

Latch Key Prometheus: How I Became the First ELF Cell... A Non-admission of Guilt

Michael Loadenthal

2014

The first Earth Liberation Front (ELF) action in the United States may have been inadvertently carried out by me, or rather an eight year-old me. Though I can't remember the month, in or around 1991 I set fire to a home under construction in a plot of land adjacent to my home; a plot that up until a few months prior was a spotty field—a mini woods, one could say. When they began construction on the new homes, the woods changed. What were once woods where the older kids went to smoke cigarettes, kiss one another and occasionally drink and leave shattered glass, rapidly became a clearcut, then staked-out holes, then wood frames, then homes. Later a road was built, Dick Avenue. Seriously. Dick Ave connected two small parallel streets in a suburban city of 40,000. After the construction that cut through the woods, when you drove up Dick to your left and right were houses, maybe eight in all.

Before these became houses they were holes with mountains of dirt beside them. In this time my friends and I would climb these giant dirt piles after the workers left for the day. This is what we did after we got home from school; latch key kids with some time to kill. So we played on the giant hills and did our best to cause avalanches, filling the carefully dug basements with rubble and dirt. Sometimes we brought tools to make the process seem more professional. Other times we just used large rocks, wooden stakes and our hands to dig.

Once the holes became filled with concrete to form basements, and the wood began to arrive in earnest, we quickly changed our strategy. We began a concerted effort to relocate the survey stakes which served to guide the construction's dimensions and measurements. We made as much havoc as we could with their planning. Why? Because we were mad that they had taken our woods, our place to explore and eventually smoke and kiss and drink. We lost our blackberry bushes and the wild raspberry bushes that we ate from every year. For years prior we foraged this wild suburban fruit and loved it. When they bought the woods, they chopped it all down.

Once the stakes were no longer necessary and larger pieces of wood began to arrive, we made haste to syphon as much material as we could—2" x 4"s, plywood, nails and giant misshaped pieces of various materials. We took plastic siding and rope. We took what we could carry. Hell, the only thing separating us from the construction work was 10 yards and a large wood fence that one could climb over, under, or through. We took all of these things and made piles beneath the skeleton of a swing set. We made monkey bars and a slide and two hand swings. Using the wood, nails, rope, and a few hammers from my garage, we nailed the wood into and around the swing set, creating levels to stand atop, walls, a roof of sorts, and a door. Within a week the swing set, which could be easily seen from the street, was huge. It looked like an old Scottish castle, or an Earth First! roadblock in Cascadia.

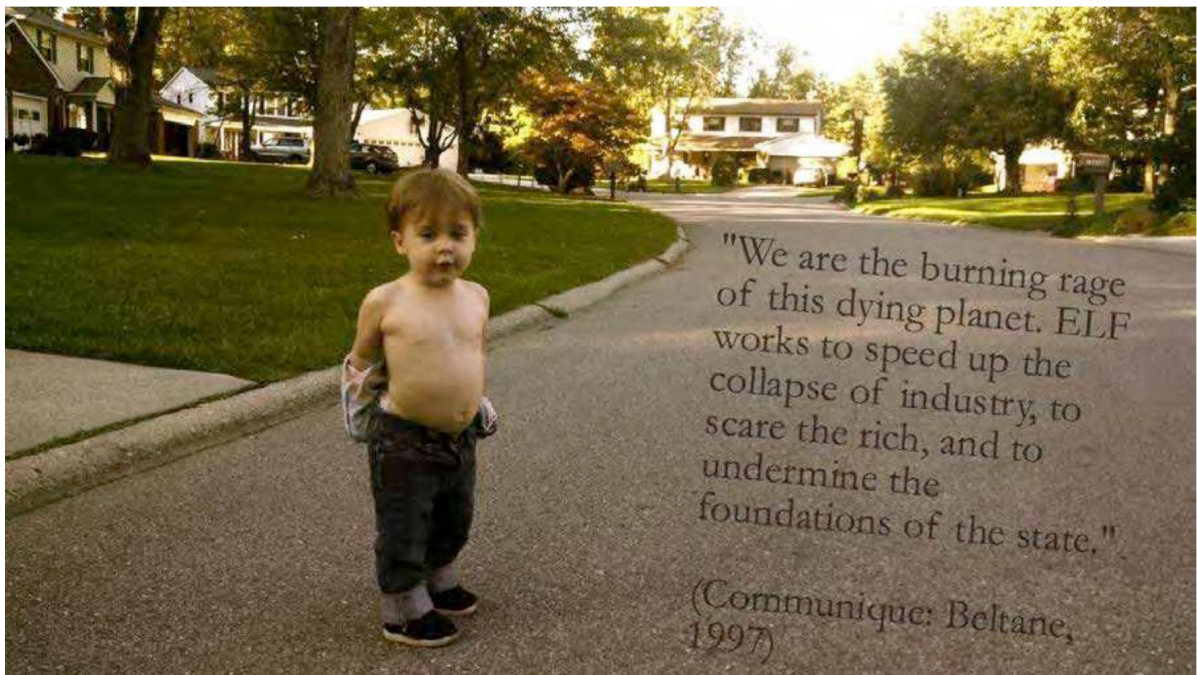
Eventually, the construction company saw the fort built from their materials and told my mom. We had to stop stealing their wood, but the fort stayed up for weeks.

