

September 2015

Days of Hope

TRAIL EDITION

INTO THE WILDERNESS

On the first of September I joined three guides from Great Circle's Meramec Adventure Learning Ranch in Steelville, Missouri. We headed west, and added to our number a staff member from the Great Circle campus in Springfield. There we also collected a group of young men, aged 13 to 20, and began a journey I will not soon forget.

Our ragtag crew traveled to the Sangre de Cristo wilderness



area in south central Colorado, on a mission to complete six days of backcountry hiking and camping. We were setting out to climb a mountain.

Over the next several days we would face innumerable challenges and difficulties. Our group would hike in several stages from 8,000 feet of elevation all the way up to our base camp at 12,000 feet. From there we would summit Mount Humboldt, one of the tallest peaks in the continental US at 14,065 feet.

We would teach young men how to do strange things like build their own shelter from a tarp, dig a latrine, and cook their own food in a mess kit. We would invite young men into a brotherhood of men, and challenge them to live out their higher calling.

I had joined the group with hopes of learning from the guides who were leading it. I expected to be able to add here and there. Perhaps I might help reinforce spiritual truth and speak to these young men on their faith journey. After just three days into the back country, an emergency at home forced one of our guides back to Missouri. With his exit from the group, my role shifted considerably. I was excited to be asked to step up and help to lead this group as we finished out the trip.

I believe that the men who came down from the mountain are different from those who went up. I know I am better for the experience.

The stories in this month's newsletter originate from our time on the trail. Enjoy!



*Mt Humboldt &
South Colony lake*

COATS & HATS

There is a growing frustration that I have experienced in my work is a chaplain. There is a common thread that I keep seeing among some of the kids we serve, a shortcoming that has reared its ugly head as long as I've been working with at-risk youth. It seems that so often these young people accept the gospel and then wear their faith like a coat or a hat. Let me explain.

Bill* is 15. Bill grew up in poverty, that is all he knows. Bill is deeply saturated in the drug culture of Central Missouri. Bill hates law enforcement. Bill curses like a sailor. Bill is a fighter. Bill comes from a long line of high school dropouts.

Enter Chaplin, stage left. Chaplin shares the gospel with Bill. Now Bill is a low income, drug culture, police hating, cursing, fighting, high school dropout Christian.

Lavon* is 16. Until now, Lavon has never left an inner city ZIP Code. Lavon comes from a long line of absent fathers. Lavon is a brawler, a frequent drug user, and a young womanizer.

Enter chaplain, stage right. A Chaplin tells Lavon about Jesus. Lavon prays a prayer, and becomes a Christian, fatherless, brawling, drug-using, womanizer.

This compartmentalization of the faith turns the gospel into an attractive suit that we can wear. The core pieces of who we are, our identity, our victimhood, and our history of pain all remain insulated from the power of and presence of the Creator. God desires the renovation of such broken parts of our soul; the cross makes such healing possible.

Yet I've seen firsthand how people of faith have engaged in this kind of shallow Gospel. They say all the right things, they show up in the right places, but their wounds have never seen the light of the Son. Their identity remains rooted in the lies they have believed for so many years.

In the end, it is the frustration with "coats and hats" that caused me to leap at an opportunity to spend 11 days working closely with a group of young men. The chance to encourage these youth to go deeper and invite truth into every part of their lives was an irresistible prospect.

Throughout our trip, the entire group sat down several times a day to journal and talk about these issues. From our earliest moments we were asking the guys questions.

What makes an ideal man?

Who are you? What is it that people have said about you?

And from the very beginning, their deep-seated identities began to show up. *I am a loser. A failure. Unwanted. Victim. Perpetrator. I'm just going to end up like my dad.*

Like inmates reciting their sentences, our young men began to share the labels that had been seared onto their hearts. This was our first step, to recognize the labels we have been living out and call them out for what they are— lies.

As the trip progressed we began to remind these young men that they are image bearers of the Creator— called to be sons of the Most High God. We talked about their amnesia— how they have forgotten who they truly are. In small and faltering steps we watched as these young men began to reject the lies that their wounds had imposed. They began to step into a bigger story.

Their growing competence on the trail reflected an internal shift in self concept. How would you live differently if you were deeply convinced of who you are— a son of the most high God? How do you live out the role of an image bearer of the Creator?

