for no other purpose or audience—but to express my love in thanksgiving. My mind is the ink well, my heart is the pen, my gratitude the inspiration, my book without end." I penned these words in a tiny apartment under mandatory COVID-19 lockdown in May 2020, having just returned home from a two-week vacation in Cody, Wyoming.

The disparity between the tiny apartment in Hawaii and the big skies of Wyoming was much greater than the 2,379 miles of ocean that separated the two locations. The purpose of the vacation was to decide whether to accept an assignment to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. or to retire from a twenty-eight-year military career. With the assignment, I would be named the Radar, Airfield, and Weather Systems Career Field Manager, the pentacle of the profession charged with recruitment, training, professional development, and the career progression of nearly five thousand personnel stationed all around the world. With retirement, there would be that river, the Shoshone River, the streams whereof made me glad.

Vainglory disguised as duty and selflessness, I chose the assignment with its alluring rank, authority, and position. But God had other plans. Over the next three months, the assignment to D.C. evaporated through a series of fluid decisions in the federal government and a moratorium on military Permanent Change of Station (PCS) travel during the pandemic. By

the time the early fog of the pandemic cleared, the words that John Muir so eloquently penned in a letter to his sister in 1873 rang true, "The mountains are calling, and I must go."

The writings of John Muir and the nature Psalms of David and Asaph in the Bible had their grip long before the life-changing decision during COVID-19. Through a series of assignments in major cities, Frankfurt, Tokyo, San Antonio, Honolulu, and Seoul, I had come to yearn for the wild places of my youth. I took to writing about the natural places visited in conjunction with frequent business travel and started a nature blog to capture some of those experiences for later reflection once I had returned to city life.

The blog, intended for personal observations and reflections accessible anywhere on my travels, became an expression of gratitude to God for allowing me to see the beauty of wild places. Confined at times by the busyness of a career, these simple expressions of gratitude helped me see the beauty surrounding me wherever I found myself. From a snail on a city sidewalk, to the infinitely intricate veins on the back of a leaf near the airport, to the majestic mountains surrounding work trips to Denver, Tokyo, and Anchorage, beauty was everywhere I took the time to see it. The more beauty I saw, the more grateful I was. The more I expressed my gratitude to God, the more beauty He showed me.

With retirement quickly finalized, all investment properties sold, and all household belongings placed in long-term storage, my wife and I left our twenty-eight-year relationship with the U.S. Air Force without encumbrances and moved to Cody, Wyoming. For the first time since joining the military at seventeen years old, I was free of all its support structures. What I had come to view as everyday occurrences—my rank and position, coworkers meeting us at new assignments and taking my wife and me to pre-arranged accommodations, offices prepared for

my arrival, and busy schedules to which I had to adhere quickly—were all gone. We knew no one in Wyoming. While navigating life post-military, I immersed myself in the vast wildernesses in Yellowstone National Park, Shoshone National Forest, and the Washakie Wilderness Area.

Hiking deep into the backcountry of the Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains along the Continental Divide, I asked God what he would have me to do with the balance of my life. Through much prayer, fasting, and meditation on the scripture, it was revealed that my one true passion in life has been writing and that very few people write *to* God these days. People write *about* God. People even dedicate their efforts to God as they write about something they are passionate about. But very few people, if any, write *to* God. We have relinquished writing *to* God to the Psalmist and the scriptures alone.

Good writing—writing that captures the good, beautiful, and true—starts with observing the environment and seeing God's beauty surrounding us with our natural eye. God's beautiful hand of creation is seen in natural objects, cultures, and the character of people across creation. My years of living outside of my own culture and the feeling of never quite fitting in—an outsider looking on—have given me a unique ability to see God's beauty in all creatures. I desire to capture those observations in a way that brings glory and honor to God.

Therein lies the challenge, to see His beauty that surrounds us and express gratitude to Him in a way worthy of His greatness. It has been my experience that only God can give us adequate words to praise Him. Very few people are comfortable writing the intimate expression of their gratitude directly to God. Nature shows the glory of God. Sunrise and sunset speak of God in a language all the earth's inhabitants understand. The sky declares His handiwork. The

invisible God is universally seen in nature. It is nature that inspires my writing *to* God. I do not worship nature as the naturalist does, but the beautiful poetry of creation speaks to the creative nature of the Creator and points us to Him.

Settling into retired life in Wyoming, a pattern emerged in my process of writing. I started each day early in the scripture. David and Asaph captured my imagination in the Psalms. The writings of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and St. Augustine also reverberated. God sewed my heart to my eyes while meditating on scripture in wild places; a tapestry of the day's scripture emerged in the nature set before me. The relationship between God and writing *to* God merged at the confluence of nature and scripture; gratitude overflowed its banks, filling the valley of my heart with the worship of writing expressions.

One particularly inspirational portion of the Absaroka Mountain Range is in Buffalo Bill State Park near Cody, Wyoming. The park comprises craggy snowcapped mountain peaks surrounding the Buffalo Bill Reservoir, an 869,230 acre-foot "lake" created from damming the confluence of the North Fork and South Fork Shoshone Rivers. The lake is a favorite lookout for tourists entering the East Gate of Yellowstone National Park. To establish some continuity between writing and the time I spent in nature, I set out to hike the entire forty-two-mile shoreline of the lake to see portions of the park only accessible on foot.

Without the increasingly foreign constraints of career and schedule, I took my time with the hike around Buffalo Bill State Park and documented the exciting things encountered there. I started three to six miles of rugged and arid high-desert hiking daily by asking God to show me something beautiful. Proceeding over terrain that would test the abilities of the most

accomplished backcountry hikers, God gave me unique observations and insights as I meditated on scripture in the park's vast wilderness.

My career afforded the unique opportunity to hike all around the world, from the Great Walks of New Zealand to Mt. Fuji in Japan, through large sections of the Appalachian Trail and the Alps of Austria and southern Germany; I was fortunate to accomplish many bucket list hikes. I went through a phase consuming every hiking book I could access, from how-to guides to detailed accounts of long-distance hikes across continents. After an exhaustive search online, at the county library, and local bookstores, I could not find any written accounts of individuals hiking around the entirety of Buffalo Bill State Park. That is the impetus for this book.

Three Years with Buffalo Bill is a collection of relevant historical information about the park and personal observations from the hike that are admittedly influenced by a Christian worldview and the cultural experiences that shaped me while traveling to thirty-two countries. I envision the work partly as a how-to guidebook (or, more appropriately, a where-to guidebook), a record of what one might encounter in the lesser-traveled sections of the park, and an inspirational outdoor adventure story that points people to my faith in Christ. I hope this work prepares hikers for the perils and adventures they might experience in the park, as well as an inspiration to others to complete the entirety of the hike.

According to the National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park has nearly five million visitors annually. Most of those visitors skirt Buffalo Bill State Park on the busy highway that connects Yellowstone's East Entrance to the hotels and restaurants of the surrounding towns. The state park begins at the jagged peaks of Cedar Mountain along a stretch of highway that President Teddy Roosevelt called "the most beautiful 50 miles in America." The

park's beauty beckons millions of Yellowstone visitors to break from the traffic, pull over, and take pictures of the scenery—soon realizing their camera cannot capture the vast, untamed ruggedness that their eyes are seeing. They quickly move on to the more Instagram-perfect national park to the west, never realizing that Buffalo Bill State Park holds more beauty and adventure than the crowded boardwalks and traffic jams that await them in Yellowstone.

While elements of the hike around Buffalo Bill State Park fit neatly into the creative nonfiction genre, portions of the story are not as clearly identified under this moniker. Science says that water, air, food, and light are the four essential elements humans need to survive. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau asserts that the essential elements of life are food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. The hike around Buffalo Bill State Park was a time of great personal transition. For the first time in nearly three decades, I could decide what I wanted to do with my life without the encumbrances of necessity or accomplishment. I meditated on one question on the journey around the park: what are the necessities of life?

The obvious answer is water, air, food, and light. While I cannot argue that those are the essential elements humans require, I wondered more about what we need to live and not just exist. If Thoreau hadn't considered air or water important enough to make his list of essential elements, what else might he have missed? Perhaps what modern humans need has changed since Thoreau first penned *Walden* in 1854. This is the literary context for my work and the driving side story to the more practical events encountered in Buffalo Bill State Park.

In *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, John Muir chronicles an adventurous trek from Kentucky to Florida, where he sleeps in cemeteries and relies on God to provide for his basic needs. This book was one of the first "outdoor adventure" books I ever read, and outside of the

Bible, the most influential book on my writing aesthetic. In the book, Muir found himself on the brink of death in rural Cedar Key, Florida, which is only a few miles from my hometown of Crystal River. Fighting a three-month bout with malaria, one in which he was delirious with fever, unconscious, and mistaken for dead, he relied on the kindness of fellow Christian and caretaker Jeanne Carr to nurse him back to life (Muir 348). Following his miraculous recovery, Carr wrote to Muir, "God gave you the eye within the eye, to see in all natural objects the realized ideas of His mind. He gave you pure tastes, and the steady preference of whatsoever is most lovely and excellent. Perhaps He only wants you to love and to speak of Him" (Badè 122).

Muir went on to "love and to speak of Him," using his powerful observation skills and eloquent writing to express his gratitude to the God of creation. He credited the wonders he saw in nature and the healing it brought to his life to God's goodness. His passion inspired generations of Christian nonfiction writers, especially in the outdoor adventure/nature genre, to draw connections between the God of their faith and His hand that they see in the natural world. Muir's ability to capture my imagination and bring me along on his "sauntering" in the wilderness gave me great comfort in the many difficult struggles of my military career.

Muir had the ability, mainly due to his care to meditate on scripture and the God of creation while walking in nature, to harmonize apropos spiritual connections with his scientific and historical observations, knowledge, and training. This symbiotic mix of the good, beautiful, and true is the critical combination I hope to achieve with the writing found in *Three Years with Buffalo Bill.*

Much has changed since completing the hike around Buffalo Bill State Park. While I still have frequent contact with my extended military family, I haven't been on a military installation

in years. After traveling around the nation visiting national parks in our camper for nearly a year, my wife and I finally settled down and built a house in rural Clark, Wyoming. I have almost completed a Master's Degree in Creative Writing, of which the account of my adventures in Buffalo Bill State Park will be the capstone submission for my thesis. While not fully understanding how my writing will have an impact in the vast sea of literary work available today, I trust that by remaining true to my original purpose of expressing gratitude to God for His great beauty that surrounds us, I will accomplish what He impressed on me to do.

Chapter 2

Critical Paper: John Muir

This paper examines the author John Muir, highlighting his impact on the literary traditions of nonfiction writing and his contributions to developing creative works in the action-adventure/nature genre. The paper will review relevant scholarship and primary sources that inform the academic community's understanding of action-adventure/nature writing and explain the relevant theories and other significant interpretive practices used in developing *Three Years with Buffalo Bill*, a creative nonfiction work in the genre.

Before John Muir's writing inspired the formation of our national parks and sparked the modern conservation movement, he twice overcame journey-ending catastrophes. In *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, Muir explains that one disaster nearly ended any chance he had to pursue his passions, while the other nearly ended his life (Muir 344). In 1867, while working at a carriage factory in Indianapolis' Old Southside, young Muir was involved in an industrial accident in which an awl punctured his right eye, temporarily causing blindness in both of his eyes. A coworker overheard Muir cry, "My right eye is gone, closed forever on all God's beauty" (Taylor).

Relying on his great faith, Muir asked God to restore his sight. In the Introduction to *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, William Badè says about Muir, "No prophet of old could have taken his call more seriously, or have entered upon his mission more fervently. During the long days of his confinement in a dark room, he had the opportunity for much reflection. He concluded that his life was too brief and uncertain, and time too precious, to waste upon belts

and saws; that while he was pottering in a wagon factory, God was making a world; and he determined that, if his eyesight were spared, he would devote the remainder of his life to study of the process" (Badè 236). Prayer answered, and with "all draw-backs overcome" (Muir was being considered for partnership in the well-established carriage business), he began his "joyful and free" walk to Florida from Indiana.

After an adventurous 900-mile walk and 100-mile boat ride, where he slept in cemeteries and relied on the goodness of the people he encountered to provide for his basic needs, Muir found himself on the brink of death in rural Cedar Key, Florida (Muir 348). Fighting a three-month bout with malaria, one in which he was delirious with fever, unconscious, and mistaken for dead, he relied on the kindness of fellow Christian and caretaker Jeanne Carr to nurse him back to life. Following his miraculous recovery, Carr wrote these prophetic words to Muir, "God gave you the eye within the eye, to see in all natural objects the realized ideas of His mind. He gave you pure tastes, and the steady preference of whatsoever is most lovely and excellent. Perhaps He only wants you to love and to speak of Him" (Badè 122).

Muir went on to "love and to speak of Him," using his powerful observation skills and eloquent writing to express his gratitude to the God of creation. He credited the wonders he saw in nature and the healing it brought to his life to God's goodness. His passion inspired generations of nonfiction writers, especially in the outdoor adventure/nature genre, to draw connections between their faith and God's hand that they see in the natural world.

Outdoor-adventure/nature writing—writing that captures the good, beautiful, and true—starts with observing the environment and all the beauty surrounding us. God's beautiful hand of creation can be seen in natural objects, cultures, and the character of people across creation.

While Muir created a writing aesthetic that captured the good, beautiful, and true for generations of writers, he was inspired by the beautiful nature poetry contained in the Bible, often referencing or directly quoting the Psalms penned by David and Asaph in his work (Badè 231).

In addition to carrying torn-out pages (to reduce unnecessary weight) from the book of Psalms on his many hiking adventures, Muir was known to bring a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature.* In *Nature,* Emerson establishes the foundation of transcendentalism, a belief system that espouses a non-traditional appreciation of nature. Transcendentalism suggests that the divine, or God, suffuses nature and that this reality is understood by studying nature. This concept also owes its roots to one of John Muir's favorite Psalms, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Psalm 19:1).

Having read much of Emerson's work and greatly influenced by his writing style, John Muir met Emerson in Yosemite in 1871. Muir wrote of Emerson, "Emerson was the most serene, majestic, sequoia-like soul I ever met. His smile was as sweet and calm as morning light on mountains. There was a wonderful charm in his presence; his smile, serene eye, his voice, his manner, were all sensed at once by everybody. I felt here was a man I had been seeking. The Sierra, I was sure, wanted to see him, and he must not go before granting it an interview! A tremendous sincerity was his. He was as sincere as the trees, his eye sincere as the sun." According to Muir's friend John Swett, on his return from seeing Yosemite with John Muir, Emerson said, "He is more wonderful than Thoreau" (Badè 125).

Inspired by the Psalms and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Muir carved out his distinct writing aesthetic. He seamlessly wove his passion for nature and the outdoors with his faith and interest in science. As seen in his description of Emerson, "He was as sincere as the trees," Muir often

personified natural objects. While common in contemporary nature writing, this aesthetic of building a personal relationship between nature and the affections of his readers was original to Muir.

In an article for *The Journal for Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Emily Brady explores John Muir's writings and constructs a Muirian environmental aesthetic with three key features. First, the aesthetic category of sublimity is evident as he explores the vast wilderness of his favorite haunts in the Sierra Nevada. Second, a pluralistic environmental aesthetic is found through his interweaving of aesthetic, religious, and scientific ideas. Third, his journals from *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* reveal an active and situated aesthetic shaped by his practice of exploring and communing with nature. Together, these features support a quite contemporary perspective, in tune with environmental and everyday aesthetics and modern work in environmental ethics (Brady 463).

Sublimity aesthetic, the uplifted, high, or exalted, references more than the altitude Muir often found himself in as he hiked alone for weeks in the High Sierra. Muir personified the mountains and gave them his voice when he penned his most famous quote in an 1873 letter to his, "The mountains are calling, and I must go" (Watkins). Muir did not worship nature as the modern naturalist does, but instead, he understood that the beautiful poetry of creation speaks to the creative nature of the Creator and points us to Him. In this way, Muir's aesthetic of sublimity elevated nature to its rightful place, the exalted creativity of God. Muir's uplifting message of nature, frequently repeated throughout his work, is that it heals those willing to take its medicine.

Muir's pluralistic environmental aesthetics are found through his interweaving of aesthetic, religious, and scientific ideas. A great example of this is found in *A Thousand Mile*

Walk to the Gulf, when Muir compares the natural beauty of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky to the well-manicured gardens of a nearby hotel, "I never before saw Nature's grandeur in so abrupt a contrast with paltry artificial gardens. The fashionable hotel grounds are in exact parlor taste, with many a beautiful plant cultivated to deformity, and arranged in strict geometrical beds, the whole pretty affair a laborious failure side by side with Divine beauty" (Muir 255). Muir, a self-taught and well-respected botanist, knew the scientific name and classification of every flora and fauna in the hotel garden. He also understood what the hotel owner attempted to achieve with such work. However, he seamlessly wove his scientific knowledge, a personification of "Nature," and faith in God to paint a picture of the beauty contained in Mammoth Cave. This is the hallmark of Muir's writing aesthetic, the weaving of intellect, study, and faith.

Muir's writing aesthetic was primarily shaped by his practice of exploring and communing with nature. Some autobiographical notes found among his papers (from the period his sight was restored and before he left for his great walk to Florida) best show his imputes for exploring nature, "As soon as I got out into heaven's light, I started on another long excursion, making haste with all my heart to store my mind with the Lord's beauty, and thus be ready for any fate light or dark. And it was from this time that my long, continuous wandering may be said to have fairly commenced. I bade adieu to mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God" (Badè 236).

One related and vital aspect of Muir's writing frequently goes unnoticed. To "store his mind with the Lord's beauty," Muir kept detailed journals of what he saw on his ventures into the wilderness (Badè 23). These journals, many of which contain the most inspirational quotes Muir is known for, were not published until much later in his life. Muir was not writing for fame or

fortune, but instead, recording what he saw for the sole purpose of acknowledging his gratefulness to the God that had created the beauty unfolding before him. He was writing "as unto the Lord" long before anyone cared to read his work (Colossians 3:23-24).

While Muir's humble beginnings as an author were perhaps more authentic and pure, modern outdoor-adventure/nature writers face similar obscurity as they attempt to translate what their eyes see into word pictures that potential readers can process and appreciate. This is a hallmark of the outdoor adventure/nature genre, recording what could perhaps be years of experiences in nature for a slight chance to connect with readers. Of the hundreds of books about hiking the Appalachian Trail that have sunk into obscurity, there may only be one of Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* that sells sixteen million copies and gets turned into a Robert Redford/Nick Nolte film.

