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Father / Son Conundrum

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Father/Son Conundrum:
Confessions of a Homeless Student and His Father

Fall Semester 2003

Benjamin Abbott
and Scott Abbott

23 August 2003
2 p.m., Sunday

Ben loads his mountainbike into the back of my van, throws in a backpack bulging with a tent, sleeping bag, and cooking equipment, adds a cloth bag full of books and a little dufflebag holding a few clothes, tosses in a bike helmet, and we're off, headed from Orem to Logan, where Ben will start his second year at USU.

My eighteen-year-old son is just back from Colorado where he and his friends Erike and Gabe have spent most of a week camping below Conundrum Peak.

We talked philosophy, Ben tells me, while relaxing for hours in hot springs and later while backed into a rocky hole in the scree above timberline while a wild thunderstorm boomed around us. We played lots of music, me on mandolin, Erkke on his backpacking guitar, and Gabe on penny whistle. And on the way home I came up with what I call the elevator theory of education.

Glad you're going back to school, I say, elevator or not. Do you have enough money for the semester.

Sure do, Ben answers. \$600 cash from my scholarship after tuition and fees. \$400 from my last construction job with Brandon. And \$1000 in my bank account.

Although I've been biting my tongue through Salt Lake and past Bountiful, I finally can't keep myself from asking: So with all that money, why are you so intent on camping in the canyon for the semester? I'd happily pay your rent.

I wouldn't stay up the canyon out of necessity, Ben answers decisively. It's something I want to do.

I'm worried, I add, that you'll spend so much time surviving that you'll neglect your chemistry and calculus and American lit.

I've thought that through, Ben answers. The time I'll save from social activities in the dorms will more than make up for the lost time.

Driving through Ogden, I continue to press my objections: Now I'm worried about your state of solitude. There's a good chance you'll become a new unbomber.

No, Dad, Ben starts . . . but I break in: It doesn't matter what you argue, Ben, I'll just have another worry based on the last conclusion. Let's change the subject.

Ben describes last spring's bike trip from Logan down to the Bear River Bird Refuge and back. He's a fine raconteur, and by the time he's finished, we're entering Logan. So are lots of other parents and students. I look at their packed cars jealously, certain they have a house or a room with an address to go to. Ben guides me up the hill, past his dorm from last year, through a quiet, well-cared-for neighborhood, up a road leading to a little cut in the hills north-east of town, onto a gravel road. A couple of restrooms stand at a trailhead. We drive up the canyon a ways, and Ben announces that this is the place. He takes out his bike, his bags, and gives me a big hug.

Take care, I say, and hand him five twenties. Security funds.

Thanks, Dad. This will come in handy. Take care yourself.

I will, I promise, and guide the van down the canyon, through Logan, and south toward Utah Valley, my mind buzzing with worry and pride, climbing my own conundrum peak.

benjawa <benjawa@cc.usu.edu> 08/25/03 02:46PM

Hey pops,

You should see the spot I found. It's a secluded oak grove quite a way above those picnic tables we looked at. Its only drawback is a touch of slantiness so I woke up in a bundle at the bottom of the tent. It's hidden enough though that I'm confident of the area's robber-free status. I rented a locker at the field house and a p.o. box at the post office and bought a stove and a sports radio last night. Your money was really helpful thank you. I've met lots of people and run into lots of people I already know. My geomorphology class is excellent and my chemistry professor has already proved himself to be three or four times the teacher of my last year's crap-head professor. You start

school on Wednesday correct? Well good luck and love from me. Thank you so much again for the ride yesterday and all your love and money.

Ben

ABBOTTSC@uvsc.edu

26 August 2003

Hi Ben,

thanks for the email. It gives me a sense for where you are, and that you are. I know it's a virtual space, but it's a real message. Glad to share my love and money.

Driving home yesterday, after leaving you and your precious few things in Green Canyon, my head was spinning with thoughts. To deal with them, the good ones as well as the bad ones, I gathered them into groups, compared them with each other, figured out alternative takes on the issue, and gradually realized I was writing a piece in my mind. Why shouldn't Ben and I, I thought, use our daily emails to talk about this attempt to live in solitude outside the normal structures of student dwelling?

