

The
Man Who
Quit
Money

. . .

MARK SUNDEEN

Riverhead Books
New York

The
Man Who
Quit
Money

Also By Mark Sundeen

Car Camping

The Making of Toro

North by Northwestern

(with Captain Sig Hansen)

The
Man Who
Quit
Money

. . .

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017,

India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,

South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Book design by Tiffany Estreicher

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First Riverhead trade paperback edition: March 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sundeen, Mark, date.

The man who quit money / Mark Sundeen.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-101-56085-3

1. Suelo, Daniel. 2. Self-reliant living United States. 3. Alternative lifestyles—United States. 4. Money—Social aspects. 5. Simplicity. I. Title.

CT275.S87445S86 2011

332.4'9792092—dc23

[B]

20110499

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Cedar,
who gave me the kernels anyway*

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in the barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

—Jesus

Let us live happily, then, though we call nothing our own! We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness!

—Buddha

Home is anywhere I'm living, if it's sleeping on some vacant bench in City Square.

—Merle Haggard

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IN THE FIRST year of the twenty-first century, a man standing by a highway in the middle of America pulled from his pocket his life savings—thirty dollars—laid it inside a phone booth, and walked away. He was thirty-nine years old, came from a good family, and had been to college. He was not mentally ill, nor an addict. His decision appears to have been an act of free will by a competent adult.

In the twelve years since, as the Dow Jones skyrocketed to its all-time high, Daniel Suelo has not earned, received, or spent a single dollar. In an era when anyone who could sign his name qualified for a mortgage, Suelo did not apply for loans or write IOUs. He didn't even barter. As the public debt soared to eight, ten, finally thirteen trillion dollars, he did not pay taxes, or accept food stamps, welfare, or any other form of government handout.

Instead he set up house in caves in the Utah canyonlands, where he forages mulberries and wild onions, scavenges roadkill raccoons and squirrels, pulls expired groceries from dumpsters, and is often fed by friends and strangers. "My philosophy is to use only what is freely given or discarded & what is already present & already running," he writes. While the rest of us grapple with tax deductions, variable-rate mortgages, retirement plans, and money-market accounts, Suelo no longer holds so much as an identification card.

Yet the man who sleeps under bridges and prospects in trash cans is not a typical hobo. He does not panhandle, and he often works—declining payment for his efforts. While he is driven by spiritual beliefs and longings, he is not a monk, nor is he associated with any church. And although he lives in a cave, he is not a hermit: he is relentlessly social, remains close with friends and family, and engages in discussions with strangers via the website he maintains from the public library. He has crisscrossed the West by bicycle, hopped freight trains, hitched through nearly every state in the union, hauled net on a Bering Sea trawler, harvested mussels and kelp from Pacific beaches, spearfished salmon in Alaska streams, and braved three months of storms atop an ancient hemlock tree.

"I know it is possible to live with zero money," Suelo declares. "Abundantly."

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AS IT HAPPENS, I had met Suelo long before he gave up money, in the desert outpost of Moab, Utah, a haven for seekers and dropouts. We ran in the same circle, worked a stint together as cooks, and squatted on public lands, not as a statement against something, but because we didn't want to pay rent. We had both gone truant from career paths because we were angry about the way the world was, and had no means of changing it. If we couldn't overthrow the bastards, then at least we wouldn't enter their data in their cubicles and buy junk in their big boxes and make payments on their LandCrunchers. But over the years, we drifted our separate ways, geographically and otherwise.

By the time I set out to find him again, we hadn't had a conversation in more than a decade. I had heard of Daniel's attempt to live without money, and I'd assumed he had simply lost his mind. For my part, I was no longer an itinerant river guide living in my truck on eight thousand a year, but a

professional writer now and then passing through town to pull weeds and repair the plumbing at my rental property, a trailer on an acre of tumbleweeds whose market value had tripled in three years, thank you very much. My one connection to the cave dweller was that he had friended me on Facebook.

I'd seen him once in the intervening years, though. On a visit to Moab, I had glanced at a shaggy gray-haired man across the aisle at the market. We made tentative eye contact. He looked familiar, but could this old guy, gray in the muzzle, with deep lines on his face and pants worn thin, be the Daniel I had cooked with a decade before?

He smiled at me. The sight of his teeth, dark and crooked, rotting right there in his mouth—it chilled me. As much as I supported a person's right to voluntary poverty, here at the height of America's greatest prosperity, I drew the line at bad teeth. I should not be forced to look at such a sorry mouth. The sight made me ashamed—of my own excellent dental condition, my disposable income, my rental property—as if he had accused me directly. My shame made me mad. It was a free country, I conceded, and Suelo had every right to sleep in the dirt and lasso grasshoppers or whatever, but how dare he sit in judgment of me?

By now I had recognized my old acquaintance beyond doubt. But I did not take his hand, offer my friendship, ask about his health. I didn't even say hello. My jaw tightening, I threw him a nod and escaped to my car.

The truth was, I'd come to *like* money. In fact, I had always liked it. When I was a boy, I counted and recounted the coins I collected in a tin can, packing pennies and nickels into paper rolls and depositing them at the bank, greatly satisfied as my fortune grew on the passbook. I also liked what money represented, the entire system of trade and credit and saving. As I grew up, money served me well: I started getting paid to do what I wanted, like writing books. Money allowed me to test my wit, to save, to gamble, to win. Even in my days of living in a tent, the act of *saving* money allowed me more freedom. And now, when I hunted for a used car below Blue Book value, or refinanced my house at a lower rate, I felt like I'd outwitted the system.

After surviving well into my thirties with only the possessions that could fit inside the bed of a pickup, I began to reap the rewards of my pennies saved and pennies earned. I acquired a second car and a second house (okay, one was that singlewide), contributed to a retirement account, and filed fifty-three pages of tax returns. I possessed six pairs of skis.