Days of Hope

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****We take the privacy of those we minister to seriously. We never disclose names or share images of the children we serve. We choose to leave out many details from the stories we share to protect their identities.***

EVERY KIND OF ABUSE

It was the first day of our adventure on the trail. This was the only campsite where we had an actual toilet; a trailhead where the National Park Service had installed facilities. Somehow that evening I had joined a group of young men who were headed up to the toilet. I spent a few minutes helping to shuffle them in and out and back to their shelters.

Once the final straggler had finished his business, we began walking back to our nearby campsite. I encouraged him to help me gather firewood as we walked. As we broke branches and collected sticks, Jim* began to tell me his story.

"I am a victim of every kind of abuse."

"Really? What does that mean?"

I almost regretted asking the question, as Jim began to outline in detail the various categories of abuse and the ways in which he had been assaulted. His recollections were detailed enough that our staff chose to contact his therapist back on campus and make sure that all of the information had been duly reported.

I am learning how to discern the difference between low functioning kids who have an organic deficit, and low functioning kids who would not be mentally delayed if it were not for severe abuse. These kids speak slowly. They take time to put their thoughts together. Perhaps they have a speech impediment. Their peers may call them stupid, retard, idiot. But there are so many kids like Jim who did not suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome or some brain-based mental incapacity.

They were simply locked in basements, starved, beaten, molested, or otherwise treated

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THE PHOENIX

It was our first full day of hiking. Not far from the trail pictured below, we had our first 'breakdown.' All it takes is one of our number to get upset and sit down, and the whole group is dead in the water. Tarrig* had been hiking at the front of the group until he got angry. With a scowl on his face, he turned around and plowed through his fellow hikers, cursing and stomping towards us at the back of the line. Another guide caught him as he puffed by, and we all sat down by the trail to figure out what was going on. Tarrig was infuriated about a million things. *The trail was too hard. The other hikers were jerks. Tarrig didn't even want to come to this thing anyways. Tarrig wanted to go back to Missouri. Tarrig rattled off a litany of complaints, followed by his refusal to do any more of this 'stupid hiking.'*



That first day I shared a verse with Tarrig from Proverbs 24. 'Though a righteous man falls seven times, he will get up again.' The righteousness is not found in perfect performance, but in the determination to rise and rise again. I reminded Tarrig that his greatness is found in his rising. We did eventually get up out of the dust and continue down the trail. Turns out that I was something of a prophet, as that was not the last of Tarrig's meltdowns on the trail! And in spite of his meltdowns, Tarrig eventually stood with the rest of us on

the summit of Humboldt at the top of the world.

It was after our summit day that our group spent an afternoon exploring the alpine basin at the foot of the mountain. We checked out an abandoned silver mine and hiked up to the banks of a crystal clear lake. It was there at South Colony Lake that Tarrig expressed his frustrations in his typical way.

"You keep talking about all the lies we are holding onto. . . nobody has ever said those things to me. . . I'm not like these other guys, for real, nobody has ever called me anything . . . They have just done things to me."

