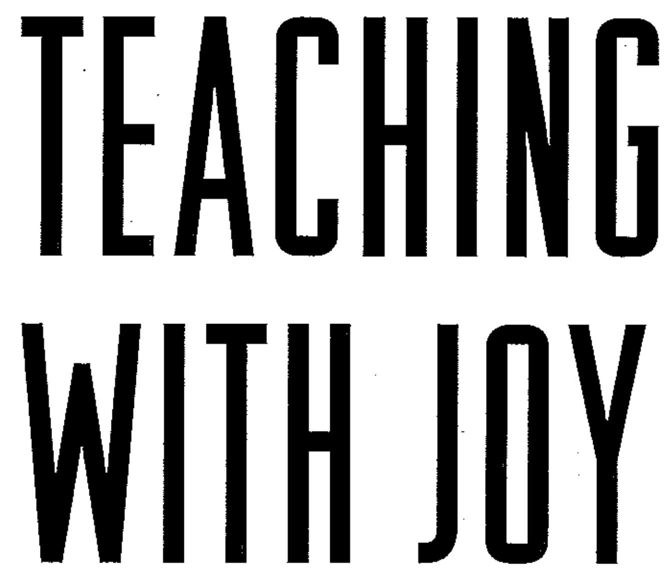

Educational Practices for the Twenty-First Century

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Spirits Rooted in Place

Field Studies as Pedagogical Paradigm for Creating Change

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What happens to a people surrounded by beauty and infused with wonder? How does our environment—the soil we set our roots down in, the sun and space we share, the water we wet our souls with—affect the slow growth of our own spirits and the shape they will finally take? Because the academic environment seldom lends itself to answering such questions, I began to navigate new territory, moving my classes off the university campus and into natural landscapes to explore the ways in which the spirit might respond. For both, instructor and students, the answers to these questions—the responses of our spirits—came in surprising and significant ways.

We entered the pinyon- and juniper-covered canyons surrounding Silver Peak, on the first day of a week-long field study course in creative writing, still strangers to one another and to the land around us. But, the land was large and inviting and seemed to call us in. We climbed the broken cliff faces and ridges ending in tumbled stone, only to marvel at their wind-carved shapes and intricate structures. The land was so pocked and punctured, so brightly bathed in sunlight and shadow, that we began to feel as if we were witnessing a sermon in form and color, a song in shape and stone.

Inside a high, sand-bottomed cave, one student found an ancient Paiute basket, surrounded by dust and filled with history. Willow shoots, plant fiber cordage, the tight weave of an ancient master, all spoke of the nimble fingers, the patience and the skill of a forgotten art, a forgotten time, a lost way of life.

Toward the end of our first day, as the dusky shadows of night crawled up canyon walls and crept out of caves, we climbed between two massive cliffs, toward a darkening night sky. An erratic fluttering of small, black shapes in the air stopped us in our tracks. "Bats," I whispered, and then we stood watching, still as stones, mesmerized by their movement. They flew back and forth,

diving and rising in the cool evening air. At times they swept so close that we could feel a breath of wind on our faces from each pair of whirring, black wings. We couldn't move, we were so filled with wonder. In the silent exchange of shared glances, eyes and hearts said what words could never articulate: "This moment, this thing we are doing, this memory we will share, is somehow more valuable to me than I can even express or understand."

For the students participating in this field study course, the opportunity to touch history or to stand amid a swarm of feeding bats, became transformative experiences, opportunities to reflect upon their own lives and the lives of others. The desire to afford students such opportunities, and to utilize these experiences in reaching students on a deeper, more significant and spiritual level, led to the development of a series of field studies courses offered through The Great Basin Institute at the University of Nevada, Reno. The institute specializes in creating the opportunity for students to have spiritually, intellectually, and physically significant experiences that encourage personal growth and transformation through the challenges offered by studying in untrammeled natural landscapes.

Through such wilderness experiences students find themselves confronting not only the limits of their own knowledge, personal character, and physical fortitude but also the parameters of what it means to be human. By coupling these peak, transformative experiences with the interdisciplinary study of ecology and environmental literature, students are given intellectual and imaginative guidance as they navigate through both the geographical and psycho-spiritual terrain of the course. While the study of ecology supplies students with necessary factual information, literary studies connect these facts about the natural world with our imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual responses to it. Literature, like any art form, represents the artist's efforts to externalize and communicate to the world his or her own internal feelings and beliefs. Thus, literature can serve as both an appropriate subject for study and as a useful guide to aid students in their explorations of the natural world as well as their internal investigations of the self.

One of the most significant educational experiences to occur for students participating in such field studies courses stems from their interaction with untrammeled and awe-inspiring natural landscapes. These experiences afford students the opportunity to step outside of themselves for a moment, encouraging reflection about their place within the world. By engaging students with charismatic forms of the nonhuman "other," we are able to encourage the type of reflection that ultimately leads to self-growth and psycho-spiritual discovery.