Then came 2008. Twenty trillion dollars in world assets were incinerated by bad mortgages and speculation. The real-estate bubble splattered into foreclosure and bankruptcy, taking down with it the pensions and savings and jobs of millions of people. My paltry retirement account became 50 percent paltrier. Magazines that employed me furloughed staff, or shut down altogether. Budget cuts would eventually eliminate my college teaching job. Suddenly that big monthly payment on my home didn't seem like money well spent. I could paint all I wanted, but no number of trips to Home Depot would make the house worth what I had paid for it. Those naysayers who forecast that my generation, born in the 1960s and 1970s, would be the first in America's history to be worse off than their parents: maybe they had a point.

Suelo meanwhile had gained a little notoriety, thanks to stories in *Details* magazine and the *Denver Post*, an interview with the BBC, even the pages of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. His blog and website got tens of thousands of hits. As I pored over the writings he had compiled, from Thomas Jefferson and Socrates and Saint Augustine, I began to think about the choices he had made, bad teeth and all. Here was someone who had said all along what the rest of us were being forced to contemplate for the first time, now that our bubble of prosperity had burst: money was an illusion. "I simply got tired of acknowledging as real this most common worldwide belief called money," cried this voice in the desert. "I simply got tired of being unreal."

Daniel had opted out entirely, rejected what I had pursued. I wondered whether, apart from everything he rejected, there was something he embraced. What was I missing out on? Finally I decided to drive to the Utah desert and find out for myself.

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I RETURNED TO Moab. I was staying with friends, a married couple. I had exchanged a few emails with Suelo, but we had failed to make a foolproof plan. Of course he had no phone. And apart from any question of cave etiquette—was it okay to just drop by?—I didn't know where to locate him in the vast wilderness. I sent an email, then sat back and hoped that he wandered out of the canyon soon, and logged on at the library.

A day passed. It was fall, and the air was sunny and cool and crisp. I sat on my friends' porch, sipping a glass of fresh watermelon juice. One of my hosts, Melony (her real name, I swear), considered watermelon a wonder food, filled with antioxidants and electrolytes and vitamins. She swore it had cured her of a five-year illness that no doctor, medication, or allergy panels could solve, and she drank the red potion three times a day, stuffing rinds, seeds, and everything into a blender. By the time the harvest was over, and both markets in town sold out, she was running low. With winter approaching, she was contemplating doing something desperate, like ordering them on the Internet. Another day passed, and still no word from Suelo.

And then, as I sat on the porch checking my watch, an apparition appeared. A bicycle was approaching: dark mount, dark rider. Horn-rimmed glasses emerged between gray hair and beard. The rider wore a black felt bolero cinched under his chin, with a stampede strap held snug by a tin brooch. His gaze was forward, serene. Although his legs were clearly pumping, his body gave the impression of utter calm. As he pedaled toward me I made out a plastic crate of apples and oranges lashed to a rear rack. I would not have been surprised had he let go of the handlebars, plucked the fruit from the basket, and begun to juggle.

I rushed into the street and called, "Daniel!" He slowed to a halt, then turned the bike around and looked at me, puzzled, until I identified myself.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

For a dude who lives in a cave, Suelo displayed a positively keen sense of style. His trousers were a few inches too long, cuffed with rolls above boxy workman shoes. A plaid flannel over a tight black t-shirt revealed a slice of trim belly above a leather belt. He looked like a cross between a Great Depression hobo and a vagabond French painter—Buster Keaton meets Paul Gauguin.

Unsure what to do next, I threw my arms around him in a clumsy hug. He smelled like wood smoke. I invited him inside and introduced him to Melony and her husband, Mathew. Melony poured tall glasses of watermelon juice—the last of her cache, she told us.

Suelo perked up. Above his right eye is a scar that causes the brow to rise in a sharp peak, giving him a perpetual appearance of intense curiosity.

"Do you know about the melon patch?" he said.

We didn't.

"That field between the creeks," he said, nodding toward the street. "There's hundreds of melons over there. Watermelon. Crenshaws. Squash and pumpkins, too. I've been eating them for months."

"Whose are they?" I said.

"Some guy." He shrugged. "After Obama was elected, he thought the whole system would collapse so he planted his fallow fields. But the end-times didn't come, so he left everything to rot."

Mathew and Melony and I followed Suelo out of the house and onto the street. He pushed his bike along the paved road until it turned to dirt, leading us to a field nestled between two creeks, a green

swath of desert farmland that had survived from pioneer days. Someone had planted all kinds of trees and vines that grew out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. Peach trees. Pear trees. Apple trees. Only the serpent and the naked lady were missing.

And there were hundreds of melons, a cornucopia, some tucked green into the rows of thistle and tumbleweed, others already yellow mush swelling in the sun. Suelo cradled a sound one like a baby and thwapped it with his thumb.

“If the thud is too deep, it’s overripe.”

We wandered the rows, tapping and listening.

“Does anyone have a knife?” Melony asked. Suelo had left his on the bike. But no matter. He picked up a melon the size of a pony keg and raised it overhead, then heaved it down. It burst at his feet with a *whump*. He knelt beside it, scooped up the flesh, and lapped it from his palms.

And then, verily, he fed our multitude.

Wordlessly, Mathew and Melony shoveled watermelon into their mouths as the syrup dripped toward their elbows. I buried my face till my nose bumped against rind. We busted melons open, one after another, some putrid, others green, some delectable. It was cool and dry and sunny, and the sand soil was wet after the first big rain of October. The field was ringed by cottonwoods exploding in yellow, like a million kernels of popcorn. Beyond the trees, the red cliffs bore down, and above them the snowy peaks thrust through a ring of clouds into the blue sky. We all ate and were satisfied. The number of those who ate was four.

“I don’t remember the leaves ever being this yellow,” Suelo said, drying his wrist on his pants. “Too bad all the squash are rotten.”

Looking across the fields, we could see that Mathew and Melony’s house stood just a hundred yards away, a literal stone’s throw from this Eden. It seemed truly mystical how unfindable, moneyless Suelo had materialized from the ether and led us across the desert, to Melontopia. To the abundance.