Are you interested in a daily exchange of thoughts on survival, on dwelling, on space, on nature, on home, on learning, on our relationship.

There's a risk, of course. Free and open correspondence between father and son can get tricky. Franz Kafka's letter to his father, for instance, must have been a hard pill for Mr. Kafka to swallow:

Dearest Father,

You recently asked me why I claim to be afraid of you. As usual, I had no answer, partly because I am afraid of you, partly because in order to explain the fear would require more details than I could even begin to bring together in a conversation. . . .

Franz

Are we willing to risk written conversation?

What the hell is geomorphology?

love, Dad

benjawa <benjawa@cc.usu.edu> 08/26/03 05:54PM

Dad,

I love the idea. I'm incensed in fact. I watched the most glorious sunset of my life last night while the indoor students socialized and you know I couldn't say which activity was more worthwhile. It sure is strange though to think of the restless dorm energy interactions which are immediately cotemporary to me sitting on a log trying to find audio patterns in the treble harmonies of cicada and cricket. In a way the other students are surrounded by life. In a way I'm surrounded by life.

Last night I didn't bring up enough water so I mooched from a group of drum players in Triangle Cave, a popular pot smoking destination about five hundred yards from my camp. I left my food bag unzipped and came home (I feel like saying "came camp" rather than "came home") to a bagful of immature boxelder bugs. I had to eat though. Maybe I could sell my "shaved almond a la beetle" muffins to Albertsons.

love,
Ben

p.s. Geo- earth Morph- shape or change Ology- the study of

28 August 2003

Good morning Ben.

I'm pleased as punch to hear from you (although it makes me nervous to think you are "incensed" about writing with me).

I woke up in the night to flashes of lightning and booms of thunder. It was so pleasurable to hear the rain and feel a relief from the dry and hot summer. Pleasurable, that is, till my mind turned to Green Canyon. How did you do last night?

I'm working today on a syllabus for my Ethics and Values class, Philosophy 2050. After reading enough ethical theory so the students can distinguish divine command theory from utilitarianism and deontology, I think we'll work for the rest of the semester on questions of war.

You're taking geomorphology, American literature, chemistry, calculus 2, watershed biology, biking, and frisbee? Is that the list?

I was wondering about water. How will you solve that problem as time passes? A camelback with a big bladder? With a couple of bladders?

love you,
Dad

29 August 2003
Good evening Father,

I've had the most excellent of days. It started out in a heavy rain but I'll tell ya, Sierra designs a good tent. I was in the mood to be connected" this morning so I turned on my new \$5.00 sports radio and listened to the only station I get, 92.3 bible radio. I rode on drying roads to classes. It was a fierce frisbee game today and then a challenging geomorphology lecture on the fundamental forces of landsculpting. On top of good instruction in my cycling class, we get a twenty percent discount at Sunrise Cyclery.

After only three days I already feel so much more comfortable under the open sky. I was pretty nervous the first night. I spooked myself into a dizzy in fact but I've ridden up to my camp after dark these last two nights feeling fine. I've discovered another illicit canyon tenant. He's got brown hair and sleeps in a purple sleeping bag in the bed of a white pickup truck in the parking lot about three quarters of a mile distant from my camp. When the rain started this morning I heard him curse and start up his truck. Acoustically I don't have any privacy. Even joggers seem to make a racket on the gravelly path. The canyon amplifies everything.

On the subject of water, I bike up drinking water every now and again. For dish cleaning water I use the Logan Canal which is only about a mile down the trail and road. Each night I park my bike only about 15 meters from the trail and then hike up to my site, careful to pick a different route each time to avoid establishing a trail. This is out of respect for the grass and also in defense of my gear.

Well, love you Dad,
Ben

29 August 2003

Dear Ben,

Friday afternoon, parking lots starting to empty outside my office. Rain this morning, which felt good, and which made me think of you.