A few months down the line the homes began to take shape. Walls, siding, roofs, wiring and chimneys.. the latter two our main enemies. We laid waste to as much wiring as we could find. We used a small golden knife with a blade no longer than two

inches. It was my father's from the Marine Corps. The delicate blade rotated safely into a golden metal casing, and on the back was a clip for your belt. We used that knife to make scores of cuts throughout the homes. Sometimes we hid the cuts in clever places so the location would be difficult to find and fix. We did this relentlessly but with an irregular schedule so as not to be caught. Sometimes when we would begin a day of cutting, we would find the previous day's work repaired with electrical tape. So we made new cuts, reattached the tape, and moved on.

And the chimneys? We would haul up the biggest objects we could find, stand on top of the house at the entrance of the chimney, and just toss down whatever we could. One time it was an old computer monitor, another time parts of a new toilet left on a property. Mostly it was roofing tiles and bricks left out for future work. This was the most nihilistic part of the campaign. Hurling bricks and red roofing tiles down a chimney and straight onto the concrete basement floor left debris piles of enormous proportions. I remember tossing bricks into a basement just to see how loud a sound we could make. After all, we were angry. They had taken our woods, our zone of opacity, and turned it into private space.

So onto the main event.



Baby Emory, daughter of the author, fighting ecocide daily by staying vegan, being nice to doggies, and refusing the domination of shirts. She'll be appearing this Halloween as her hero, Daniel McGowan.

During this time in my life my friends and I had a profound interest in fire, as many kids do at that age. We loved filling scavenged containers with various liquids and

seeing if a good wick would set them alight. Hairspray, gasoline, cleaning chemicals, matches, fireworks—all readily available in homes. Well, when our fondness for fire found empty lots, we knew we had a playground. Most days we would make fires in the areas just below a giant rock and dirt pile. After we lit the milk jug or whatever, and the flame got too large, we would panic and cover it with dirt, extinguishing the fire. But one day it didn't go so smoothly.

We lit a fire adjacent to the bare wood structure of a new home. Not all of the houses were being finished at the same rate and this one was still in its early stages with rock piles and some wood rafters. On this particular day, a friend and I took a couple of two-liter soda bottles and cut the tops off with our small knife. We tied them side to side creating two open chambers. Inside of the frame we put a ton of matches, poured some grill starter on top, then a layer of loosely packed newspaper. Draped over both open top plastic bottles was a rag sprinkled in gasoline from the tank of our family hedge clipper. We made a long skinny fuse from cardboard, placed the end in the container atop the newspaper, lit it, and backed up to watch the show.

The cardboard burned, slowly but surely, towards the two containers and the gas rag. When it came to nearly touch the rag the fumes ignited. The burning rag was instantly hot enough to light the newspaper below, and finally the soaked matches. A final blast of blue heat melted the containers and the fire accelerated with added oxygen and exploded out the sides, expanding laterally. We knew that while we had succeeded in making a cool fire show, it was burning far more than our typical creations. This one was pluming thick black smoke clearly visible from my home and that of my neighbors. We tried to kick it over by avalanching a pile of dirt on top of it, but instead the fire just fell onto the outer structure of the home. The structure began to burn. Wooden walls were blackened.

Through a panicked yet consorted effort, we were eventually able to put the fires out. The area stunk like burned wood and plastic, and the half-burned incendiary device was somewhere in the mix of rubble. Our hands were black from handling burned wood. We did our best to hide it. We tried to kick apart the wood so that it wouldn't be so clear that it was burned. An FBI forensics team would have just laughed. We left evidence in troves I'm sure; from footprints and DNA to handprints left in blacked soot and ash. And let's not forget we were already on their radar for stealing all their wood and nails. Hell, we were nearly the closest neighbors. After quickly trying to make the area look less conspicuous, we all dispersed and went home.