One writing tool that can be of particular use to the modern outdoor-adventure/nature writer is *resonance*. Resonance is a term borrowed from music, where it means a prolonged response attributable to vibration, as it relates to writing, an aura of significance beyond the components of a story. In particular, resonance can come from biblical associations (Stein 31). Resonance is a crucial element of outdoor adventure/nature writing, connecting the life-and-death struggles, defeats, and triumphs that occur cyclically in nature to those same experiences in the day-to-day life of readers. Resonance is more than a word picture that accurately describes what a reader would see if they were in the same place as the author. Resonance transports readers to the writer's location on a trail paved with echoes of relatability and relevance.

John Muir relied on resonance throughout his writing, in particular biblical resonance. When Muir penned the then-unread journals full of monotonous tidbits about flora and fauna, the

Bible was undoubtedly the most read and discussed book in America. By relating what he had seen in nature to a portion of scripture, Muir developed an heir of familiarity with his readers that resonated in comfortableness and trustworthiness in his writing. With most of the nation attending a church service at least weekly, Muir often drew parallels between what he saw in nature and the church many of his readers were more familiar with.

For Muir, the wilderness is the primary house of worship, and the plants and animals are all part of the landscape "congregation" (Hatch 53). While looking at Yosemite's Cathedral Peak, Muir wrote, "I have not been at church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad, overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as he never did before. The glory of the Lord is upon all his works; it is written plainly upon all the fields of every clime, and upon every sky, but here in this place of surpassing glory, the Lord has written in capitals." Muir successfully uses resonance by drawing parallels between the familiar cathedrals of the East and the cathedral of mountains before him. In addition, he uses resonance by showing his reader's familiar parallels with scripture. Each time the word "LORD" is written in all capital letters in the Bible, it refers to the personal name of Israel's God, YHWH (Yahweh). This would have been very familiar to the readers of 1860s America and an effective use of resonance.

Traditionally, nonfiction conveys information, while fiction evokes emotion. Standard works of outdoor adventure/nature held to this convention, expressing, albeit eloquently, the facts of observations in nature. Henry David Thoreau painstakingly observed, recorded, and presented relevant details of the freezing Walden Pond in *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (Thoreau 158). For every quotable sentence John Muir is remembered for, he journaled untold

pages containing the metric measurements of plant leaves, stems, and root structures. However, outdoor adventure/nature writers must convey information while evoking emotion in the modern multimedia era.

Creative nonfiction should be—creative. That does not mean facts have to be skewed or genuine experiences exaggerated. Not every hike in nature yields a life-changing epiphany that even the most skilled writers can translate into a meaningful experience for the reader. Suppose information is presented in its raw state. In that case, the writing can seem pedestrian, especially in an era of cinematic videos accompanied by inspirational music showing the same experience in a more digestible format. Bored, the reader yearns for the images, anecdotes, and characterizations that make nonfiction writing come alive on the page (Stein 7).

That's not to say that nonfiction writing can no longer have the positive impact that John Muir had on the world. After all, even God chose the written Word to change the hearts of people for all generations, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). More so now than ever, it is imperative that creative nonfiction, especially in the outdoor adventure/nature genre, tell a story and not just present information. Lackluster outdoor adventure/nature writing would convey Buffalo Bill State Park's relevant facts and history. In contrast, enjoyable writing would bring the park alive (and thereby the reader) by expressing how those relevant facts and history enhanced the emotional experience of hiking through the park's unforgiving terrain.

Outdoor-adventure/nature writing should entice readers with landscapes, facts, and knowledge they would have otherwise felt uninterested in. Poetry of language is the craft tool

that accomplishes this goal. Consider two photographs of the Lamar River Valley in Yellowstone National Park. The first was taken quickly by a tourist with their cell phone camera as they passed along a busy park road en route to collect souvenirs at the gift shop in Mammoth Hot Springs. The other, taken during the peak of winter in the backcountry of the same valley, captures the life-or-death struggle between Wolf 907F, the alpha female of Yellowstone's largest wolf pack (Junction Butte Pack), and an injured buffalo calf suffering through its first winter. Both pictures are of the same valley, yet the description of the different scenarios presented (in writing) makes one picture loathsome for the reader and one of great interest because it tells the emotional story of the experience.

Creative nonfiction readers insist on seeing what they read in the multimedia era. Most modern readers would admit to imagining the characters of a book they are reading on the screen of their television or mobile device. They subconsciously change every book into a screenplay, with the characters interacting in a way they have seen in their favorite movie or television show. This is why the most critical aspect of good storytelling is to "show and not tell" (Stein 122). The struggle of every fledgling writer, but especially nonfiction writers, is showing and not telling.

In his landmark book *On Becoming a Novelist,* John Gardner relates three areas that writers typically tell rather than show: when telling what happens before the story began; when telling what a character looks like; when telling how a character uses their senses (sees, hears, smells, touches, or tastes). Whether it is backstory, a character's appearance, or a character's use of the five senses, the key to overcoming this obstacle is to include an action. Including action in

nonfiction writing is especially important because the genre tends to inform rather than provoke an emotional response (Gardner 115).

In outdoor-adventure/nature writing, the storyteller frequently encounters beautiful landscapes that inspire them to include a description in their story. These landscapes are critical to the storyline, often in their own right becoming principal characters. Blistering winds, thinning altitude, and freezing temperatures are as much characters in the story as a description of a longtime hiking partner. Words like "beautiful," "grand," and "vast" are the go-to narratives that are told and not shown. Towering mountain peaks lord over a hiker, taxing half of each breath. Blistering winds slice through their jacket, leaving a naked marble statue. With each laborious exhale, frost creates ice crystals in the hiker's nose, shattering like glass. Including action is the key to showing and not telling in creative nonfiction writing.

Credibility is vital in all writing, but especially in nonfiction writing, because it is expected that the characters and the situations they find themselves in are something the reader would likely encounter at the same location. No matter what peril a character experiences, the circumstances must, first and foremost, be believable. Just as a Floridian might drive twenty-five miles per hour down a steep mountain pass in Colorado while being cursed at by angry locals, perspective plays an essential role in credibility. What is worth a reader's attention depends heavily on what they hope to gain. More so, a writer's experience, or lack thereof, must be tempered by the requirement to be credible.

Intention is the base element of credible writing. If the writer intends to tell a sensational story for recognition or financial gain, they may stretch the storyline past the point of credibility. Credible writing in the action-adventure/nature genre must respect the bounds and limitations of

the author. What might seem interesting or even sensational to the author may be common knowledge in the community they are writing to. Credible writers serve their readers and not themselves.

Writing should excite a reader's curiosity, introduce a subject that stimulates thought, and resonate within a reader's life. Readers should gain some value for the effort they expend reading a portion of prose. The writer should provide the reader with a positive value proposition. A hiker may have experienced an emotional boost from crossing the Continental Divide for the first time. However, expressing how that matters to the reader is the difference between quality prose and a personal diary.

Sometimes, readers do not know what they need from a particular piece of writing. It is not the work of the author to write on subjects they are uninterested in solely to meet the needs of potential readers. The critical distinction in writing with the wrong intention, thereby sacrificing credibility, is writing with charisma and excitement that is palatable to any reader, regardless of their interest in a particular subject. It is possible to write about the legislation that established Shoshone National Forest, the nation's first national forest, with such passion and enthusiasm that the story of the legislative acts of the U.S. Congress in 1891 enthralls readers. The key is to establish how the reader benefits from such legislation, namely the eventual conservation of 640 million acres of land that is literally owned by the reader and set aside for their personal "benefit and enjoyment."

When analyzing the life and written work of John Muir, it can be daunting for prospective creative nonfiction writers to consider their chances of having such a wide-ranging impact on their craft. It should be encouraging to know that most of what John Muir wrote was

not published until 1957, some forty-three years after he died in 1914. In *Culture Making*, Andy Crouch advises writers looking to make a similar mark on the world, "The bigger the change we hope for, the longer we must be willing to invest, work, and wait for it. Even the resurrection of Jesus, the most extraordinary invention of God in history, took hundreds of years to have widespread cultural effects. The only way to change culture is to create more of it. Creativity is the only viable source of change" (Crouch 57-73). Modern writers of creative nonfiction in the action-adventure/nature genre must be willing to consider the needs of their readers and write with resonance and credibility in such a way as to capture their imagination.

In conclusion, this paper examined the work of Christian naturalist John Muir, highlighting his impact on the literary traditions of nonfiction writing and his contributions to the development of creative works in the action-adventure/nature genre. The paper reviewed relevant scholarship and primary sources that inform the academic community's understanding of action-adventure/nature writing and explained the relevant theories and other significant interpretive practices used in developing *Three Years with Buffalo Bill*, a creative nonfiction work in the action-adventure/nature genre.

Chapter 3

Creative Manuscript: *Three Years with Buffalo Bill*

High above a uniformly planted pine forest and free from the bonds of gravity, I flap my arms gently and float from treetop to treetop—a reoccurring dream so vivid and convincing, perhaps a time wrinkle of an experience yet lived. There is nothing more to the dream, just me floating effortlessly and without burden above the trees. Awake, I am terrified of heights.

That is why it is so strange to find myself standing on a craggy cliff above a rugged lake in northwestern Wyoming. My uncontrollable fear of heights stiffens my muscles. Shallow breathing matches the tightness that grips my chest. Lightheaded, my depth perception is untrustworthy, making the cliff's edge uncertain. I am both scared to death and as free as ever. I have but one step to take: one that cannot be un-stepped, a step of faith.

Faith is more than believing in what we cannot see; often, faith is believing in what we cannot even imagine as possible. An element of faith is involved in all of life's best experiences. Without faith, we would never wander and likely never experience wonderful. Wondering what it would be like to walk the entire shoreline of this vast wilderness, I step out and head west around this wild place.

The trip around the 8150-acre Buffalo Bill Reservoir begins with wonder, but the 42-mile journey over arid terrain and rocky shoreline takes much more than wonder to complete. Nestled in the Absaroka Mountains near the East Entrance to Yellowstone National Park, wilderness this grand challenges inflated personal perceptions, making even the most cynical among us attentive to our motivations. I take this journey around the reservoir to consider, without the distraction of

cushy comforts, what the essential elements of modern life are. Food, shelter, clothing, fuel—have they changed since Thoreau penned Walden in 1854 (Thoreau 9)? How much time is spent on things that leave the happiness quotient unbalanced—costing more happiness than is gained? With food, shelter, clothing, and fuel, I step out.

Day 1.

3.16 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center to North Shore Bay boat ramp.

It was 2 o'clock on Sunday, April 25th, 2021, a comfortable 60° outside. It was primarily overcast; the same short bursts of sunshine that warmed my arms also illuminated the dusty canyon walls surrounding the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center. I was beaming with anticipation heading into the 42-mile hike around historic Buffalo Bill State Park just outside Cody, Wyoming.

The parking lot had six cars, an all-time high for the many years I have visited the park during the winter. Soaring straight overhead was the imposing 9100-foot cliffs of Rattlesnake Mountain that remained oriented there until I reached the western terminus of the reservoir at Gibbs Bridge. On the opposing side of the reservoir are the breathtaking 7800-foot red cliffs of Cedar Mountain adorned with a white ring that signifies its marriage to the reservoir at the high water line. The reservoir is clear, making it possible to see six feet into the depth before it drops into the abyss 157 feet below the surface. If there were trout, they would have been easily visible from this vantage. I wore a T-shirt and hiking pants, and the weather was perfect for hiking.

I left the parking lot and immediately hiked close to the edge of the sandstone cliff overlooking the depths below. My extreme fear of heights caused my chest to tighten, resulting in shortness of breath. Moving one inch closer to the edge took two feet of courage. It was hard to think without involuntarily grunting in fear. If the rock had given way, I would have either

been crushed by the rock fall or drowned in the depths of the water with a heavy pack strapped tightly to my back.

Piles of sun-bleached driftwood were stacked near the end of the reservoir closest to the 350-foot Buffalo Bill Dam. Then 325 feet, the imposing grey structure was the highest concrete dam in the world when completed in 1910 (Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center). The straight-line driftwood formations sat about thirty feet above the waterline and a hundred feet below my precarious position.

A few minutes into the journey, I encountered a fishing shack someone had built out of large pieces of driftwood. The log-cabin-like shack sat thirty feet below. My path was washed out to the highway guardrail, so I had the trek's first challenging decision: climb down the washout to the fishing shack or cross the guardrail and walk on the highway for nearly a mile. Since the tourist traffic was picking up on this thoroughfare into Yellowstone National Park, and the scenery around the road distracted drivers, I chose the less risky venture and found the least dangerous route to work safely down the cliff.

Up ahead, a Canada Goose was sitting on the cliff and taking in the beauty of this place. My unwelcome interruption garnered a loud honk of disapproval. The driftwood shack near the bottom of the cliff looked to be straight from a rural fishing village on the Mediterranean. A light rain made the path slippery while descending the rocks to the water's edge.

What was immediately apparent from this vantage was the large cracks in the rocky cliff. Even though I was closer to the waterline, my fear of heights kicked in as I considered the risk of standing on the cliff's edge just a few minutes before. I was shaken out of my thoughts by

the fast-flapping wings of an Eared Grebe, a small brown waterfowl with a bright red eyepatch paddling out into the water.

Having only been in this venture for a few minutes, the beauty of simple things became noticeable. A rectangle rock was chiseled geometrically perfect by nothing more than time, water, and freezing temperatures. Its shape was so perfect that it stood out among the thousands of boulders lining the path.

The next task was a boulder scramble, nothing but boulders of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see. Some were as large as a bus, some about the size of a grown man, none good to walk on. The boulders required intense concentration to navigate, or the consequences would be devastating. My hiking poles clanged and vibrated with every strike on this uneven, rocky surface. Stopping to take a break from watching my feet, I caught a glimpse of Devil's Tooth, a peak on the south side of the reservoir.

Down at the water's edge, I saw what appeared to be an animal femur and wondered if the boulders perched precariously above had shifted and crushed some unsuspecting creature. What a way to go. So much emphasis is placed on living well these days when, in times past, just as much emphasis was given to dying well.

An amusing text popped in from friends of more than 29 years, and I wondered what they were doing on this day. I thought about how abundantly blessed my life is. How does a trailer park kid from Florida find his way into this vast wilderness? I counted my blessings to be physically able to embark on this adventure. Failing in some great adventure is still satisfying,

although I have never experienced it. Adventurous people are always successful, as the journey attempted is the best measure of a life well lived. Adventure is a never-fail venture.

A twelve-inch square piece of sandstone split by time and weather obstructed the path. It is so perfectly thin and flat that the little boy in me wondered if it would float. Taking the time to satisfy my curiosity, I tossed it as level as possible into the water, its displacement only reluctantly allowing it to sink slowly into the depths.

The terrain is so unforgiving that one of the bright blue hiking poles I have used for hundreds of hikes around the world became pinned between two boulders. I pulled to dislodge it, and the handle came off, leaving the pole behind. Hiking poles are designed to take pressure pushing downward; this hike demands that I also pull upward on the poles. Sometimes, we find ourselves in situations where pressure comes from every direction. We must stand tough, take the world's weight, and keep moving forward to finish our journey. I slipped the handle back on, dislodged the pole, and kept moving forward.

A bus-sized boulder is propped above my position by the most minuscule of rocks. Like a Chihuahua barking at the Great Dane, I considered what would happen if the boulder changed its mind and decided to come down. I concluded that there would be no great moves or maneuvers; I would die. Life is fragile, a handbreadth relative to the eternity of time. Every day, we do a thousand things in which our life hangs in the balance. Every single day could be our last. Life is delicate, but it's never more evident than when you are standing below an enormous boulder propped on small, shifty rocks. I quickly moved on; this is no place to consider such things.

My first fall came just a few minutes into the hike. Foolishly stepping into loose gravel while looking up at the precariously-propped boulder, I fell six feet to the water's edge. In the panic, my eyes never left the boulder since it was perched on the same small rocks that shifted underfoot. Being so focused on the boulder, I ignored the small rocks I was stepping on.

It is usually not the big things in life that have the most impact. The little things, the seemingly insignificant day-to-day things, matter so much more. Every small decision we make tumbles through our lives. The big rocks can kill you, but the small rocks can make you miserable. I ran through the hikers "Am I okay?" checklist: knees, ankles, wrists. I was okay and moved on.

Over the next rocky cliff was my first impasse. It was a mono-climb, a vertical and smooth rocky ridge coming out of the lake and going to the top of the cliff high above my head. There was no going over, only up and around. I was out of breath as I crawled up the cliff like a coconut crab. Only fifty feet above the water's edge, my Florida-boy lungs were a burning testament that the surface of this lake is 5382 feet above sea level.

A pavement of neatly stacked driftwood lined the rocky formation atop the boulders; a wooden highway weaved together at the high-water line. I cautiously crossed several sun-withered log bridges, only to learn they were as sturdy as any bridge built by modern engineers. Some driftwood logs had sharp stubby branches sticking out in every direction, like barbed wire. If I fell, the driftwood would skewer me. Rambo would be proud of their challenge to hikers traversing this terrain.

One hour into the hike, the rain picked up. Even with the rain, my throat was burning with dryness from the arid terrain. I was shocked that after exerting so much effort, I was only .6 miles from the start of the hike. Finally lifting my head from the intense boulder scrambling, I realized I was parallel to where the spiny west tip of Cedar Mountain juts into the reservoir.

Known locally as Spirit Mountain, Cedar Mountain will be the final terminus of this hike. In the 1906 version of Buffalo Bill Cody's last will and testament, he requested to be buried on Cedar Mountain overlooking his namesake town of Cody, Wyoming, with only a buffalo monument marking his grave. A subsequent will in 1913 left his burial arrangements to his wife. When he died in Denver in 1917, his wife accepted a monetary offer from the city of Denver and the Denver Post newspaper to have him buried in the Denver area to serve as a tourist attraction. As local legend goes, the enraged people of Cody *spirited* away his body from the Denver mortuary in an elaborate ruse and buried him on Cedar Mountain. Whether or not he was buried on Cedar Mountain, a buffalo monument was erected as he requested (Freedman 195).

At only two hundred yards across the reservoir, it was still seven hiking days at this pace. Just off the tip of Cedar Mountain were a dozen Eared Grebes. What an awe-inspiring place. My feet were hurting from the boulder scrambling; the bottoms of my sturdy hiking shoes already looked like papier-mâché.

