

Caroline Redick

Dr. Gingrich

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The Paradox of Self-Reliance

In the late eighteenth century, America aligned herself with other prosperous nations and ventured down the path of industrialization. America was forever changed; inventions such as Eli Whitney's system of interchangeable parts, the cotton gin, and the steam system all made mass-production of goods possible. Labor became more stratified, with farmers focusing solely on cultivating crops and factory workers focusing on assembling and manufacturing goods. Farmers relied on factories for their source of clothing and household goods, while city dwellers relied on farmers for a steady food supply. Innovations in transportation, like the railroad, made the exchange of goods back and forth feasible. Fearing this dramatic shift towards industrialization and civilization, many resisted the revolution and clung onto the idea of a wild, untamed America. Artist George Catlin romanticized the vast American wilderness in his paintings, while writer Thoreau emphasized the importance of self-reliance in his essays. However earnest in their efforts, the Industrial Revolution had already set foot on American soil, and Catlin and Thoreau were helpless to prevent its expansion. Industrialization has only increased since, with America being a completely consumer-driven, capitalistic nation. Marks of civilization surround us every way we turn, and we are dependent on the work of others for even simple tasks like eating and drinking. Water falls into your cup with the touch of the button, food always waits patiently on grocery store shelves, and most people cannot even tell you where this water or food came from. We so blindly

rely on others for our most basic needs, and we don't even realize we are doing it. In the critically-acclaimed novel *Into the Wild*, author Jon Krakauer asserts that total self-reliance is unattainable. Krakauer develops this assertion by describing Chris McCandless's struggles in the Alaskan wilderness, revealing Chris's numerous relationships with other people, and providing testimony supporting this claim from Chris himself. The chaos resulting from recent power outages and my own dependence on parents, teachers, and material items further disprove the feasibility of self-reliance.

Jon Krakauer uses Chris McCandless's true life story to argue against self-reliance. Firstly, Krakauer highlights McCandless's interpersonal relationships that he forms during his escapade in the West with Wayne Westerberg and Ronald A. Franz. Wayne Westerberg came across Chris on the side of the road in Carthage, South Dakota. Chris hitched a ride with Westerberg, later accepting a job offer from him at his grain elevator. Chris and Westerberg formed a deep friendship, with Westerberg eventually introducing Chris to his girlfriend and his mother. When Chris departed Carthage, he left Westerberg his prized 1942 edition of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Later, Chris would use Westerberg's address as the return address for his letters, and he would tell people South Dakota was his home. Chris relied on Westerberg as his boss, his tenant, and his friend. In addition to Westerberg, Chris formed a relationship with Ron A. Franz. Franz was an 84-year-old man whose wife and only son had died in a car crash while he was serving in Afghanistan. After falling into a deep depression, Franz turned to religion to save him. Franz saw McCandless on the side of the road in Salton City, gave him a ride, and later made it his mission to "convince him to get an education and a job and make something of his life" (Krakauer 51). Franz quickly learned that McCandless did in fact have a college education, and he was living the life he wanted. Franz and McCandless gradually spent more and more time together, Chris trying

to convince Franz to throw away all of his belongings and live an adventurous life, and Franz teaching Chris skills like the art of leatherworking. When Chris eventually announced that he was leaving for Alaska, Ron anxiously offered to drive McCandless up to Colorado. He gave Chris a fishing pole, a machete, a parka, and some other gear to help him in the wilderness. Having no children of his own, Ron even asked Chris if he could adopt him. Krakauer describes Ron's fondness for Chris by saying that "the affection he felt was genuine, intense, and unalloyed". Chris was like a son to Ron, and, conversely, Ron was a grandfather figure for Chris. Although Chris set out to get away from his parents' reach, he formed his own kind of family with Ron. Krakauer develops his argument against self-reliance by revealing Chris's deep, genuine relationships with Ron and Wayne to his readers. Krakauer effectively proves that Chris relied on others emotionally through his description and development of these close bonds. Chris also was dependent on Franz for gear; there was no chance of survival without proper tools. Chris embarked on his cross-country crusade to prove his self-reliance; however, Krakauer portrays this crusade in a very different light by stressing Chris's reliance on key figures like Ron and Wayne.

Jon Krakauer argues logically against self-reliance, as well, through McCandless's physical endeavors in the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless did not build his own shelter; instead, he found haven in an old, rusty bus placed there by people before him. Krakauer uses the bus as a symbol for civilization, which can be found even in the far-flung, snowy regions of Alaska. Ironically, even in the seemingly untouched forests of Alaska, McCandless fails in his quest for self-reliance by relying on an object left by civilization. McCandless also relied on a handbook to differentiate poisonous and edible berries. He did not have a knowledge of wildlife, and therefore relied on the knowledge of another individual. More than anything else, however, McCandless's death represents the impossibility of self-reliance. In trying to become self-reliant, McCandless

was forced to sacrifice his own life. Krakauer disperses these indisputable facts throughout *Into the Wild* to further convey his message that self-reliance is unattainable.

Lastly, Chris McCandless's own testimony works to support Krakauer's argument. In the margins of *Doctor Zhivago*, McCandless scribbled, "Happiness only real when shared" (Krakauer 189). McCandless scribbled this revelation in his last days alive in Alaska. After his efforts to seek happiness in solidarity, Chris discovered that happiness could not be found alone- it had to be shared. Chris himself admitted that in order to be happy one has to be dependent, at least to some degree, on other people. Krakauer introduces this revelation towards the end of the novel, at which point the reader has already formed an attachment to Chris McCandless and thus views McCandless as a credible source. Krakauer builds McCandless's credibility throughout the novel and then uses this credibility to give validity to McCandless's statement. McCandless's own testimony brings Krakauer's argument full-circle.

Today, the dependence of human populations to technology can be seen through the effects of Hurricane Irma. Hurricane Irma, although not directly hitting Puerto Rico, still caused widespread damage throughout the country; however, the widespread power outage caused by the hurricane was perhaps the most devastating. Without electricity, Puerto Ricans are still left in the heat without air conditioning, schools have been closed indefinitely, people cannot go back to work, and fuel supplies continue to dwindle. Puerto Rico is crumbling under this loss of electricity, proving just how dependent today's societies are on technology.

In my own life, I have never been completely independent. I have depended on my parents since day one, and I will continue to rely on them in some form for the rest of my life. My parents have given me everything I have- the clothes I wear, the food I eat, the bed I sleep in-, and while I would love to think I am independent, I know that I am not. Material items surround me, and I

rely on these items so much it sometimes scares me. If the zombie apocalypse were to come, I know I would be the first one dead. I wouldn't know how to find edible food in the wild, not to mention that I can barely cook food found in the grocery store. Even if I did have the skillset to be self-reliant, I wouldn't want to be. I, like most people, have always had a subconscious desire to make friends, and I deeply value the friendships that I have made over the years. Emotionally, I would not be able to live in solidarity for an extended amount of time.

All in all, the capitalistic, industrial nature of society today makes self-reliance implausible. Jon Krakauer supports this claim through his account of Chris McCandless's life, including in this account the deep relationships Chris built with others, the struggles he endured, and the lessons he learned. Krakauer uses McCandless's credibility to further develop his argument by including testimony from McCandless himself disproving self-reliance. The mental and emotional toll that complete independence has on an individual bargains the question: Is self-reliance even something that we would want if we could have it? For me, the answer to this question is no. My personal experiences as well as Puerto Rico's current predicament have further consolidated my rejection of self-reliance.