

Busy Doing Nothing: Exploring the Merits of Inactivity within an Activity-Oriented Wilderness Therapy Program

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The "Doing" of Wilderness Therapy that is generally associated with overt and specific change dominates both the literature and research. The "Being" of Wilderness Therapy associated with stillness, silence, rumination, thinking, and spontaneous and intuitive learning is acknowledged but not generally recognized as an alternate and valid way of knowing, despite recent research findings in the cognitive sciences (Claxton, 1997). This paper outlines the author's doctoral research into participant experiences of "Stillness" within a challenge-based and action-oriented Wilderness Therapy program. The personal experiences that motivated the study and the use of photography as part of the qualitative methodology are described. The paper concludes with extracts from early data collection and analysis.



I work in the mountains, on the water, in the caves and off the cliffs of Tasmania, Australia, as a senior facilitator for a Wilderness Adventure Therapy program called Project Hahn. Project Hahn is a not-for-profit community organization whose motto is "Personal Growth Through Challenge and Adventure." Project Hahn runs programs in remote locations throughout Tasmania. Most program participants are between 14 and 25 years old and are considered "at risk" in some respect, either by themselves or oth-

ing that Project Hahn is about personal growth and challenging outdoor activities. Participants may refer themselves to a 6-day standard course program; however, most are referred by teachers, counselors, social workers or concerned others. Four-day specialist programs are also run for specific agencies such as the Vietnam Veterans Children's Education Service and a Salvation Army residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation program.

Fundamental to this challenge-based model of Wilderness Therapy is a philosophy about the process of change that is grounded in the development of competence and the confronting of internal limits. Overt, specific, and action-oriented learning, sometimes referred to as first-order change (Gass, 1993) is typical within challenge-based wilderness therapy programs and is regarded as a cornerstone of practice. Change also occurs covertly and spontaneously. This second-order change (Gass, 1993) is often associated with quiet, action free, non-facilitated time, and is also typical within challenge-based Wilderness Therapy programs. However, although journals and texts pay tribute to the healing power of nature and the wilderness (Handley, 1990; 1992), the experience of transcendent or magic moments (Nettleton, 1995), and the inherent spiritual component of Wilderness Therapy (Bowch, 1994), there has been little or no systematic attempt to evaluate the potency of these factors for affecting long-term change. These hard-to-define experiences, often associated with physical stillness or inactivity, have, on the one hand, been clustered together as part of the miracle and essential mystery of Wilderness Therapy (Handley, 1990) and, on the other hand, cautioned against as "accidental therapy" (Chisp, 1996).

Personal experience in the field indicates that second-order change is not "B-grade" change. Moments of stillness, whether the bliss of a quiet sit on a mountain top or the frozen "stuckness" of indecision, have often been potent forces for insight and understanding of self that participants have referred to months later as important and instrumental to ongoing change. Typical comments include:

"Time out was a spiritual thing."

"... (sitting there) I felt like I was just me and that's all I had to be, there for here and now."

"Just after (the quiet sit) the penny just dropped. I knew inside myself basically where I stood, which is basically the same place I knew I was, but I felt at ease with it a change in my attitude."

"I still do, I still do take my 10 minutes every night. It's definitely one of the most important tools I've picked up. Just to take time for me, just to take time for me."

Despite the potency for change contained within these statements, focus in the literature and research sits comfortably on the "mechanistic" components (Powch, 1994) of programming: the "doing" of wilderness therapy that is generally associated with first-order change (e.g., sequencing of activities, the use of narrative, metaphor and non-directive leadership styles, debriefing, etc.). The "being" of wilderness therapy associated with stillness, silence, ruminative thinking, spontaneous, and intuitive learning is acknowledged, but not generally recognized as alternate and valid ways of knowing despite recent research findings in the cognitive sciences (Claxton, 1997).

