

Groundings in Nature Mysticism and Adult Learning

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Overview

Historically, American education has functioned as the benefactor and disseminator of nature education, although that role has diminished in direct proportion to the diminutive presence of American natural landscapes. This withdrawal has led many to adulthoods typically devoid of a sense of place on the planet, as well as potentially limiting the ability to experience the sublime or mystical insights of life. This discussion investigates an experiential, interdisciplinary-action approach, used at Yellowstone National Park and a Canadian wilderness project, that supports and informs the reintegration of nature for the sublime or mystical development of adult students in higher education.

Certain voices within American education have been proponents of nature education. From the writings of Thomas Jefferson's sublime experiences at Virginia's natural bridge (Frankel, 2001), and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (2004), a patterned importance for natural spaces has been espoused as an imperative educational component. Nonetheless, education has largely co-opted itself for the promotion and acquisition of materialistic commodities. However, a contingency of educators connected to the awe of nature still exists. For many of these people it is not enough to solely hold these life changing nature experiences for themselves: they want to extend the opportunity to others.

Those dedicated to connecting natural spaces to post-secondary education are few, resulting in the limited opportunities afforded college students today. Nonetheless,

much of the sustainable driving force for these educators, in both Canada and the United States, is influenced by the romantic movement of the late eighteenth century, when people celebrated, yet feared, remote or isolate tracts of unsettled land and wilderness (Kaufmann, 1998).

Setting the Stage for Transformational Experiences

Transformation is recounted by countless people having experienced heightened awareness while in nature. The following short account will describe how an educational institution has designed a wildlife experience in Yellowstone National Park supportive of nascent transformational opportunities, to experience the sublime and mystical. Then, lastly, an account of a Canadian wilderness experience, where 21 people built a dwelling and reenacted the outline set by Henry David Thoreau.

Mysticism and Nature

From August 18 to 22 of 2004, 23 people from various parts of the United States engaged in the “Lamar Landscapes: Focusing on Our Wild Nature” residential, wilderness, learning experience based at the Lamar Buffalo Ranch Field Campus, located in the Lamar Valley in the northeast portion of Yellowstone National Park. The main purpose of this program was to effect transformation among participants, creating for them a bond with, and love for, nature, which in turn would produce physical and psychological benefits (Day & Petrick-Underwood, 2004). Sponsored by University of Wyoming’s Department of Adult Learning and Technology, the event was hosted by Adult Educator Michael Day, Yellowstone, outdoor, education consultant, Ellen Petrick-Underwood, and National Museum of Wilderness Art’s Curator of Education, Jane Lavino.

For three (an one-half) days and four nights, the group learned of wolf restoration, observed various wild animals (such as buffalo, elk, brown bears, grizzly bears, hawks, bald eagles, and badgers), experienced some of Yellowstone's unique natural formations and features (such as petrified trees, mountain vistas, Mystic Falls, and Sapphire Spring) on various hikes, and acquire a detailed awareness of local flora and fauna through natural sculpting, photographic, and sketching activities conducted near the field campus or on hikes. Participation was voluntary. About half of the group members were return participants; several others have had similar nature experiences in the past and plan on returning to Yellowstone in the future. During casual discussions, several of the group members expressed the religious or spiritual significance of the trip, while others expressed very personal thoughts. Later, in retrospect, still other group members commented on the connectedness of the people and how quickly community was formed. Even the literature directly associated with the trip alludes to the intangible benefits and spirituality associated with Lamar Landscapes and other wilderness experiences. These expressions are all akin to mysticism.

Certainly, untold numbers of people visit wilderness areas every year to view natural spectacles such as Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser. The majority of these people visit such areas for the show alone, never wandering farther than paved or pebbled paths or boardwalks; although gaining some of the benefits of a wilderness experience, they do not feel compelled to return or to pursue more substantial contact with nature. Notwithstanding, wilderness experiences such as Lamar Landscapes draw people with a certain affinity for nature. These people seek out substantial, authentic experiences in pristine, untouched (by humans) wilderness, and in a sense self-, or pre-select themselves

for consubstantial programs (Petrick-Underwood, 2004). People with such a desire for wilderness experiences, although consciously attributing this desire to aesthetics, stress release, or establishing (or remembering) a connection with, and place in, the natural order, may in fact (consciously or unconsciously) be attracted to an altered state of consciousness, the study and pursuit of which is known as mysticism. Mystical states can be triggered, or facilitated by natural surroundings. Indeed, some of those who consciously pursue such experiences often visit wilderness areas because of this quality.

