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ABSTRACT

A college honors course called "A Field Study in American Literature and Philosophy" helps students develop foundations for an environmental philosophy, by introducing them to the literature of natural history and exploration, and more importantly, through actual participation in outdoor activities. The class spends at least four days and nights in some remote corner of Utah or Idaho, "alone" in wildness, cooking for themselves and participating in activities. Readings for the class describe actual physical activities experienced by writers in wild settings, and focus on the geography local to where the class is held. For example, on the topic of the ascent of a mountain, readings include "Ktaadn" by Henry David Thoreau, "The Range of Light" by John Muir, and "The Mountain of My Fear" by David Robert. After students read and discuss the essays, they actually do a moderate climb and a free rappel. Observations are shared later in group discussion. This same pattern is followed using orienteering (compass work), individual exploration, and a solo bivouac. The solo bivouac--spending the night alone without sleeping bags or tents--is the most challenging segment of the course, and requires students to call upon and assess what they have learned: crossing new ground, exploration, courage, solitude, observation. It is interesting to see how fast social barriers break down in these experiences of wildness and how quickly a group made up of diverse people cast off ideologies and bond together into a harmonious community. (SR)

Teaching Natural History in a Wilderness Setting

by

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It has always been my intention to follow the injunction of Robert Frost in "Two Tramps in Mudtime" and that is to "unite my vocation and avocation." And because of my interests in mountaineering and transcendentalism mixed with a personal concern for what is left of the World's wild places, I have been able to do just that. I feel that it is the obligation of all members of the human family to, at the very least, be educated in matters of world, national, and local ecology. As a university professor I am committed to introducing my students to my world view and then let them develop arguments of their own. One of the ways I felt I could do this was to establish Honors 491, "A Field Study in American Literature and Philosophy," and in so doing I have stumbled upon a great approach to help students with some development of foundations for an environmental philosophy. I do this by introducing them to the literature of natural history and exploration through reading, and more importantly, through actual participation in outdoor activities.

The essence of natural history writing is experience. Stephen Trimble, in the introduction to his excellent anthology Words from

the Land quotes Ann Zwinger regarding experience: "There is no substitute for blisters and sunburn and seeing it where it is" (9). And yet we all know how unforgiving wild nature can be to those who lack the understanding of harmonious co-existence. Emerson said, man is the only animal out of harmony with the environment, and he argues that disharmony is learned behavior rather than innate. In many ways the new technology that has aided wilderness activities like climbing, backpacking, mountain running and biking, white water sports, etc., has also increased the danger is all those activities by providing a false sense of security to the unexperienced. Just because one has the latest and best equipment doesn't mean one is prepared to venture out. These technical blessings are not substitutes for humility and a developed sense of place and harmony with the wild, natural world. We need to cast off human arrogance when we go out and be willing to watch and learn from wildness, to become "illuminated," to gain an understanding of our relationship to the wild world. The literature of natural history helps to develop that simple, yet very complex process. It is as Barry Lopez states: "an illumination of the relationship between human beings and landscape, particularly modern man trying to come to grips with a re-orientation toward landscape" (Lopez, qtd. Words from the Land 28).

It was with these intentions in mind that I developed this class. "A Field Study in American Literature and Philosophy" is a cross between real egg-head classes like literature and philosophy

and P.E. As part of the class proposal I felt that such a class should be team taught. And for the past seven years I have invited several colleagues to work as my partner at various times. The students who register for this class need to plan to spend at least four days and nights in some remote corner of Utah or Idaho away from cars, T.V., the radio and the worst of all nuisances, the telephone. They cook for themselves, participate in activities, many for the first and possibly the last time. They are, part of the time, "alone" in wildness and they interact as a group as well. As I mentioned this class is offered as an Honors class. There were two reasons to chose to run this class through the Honors program: 1. Honors allows for more experiment without all the university curriculum hassles and because Honors classes are allowed to carry with fewer more motivated students. 2. I was concerned that by offering such a class through the regular university curriculum class numbers would become unmanageable from both a teaching standpoint and out of concern for the environment.

In developing "Field Study 491," I fell back on a technique used in the American Studies program at Bowling Green University where I took by advanced degrees. Professor William Grant was fond of using what he called a "paradigm/parody" approach to teaching. For instance he would assign readings in Freud's work Civilization and its Discontents, to teach an idea like Freud's "process of mourning." Then he would assign a literary work that incorporates the psychological paradigm, like D.H. Lawrence's "Love Among the Haystacks." By having the paradigm reinforced through the creative

parody the student is able to more readily grasp, what in many cases, would have been far more difficult when relying on the original source only.

In my efforts to teach nature writing, I have found that same paradigm/parody a very effective strategy. To establish a "paradigm" I select writings that describe actual physical activities experienced by various writers in wild settings. A good example would be of such a physical activity would be mountain climbing. In dealing with mountain climbing the readings I assign are: "Ktaadn" by Henry David Thoreau, "The Range of Light" by John Muir, and David Robert's "The Mountain of My Fear." Each selection has for its focal point the ascent of a mountain. In Thoureu's case the Ktaadn adventure was little more that a hike, yet his account is filled with fear and alienation. The records of both Muir and Roberts represent mountain climbing on far steeper ground and far more dangerous and yet reflect feeling of humans blending in with and learning from the wild, natural world. This is true even with the Robert's piece that focuses on the death of his climbing partner.

