

How Then Shall We Live? A Week-long Wilderness Adventure

Taos, New Mexico, September 8-15, 2018

A voice in the wilderness calls out...

“Want to hear a secret most of us know but rarely admit? The good life in modern society isn’t so good. In fact, these days it often feels exhausting. Frantic. Broken. Headed for a cliff. . . For all its glittering perks, the current version of ‘the good life’ often feels suffocating: to ourselves, other people, and the planet. Enough is enough. Our authentic selves, our awaiting children, and our aching planet need us to find a better path. It’s time to break from the destructive systems of dominant culture so we can become the free and untamed people of God has always wanted us to be. . . It’s time to reinvent our current American way so we can better follow the Jesus Way.”

So writes Todd Wynward, wilderness educator and Mennonite minister for creation care, in *Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God*. Hearing this call, Mennonite Men engaged Todd and TiLT (Taos Initiative for Life Together) to provide a week-long immersion experience in the wilderness of New Mexico to address the question, “How then shall we live?”

In response to an open invitation from Mennonite Men, ten men from across the country came together for this event. The purpose of the week-long immersion was to provide an in-depth experience for men to explore how to live as followers of Jesus in a world where our lifestyles impact people and the planet. We sought to discover a life with greater freedom, satisfaction and love while enjoying the wilderness.

We stayed at TiLT, a Mennonite-inspired social change movement in Taos, NM, where folks seek to follow the way of Jesus to honor the earth, care for people, and transform society. This was a place for us to reimagine the “good life” with people who model a community at the crossroads of nature and scripture.



What follows are a few snapshots of our experiences addressing the question “How then shall we live?”



To explore this question, we visited traditional Native American and intentional communities to see how various ways people answer this in their lives. We did excursions into the wilderness—allowing God to speak in wild places, as God has throughout history. And we enjoyed deep conversations together over delicious meals from food from the gardens of TiLT.





We were impressed with the Taos Pueblo, the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America, dating back to around 1000 A.D. This four-story structure made of adobe (earth mixed with water and straw) continues to house Tiwa-speaking Native Americans. We learned of their life drawing on both Christian faith and ancient Indian faith and how they have resisted domination by Spanish and other western powers.



The San Francisco de Asis Mission Church was built in the late 1700s of adobe brick and wood timbers. Literally built from the earth, this church is resurfaced each year by its members as an act of community to preserve their heritage and way of life.



In the front of the sanctuary are several images of St. Francis with skulls, inviting us as visitors to reflect on our mortality.

Knowing that we are going to die, "How then shall we live?" Francis and others who contemplated on this were led to live a life of simplicity, love and justice in God's creation.



We crossed the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, an impressive structure over a stunning canyon with the Rio Grande river running below. While an inspiring site, it's also a sad place where many people have ended their life.



On this bridge we heard of people struggling with the question, "How can I go on living?" Life for too many people is so full of pain and despair that death is sometimes preferred. For these, there is an invitation of hope and a button to connect with someone who cares.



One man who found hope for new life is Daniel Herrera. The skulls on his staff remind him of his addictions and former life. He goes by RYNO—Rewire Yourself with New Opportunities. He and Todd Wynward are exploring how to

bring his vision of a ministry to recovering addicts to life so that they, too, may be rewired with new opportunities.

For a service component in our immersion experience we worked on the site where RYNO's ministry is envisioned. Here we cleared debris from an adobe structure that had fallen in disrepair (shown below).



Daniel sits in an old adobe church now in ruin. He plans to rebuild this church to be a chapel for people reconstructing their lives. A modern St. Francis?



We also visited “earthships” in the desert. These ultra-sustainable adobe homes are constructed with used tires, bottles, cans and other recycled materials.



These earth-friendly houses being developed around the world demonstrate creative construction practices that reuse materials and conserve water and energy.



While we may not choose to go off and live in an earthship, we can consider ways to reduce our imprint in the world.

At the end of our experience together we enjoyed recreation in the wilderness—hiking into a canyon, swimming in the Rio Grande, and soaking in the sun.



Our camping in the wilderness included a 24 hour solo on the side of a mountain. For this, each of us far from each other, stayed within a thirty foot circle and pay attention to how God was calling us to live. Upon returning to the TiLT house, we gathered to hear what came to each man.



As we shared around the circle, we witnessed how God continues to use the wilderness as a space for the Spirit to work in our lives.

One man offered this poem.

Why We Came

*We journeyed far to this mountain, this river
By car and train, truck and plane,
From flatlands and cities and farms;
Wobbly with intention, deaf and blind,
Drawn toward possibilities, to limits,
Into questions.*

*What are we desperate for?
What do we desire more
Than a cushy bed, our mate close, perfect hygiene,
Bread, stars, air?*

*How do we live in contradiction?
Doc Udell, Kit Carson, the light-footprint Angie,
Our
Selves?*

*Nevertheless,
We settle
For unsettled, and*

*Therefore,
We only can only open our hands,
Our shoulds, our phones,
Shatter on the floor.*

Another man presented this word that came to him.

Write your own eulogy. Live so that when you die, this is what they'll say. The words weren't spoken to me. It was more like a whisper, an invitation from the Spirit. As I reached the top of the hill, the eulogy wrote itself.

He always had a smile on his face...always seemed happy. He was creative...made preaching look easy and had a gift for speaking with children. He loved to fix things, design things, improve things. He was a good dad and a faithful husband.

The list went on. Lots of good things were spoken. Then the words stopped. Abruptly. I started to weep. What came next were the words that would not be spoken. The things that would not be part of my eulogy.

No one would say he was a fierce lover. No one would say he was my best friend. He had lots of friends, acquaintances. But when it came time to choose between "wasting time" with family or a friend or finishing a project, he was always drawn to the project. Relationships were secondary to accomplishments. Deep friendships seldom developed.

A fresh take of Jesus call rang out in my heart: Repent. Drop business as usual. And radically change one's life. Not just so kind words will be spoken in memorial, but so that I can become the more loving person I desire to be.

Three testimonials from the retreat....

- *There is a tension in this nation about being a strong man and being a Christian man. I was so inspired by my week at Taos to be fearless and fierce in the way Jesus taught, not in the American way of violence.*
- *The rewilding retreat exceeded my expectations at every turn. I learned so much, and appreciated getting to know a great bunch of guys, and the Tilt staff. This retreat was the perfect blend of action, learning opportunities, rest, and reflection. As I'm standing at the threshold of a major life transition (retirement), it gave me the space and context to reflect on the next stage of my life and write out my personal life mission statement. I'm really grateful for the opportunity.*
- *Do this. Tear yourself away and go. Your responsibilities and loved ones will be there when you return. And you will return, with a more passionate vision of how to be present and active with yourself, your people, and the place you live.*

Looking ahead... Based on how powerful this first week-long immersion experience was, Mennonite Men is exploring another immersion event in 2019 focusing on immigration, racism and justice.

Look for an announcement for this upcoming event.

--September, 2018