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep are my favorite animal and a primary reason why I chose to settle in this area. They are majestic and often associated with a healthy environment due to the species' sensitivity to human-related environmental impacts. Because they cannot move quickly through deep snow, they prefer the unthinkable heights of the cliff's face. God designed them with perfect features to navigate the heights with ease. For the rams to bear fifty-

pound curved horns on their head, they are equipped with split hooves (a rigid outside rim used for digging into the ground with a soft spongy inside used for traction) that pinch and hold rocks like claws (Denver Zoo). Because of my fear of heights traversing these cliffs, I have difficulty focusing on anything but the death-defying risk they take.

Cliffs of shifting rocks around the reservoir gave me a sudden revelation concerning heights. The higher one hikes up the cliff, the fewer shifty rocks are perched above; the higher you rise, the less risk of rocks, snow, or mountain lions impacting you. Gaining a new understanding that walking at heights is safer for the sheep because they only need to trust their natural abilities, I developed a new appreciation and kinship with them. A Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep I am not; I slip and fall a second time, scaring away the Eared Grebes—scaring me.

A little farther, I saw what looked to be a deer skull with vertebrates and wondered how it died. Did the shifty rocks crush it? Did it lose its footing? How precarious are my feeble feet if something so agile and graceful could lose its life on these rocks? An hour and a half into the hike, I was only .75 miles from the starting point. The boulder scramble was brutal. It looked like the parking lot I started at, near the visitor's center, was still only twenty feet away; my shaky legs told a different story. Only 41.25 miles to go. Even though I am relatively fit, I was using muscles that never get used, trying to balance in every direction on every step. My feet would go in every direction like deer hooves on a frozen pond—if that pond were vertical and filled with sharp boulders.

I stowed the hiking poles in my pack because it was impossible to watch where I placed my feet and the poles simultaneously on this terrain. Such is life; there are things we think we

must have—our crutches. These things only slow us down, make us miserable, or even kill us. Perhaps it is a toxic relationship, alcohol or drugs, or a reluctance to reach beyond our comfort zone. It is hard not to relate this place's challenges to life's travails. Thoreau observed that there are professors of philosophy nowadays but not philosophers. Perhaps nature on this scale turns us all into philosophers again. Inspiration peaks in wild places, and the vast grandeur of this mountain lake makes one feel small, causing reflection on who they are and where they fit into the seasons of life out here.

Just past the tip of Cedar Mountain, about five feet from the shoreline, the water was bubbling—a spot worth sauntering in for a moment. Boiling water could be heard across the reservoir when the wind briefly died. Right where the sound came from, I noticed pastel yellow minerals painted like watercolor on Cedar Mountain's eroded white sandstone spires.

The explorer John Colter dubbed what is now called the North Fork Shoshone River that flows through the reservoir the "Stinking Water" because of sulfurous gases emanating from geothermal features. Anticipating the opening of Yellowstone's East Entrance in 1903, the Wyoming legislature changed the river's name to be more tourist-friendly in 1902 (Northwest College Wyoming). Many of those geothermal features were covered when the Bureau of Reclamation flooded the river valley in 1910.

It was exciting knowing that the ending point of this journey could contain a dip in the hot springs that I could hear bubbling on the other side of the reservoir. In anticipation, I dipped my hand in the bubbling water below me, and much to my surprise, it was cold. A disappointing realization: Gasses, not increased temperature, generated the bubbling water. The smell of sulfur and alkaline was overpowering, like a pot of rotten egg yolks boiling in salty beef broth. If you

smell the sulfur-alkaline mixture for yourself, you will understand just how accurate of a description this is (formed by many hours of apothecary-like consideration).

.87 miles and nearly two hours into the journey, I was just below the second highway overlook. Slamming car doors and loud voices echoed down to my location below the cliff. The proximity to the highway might lead some to believe that this place is civilized, tamed by the hand of civil engineers. A hundred feet below the modern road into Yellowstone National Park, the boulders beating against my hiking shoes wrote a different story on my aching feet. The original road into Yellowstone's East Entrance can still be seen throughout Buffalo Bill State Park. The remnants of two bridge abutments flank either side of the park headquarters, and looking closely, one can see unnatural ridges cut into the surrounding hills where the road once wound through the park.

An Eared Grebe shot out from beneath a boulder. The flapping sound of its undersized wings sounded like falling rocks, blasting my body with adrenalin and causing my heart to beat at the same pace as its little wings. I took a few more steps and had the first view of what appeared to be a reasonably rock-free beach about a quarter mile ahead. Even with shaky legs, the thought of soft terrain caused my pace to quicken. The altitude stole my breath, and I fell back into the pace I had previously settled into, realizing that the terrain established the pace out here.

As I stopped to catch my breath, I considered that Thoreau did not list oxygen as an essential element of life, nor did he specifically mention water. We could live much longer without food, shelter, clothing, and fuel than oxygen or water. Perhaps it never occurred to him

that clean air and water would not always be so readily available. What else might he have missed in the hierarchy of necessities if he had not considered air and water?

Two hours and fourteen minutes have passed, and I have only traveled 1.6 miles. I finally reached the sandy beach just as my knees, ankles, and feet screamed out for a pardon from the boulders that govern who can pass along the southern shore of the park. The beach came with a 20-mile-per-hour face-smacking wind that made my face, neck, and arms join the conversation with my knees, ankles, and feet. There was no reprieve in sight in this rugged environment.

The intense sunlight and wind cutting into my arms and neck showed that clothing is essential to life. The beauty and the peril of this place are intertwined. I saw remnants of human activity, two Bud Light Lime bottles, and a bag of Goldfish crackers. Why is it always Bud Light? I cannot recall seeing Asahi or German imports left as litter while hiking in various landscapes across six continents.

The section of shoreline between the Marquette Low Water Ramps and the North Shore Bay boat ramp is particularly familiar. Just after retiring, my wife of twenty-five years and I spent many weeks camping in this waterfront section of the park while looking for land to start a homestead. We have enjoyed sunsets, moonlit campfires, and roasted many marshmallows here. The sun-bleached rocks with the dry, stinging wind always make me think of Jesus and the Sea of Galilee. The two landscapes look surprisingly similar.

A rental R.V. passed by on the highway above; a seagull meandered overhead at the same pace as the R.V.—a seagull in the middle of land-locked Wyoming. I grew up five miles from

the Gulf Coast of Florida, and we never saw seagulls that far inland from the coast. I have had the opportunity to observe many birds in the wild. The majestic Golden Eagle, the Pelican, and the Osprey all dance on the wind, using drafts to float effortlessly about their business. The seagull is unique in that it almost always flies into the wind. I surmise that it must have the sturdiest wings of any bird.

I tried to be observant on the hike, but time was against me. No matter how hard I attempted to be attentive, time and again, I tended just to put my head down and get on about my business. Doing some quick math, I determined that this hike still had 40.4 miles left. The task's difficulty became more apparent as I looked through the lens of unforgiving, pace-killing terrain. Putting your head down and getting consumed with the task is a defense mechanism. People do that often, get drunk with the busyness of life, and neglect to see the beauty that surrounds them.

Two driftwood teepees decorate mile 1.8. Made from long lodge-pole-shaped pieces stacked into the conical shape of a Native American teepee, this was the hike's third set of driftwood buildings. They were a welcome break from the intense focus required in boulder scrambling. They lifted my spirit, perhaps because of their ingenuity, but likely because they represented someone having a good time with their children. People took a break from the task at hand to build something of no real purpose for no other gain than to express creativity. Being creative creatures is creation's most Creator-like expression.

The setting sun began to adorn the mountains of Shoshone National Forest and Yellowstone National Park with brilliant hews of yellow, refined by the most talented goldsmith. Almost immediately, the temperature dropped, so I put on a light jacket and a tactical

smog around my neck to retain warmth. Clothing is an essential element in this terrain. From experience, the sensitive skin on lips, ears, noses, and cheeks will crack off without clothing protection.

At the two-mile point, I got my first glimpse of what looked like an extension ladder turned on its side at the end of the reservoir. A little further, it became apparent that the ladder was Gibbs Bridge, the western terminus of the reservoir. I took a few minutes under a small stand of green trees for a snack break with water and "mountain" trail mix to restore my energy. The essential elements of my trip have been air, water, clothing, and food. But I felt that there was also something less tactile, something more vital to our mental health and resilience.

At the 2.5-mile mark, I encountered a rocky formation resembling a dragon's back. I snapped a picture, half believing it might be a prehistoric animal fossil. According to the Buffalo Bill State Park Superintendent Dan Marty, many dinosaur remains have been found in the park. Ancient bones of a horse, bison, camel, and a creature similar to a deer called an artiodactyl, and the rare find in 2018 of Columbian Mammoth bones. The wildness of this place makes everything seem possible.

At 2.66 miles in, I got discouraged about the speed at which I was trekking this 42-mile lakeshore. Perhaps I had been tied to the clock for too many years, or maybe I was relating my hike around the reservoir to the Tokyo Marathon I completed just before retiring from the military. The park is not a speed or endurance race; it must be sauntered in and absorbed with the eyes. It occurred to me that I might be setting the speed record for going around this body of water. I could be the first person ever to attempt this hike. An extensive amount of research has not shown otherwise. Even though I know it is not likely true, it boosted my spirit.

At mile 2.84, a bright red tent grew closer on the shoreline. Two half-submerged mesh pens of bloated fish floating belly-up accompanied the tent at the reservoir's edge. The area was roped off for what was no doubt some biologists or environmental experts experiment to eradicate an unwanted species of fish or study the otoliths of another. Those giant baskets filled with dead fish will contribute to knowledge and future improvements for the ecosystem or species. But for the fish in those massive baskets, it was just the end of their life. What makes one life more important than another?

Our society is drowning in a vast Wyoming reservoir of experts and information. The thing with experts is that it is difficult to know who to trust. For every expert supporting one side of an argument, there is another equally credentialed expert with the opposite opinion. Both sides claim to base their argument on fact and scientific evidence and use the accepted language of their respective profession to establish that they are the most knowledgeable. No one knows who to trust, but some pretend to know.

Experts say to stop eating something, and shortly after, another expert says just the opposite. Whole milk or 2%? Diet soda or regular soda? Well-educated experts tell us that certain drugs and chemicals are safe, FDA approved even, only to see them in late-night class action lawsuit commercials that start with, "Have you or a loved one been diagnosed with…" Often, academia develops supporting data for anything someone is willing to pay. "98% of experts agree…"—with the person paying for their research. Much trust is placed in education and experts, which often only results in someone's well-credentialed opinion.

Is education an essential element of modern life? Growing up as a poor kid in the South, I often heard, "Get your education if you want to get a good job and be successful." When

someone does not conform to societal norms, the community says, "They must lack education" or "They just need to be more informed, better educated, and they would understand my way is right."

Our society values overpriced education and the decaying wallpaper it produces. It takes the average family nearly thirty years to pay off a home loan, yet students borrow that same amount or more for their education. Is that four-year education worth the value of a home or the thirty years of effort required to repay the student loan?

Many students would benefit by considering the work-value quotient of an education. Trading thirty years of labor for four years of an institution's labor output is unfavorable. Any "increased earning" quotient touted by the seller of such an agreement does not factor in the time value of money and income potential of modern tradesmen gaining credentials through paid on-the-job training programs.

Many trust relationship advice from licensed clinical experts who have been divorced five times and fail to ask their grandparents about their marriage spanning six decades. Many latch onto the "Five Keys to Raising Children" authored by a child psychologist in an online magazine and never consider that the author's children have not spoken to them in years. More excellent learning could come from seeing the world through our neighbors' eyes, even for a moment.

Pinterest has made everyone an expert in building methods, yet there is a shortage of general contractors. Some criticize failed innovations on a TikTok video yet have never attempted to develop a single idea of their own. Automotive experts fill our society, yet quality

mechanics are as rare as the Whippoorwill in the daytime. Time-lapse YouTube videos fail to translate the intense physical labor required for yet another project started and not finished.

Students study the culinary arts, business administration, engineering concepts, and computer fundamentals, yet our nation has a shortage of chefs, entrepreneurs, engineers, and I.T. specialists. Our society values knowledge and education over action and accomplishment. Life and accomplishment—real impact—are not as simple as alliterated in well-intended college lectures.

Everyone's an expert in every field;

Yet, no car, nor business, nor house can they build.

An education they tout, with no job or tasking;

You'll get their advice without even asking.

They'll say it with conviction like they are all-knowing;

But out of their mouth, opinion is blowing.

Is education an essential element of modern life? Even though I have earned multiple graduate degrees, it is hard to see the value proposition education presented in my career. Indeed, continual learning has value, but I struggle to deem "formal" education an essential element of life.

The first day ends at the North Shore Bay boat ramp. Four hours and 44 minutes hiking time for a hard-earned 3.16 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center. Boulders, lots and lots of boulders!

Day 2.

5.21 miles from North Shore Bay boat ramp to Gibbs Bridge.

Spring had sprung by the time life allowed the second leg of the journey. It was June 5th at 1:10 PM, and I was starting at the North Shore Bay boat ramp and hiking west towards Gibbs Bridge. A green coat jacketed the sagebrush valley that the reservoir sits in. The high desert was in full bloom, filled with bright red Indian Paintbrush and florescent yellow Prickly Pear Cactus flowers. The weather was mild; the sun flashed between thick clouds that blew quickly overhead.

The day started with a dog named Stephen. Much to his owner's chagrin, Stephen thought I was playing fetch and joined in the fun as I bent over to wash my hands in the lake. Because of his effortlessly-outgoing nature, Stephen boosted my spirit, something needed for the path that awaited me. I would rather play fetch with Stephen than tackle the lengthy boulder scramble ahead.

It is 84° with a twelve-mile-per-hour headwind. While hiking into a headwind is not ideal, it is moderate and as good as it gets most of the year in this region. The day's first challenge was crossing a small drainage washout blocking my path down the beach. I only needed to step on the top of two round rocks and then jump to the other side. Simple. In a cruel plot twist, a family of five was peeking over a dune to see if I would make the sizeable leap. You already know how this ends. I yell, "You'll never see these people again," and hop, hop, jump, and splash! My leg was wet up to my butt. I felt embarrassed, so I didn't bother to look around; I knew they were watching.

The beach had lots of loose gravel with some light boulder scrambling. The high-water mark was thirty feet above my head. I settled into a comfortable lane about ten feet from the shoreline, where the sand was dense enough to cushion my step without stealing my shoe. My mouth tasted like a gravel road ten minutes into the hike. Walking noticeably faster than on the first hiking day, I wanted to slow down and see something extraordinary. I pray on every outdoor adventure: "God, show me something beautiful today. Establish the work of my pen. Let your beauty be upon me that others might see you. Create in me a clean heart. Purify my thoughts so that I may see what I might otherwise overlook."

Navigating the corner of a sixty-foot sheer cliff, I got a peek at Rattlesnake Mountain, the 9100-foot behemoth previously blocked by my precarious position between the cliff and the lake. Buffalo Bill State Park staff member Jared Brinkerhoff pointed out that from this vantage, the word "CODY" is crudely formed in the natural striations of the mountain's face. I had not seen this before, but now I cannot un-see it. The canyon at the base of the mountain is heavily forested, an area that early settlers of Marquette harvested timber from to build the homesteads and businesses that now sit underwater at the bottom of the reservoir.

The cliff beside me is layered with sandstone near the bottom, with fifteen feet of dirt near the top. Small round holes about four inches in diameter filled the dirt layer. It looked like a miniature version of the cliff dwellings at Seminole State Park in Texas, but these holes were too small for humans. No, this was a large colony of Bank Swallows, and they were actively flying around, feeding on insects in the sky above.

Just ahead, I encountered a car-sized boulder resembling the egg that came down from outer space in the T.V. show Mork & Mindy. My thoughts wandered to Robin Williams and the

great character he played in that show. Remembering how his life ended in tragedy, the funniest man on the planet never entirely fitting into society, I considered whether acceptance and affirmation are essential to modern life.

Could we survive without the acceptance and affirmation of those around us? Charity not documented on social media may not have even happened. Humility is just a proverb, something touted but no longer pursued. "Giving back" and "paying it forward" are no longer done in secret; ostentatious tweets immediately capitalize their gains. The right hand is in constant communication with the left hand. We shouldn't pretend to have humility we do not possess, but we should at least sample the sweet savor of doing right when no one is looking.

The rivers feeding this reservoir do not set about to carve a beautiful canyon on their path to the ocean. The breathtakingly deep canyon results from the river working around an obstacle. A well-intended person might learn of someone's success in changing the world and want their life to have such an impact. As such, they may pretend to possess those same characteristics. In a time equal to their fortitude, they always return to their inherent qualities—no more, no less. Nothing is wrong with this; it is who they are and their best opportunity to make a difference.

Most *successful* people don't set about to do good or aim to be something more than who they genuinely are. In so doing, they would never reach their full potential. Instead, they give each day's task their best effort, showing kindness to those the day brings their way. No person of consequence has ever become great by imitating another's virtue. Being *like Christ* is genuine and from the heart, not a false imitation of him. Each of us follows our own path to the ocean, and only after our lives pass do others see the beautiful canyon we left behind.

We follow our passions on social media, never realizing that the influencer we are so inspired by is only regurgitating the thoughts and imitating the techniques of those they follow. Content generators are almost entirely content re-generators. New platforms have replaced new concepts and ideas. Original thought has succumbed to origin thought (who the thought comes from, and the platform on which it is presented is more important than the thought itself). Who or what is the headwaters of content? We no longer have the foundation on which original thought is built. When the foundation erodes, what will good people build on?

People have been dancing since the dawn of human existence, yet placing a ten-second video of someone dancing on the latest social media platform is considered revolutionary. Millions of followers mimic this behavior with no regard for being a follower. Not a leader, a follower. Natural-born followers. We now condition our youth to follow people, to be followers. Perhaps no scourge they face is more damming than the systematic programming of "following" or "follower." This terminology is injected like larvae on every social media platform. By whom we follow, we define ourselves, our interests, and our character. Who, then, is the leader and source of creativity? Followers, following followers, following followers.

A quarter mile ahead, I saw a woman sunning on the beach and got excited at the chance of human interaction. We are social creatures. At that moment, it occurred to me that even Thoreau knew while alone in his cabin in the woods that he was writing for an audience. Was this not his reprieve from the lonesome wilderness (just two miles outside Concord, MA)? Was his social interaction and outlet any different than social media? I assert that acceptance and affirmation are, and have always been, a necessity of life.