Contrary to contemporary misconception, mysticism is different from ordinary religious sentiments, the supernatural, or occult phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, visions, or voices (Wainwright, 1981; Underhill, 2002). The Random House College Dictionary (1988) defines the term as “the doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation and love” (p.882). This definition is, of course, oversimplified, and may be misleading, since, by its nature, the term defies explanation.

Those who have examined mysticism, the term enumerating mystical experiences, have created various schemes for its classification. However, F.C. Happold (1988) has identified seven characteristics of mystical experiences that seem to permeate other scholars’ delineations or depictions (See, De Marquette, 1949, Katz, 1983, Wainright, 1981, and Underhill, 2002). (1) The mystical state is ineffable. It “defies expression” to those who have “not known some analogous experience.” It is “a state of feeling rather than a state of intellect,” which, like a color, smell, or a nature experience, is not capable of being fully described in words (Happold, 1988, p. 45). (2) The mystical state is noetic.

The experience is one of knowledge. A person has an understanding of, or insight into true reality, which brings with it a tremendous sense of authority. “Even though he may not be able to say, in the language of the intellect, what he knows, one who has undergone mystical experience is convinced with absolute certainty that he does know” (p.45). (3) Mystical states are transient. They seldom last for long and end in a speedy return to normality. (4) The mystical state has a passive quality. Even though one can prepare for reception of a mystical experience, it carries a sense of being given. One’s own will is suspended while receiving the experience. (5) The mystical state generally bears a consciousness of the unity of everything. This “All in One and One in All” consciousness transcends the phenomenal reality of opposites and dichotomies in which normal consciousness resides (p. 46). (6) The mystical experience is timeless. It is not restricted by clock time. The mystic (or one who is experiencing a mystical state) is simply in no dimension of time, or in a dimension where time does not exist. (7) Finally, the mystic asserts that “[t]he self, the ego of which we are normally conscious . . . is not the true self . . . it is bound up with bodily organizations, and mental happenings which are subject to change and decay” (p. 48). The mystic becomes aware of the true self (the Atman in Hinduism; the spark, centre, apex of the soul, or ground of the spirit in Christian Mysticism). The true self “is immortal, constant, and unchanging, and is not bound by space-time. It is not only an individual self, it also has a universal quality” (p. 48).

Mystics through the ages who have communicated reflections on their experiences have made the four following general assertions: (1) the phenomenal world and its corresponding individual consciousness is only a partial reality, but is connected

to a “Divine Ground” (true reality) from which all partial realities come forth; (2) humans can realize the Divine Ground through direct intuition (the mystical experience) which is superior to reason, and in which the person, or knower, is directly connected with the known or knowledge; (3) through the mystical experience, humans can differentiate between the phenomenal self and the non-phenomenal, or true self, and experience the true self, thus connecting with the Divine Ground; and (4) by realizing the true self and connecting with the Divine Ground, the mystic understands true reality and experiences what others call eternal life, salvation, or enlightenment (Happold, 1988).

The state of mysticism is the apex of altered, or higher consciousness. One can experience several lesser levels of this altered consciousness while in pursuit of, or instead of, the ultimate mystical state. These less extreme levels of consciousness nonetheless give indication of the ultimate level’s existence. The continuum of these lesser events has been described as “conversion,” “awakening of the self,” or “increasing lucidity” (Underhill, 2002, pp. 176-180).

Mysticism has touched every religion and culture. One can find accounts of these experiences from all over the world throughout recorded history. Even each western monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) has its sect of mystics, which the religion officially accepts (De Marquette, 1949; Ellwood, 1987; Happold, 1988; Underhill, 2002). Mysticism is asserted as the core experience that spawns all religions (Happold, 1988, pp. 18-19); therefore, this account bypasses the unmanageable and confusing discussion of separate religious experiences in favor of focusing on the common mystical experience.

