

Reflections on Connecting through Outdoor Adventure

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Connecting through outdoor adventure is a process that may or may not seem obvious. For us, the word “connecting” resonates with a powerful and extensive implied meaning that we feel compelled to share. A recent collaborative research project between leaders from Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve and researchers from Laurentian University helped to uncover, or perhaps rediscover, that meaning through a series of outdoor adventure leadership experiences (OALE) designed for youth from this northern Ontario First Nations reserve (Ritchie et al., 2010).

Wikwemikong is a large reserve located at the eastern end of Manitoulin Island in Georgian Bay. The OALE involved a 10-day wilderness canoe excursion homeward through the traditional territory of the Wikwemikong community. The route followed the historic French River and then proceeded along the north shore of Georgian Bay towards Killarney and then across the channel to Manitoulin Island. Over two summers nearly 16 percent of the on-reserve population of youth who were between 12 and 18 years of age had completed the program.

Research data was collected via participant interviews, journals and talking circles during the 2009 summer season. This data was analyzed to assess how the OALE may have affected the youths’ resilience and well-being, revealing insights into the process of outdoor adventure. For over a year, we reviewed the data collaboratively at numerous meetings (member checks) and through guidance from community leaders and Elders. We also co-analyzed the data with the staff who were responsible for leading and facilitating the OALE program.

Connecting was the salient theme that emerged from a preliminary analysis of the data, and it has crystallized into a rich concept that we are still trying to understand more fully. The youth seemed to connect or

deepen their connection with *self* and *creation* through their involvement in the OALE program. To clarify, the OALE functioned as both a process of self-discovery (connecting to self) and a medium for global awareness of nature, people and the created world (connecting to creation).

Connecting is a broad concept that, for many of the youth, is active and inclusive of the interconnected experiences and introspection that combine to form a pathway towards resilience and well-being. The concept of connecting could also be described as reconnecting or awakening. In other words, perhaps many of the connections were already there but not necessarily noticed or realized until the experience for a particular youth reached a threshold level, where the connections became apparent. One of the youth described the process of connecting; she seemed to reach this threshold early in the experience:

On day three, I told myself that I was going to be here for seven more days. I have to do what I have to do. So I started thinking more positively about the trip. I remembered how my mom wanted me to learn my inner strengths. So I thought about my mom and she is my inspiration. I was thinking that if I wanted to go home, what would she think about it? So just thinking about that put me in a better mood. I made myself be happy and it was a nice day outside. So I bathed in the water. I felt clean and fresh. I had a whole new attitude. After I woke up, I changed, put the tents away, and cleaned up a lot. I remember the canoe ride and we went through a bunch of rapids. We fell in the water, got wet, and went through a bunch of storms. It was hot, it was cold, and we got some rain. After all that, I thought “Wow, this is canoeing.” I enjoyed it. I loved it. (Female OALE Participant, 15 years, Summer 2009)

Recently a Wikwemikong Elder reflected on the comments from this youth and the impact the OALE may have had on her and the other youth participants. She described the OALE process as a beginning, or an *eye-opener*, for the youth, and stated that the *hearts of the youth had been opened*. She used the analogy of the youth as representing the seeds of a flower that begins to bud and bloom, as the youth connected with their inner strengths and began to see more clearly their place in the world around them. From her perspective, connecting is primarily a spiritual process. Her words are a poignant reminder of the impact outdoor experiences can have on all of us:

Many people speak about spirituality. Spirituality is a way of life, and includes all of creation and the Creator. Connecting with creation is like watching a flower bloom. There must be someone making this possible. From a seed comes the stem, followed by leaves and a bud, which with time will become a beautiful flower. The seeds, that is the youth, are nurtured, cared for, and taught life's teachings. These teachings will help the youth lead a worthwhile and rewarding life. They are never alone. This is anishinaabe bimaadiziwin.