We know that the brain is built to linger as well as to rush, and that slow knowing sometimes leads to better answers. We know that knowledge makes itself known through sensations, images, feelings and inklings as well as through clear conscious thoughts. ... To be able to meet the uncertain challenges of the contemporary world, we need to heed the message of this research, and to expand our repertoire of ways of learning and knowing to reclaim the full gamut of cognitive possibilities (Claxton, 1997, p. 201).

Encouraged by Claxton, I embarked on the steep and rugged learning curve of doctoral research. Step one was to determine what I wanted to ask. Trying to find a word or way of getting to what I could feel rather than articulate was tricky. "Busy Doing Nothing" easily came to mind, and was catchy as a title that could help keep me focused, but I needed to get narrower, to isolate what it was I was going to study. I opted for the word stillness and decided that in the research, it would be used broadly to encompass the nuance of interpretation suggested by the Macquarie Thesaurus. Stillness is defined as "free from bubbles, at rest, stuck, silence, no movement." All Project Hahn programs are underpinned by a course plan that outlines projected activities for the trip such as kayaking, bushwalking, abseiling, and debriefing. The focus of this research is on the interludes between and during these active components of the journey. Thus, Stillness in this context, as the starting point for the study, is used broadly to describe a physical rather than an emotional state.

It took me a year to write my first sentence: The aim of this study is to use grounded theory methodology to develop an understanding about the impact of Stillness within an activity-oriented wilderness adventure therapy program.

It took longer to isolate the questions that could guide the study and data gathering process:

- What do participants identify as experiences of 'stillness' within a challenge-based Wilderness Therapy program?
- How do participants describe these experiences?
- What are the characteristics of these experiences?
- What are the causal conditions of these experiences?
- What meaning do participants attach to the varying experiences of 'stillness'?
- How do participants attach value to the 'stillness' experience?
- What factors influence the nature of 'stillness' experiences?
- How do participants describe the consequences of the experience in the short and long term?

Research Methods

Participants

Participants for the pilot study on which this paper is based were drawn from two Bridge Specialist programs. The Bridge Specialist Program evolved out of a partnership established between Project Hahn and the Salvation Army Bridge Program. The Salvation Army Bridge Program is modelled after Bridge Programs operated by the Salvation Army in other states around Australia and is comprised of a 12-week course for people with drug, alcohol, or gambling addictions. The Project Hahn Bridge Specialist Program is offered as an adjunctive intervention opportunity for clients in the last six weeks of their residential program. It consists of an orientation day on Mount Wellington followed by a 3-day bushwalk and a day of abseiling. The 4-day journey is regarded as an adjunct to the rehabilitation occurring at the Bridge Program. It aims to provide an opportunity for participants to experiment with new behaviours in an alternative environment beyond the support structure of the Bridge Program. The course is underpinned by the same ethos and bush counselling approach as all other Project Hahn programs.

Methodology

It was clear that a research method was needed that could provide for the interpretation of actions and events, as well as reflect the multiple perspectives of the research participants. It was important to be able to delve beneath description to look for themes, connections, concepts, and processes at work. Qualitative research and Grounded Theory appeared to meet this need.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) succinctly describe qualitative research in terms of the *time of research* that provides the *time of reflection* and *time of*

procedures or other means of quantification. Qualitative data is in the form of words rather than numbers and is typically obtained through interviews, observations and focus groups rather than surveys and questionnaires. Hence, qualitative research is particularly appropriate in research that seeks to understand meanings, processes, contexts, and causal relationships.

Grounded Theory is not a theory at all. It is an overall strategy, or method for doing research, and as such, has its own particular set of techniques and procedures. The method provides for both thick description of participant experiences and a set of concepts and linking propositions that will provide theory and explanation about the research phenomena (May, 1986, p. 178). "Grounded" infers that theory will generate from, and therefore be grounded in, data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Research participants are engaged as critical members of the research team. Throughout the data analysis, participants engage in verifying the data and emerging theory. This role of participant as co-researcher sits comfortably with the mutual respect and neutral power relations engendered in Wilderness Therapy programs. Grounded Theory methodology dictates that data collection and analysis are linked from the beginning of the research and interact continuously, becoming increasingly focused and specific as the research develops.