Your last email was sent last night just before 10, which means you must have biked "home" in the dark. Has it indeed started to feel like home?

Yesterday, in my ethics and values class, I had the students read Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), including this sentence: "Statutes and formulas, those mechanical tools of the rational employment or rather misemployment of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting tutelage." Searching for an example to clarify that passage, I told the story of our Sunday drive into Logan, of dropping you off in the canyon, of my "statutes and formulas" linking students to dorms or apartments and of your independent thinking that saw "student" and four walls and a roof as not necessarily connected. Oh my god, one young woman said, what high school did he go to? Orem High, I answered. Oh my god, she said again, Ben Abbott! It makes perfect sense! I know him too, a second student piped up. I sang in Show and Chamber Choir with him.

Ben, you're famous!

Dad

>>> benjawa <benjawa@cc.usu.edu> 09/02/03 21:38 PM >>>

Dad,

Thursday was a long and involved night. I arrived at camp relatively early, around 7:00 p.m., read some and watched the turmeric yellow sunset. By 9:00 I was asleep but a nightmare about wolves woke me up. I turned the radio to the bible station and listened to a sermon to soothe my fear. After killing a few stowaway spiders I settled down and thrashed for five hours. I couldn't get comfortable, the angle of repose was too sheer. My body just wouldn't relax so at 2:00 a.m. I gave up on the tent and threw my sleeping bag into a field of thigh-high grass about 20 yards from my official camp. Oh what bliss the flatness was. Then, of course, came the high-pitched hum of mosquitoes. I smashed the first one on my forehead and then fell asleep.

At 5:00 a.m. I awoke to find my face itching and tickling with a million tiny ant feet. I sat up swatting violently, but was puzzled to find my skin strangely ant free. I looked up to the sky in wonderment and then looked around the entire field. Clouds had rolled in and the humidity had made the tall grass lose some of its rigidity, causing some of it to droop down and brush against my face. I laid back down and watched the powerful ghost-white clouds float on, amazed at the dynamic subtleties of nature as a nightjar called nearby.

The grass barometer was correct and at about 8:00 a.m. rain woke me up to three black widows who had decided to take me as husband during the night. They had begun constructing webs between my bag and the grass. I carefully packed up my gear, covered it carefully with my twelve-dollar space-blanket/tarp, and left the red bundle of my possessions peacefully shedding droplets in the forest for the weekend.

Dad, who was it that remembered me in your class? Give them a hello from me (and also if they're attractive feel free to give them my e-mail address).

I like that Kant quote though I can't quite see what his goal is. Is a lasting and absolute truth his goal or is he resigned to the constant re-evaluation of "everlasting tutelage." The idea of an absolute truth is a comfort and also a depressing sentiment. Oh how I'd like to rest, to find some type of ideological retirement, some "this is it." I wonder how long I'd be content. I'm reminded of Dylan's lyric from "Visions of Johannah," "inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial. Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while. But Mona Lisa had the highway blues you can tell by the way she smiles."

Love you Dad,
Ben

3 September 2003
Dear Ben,

10 p.m. Wednesday night. I'm soooo pleased to read your email from last night, even if it looked like it was sent just before midnight and the thought of you biking up the canyon in the dark still worries me (although last night while I was standing in my skivvies in the back yard under the bright stars sometime after midnight throwing rocks at a half-grown yowling kitten I looked up at the half moon and thought gratefully it must have guided you home).

Kant and truth? He's pretty interested in truth, but he's also the guy who brought us an abiding skepticism about our access to what he called "the thing in and of itself -- das Ding an sich." Make of that what you will.

As for the two young women in my class, they're both attractive and I'll pass on your email address. I like that you used the word "attractive" rather than good looking. It's broader and richer. But it sounds like you're already hitched to those black widows.

Dylan ought to have a Nobel Prize, don't you think!

love you, and take care.

Dad

7 September 2003

Dear Ben,

Where the hell are you? Nothing since early last week. Swallowed up by the universe?