The Outdoor Adventure Leadership Experience [OALE] may only be the beginning, an eye-opener for the youth. Another way of saying it may be that the hearts of the youth have been opened. The youth experienced an awakening, or an awareness of life and all that the Creator has given us. As one youth stated on his return from the trip, "I believe." That youth's belief may have been an awakening. What may have seemed impossible is made possible through positive support and guidance. Being spiritual is having an open heart to the abundance of grace that the Creator offers us, to be adventurous, to be courageous, and to be resilient. (Rita G. Corbiere, Wikwemikong Elder, former teacher and principal, December 22, 2010)

Clearly the concept of connecting is a complex interaction that extends beyond

physical and mental health, evoking heightened emotions with spiritual implications. This is not surprising, given the teachings of the medicine wheel and the framework of health that is foundational to many indigenous communities across Canada (Waldram, Herring & Young, 2006). The medicine wheel, as a framework of holistic health and well-being, includes the four quadrants of mind, body, emotions and spirit, and it is particularly relevant to the Anishinabek world view in Wikwemikong (Buswa & Shawana, n.d.). The medicine wheel perspective captures the essence of a *sacred circle* and reflects the interrelatedness, interconnectedness and balance in a person's life (Rheault, 1999); it also includes a person's relationship with and health of the community and the entire natural world.

Many others have described concepts that are not that different from the teachings of the medicine wheel, and they could help us understand the connecting phenomena further. We present here a few short examples, since a deeper exploration of the literature in this area is beyond the scope and purpose of this work.

In her doctoral thesis, Takano (2004) described the process of *bonding* in her cross-cultural examination of the relationship with the land in seven outdoor programs—four in the United Kingdom and three in indigenous communities in the far north of Canada and Alaska. For the three in indigenous communities in particular, *being on the land* was akin to *life* itself. Henderson and Vikander (2007) presented the *friluftsliv* way from both Scandinavian and Canadian perspectives; numerous scholars related personal perspectives in this edited work. For instance, Gelter defined *friluftsliv* as the "interpretation of a way of life in relation to nature, where the interconnectedness and immersion in the natural setting is at the centre of a philosophical experience of nature" (p. 46). Vikander used the terms *deep anchoring* and *embedding* to describe *friluftsliv* and the relationship between a person and a natural setting (p. 10). Henderson described the northern Cree First Nations' expression, *miyupimaatisium*, which means "being

alive well” with the land (p. 6). Perhaps the concept of connecting is related to *friluftsliv*, Takano’s *bonding*, Vikander’s *deep anchoring* and *embedding*, or the Cree concept of *miyupimaatisiium* and the Anishinabek concept of *anishnaabe bimaadziwin*.

Our purpose in this paper is not only to introduce the ways in which the OALE impacted resilience and well-being for Wikwemikong youth but also to extend and apply our understanding of connecting beyond the context and culture within which it is rooted. We want to reveal how the OALE research reached beyond the youth participants, and how their experiences and stories have touched us on a personal level. Although the youth seemed to benefit from the OALE, the staff, community leaders and university researchers also seemed to benefit. Often the voice of the researched or the *other* is profiled; however it is also important to hear the voices of researchers and how they were impacted. Research can be a deeply reflexive process, and it impacts all who are involved (Davies, 2008). We would like to share this reflexive perspective through two personal philosophies of connecting through outdoor adventure, since we were intimately involved in the research and specifically in the qualitative analysis. We were impacted, our world view shifted, and this is our voice.

Stephen’s Philosophy of Connecting through Outdoor Adventure

The world is complex. Yet at times, there seems to be a coherence, unity and harmony in the world when I am immersed in wilderness environments. I seem to perceive this coherence best during times of heightened involvement in adventurous outdoor activities. During these times of challenge, I am alert and even more connected and engaged in an awe-inspiring created world. To me, complexity, coherence and creation are best represented by the sublime simplicity of the circle.

In Anishinabek teaching, the circle is sacred and symbolic, representing the connections we all have with each other and the natural world (Rheault, 1999). It also represents

completeness, in that everything has its place in order to complete the circle. Unlike the uniform simplicity of the circle, my perceptions often tend to complicate the world through feeble attempts to understand, compartmentalize and structure it so that it makes sense to me. Through these attempts, I am usually left with an empty feeling that my efforts are futile, never to be fulfilled, that my potential to perceive is limited, that the extent of my capacity as a human is only to intuitively grasp a marvelous and mysterious world that fits and functions through its complexity. However, when engaged in outdoor adventure, I have an innate capacity to sense completeness, a connection amongst people, across species and inclusive of the entire natural world. The circle is my metaphor that makes meaning of this complexity.