Is it possible that social interaction, whether in-person or virtual, is as essential as oxygen, water, clothing, and food? There are a plethora of reality shows that put people in extreme wilderness situations. At first, they thrive on going about the business of surviving. Then, once the work of survival slows or the essential elements of life get scarce, social interaction is either the lifeblood of their existence or the downfall of their attempt to live a solitary existence in nature.

It is my analysis that acceptance and affirmation, whether in-person or virtual, are as essential to life as oxygen, water, clothing, and food. The only caveat is the timeline for going without them is longer. The sunbathing woman saw me coming and hightailed it to her SUV long before I could identify her. I must have caught her in a compromising position.

The rocks and boulders gave way to a fine gravel-sand mix 3.8 miles from the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center. Gibbs Bridge was visible in the distance, but it did not look close, nor was it close. Across the reservoir to the south was a very steep dirt road going up Sheep Mountain, an area I would see firsthand on the next leg of the journey. Beyond the lower elevations of Sheep Mountain, I could see Devil's Tooth starting to lose its winter ice coat.

Devil's Tooth is one of approximately three hundred prominent peaks along the ridge south of Buffalo Bill State Park. The entire ridge and the highest peak (12,324 feet) is known as Carter Mountain. As Buffalo Bill State Park staff member Jared Brinkerhoff pointed out, Carter Mountain is the largest mountain mass in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, with its north face being one of the highest of all the ranges in Wyoming or Montana, dropping 4,000 feet in one mile and 6,000 feet to the river.

Time, wind, and water have worked together to smooth the edges of the boulders near the shoreline. I cannot help but relate that to my own life experience. There were things that I was passionate about when I was younger. I devoted much time and energy to these causes and would defend my position to anyone willing or unwilling to listen. Now that I have lived on four continents and traveled to 29 countries, I see the connections between all people more broadly. Many ways exist to do the same tasks and to live a great life. There is value in dedicating your effort to loving your neighbor as yourself.

Further along, I encountered what appeared to be two rough-sawn log fence posts. At least they looked like fence posts with one end crudely beveled for use in the ground. I occupied my thoughts with the age of the old fence posts and how far they must have come down the North Fork Shoshone River to get to this point in the reservoir. Were they part of some old homestead before the Shoshone National Forest or Yellowstone National Park were developed, perhaps from the North Fork Shoshone River headwaters atop Stinkingwater Peak near Sunlight Basin?

Continuing around the reservoir, I bent over to pick up a shiny piece of pink granite. It is as smooth as glass and evokes the little boy in me. I picked up a piece of nearby driftwood and hit a couple dozen rocks into the lake; the impromptu batting practice delayed the hike considerably. The wind gusts peaked in sync with each hit, mimicking the roar of a crowded stadium.

This wilderness brought out my imagination. Perhaps our imagination is always there, just crowded by the busyness of life. The pause did my heart good. Nature only heals those who have time to take its medicine. The mountains bring peace to people. Mountains bring the

realization that there is something bigger than yourself and that you are not the most important thing in the universe; your problems are not as big as you have imagined. This realization is the first step towards understanding the one who spoke the mountains from the sea. I go to the mountains to admire the poetry of creation.

The lovely sandy beach turned into a quarter-mile-long boulder scrambling dogleg section. With my spirit lifted by the batting practice and cheering crowd of wind, I began conquering the boulders with the intensity they demanded. No one gets through the boulder scramble unscathed. A shifty rock hooked into the outside of my shoe and pressed sharply into my foot. Pain buckled me onto the ground.

A half mile further, where Rattlesnake Creek flows just below the Eagle Point picnic area, I encountered terrain similar to quicksand. I quickly sank up to my ankles before scrambling backward. I thought about the many tourists stuck on the silty shores outside of Anchorage, Alaska, and dying on the incoming tide. Just past the Eagle Point picnic area, a walkway goes under the highway from the reservoir to Shreve Lodge (available by reservation). I saw two more primitive fence posts and was now impressed at the quantity along the shoreline. An entire ranch must have gotten flooded and washed away.

It was getting late in the day, and my wife texted and asked if I wanted to be picked up. I had made it to the end of the most prolonged boulder scramble of the whole hike, but the goal for the day was Gibbs Bridge. As tempting as it was, I pressed on. A magnificent natural sculpture carved in a large gray granite slab with pink racing stripes rewarded my fortitude.

At the end of the boulder scramble, I climbed up near the roadway and realized that about forty feet above where I had been walking, there was a sandy walkway the entire length of the boulders. A sense of accomplishment quickly replaced my initial feeling of foolishness. Nothing easy brings much satisfaction. Earning your own way brings a sense of accomplishment and worth, something we often overlook in our charity and government.

Pride in accomplishment is critical to self-worth, the most essential part of a healthy human existence. The latest peer-reviewed research shows that depression is not tightly linked to low levels of serotonin in the brain as previously theorized, but more so the stress of life (Cowen 158). The most stressful event often faced by people in Western civilization is the lack of self-worth, a deficit of purpose. Our charity should complement the needs of our neighbors, not make them dependent upon us. People should help each other out of love and genuine concern, not relegating charity to the cold functions of government and taxes. Personal involvement allows the giver to determine when assistance morphs into dependence.

When Asaph penned Psalm 82 some 3,000 years ago, the wicked were preying on the fatherless, the poor, and the needy. Asaph called on God to "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course" (King James Version, Psalm 82). If you want to know who the wicked are in our society, determine who is preying on the fatherless, poor, and needy. Our nation is off course, split into two sides. One side supposedly espouses itself to the fatherless, poor, and needy. History shows that this is the ruse of the evil among us.

From the sandy walkway above the boulder scramble, I looked out over the lakeshore towards the path I had just traversed. Looking back toward Cedar Mountain, I caught the tail end of an otter diving below the rocks. He looked out of place in this deep lake. In a stroke of God's goodness, and much to my delight, he jumped out of the water like a dolphin swimming down the shoreline.

At the end of the sandy walkway was a man fishing with what appeared to be his significant other. Well, at least he was fishing; fishing did not seem to be her thing. It was the first person I had encountered since the family watched me fall into the creek. I got excited and gave a hearty "howdy," fishing for a short conversation. They seemed uninterested, and the greeting did not get a bite. I got self-conscience with their lack of response. Remembering the sun-tanning woman fleeing at the first sight of me, I wondered what I must have looked like this far into the hike.

Encountering the fifth primitive fencepost, I decided there could not be that many fenceposts along the shore. Upon closer inspection, I realized the beveled end was from a beaver's teeth. They were not fenceposts; they were merely trees cut down by beavers. I felt extra foolish. I gave it a bite, convinced it must be soft wood for a beaver to bite through it. It was not. The beaver's teeth and jaws are a godsend. Perhaps this is how we learn in nature. Someone had to find out the hard way that some mushrooms are good to eat, some are fun to eat, and some can kill you. Man makes some fence posts, and some are made by beavers.

4.96 miles from the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center, I unknowingly convinced four Canadian Geese with two chicks that getting into the water was better than seeing if I was a real

threat. A little further, a deer carcass with the skin still attached was lying on the rocks with the ligament and bone visible. He was on the water's edge, reminding me how wild this place still is.

It took one hour and 45 minutes to travel the first two miles of the day. The dust from exposed silt near the western terminus of the reservoir parched my throat. I got excited because Gibbs Bridge started to look more prominent. A small sandy cove offered a reprieve from dusty wind blasts. There was a sharp stone sticking out of the sand. I dug it out, and it appeared to be an arrowhead, so I returned it.

Above me were two Sprinter travel vans parked on the side of the highway. I am convinced that "Follow us on Instagram," an oddly curious trend, is printed on the back of the vans. Still, I did not want to expend the energy necessary to satisfy my curiosity. I cannot mention it enough that the boulder scrambling was brutal.

A sizeable Canadian Goose feather was on the rocks ahead. It occurred to me for the first time that the quill shaft looked very much like a modern pen. I know the contemporary pen is a descendant of the quill, but this was my first opportunity to tie the two together visually.

5.76 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center, and two hours into the day's hike, I stopped to drink. Water is a necessity. I ate some honey-roasted pecans. Food is a necessity. I stood under cottonwood trees to block the sun and wind. Shelter is a necessity. In some climates, it may be possible to survive longer without shelter, but shelter from exposure is ultimately necessary in every environment. Shelter is an obvious necessity in this harsh climate. At this point in my journey, I was convinced that oxygen, water, food, clothing, shelter, and social interaction were all necessities.

I looked back at Cedar Mountain six miles into the hike, and it seemed as close as it did from where I began at the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center. A short while later, I stopped at the beginning of a boulder field to get a rock out of my shoe and tighten my shoelace. I got my first fall of the day when I stood up and started into the boulders. The slight adjustment to my shoe changed the whole balance of my gait because my legs were already tired.

Brewer Blackbirds filled the sagebrush on the cliff above. I walked fast on the sandy stretches and slowed down on the boulder scrambles. While I concentrated more on my feet during the boulder scrambles, I was also deeper in thought and more reflective. I became more appreciative of the little things because of the slower and more intense pace.

Slow down. Enjoy life. Appreciate those that matter most before they are gone. Be quiet in trust, not crying for need all the time. This hike showed me that we do not need much. We spend valuable time pursuing things that add little to our happiness. Many things that consume our time are not worth the value they take to chase. Real wealth is measured by the things a person can afford to do without.

6.26 miles from the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center, there was a group of teenagers sunbathing and hanging out. This time, I walked high up on the bank because interacting with a group of people is awkward when you are alone coming into it. Besides, I must have looked frightening based on my previous two encounters. A quarter mile further, I arrived at the southernmost point of the reservoir's north shore. The wind was blowing 20 miles per hour, so I raised my arms and yelled, "I'm king of the world," Titanic style. I felt better.

7.16 miles in, there was a brutal boulder scramble that extended nearly the entire rest of the hike to Gibbs Bridge. This section's pink and grey granite was so steep and treacherous that you must constantly watch every step. Taking your eyes off of your feet for one second, you would likely get seriously injured. Even the most immense boulders moved with my body weight if they were in the right position. During the most challenging times, you have no choice but to put your head down, put one foot in front of the other, and get on with it. The large granite boulders moving with my weight reminded me that the impossible is often possible. With God, there is no impossible.

I finished the boulder scramble at 7.81 miles from the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor's Center and entered the North Fork Shoshone River section of mud flats. The North Fork Shoshone River only partially keeps this dry, silty soil on the ground. Vast dust clouds stretching the entire distance of the reservoir are visible for many miles on windy days. The North Fork Dike, a long curved section of rock intended for dust abatement in this reservoir section, helps, but the dust can still be unbearable sometimes. I was excited when I saw my wife waiting for me on Gibbs Bridge.

Traversing the mud flats quickly, I unknowingly scared a whole flock of Canadian Geese into flight. The geese were resting in a shallow, flooded area. The overpowering smell of bird droppings saturated the wind. Still, this is one of the most pristine rivers in the country. The wind gave one last challenge, a dust storm that would rival any desert country.

The second day ended at Gibbs Bridge, three hours and 45 minutes of hiking time for a hard-earned 5.21 miles. It was a world-record pace, no doubt. I was 8.37 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

Day 3.

6.12 miles from Gibbs Bridge to the eastern tip of the South Shore Day Use Area.

Get thee behind me, summer! After two months of 105+ degree temperatures and a thick blanket of smoke from the wildfires in the Pacific Northwest, Buffalo Bill State Park returned to the kind of inhospitable place I wanted to hike. The ever-changing faces of Buffalo Bill Reservoir had now put on a different look. The reservoir was low, historically low.

The slow pace of my first year of retirement had shifted like the reservoir, giving way to the busyness of a new life. We were just days from finishing construction on our retirement home and had adopted a 3-year-old boxer named "Hicks." Completing the final classes of my MBA, school, and a minor surgery had sidelined hiking for almost a month.

Sadly, we also made an emergency trip to Florida for the death of a dear nephew. COVID-19 took him at the young age of 35. Why do we consider one life long and another short? The beauty of a river is not measured by how far it flows. Time is always a temporal perspective. When measured against an eternal God, all lives are cut short. Generations pass to generations as snow falls and melts into the river—God is ever to ever. What makes us especially sad about a loved one dying young? Not what they missed out on but what they left behind. Namely, us.

Most hiking books capture a trail experience suspended in a small window of time, a snapshot of what the trail was like for the author. A person hiking the same trail a week before

or after could have a different experience. It is fitting that I hiked Buffalo Bill State Park over three years to capture as much of the ever-shifting grandeur as possible.

Starting at Gibbs Bridge on November 3rd, 2021, at 2:15 pm on a bright and sunny 57° day, I encountered a 25-mile-per-hour wind that whipped out of the west. The wind was so strong it felt like it could blow me off the bridge, but that was probably my fear of heights kicking in. Even at these mild temperatures, hiking in a hoody is necessary because the Wyoming wind amplifies even the mildest cold.

The North Fork Shoshone River was crystal clear and fast-flowing. Silty mud flats were entirely exposed, revealing the ever-changing shoreline of Buffalo Bill Reservoir. Taking the first trail off the bridge, I left my wife and Hicks sitting in the North Fork Campground. I headed East along the Sheep Mountain Day Use Area and passed along the eastern side of Gibbs Bridge. There was a large patch of what appeared to be cotton plants in full bloom. The large cotton balls reminded me of the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta, where I was stationed for the first five years of my military career. Seemingly out of place in northwest Wyoming, the Eriophorum, or Artic cottongrass of the Sedge family, is a native plant species in this area.

The East Entrance to Yellowstone National Park would be closing in one week. Winter's fast approach was apparent by the trickle of tourists now frequenting Yellowstone. Walking along the river bank, I kept a steady eye on the slack water for trout fattening up now that the shallow water was cooling off.

The river winds through the dark black, silty flats, the last remaining indications of summer. Only a pair of boot tracks sunk deep in the rich soil spoke to the great fishing here

earlier in the season. The river flowed over a large rock, providing a symphony of beautiful sound in what was otherwise a smooth flow through the silty flats.

Like scaly skin, the receding reservoir left large blocks of dried and cracked silt about four feet in diameter. The dry, silty blocks moved with each step, revealing a powdery undercoat that quickly blew ahead in the wind. Small pieces of dried silt about the size of a dime flaked off and made a crumbly noise as they blew ten feet ahead. In this way, my steps preceded me.

The wind rippled the slack-water North Fork Shoshone River against the bank in what resembled a tropical mangrove swamp more than a rushing snow-fed mountain river. The topography transitioned to a rocky shoal a bit further down, and the river took on its familiar sound and fast flow—a symphony of snowmelt. From the vantage of the rocky shoal, the silty layer that covered the reservoir floor was at least three feet thick.

.55 miles from Gibbs Bridge and headed east along the river, the scaly blocks of dried silt transitioned to thoroughly dried silt blocks the same density as sandstone. The blocks were filled with light brown and red hues, the same color and structure as the sandstone in the Absaroka Mountains' foothills surrounding the reservoir. At some point in history, the sandstone formations high above the park were no doubt formed similarly by quickly receding water. I took a short break while considering the flood account found in the Bible (King James Version, Gen. 8).

My wife and I attempted to fish in this section of the river during the peak of summer. It was pretty well unfishable because the water depth, stream flow, and water temperature were

inhospitable to trout. This time of year, the water depth was an average of three feet deep, the stream flow was perfect, and the water temperature had returned to pristine trout habitat.

The dry, silty shore gave way to a fine, powdery gravel. The river had cut through the granular gravel, leaving a nice overhang several hundred yards down the bank, a prime structure for native Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout. The Bald Eagles and Ospreys patrolling this river segment attested to that fact.

Too close to the river bank, my left shoe sucked underneath the deep muck just below the dry powdery gravel. It took several attempts to dislodge the shoe, which came loose with the sucking-plunger sound of regret. I slowly made my way out with one shoe in my hand and only a muddy sock on the foot it came off. I put my shoe back on over the sock; these temperatures guaranteed a long hike with one wet, muddy foot.

A hundred yards further, I looked back at where I lost the shoe. This vantage showed that the area was the path the river followed earlier in the summer. The dry, powdery rock was the old riverbed, full of mud just below the surface. The fine gravel was a deceptive trap that made me look pretty foolish. Laughing at my ignorance, I said, "Aren't you pretty stupid!" and moved on.

Around the river bend, there was a sizeable mudflat. I kept my shoes on my feet this time and headed up the forty-foot bank above the mud. At the top of the riverbank was Stagecoach Campground, an area the park is developing to accommodate the throngs of visitors that flood the area during summer. The campsite was part of the South Shore Day Use Area, across from the Sheep Mountain Trailhead, which the Bureau of Land Management manages.

As the reservoir receded during the summer, it left water level indentions in the shore approximately four feet wide that resembled the layered rice terraces of Asia. At least ten of these terraces were going down to the water's edge, and it was a site to see carved into the sun-bleached stones that lined the shore.

I intentionally put my head down for the next half mile. I covered good ground, partially because of the construction debris and equipment, and though I hate to admit it, somewhat because I had not been out hiking much that summer and wanted to enjoy the peace of things. Although temporary, the sound of tractors and dump trucks was not what I was in the park for.

1.59 miles from Gibbs Bridge and one hour into the day's hike, the mouth of the North Fork Shoshone River met the Buffalo Bill Reservoir. The union point of the river and the lake is ever-changing. The mud I lost a shoe in could have been under forty feet or more of water the previous spring.

There was a lot of powdery-white alkaline dust along the shoreline. I chose a path based on the color of the sand and alkaline. Color was the best indication of ground firmness. The lighter the color, the firmer the ground. The darker the color, the more chance of losing a shoe in the sucking mud.

The environment in the park requires the hiker to use all their senses and intellect or risk looking foolish—or much worse. I stopped for a minute and considered that my shadow and the dust from my steps had preceded me by ten feet all day. A person's shadow and steps preceding them—that does not happen much in life. Natural beauty and raw ruggedness sharpen the senses, creating a heightened ability to be more contemplative.

1.85 miles from Gibbs Bridge, a row of fence posts, not of the beaver kind, stretched down into the water. Silt partially buried some of the posts at the higher side of the bank. When the reservoir gets historically low, it is possible to see remnants of human activity that transpired here before the dam flooded this beautiful valley. Some remnants are from the settlers who lived in the valley before the reservoir, and some are from old portions of Buffalo Bill State Park that flooded when the Bureau of Reclamation increased the dam's crest by twenty-five feet in 1993 (Bureau of Reclamation).