While field studies continue to use traditional classroom-based teaching methods (such as lectures, tests, course readings, reading responses, discus-

sions, and formal writing assignments) they are able to utilize a variety of experiential pedagogical practices that are not available to the traditional classroom-based instructor. Students in field-based courses are able to supplement textual research with firsthand observation and experimentation as well as engage in a variety of styles of personal reflection in their journals, formal essays, and class discussions. Class assignments build upon students' experiences in the field, connecting those experiences to course material and directing students through the reflective process so that each student can realize the greatest amount of intellectual and spiritual growth possible.

One of the most important tools for guiding and documenting students' course work and field experiences—as well as their intellectual and spiritual development—is an extensive field journal. In their field journals, students engage in a variety of exercises from compiling observations and research, to sketching, creative writing, and responding to course readings, as well as reflecting upon their own experiences and the value each student finds in them. One assignment I often use, for example, requires students to pick a specific plant or animal species, observe it for half an hour, sketch their subject of study, and write an objective description of its distinguishing features, characteristics, and behaviors. Each student then uses a field library, consisting of natural history texts and field guides, to identify their subject's taxonomy, research its natural history, and include this information in their journal. After these objective studies have been completed, each student is then directed to write subjectively about their particular species, using their imaginative abilities to write about the world from that particular animal or plant's perspective. Following this journal entry, I have students document their own feelings and thoughts about their subject, describing why they chose it, what cultural meaning or significance it might have, what it means to them personally, and what value they find in its existence. Similarly, I will often assign students to pick a particular plant or animal and, utilizing a similar process of research and self-exploration, use that particular species as an extended metaphor to describe themselves and their own personal traits of character and spirit. Students then utilize this metaphorical species—now endowed with significant personal meaning—as a totem animal, or touchstone, an external representation of their own self that can be seen in the natural world around them.

Through the process of sharing their journals, students learn a great deal about the natural world from each other, while also discovering much about themselves and their classmates, by having a safe manner in which to explore, expose, and articulate their own internal feelings, experiences, and psycho-spiritual discoveries. What begins as an external exploration ultimately yields internal and personal discoveries on the part of each student. A direct connection

is made, for students, between the external world, our perceptions of it, and our own internal sense of self.

Likewise, such guided journal entries aid adult students' in renewing their childhood sense of wonder, in rekindling the joy of discovery, and intuiting important connections between the self and the other. Selected course readings and journal assignments guide students in exploring our kinship with all forms of life—what E. O. Wilson has termed biophillia—and then allow them to turn this exploration inward to gain insights about the self. In this manner, we are able to help our students navigate their own, internal psycho-spiritual terrain while also providing an atmosphere of open, intellectual discovery that reinvigorates the classroom by opening its doors to the world.

By reengaging our students' innate sense of curiosity, we are able, as instructors, to punch through the apathy of late adolescence and open the mind and spirit of each student to the possibilities of new insights, growth, and change. On a field studies course in American literature, for example, the simple occurrence of finding what was thought to be a dead butterfly turned into a life affirming and spiritually moving experience for two students. In her journal one student wrote:

> I called to Carly who was on the trail ahead of me to share this amazing pink and orange butterfly. I lay the butterfly in my hand, upside down, observing the body of the butterfly curled in a fetal position, like a worm curls up tight when you touch it. . . . The body was curled up tight, on its way to the next world, I figured. After about five minutes of holding the butterfly, it began to move. It uncurled its body and stretched its legs and then began kicking its legs and flapping its wings. Carly said "Wow! It's finishing coming out of its cocoon!" (Quesnel)

Both students later reflected upon how this experience touched them, how it seemed like such a miracle to watch this "dead" butterfly come to life in their hands, unfold its splendidly colorful wings, and take flight through the crisp mountain air and late summer sunlight. To touch and be touched by life, especially the life of another, represents one of the most significant spiritual experiences a human can have. By taking students out of the classroom, and putting them back in touch with the living world, field studies classes engender these types of spiritual encounters and encourage growth on a variety of intellectual, physical, and spiritual planes.

In the same way that field studies courses encourage students to approach their subject of study from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, they also ask students to interact with the world on more than just a theoretical or intellectual level. Students are encouraged to utilize all of their senses, and even their physical bodies, as a tool with which to explore and analyze the world around

them, their course material, and their responses to both. In their field journals, students describe and reflect upon the physicality of their experience, making note of both the physical hardships and pleasures encountered through living and traveling in the backcountry. Likewise, they are often required to rely on their other senses to conduct observational and reflective journal entries with their eyes closed, utilizing only their sense of hearing, or basing an entry entirely on their sense of touch or smell. Through such exercises students become attendant to their bodies and, more important, to the connection between their bodies and their minds, the holistic experience of being human.