Mathew and Melony and I filled our arms with melons, hoarding them like iGadgets we’d liberated from Best Buy after a hurricane. But Suelo chose only a single, small green fruit. He lowered it into his crate and silently pedaled off.

“OUR WHOLE SOCIETY is designed so that you have to have money,” Suelo says. “You have to be a part of the capitalist system. It’s illegal to live outside of it.”

He has a point. Our national identity is enmeshed with the idea of private property—our right to it is enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees that we not be deprived of it, any more than of our lives or liberty, “without due process of law.” The flip side of this protection of property holders, however, is a lack of protection for the property-less. And nowhere is this more apparent than with respect to real estate. The American Indian belief that man can no more own land than he can own air or sunlight was quashed with the arrival of Europeans. The ground beneath their feet was available for the taking, and over a period of three centuries, white people took it, until the frontier closed around the year 1900, after which all real estate in America was spoken for. The legal supremacy of private property—a relatively recent human invention—is cemented in the American logic, as indisputable as the laws of physics. If you step off the roof, gravity will pull you to the ground. If you don’t pay the rent, the landlord will evict you. And if you squat in an abandoned building, you are guilty of trespassing.

Even lands set aside for the public do not welcome a man without money. While a company may drill a mine or erect an oil rig on federal property, a citizen is prohibited from building a cabin there. Homesteading has been outlawed for more than a century. Visitors to national forests must vacate their campsites after fourteen days, and often must pay a nightly fee. Living in city parks and on sidewalks is deemed vagrancy and banned in most places. The punishment for sleeping in an unused public space that requires little upkeep—under a railroad trestle, or along a river—is often to sleep in an expensive jail built with tax dollars.

Suelo has defied these laws. His primary residence is the canyons near Arches National Park, where he has lived in a dozen caves tucked into sandstone nooks. In the fall of 2002, two years after quitting money, he homesteaded a majestic alcove high on a cliff, two hundred feet across and fifty feet tall. Its sculpted mouth was windblown into smooth symmetry. Sitting inside and gazing into the gorge below felt like heralding himself to the world from inside the bell of a trumpet.

Suelo’s grotto was a two-hour walk from pavement, and believing he was unlikely to be disturbed, he settled in for the long haul. He chipped at the rocky ground to create a wide, flat bed, and lined it with tarps and pads and sleeping bags that had been left out with someone else’s trash. He stacked rocks to block the wind, and built wood-burning cookstoves from old tin cans. He learned to forage for cactus pods, yucca seeds, wildflowers, and the watercress that grew in the creek. From dumpsters he stockpiled dry goods like rice and beans and flour, and sealed them in plastic buckets. He drank from springs, bathed in the creek. He washed his clothing by weighting it overnight with a river rock, dried it on the hot sandstone. He arranged on stone slabs a library of books. From a chunk of talus he carved a statue, a ponderous head like some monolith from Easter Island.

In warm months the cave attracted occasional hikers, and when Suelo was away, he left a note. *Feel free to camp here. What’s mine is yours. Eat any of my food. Read my books. Take them with you if*

you'd like. Visitors left notes in return, saying they were pleased with his caretaking.

Then one day, after several years of peace, a ranger from the Bureau of Land Management arrived to evict him. Suelo had long since violated the fourteen-day limit.

"If I were hiking along here and I saw this camp," said the ranger, "I'd feel like I wasn't allowed here, that it was someone else's space. But this is public land."

"Are you saying this because you're paid to say it, or because you really believe it?"

"Well, I do have to keep my personal and my professional opinions separated," said the ranger. "But you are making a high impact here."

Suelo said, "Who do you think is making a higher impact on the earth: you or me?"

The ranger wrote a ticket for \$120.

"Well, I don't use money," Suelo said. "So I can't pay this."

Not only did he not use money, he had discarded his passport and driver's license. He had even discarded his legal surname, Shellabarger, in favor of Suelo, Spanish for "soil." He chose the name spontaneously, back in his tree-sitting days in Oregon, when he caught sight of a sticker that said ALL SOIL IS SACRED. "Suelo" stuck.

The ranger felt conflicted. He'd spent years chasing vandals and grave robbers through these canyons; he knew that Suelo was not harming the land. In some ways, Suelo was a model steward. The ranger offered to drive him to the next county to see a judge and resolve the citation. The next day, these odd bedfellows, a penniless hobo and a federal law enforcer, climbed into a shimmering government-issue truck and sped across the desert. As they drove, Suelo outlined his philosophy of moneyless living while the ranger explained why he had become a land manager—to stop people from destroying nature. "And then someone like you comes along," he said, "and I struggle with my conscience."

They arrived at the courthouse. The judge was a kindly white-haired man. "So you live without money," he drawled. "This is an honorable thing. But we live in the modern world. We have all these laws for a reason."

Suelo hears this all the time: that we're living in different times now, that however noble his values their practice is obsolete. He even heard it once when he knocked on the door of a Buddhist monastery and asked to spend the night, and a monk informed him that rates began at fifty dollars.

The Buddha himself would have been turned away, Suelo observed.

"We're living in a different age than the Buddha," he was told.

But Suelo simply doesn't accept this distinction. Whether today or two thousand years ago, he believes, public spaces are for the public, and he need not ask permission to occupy one. When a policeman asks what he's doing as he hitchhikes into town or pulls a pizza from a dumpster, he says, "Walking in America."

"It resonates with cops," Suelo says. "A lot of them are very patriotic, many are veterans, and they understand that every citizen should have the right to walk in this country."

To the Utah judge casting about for an appropriate sentence, Suelo questioned the purpose of the fourteen-day camping limit. "Does it have anything to do with justice or protecting the environment? No. It's to keep people like me from existing." Daniel offered to do jail time or community service.

"I don't think jail would be appropriate," said the judge. Like the ranger, the monk, and the many cops who meet Suelo, the judge just didn't know what to do with someone who refused to abide by one of our culture's most basic premises—the use of currency as a means of exchange. Finally he said, "Well, what do *you* think you should have to do?"