One of the several approaches to mystical awareness is the belief that nature or wilderness environments can facilitate, or increase the probability of the mystical

experience. This branch of the mystical persuasion is known as Nature Mysticism. Its typical expression is that of the immanence of God, Creator, true Reality, or the Absolute in nature (Happold, 1988; Underhill, 2002), or that the contemplation of one natural object can lead to a mystical awareness (Underhill, 2002). Allusions to Nature Mysticism abound in the writings of mystics all through history. The concept has even made its way into ordinary religious thought (Pannenberg, 1964; Pepin, 1987; Happold, 1988; Clark, 1998; Underhill, 2002).

Several American writers/practical philosophers display mystical elements in their writings. Thoreau is one such writer whose approach alludes to nature mysticism. He has been labeled a transcendentalist (Albanese, 1990, p. 87), and his work *Walden*, which contains several allusions to nature mysticism, such as the channel of purity between man and God (Albanese, 1990), has been examined for its abundance of mystical content (Hourihan, 2004). Perhaps the desire for wilderness experiences expressed by writers like Thoreau, nature mystics through history, and modern outdoors people comes from advancement of intellectual thinking and the onslaught of civilization. In writing on the spirituality of environmentalism, which also reeks of mystic thought, one scholar explains this idea in detail:

Even though human beings, too, are “natural,” it is (uniquely?) possible for human beings to forget the fact. By reasoning our way to power, by laying out Cartesian grids in streets and national boundaries, we hide from ourselves the true continuum. Out in what we can conceive as “wilderness” (or even “countryside”) we can forget what makes us “different,” or “alienated” from the Whole. Cities, in one sense, are as natural as ant-hills, and as likely to contain a host of unseen

agencies. There is nowhere (and will never be) a region sustained “against nature” by the will of human architects alone. But in the city it is easy to forget the natural powers sustaining everything we seem to build. In wilderness (even one infected or constructed by our human actions) we find it easier to recall the truth.

(Clark,1998)

Realizing the ever-continuing expanse of civilization, and, with it, the distancing of humans from their connection to the world (and universe), one can better understand the desire of a segment of the population for wilderness experiences.

All the aspects of mysticism described above are visible in the Lamar Landscapes situation. No less than nine of the participants engaged in conversations discussing various levels of spirituality and naturalism. Some of these participants expressed their feeling of a connection with the Creator through the wilderness that surrounded them. Others expressed heightened awareness, or altered consciousness. Others expressed the wonderment at the sense of community and connectedness they were experiencing with other group members and with nature itself. Still others expressed the sheer awe and spirituality they were experiencing struggling to find the words. None of the participants in these conversations were fully able to express themselves fully, as one would expect in a conversation that attempts to discuss the elements of the different levels of mystical states.

Literature that conveys the importance of, and procedures for, conducting various kinds of nature experiences is no less expressive of nature mysticism. *Stalking the Butterfly*, newly written literature, which was developed using, and is designed for, adult wilderness experiences like Lamar Landscapes, is perhaps the latest example of such

literature displaying this characteristic. Its substantial references to Thoreau's *Walking* and *Walden*, its asserted desire for participants to live in the present and fully experience the wilderness, its discussions of deprogramming, relaxation (which, as described in the book, is the first step in entering a meditative state), heightening the senses, and taking time to contemplate individual objects in nature (as in nature photography) (Day & Petrick-Underwood, 2004), are only some of the examples in the manuscript that suggest a process for preparing to receive a mystical experience.

Lamar Landscapes is perhaps a microcosm representing nature-lovers around the world. It exemplifies people drawn to nature for reasons they cannot fully describe or understand. These people point to the physical and mental benefits derived from, and the beauty of, nature to give tangibility to an otherwise intangible compulsion. However, when surrounded by nature and able to discuss the experience with others, they attempt to express the more profound, and more ineffable reasons for being drawn to the wilds. In the end they can express little in words, and must resolve to be content in sharing the moment, and assuming their companions understand. Perhaps in future programs like Lamar Landscapes, research will be conducted (qualitatively or by way of survey) to see if people drawn to nature are really looking for the mystical experience.

A Post-secondary Design

From the mid-80's to the late-90's, a group of American men and women owned 200 acres of land in northeastern Ontario, Canada, where they built their main lodge and out building for the purpose of testing the euphoric transformative model of Thoreau. Although the initial move was difficult, as was the displacement of social inertia, my account in *Visual Pathways to the Inner Self* speaks of the simple complexity of the next

stage: “It was here where I lived and shared with a group of twenty men and women, and it was here where I began to listen, appreciate, and understand myself. I learned to mentor myself, to think for myself: I no longer followed blindly the thoughts of any one group. I became internally strong and externally generous. My mind was beginning to open” (p.1).