Dad

9 September 2003

Dear Dad,

Sorry about the communicative hiatus. I went to the Sawtooth Mts in central Idaho with the FOP (friends of the Pleistocene). They're a group of geologists from all around the U.S. who get together once a year and go on these theme-based geologic tours. This year's FOP was on the effects of crown fires on debris flows in the Sawtooth Mts. We camped next to some hot springs and sang geology songs around the campfire. "Go go, go glacier go, go go, go glacier go, go go, Glacier be cold."

I'm covered with oozing bugbites from I don't know what. It's rained quiet a bit but I've just been sleeping under the stars (and my red tarp). Every trip up the canyon is easier, although I just remembered -- on Thursday I lost my bike key and ran the four miles from campus. On Friday I gave up on ever finding my U-lock key and called campus police. "So, your bike is locked up to a tree and you live in Green Canyon??" the incredulous dispatcher asked. They eventually sent an officer and then he called for backup and a guy came with a grinder and in an impressive fan of sparks they vanquished my trusty bike lock.

Not having the heart to throw it away, I hid the lock corpse behind a row of bushes by the Ray B. West building and I eat lunch by it sometimes.

I feel a little strange today. Pensive. . . maybe, melancholy. . . yeah I guess a little bit but it's mostly just a mood thing. Tom and I talked about our moods on the phone a few weeks ago. He said that just once or twice a month nothing glimmers anymore, appeal dissolves into dark indifference and you wallow for a few days. I'm in the midst of such a wallow. I'm OK though.

Love,
Ben

p.s. What were you like at my age? What did you believe in, who did you read, what were you passionate about, what did you think about?

10 September 2003
Hey Ben,

Sooooooooooooooooo nice to hear from you, and to learn that you weren't lying among the embers of a lightning-induced fire or that you hadn't broken your leg in the night trying to get back to camp and then had been pecked to death by hungry magpies or that you hadn't fallen victim to a bevy of drug-crazed and sex-starved ex-students. You had just gone on a field trip!

I'm surprising myself at the level of ambient nervousness I'm feeling. I guess I ought to remember my feelings when Tom was scratching together a living playing his sax in the New York subway or when Maren had police burst into her apartment at Snow College. If you care for someone deeply, you're letting yourself in for anxious moments as well as sweet ones.

More later. And love now.

Dad

09/12/03 11:45AM

Dad,

I'm going to a College of Natural Resources leadership retreat this weekend so you won't hear from me but I can't wait to write you. So much has happened (foxes, moons, Rousseau's paintings, lovers, Buddhists. . .) and I feel like a new person. Man, life is really great, I'll tell you about it later.

for now remember that I love you.

Ben

p.s. I still want to know what you were like at my age.

14 September 2003

Dear Ben,

Your Friday email left me with an easier heart, knowing (sort of) where you would be. Your list about what has happened (foxes, moons, Rousseau's paintings, lovers, Buddhists. . .) has me wondering if we ought to have a father/son talk about the potential psychological and health dangers of multiple lovers. (Is this middle-aged jealousy talking?)

You mentioned depression, and said you had talked with Tom about his bouts with that old slayer of liveliness. I wrestle occasionally with what feels like a laming sadness, a kind of miserable melancholy; and your mother does as well. That makes you prime genetic material for the disease. I don't court depression, but I do see it as a welcome reminder that I'm human, that I'm mortal; and in the process, those dark scirms set off the brighter days of my life all the more brilliantly.

Now, to an earlier question about my life as an 18 year old. Of that first year at college I have several clear memories:

1. A brief but passionate couple of months in the company of a fellow honors student, a girl from California whose kisses graduated me suddenly from high school to college.
2. The intellectual thrill of lectures, hanging around the honors reading room, films, lots of reading — the general excitement of college.