Suelo suggested service at a shelter for abused women and children. They agreed on twenty hours. Suelo volunteered regularly at the shelter anyway, so the punishment was a bit like sending Brer Rabbit back to the briar patch. And within a few weeks of eviction from his grand manor, he found a

new cave, this time a tiny crevice where he would not be discovered.

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IT'S TEMPTING TO conclude that Suelo's years in the wilderness have transformed him into a crusader for the earth. During his 2001 stint as a tree sitter, he was exactly that. A year after quitting money, he perched atop an Oregon hemlock for three months, alone most of the time, disregarding threats from the sheriff and the buzzing saws of loggers. He and his fellow activists saved the grove from being cut down.

And clearly his lifestyle has a lower impact than virtually anybody else's in America. Without a car or a home to heat and cool, he produces hardly any carbon dioxide. Foraging for wild raspberries and spearfishing salmon has close to zero environmental cost—no production, no transportation. And although food gathered from a dumpster must be grown and processed and shipped, rescuing it from the trash actually prevents the further expenditure of energy to haul and bury that excess in a landfill. Suelo brings into existence no bottles, cans, wrappers, bags, packaging, nor those plastic six-pack rings that you're supposed to snip up with scissors to save the seabirds. As for the benefits of pitching Coke bottles into the recycling bin—Suelo is the guy pulling those bottles *out* of the bin, using them until they crack, then pitching them back. The carbon footprint of the average American is about twenty tons per year. Suelo's output is probably closer to that of an Ethiopian—about two hundred pounds, or about one half of 1 percent of an American's.

“He wants to have the smallest ecological footprint and the largest possible impact at improving the world,” says his best friend, Damian Nash. “His life goal since I met him is to take as little and give as much as possible.”

Yet saving the earth is not Suelo's primary mission. His energy use before giving up money was already so low that quitting money caused only a negligible decline. And even after his successful tree sit, he questions the value of political action. “I don't know if it does any good. We're feeding the roots and pruning the branches—and they flourish more, actually. If we really want to help, we shouldn't feed the monster in the first place, and that's the monetary system.”

. . .

SUELO'S QUEST FOR free Parking might be easy if he availed himself of government programs or private homeless shelters. But Suelo refuses these charities as by-products of the money system he rejects. Government programs are funded by taxes paid not freely but out of legal obligation. Most shelters are staffed by paid workers who “give” only with the expectation of a check.

Suelo does, however, accept hospitality that is freely given. He has knocked on the door of a Catholic Workers house, a Unitarian church, and a Zen center, and has been offered a place to sleep. He has spent time in a number of communes, including one in Georgia where members weave hammocks to provide income, and another in Oregon where residents grow their own vegetables. In Portland, Oregon, he stays at urban squats populated by anarchists, or in communal homes that welcome transients.

Suelo is also welcomed by family, friends, and complete strangers. He has an open invitation to stay with his parents in Grand Junction, Colorado, his brother Doug Shellabarger near Denver, his friend Damian Nash in Moab, and a half-dozen others across the country. Tim Wojtusik, in eastern Oregon, is not surprised when, after no word for months, he wakes to discover his friend camped in the backyard. Suelo has lost count of the times someone picked him up hitchhiking, then brought him home and served him a meal. A Navajo man gave his own bed to Suelo and slept on the couch, then i

the morning treated him to breakfast.

Through two decades in Moab, Suelo has developed a reputation as a reliable house sitter. In a town of seasonal workers who often leave home for months at a time, his services are in high demand. He spent one winter hopping from one house-sit to the next. For a time a friend invited him to stay in a tree house in her backyard, until a neighbor complained.

Even with all the roofs offered, Suelo spends the majority of his nights outdoors. He camps in wilderness, the red rock country around Sedona, Arizona, or the Gila of New Mexico, where he spent a few weeks learning survival skills from a hermit. He and some friends rode bikes from Portland to Wyoming, camping along the road. He has hopped trains all across the country. One summer Suelo colonized an island in the Willamette River in the heart of Portland. He commandeered a piece of plastic dock that had floated downstream, and paddled it to the brambles of the undeveloped island. He carved out a clearing in the thick brush so that he couldn't be seen from shore. "I had visions of building a cob house," he says, but that didn't pan out. He spent another summer in the woods by Mount Tamalpais, just north of San Francisco. He dropped his pack just thirty feet from a trail and lived undetected in the heart of one of the wealthiest zip codes in America. He spent a month campeo in a bird refuge on the University of Florida campus in Gainesville. Turns out there are plenty of places to sleep free in America: you just have to know where to look.

These days, in addition to the cave, he maintains a camp within Moab city limits, hidden in a thicket on private property. It looks like a typical homeless squat: torn plastic tarps draped over a tent, pots and dishes scattered in the dirt. One morning, the landowner saw smoke from the fire and came running with a shovel and blanket. He was relieved to find that it was just Suelo, whom he'd known for years. The landowner told him not to build fires, and while he didn't exactly grant Suelo permission to stay, he more or less turned a blind eye.

The town camp saves Suelo the two-hour commute to his cave, and sometimes he crashes there after a late night in town. But the truth is, he largely sleeps wherever he chooses to. "I've found you can camp anywhere, as long as you're just a few feet off the pavement," Suelo says. "People don't notice you. I've slept right beside a police station."

. . .

WAIT A MINUTE. isn't suelo just kidding himself? Is there really any difference between accepting a room in a church and a room in a homeless shelter? And isn't hitchhiking in a gas-powered automobile or blogging from a library computer evidence that he is just as dependent on money as the rest of us—if not on the green paper itself, then certainly the commerce without which there would be no cars or gasoline or libraries or computers?

Suelo considers these criticisms. He concedes that by using the public library, he is accepting other people's tax money, and for a while considered stopping the practice, accessing the Internet only at friends' houses. But ultimately he felt he was splitting hairs a bit too finely. He certainly wasn't going to stop walking on public roads merely because they were paid for with taxes. Our economic lives are so intertwined that he could never achieve absolute purity. His intention is to give freely what he has without expectation of return, and to accept without obligation that which is freely given by others.

