

18 May, 2013 A+ Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom – Ken Ilgunas

The timing of this book is interesting, as I am NINE shifts away from leaving my job at the Service Desk. Ken Ilgunas was smart enough at a young age (no wonder he got into a fancy school like Duke) to see that debt curbs freedom.

Like many, I stumbled onto Ken's article about living in a van at Duke in order to obtain a graduate degree without accumulating any debt. I thought it was a) a great article b) a great idea. If I had encountered someone at school living in a van I would have invited myself over to check it out. But then again, I am fascinated by small spaces.

Whenever I read a book about someone embarking on a great lifestyle experiment, I find myself comparing what I find to be their really got their shit together skills with my I sort of fumble through things skills. I just assume that everyone is way better at these things than me but It turns out that Ken Ilgunas also fumbled his way through many of the tasks he performed in his book. This made me like the book even more. It's nice to know that people doubt themselves all the time.

About half of this book is how Ilgunas paid off his \$32,000 student loan. He probably could have paid off his loans living at home and worked crazy hours at Home Depot but he found the job soul sucking and I as I have discovered, being in a soul sucking job is another form of debt. So off to Alaska where he worked, ironically, in fairly low skilled jobs that did not require a university degree. In Alaska he took advantage of working at jobs that included free board and not having to pay rent really did cut down on expenses. Adopting a monastic lifestyle (mostly) he abandoned consumerism and worked like crazy to earn and cleared his debt in just over 2 years. I cannot fathom the immense relief he must have felt when he paid off his debt. When I read the part where he was completely debt free (just like in the No Harvard Debt video) I got a little teary eyed.

This book is was very entertaining to read because of Ilgunas' writing style. He's a funny guy. Not everyone can write a book about many scary moments/people/exasperated parents and not have the book read like pulp fiction "he decided to hitchhike from Alaska, but all he met was terror," but instead it's a whimsical tale of a young man on an adventure, "one day while cooking supper for the meth heads..." The parts where he describes van dwelling are entertaining even though at times I am sure he was uncomfortable, depressed and a little lonely. Living a lifestyle where one must sacrifice comfort and ease in order to gain a long-term benefit is a tough ride.

There is a serious message in this book. Debt is slavery. Ken Ilgunas only ran up a \$32K debt because he transferred to a cheaper university with lower tuition and worked during the school year, His friend Josh, chose to study at a more costly university and ran up a debt of \$66K. When the US economy crashed, Josh found himself trapped by his debt. He eventually took a job recruiting students to an online school with a less than stellar reputation. It took a while but Josh came to his senses and quit that job and he even testified in front of the Senate about the questionable business practice of the school. Things eventually worked out for Josh but the amount of anxiety his debt created makes me think a university education is worth the money. After all, both Ken and Josh graduated with few real world skills.

I read this book as a bit of a personal pep talk as I take the plunge of cutting the headset. At some moments I feel excitement to be released from the misery of tech support and IT, and at other moments I feel like I am falling from a building. Still I know my choice is the right choice because like Ilgunas, I worked very hard over the last few years to save like crazy so I have the luxury of not being trapped by debt, lifestyle inflation and a soul crushing job.