William "Buffalo Bill" Cody envisioned damming the Shoshone River to create a water and hydroelectric power source for his namesake town of Cody, which he founded in 1896, making it possible to provide accommodations for crowds of visitors to the newly established Yellowstone National Park. Completed in 1910, the Buffalo Bill Dam and the resulting reservoir had broader cultural impacts on the region. Buffalo Bill State Park is built on land originally owned by Colonel Cody and was acquired by the federal government, along with 60,000 acres of water rights, to implement the reservoir project (National Park Service).

Buffalo Bill Reservoir is the source of life in northwest Wyoming and is as critical to the region's cultural identity as its namesake. The 8,150-acre reservoir sits at the confluence of two rivers that explorer John Colter knew as the Salt Fork Shoshone River and the Stinking Water River when he passed through what he deemed "Crow Country" (named after the Crow Indian Tribe) in 1807-1808. Many other native peoples inhabited the area, including groups known as the Shoshone (Bureau of Reclamation).

Early settlers established the frontier town of Marquette at the confluence of the rivers around 1878, taking advantage of the year-round water source and strong Chinook winds that swept the converging canyons clean of deep snow. When 1872 legislation established

Yellowstone National Park just 46 miles to the west, the area became of national importance as the East Entrance to the park. After the nearby town of Cody was incorporated in 1901, the Stinking Water River and Salt Fork Shoshone River were renamed the more tourist-friendly North Fork and South Fork Shoshone River in 1903.

President Theodore Roosevelt created the Bureau of Reclamation in 1902 to manage the water projects needed to develop the American West. The bureau set out to capture surplus water from the heavy snowmelt and spring rains that often flooded western towns. Most importantly, it led efforts to distribute the water reserves to the surrounding villages and communities, making agriculture possible during the hot and dry summer months (Bureau of Reclamation).

The Shoshone Project is among the bureau's oldest projects, serving as the template for the Bureau of Reclamation efforts, which presently manages 348 reservoirs across 17 western states. As the nation's largest wholesale water supplier, the bureau delivers water to more than 31 million people each year, with the capacity to provide the water needs of 959 million more. The reservoirs patterned after The Shoshone Project support 58 hydroelectric power plants that support 3.9 million households, making them the fifth largest electric utility across the 17 western states they serve (Bureau of Reclamation).

The Bureau of Reclamation's Wyoming Area Office manages twenty reservoirs that provide water storage capacity for up to 19.2 million people and twelve power plants with a combined capacity to support 280,000 households. Of them, the Buffalo Bill Dam and Reservoir allowed irrigation of the Bighorn Basin, converting a 100-mile-wide swath of semi-arid sagebrush-covered plain into the 107,000-acre heart of Wyoming's agricultural community.

The Shoshone River converges with the Big Horn River nearly 100 miles downstream from the dam. The controlled release of water from Buffalo Bill Reservoir made it possible for early settlers to develop hand-dug irrigation canals that supported farming operations across the Bighorn Basin. The towns of Powell, Byron, and Lovell sprung to life in what was previously considered an inhospitable high-desert plain. The Shoshone Project has impacted generations of families, not only supporting their agricultural way of life but also fundamentally making life across the plain possible (Buffalo Bill Dam and Visitor Center).

Buffalo Bill Reservoir was incorporated into Buffalo Bill State Park in 1957, a land conservation and utilization trend that followed at six other reservoirs across Wyoming. With major road and tunnel projects completed that year, visitors were no longer exposed to the risk early park visitors experienced as they transited Colter's Hell, the Shoshone River canyon downstream from the Buffalo Bill Dam. Even so, the area retains most of its rugged wildness despite our best efforts to capture the tremendous natural resources pulsing through it.

It has been well over one hundred years since Marquette, the tiny frontier town at the confluence of the rivers, was flooded to make the Buffalo Bill Reservoir. Yellowstone National Park now hosts 4.8 million visitors a year, with well over 400,000 passing unknowingly through Colter's Hell, beside Buffalo Bill Reservoir, following the pleasantly-renamed North Fork Shoshone River to the East Entrance of Yellowstone (National Park Service). Visitors to the park stay in the hotels lining Sheridan Avenue in Cody, enjoying the electric lights, fresh local vegetables, and ice-cold drinking water the reservoir delivers all summer. Buffalo Bill's vision, The Shoshone Project, has been fully realized. For the generations that have lived and worked across the region it supports, the project is more than a way of life; it is life itself.

2.04 miles from Gibbs Bridge, there was a section of wide rocky beach with a fairly steep cliff line. Quietly hiked along this section, I was unknowingly smiling. It had been a couple of months since I had been out in nature, and this wild place made me happy from the inside out. The involuntary smile was inditing a good matter within, a welcomed expression of my love for the park, nature, and the Creator of such places.

My mind wandered, thinking about a situation where someone asks what I do for a living (an American practice that is offensive in many other cultures). I often reply that I have dedicated the balance of my life to rivers, mountains, and the beauty of wild places. My sole purpose is to find the beauty that surrounds us and acknowledge that the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.

What a wonderful meditation to have while you are sauntering by yourself, in a good deep thought, surrounded by wilderness. My heart is the pen of a ready writer, unto God my exceeding joy. I write unto God—for no other purpose or audience—but to express my love in thanksgiving. My heart is the ink well, my mind is the pen, my gratitude the inspiration, my book without end.

Are purpose and impact necessities of modern life? More than ever, we want our lives to have a purpose, to matter—to have an impact. With modern technology at our ready, we believe this is more possible than any other generation. Not just impact, but global impact. Yet, no generation has ever inherited such a diminished opportunity to make their mark. There has never been so little of the planet left to explore, so little industry remaining to invent or improve, and so few concepts left to validate. Information and statistics replace wonder and awe. Criticism and pettiness replace creativity and productivity.

No generation has ever been so ill-equipped to make an impact; fortitude and perseverance have never been poorly handed down. We are duped into believing that "increasing awareness" is a real impact, and it comes without getting our hands dirty, without experiencing the awkwardness of human interaction, and without the intimate act of giving of ourselves to help a neighbor in need. All we need is a well-edited Facebook or Instagram post. That will be our purpose, our impact. We increased awareness and maybe only slightly tooted our own horn.

Stopping in a small sandy cove to enjoy the windbreak, I read an encouraging text from a friend who enjoyed a poem I had written on her birthday card. Looking over the reservoir, I could distinguish a silty brown flow where the North Fork Shoshone River maintained its original path through the deepest section of bluish-green lake that surrounded it. What a story God allowed me to read!

Nature is a journal of God's thoughts. His very words are written on the parchment of wilderness. Rivers and streams are a masterpiece of beautiful poetry—scripted on the scroll of the canyon floor. Sunrise is a tale beaming with God's expression of joy—articulated with graceful perfection. Sunset is a love story that is read again and again. Early morning twilight is the binding that covers the book of life, each chapter beginning with hope and promise: life, beautiful life, written by the hand of God.

The sandy beach gave way to a steep rocky shoreline about sixty feet in height, of which I walked about halfway up. The rocky shoreline extended approximately one-quarter mile, traversing in and out of small sandy coves. 2.44 miles from Gibbs Bridge, I entered what I believed to be the deepest cove, about 200 yards from the prevailing shoreline. There were

remnants of children at play. As had been the norm, there was a driftwood teepee and Y-shaped sticks fashioned into a fishing rod holder.

Distracted by the spectacular views, I lost my footing. I made a reasonably athletic move to narrowly avoid breaking my face and slipped on the boulders down the cliff. A quarter mile further, my athleticism was rewarded with a cricked neck to remind me that I was a 47-year-old military veteran. Military vet life is the "city miles" of aging.

The shoreline flattened 2.7 miles from Gibbs Bridge, giving way to shoe-size rocks and boulders. The sun was setting and projecting every variation of gold hues onto Rattlesnake Mountain to the north. Granite cliffs bordered the path as my shadow pointed the direction to go.

Three miles from Gibbs Bridge, I came out of a cove and saw Cedar Mountain lit up like a drive-in theater featuring "Golden Sunset." The easternmost point of the South Shore Day Use Area, the stopping point for the day, was drawing near. Excited and checking my GPS map, I realized I was only halfway to the extraction point. The coves made the actual distance quite deceptive. Sometimes in life, we know where we are going; we just do not know how long it will take to get there, something very frustrating to ambitious people.

I paused and considered that some of my contemplative nature may have been lost since my last hike in the park. The busyness of life, building a house, the death of my nephew, travel, and university combined to distract me from the closeness I had to nature just a few months before.

When the weight of your body concentrates on the ball of your foot, sand covering muddy silt has a very distinct sound when you crunch through it. The ground breaking beneath your foot causes a quickening of your pace. No hiker wants to lose two shoes in one day, so I sat my thoughts aside in favor of a quicker pace.

Two hours into the day's hike and 3.25 miles from Gibbs Bridge, the shoreline was approximately seventy-five yards wide. The rocks overhead reached the high-water line some fifty feet above me. Following a line about ten feet from the shoreline, where the gravel gives way to the reservoir, I saw my first glimpse of the easternmost tip of the South Shore Day Use Area, and it was a worrisome distance relative to the remaining daylight.

Just outside one of the increasingly overwhelming number of coves, the high-water line led to the Taj Mahal of driftwood teepees—the finest one on the lake, complete with a single-pitch roof and views like the finest villas. I climbed sixty feet to admire it and decided to keep the high-water line path for a change.

3.53 miles from Gibbs Bridge, I returned to the sandy beach and enjoyed a nice, quiet calm without the powerful winds found on the ridge above the reservoir. On the other side of another driftwood teepee, Sheep Creek (known locally as Spring Creek) flowed across the beach and into the reservoir. According to Park Superintendent Dan Marty, many ancient bison bones were found at the mouth of the creek. Walking across the shallow creek, I paused on fungus-covered rocks a half-inch under the water. Small stones trapped Cottonwood leaves all around me. The wind created a clapping sound in the leaves that decreased in volume as each gust got further away. It sounded identical to the fading sound of rain sticks the native peoples of Ecuador make and sell to tourists such as me.

3.8 miles from Gibbs Bridge, the shoreline was covered in white alkaline powder about eighty feet above my walking line. It took two hours and thirty-eight minutes to walk four miles. The easternmost tip of the South Shore Day Use Area became increasingly prevalent in my line of sight.

4.23 miles from Gibbs Bridge, there was a rocky outcropping jutting out toward the base of Cedar Mountain that looked like the Rock of Gibraltar, as seen on the ferry from Morocco to Spain. The rocky outcropping was a natural jetty, forming a large bay and natural harbor inside the reservoir. With its clear water and natural windbreak, Bentonite Bay, as it is known locally, is only visible for a small portion of each year.

There was a wide-open, silty beach 4.49 miles from Gibbs Bridge, and I almost lost another pair of shoes. This time, instead of going forward, I smartly stopped and walked backward, carefully dislodging my right shoe from the mud in the same direction it had entered. It was tough to get out of the mud, but somehow, I managed to keep my sock dry.

A small rocky deposit up the bank of the reservoir made the best course for the remainder of this section. The beach was nearly 200 yards wide and filled with a silty, white clay-shell rock from the eroded cliff above. The white alkaline powder was not the best walking surface, but I was rewarded with another beautiful view of the sunset on the granite face of Rattlesnake Mountain.

This beautiful protected bay is surrounded by silt at least fifteen feet deep. The silt broke under the weight of my shoe, and the thought of sinking over my head in wet, black sand was ever-present. Little did I know this would not be the scariest part of the day's hike.

This section resembled the moon's surface with all the rock and alkaline deposits. Many tourists pass by the park on their way to fight the crowds of Yellowstone National Park for a chance to see the same oddities in the Norris Geyser Basin. They are unaware of this place's beauty when viewed outside the rental RV window.

Just as I thought I was nearing my extraction point on the easternmost tip of the South Shore Day Use Area, a long finger of water jutted inland about a quarter of a mile. The inlet was completely invisible a few hundred feet before. The last one hundred yards of the inlet contained deer tracks alarmingly deep in the mud. Heeding the deer's warning, I made my way around the muddy tip of the inlet, and the soil became rocky again. Large rocks fell from a cliff forty feet above, so I quickly made my way up what appeared to be the last hill before arriving at my extraction point. As the sun set, the harsh conditions reminded me that quickness is impossible in this terrain.

Atop the hill, I saw yet another large inlet going about .75 miles inland. With fading daylight, I worked around the inlet and finally reached a point dry enough to cross. Climbing up the shifty sand bank on the other side, and even though dark was closing in and I was anxious to find my wife, I took a moment to soak in the fantastic views from the higher elevation.

A section of great concern lay ahead on my path. The section was about 50 yards wide, a fresh mudslide. The now-impassable cliff formed by the destruction left no choice but to cross the mudslide or backtrack for at least two hours. The mudslide was twenty-foot-deep dark black mud streaked with white alkaline and yellow sulfurous powder. Steam was rising from the cracks, and it looked like the lava fields on the Mt Kilauea volcano in Hawaii.

My mind raced—I was legitimately scared. If I fell through, I would die. It looked increasingly unstable as I mustered the courage to cross over. Reasoning the cost of backtracking against the risk of crossing, I said aloud, "God, you did not bring me this far…" and started across. The mud was firm on top, but as I got too far to turn around, the alkaline and sulfur-lined cracks grew into fissures that I could hardly jump across.

The situation quickly grew into the scariest encounter of all the hiking I have ever done. I have never encountered anything this risky: the Appalachian Trail across Maryland, the Great Walks on the southern island of New Zealand, the steep mountains of Japan, Austria, and Hawaii. Past the point of no return, all I could think about was how foolish I was not just to backtrack and climb above the landslide. After what felt like an eternity, I made it across. Bent over with my hands on my knees, I took a deep breath in jubilation and said aloud, "Thank you, Lord."

I made my way up the steep bank and onto the flat point of South Shore Day Use Area #6. This area is entirely underwater most of the year but is covered in grass during this part of the season. During winter, the submerged portion is frequented by locals trying their hand at ice fishing. I saw the headlights on my wife's truck. She saw me and made her way with our dog Hicks across a flat field of driftwood covered in tall grass. Still reeling from the risk I took less than a half mile from her, she had no idea what I had just encountered. What a glorious day to be alive!

I cannot imagine not living life to the fullest and having the freedom to take in the rugged beauty of this place. There are risks to experiencing such a life, but the rewards are most

certainly worth it. Are quality life experiences a necessity of modern life? Never has so little effort been dedicated to satisfying our natural sense of wonder.

A simple internet search satisfies our curiosity, with no concern for the experience of the source. We know the answer to every question but have never experienced it ourselves. We are comfortable taking someone else's word as truth if it fits what we consider reasonable. Was the combustion engine, electric lightbulb, telephone, or space travel reasonable?

We can access audio files and listen online to the call of a Golden Eagle but have never heard it with our own ears from the cliffs high above the Clark's Fork River. Wikipedia quickly gives us the temperature range of Death Valley, but we have never felt its dry sting in the back of our throats. A simple search on Yahoo tells us the function of trees in the ecosystem, but we have never smelled the purity of Sequoia National Forest with our own noses.

We know where every river begins on Google Earth imagery but have never tasted the pure headwaters of the South Fork Shoshone River in the Washakie Wilderness. We know the fame of the Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Grand Staircase, and Grand Prismatic Spring but have never seen with our own eyes why our ancestors could only describe them as "grand."

I write not of those reasonable among you who are willingly locked in the struggles of life—having good and bad days—battling to live life to the fullest. Instead, I am writing of those of you who are unengaged, miserable in their abundance of idleness. Those who have never experienced anything so awe-inspiring that they had to test the bounds of language in an attempt to describe it. Those who, if suddenly gripped with consciousness, would look over their life and not recall a single day when they were satisfied with their condition. Those who have never had

the economic or social pressure to move themselves forward. Those who sit on the sideline criticizing and complaining how they could do your task better, yet never do—never do anything of real consequence; those who take pride in calling judgmental behavior sarcasm and pass opinion as fact without concern for integrity; those who sit fat in creature comforts and have no concept of what it takes to provide them; those whose preferred call to arms is a whiny virtual complaint on social media versus actionable work to right the wrong.

Approaching my wife with an onion grin, I was partly glad to see her and partially happy to have come through this section with only a couple of muddy shoes. Hicks welcomed me with unconditional love. I kissed my wife, who had the truck headlights on to ensure I made it safe.

The third day ended at the easternmost tip of the southern shore, South Shore Day Use Area #6, nearest to Cedar Mountain. Three hours 45 minutes hiking time for a relatively flat and easy 6.12 miles. 14.49 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

Day 4.

5.25 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6 to South Shore Day Use Area #1.

On Saturday, January 29th, 2022, at 12:04 pm, I started across a grassy field littered with driftwood. A 52° wind was blowing 20 mph from the west. The grassy field gave way to a half-mile-wide flat area of rocks and sand. I made my way to the easternmost point of the park's southern shore, directly in front of Cedar Mountain, and exactly where the town of Marquette once centered before the dam flooded the valley. The point is affectionately known by park staff as "Social Security Point" due to the many retirees that fish here. The shoreline was lined with ice stacked three feet high.

The alkaline and sulfur-stained cliffs visible at the base of Cedar Mountain on the first day of the trek were now prominently displayed directly across the reservoir. The wind was brutal, and my gloved hands were already freezing. The strong wind made thick ice ripple in the shallow water, creating the sound of a rushing river.

Buffalo Bill Reservoir was frozen except for a small channel running east to west where the wind from the North and South Fork Rivers competed for the ice's attention, creating a crack in the ice. Silty sand blew up and covered the ice shelf that lined the shoreline. Forty-one minutes and one mile into the hike, the flat shoreline increased in elevation, a small indicator of what the rest of the day would hold. The sandy shore gave way to ice, so I climbed up a twenty-foot-wide boulder field and walked on a flat plain approximately one mile wide.

The plain had vehicle tracks where someone had drug a boat or ice fishing equipment to a break in the ice about fifty yards from the shoreline. I discovered a fishing hole bored in the ice near the shoreline. Now that I realized what I was looking at, dozens of boreholes became visible.

1.13 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6, I was forty feet above the shoreline on a bolder scramble as far as the eye could see. The distinct peaks of Devil's Tooth, Sheep Mountain, Cedar Mountain, and Rattlesnake Mountain were visible from this vantage. With half the bank of boulders covered in ice, I walked on a flat, sandy area above. Just after the ice ended, I worked back halfway down the bank. While walking on the flat area on top of the bank was more accessible, I felt like I might cheat my way out of something beautiful.