That said, he constantly rethinks and interprets the rules of living without money. After his first couple of months of this experiment, hitchhiking with a friend along the East Coast in 2000, he complained in an email to friends, "We've been trying to live without money, but people slipping massive amounts of it into our pink little hands has raised questions of what we should do. I made a rule: I would get rid of it before sunset, either give it away or spend it, usually on some little treat I didn't need, like a chocolate bar. But then that sunset rule turned into sunrise." Finally he decided no

to spend the money at all, but rather to give it away.

But a ride in a friend's car meant using gas that someone was going to have to pay to replace. "Maybe if we just wait here someone will give us gas," Suelo proposed on one occasion. "Or we'll find some." The friend opted to fuel up with his own money.

In the spring of 2001, Suelo had his one major lapse. While staying at a commune in Georgia, wondering how he was going to get back to Utah for a friend's wedding, a most tempting and confounding piece of mail arrived: a tax return in the amount of five hundred dollars.

"This experiment of having no money is on hold now," Suelo wrote in a mass email to friends and family. He cashed the check, paid the deposit on a drive-away car, and blasted across America at the wheel of a brand-new, midnight-blue, convertible Mercedes-Benz 600 sports coupe.

"What a kick it is to go from penniless hitchhiker to driving a Mercedes!" he wrote. "I got a deep breath of the southern US all the way to New Mexico, riding most the way with the top down and the wind making me look like a dust mop. On top of that, I get so much pleasure seeing the look on hitchhikers' faces when a Mercedes stops for them. And dumpster-diving in a Mercedes is an absolute scream! Everybody should try it. It's almost as fun as hitching in the back of a pickup. Almost."

Later that summer he ditched the remainder of the money "because it felt like a ball and chain," and has not returned to it since.

. . .

ON A SUNNY october afternoon, a few days after the watermelon feast, I follow Suelo up the canyon. He wears a plaid shirt and a ranger's olive-green trousers cut off at the knee—an attractive find in the discards of a national-park town, although a friend who made a similar score was cited for "impersonating a park ranger." Suelo's bolero hat completes the outfit. The flat brim and strap make me think of a Peruvian peasant, or a witch doctor. "I found this in the dumpster of the Christian thrift store," he says. "It was a child's cowboy hat. So I soaked it and stretched it and flattened it out. Fits perfect. Funny thing about that thrift store—they throw away all the good stuff and try to sell the crap. Anything that's old and made out of wool, if it has a tiny hole in it, they toss it. But they resell all the cotton T-shirts made in sweatshops."

Near the trailhead, he hides his bike in a thicket, scooping apples and potatoes from the crate into a threadbare backpack. Suelo has acquired and discarded many bicycles over the years. His current ride, which he has painted with Anasazi petroglyphs and decked with pink plastic flamingos, was a gift from his parents. He maintains it with parts and tools from a volunteer-run bike shop, and pulls used tires and tubes from the trash bins of retail stores. He doesn't own a lock.

As soon as we leave the asphalt he slips off his sandals, tucks them into the pack, and grips the desert floor barefoot. His feet are leathery and wide and cracked at the heels. He pads along the rocky trail.

The canyon is dizzying. Golden cliffs tower on both sides, ravens circling on the updrafts. We walk beneath ancient petroglyphs pecked into the rock—bighorn sheep and bigheaded humanoids. Along the base of the walls, the sandy bluffs are dotted with piñon pines and juniper and sagebrush, their trunks gnarled by the baking sun, roots burrowing into the sandstone cracks for a drop of moisture.

At first glance, the country appears uninhabitable. Above the canyon lies a badlands of stone fins and arches and dry gulches that has inspired place-names like Devil's Garden, Fiery Furnace, and Hell's Revenge—the kind of landscape in which Hollywood actors stumble upon a human skeleton picked clean by vultures, finger bones clutching a dry canteen. But at the bottom of the canyon, a cool green stream bubbles over the slickrock, carving porcelain bathtubs and plunging over algae-streaked falls into deep, clear swimming holes. Leafy willows and cottonwoods cling to the banks, dropping

yellow leaves into the swirl. Beavers have chomped the soft trunks, building lodges and ponds that shimmer in the shady oasis. The air is sweet with the smell of Russian olive trees.

The trail turns to sand, and the grit pours into my shoes, so I follow Suelo's lead and remove them. At a shallow spot in the canyon, hundreds of small green shoots rise from the sand. "Wild onions," Suelo says, kneeling and digging away at the tendrils. I dig one, too. "Careful not to pull too hard," he says, "or it'll break." He rummages through his pack for a metal spoon, and digs with that. We each harvest an onion, stripping the fibrous husk from the bulb. "You can eat the whole thing," he says, curling the green stalk around the white tuber and popping it in his mouth. I do the same. It's delicious—a sweet, tangy chive.

We drop into the shade and wade across the stream. A raven caws overhead and Suelo caws right back in perfect imitation. After about an hour, we leave the trail and scramble up a shallow gulch. Suelo hops between rocks, avoiding the sand and grass. "I try not to leave footprints," he says.

In a shady alcove where black streaks of springwater stain the cliff, we climb a steep talus slope and arrive at his current cave, a spacious twenty-by-twenty cavern with a commanding view of the opposing cliffs and brilliant blue sky. Beside a fire ring, a deflated sleeping pad lies in the dirt, along with a sleeping bag, a few articles of clothing, a guitar, and Suelo's most recent score: an expensive pair of binoculars. "I found those in a dumpster," he says with evident delight. "So I decided to become a birder." So far he has glassed a great blue heron, a hawk, and a pygmy owl.

Suelo drops his pack and carries a scuffed plastic soda bottle down canyon to a rain pool, where he hops across a quicksand bog and crouches to fill the bottle. He harvests handfuls of wild grasses, pine needles, juniper sprigs, and mallow leaves.