On a field study course based in the John Muir Wilderness, we stopped one afternoon near a slow-moving mountain stream to perform a silent, eyes-closed journal session. At first, I heard the faint trickle of water gurgling over the shallow gravel bars, massaging rock in ripples and waves of sound. Then above and all around me, I heard the low rhythmic sighing of the wind through the pines, a steady whir of breath coming down off the high Sierras to whisper and billow through the thick stands of Lodgepole and Ponderosa pine. In the distance, the complaints of a Steller's jay growled through the forest in deep, raucous burps of sound. Closer to home, I finally came to hear the slow rhythmic breathing of my own, chest and lungs. Inhale with a slight whistle and a smooth slide of air. Pause. Silence. Exhale with another, longer slide, trailing off at the end. I realized that, even when unconscious of it, my breath remained always and ever present like the constant sighing of the wind through the forest's many-fingered canopy above me. In my memory, I could hear the gritty thump, the constant, repetitive pounding of our feet as we hiked. As I listened, the sounds of the forest mingled with my own rhythmic breathing and the resounding echo of steps traveling through my memory. I realized that I too was an instrument, like the sighing of the wind through the trees, and the babbling of the brook in the shallows. We were all joined in one great symphonic chorus that only the truly attentive could hear.

After our silent journaling time, we reconvened as a group to read our entries and share our thoughts about the experience. Although each person found his or her own focus, some writing very concretely about the sounds they could hear around them, others moving quickly to flights of fancy and the workings of their own imaginations, they all became acutely aware of the degree to which we rely on our sense of sight and the manner in which we let this single perspective dictate our perception of the world. We discussed how, even with our eyes open, we were more aware after the exercise of the subtle background noises that filled the forest. We noted how we had become conscious of our own bodily noises and rhythms, and how this heightened sensory awareness seemed to enrich the world around us and to deepen our experience of it. Such ruminations led us into discussions of meditation, silence,

and prayer as spiritual practices, and the inherent connections they heighten between ourselves, and the world around us.

The pedagogical techniques that I utilize in the field can also be used successfully in traditional campus-based courses. Students in my classes can often be found scattered throughout campus doing silent journal entries, observational botanical studies, or even character sketches. Two ideas lie at the heart of this enterprise, whether the assignments are carried out on a manicured college campus or in a backcountry wilderness area: First, that students should learn to apply the same critical thinking, interpretive, and analytical skills used in studying literature to the extra-textual world in which they live, as well as to themselves and their own culturally limited perceptions. Second, that through literary techniques and imaginative methods of perception students can begin to connect their interior, psycho-spiritual life with the human and nonhuman "others" which inhabit the world around them. Such an educational process—which I would term holistic education—is intended to teach the whole student, to develop students physically, intellectually, spiritually, and with good character. Holistic education is designed not only to make students better critical thinkers but also to make them better citizens of the world, to demonstrate for them the inherent interconnections between their life and the lives of those they share space with. By unifying the intellectual with the physical—the mind with the body and the classroom with the community—students are shown a more holistic approach to learning and to life.

For students, these transformative experiences culminate in uniting their newfound insights with some form of practical action on behalf of those places—the human and nonhuman communities—which afforded them the opportunity for growth and change. In field studies courses, this usually involves some form of environmental restoration or advocacy on behalf of the particular place they have been studying in. During their field studies course in creative writing, for example, students served as advocates for Silver Peak to receive permanent protection as a formally designated Wilderness Area. After living in and writing about the Silver Peak area, these creative writing students published a magazine of their own writing and photography, with grant funding, and distributed it to key lawmakers and natural resource managers, calling for their beloved high-desert home to be protected forever.

Such a process added praxis to the students' writing, as they came to see themselves responding to an urgent need and writing with a real purpose. In addition, it also took the students through the entire publication process, giving them experience in a variety of skills and teaching them to cooperate with others. They worked together as a group to revise each other's writing, to make choices about the structure of the magazine, to choose images and lay-

outs, and to stay within budgetary restraints. In essence, the students came together as a group of writers with a cause, with a practical project to try and affect real-world change through their writing. In this sense, they made the important transition from being students in the world to being citizens of it.

The most important benefit of such service-learning activities, however, is that they allow students to unite their beliefs with their actions. Students are aided in making the important transitions from "I know," to "I care," and finally to "I act." And, it is in the acting, in the process of giving back, of completing their own reciprocal relationships with the world around them, that students are able to witness this transformation in themselves and watch it bloom into the full flower of being holistically human.

