

Re-Creation, Spirituality and the Great Outdoors

Peter Higgins

'I would like to say a few words about this land.

*The only food I like is meat.'*¹⁴

Well, I don't feel the same way about meat as this Inuit does – in fact I eat very little – but I may at times in my life have had some similar understanding of the land referred to. For me, a person without formal religious beliefs, the concept of spirituality feels remarkably comfortable. In fact I get a little tetchy when I feel it being hi-jacked by formal religion. Nor do I find it a difficult or awkward concept to describe or discuss. My descriptions rely on places, or more accurately types of places, to provide examples. The times when I can safely say I have felt most 'alive' are when I have been in places where it was impossible to be ignorant of the fact that I was just a part of the food chain! As far as the animals around me were concerned, my relevance was solely that I might eat them or they might eat me. I had no other consequence (although plants and animals are not aware of it) than perhaps as fertiliser for the soil if I should die in that place.

Where have I been that I might feel this way? Wild parts of Alaska spring to mind for me, as I have had the good fortune to visit these areas recreationally and travel through them by kayak, canoe and on foot. Perhaps more surprisingly I have equally memorable experiences of, for example, sea kayak trips off the west coast of Scotland. Alaska may well be the kind of place the reader might have imagined I'd use as an example – the presence of bears adds a certain spice to the experience. However, they generally avoid contact with humans unless provoked. So you know you have to be on your best behaviour when you're in what is so clearly their land. What is there to eat you in Scotland? Well, midges may not seem to be as much of a hazard as bears, but in the summer months these tiny bloodsucking insects swarm in their thousands around any area of exposed flesh and can make the simplest of operations such as cooking and eating outdoors impossible for the unprepared. As far as they are concerned humans are 'just part of the food chain' too. In areas such as these it *matters* if you upset the bear and it *matters* if you forget your midge repellent and protective mesh hood.

¹⁴Quoted by H. Brody in *Living Arctic: Hunters of the Canadian North*. (London, Faber & Faber 1987)

WRESTLING AND RESTING

Whilst I hasten to add that I take all my food with me on these trips and don't 'live off the land', this feeling that I am truly of no consequence other than in these terms is important to me and I need regular reminders of this status. In modern society it is, paradoxically, possible to feel both full of one's own importance (e.g. at work or in the family) and unimportant (e.g. also at work or in a seething crowd of shoppers). My engagement with the landscape is in a sense a search for an awareness of the physical landscape and the complex of organisms around me. The search provides a sense of perspective of the cosmological, geological, evolutionary timescale we are subject to, as well as the more immediate influences of the seasons, climate and weather. How does this lead to spirituality?

An awareness of scale and complexity of life on Earth makes me feel very small, but not irrelevant. I do have a function as I am part of this complex web of life, and the atoms of which my body is made¹⁵ have been shifted and cycled throughout the universe since it began 4.6 billion years ago. This is an awareness of truly being alive: I have 'vitality' (*vita* – Latin meaning 'life'; 'vital' – essential; 'vitality' – full of life). It is perhaps this sense of scale, connection, vitality (and the potential to lose it if you get it wrong!) that stimulates in me what I describe as spirituality.

If I feel this close connection, how can I do other than care for the physical Earth and all life upon it? This brings me to my choice of profession. I am an 'outdoor educator' and it is my good fortune to spend at least part of my working life with others in the outdoors, doing the kind of things I described earlier. The frequently stated intention of outdoor education is to stimulate personal and social development through 'guided direct experience using the outdoors as a medium'. My own view is that we can do so much more and that such powerful learning potential should be used to develop more than physical, academic and social aspirations. It should also encourage environmental, aesthetic and spiritual awareness. Educational use of the outdoors is well suited to the development of these so-called 'multiple intelligences', and also allows students to use a wide variety of senses to assess the nature of the world around them without the background noise generated by urban life or the media.

¹⁵For a beautiful account of a 'personal history' of the universe from the perspective of a single carbon atom, see P. Levi *The Periodic Table* (London Abacus 1989)

However, this doesn't go far enough either. For me life makes little sense unless I feel I can take responsibility for my own actions. Taking responsibility for actions and accepting the consequences is a characteristic of adulthood. Taking responsibility for my own learning is the key to continued development (and enlightenment). It is this aspect of education which now seems to me to be hard to find in the educational opportunities of young people at school. There are many other conflicting pressures all demanding time within the curriculum, and many seductive pleasures (e.g. television, computer games) outside school hours. There is less and less need to engage with the 'real' rather than the 'virtual' world. I have followed my chosen career path because I believe that through outdoor education we can help people to appreciate that there are consequences to their actions (it *matters* if you forget your tent poles, food or waterproof!) and that they can take responsibility for themselves and their own learning.¹⁶

I have found that my engagement with the outdoors, particularly in the ways I described above, has encouraged me to appreciate my connection with the planet and develop an awareness that there are consequences to my actions. Through recreation I find I can feel a 're-creation' of that essential vitality so often lost through a modern life style. I become aware of my spiritual self and life regains meaning.

*'The human heart, as history proves, I believe, can endure anything except a state of meaninglessness. Without meaning it dies like a fish without water on the sands of a wasteland beach'*¹⁷

¹⁶This is explored in more detail in P. Higgins 'Outdoor Re-Creation: Connection and Consequence in Outdoor Education' *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership* (Adventure Education, 1996)

¹⁷Laurens van der Post *Jung and the Story of our Time* (Penguin, London, 1978), p275.

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