"People are always giving me wheatgrass," he tells me. "And I thought, well, why not use wild grasses? So I've been drinking it most every morning. And I've been feeling really good."

He sits cross-legged on a foam pad in the dirt and lights his stove—a blackened number-ten chili can with the lid removed and a hole cut on the side. Into the opening he feeds twigs, until a fire burns inside the can. He sets a pot of water directly on top. Holes poked in the side of the can provide ventilation, and within just a few minutes the water is boiling. Suelo lowers his bundle of wild herbs into the pot and lets them steep.

Between the wilderness approach, the soot-covered cave, and the gray-haired wise man steeping herbs over a flame, a visit with Suelo starts to feel like some Himalayan trek to the guru. And it's true that conversations with him turn quickly to religion and philosophy. On this particular trip, Suelo is hosting what you might call an apprentice, a young man from Indiana who has been studying martial arts and Eastern religion for a decade, and after reading about Suelo on the Internet took the Greyhound west to learn moneyless living from the master.

Suelo quickly deflates any perception of himself as a holy man, however. The deeper he gets into philosophy, the more he laughs at himself, averting his eyes when he says something particularly insightful, as if embarrassed to reveal his deeper knowledge. He is chronically forgetful, rubbing his forehead and saying things like "I can't remember if I went to India before or after I went to Alaska." He has a disarming habit, when presented with some fact he already knows, of exclaiming, "Oh, yeah!" or "Ahh!" as if he were learning it afresh.

Me: "I read that the Buddha was born a Hindu."

Suelo: "Oh, yeah! You're right!"

What's more, Suelo's sense of humor is strictly goofball. Upon hearing that a tract of land beside the cemetery is to be developed into houses, he says, "I hear people are just dying to get into that neighborhood!"

While I ask him what he has learned from living without money, he beats back a column of smoke from the second round of tea. I note that he has taken on a certain Oz-like appearance, answering from

behind the curtain of smoke. He waves his hands like a sorcerer and intones in a wizardly voice, “No I have entered the mystical realm!” He busts up at his own joke. “I am a genie in a bottle!”

. . .

WITH FOUND AND discarded objects, and a construction budget of zero, Suelo has turned his current cave into a postconsumer hobo paradise. When he first discovered it, the floor was rocky and uneven, so he hauled buckets of sand to level it. He piled boulders at the mouth to block wind and visibility. He collected discarded pots, pans, bowls, plates, knives, forks, spoons, and spatulas. In a sealed plastic bucket he stored rice, flour, noodles, oatmeal and grains, as well as root vegetables like potatoes and carrots, which can last for months in the dry, cool cave. Now fresh groceries hang from the ceiling in a cotton bag, safe from mice and ringtail cats.

Tucked beneath a north-facing cliff, the cave never gets sun, and even in the daytime it is chilly. As darkness falls, he lights his lamps. While Suelo sometimes finds functional flashlights, the batteries eventually die. Oil lamps arranged on small rock ledges around the cave are a more reliable light source. To make one he simply fills a glass jar with vegetable oil, then inserts a short length of cotton cord into a wine cork, which floats on top. A tinfoil barrier keeps the cork from catching fire, and the wick burns for days.

That night I unroll my bag across the fire ring from Suelo and, gazing out the cave and up at the bright silent stars, quickly fall asleep. When I awake just after dawn, Suelo is sitting cross-legged on his pad with his sleeping bag draped over his shoulders. He sits perfectly still facing the canyon as the sun creeps down the far walls. Then he lies back down and sleeps awhile longer.

After morning tea we move out of the cave onto the sunny rock ledges where Phil, the apprentice, leads a session of Qigong, a meditative Chinese martial art. We cycle through such postures as Embracing the Tree and Catching the Ball. With sunlight pouring over the rim and wrens singing, the moment swells toward unreasonable bliss, until Suelo swings at me with some honky karate chops and blurts in his best Bruce Lee accent: “Now we fight a match to the death!”

Although he lives with great intention, Suelo seems to go whichever way the wind blows. When he finds binoculars, he takes up birding. When he finds a guitar, he takes up music. When a martial artist arrives in his caves, he takes up Qigong. And so on. “Randomness is my guru,” he told me.

As such, canyon life is idyllic. Once it warms up, he will take a dip in the creek. When he doesn’t feel like going to town, he can survive for a week or more on his stores and what he forages. As we sit there in the sun he plays a melody on a wooden flute someone carved for him. Juniper and sage and the spindly reeds of Mormon tea shrubs rise out of the bench.

Yet Suelo does not become too attached. He knows that at any moment a ranger could arrive and whisk him along. The cave does not belong to him. His residence here is explicitly against the law.

“This is a nation that professes to be a Christian nation,” he tells me, surveying his temporary kingdom. “And yet it’s basically illegal to live according to the teachings of Jesus.”

Expecting anybody to follow the teachings of Jesus—least of all the United States government—sounds like a pretty naive view of the world. Yet that’s how Suelo was raised, in a family of religious idealists who, like him, don’t accept that modern times are fundamentally different from the times of the prophets and heroes.

ONE DAY WHEN he was eleven years old, Daniel returned from playing in the yard to find the house empty. The year was 1972 and the family was living in the suburbs of Denver, where Daniel's father worked at a car dealership. Daniel called for his parents and siblings. No reply. His three older brothers were not in their room. His older sister was nowhere to be found. He called their names, his voice trembling. He rushed to his parents' bedroom. His mother's clothes lay atop her shoes. She would never leave clothing on the floor. It was as if she had vaporized while standing in them. "Mom!" he cried. "Dad!" An electric fan whirred.