In our classes, we were able to situate such service-learning activities within their larger historical context, noting the different manners in which communities of faith have historically advocated selflessness as a guiding ethic for those on spiritual paths. We reflected upon Christian teachings of the Good Samaritan and the path of the Bodhisattva as prescribed in Buddhism, and came to see ourselves, and our work, as a part of a long, multicultural tradition of spiritual faith and altruistic community ethics. By striving to meet existing community needs, students were able to see their work as a type of offering, a way of giving back to the world.

These same service-learning strategies can also be utilized in campus-based courses, where students have a variety of community service providers with whom to volunteer. During my on-campus classes, students complete field journals on a variety of local issues, from doing botanical studies to analyzing facets of urban planning and development. We couple these real-world observational exercises with course readings on related topics, conduct library research, and review the local media to learn more about our subjects. Then students select a local, community-service provider with which to volunteer and attempt to improve the situation. In the past, I have had students volunteer with the local food bank, homeless shelters, or women's crisis centers; participate in park and river clean-up projects; tutor or coach youth; volunteer at wildlife sanctuaries; write letters to the editor of the local paper; as well as a host of other activities ranging across a wide spectrum of social and environmental issues.

These service-learning projects serve as a type of field research for students while aiding them in giving back to their own communities in a meaningful and pragmatic way. Thus, service-learning activities meet the educational needs of the students while also meeting the practical needs of their communities. In addition, as a method of character development, or psycho-spiritual education, such service-learning initiatives are unparalleled in the depth of personal reflection they engender and the breadth of significant personal transformation

they afford. As students begin to work with, and come to know, people, places, and communities in need, they are confronted and challenged in very real ways, in manners that just are not possible within the confines of the traditional classroom. For students within the academy, most of whom are members of a privileged class, the opportunity to step outside the self-imposed boundaries of that class is not only beneficial for psycho-spiritual growth but also necessary for the development of concerned and committed citizens who are active participants in their own democracy.

Holistic education then, from my view, means more than just instructing the student academically and intellectually. Holistic teaching means guiding the student through his or her own mental, physical, and spiritual development in such a way that connections between the self and the world—between "I" and the "other"—are fostered and strengthened. Holistic teaching means reaching through the student, beyond into the community, engendering a reciprocal relationship that meets the needs of both our students and the world in which we live.

At its very basis, education is an inherently self-centered activity. Through it we seek to develop the self, usually for our own motives such as gaining knowledge, securing a career, or increasing our income. Outdoor recreation and wilderness experiences, likewise, tend to be self-centered activities where participants focus on what they will gain from the experience: adventure, solitude, or relaxation. Both activities, however, can be focused and applied in selfless ways. They can be used to improve the lives of others directly, or they can be designed to develop the self so that we have the knowledge, ability, and personal commitment to change the world for the better through other facets of our personal and professional lives.

After her return from a week-long course in the John Muir Wilderness Area, one field studies student wrote:

> When I escape into the wilderness for a few days it is usually from a primarily selfish motive, but I always emerge with more than I expected. I not only return feeling rested, balanced, and connected, but I have plenty of all that good stuff to go around. I give extra long hugs to my friends and family. I am especially patient at work. I smile at everyone I pass. I tell stories about the wonderful things I saw. And I remember. I remember the intimate connection I share with the wild animals on the street. I remember to give thanks. And, I remember that I came to the city to remind others of what they forgot. (Johnson)

As a field studies instructor, what I remember most are the individual moments, those special instances that remain rooted in memory, crystalline and unchanging. I remember lying atop the deep red pumice of a cinder cone in the Sierras, the extinct volcano below us silent and still in the dark night, and

watching the glow on a student's face as he witnessed the first shooting star of his young life. The long blue-white streak flashed across the star-studded blackness of the night sky for only a moment, but it still hangs in both our memories, refusing to fade. I can still recall the glowing look of pride and accomplishment on one young woman's face after having successfully completed a week-long backpacking course, overcoming her own fears and physical limitations in the process. By the end of the course, she seemed to have grown in some strange way; the strength of her presence, the air of confidence that surrounded her, had become palpable even to the rest of us in the class. In many places, the land, itself, remembers my students; the testament of their spiritual connection to place has been written in cleaned up rivers, newly constructed hiking trails, and recently planted trees. And, within our own community, there is, perhaps, a woman on the other end of the phone at the crisis call center, a troubled teen at the boys and girls club, or a homeless man at the local food bank, who remembers.

Field studies offer us one way to teach holistically, to reach through our students and into the world, to foster personal growth on a variety of physical, intellectual, and spiritual levels, while affecting significant change in our communities and our world. To teach holistically is to recognize the importance of all aspects of our students' character as well as our spiritual commitment to help others; it is a pedagogy that seeks to imbue every aspect of our lives fully with spirit, to make us whole, to make us human.

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