One of the initial concerns about the study and the interview process was that it was heavily dependent on verbal language, a communication skill that many Project Hahn participants struggle with. This challenge was met in part by harnessing the power of photography to clarify assumptions (Collier & Collier, 1986) and facilitate the exploration of personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and meaning making (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998), as well as its ability to function as a visual narrative and aide memoir (Harper, 1987; Gass & Mackey, 2000).

Participants were invited to make a visual and written, or drawn, diary of their experience. They were each given a disposable camera for their private use and access to the Project Hahn camera for more general snapshots. One of the facilitators also created a detailed photographic journal of the trip. An interview was conducted within 10 days of completion of the program. The semi-structured format of the interview incorporated Stimulated Recall methodology (Marland, 1977; Tuckwell & King, 1980) and Photo Elicitation techniques (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). The interview was constructed around the participants viewing of their personal photographic diary, the Project Hahn snapshots and photographs taken by the assigned facilitator. Participants were encouraged to select photographs that connected with their personal experiences of the program and talk aloud about the thoughts, feelings, reactions and perceptions that the photographs evoked. With the participants' permission, the interview was taped, recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Preliminary Findings

Participants responded enthusiastically to the review of their own and the facilitators' photographs. The photographs evoked memories and emotions and paved the way for fruitful dialogue:

"That's it, he's got it right there, that says it all."

"That's not me in the photograph but that's exactly how I felt...."

"Just looking at it now brings it all back, makes me tingle."

"That one says it all, I can't put it into words but that says it all."

It is also interesting to note that some participants deliberately staged photographs in order to better convey their experience.

"That's a good photo, it just sums it up, we were all just sitting there having a laugh and a smoke, and feeling real. Actually we didn't smoke inside we just did that for the photo, we took it outside."

Any concern that the camera might interfere with facilitator and participant rapport (Bogden & Biklen, 1992) has been dissipated by participants' extraordinary interest in the project and enthusiasm about viewing and securing copies of the photographs. "It's really nice to know that someone is interested in my experience."

Bogden & Biklen (1992) liken the process of data organization and analysis to the "piling" and "sorting" of masses of toys strewn across a gymnasium floor. The initial piling and sorting of data from the pilot study began with the garnering of occurrences of silliness identified within the semi-structured interviews and by participants as a direct response to the invitation to talk about the "doing nothing times, the quiet times when nothing much was going on." "Watching," "a quiet sit" and "sitting around the fire" emerged as dominant themes.

Watching.

"Watching others" was always described in specific relation to the watching of others physically struggle. Disbelief, development of empathy, and a reenvisioning of self and other characterized the experiences described below.

Mike: "I was just elated, I couldn't believe she did it because I had a bit of animosity towards her, well not her personally, just differences in character. Like she's a really out going person and she's got a bit of a rough tone to her voice and um, added to that, um, she sits down to breakfast and she wants her knife and fork and says to me pass me

and wanted us to put the tents up for her and that. I kind of didn't say much but that did start to get under my skin and started rubbing me up the wrong way but um, the only thing that saved her from me totally thinking she's just a walking catastrophe was the willpower and strength with which she did everything and I sort of realized that I was being too hard on her. That she's been just as hard on herself with expectations of things, and I should ever look all that because behind all that, it's just like a facade that would upset people unless they knew about her, behind that facade was actually a person who was very capable and against all odds, physical or mental whatever, was able to achieve all these goals and go down this rock and everything... But when she got down to the bottom, I just yelled out and ran over and gave her a big hug. I just couldn't believe it. She said she was starting to cry and that and I just had water in my eyes and I said "Look at my eyes!" and I was just really stoked for her and that was it, that was the seal in the coffin for me. I had great respect and extra time for Sally after she did the absell because she just done everything. It spun me, there wouldn't be many. I felt privileged because there wouldn't be many, I don't think a lot of girls would go on that trip and do the absell like Sally."