It is easy to be philosophical about the records mountaineering around the "fire." And humans are always very willing to be critical from afar. Just listen to all the "arm chair quarterbacks" on Monday morning. But put people in the actual setting and they develop whole new ideas. And putting students in the shoes of the writers is exactly the next step in this educational precess. After having had the students read and

discuss the essays on mountaineering I have them actually climb. Usually the climb is of moderate difficulty (5.7-5.8) and one pitch (150 feet), but to the neophyte it may as well be the North face of the Eiger. Following the climb the students then get the thrill of a 150 foot free rappel. It is interesting to listen to the discussion after the experience. Some preconceived opinions are merely reinforced, in many cases opinions are completely reversed. But the point is, after having read of, then participated in such an activity, the student now has the information to make some intelligent decisions regarding literature of mountaineering as well as the activity itself.

I follow this same pattern using orienteering (compass work), individual exploration and a solo bivouac to follow up selected readings. I feel that it is important to focus on the geography local to where the class is held. Where my class is held in either Utah or Idaho, I establish a reading list that will reflect, for the most part that part of the landscape. For "Field Study" I assign "West of the Great Basin" by John C. Fremont and "Desert Solitaire" by Edward Abbey. Both the writings of Fremont and Abbey are dealing with Utah. Fremont's work reflects exploration, entering a place for the first time, which in most cases, the students are doing the same thing. Here is an account of Fremont's first sighting of the Great Salt Lake:

> The neighboring peaks rose high above us, and we ascended one of them to obtain a better view. The waves were curling in the breeze, and their dark-green color

showed it to be a body of deep water. For a long time we sat enjoying the view, for we had become fatigued with mountains, and the free expanse of moving waves was very grateful. It was set like gem in the mountains, which, from our position seemed to enclose it almost entirely. (Fremont, qtd. Bregon, The Wilderness Reader 89)

Abbey's work is assigned to encourage the students to take a careful look at what is going on around them. I want them to see and observe as Abbey does during his stay in Arches National Park. Too often in the harried pace of daily life we see, but fail to observe:

I wait. Now the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me; I can see the stars again and the world of starlight. I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human, but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and a quiet exaltation. (Abbey, qtd. Bergon, The Wilderness Reader 346)

With these readings to serve as the paradigm, I then give them a "crash course" in compass usage, assign each student a heading and send them off in that direction with the assignment to walk for a half an hour (no one is allowed to have a time piece, they have to rely on their senses). After walking for the proscribed time period then each student is to "observe" and make records of what they see and hear and maybe most importantly, what they feel. Upon their return they register their actual time in a log to see how

well they can feel time. Their observations are shared with the group during the group discussion that follows supper.

This same process is then followed for all the other activities. But to keep the mundane from creeping in, activities are sprung upon the group so as to prevent second guessing of assignments and activities, and to make each experience a "new One," even for those who may have had some previous outdoor experience. It keeps the class on equal ground so to speak.

It is interesting to watch the group dynamics. How partnerships are formed, who aligns themselves with whom. One interesting thing I have observed, and by the way probably the most encouraging thing that comes from this class, is to see how fast social barriers break down and how quickly a group made up of diversely different people cast off idealogies and bond together into a very harmonious community. Such results support Emerson's idea that humans can learn to become harmonious by visiting wilderness. To help facilitate this development of community the first activity after the four or five mile walk in to the base camp and the establishment of camp, is to introduce some "New Games." I have the group participate in what are called trust acts. These "trust acts" begin with very simple activities like pairing off and taking turns leading each other around over new ground blind folded. They then graduate on to more harrowing activities like jumping off a high log (four or five feet) blind folded and backwards in to the arms of the group.

The most challenging segment of this course is the solo bivouac. The assigned reading used to establish the paradigm for this activity comes from the writings of Plenty Coups, the last tribal chief of the Crow. "Vision in the Crazy Mountains" is the record of the experience of Plenty Coups as a ten year old boy as he prepares to assume tribal leadership that involved fasting, sweat baths, and at one point the voluntary and self inflicted amputation of a finger to receive his vision. I encourage the students to seek their own vision in their own ways. As Emerson said "A dream may let us deeper into the secrets of nature that a hundred concerted experiments." This experiential parody works for the students to synthesize their lessons gleaned from the activities of the previous days. It requires them to call upon the things they have learned: crossing new ground--exploration, courage, solitude, observation, and it allows the students time to assess what they have learned. The solo bivouac is without sleeping bags or tents. All the student is allowed to take with them is a small amount of food, warm clothes, water, their journals and readers. We lead them to places of solitude and leave them alone with the instructions not to return to camp until an hour after sunrise.

It is after this experience that some of the most interesting and most honest discussion takes place. The discussions are filled with stories of transcendent experiences, cold, and fear, but mostly of personal triumph with overcoming fear or discomfort--or being able to do something that only four days before was not only

impossible, but inconceivable. I should also note that it is important for the instructors to participate in all the activities, especially the bivouac. Participation keeps us, as teachers, in touch with student's feelings and I think by knowing that the instructors are actually involved encourages and supports the student's desire to learn, not to mention the fact that it allows us to re-acquaint ourselves with wildness, and with the infectious desire for knowledge and experience found in youth.