1.37 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6, the bank was nearly eighty feet tall. I walked a line about twenty feet from the top on slippery shoe-sized rocks. The rocks were incredibly shifty in this section, so I worked my way to the top of the bank to an area of beautiful golden grass and was shocked to find a string of driftwood nearly a hundred feet above the waterline.

With so much driftwood, I wondered what it might be used for. One piece looked just like the torch on the Statue of Liberty. Picking it up to take a photograph, I noticed the reservoir's east shore was lined with trucks and ice fishermen. Distracted, I slipped on the boulders again.

At 1.55 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6, I reached a decision point I knew would be coming when scouting this section of the hike. The golden grassy plain to my right

eroded into a cliff of boulders that melted into the reservoir a hundred feet below. I could no longer bounce between flat grassy plains and boulder hopping below the high water line. I had to decide to stay above the cliff line on a small dirt road or boulder scramble for most of the day. Since anyone can drive above the cliff on the small dirt road, I opted for the more adventurous but more daunting boulder scramble.

I sat on a sizeable smooth driftwood log facing out over the reservoir and absorbed the park's beauty. The cliff behind me offered a brief reprieve from the wind, a small consolation for choosing the lower but more difficult boulder scramble. The boulders were very loose, shifting with every step. They made it impossible to walk without paying attention to the placement of each step. Even with intense concentration, I fell a dozen times before settling into a rhythm of sliding with each step.

The cliff was nearly a hundred feet tall, so slipping down would be fatal. Boom! A large crack in the ice about 150 yards out in the lake sounded like a bomb blast. The released kinetic energy bounced off the cliff above, and it took a second for me to figure out what had just occurred. It was not the best place for a distraction. I saw a shoreline break in the ice, creating a twenty-foot-wide pool. The cliff was so steep that the water visible in the pool quickly dropped off into the abyss just three feet from the shoreline. I stopped from my rock scramble for a minute to look for trout.

The unstable cliff above grew higher and higher, which gave rise to my fear of another landslide. Several large boulders had already slid down the hill and onto the ice a hundred feet below. Every rock I stepped on shifted six inches or more. The wind blowing ice chunks across the icy surface of the reservoir made a whistling sound. Boom! Another crack in the ice below

interrupted, causing a 150-foot fisher to develop in the shoreline below. This area is volatile and alive.

I spent the next hour watching every step, only stopping occasionally to admire an unusual piece of driftwood. The clifftop was thirty feet above, the waterline 120 feet below. Rocks slid down the hill every few steps. Slipping frequently in this section, I watched them intensely to see where I would end up if I fell. I am reasonably sure-footed, but this section was impossibly unstable. Ahead lay a gravelly area filled with goose feathers that spanned one of the many ravines that fed into the reservoir. After a short break in the gravel, I started back into the next section of boulder scrambling.

I looked up each time I fell to see if I had triggered a rock slide above me. This section of the cliff was at least sixty degrees. I became a tripod, with two feet and one hand on the high ground angled up to my right. Rocks triggered by my steps fell to the ice 120 feet below me.

I reached my first decision point two hours and 18 minutes into the hike and 2.12 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6. The boulders transitioned to a sheer sandstone cliff I would have to go over. Fortunately, a ravine just before the sheer cliff allowed me to exit the path. I inched my way across loose pea-sized gravel and up a snowy cliff to the bottom of the ravine, then navigated to the top of the cliff back into the golden field of grass above.

I was now 250 feet above the shoreline with amazing views of the dangerous sandstone cliff I had avoided. As I stopped to look out over the reservoir, a powerful gust of wind pushed me off balance and dangerously close to the edge. I was only a hundred yards from the dirt road that runs through the park, but you can never let your guard down. Going around the cliff line, I

worked through several ravines to see if the sheer cliff at the water's edge was passable. I crossed the shallow end of one ravine and spooked two red foxes back up to the trail.

At 2.74 miles and walking atop the cliff, I glimpsed the beach 350 feet below me. Finally clear of the rocky cliff, I backtracked a quarter mile to the last ravine I had crossed to see if I could safely descend to the shoreline. The ravine quickly sloped through neck-high brambles that tore at my clothing. After some problematic bushwhacking, I arrived at a smooth creek bed that led to the shoreline. All in all, I was about a quarter mile from where I had come up the cliff.

Entering a small cove not visible from the grassy field, I stumbled upon the most scenic private beach. Distracted, I slipped on shifty rocks until my chest was flat on the ground. Because I had fallen so many times, my body instantly went limp on the way down, and I miraculously did not break anything. I walked across large, flat, loosely-stacked sandstone boulders to a soft sandy beach. The powdery sand was just below a sandstone cave thirty feet above me. The beach extended as far as the eye could see, with a break in the ice about ten feet from the shoreline. The break offered an uninhibited view of the pristine water below the ice.

The South Fork Shoshone River was visible about a mile ahead, but a sandstone cliff signaled the end of the sandy beach. The cliff was far worse than the one I had detoured earlier in the hike. I either had to continue my trek, hoping it would not lead to another sheer rock face, or turn around and return to the ravine. Outside my comfort zone, I proceeded up and around the sandstone cliff.

Around the bend, the sandstone cliff turned into another sheer rock face. The vertical rock face was covered in small pebbles, making it impossibly slippery. I was about a hundred feet above the frozen lake and three feet from the edge of the sheer rock face. I started breathing hard. My knees tightened with fear. If I slipped, I would die. I inched forward, hugging the vertical rock face with both feet and both hands gripping the rock. It took nearly ten minutes to travel fifty feet.

I arrived safely at the other side, shaking my head, and said aloud, "That was dumb." I also thanked God for allowing me not to fall. After the risky venture over the landslide on Day 3, I thought about the business term *Sunk Cost Fallacy*. Sunk Cost Fallacy describes our tendency to follow through on an endeavor if we have invested time, effort, or money into it, whether or not the current benefit outweighs the proposed additional cost. This causes us to take more risk the further we go because we rationalize that we have already accepted so much risk. Here are the notes I dictated to my voice editor during the hike: "This section was stupid to do. I should have stayed up on the cliff. The same risk I went around earlier, I find myself taking now—plus some. Stupid!"

After another grueling forty-five minutes of cliff-climbing on all fours and sometimes my butt, the South Fork Shoshone River became visible. The scary cliff returned to a relatively flat rocky beach. Another quarter mile up, a thin stream off the main river cut out into the wide mudflats. I forded the stream close to a boulder field created by a landslide and entered a wide-open silt flat. I could see the South Fork Dike and my nearby extraction point.

Three hours and fifty-five minutes into the hike, I was 4.05 miles from my starting point at South Shore Day Use Area #6. Making my way across the middle of the open flats, I was

disappointed to discover the wide part of the river hidden in a deep ravine. Blocking my desired path, I walked along the river's west bank, where I saw my wife parked at the South Shore Day Use Area #1.

I attempted to navigate a large stand of thick, neck-high willows between me and the parking area, but it was so thick that I could not pass through it. Walking around the thicket on the frozen South Fork Shoshone River section was a better option. Navigating out onto the frozen river, I broke through the ice a few hundred feet from my wife and sank up to my chest in the icy water below. I attempted to escape, but the ice kept breaking. Wide-eyed and looking foolish, I heaved onto the muddy bank and out of the freezing water with one last push.

Even though we had been married for 25 years, I was humiliated at the dumb decision I had made so close to the parking area, even more so that she had witnessed the event. I removed my soaked clothes immediately, stripping down as I approached the truck. After a brutal day of cliffs, boulder scrambling, and risky hiking outside of my comfort zone, my wife drove me home naked, wrapped in a towel, and too tired to talk.

The fourth day ended at 5:48 pm at South Shore Day Use Area #1. Four hours and 44 minutes of the most demanding hiking in Buffalo Bill State Park. 5.25 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #6 and 19.74 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

Day 5.

3.12 miles from the South Shore Day Use Area #1 to the No-Fee Area located at the east end of the South Fork Dike.

The first hundred yards of the hike on July 26th, 2022, were in the chest-high marsh grass. The mosquito-infested marsh was a pleasant 75 degrees at 1:16 pm, perfect summer weather in Buffalo Bill State Park. My family affectionately calls this fishing spot at South Shore Day Use Area #1 "Mosquito Hole." It was our second summer in Wyoming before we knew that there were even mosquitoes in the state, and it was this spot where they discovered us. We wear heavy clothing, gloves, and face nets when summer fishing in this South Fork River section.

What sounded like a truck on Stagecoach Trail that forms the park's southern border was a bubbling creek under the marsh grass—several creeks. The grass was the ideal terrain to set off the innate bear senses quickly developed by living in Grizzly country. I jumped the bubbling creek, unable to see the other side because of the ever-taller grass. Just over the creek, deer (or possibly bear) beds were matted deep into the marshy grass.

My luck ended with a splash as I attempted to hop from grass clump to grass clump through the marsh. Cheese and rice—starting another day with wet feet! Perhaps it would have been prudent to skip this two-hundred-yard section and jump onto the trail at the Lower South Fork Road bridge. I cut through the willows to the river bank. The river was clear and perfect for fishing, the first time water clarity had improved since historic floods devastated the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in June of 2022. I was there to hike but couldn't help but look for trout.

Since moving to Wyoming, friends and relatives have often asked why we chose Wyoming. There are a million answers to that question, but now I simply answer trout. Trout! With that answer, people immediately make assumptions about my passion for fly fishing and even wrongly assume that I am good at it. I am not; besides, my answer in no way reflects the act of fishing.

I am passionate about fly fishing; the pull of a Yellowstone Cutthroat or the golden flash of a Brown Trout is the thrill of living. A lifetime of fishing education, skill, trial, and error is involved. The season, streamflow, time of day, water temperature, sky condition, wind, water clarity, casting angle, drag, drift, presentation, and insect hatch all matter. Even if you figure all that out, there are still a million fly patterns to choose from, each with a different name depending on the area you are fishing. The Beadhead Wooly Bugger, Copper John, Rusty, Smoke Jumper, Green Drake, Big Drake, and Parachute Adams. What is a wooly bugger anyway?

The scale is always tipped in the trout's favor. Many days, I catch absolutely nothing. Yet still, hardly a week goes by that I do not wet a hook. I do not like fishing so much as where it takes me—and trout fishing always takes me somewhere beautiful. Trout are the most noble of fish, only living in pristine environments. Trout are the embodiment of untouched wild places. Trout are the canaries of the river, only inhabiting ecosystems without a heavy human presence and the pollution we cause.

Often, when trout fishing in the region, I will not see anyone all day. The experience of listening to the fast-flowing shallow river while staring at snowcapped volcanic craters some three thousand feet above with snowmelt waterfalls cascading down the cliff face to the river

valley is worth every effort. Riverbanks are blanketed in wildflowers, beautiful red Indian Paintbrush, and purple Lupine. I am at peace, happy. Trout brings me here.

There may not be a trout all day, but that does not matter. Why Wyoming? Of the many countries I have lived in, there is no place like Wyoming. Before my dad passed, he asked what I planned to do after the military. Find a small town and settle down. He wondered how I could do that after jet-setting around the globe for nearly 30 years in the military. After much consideration, I concluded I had to find a place grand enough to contain my wander. Northwest Wyoming is that place. But the simple answer for those not here to experience the wild beauty of this grand place for themselves—trout.

The historic floods created a new riverbank, causing me to tread lightly to avoid triggering a landslide into the river. I paused to snap a picture of a fat Brown Trout hanging out under a tree leaning over the river. The willows were so thick that a scarcely used game trail was my best path along the narrow section of the park. The mosquitos were so thick that I had to breathe through my nose with my mouth tightly closed.

To escape the standing water and life-sucking mosquito attack, I made my way to a rocky shoal along the riverbank. Two fishermen were posing for a picture with a Rainbow Trout they had caught. I told them the location of the Brown Trout under the overhanging tree and immediately regretted it. They barely looked and returned my friendly gesture with only a slight acknowledgment. Unwelcome. I rationalized that they were embarrassed by getting caught taking a selfie with the trout.

Next up, trekking back onto the riverbank through the high marshy grass and crossing to the east side of the river using the bridge on Lower South Fork Road (County Road 6QS, sequentially labeled 6FU but changed because of the unsavory implication). I hoisted a heavy pack and belly-climbed onto the bridge abutment to get around a barbed-wire fence. The two fishermen's trucks were in the parking area—Wyoming plates with symptoms of Wisconsin. Green Bay Packers fans, it figures.

The east side of the river was a mix of private, state, and federal land, but if you stayed close to the riverbank en route to the No-fee Area on Shiloh Road, you would remain in Buffalo Bill State Park. Since the gate was locked, the only option was to climb through the barbed-wire fence on the bridge's east side to enter the South Fork Day Use Area. Following the riverbank closely, I went north along the park's narrow eastern border. I walked high on the riverbank, careful not to spook the trout for the guys fishing towards me from the opposite side of the river.

The shade of the cottonwood trees outlined a meadow filled with yellow flowers. Fifty yards from the river and well over ten feet above the current flow, you could see where the river overcame its bank during the flood. The mosquitos were so thick they blocked more sun than the cottonwood trees! The area consisted of gray sandy shoals surrounded by chest-high marsh grass. A mating pair of Ospreys protected a nest that park staff had recently placed atop a telephone pole. Unknowingly invading their comfort zone, one Osprey flew over and gave me a five-chirp warning while the other moved into a nearby tree.

I quickly moved under trees to maximize our separation and relieve any accidental pressure placed on the powerful birds. The mosquito attack intensified! Since the Osprey nest was in a swampy area and I didn't want to pressure them or get my feet wetter, I weaved through

the same kind of willow thicket I had avoided in the winter hike. According to Buffalo Bill State Park Superintendent Dan Marty, a bear attack occurred in this park section nearly twenty years ago, but I could not find additional information on the incident. My bear-aware senses heightened traversing game trail tunnels through the willows. It was the perfect environment for an ambush attack from a predator.

.77 miles from Day Use Area #1, I stepped out of the willow thicket for a quick break and saw that the shallow, fast-flowing river was giving way to the deeper reservoir. The No-Fee Area at the end of Shiloh Road was visible about a hundred yards ahead. Most encouragingly, there was no high marsh grass and likely no mosquitoes!

This section was not family-friendly because I had to bushwhack a hundred yards across a knee-deep swamp and struggle up a rocky cliff. As hoped, the higher and dryer cliff area was free of mosquitoes. After walking the cliff for about a hundred yards, it eased back gently down to the lake's shoreline. This area would have been considered part of the river any other year, but the recent flood had the reservoir at capacity. With a faint game trail visible, I walked the terrain where the sage ended and the wetlands began. A stout 6-point whitetail buck feeding on marsh grass crossed the path.

Just past the deer was a flock of American White Pelicans floating near a fresh logjam of matted driftwood. At 1.09 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #1, the cliffs that nearly killed me the previous winter and the open waters of the reservoir below them became visible. Topping a small hill just west of Shiloh Road, it became evident that the wetlands jutted way inland. The only choice was to hike near the private property boundary to give my pants and shoes the best shot of drying out.

A curious Magpie was perched on a driftwood log overlooking the reservoir. I said, "Hello, Magpie. I don't suppose you'll make the book. But I love you. You're smart, and you're handsome." He agreed loudly and flew away. The No-Fee Area at the end of Shiloh Road consisted of a flat point of land that juts out where the mouth of the South Fork Shoshone River meets the Buffalo Bill Reservoir. The public land is surrounded by private land, so care should be given to stay within the park boundaries.

1.62 miles and one hour thirty-five minutes from South Shore Day Use Area #1, I made my way onto the southwest end of the South Fork Dike. The dike separates South Fork Dike Pond, fed by Carter Creek and Marquette Creek, from the Buffalo Bill Reservoir. Two dust abatement dikes and one protective dike were constructed around the reservoir. The North and South Fork dikes keep water on areas of the lake bottom that produce dust when the reservoir level drops. The Diamond Creek Dike prevents the reservoir from inundating Irma Flat (Bureau of Reclamation).

A small concrete wall that serves as a drainage divide made for a better path than the boulders separating the pond from the reservoir. The driftwood on the reservoir side of the wall showed that the pond flowed over this small spillway during the recent flood. A jalopy Lake Trout splashed in the pond just off the right side of the path. At the top of the dike, the wind picked up out of the northeast at about 5-10 mph. The service road on top of the dike was covered in Canada Goose feces. The west side of the dike was a deep blue-green with a driftwood-lined shore. In contrast, the east side looked shallow with brown mud-colored water.

According to the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) performed many pre-war experiments with trout stocks in the rivers and streams of the Shoshone

watershed, including introducing non-native species. Since the haphazard introduction of non-native trout species occurred early in the development of Shoshone National Forest, an acceptable practice of the era, government and non-governmental conservation efforts have evolved. Most modern conservation and management efforts focus on eradicating non-native trout species that compete, and most often out-compete, with native species in the rivers and streams of the Shoshone watershed.

Since the CCC performed many pre-war experiments with trout stocks in local rivers and streams, including introducing many non-native species, there is room for discussion on what a native trout is. The native trout in the Shoshone watershed are widely considered to be the Yellowstone Cutthroat, Brown Trout, and Brook Trout. The CCC is not the only organization that negatively impacted native trout species in the region.

As one of the earliest US Bureau of Reclamation projects (1900-1910), the Buffalo Bill Dam and Reservoir at the center of the park was the main focus of the Shoshone Project (Bureau of Reclamation). This early 20th-century public works project significantly impacted the area's trout populations since the dam and subsequent reservoir were constructed at the confluence of the North Fork and South Fork Shoshone Rivers. While there were many benefits to the surrounding communities, much of the trout habitat found at the confluence of the rivers, which was especially favorable to native Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, was destroyed when the reservoir flooded this area.

The CCC stocked the resultant reservoir with non-native trout species, such as the Lake Trout I saw on my hike. Lake Trout are an incredibly hearty and adaptable species, not only out-competing Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout for habitat but also preying on their fry. Newly hatched

trout have yolk sacs protruding from their undersides for 11 to 14 days and are called sac fry. During this time, the sac fry consumes their yolk sac. As the yolk sac disappears, the belly of the fry "button up," and they soon "swim up." Once the sac fry consumes its yolk sac, they are called fry. Non-native Lake Trout prey on native small Yellowstone Cutthroats and their fry in the region, significantly reducing their populations.