I was outgoing, yet shy, curious but a bit lazy, very interested in girls but a little backward, drawn to dress well but poor as a junior-high-school teacher's son. I stayed on campus over Thanksgiving, having collected extra dorm cafeteria food for a couple of weeks, rather than going home to Farmington, N.M., so I didn't see my parents from August till Christmas. I wrote to them twice, at most. Looking back, I'm amazed at that distance and pleased that you and I are sharing a richer conversation.

love, Dad

16 September 2003

Daddio,

It sounded like a traffic jam this morning, The wind was thrashing the oaks all around me. A few hours and a few inches of snow later I decided it was time to go to school. I'd written a song "Victims like me of the wind and wet (an ode to fallen leaves)" that I whistled to myself on the 20-minute ride to school. My stiff plastic rain poncho gouged into my bare knees and meltoff ran down both legs and completely filled my boots.

Last week my newly purchased Ventura roadbike got stolen. It was a fine orange vehicle with aluminum toe clips and sleek, powerful lines. I'd bought it at the ORC gear swap for \$20 along with a new 15-degree sleeping bag. Here's the journal entry I made that night: "I write, humbled and grateful. Today was like a waking dream – so much became clearer. All my stuff fell from my backpack when I was riding through the rain across the fieldhouse intersection – books, newly washed laundry, and lettuce all got the wet road grime treatment. I laughed though, happy to be alive. Geomorphology was good. Afterwards Janet, Justin and I had a splendid time laughing for the sake of enjoyment. I ate a great sandwich, practiced 'My funny Valentine' and my bike got stolen. I walked across campus feeling quietly alone to get my trusty Marin Eldridge-grade mountain bike. On my ride home I stopped and pilfered some tart red apples from the 1400-north tree. I idly prayed and for whatever reason I started to freely cry.

“A fox was waiting for me at the trailhead of the path that leads to my tent. I stopped about five feet from it. It glided towards me and its large tail swung and bobbed purposefully behind. In the moonlight its body and tail were cream colored and its huge eyes were dark opal blue. It had this innocent secure energy about it that shook me to the core. Never in my life had I met a human being so completely unapologetic. It brushed against my left leg and then sat, leaning on my derailleur. A few seconds later it stood, gave me a nod and padded off down the trail. I'm not alone in the canyon anymore.”

Dad, this whole week under the heavy moon has been extraordinary. A little bit later each night the moon drags its wintergreen light across my canyon making everything grey/blue/cream. The junipers look like polygon simplifications of trees. I feel like I'm sleeping in Rousseau's painting "The sleeping Gypsy" and I'm constantly expecting a curious lion to appear.

My comment about multiple lovers referred to three woman all of whom I am and am not in love with. Maybe “lover” wasn’t exactly the right word.

Hey I love you.

17 September 2003
Good morning Ben.

just after 8 a.m., brilliant sun shining through my windows, fresh coffee brewing, and an email from you to read. Feels good.

Sorry about the theft of your bike, the rain on your books and wash and lettuce. Sounds like you dealt with it existentially and well. What a face-to-face meeting with the fox! It really leaned against your bike? The image of you standing there, having picked the apple like Adam, praying and weeping, undid me.

Take good care!
Dad

18 September 2003
Dad,

I've taken to sleeping with my toothpaste, otherwise I end up with frozen toothcake. Soon I'll start doing the same with my apricot preserve and peanut butter.

My two goals in this homeless venture are one: to conquer my fears of the beast and of being alone, and two: attempt to only own what I really need. In defining this need, past my physical necessities, I've included books, my guitar, mandolin, and movie camera. I get this sleek, stripped down feeling when I've got all my possessions on my back. I'm no St. Francis but I do hope to experience independence as fully as possible.

How are you father? Anything come of those girls I know in your class? What questions or dilemmas have you been thinking of? I've been wrestling with the problems of free will and have been trying to find a reliable determiner between foolhardiness and bravery. Any insights on those issues?

Ben

p.s. Some of my minimalizing has created new reliances. I dry my shoes off at the geology building heat vent and I have about a meal a day.