I can recall how, at the time of the arrival at our land surrounded by unknown miles of Crown forest, how words entering my *Day Book* had a translucency of language. Yet, the stage had been set and people became infected by it in various ways; I wrote: “Virginal wilderness has a smell, a quietude that is . . . startling.” (Armstrong 1985-1995). Nature pulled people apart and helped them to rejoin themselves, but often as apparently very different people.

“Nature is a hard mistress,” I heard one fellow say, after a community member’s baby died at birth. What was expected to be a celebration took the entire community’s strength to help each member recover from the loss, which caused me to make a translucent comment that I recalled in *Visual Pathways*: “Even surrounded by wildlife and forest, there were moments of deep pain . . .we couldn’t have gotten through the experience without the community that rapidly emerged” (Armstrong, 1996, p.2).

One notable change not tested in Thoreau’s isolation was the transformation of individuals in community. As a first example, my *Day Notes* capture what a “natural inclination to take on” what I called “pagan rights of sorts: one such behavior occurred during times of heavy downpour and flashing lightening, when the men would *instinctively*, completely, strip, run fast through the meadow, and suddenly stop, causing their bodies or feet to slide for yards on top the tall grasses; at which time they would

make howling, yelping, and screeching sounds uncharacteristic of the people we thought we knew.” During these times people were clearly *elsewhere*, beyond the physical land where they stood; and as I continued, “even the sparks of exultation in their eyes left them vacant to the presence of human forms near them. I feel that the shear weight of their bodies kept them from flying away When the moment passed, they would silently go to the stream with the women to bath, feeling the aftermath of the intensely electrical sparks that they had just held in their minds and bodies.”

The work of the community transformed just as it had within the group and individual encounters with the sublime exultation of nature. The most masculine, emotionally absent men became some of the more sensitive participants. I wrote that these individuals “cried for the simplest loss: finding a dead animal or inadvertently hurting the feelings of a fellow-participant.” One such fellow and his girlfriend ran away from the community for almost a week, leaving a note that read: “We love you guys, but we cannot stand so much kindness and affection, it is driving me crazy. I did not know how to express all of this.” Their note was quite astute in what it stated: strong compassion did reside between participants.

Ruth Richard’s work vivifies certain experiences and expunges misconceptions in a way that clarifies the Canadian experience with nature. The participants definitely felt that the beauty of nature was active and engaging, not a “Kantian view that beauty is ‘disinterested’” (2001, p. 59). Further, Richards explains the caring and intimacy that occurred: “Beauty can open up our vision in an endangered world—while yielding intimacy and delight, not isolation and fear. Caring can become natural for the greater whole we all co-create” (p. 60). Dombrowski (2002) argues against the potential danger

of misunderstanding the power of beauty in nature, for it is distinctly different from cuteness. The Canadian project was real and so were the risks. These facts may have been the fulcrum on which our world was spun, a move away from the suburban certainty of regulated reality to one more tenuous. One author speaks of nature as the “sublime but often darkly ominous,” when referring to his Antarctic sojourn (Abbott, 2004, p. 681), another speaks of how the sublime, when conveyed through spiritual films of realism, also produces experiences “. . . at the edge of the knowable” (Pence, 2004, p.29). Nature asks the participant to see the dark side and the sublimity of nature, which is not knowable or fully expressible. By doing this, the participant moves from the predictable and the known, making way for the unknown to approach.

Although both examples of nature education (Yellowstone and Canada) presented in this paper attempt to express the theory and practice that support the value of nature education, they also promote the importance of striving for goals not solely materialistic. Conditions that have been cited as possible portholes into mystical experience and knowing are typically solitary and/or natural. The nature approach was elevated by Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau and was the basis for the origin of this investigation. As a result, both projects could be deemed successful, as shedding light on some heretofore hardly examined points. Each project demonstrates that people gravitate toward nature, not only for obvious physical and mental benefits, but to fulfill a desire for a transformation to more elevated states of consciousness; and each has generated moments of transformation and the sublime. Those experiences have moved the participants to elevated levels of reflection about their lives, for the rest of their lives.

Moreover, the observations made in each project have hopefully opened the door to further substantial investigation.

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