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Caldwell Wilderness Reflection: Off the Map

“Dear Megs,

“Congrats on finishing Wilderness!” begins the letter that I wrote to myself before starting the 2026 Caldwell Wilderness Trip, a week long backpacking trip that, this year, took place in the Sierra Nevadas. “I am so proud of you! You did the thing, that bucket list, Caldwell item since you were a freshman. How was it? I bet you’ve got stories, things that went fabulously well, unexpected sights, and stray thoughts you shared and heard, and probably a few things that went totally haywire.

“Wherever you take it, and whatever happened out there, I hope you laughed. I hope maybe there was a tear or two, if it felt right. On my side of our timeline, I’m hoping to go in without putting pressure on myself to lead or dig deep in myself for some epiphany. My goal is to just relax and be. What do I do when I just be? I’m excited for that.”

Ultimately, those were my goals with Wilderness: To honor the freshman I was who went to the first Caldwell interest meeting and made going on Wilderness my dream if I was lucky enough to get into Caldwell, and to see who I am without all my guardrails. I grew up in a high conflict divorce since I was seven, which means my parents were vicious to each other, and my siblings and I were used as fodder in their efforts to hurt each other. I am vividly, brutally aware of the emotional ways that I can be hurt. Because of my own deep intimacy with the personality traits that hurt me, I can manifest those traits, easily sometimes, and hurt people. I have spent

most of my conscious life intentionally choosing not to practice the traits I see my parents use to hurt each other. I want to be better than the accidental adoption of a skill that I hate. My parents divorce consumed over a decade of my life – and at twenty-two, that is a statement. It is a sad reality of my life that when I explain who I am today, it is still the topic that I return to. I want to be more than this one brutal part of my life.

I want to be more than that.

So I went on Wilderness, with the explicit goal to not have a goal, to drop the guardrails, to not try to *be* anything. Who am I? What is my baseline of behaviour, really?

I want to know, because I refuse to be scared of myself.

So what did I find, between the snow and the jagged peaks that became silver-lined with each sunset? What was it, sleeping in a damp sleeping bag on snow each night in temperatures well below freezing? Normally, I am really positive and put the group's needs before my own. I found that I am not positive all the time, but I am also not negative. I do not drag the group down with my discomfort. I also put my own needs first, instead of only putting the group first. Even without guardrails, I found that I do not have a short fuse or tend towards anger. However, when I do get really frustrated and hit my breaking point, I snap. I want to communicate more gently in that moment. I can deal with a lot of discomfort and get on. I am tough, guardrails or no. That is not about what I am trying to make myself be, that is just me.

I am goofy. I am confident in my knowledge and capability and do not feel the need to prove myself. I am less axed about other peoples' opinions of me, though I do still care. I laugh easily and am quick to have fun. I play games – with myself if no one else will play. I rocked up to Wilderness with a notebook, where I made bingo sheets and crossed them off throughout the

week. They included experiences like seeing a tumbleweed, iodine-ing water, undoing a bear bottle on the first try, and finding a chaparral bush (a medicinal plant that I really wanted to see and found while driving across Death Valley on the first day). I got four different bingos. I am excited about things, and quick to share that excitement.

My realisations are ultimately social. My guardrails are really about how I treat people and the way that I want to make them feel. I am endlessly grateful for the people on my Wilderness trip. They still enjoyed me, even without the guardrails. And you know what? I enjoyed myself. I would not have gotten to see those parts of myself if I had been in the woods alone for a week.

Yes, I snapped at Kevin, another Caldwell, once during Wilderness, and promptly, genuinely apologized. Yes, I complained that it was really cold, and I was really uncomfortable. But all in all? I was still me. I was still someone that I recognised, and I did a better job during Wilderness than I do with all my guardrails of showing up evenly for myself and everyone else, rather than skewing towards putting others first. I do not need to walk on eggshells with myself and be scared of what I will do if I am not so on guard against my own responses. Even at my most stripped down, I am worthy of my own trust.

In the wake of the miles I walked through the John Muir Wilderness valley that we hiked into, where not a single car engine could be heard echoing off the austere mountain slopes, and the miles that I walked through my own psyche, past my many, many guardrails, my letter read, “whether you stuck with that [goal], changed it up, did a bit of both, or a bit of everything, I am proud of you. I don’t know how many miles you walked, peaks you saw, blisters, or bug bites you warred with, or times you bargained with the fates for a shower. Whether you dealt with the big or the small on any given day, I am proud of you.

“It’s funny, with this hand-off, no pressure approach, I have less let’s-cry-together-through-time things to say. I would still totally pass a tissue through the time warp, if needed, though,” which was needed, because I did cry when I read this. “I love you always, in your highs, your lows, your cringe-worthy moments, your standing ovations and all. I love you always.

“Whatever you do next, I hope you fill your cup (even if it is a slightly-more-dented-than-before backpacking cup) in whatever way you need. Time alone, in bed, with friends, a good hug, some lavender-chamomile tea or earl grey, maybe. Probably a shower or three.

“I am so proud of you, darling. I love you always.

“With love,

“– Megs.”

And to her, I write back,

Thank you for believing in my skeletons enough to show them the light.

With love always,

– Megs