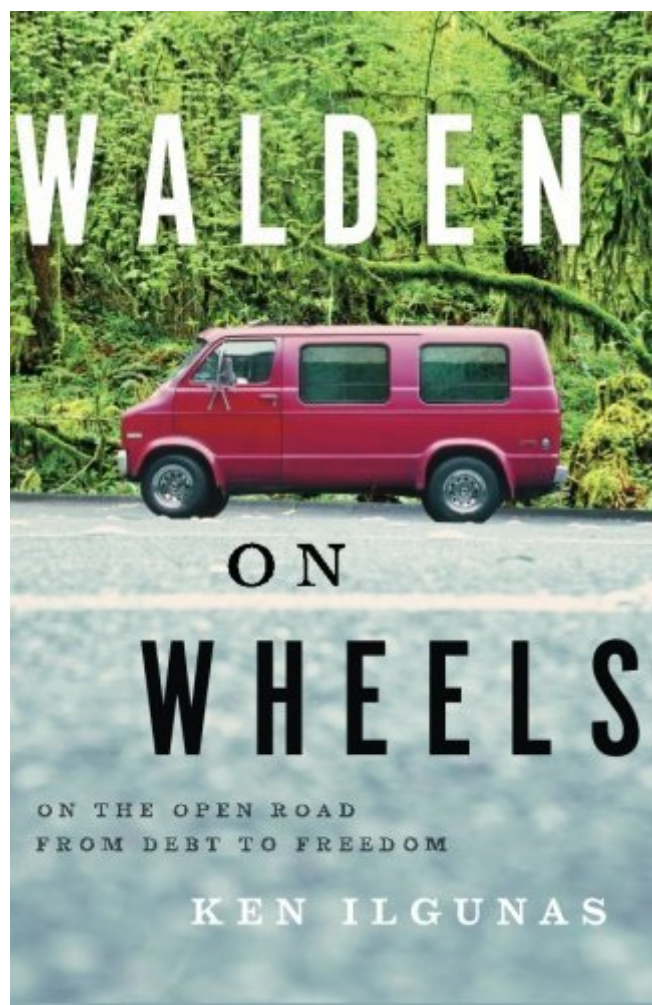


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Walden On Wheels: On The Open Road From Debt To Freedom



Synopsis

In this frank and witty memoir, Ken Ilgunas lays bare the existential terror of graduating from the University of Buffalo with \$32,000 of student debt. Ilgunas set himself an ambitious mission: get out of debt as quickly as possible. Inspired by the frugality and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, Ilgunas undertook a 3-year transcontinental journey, working in Alaska as a tour guide, garbage picker, and night cook to pay off his student loans before hitchhiking home to New York. Debt-free, Ilgunas then enrolled in a master's program at Duke University, determined not to borrow against his future again. He used the last of his savings to buy himself a used Econoline van and outfitted it as his new dorm. The van, stationed in a campus parking lot, would be more than an adventure—it would be his very own "Walden on Wheels." • Freezing winters, near-discovery by campus police, and the constant challenge of living in a confined space would test Ilgunas's limits and resolve in the two years that followed. What had begun as a simple mission would become an enlightening and life-changing social experiment. *Walden on Wheels* offers a spirited and pointed perspective on the dilemma faced by those who seek an education but who also want to, as Thoreau wrote, "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