Daniel's mind raced for some benign explanation. Maybe they'd taken a walk with the dogs. Or driven somewhere. But the car was in the driveway. Try as he might to interpret these clues in some other way, he fixated on what struck him as the only plausible scenario: Rapture. The Lord had returned and sat in final judgment. The righteous, including Daniel's family, had ascended to heaven. As for the sinners, they were doomed to suffer the tribulations prophesied in the Book of Revelation. Fires would rain down from the skies and wicked Babylon would plunge into the sea. As poor Daniel stared trembling at his mother's shoes, he could only conclude that while she and the rest of his family had soared up to heaven, he, in punishment for some unspeakable sins, had been *left behind!*

When the family clomped up the front steps—they'd been over at the neighbors' house—they found Daniel crying. They comforted him and had a gentle laugh. He was the youngest, and so worried about everything. He shouldn't fret so much. When the end-times did arrive, he would be going home to Jesus.

In a family of biblical literalists, Daniel was the most literal of them all. One summer when he was very young, he stockpiled his dollars and quarters and bought Christmas presents for Mom and Dad, for Pennie and Rick and Ron and Doug. He wrapped them with Santa Claus paper and presented them in the August heat. He wanted them to enjoy their gifts here on earth, before the Great Tribulation.

Daniel felt like he was the only kid in Sunday school who took it seriously. But that didn't make faith easier. The kids who goofed off and passed notes didn't lie awake fretting about Mathew 19:24, wondering how a full-grown camel could squeeze through the eye of a needle, and if so, why such an event was more likely than a rich man entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

For those not raised fundamentalist, the Rapture seems a cartoonish fairy tale. But in the past half century the notion has become mainstream. As the percentage of Americans belonging to mainline Protestant denominations has steadily dropped since the mid-1960s from a quarter to a tenth, those belonging to evangelical or fundamentalist churches have held fast at about 25 percent. Factoring in population growth, that firm percentage reflects an increase in numbers. In the popular imagination, the child's nightmare of burning in hell with the devil and his pitchfork has been replaced by the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, with its four horsemen and pits of boiling sulfur. Those raised in the faith accept as fact that this world's days are numbered. Clocks will stop, and time as we know it will cease.

Suelo's family typifies the nation's drift toward fundamentalism. They are part of the

counterweight to the great secular shift that was also occurring over the past half century, making Americans—my family, for instance—less religious and more educated, urban, and prosperous. I had assumed that a conservative Christian family would be less accepting of a son who chose to be homeless. I was wrong. For fundamentalists, living in a cave and eating locusts and wild honey is a less far-fetched way of life than it seems to secular people concerned with getting a good internship and scoring high on the SAT. The guiding mythology of the Shellabarger family is not the American Dream, in which wealth waits as the reward for a lifetime of hard work. Theirs is a deep idealism in which faith trumps everything, and money never matters much. For all of his eventual rebelling, Suelo's upbringing actually *prepared* him for quitting money.

. . .

AT EIGHTY-TWO, Dick Shellabarger is still a lumbering fellow, with a sprawling six-foot-five frame and big hands and big feet. He fills the room like a Clydesdale. His booming voice carries a twang as he drops cowboyisms: *I says to him, no way* and *The Lord don't care about that*. "Money is the public God," he bellowed as a way of welcoming me. "They do anything possible—kill, murder, and lie—fo it."

Dick has been married to Daniel's mother, Laurel, for more than sixty years. They live in Fruita, Colorado, a farm town that is being overtaken by the sprawl of Grand Junction, fifteen miles to the east. They're about one hundred miles from their youngest son's cave. The cul-de-sacs named Comstock and Motherlode are empty except for children on bikes and mothers pushing strollers. American-made cars and trucks fill the double driveways, with bumper stickers that say *RESPECT LIFE*. The Shellabarger home is a single level of brick and stucco and wood siding, with a pair of evergreen on the lawn. On the front door hangs an inscribed placard: *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature*. The house, which is owned by Dick's older brother, is plain and clean: three bedrooms and two bathrooms, textured walls all the same neutral shade of off-white. In the garage, between meticulously organized hand tools and coiled extension cords, is a nondescript sedan.

The youngest of five children, Dick Shellabarger was born in 1928, on the cusp of the Great Depression, and raised in Colorado. His father, a mechanic and barber and jack-of-all-trades, hopped freight trains to California in search of work. After working as a truck driver on the construction of the Alaska-Canada Highway, he parlayed his earnings into two cow ponies and a ranch near Denver. Dick grew up on a horse, moving from one place to the next as his dad sold one ranch and bought another. "I was trying to go to high school in Castle Rock, taking two or three buses to get there," Dick says. "I finally had to quit after tenth grade."

The family never got ahead, unable to obtain a loan for the initial livestock. They did keep afloat at a dude ranch that offered horseback rides, and an old lodge with a bar, jukebox, and dance floor. Dick's older brothers left home and built an empire of car dealerships, but Dick took after his father, tinkering with one thing and another. After an army stint in Japan, he supplemented his summer income at the ranch by breaking the neighbors' horses.

If Suelo inherited his itinerant nature from his father, then his contemplative side comes from his mother. Laurel is a year older than her husband, a real beauty with regal carriage and sparkling eyes and fine cheekbones. Laurel Jeanne Wegener was born in Denver in 1927 to first-generation Americans whose parents had emigrated from Germany. Her father, Charles, was a traveling salesman and woodworker. The family struggled during the Depression, buying groceries on credit. But Charles—who like a European of the previous century played the flute, dressed in dark suits, and never learned to drive, preferring trains and trolleys well into the automobile era—insisted that his daughters learn classical piano and sing in a choir.

Although the family was nominally Christian, they were not devout. “I went clear through the cattiness at the Lutheran church,” Laurel says. As she matured into a striking and proud young woman, her commitment to the religion proved thin. One day she walked to church for a field trip, arriving just as the bus was pulling away. She ran after it, waving and hollering, but the bus didn’t stop. “And guess who got mad,” she says. Laurel never went back.

