

The Yin Yang of a wilderness therapy experience

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Abstract

Initially motivated by an interest in wilderness therapy participants' experience of relaxed inactivity and 'stillness', a qualitative study adopted a grounded theory design to address the question "What is the phenomenon of Quiet time from a participants point of view and how do they use this phenomenon in a challenge based wilderness therapy program?"

In this presentation the Chinese yin yang Tai Chi symbol is utilized as a visual metaphor to symbolize the research findings. Four readings of the symbol are proposed. Firstly, the concept of Quiet time as "a sense of solitude" is considered as the complimentary opposite to a sense of community and companionship. The second reading portrays a temporal and cyclical relationship between the desire for community and the desire for Quiet time. The third reading considers how the experience of community and the experience of Quiet time impact upon and transform each other. The final reading portrays the place of Quiet time in a healthy life.

Introduction

At the start of my journey into the wilderness of doctoral studies, the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth symphony surprised me with an auditory metaphor through which to express the elusive nature of my research interest.

The symphony commences with a single beat of silence, a crochet rest. Poised and alert musicians purposively restrain the business of sound making until the second beat of the baton. The phrase is repeated in the third bar. Heavy with accumulating tension the first and resting beats pave the way for the unfolding drama. Take out these rests, these spaces heavy with emotion and noted by silence and the drama and intensity of this most famous of openings is lost.

Appreciating sound and silence, activity and stillness as equal partners, each impacting upon the other within the context of a dynamic whole, resonated with observations made in my role as a facilitator of a challenge-based and activity oriented wilderness therapy program. It had been my frequent observation that the potential for personal growth and enhanced wellbeing resided not only in the action of challenging physical activity but also within the experience of quietude and silence.

Inspired by experience in the field and motivated by a desire to contribute to the body of knowledge about the processes of wilderness therapy, I embarked on doctoral research to enquire about participants' experience of relaxed inactivity and 'stillness'. Within the first of four exploratory interviews, an interviewee responded to an inquiry about "what was happening for you in those times when nothing particular was going on?" with a detailed description of two instances of what she described as Quiet time. It became clear in subsequent interviews that other respondents identified with the use of the

phrase. When asked about their experience of Quiet time, participants talked spontaneously about incidents of reflection and/or solitude, resting, absorption in nature and gentle conversations around the campfire. From that point on the study was guided by the central question: ‘What is the phenomenon of Quiet time from the participants’ point of view and how do they use this phenomenon in a challenge-based wilderness therapy program?’

Given that many of the observations motivating the study were described by participants as special, ‘out-of-the ordinary’ or ‘magical,’ a key challenge was to design a research approach that could be responsive to the ‘hard-to-explain,’ and the nuance of participants thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This need was met by adopting a grounded theory design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This inductive approach provided the research with a systematic set of procedures with which to guide the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in the form of interviews, photographs, journals, field notes and standard program documentation.

The Mountain Challenge wilderness therapy program was selected as the site for the investigation. Project Hahn (now known as the Wilderness Program) is a Tasmanian based Government funded provider of wilderness therapy programs. At the time of the study the agency took its name from the founder of the Outward Bound movement, Kurt Hahn, and identified its purpose as personal growth through challenge and adventure.

Sixteen male and two female participants from four Mountain Challenge wilderness therapy programs scheduled between February 2002 and February 2005 participated in the study. All but one of the adult participants came to Mountain Challenge as part of ongoing therapy for drug and/or alcohol addiction. The Mountain Challenge program consisted of a four-day self-sufficient journey that aimed to provide opportunity for participants to experiment with new and positive attitudes and behaviours beyond the support of the rehabilitation centre.

Following the procedures of grounded theory analysis of the data culminated in the development of visual diagram representing the dynamic matrix of conditions, actions, interactions and consequences associated with the phenomenon of Quiet time (Nicholls, 2008). The diagram identifies Quiet time as ‘sense’ of solitude that, contrary to understandings of solitude as an objective and external condition was defined by co-occurring subjective and internal conditions. The interrelated and multi-dimensional nature of the model affirms the advice of Daniel (2005) who, based on his research into the life significance of wilderness solo, cautions that “Whilst it is tempting to look at (the experience of solitude) in isolation from the rest of the expedition, we may oversimplify our understanding of its significance in doing so” (p. 93).