23 September 2003

Hey Dad,

Monday, aggravated by a gimpy Achilles tendon, I rode home, barefoot, with that worthless, hollow, spit-and-grimace feeling. I pedaled up the gravel trail choking back dejection/terror tears and then barefooted, painstakingly picked a prickly path up to my juniper "garage" where I parked my bike. Then I heard a "CRACK!" from only a few feet ahead of me. My vision was still tinged with red from the exertion, but my nose was filled with an evil acidic odor. "SNAP!" This time I whipped out my 'Black Stallion' lock blade and jumped out from the confining cover of the tree into the clearing below my camp. "HOLY LUCIFER" I yelled, the earth was scalding hot and had burned my feet! I high-stepped up the path a few steps and looked back, bewildered. It was then that I noticed what looked like thousands of tiny red-glowing eyes, eyes of thousands of hellish imps marching in formation across the glade. A breeze blew a thick billow of smoke into my face and I realized that the mountain was on fire! I sprinted up to my camp, grabbed my 'Tropicana' gallon water container, jerked on my boots and was back to the demons seconds later. The cool breeze had quickly nursed the nascent embers into flames. A circular area about 20-feet across with a juniper dead in the middle was burning. I fell into that burning ring of fire and kicked, stomped, doused, dropped and rolled all over those flames.

I remembered that I'd seen a light up canyon and when I had most of the flames under control I ran down the trail, leaped across a 10-foot wide ravine and sprinted up the canyon access road screaming "Is there anyone up there at that light?!"

After a few seconds I heard a "Yeah, I'm up here," from up on the hillside. "Do you have any water? There's a fire across the canyon?"

"Not that much water, I've got a shovel though"

We jogged back towards the fire. He was a lanky, fit, leathery middle-aged guy who introduced himself simply as John. Together we dug a fire break, smothered all the glowing eyes, and then carefully sifted through the dry needles under the tree feeling for hotspots.

It looked like the fire had started right next to the trunk of the juniper, smoldered deep into the parched, organic loam and slowly burned outward until it hit the grass. I'd somehow had the luck to get there right as it really began. The wind would have led it right to my tent and then right up the mountain. Not only would I have lost all my gear but I'm pretty sure the Forest Service would've hung me out to dry, I mean who would believe that it wasn't me? With the fire only feet from my camp and no other explainable ignition source I tell ya, that would have ruined my day.

Well, it's time to do some Chemistry (not the combustion kind). I've got a test on Wednesday.

Love,
Ben

25 September 2003

Hey Pops,

I got the nicest packages from Maren today. A snaps cowboy shirt and some cookies. Man she made me feel so good.

Today in American Lit. I lead a discussion on personality formation. The whole Nature/Nurture is relatively interesting but what I like to think about is free will. Self is prerequisite to choice, as far as I understand, so who is responsible? Is choice ramification and response, are we echos and rockslides or are we creators? I was thinking that perhaps the immense complexity of our response is what makes us humans. It's an intricate, synthetic, and I think beautiful dance between reactants and products.

I moved camp, the fire made me nervous and even vaguely suspect an arsonist. I'm closer to campus by about half a mile. I consciously made a urination perimeter around my tent which now makes me wonder if there is any interspecies territorial respect. Do I smell menacing or wimpy. If I lift weights does my pee gain credence? Our explicit abstract language has replaced many of those subtle cues. We don't have a corner on the abstraction market though. Those forms of olfactory communication are just as representative as our hieroglyphs and vocal clicks. A certain smell isn't inherently offensive, the coyotes have simply learned what it means.

love,
Ben

30 September 2003

Dear Ben,

Glad you moved your camp. Vaguely suspecting an arsonist just adds to those subconscious anxieties that you fight in an unusual living situation, huh?

The question you are raising about nature/nurture, about biological determinism vs. free will and creativity is one I've been thinking about on and off over the last decade. Writing after my brother John's death of AIDS, I tried to think through how much of his sexual preference was chosen and how much biologically determined. There are good studies that link some sexual behavior to biological determiners. And – I was surprised and then pleased to find some gay activists who didn't want anything to do with biological arguments, who felt they had freely and creatively chosen their sexual preference.

A branch of the subject I particularly like is the Marxian one that questions our ability to act autonomously given the social and economic structures that bind us so tightly.