Perhaps it was her parents’ European refinement, but Laurel was just plain dissatisfied with the life that wartime America offered. After graduating, she worked as an usherette in a movie theater, then earned a certificate in calculation from the community college and got an accounting job. After a few months she thought, *Good grief, is this all there is?*

The year was 1946, decades before fundamentalism reached the mainstream. “Born again” and “personal savior” were phrases cried out under revival tents, not under the dome of the United States Capitol. Billy Graham’s evangelical crusades would not begin until 1948, and Jerry Falwell would not found his church until 1956. (Though some might quibble, I use the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” interchangeably. Both describe a faith based more on a literal Bible reading than on membership in an organized church.) As the size and scope of secular government increased during the New Deal and World War II, and mainline churches focused on social justice instead of personal salvation, more Christians responded to what looked like the apocalypse—D-day, Auschwitz, Hiroshima—by seeking the moral certainty of scripture.

One night, listening to her parents’ radio, Laurel tuned in to the warm voice of a preacher on *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* broadcast from California. He spoke of missionaries in Africa, saving souls on the hot plains and deep in the jungle. Now, that sounded like a fulfilling—and exciting—life. Laurel enrolled at the Denver Bible Institute. On the first day, the teacher unrolled a sheet of paper and drew a time line outlining the seven eras of human existence, corresponding to the seven days of Creation. The Dispensation Chart. The First Dispensation was the Creation. The Second spanned the 1,656 years from Adam to Noah, the Third encompassed the next 430 years to Abraham, and the Fourth covered the following 1,960 years to Jesus. Ever since then, the teacher announced, we had been living in the Fifth Dispensation, or the Church Period, which would come to a catastrophic close with the return of Christ, and the advent of the Sixth Dispensation: the Great Tribulation. In this violent period lasting only seven years, the prophecies of the Book of Revelations would come to pass: the seven seals would be opened, Christ would sit in judgment, fires would burn down from heaven, Satan would boil in sulfur, and all of wicked humanity—Babylon—would be cast into the sea like a millstone. When the ash cleared, the true believers, the righteous Christians, would go forth into paradise and the Seventh Dispensation: the Millennium. Having destroyed Babylon, Christ would rule the New Jerusalem. The martyrs and saints would be resurrected, the Twelve Tribes of Israel restored, and the lion would lie down with the lamb.

“I was saved,” Laurel says now. “I went home that night and asked Christ to be my personal savior. She spent the next three years in Bible college. The teacher took her under his wing like a daughter, and she traveled to Bible camps to testify. She preached the gospel to her parents, and they, too, were born again.

In the fall of 1948 she took a vacation. The bus dropped her seven miles from the guest ranch. Two cowboys leaned against an old Studebaker pickup. She locked eyes on the younger of them, a strip of rawhide in Levi’s and boots and a Stetson, six foot five and 150 pounds. She squeezed between the two men in the cab of the pickup as it rattled toward the ranch. Every time the truck hit a bump, her knee banged against the skinny cowboy and a volt of something thrilling crept up her spine.

They arrived at the ranch and Laurel was led to her quarters, a sparse wood-planked cabin with a cot, smelling like pine needles and mothballs. Although the lodge was closed, Dick Shellabarger plugged in the jukebox. “I put some music on and we danced,” he says today. “Just the two of us.”

By the next day, they couldn't stay apart. Dick invited Laurel to have a look at a private cabin that he took care of. They walked together in the cold wind, closing the heavy wooden door behind them. He struck wooden matches and lit the kerosene lamps. He unfolded fresh bedsheets and together they spread them over the mattress. Then he knelt by the fireplace and wadded newspaper and stacked kindling and lit a match. Laurel discovered a piano and sat at the bench. Dick remembers the music she played as something ethereal, romantic, divine—nothing like the honky-tonk he was used to. He hovered behind her, swallowing her sweet scent and breathing the melody. His hands removed themselves from his hips, ventured forward unsteadily, and came to rest on her face.

Laurel leaped up from the bench in a tumble of chaotic notes. She turned, gave her suitor a peck on the cheek, and fled into the starry night. Dick ran after her. It was dinnertime, and he could smell his mother's fried chicken. He stumbled into the kitchen, lobbed his hat onto a hook, and took the last vacant seat. Everyone was there: Mother, Father, two brothers, a cousin—and Laurel. He shot her a nervous glance, then returned for an awkward stare. Something was wrong. The rosy flowers beneath those delicate cheekbones were black bruises. He gazed helplessly. There on her face for all to see was the evidence of his indiscretion—the prints of his sooty fingers.

. . .

SIXTY YEARS LATER, the Shellabargers are still crazy for each other. Dick still talks like a ranch hand, and Laurel still corrects him.

“We used to call Dad the original railroad bum,” he told me as I sat in their living room.

“But he wasn't a bum,” Laurel said.

“No, he wasn't. We were just joking with him. I wish I had his skills.”

“You do,” said Laurel. She turned to me. “He just doesn't give himself credit.”

“My grandfather was a barber,” Dick told me.

“A cosmetologist,” Laurel insisted.

That night, heading into the bedroom they had readied for me, I paused in the hallway outside their office and listened. Dick sat at his desk, dictating an upcoming Bible lesson while Laurel transcribed the notes so that a deaf girl in the class could read along as he lectured.

“Verse nineteen,” he began, clearing his throat. “Capital *I*. I will betroth you to Me, capital *M*, in righteousness and in justice, comma, in loving kindness and in compassion, period.”

I knew that they had computer programs and the Internet, from which they could cut and paste this verse. But they enjoyed the ritual, he the preacher, she the scribe. Dick Shellabarger continued: “Verse twenty. Capital *A*. And I will betroth you to Me, capital *M*, in faithfulness, period. Capital *T*. Then you will know the LORD, all capitals, period.”

. . .

AMONG EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS, all of whom await the Second Coming of Jesus, there are historically two camps: postmillennialists and premillennialists. For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries most were of the “post” variety, meaning that they expected the Messiah's return after the thousand-year reign of peace. In order to hasten His arrival, they set out to create that harmonious world here and now, fighting for the abolition of slavery, prohibition of alcohol, public education, and women's literacy.

The chaos of the Civil War and industrialization caused many evangelicals to rethink their optimism. They determined that Jesus would actually arrive *before* the final judgment. Therefore any efforts toward a just society here on earth were futile; what mattered was perfecting one's faith. As

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