Paul Tillich, Salvation, and Big, Unnecessary, Crazy, Travel Adventure

Paul Tillich emphasized that salvation has a paradoxical form. Among a growing community of people, the cultural quest for salvation has recently taken just such a turn. Rather than keeping the evils of death and meaninglessness at bay via the comfortable promises of a technologically manipulated environment, some have taken it upon themselves to, instead, quit their jobs and embark upon incredible journeys in some of the harshest environments of the planet. They thrive on rather minimal preparation, entrust themselves to the kindness of strangers, and frequently change their plans. From bicycling 30,000 miles home, across Siberia—in winter, as Rob Lilwall did, to more humble “micro-adventures” as Alastair Humphreys encourages, these adventurers have at least one thing in common: They encounter an intensity of life that the normal mode of technologically-dependent life systematically subverts.

What I hope to argue is that this movement points to the experience of salvation in our time. Tillich’s thinking on salvation was often framed by the ideas of what he called *structure* and *depth*. These were the terms he was thinking in when he described culture as the *form* of religion and religion as the *depth* of culture. The basic problem that he identified is that religion has been artificially separated from culture and that culture is then ever in danger of losing its depth. Thus, if salvation is the dynamic encounter of the depth of being within the structure, and if the structure has lost its grammar of depth, then it is understandable that people will go looking for depth elsewhere. And we might expect that they will do so precisely by spurning empty cultural forms. I hope to show that these individuals represent a theologically interesting enactment of the fragmentary overcoming of estrangement in our time.

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