Outdoor adventure embodies a connection with *self* and *creation*. Connecting with self provides innumerable introspective opportunities for me. I am able to explore and understand more of who I am, and how and why I act the way I do. I am able to perceive and regulate my emotions, attitudes and behaviours. Often I develop a clarity of purpose and personal resolve that is motivating, addictive and immensely satisfying: to climb the summit or paddle the rapid, I discover the real me. Connecting with creation allows me to see glimpses of our complex world through powerful linkages that intuitively and instinctively make sense, despite the magnitude and extent of the unknown. For instance, I feel and share the warm sun with others, a sun that provides me and my friends warmth and light for direction, and at the same time the energy required for photosynthesis in plants—and these same plants may become my food or shelter, or the food and shelter for other animals. I believe that the natural world was created, and it embodies all that is not me: people, animals, plants, elements, world and universe. In short, outdoor adventure is the medium through which I connect more completely with my self and with creation.

As I contemplate a created world that I best perceive and understand through outdoor

adventure, I am also reminded that I live in an imperfect broken world, and that I am imperfect. I am selfish and a sinner, and I negatively impact the environment and the world I live in. Connecting through outdoor adventure has a dark shadow that is a broken circle. As I actively engage in wilderness environs, I am aware of my selfish desires, my sinful nature and the footprint I leave on the Earth. Connection with self and others is contrasted with a fragile me and a fragile Earth.

Fortunately, the Creator is in control. He sent his one and only son to save me and the Earth. My connections are complete through Christ. The Creator and Christ complete and connect the circle: a realization that comes to me through outdoor adventure pursuits.

Danielle's Philosophy of Connecting through Outdoor Adventure

Connecting is the invisible string that ties everything to everything else. I like to experience the world through contact with the Earth—with others, and with the dirt and the soil. By embracing and connecting with the Earth and with others through outdoor adventure, a new, fresh perspective waits to be seen. Fostering connection with the world allows well-being to blossom. For me, loving God and others is a part of my faith that inspires me to strive to act intentionally. This past year I have been learning, reflecting and synthesizing my personal philosophy, which I had the great opportunity to share in the classroom. I have been able to pull my thoughts together and explore how my value of loving God and others materializes through sharing and fostering connection, especially through discovery and adventure in the outdoors.

I choose to act in ways that connect me with the place where I am, and this creates a sense of belonging. Personally, I feel most connected when I am out in creation. It is in creation that I am reminded of and become fully aware of my vulnerability. I can feel the importance of interdependence in my small yet valuable part of the world. Out of this belonging I am compelled to care, and thus

the bond grows stronger. Connecting gives my life meaning and, at the same time, seems to enhance the well-being of the social and ecological community that surrounds me.

I find great satisfaction when I can embrace a challenge and do or make something myself. I love to spend time outside, to discover the long way, to understand and participate in the processes of life. This desire to discover is what I think children naturally have. I think that through sharing experiences and stories with children, and by encouraging and allowing them to discover how they are connected to the world around them, room is made for invaluable learning to take place. I like to think of this act of helping others to connect as *deep care*.



Figure 1: Deep Care and Connecting Through Outdoor Adventure

Figure 1 illustrates the *meaning* and *belonging* that deep care and connection bring. The circle shows how gifts and needs meet and overlap, creating that connection. When I am removed from the process, the face-to-face interaction and the understanding of where I fit into the larger context, I no longer feel like a contributing part of the whole circle. Belonging and understanding my role in the world gives me meaning, and compels me towards responsibility and good work. Outdoor adventure within a group context is an example of an activity where powerful connection is experienced. In these adventures and journeys, I rely on my peers to live, and I work with all of



creation in harmony. I am needed, I need others and I need the environment; therefore I must act respectfully and find my place in the circle. I believe that outdoor adventure experiences are meaningful because they leave a magnified impression on the souls of the group members. Outdoor adventure experiences cause me to see and seek harmony and find connections in other areas of my life. In a similar way, these connections may provide inspiration and positive therapeutic effects for others as they engage in activities together.

Conclusion and Implications

We realize that these personal philosophies are intimate, unreserved and private, however we are hopeful that by sharing them, they are respected and resonate with some readers and perhaps trigger an unrelated personal response in others. Connecting through outdoor adventure may not be a concept, philosophy or framework that is shared by everyone who engages in outdoor activities, but it may offer an explanation for the allure of the wild for some.

Finally, we would like to challenge our readers and their students to write their own outdoor-related philosophy as we have done.

The philosophy could be a reflection on environmental ethics, self-propelled travel, non-consumptive experiences or any of the myriad of factors that may be important to an individual in their outdoor pursuits. Alternatively, it could be related to a single concept such as connecting. Keep it to one page.

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For more information on OALE: A research report concerning the OALE is available from www.ihrdp.ca/reports.html and a short video documentary is available for viewing online at www.oalevideo.laurentian.ca.

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