The Wyoming Fish and Game Department managed at least seventy-one projects to cultivate trout fishing across Wyoming from 1953-1998. Since these projects altered the natural flow of dozens of rivers and streams, it isn't easy to fully understand the natural habitat and location of trout species in the region (Binns 17).

During World War II, more than 14,000 Japanese-Americans were confined to an internment camp in neighboring Powell, Wyoming. The unjust incarceration is well-documented by the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation at a museum that now stands on the site. Lesser known, the internees were forced to work for the Bureau of Reclamation on the Shoshone Irrigation Project, which included waterways and over 5,000 feet of canals in the Shoshone watershed. The projects the interred Americans were forced to work on had a substantial impact on the rivers and streams and, subsequently, the trout in the region (Bureau of Reclamation).

It is widely acknowledged that the depression-era CCC introduced most of the region's non-native species, such as the Lake Trout and Rainbow Trout, and even highly destructive species, such as the Largemouth Bass. The CCC's interventions in the Shoshone watershed, especially the haphazard introduction of invasive species to "improve" fishing, were conducted under the impetus of putting people to work while increasing tourism and enhancing recreation in the region. However, introducing non-native invasive species is not restricted to some bygone

era with misguided conservation efforts built on increasing tourism in our National Forests and National Parks.

The Wyoming Fish and Game Department currently manages the Clark's Fork Fish Hatchery just a few miles north of the park in Clark, Wyoming. The hatchery is the second largest fish hatchery in the state and offers a unique opportunity to view fish culture in progress. The Clark's Fork Hatchery focuses on hatching and rearing fish for stocking into waters that allow public fishing. The hatchery tracks the ongoing introduction of native and non-native trout species at the station, including Eagle Lake Rainbow Trout, Fall Rainbow Trout, Firehole Rainbow Trout, Brown Trout, Bear River Cutthroat Trout, and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout (Wyoming Fish and Game Department).

While the state still practices stocking non-native trout species, Wyoming Trout Unlimited and the East Yellowstone Chapter of Trout Unlimited (of which I am a member) focus on recovering the native Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout population of the upper Yellowstone River and Yellowstone Lake system. The focus has been on aiding and encouraging the National Park Service and US Forestry Service to suppress the invasive and predacious Lake Trout introduced into that system around 30 years ago (Wyoming Trout Unlimited).

The non-profit organizations also aid the US Geological Survey in their multi-pronged efforts to locate the Lake Trout spawning beds, learn about their spawning behavior, and develop alternative suppression techniques focused on Lake Trout ova and fry. If their efforts are successful, the invasive angler-friendly trout species found in the region will not always be a concern as government and non-profit organizations work together to drive them out (Wyoming Trout Unlimited).

At 2.05 miles from the South Shore Day Use Area #1, the aridness of the dike service road had me parched. I decide to wait until the end of the dike to stop for water. While the hot, dry wind made me thirsty, it was a welcome reprieve from the marsh full of mosquitoes!

Sunflowers lined the east end of the South Fork Dike. Small waves lapped at the dike from the north as the Seagulls squawked overhead, reminding me of the beachside community on the Nature Coast of Florida where I grew up. Looking out at the tip of Cedar Mountain, it became apparent that the hike had no more than a couple of days left to complete. I mapped out a two-day hiking plan to get every bit of goodness out of this experience.

I encountered a family of four, where the dad was pulling two kids in a wagon, one old enough to gain the advantage of the walk. Mom was walking far behind. "You going to the end?" "No," he replied. That was the full extent of our engagement.

A concrete dock at 2.81 miles from South Shore Day Use Area #1 and three-quarters across the dike had a grate at the end that allowed water to flow in and down a large pipe. The dock's survey marker read, "US Department of the Interior BM." I thought it might be the water intake for the City of Cody water supply, but a further interview with Park Superintendent Dan Marty revealed that it is an overflow for the small pond formed on the south side of the silt abatement dike.

At the end of the South Fork Dike, I reached the No-Fee parking area on Lower South Fork Road. The dike was exactly 1.5 miles long. My pants were dry, but my shoes and socks (I wore cotton socks instead of wool hiking socks because of the heat) were still damp. I had the daylight and energy to continue to the planned extraction point at the Diamond Creek Dike but

decided to break the last push into two hiking days. Partly because I wasn't ready to be done with this adventure and partially because the push to the tip of Cedar Mountain would be a long down and back because the area on the south side of the dam is an impassable cliff. Growing nostalgic, like at the end of a military assignment, I started to reflect on the success of accomplishment, thanking God for His goodness in this experience.

The fifth hiking day ended at the No-Fee Area at the end of the South Fork Dike on Lower South Fork Road at 3:48 pm. Two hours and 27 minutes of easy hiking in Buffalo Bill State Park. 3.12 miles from where I started in the mosquito-infested South Shore Day Use Area #1 and 22.86 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

Day 6.

2.59 miles from the No-Fee Area at the east end of the South Fork Dike to the Day Use Area at the south end of the Diamond Creek Dike.

It was 1:44 pm on December 31st, 2023, New Year's Eve, and Buffalo Bill State Park's clear skies were an unusually warm 49 degrees. The El Niño weather pattern impacting winter was one of the strongest on record, catapulting it into the rare "super El Niño" category. The tropical Pacific Ocean, where El Niño originates, was two degrees Celsius warmer than average, resulting in the park having no snow to speak of and very little ice on the reservoir's surface for this time of year (National Weather Service). I wore thin hiking pants, a T-shirt, and a light hoodie. The park was blanketed in the perfect weather for hiking.

I made my way from the parking area at the end of the South Fork Dike to the reservoir's shoreline below. Just off to my right, and two hundred feet from the beach, was an irrigation canal that feeds all of the farmlands in this area and also forms the park's eastern boundary. On the north side of the dike, a light breeze blew as I looked out over the clear water. The beach was volcanic dirt pulverized from rocks beating against each other as they transit the rivers and streams of the Shoshone watershed. Traffic on the South Fork Highway overpowered the sound of Canadian geese in the distance.

Camping at the park for the previous fourteen days, the South Fork was lit up at night like a city, whereas at the start of this hike three years ago, it was completely dark when looking out from the same campground at night. Our vintage Silver Streak camper was visible across the reservoir as the sun reflected off its aluminum exterior. Looming over the brown grassy hills of

Sheep Mountain was Jim Mountain, with snow only on its upper reaches. Fresh three-prong bird tracks imprinted the sandy beach, looking eerily similar to the fossilized dinosaur tracks at the Red Gulch Dinosaur Track Site seventy miles to the east.

After only a hundred yards of the comfortable black sand beach, the sand gave way to a quarter-mile rock scramble. My mind was on ice fishing because the pond formed by the South Fork Dike was partially frozen, and people were ice fishing for Walleye. Since I don't have a fishing buddy, I considered hiring a fishing guide to teach me how to ice fish or, most importantly, how not to fall through the ice. I had a diverse workplace in the military to meet people from all walks of life and develop lasting friendships. After three years of being retired and living in the least populated area of the least populated state, I have started to long for companionship and friendly conversation. I love my wife, and she's the person I'd love to talk to for the rest of my life, but there's a different dynamic to conversation with someone other than your spouse.

Invisible from a short distance back, black sand between the rocks broke up the boulder scramble and cushioned each step, relieving the need to hop from one boulder to the next. The high-water mark was lined heavily with driftwood a hundred feet from the shore, forcing a path twenty feet below. A quarter mile from the South Fork Dike, a creek-like water drainage flowed through the rocks and over the sand. The creek washed out the sand from between the rocks, generating the first legitimate boulder scramble of the day.

The lake was neither frozen nor was the shoreline, but wind and waves had formed six-inch chunks of ice between the rocks that looked like scales on a dinosaur's back. I remembered an earlier day of hiking in which I had realized that hiking poles could sometimes be a useless

crutch and more work than they were worth. I thought about the Silver Streak Trailer Club and how many of its members spend years and small fortunes renovating their vintage camper trailers but never actually take them camping. The extraordinary ice formation on display before me was invisible from the highway into Yellowstone, just a few hundred yards away. I felt so special to get to experience it.

Is being unique and special a necessity of modern life? Skin color, sexual orientation, and political affiliation have become our distinctions, replacing faith, kindness, generosity, and character. A person's worth is based solely on where they fall on five hot-button topics. We cut our teeth on our neighbors because they support a different candidate. We reply on social media to perfect strangers without any semblance of respect. We have no idea why that person is so hateful or what they are going through that would cause them to lash out so haphazardly.

We take satisfaction in cutting them deep with snarky comments to "win" the argument. We post replies with pride for all the world to see how smart and informed we are. We do not care about our neighbors. They are miserable. They are hurting. We have a chance to practice a little humility, to answer their hate with love, and instead, we seethe with the satisfaction of cutting them deep, getting them back.

The most significant threat to our nation is not the defeat of our military by foreign forces. Instead, the danger comes from within. A nation divided cannot survive, and division always precedes the fall. There is no gaining of power, only shifting of power from one government to another. As the balance of power shifts, some inevitably gain at the expense of others. In the current division, the media stands to gain the most. The more unique and special categories we place people into, the more division it spurns. The media, especially social media

platforms, are the proprietors of the division. Division stirs emotion, and emotion sells. Division is a marketing tool.

I have been asked how a logical and reasonable person could live a life based on faith. I am just too humble to be an atheist. Looking at all the intricate workings of the natural world—the vast unknowns of our universe—and believing that we are the most intelligent life form is the height of narcissism. I cannot accept that as truth as it violates probability, logic, and my senses.

When I look at the cosmos with all its endless unknowns, I see the possibility that a "god" could exist. To see all the planets, stars, supernovas, black holes—the great depth of space, and think that we are the most intelligent beings in the universe is the very definition of narcissism. It is ludicrous to believe that in the vast unknowns of the universe, things can only be possible within the bounds of our discrete knowledge of terrestrial-based physics. In the vastness of the universe, a god cannot exist? If a god did exist, it could not walk on water or part the Red Sea?

In my humble understanding, the highest communication of intelligence is love. It would make sense that if there were a more intelligent being, it would express itself with love. That love would be best displayed by humility (because a god would understand its intrinsic superiority) and sacrifice (as all love is). When I look across the known world, I have only seen one God who has communicated with the language of love (humility and sacrifice): Jesus. That is why I believe it's possible that God exists and He is Christ. If we look closely at His words, we are all special and unique, beautiful beings that reflect the skill and artistry of the Creator.

A hawk was beautiful even in death at .3 miles from the South Fork Dike. His feathers were a vibrant working of dark and light brown tiger stripes as he lay on the rocks. Again, I

considered the three-prong bird tracks in the sand and wondered whether the dinosaur tracks in Red Gulch were just tracks from the same birds. Perhaps, if the unruly conditions of the high desert and soil composition are just so, tracks could fossilize faster than we previously thought possible.

In 2018, the intact carcass of a Columbian Mammoth was discovered along the west side of an island in this section of the park. This was the first day of the hike that I could see the island since understanding its significance. The western portion of the island where the mammoth was found is only visible when the reservoir reaches its lowest water levels. For those unable to see the bones, an unframed photo is unceremoniously displayed on a bookshelf in the park headquarters building.

A crayfish claw populated the shoreline just below a private residence that juts out over the park. The bright blue claw seemed otherworldly compared to the many hues of browns and greys covering the park in winter. Just .42 miles from where I started at the South Fork Dike, a small jetty jutted out thirty feet into the lake. Compelled to take a photo, the colorful rocks and clear water, complete with a mountainous background, are identical to the often-photographed Flathead Lake near Glacier National Park in Montana.

Small boulders outlined with black sand quickly transitioned to large boulders outlined in ice. The sudden terrain change caused my first fall of the day. I was not in the best shape for a fall because working around the homestead all summer kept me from hiking. Out of breath and with diminished flexibility, weakened stability and balance reconciled my misaligned priorities.

Perched above the waterline on high boulders, I thought a lot about fishing. The rocky bottom was visible twenty feet out into the clear water. There would normally be a lot of fish here, especially in winter when it typically gets covered in ice. The El Niño conditions have prevented this part of the reservoir from freezing, with the first negative temperatures of the season not predicted until the second week of January. I kept looking from the boulders down into the lake for fish, so I stopped to be more observant of the things under my feet. Driftwood lined the high water mark, something hard to imagine as I stood on the shoreline and thought about the water being a hundred feet above my head.

I found a giant rusty nail and tossed it into the lake. I climbed down to a white PVC pipe sticking out at an angle along the shoreline. Halfway thinking it was a fishing rod holder, I discovered it was just more debris caught in the rocks. I could hear a dog barking from one of the houses close to this narrow section of the park and people talking as they walked down the small dirt road along the irrigation canal. The large boulders stacked along this park section were placed to withstand the brunt force of the waves as the prevailing west wind blows across the reservoir and hits the lake's eastern shore.

Having recently aggravated an old military injury, each ankle and knee felt the boulder scramble. At .63 miles from the South Fork Dike, there was another section where water flowed under the rocks like a creek. Close to another house, I decided to go up from the shoreline and follow the canal road through the park to avoid entering the marina, which is private property along the shoreline.

A natural rock formation formed what looked like a boat ramp .68 miles from the South Fork Dike. Another frozen creek complicated my path to the formation. At .8 miles, I again

climbed from the shoreline to the canal road and saw a small pond and a lady hiking with her two dogs. I stopped and talked for about ten minutes with two ladies walking their dogs in the park. They were the first people I had exchanged more than a greeting with on the entire hike. Two more people were hiking behind them. It was the most people I had encountered in the park, a busy hiking day for the final day of 2023.

Unless you hike close to the lakeshore, you'll encounter people in this section because it is close to a neighborhood. Weaving down a small path between the canal road and the shoreline to experience more of the park, I encountered a giant ant bed, maybe six feet in diameter, which had pieces of driftwood curiously stuck throughout it. At 1.01 miles, a fifty-foot-high cliff had developed from the lakeshore during the recent peak water levels, surrendering an uninhibited view of the entire reservoir. The marina was visible from this vantage, which signaled the end of a very short hiking day.

The game trail entered into a little bowl with a raised area on the left that dropped off a cliff into the lake and a slight rise on the right. I walked down the middle of the bowl because the road just to the right was busy with hikers. Between the bowl and the shoreline was a large cliff of about seventy-five feet, so I had to find a place to work down. There were two people riding horses, a lady with two dogs, and two people with a dog hiking on the road, so I bushwhacked through a sage-filled ravine with no clear path.

At 1.22 miles from the South Fork Dike, I found a ragged ravine passable down to the shoreline. Concrete blocks were ad hoc mounted into the side of the wall to aid in the tricky decent. At the bottom of the ravine was an area that flooded because it was filled with driftwood up to the narrowest end. The mouth of the ravine was a mix of sand and gravel with remnants of

a campfire. Marijuana or cigarettes faintly wafted in the air, and it wasn't apparent if it was coming from one of the hikers or the fire pit.

A small inlet on the shoreline near the marina was completely frozen. Rounding the tip of the frozen inlet, I realized it was the Bartlett Lane Boat Ramp. I had to hike a quarter mile inland to get to the boat ramp at the head of the inlet. About halfway around, the water flowed from the dirt like a natural spring into the inlet. A creek with muddy and icy banks was at the farthest end next to the boat ramp. Finding some driftwood in the creek that I could step on and cross reasonably dry, I sunk over my shoes in the muddy soil on the far side.

At 1.63 from the South Fork Dike, I reached the Bartlett Lane Boat Ramp and Day Use Area. There were still tracks in the ice where park staff had recently pulled the moveable boat ramp out of the water for the winter season. Making my way up the boat ramp to get my bearing, I surprised my wife and Hicks walking in the Day Use Area. She had tracked my whereabouts because I was close to my extraction point. The Bureau of Reclamation maintains a nicely appointed picnic area in this section.

I finished the last half mile of the day with my wife and dog, Hicks. Our truck was parked at the Diamond Creek Dike near Bighorn Basin Boat Club, which will be the start of my last hiking day around Buffalo Bill State Park.

The day ended at Diamond Creek Dike at 3:56 pm, 2.59 miles and two hours and 14 minutes from where I started at the parking area at the South Fork Dike. I was 25.45 miles from Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

Day 7.

7.82 miles roundtrip from the Diamond Creek Dike to the southern cliffs at Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center.

It was 12:06 pm on February 12th, 2024. Buffalo Bill State Park was 36 degrees and being hammered by sustained fourteen-mile-per-hour winds gusting to twenty-nine. It was brutal but fitting weather to start my last hiking day at the union of Buffalo Bill State Park and the Bureau of Reclamation land on the park's eastern border. Above the starting point was Diamond Creek Dike, which the Bureau of Reclamation managed, while the small road I walked between the dike and the shoreline was part of the Fee Area of Buffalo Bill State Park.

Using the vehicle as a windbreak to suit into heavier winter gear, I oriented myself to the day's task and decided whether to attempt the hike in these conditions. The weather app showed that the wind gusts would weaken two hours into the hike, just enough pseudo-relevant information to convince me to do the opposite of what my body was saying.

The park road was covered in ice and was extremely slippery. I wrestled with another bout of reason, pushing past the desire to escape the icy road and arctic wind blasts. The road skirted a portion of the park popular with ice fishermen this time of the year, but the shoreline was absent of any human presence in the blistery winter conditions. For the first time during the hike, I wore a sweatshirt hoodie, stocking cap, gloves, and a primaloft "puffy" coat to break the wind. Despite the gratuitous amount of clothing, my body fought to stay warm.

Bowing my head to block the wind blasts, I asked God to show me something beautiful and to help me overcome the conditions weakening my strength of will. I frequently pray that God will allow me to see His beauty that surrounds us. God shows His beauty to me in nature. But nature, in all its majestic array, is not able to bear all of His words. Perhaps I must speak of Him.

Hiking in harsh conditions was a result of poor planning. I wanted to complete the hike around Buffalo Bill State Park on April 25th, the third anniversary of the start of this venture. However, this section of the hike was needed to complete the final ten pages of my thesis for a Master's in Creative Writing. Still, I asked God to help me focus on the beauty surrounding me instead of my numb fingers and stinging toes.

The shoreline offered more to see than the park road. The wind was cutting as I spoke into my text editor, a task that required the removal of my right glove. I stood behind a Cottonwood tree to break the wind. Crossing a wide, rocky beach, "Social Security Point" across the reservoir was in view. Blowing vertical columns of snow supplanted the ice fishermen encountered there on the third day of the hike. The terrain was flat, well relatively flat, and the simplest path down the beach was where a truck had compacted the snow and rocks.