Got weekend plans?

love,
Dad

6 October 2003

Pops,

I've gone mobile and given my farewells as Green Canyon turns yellow and red. All my "necessaries" fit inside my backpack which I carry around with me. It gives me such flexibility and freedom. I'll study at the Merrill library 'til closing time then stagger into the moonlight, unroll my bag and sleep. I feel so sleek, I'm condensed. The succulent, saccharine, seductive luxuries of on-campus, under-bush living come with a new set of perils however. Rain is mild and predictable compared to violent, viperous, hissing, horizontal, scouring sprinklers. I also miss the peace of the canyon. There's a lingering fear of discovery and a definite lack of privacy whenever I sleep on campus. Some of my friends let me sleep in their back yard under a restless elm next to a little stream which reminds me of some urbanized ghetto recreation of my Green canyon campground.

There's that old Puritan idea of Satan residing in the woods, nature's an uncivilized place of carnal and pagan character. Coming out of the woods I've gotten quite the opposite impression. The canyon was wholesome. Oak trees have no hidden motives, grass is for the sake of grass.

The way I live now is closer to a true homelessness. Strangely I feel the change from tent-canyon-dwelling to itinerant-plop-down-nook-sleeping was a bigger change than the house to canyon transition. I've fewer luxuries but the current organization of my possessions is as or more convenient than it ever has been before. Because each of my possessions carries with it a cost (the cost is I've got to carry it) I'm much more discriminating in what I decide to own. Most single purpose items have been eliminated, leaving me with an adaptive set of tools. It's so useful to have all the things necessary for camping in everyday life. I can cut open cracker packages, fix bikes, listen to the radio, brush my teeth, have a flashlight, and tell which way is north (actually I ditched my compass – too big), all with things I carry around with me. I don't have to walk –even across the room – to get to my closet, or sink, or kitchen, or bathroom and because I've reduced all these things to their basic elements I think it actually is more efficient for me to carry around my room than it was to live in it.

8 October 2003

Daddyo, I've traveled this last week. I went to Bozeman Montana to see Martin Sexton last Tuesday and then over the weekend I went to Durango Colorado with the USU cycling team and raced. The CC course wound across a sage meadow then up a steep technical canyon ascent and right back down a harrowing rocky cliff descent. It then rolled over gentle hills through an ancient fragrant green and tan juniper forest. Then up a ridge and back down into the starting meadow. I did well and beat most of USU's riders.

Have you ever read Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling"? I've heard it was good and plan on reading it. I'm halfway through "The Botany of Desire" (I've read about the apple and the tulip- just about to come up on marijuana) and I completely love it.

What things are most essential to your lifestyle? What possessions have you leaned against most heavily? I mean both of these questions to refer to material, spiritual, and social things. Have you eaten any really good food lately? What is your favorite color?

love, Ben

9 October 2003

Hey Pops,

Great day today. Paul Hawken gave a seminar on environmentally sustainable behavior that blew me away. This evening I went through the new USU art museum exhibit on west coast abstract impressionism and Miro surrealism. There are some really good pieces of art up here. You should come up, we could ride, eat, and enjoy. Well the full moon beckons, farewell.

(do you think of the moon and mars as feminine, masculine, or without gender?)

love,

Ben

12 October 2003

Dear Ben,

The moon. La luna. Der Mond. Three languages, three sexes. Then there's the man in the moon. And green cheese feels feminine to me. So my jury's out on that one. Mars, on the other hand, is masculine in my mind; too much bellicose male baggage tied to that red planet over the millennia. Your answers to the same questions?

13 October 2003

Father Oh Father,

Just one thought in between a successfully completed American Literature class and a dull Economics class: My teacher mentioned "Wow, heavy load" as I lumbered out of class with my 37-pound pack. I retorted "Ahh but not nearly as heavy as all the things you tie yourself to." I then thought about it a little more and realized that the optimization of personal freedom and happiness is a profoundly subjective process. One man's cage is another man's ladder (I think that I just made that up).