Soon enough there was a knock on my front door. My mom answered the door and I listened from the top of the stairs. I was in the bathroom trying in vain to wash off the black soot from my hands and face—I hadn't yet had the time to change out of my clothes which I'm sure stunk like I'd been at a campfire all afternoon. It couldn't have been later than seven at night and some man was at my door telling my mother what happened in a home being built adjacent to our backyard. Now while my mom knew I was a bit of a mischievous, criminally-minded kid, she read this guy carefully. He seemed to have no evidence that it was *me*. It was certainly someone, but my only

connection was circumstantial history with the construction. No one saw me there. And so my mom told the man that I had been home the last few hours. He pushed back but she stood her ground. She protected her son even though she did not know where I had been all afternoon. She probably also had her suspicions that I in fact *did* do it. When your eight-year-old son comes in from playing and rushes right upstairs into a bathroom it sets off mommy radar that he is hiding something.

My mom of course asked me about it as soon as the man left. I don't remember what I said but I probably just denied it. I knew nothing good could come from telling her I set a fire and destroyed private property. She probably didn't believe me, but she let it go, as she knew that the interaction with the contractor reenacted with a guilty son could quickly become a police matter no one wanted. So my mom protected her family and hid my criminal acts, knowingly or not.

We'd dropped the dirt into the holes, de-staked their surveyors, stole their walls and nails, cut their wires and wrote dirty words in black marker in the wood and in the wet cement. We'd smashed their materials through their chimneys because we were angry. We were bored, unsupervised, and mischievous. We had a politics of sorts behind it—not quite an anti-authoritarian critique of suburban sprawl, or a goal of re-wilding through economic sabotage and property destruction, but we understood two key concepts: direct action and propaganda of the deed. We knew that if we wanted something stopped we had to do it ourselves. We thought that if we did it, maybe others would see and be inspired to follow. So we tried to frustrate the developers, make it more costly, with the naivety that they might relinquish and cancel the development. Somehow this would bring back the woods.

Movement history tells us that the Earth Liberation Front emerged in this country in 1996 on Columbus Day. On that night, clandestine activists in Oregon glued the locks and graffitied political messages at three sites: a Chevron station, a public relations office, and a McDonalds. Some of the graffiti included the letters ELF.

Sorry to say movement scribes, but my campaign was earlier than that. We never wrote a communique. Never named the action or the group. There was no

ELF moniker to adopt, and if there had been, we wouldn't have heard about it or understood it anyway. So maybe we weren't the ELF per se, but a few years later when I heard about them I remembered our small strikes against a developer. In 1998 the ELF was in full swing setting fires at the USDA in Olympia, US Forest Industries in Oregon, and the infamous ski lodge in Vail, Colorado.

Yes, my actions were more mischief than an orchestrated campaign of ecotage, but maybe these ideas and methods are just ingrained in us. We were all born in times more wild than our present, and maybe we have an innate desire for less houses, less roads, less metal towers and power lines. Maybe the drive towards technological cyber society is a suicidal path as Jensen, Kaczynski, Zerzen, and some climatologists, biologists, and zoologists would claim. Maybe, just maybe, kids are better at perceiving this than the rest of us. We know banking, we know traffic jams, we know that the homes we cringe at are the homes we one day want for our families. Maybe before we see the

utility in it all, and get comfortable with the unnecessary ease and luxury of modern civilization, we know a more pure, less adulterated version of what this world could be.

For a child, a field is best left a field. In a field, a wood, a creek, or some trees in a yard, we have small temporary autonomous zones, areas of opacity, concealed amongst the wasteland of homes, commercial real-estate, parking lots, mega retail and industrial infrastructure.

If we want to steer this world onto a positive, non-suicidal, non-destructive path, we need to encourage and foster more of the wild and less of the concrete. More fields and less strip malls. More forests and less McMansions. More community and less gated cul-de-sacs.

Michael Loadenthal finds himself in the Midwest these days multi-tasking as a father, conspirator and writer. Over the past 15 years he has organized amongst a variety of global direct action movements, and is currently (yet another) precariously-employed adjunct and grad student. Looking back, he still believes in the cleansing power of fire, and can be reached at mloadenthal.wordpress.com, or summoned by chanting his name three times while clutching a 12" pry bar...his favorite size.

The Ted K Archive

Michael Loadenthal
Latch Key Prometheus: How I Became the First ELF Cell... A Non-admission of
Guilt
2014

Earth First! Journal Brigid, Vol. 34, No.1, 2014.
<archive.org/details/001_20221128_20221128>

www.thetedkarchive.com