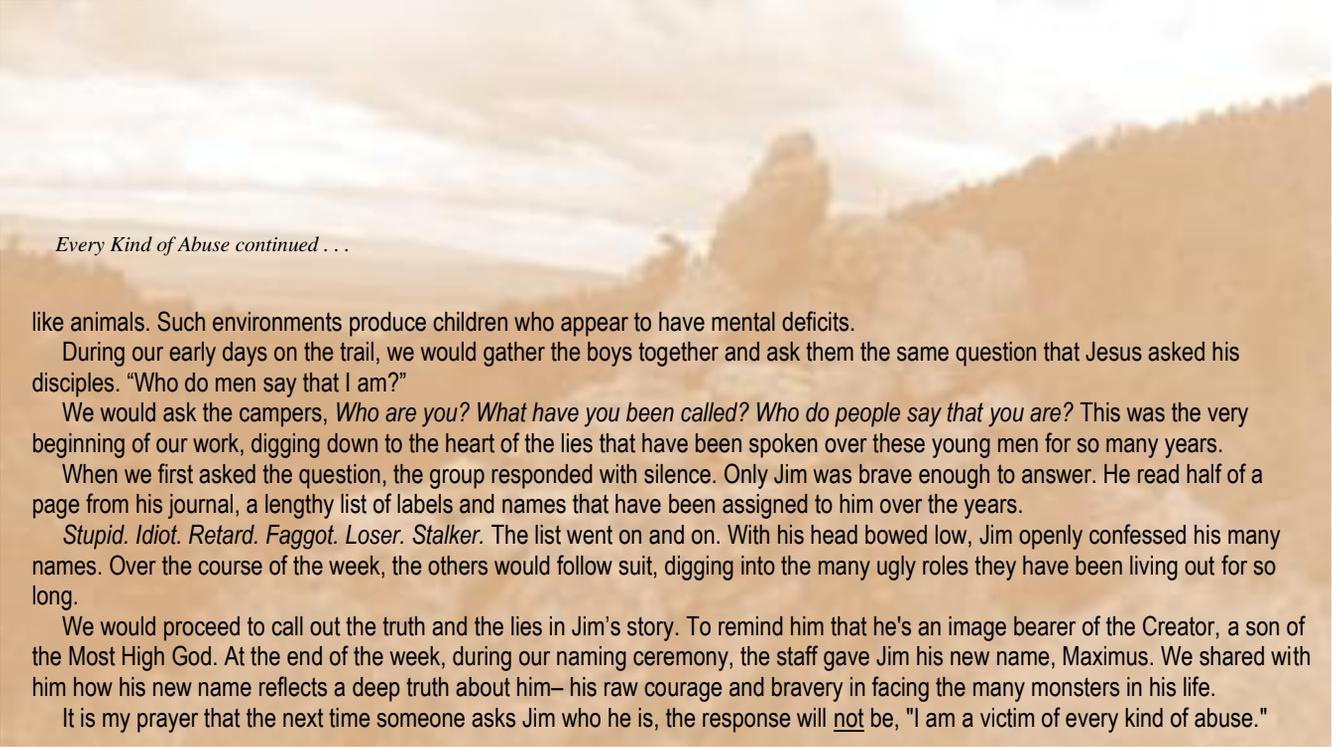
I explained to Tarrig how the wounds that are inflicted on us carry messages that we often swallow hook, line, and sinker. I asked for permission to guess what the message was in the wounds he shared. Tarrig agreed.

"I wonder if your wound is this: 'No one wants Tarrig. . . Tarrig is unwanted. . . No one will ever want to be around him.'"

Tarrig broke down there by that alpine lake. He hid from the cutting wind under a scrawny bush, tucked his head in his jacket and cried.

We spent the rest of our trip reminding Tarrig of who he really is. At the naming ceremony we gave him a new name— Phoenix.

We reminded him that his greatness is not in the failure, but in his insistence to rise from the broken places.



Every Kind of Abuse continued . . .

like animals. Such environments produce children who appear to have mental deficits.

During our early days on the trail, we would gather the boys together and ask them the same question that Jesus asked his disciples. "Who do men say that I am?"

We would ask the campers, *Who are you? What have you been called? Who do people say that you are?* This was the very beginning of our work, digging down to the heart of the lies that have been spoken over these young men for so many years.

When we first asked the question, the group responded with silence. Only Jim was brave enough to answer. He read half of a page from his journal, a lengthy list of labels and names that have been assigned to him over the years.

Stupid. Idiot. Retard. Faggot. Loser. Stalker. The list went on and on. With his head bowed low, Jim openly confessed his many names. Over the course of the week, the others would follow suit, digging into the many ugly roles they have been living out for so long.

We would proceed to call out the truth and the lies in Jim's story. To remind him that he's an image bearer of the Creator, a son of the Most High God. At the end of the week, during our naming ceremony, the staff gave Jim his new name, Maximus. We shared with him how his new name reflects a deep truth about him— his raw courage and bravery in facing the many monsters in his life.

It is my prayer that the next time someone asks Jim who he is, the response will not be, "I am a victim of every kind of abuse."

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*Every year, thousands of children and teens are sent to the residential facilities we serve to receive help with the overwhelming problems they are facing. At **Days of Hope** we continue to insist that God's core solution to all of the innumerable challenges is found in the person of Jesus Christ.*

We are a not for profit, inter-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to address the spiritual needs of children and teens who are in residential psychiatric care at facilities throughout central Missouri. We are supported by the prayer and gifts of individuals and churches in our community. We work alongside many dedicated professionals including educators, therapists, doctors and nurses, child care workers and so many more who strive to help these children who have been scarred by every form of abuse, abandonment, neglect, and harm.

Through the ministries that are offered at Days of Hope, Bibles are distributed, pastoral counsel, services, and groups are provided, and these children are given an opportunity to respond to the gospel message.