Well pops, I'm happy, productive, and busy. How are you?

love Ben

----- Original Message -----

From: Scott Abbott

To: kermit.hall@usu.edu

Sent: Friday, October 31, 2003 9:37 AM

Subject: Your camping students

Dear President Hall,

My son Ben is one of the three USU students featured in this morning's Tribune story. I have been concerned about him, naturally, but also proud and supportive of him in this venture. I was pleased, then, by your statement on the educational possibilities of a more "natural" student experience. Ben's experience at USU has been exactly what a parent hopes for when sending a child to college.

I'm also an educator, Director of Integrated Studies at UVSC (saw you yesterday at our inaugural), and as part of Ben's and my shared responsibility in a slightly risky undertaking, we've been trying to think through the experience in writing a column that will be published in Catalyst Magazine. I'll attach a version of it here, to give you a more detailed sense for what Ben (and I) have been learning.

all the best,

Scott Abbott

Scott, thanks very much for sharing this with me. It is a unique situation, but I also think students have to find their way. Let's keep in touch. I admire your approach.

Best, Kermit

Hi Ben,

haven't talked with you through the ether for quite some time. I wanted to know, for instance, how the skyroom gig went. And how your classes are shaping up as we move toward the end of the semester. My advanced writing class, where students begin their senior thesis, has dwindled from 30 students to about 15 as the weight of the project gets to them. They'll have to start over next semester.

Lyn and I spent Saturday with a chain saw clearing maples and oak brush from the site where our house will sit. Hated to see those great trees (small but great) go down; but we'll burn them respectfully to heat the house when the time comes.

Okay, here's the bad news: Greta deJong didn't print our piece in the November *Catalyst*. No answer to about a dozen of my emails. No explanation. Nothing. She also didn't print my piece about Scott Carrier's photos, but at least she told me that she was full for November. Maybe she thought that was information about our piece too. Anyway, I was disappointed, and even a little angry. Because she didn't get back to me with any discussion, I have no idea how we'll fare for December.

But she's not the author of our fates. Let's keep writing. I want to hear your new adventures. And how the hell are you faring with the 16-degree temperatures and the rain and snow?

Got a note back from your president, thanking me for my email thanking him for the reasonable words he spoke about your venture.

love you Ben,

Dad

Dad,

Where should I buy boots? I want Vasque Sundowners and they have them at a store up here in Logan but I think they have them in Orem too. They are 165.00 up here. Could you check for me what they cost down there?

Too bad about the oaks and maples. I love in 'The Botany of Desire' Pollan's constant lingering on the undomesticatability of the Oak tree. I was talking to Brandon about an Oak which he saved in the front yard of a house he built. A single adult tree costs several hundred dollars because they grow so slowly.

I rode to Orem on Friday and am going to ride back up this coming Saturday or Sunday. It was a fine ride but I didn't wear underwear and in the first hour really did almost freeze my penis off. I talked to a doctor the next day and she said that I was actually near permanent tissue damage.

The skyroom gig was so fun. We played three half hour sets: folk, jazz, and rock sets. The sound crew was new and all amplification went out during the second set so we came down off the stage and huddled around the house grand piano. We performed, Night and Day, My Funny Valentine, All of ME, Shine, Write myself a letter, willow weep for me, and Punkies Dillema in the Jazz set. The rock set ended in a fifteen minute led zepplin medly and with me shirtless. On a different note, I'm at a kiosk and there is a spider building a web behind the plexiglass screen protector. Wait the cursor is getting closer to her there

she's right there----> *

I've just got to get to the bathroom, write you later,
love
ben

6 December 2003

Dad,

It's been so long but I had a dream about you a few night ago so it actually feels like our separation hasn't been too lanky. Quite a bit has happened. I had lunch with Gary Snyder this week and have been learning alot about nature, video-editing, Tuvan throat singing, and sickness. I've got this stiff joints fever cough thing. No time to write now must learn. Listen to the attached file. The only instrumental accompaniment is a morin khuur stringed instrument. There is no jaw harp, it's all voice. I saw Ghengis Blues last night and it kinda got me interested.

love,
ben

(to be continued...)