A quick pace down the first quarter mile of the beach helped warm the body. A driftwood raft that someone had tied together with bailing twine was dashed into pieces on the rocks near the shoreline. Many of the Cottonwood trees were uprooted and overturned. Even with the day's challenging conditions, the raft and trees speak to harsher conditions when the 50-100 mile per hour west winds beat this shoreline with waves during early winter. The Diamond Creek Dike perched above the beach prevents water from penetrating Irma Flats when the

reservoir reaches peak capacity. The high water line is marked by driftwood nearly one-third of the way up the dike, showing that water is sometimes thirty feet above the shoreline.

Down at the water's edge, tall columns of blowing snow started at Social Security Point and raced across the lake's frozen surface until crashing onto the rocks in this section of the park. The snowy whirlwinds had my eyes watering, my nose dripping, and ears stinging. I replaced my woven stocking cap with a heavy "Cousin Eddie" winter hat for the remainder of the hike. Cousin Eddie wasn't pretty, but he was warm, making the pain in my ears bearable.

.49 miles from the Fee Area at the start of the dike, a small inlet marked by patchy snow and a 20-foot-high sand bar cut into the shoreline. The inlet prompted a decision, something that was increasingly hard to make in the brutal conditions. Just past the inlet was what looked to be a circular hill that rose 160 feet above the beach. On the front side was a rocky beach; the back would almost certainly require a trip onto the dike and out of the park. It could be the island on the map where a Columbian Mammoth was found in 2018, but it didn't appear to be an island from the vantage of the beach. The wind thwarted an attempt to take the paper park map out of my pack. Sticking to my plan, I trekked around the hill's front side and hugged the shoreline.

I had seen this hill dozens of times from across the reservoir and from the comfort of a vehicle. Plotting a path through this park section, I hadn't imagined it would look so different, towering above. Disoriented by weather and a skewed sense of scale, I surmised there would be a large and somewhat disappointing inlet on the other side of the hill. The path on the front side of the hill was oriented directly into the prevailing winds. Grasping for the positive, I considered that the wind would be at my back when I was exhausted on the return trip through this section.

The dark black, silty soil, the blowing snow, the howling winds, and the freezing temperatures made it look like the surface of Mars. Still, looking out at the grassy hills of Sheep Mountain and the snow-covered peaks of Jim Mountain and Devil's Tooth was breathtaking. The shallow portion of the inlet was frozen. Stepping out onto the ice to test its density, its slipperiness became the only lesson learned. Picking up the pace to increase body temperature, I delicately balanced between maintaining the proper internal temp and breaking a sweat. In other locations, "Sweat plus sacrifice equals success," but in Buffalo Bill State Park during deep winter, "Sweat equals death" is more apropos.

The beach around the western tip of the hill (or island) differed from the terrain fifty yards before. Waves of rippled black beach sand yielded to jagged wafers of rock. At .85 miles, I reached my first scramble of the day across scaly rocks approximately three feet in diameter. The tricky terrain was a welcome challenge because of a break in the wind the back side of the hill afforded.

Waves audibly lapped under the frozen surface of the lake. Shifty boulders covered in five inches of snow and ice made the whole venture tricky. Stopping to pray, I asked God to help me not to fall, but if I did fall, not to hurt myself. Stepping off a line of shifty boulders onto a shoe-sized black rock, a previously unseen piece of driftwood burst from beneath the snow and gouged into my Achilles tendon. It was only a stinger, so I pressed on.

At 12:55 pm and .99 miles from the start of the hike, the wind slowed drastically. The face of the hill jetted out into the reservoir, resulting in erosion that exposed layers of stone. I suddenly realized that the flat, unstable rocks were from the hill above. I looked more closely

once I realized the rocks were not construction debris but sandstone encased underground for eons that could contain volumes of fossil material.

Stopping to take pictures of the rock layers, which looked like the pages of a book sitting on a bookshelf, it was hard for the mind to process what the eyes saw in this landscape. Terrain this raw is like seeing your hometown as an adult; childhood memories always sit larger than reality. Only, the layers of towering rock still seem large and wild through adult eyes.

The sandstone cliff transitioned to a section of dirt brimming with swallow nests as it became apparent that the circular hill was definitely the island on the map, and the large inlet extended behind the hill to where I decided to hike the western-facing shoreline. It was unclear if the inlet on the back side of the island would be passable or if I would have to retreat a mile-and-a-half back to where I had made the fateful wind-blasted decision.

Progressing further around the island and the increasingly steep shoreline, Diamond Creek Dike became visible. It was not as far in person as it looked on the map to get around the inlet and back on track for the day's hike. The inlet was frozen, but it was safer to hike the shoreline than to risk a straight line fifty yards across the ice. There was no cell service inside the previously hidden cove. With the delayed emergency response of my satellite communicator, I would die from hypothermia long before rescue could come.

Large chunks of ice that the wind and waves had pushed in through the inlet stacked the deepest recess of the cove. Walking across the scaly chunks of ice was no slipperier than the ice-covered rocks I had been hiking on the last half mile. There were remnants of a dry creek that once flowed from a ravine 150 feet above the shoreline. The slight impression of the creek was

visible, but not the depth of the snow filling it. Too wide to jump, I sidestepped slowly across the creek. The heavily packed snow prevented me from post-holing more than six inches into the abyss below.

Approaching the back of the inlet, a service building and pump station for Diamond Creek became visible. Diamond Creek flowed out of the face of the dike just below the facility. Trekking on the shoreline would require crossing the creek. If the inlet continued behind the island, it would be possible to hike on the dike road over the creek. But, more pressing, walking on narrow black sand terraces that the receding reservoir had left, I suddenly realized that they were the remnants of a landslide from the hill 150 feet above. My pace quickened.

The inlet was muddy, making my shoes feel twenty pounds heavier, crossing a series of snow-filled dry creek beds. Post-holing waist-deep into one of them, it occurred to me that I had walked 360 degrees around the island and was quickly approaching the dike where my vehicle was parked. Already worn out from stepping on icy rocks and a renewed blast of arctic wind, I fought the temptation to head toward my red Jeep, now visible a few hundred yards away.

At 1:27 pm and 1.86 miles, I climbed up the west side of Diamond Creek Dike. The wind was a steady 20 miles per hour on top of the dike, but it blew from behind, which offered just enough reprieve to convince me to continue. The east side of the dike had a flat, snow-covered grassy area crisscrossed with dirt roads and a retention pond that formed the staging area for the creek's transition through the dike and into the reservoir below.

At 2.24 miles, I reached the end of the dike with the service building and saw an Osprey nest that park staff had placed atop a telephone pole. I descended the giant boulders that form

the dike down to the inlet. Diamond Creek was visible, something I had seen from the same distance on the black sand terraces nearly an hour before.

Knowing this was my last day hiking around Buffalo Bill State Park consumed every thought. Hiking the park had been an underlying purpose since retiring and going through a period of great transition. We spend our years as a tale that is told. Some never understand this, living life aimlessly until death snares them unaware. Some understand this early, but breaking under the immense oppression of pointlessness, they choose to shorten their lives. Some, though far too few, understand this and count each moment a precious gift, wringing every drop of beauty, joy, and truth from each of life's experiences. A snowy whirlwind from the frozen reservoir refocused my thoughts on the path ahead.

Mile 2.45 brought about another decision. I could avoid a 200-yard section of steep shoreline by climbing a hill through a ravine off my right. The ravine and grassy hill it ascended were the safer bet, but I chose the steep shoreline, thinking it would only be two hundred yards, and I could turn around if it became unsafe. The gamble paid off. The steep shoreline was more navigable than it looked. It was steep but not slippery. I took a few amazing pictures of the rust-colored scaly rocks with the frozen reservoir thirty feet below while the solid west winds puffed out lenticular clouds from the Continental Divide, making an equally fantastic background.

I hiked down a thirty-foot-high rock scramble to a black sand beach inside a small cove. Exiting the little cove, a freezing gust of wind coming up the North Fork from Sylvan Pass in Yellowstone smacked me. The highway that forms the park's northern border became visible, and I could start to make out our camper parked in the Lake Shore Campground across the

reservoir. The blinding snow-packed wind from the frozen lake made it hard to be observant. My focus was on surviving the winter conditions in Buffalo Bill State Park.

Looking through the hoodie partially hanging over my eyes, I saw what looked exactly like a C-130 airplane tire on the beach. A closer investigation revealed that it was a large bolder that mirrored the circular shape of a giant tire. They say the world changed when we invented the wheel, but looking at the perfectly shaped natural formation on the beach, I asked, "Who said that men invented the wheel?"

At mile 2.89, another cove jutted at least a half mile inland from the prevailing shoreline. The park was full of surprises. At 2:12 pm and halfway to my turnaround, calculating the remaining daylight became important. I had forgotten to bring my headlight. I rationalized that I could cut diagonally over the large bench between the shoreline and Cedar Mountain on the return trip and save time by walking on the dike and not going around the island. Even if I had to return in the dark, I was determined to finish the hike.

Further around the inlet, the shoreline was very steep and comprised of crumbly wafers of rock. Falling fifteen feet down to the frozen inlet would hurt but not kill me, so I accepted the risk because the sketchiest part was only twenty feet wide, and there was no real alternative track that late in the day. Besides, I was focused on not disturbing the unstable cliff forty feet above. Crab-crawling across the steep, crumbly rock, every piece of the cliff I grabbed fell to the ice below. I was rewarded with a nice descent into a half-mile section of soft black sand that formed the deepest section of the cove.

At 3.34 miles, I exited the cove onto a beach with two stands of Cottonwood trees and a nice blast of the freezing west wind. A quarter mile further, the western tip of Cedar Mountain became visible, along with cars on the North Fork highway and the parking area near the Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center. The mountain's tip looked about a mile away, but hidden coves could change that drastically. Even with the wind chill well below freezing, as soon as the sun peaked from behind a snow cloud, I started to sweat walking across this rough terrain.

A traffic cone and a section of ice forming a six-foot-tall A-frame on the shoreline caught my attention. Walking close to investigate, it appeared to be marking someone's favorite fishing spot. It's hard to say with certainty what it was, but knowing I am not the only person to have frequented this park section is oddly comforting. 3.8 miles in and near the center of Cedar Mountain's western face, there was only a half mile left to the turnaround point.

The ice groaned with each blast of wind coming over Gibbs Bridge, seven miles across the reservoir. The rocks were covered in deep snow because this section takes the brunt of the mighty west winds. I trained my ankles to give way at the end of each slippery step to avoid breaking something. The shore was lined with stacked sheets of ice that were pushed over large boulders resembling the Czech hedgehog anti-tank fortifications that Germans placed on the beaches of Normandy.

4.09 miles from the dike, the yellow and white sulfurous-stained rocks I saw from the opposing side of the reservoir on the first day of the hike were now visible. Vehicles on the North Fork highway were close enough to see what make and model they were. In the next quarter mile section of shoe-sized rocks covered in snow, I rubbered up my knees, ankles, hips, and feet, allowing them to go where they wanted without breaking. Hiking in this section was

more akin to ice skating. Near the end of the section was an area of suit-cased size boulders followed by a dozen red ridges extruded from an eroded cliff down into the frozen reservoir.

Under wet conditions, the ridges became prominent spines of slippery red clay-like mud. After navigating the first three, I slipped six feet down the face of the fourth, breaking through the icy reservoir and soaking both shoes with freezing water. I had no choice but to work my way back up one of the red spines of mud to a vertical vein of rock no wider than a shoe. Carefully tight-roping the narrow rock one shoe in front of the other, I ascended thirty feet to the cliff above. My fear of heights peaked, I grasped a small Juniper bush and heaved off the narrow rock vein onto stable ground.

Descending a snowy ravine across the small hill and around the spines of red mud, I saw a cave formed naturally under a pile of large rocks and what looked like mountain lion tracks in the snow. My wife texted that she could see me from across the reservoir. I faintly made out the truck headlights a quarter-mile away. With the sun now beaming and soaked with sweat, I crossed an eighty-foot cliff that angled forty-five degrees into the frozen reservoir. The cliff was extra slippery due to the stinking water seeping across its face. The smell of beef broth and rotten eggs permeates the air.

At 4.68 miles, I finally reached the large boulder on the point of Cedar Mountain that had been the aim for the last mile and a half, and just in front of the boulder appeared to be a hot spring with steam coming up from the reservoir. Six feet out into the clear water was visible before the ice regained the upper hand in the battle for the shoreline. The muddy red spines yielded to bleached-white coral-looking perforated rock or limestone and more mountain lion

tracks in the snow. Cautiously looking at the tree-lined cliff above, I assessed my susceptibility to ambush and pressed forward.

I reached the smelly terminus of the hike around Buffalo Bill State Park at 3:53 pm, after 4.77 miles of hiking on the day and 30.22 miles from where I started the adventure at Buffalo Bill Dam & Visitor Center. In summer, I would have been able to go another hundred yards further, but snow and ice blocked the path during winter. My wife texted me a grainy cell phone photo (she had taken from across the reservoir) of me raising my hands triumphantly. I unceremoniously began the return trip, pushing into darkness on icy terrain with no headlight.

Braving the stench of the stinking water, I dipped my hand into the steaming pool on the point of Cedar Mountain only to discover that the water was ice cold, just as it was on the northern side of the reservoir the first day of the hike. The return trip was much quicker, causing me to sweat profusely despite below-freezing temperatures. Even through fogged-up glasses and waning sunlight, more mountain lion tracks were visible in the snow. Every sound coming from the cliff fifteen feet above triggered the fear of being attacked.

To become a more challenging target, I worked from beside the cliff to as close to the shoreline as possible and devised an escape plan out onto the ice. Concentrating on the cliff above, a shifty boulder caused me to fall nearly flat. Driftwood stuck into my left cheek but didn't break the skin. Another inch, and it would have pierced my jaw. I ran the "Am I okay?" checklist, and seemed okay. My right knee was a little bruised, and my right ankle immediately swelled, but I could continue.

The problem with returning and following your tracks in the snow is that rocks that are safe the first time you step on them are entirely unsafe in the opposite direction. It made me think of people who are unlucky in love or adventure, but when time passes and they find themselves going in a different direction on the same path, they find happiness.

At 5.16 miles and four hours and thirteen minutes into the hike, I returned to the beach with the spines of red mud and hiked up the ravine to bypass another fall. Just before the cave in the ravine, I picked up a large piece of wood as mountain lion protection. Stick in hand, I inched closer and snapped a picture inside the dark recesses of the cave. Because of quickly dwindling daylight, I decided to stay on the bench three hundred yards from the shoreline and about 150 feet up the foothills of Cedar Mountain. The high-desert sage plain is identical to the land on my homestead and much easier to walk on than the ice-covered rocks on the shore.

The game trail I followed across the bench gave way to a horse trail that cut diagonally across the bench toward the north end of the Diamond Creek Dike. Just over the hill, the island became visible again. Looking at a small portion of the Diamond Creek Dike, I aimed at the top of the Osprey nest peeking above the ridge.

The horse trail transitioned to a nice two-track, confirming the fastest way back to the dike. Golden rays of the setting sun shined down on Chimney Rock, lighting up the entire South Fork from the heightened vantage. Crossing the second large inlet in reverse and higher up the foothill, I post-holed waist-deep into a dry creek bed filled with snow.

At 6.55 miles, my feet were hurting. The rock scrambling and icy terrain wrecked my left heel. Crossing the high side of several ravines left me out of breath. My fatigue was likely a

result of dehydration. In a rush against daylight, I hadn't stopped to drink or eat anything in nearly six hours of intense exercise. Since I could safely walk the road on top of the dike after dark, I continued forward without stopping to drink.

The last significant incline before the inlet surrounding the island became too steep to descend. The only path was to backtrack to the shore to complete the hike. Following a ravine until hitting an old cowboy fence that deadened at a cliff, I had to cross a muddy embankment about eighteen inches wide to get down to an area where descending to the beach was possible. The embankment was washed out, and if it gave way, I would fall twenty feet to the beach below. Dehydrated and pressed for daylight, I jumped to the middle of the embankment, only quickly planting one foot on the crumbling ground long enough to leap to the other side.

I reached the north end of the Diamond Creek Dike at 5:18 pm and 6.79 miles from the start. On the way up the side of the dike, I stepped on a piece of driftwood, just like someone stepping on a rake in a cartoon, and busted my shin into a bloody mess. Dehydration aside, I was compelled to walk the last mile on the top of the dike before drinking something.

I sang the hymn *Surely Goodness and Mercy* based on our morning Bible study in Psalm 23. God sews my heart to my eyes while I meditate on scripture in wild places; a tapestry of the day's scripture emerges in the nature before me. I thought I would feel bittersweet or even sad completing the hike, but mostly, I felt grateful to be able to complete the adventure spiritually, mentally, physically, and occupationally.

Some snowflakes fall on the mountaintop, collect in craggy rocks, and endure volatile weather. When conditions are right, they melt and start their arduous journey, filtering through

layers of rock. After a lengthy time, they finally join a subsurface flow. They are thrust into the river only after hitting an impermeable granite layer. My life has been like a snowflake that fell directly into the river. Through no merit of my own, my journey was easier. There were moments of difficulty as I ran against rocks in the river, but I never had to filter through twelve thousand feet of rock and hit impermeable granite on my journey. Some snowflakes fall on the mountaintop, and some in the river.

It was a day of runny noses, watery eyes, and snot rockets. A sweat-soaked shirt quickly lowered my internal temperature as the ambient temperature dropped with the setting sun. But my focus was solely on my sore feet. The dike was only 1.05 miles long, but I felt every step.

Nostalgia and gratitude filled my mind as I arrived back at my vehicle, tired and dehydrated at 5:40 pm. The mountains bring peace, an abundance of peace. The day ended at the Fee Area at the Diamond Creek Dike, 7.82 miles and five hours and 29 minutes from when I started. With only twilight left, I had to turn on my headlights to stow my gear. While much shorter than the forty-two miles of shoreline within the park, my hike around Buffalo Bill State Park was 33.27 miles, completed in twenty-two hours and 24 minutes. I spent seven glorious hiking days and three years with Buffalo Bill.

The trip around Buffalo Bill State Park confirmed that both Thoreau and science are correct in their assessment of the essentials of life: water, air, food, and light are the four essential elements humans need to survive; shelter, clothing, and fuel are vital to our existence. However, I believe faith, found in various forms throughout every society on earth, is just as essential. Faith allows us to live life to our fullest, most abundant potential and not just exist and survive.

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