John: "...once again it was seeing people achieve and seeing that sense of joy in their face I guess it just lifted the whole group up to another level... I got a bit of compassion back, which you tend to lose in addiction, compassion for others, compassion for yourself."

A quiet sit.

Participants spontaneously used the phrase "a quiet sit" to refer times when they intentionally separated themselves from the group to spend an amount of time sitting in silence and for occasions when the facilitator initiated an invitation to the group to briefly sit in silence. Whether the facilitator or participant initiated the opportunity to sit quietly in one's own space, the potential for a transformational relationship with stillness emerged. Participants expressed the experience in existential terms such as, "I felt free," "I felt truly alive."

Some sits provided the opportunity to relax and think through issues; others were described as free from thought, indescribable and "a direct source." Immediately following the latter experiences, some participants

John: "Yes, I went down on the rocks... I didn't come up with any answers, not any answers at all, but, it was clear thinking and after coming away from there, I knew inside myself, basically, where I stood, which is basically the same place I knew I was but I felt at ease with it, if that makes any sense... a change in my attitude and the way I see the problem... to get relief in that, like I said, was part of the emotional side of the journey for me, and it's probably one of the most brilliant things I have ever experienced in my life, relief in knowing, knowing inside myself, not just thinking, actually knowing inside myself that that is the way it is, just to accept it. It's just the way it is."

Participants identified a choice to participate, the absence of distraction and drugs, enough trust to be left alone and a slow enough pace to allow for the opportunity to arise as essential to a positive "quiet time" experience.

Sitting around the fire.

The fire is often used as the focus point for facilitator-led debriefs at the end of the day. Other sharing and discussion (e.g., beyond the debrief) that occurred around the fire was regarded in this study as unscheduled activity and therefore within the focus of the research. The fire provided a safe venue for the sharing of personal history, thoughts, feelings and the nurturing of friendships, self-awareness, and confidence. Underpinning these positive sharing experiences was a stated sense of trust, acceptance, and absence of drugs.

Peter: "I wouldn't be doing that at home with certain people or friends. I don't think I'd have that trust."

John: "I stayed up on two of the nights, after everyone had gone to bed, with the campfire. I actually went to bed one night then jumped back up, and just sat around the campfire, and I didn't think, I just took some time out and I just stared... that came as a relief to me."

Mitch: "In the quiet time (alone) you are yourself, you already know who you are really, you know what I mean? But around the campfire you can actually, um, tell other people how you really feel and think with no judgement on it... like I felt I wanted to tell people how I felt and what I got out of it with no wall and no guard and all that sort of thing. Um, I think, just to get that feedback from people, do you

Summary

At this most fundamental level of inquiry into the data, it was clear that stillness had the potential to function as a vehicle for personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal growth. There are also indications of prerequisite conditions for this kind of learning. Signaling potential significance is the explicit and implicit negotiation of trust and power. Similarly a qualitative difference is intimated between "magical" moments that enhance the participants' sense of well being at the time and those that play a part in the long-term positive transformation of thinking and behavior.

From here, the way forward is via the ongoing cycle of data collection and analysis and the detailed line by line coding of transcripts in order to delve beneath the words, to ask "What is going on here?" and to think in terms of concepts and categories and their properties and dimensions.

There is a long way to go but I am learning. I am learning a lot about myself. I have learned that it is a privilege to sit and listen to participants' stories. I am learning restraint. I want to rush in and elicit connections, theories, and solutions. I am learning to come to terms with overwhelm. Like being in the mountains, I am trusting that the steady plod will get me there and leave me breath to look around for depth, detail, and nuance, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

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Author's Biography

Melting skills derived from an eclectic career as a speech pathologist, patter and outdoor educator, **Val Nicholls** has worked as a facilitator of Wilderness Adventure Therapy for eight years with Project Hahn in Tasmania, Australia. Val is currently enrolled as a doctoral student exploring the merits of inactivity wilderness in action-oriented Wilderness Adventure Therapy programs.

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