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Customer Reviews

"He was many things -- a surveyor, a naturalist, a handyman, a pencil-maker -- but I thought of Thoreau as a writer more than anything else. And his greatest story wasn't one of his essays, or 'Walden.' His greatest story, I thought, was his life. He knew that anything is possible when you wield the pen and claim your life as your own. . . . [F]or those of us who can, should it not be our great privilege to live the lives we've imagined? To be who we want to be? To go on our own great journeys and share our experiences with others?" It's interesting that Ken Ilgunas describes himself, repeatedly, as a slacker: apathetic and indolent throughout his high school and undergraduate career, he finished college with a degree he didn't particularly care for (though he had found some inspiration in the last year or so of college, some thirst for knowledge, some interest in writing) and \$32,000 in debt. But a slacker would never have done what Ilgunas did: he found work during a recession and despite the enormous surfeit of college graduates with degrees but little passion, he worked at crappy jobs in ugly circumstances, worked extra hours (60, 70, 80 a week) as much as possible, he saved every penny he could, he bought almost nothing for himself -- and he paid off his debt. And then, he went back to school. But to ensure that he did not go back into debt -- a promise he had made to himself while chipping away at the mountain of his first batch of student loans -- he chose to live in a van. Ilgunas calling himself a slacker reminds me of a favorite quote from Lech Walesa, the Polish union organizer who brought his country from communism to democracy in the 1970's and 1980's: "I'm lazy."

Author Ken Kilgunas graduated from the University at Buffalo owing \$32,000 and with a degree in history and English. (Fortunately, he'd limited his debt by working over 30 hours/week at a Home Depot - \$8/hour.) Unable to find work, he ended up taking a \$9/hour job and tour guide and cook at a Coldfoot truck stop about 174 miles into the mostly gravel Dalton Highway and 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle, mostly used by truckers en route to Prudhoe Bay from Fairbanks. (He notes in 2009 there were 17.4 million college graduates in jobs not requiring a degree, including 365,000 cashiers and over 100,000 janitors - 5,057 with doctorate or professional degrees.) Clothes came from donation bins, friends cut his hair. The 'good news' is that the nearest store was in Fairbanks (no temptation to spend money), there was no cellphone reception (no temptation to sign onto a phone plan), and he got free room and board. One year later, he'd paid off \$18,000. A year later he got a better-paying seasonal job as a back country ranger with the Park Service at the Gates of the Arctic National Park, and after 2.5 years, was debt free. In Alaska, Kilgunas also learned about subsistence living and worked with a 74-year-old maintenance man living in his 1980 Chevy Suburban. Wanting

to continue his education, he applied to and was accepted at Duke. Living quarters would be a 1994 Ford Econoline van he bought for \$1,500 (complete with bald tires) - for two years! Internet and electricity - available at the library. Showers, via a cheap campus gym membership. The bathroom was a quarter-mile from his parking space. Food - he cooked himself in the van, averaging \$4.34/day, much cheaper than Duke's cheapest on-campus meal plan \$15/day. Their cheapest dorm rooms cost 18X what he paid for his parking permit.

Ken Ilgunas' book gives me some hope for the future. Ken's story proves that the American suburbs and the American education system can still -- at least on rare occasions -- produce a genuine, thinking, feeling, conscious, self-directed human being. What does it take to do that? A fertile and rebellious young mind with a hunger for books and genuine experience, plus exposure to the writings of the best minds of the past: In other words, a liberal arts education. Young though he may be, Ken is a natural-born philosopher, just as he is a natural-born writer. Though he makes much of his slacker, frat-boy origins, no doubt that is part of a writerly device to keep his feet on the ground, even when the wind is in his wings. Slacker frat-boys don't get to speak at Duke graduations, nor are they capable of conceiving, or finding words for, Ken's powerful appeal for the liberal arts, which brought tears to my eyes in an era in which universities are spending borrowed money to build yet more business schools. I want to take issue with a couple of reviews that have attempted to police and scold Ilgunas for occasionally being politically incorrect. One review lifts out of context a passage in which Ilgunas expresses thoughts of aggression toward a homeless guy who had duped him. I must police and scold such careless reviewers, who lack the insight to realize that Ilgunas really was expressing anger at himself, and questioning his own self-worth, because it was a low point in his journey. Of course Ilgunas is occasionally politically incorrect. He is a truth-seeker and a truth-teller, with no time for frauds and scams. I eagerly await Ilgunas' future writings. For better or for worse, he is never going to be able to live the way other people live.

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