In similar vein, in his book *Solitude: a philosophical encounter*, Phillip Koch (1994) considers the place of solitude in a human life and utilizes the Chinese Tai Chi diagram of the yin-yang relationship to symbolize a conception of solitude that is inextricable from encounter (Fig. 1). In Chinese philosophy the concept of yin and yang represent complimentary opposites within a greater whole. From this perspective everything, all aspects of life, has both yin and yang characteristics. The active and dynamic

Figure 1 Chinese Tai Chi diagram

nature of the yin/yang relationship is often compared to the way in which sunlight moves over a mountain and a valley. Yin (literally the shady place) is compared to the dark area occluded by the mountains bulk, while yang (literally the 'sunny place') is equated with the brightly lit portion. As the sun moves across the sky yin and yang gradually trade place with each other, shedding light and revealing what was previously shaded and obscured and obscuring that which was previously revealed. The interconnected, interdependent and ever changing relationship between the concepts of yin and yang provide an appealing metaphor for understanding the dynamic relationship between experiences of community and the sense of solitude wilderness therapy participants associated with Quiet time. Based on four characteristics inherent to the yin yang relationship Koch (1994) proposes four ways in which to read and understand the yin yang symbol. His guidance is adapted here to provide an alternate visual framework for understanding the phenomenon of Quiet time within a challenge-based and activity oriented program. All names attributed to verbatim quotes are pseudonyms.

First reading: Quiet time as the complimentary opposite to the communal context of the wilderness journey.

Like many other wilderness therapy programs group process lies at the core of the Mountain Challenge. Journeying through a remote and natural landscape necessitates the sharing of tents, food and cooking stoves. Pooled resources of wit, intellect and creativity are brought to the daily tasks of negotiating obstacles topographic, personal or social. Shared emotional experiences of exertion, challenge, fear, success and fun, similarly contribute to the development of a sense of interpersonal solidarity, kinship and community.

In contrast, the research findings indicate that given particular conditions, participants purposively and spontaneously separate from the companionship of the group in pursuit of Quiet time. Participants in the Mountain Challenge equated the use of the phrase Quiet time with personal and positive experiences of a sense of solitude. The four defining characteristics inherent to all accounts of Quiet time were: (1) a sense of being alone; (2) a positive mind frame; (3) focused attention and (4) a personal time perspective ("It's my time, my time"). Occurring within 2-30 meters of one another, the sense of being alone crucial to the defining of Quiet time required neither physical isolation nor communicative separation. With two exceptions all incidents of Quiet time occurred within 2-30m of other group members. Charlie explains:

Yeah, even with a group of five when you're sitting on top of a mountain you only had to move five metres away and you had your own bit of space...you'd think a bit better and not even see the other person...I knew there were people around me, but it was like, it was my bit of space, yeah, equally I thought I could think aloud and it wouldn't have mattered, you know. (Charlie)

Charlie's account of "my bit of space" is typical and suggests that the sense of being alone, inherent to the notion of Quiet time, is more about disengaging from the social context of the group than being out of sight or earshot. It also substantiates Bobilya (2005) who argues that solitude is more about a state of mind than external circumstances. "If people are at peace they can experience solitude in the company of another or in the midst of a crowd" (p. 63).

Second reading: The temporal and cyclical relationship between the desire for community/companionship and the desire for Quiet time

Applied to this study, the second reading proposed by Koch (1994) invites a consideration of a temporal and cyclical relationship between the desire for companionship and the desire for the solitude of Quiet time. In other words, when the desire for companionship has been satiated the desire for Quiet time arises. In due course, Quiet time loses its appeal and the need for companionship arises.

When might participants tire of community/companionship? For many of the participants the communal nature of the wilderness journey generated a number of privacy needs. In broad terms, participants initiated opportunity for Quiet time by turning or moving away from the social context of the group as a 'strategic retreat' (Larson, 1997) from the physical, social and emotional demands of the Mountain Challenge. For example, walking in single file along the track, Mitch periodically allows himself to fall to the back of the line. In this position of relative solitude he chooses to focus on the terrain underfoot in a deliberate attempt for respite from a perceived pressure, to make conversation and jokes, or in any other way take up the self imposed role of congenial group clown. Within the confines of his relative solitude he enjoys the ease of simply being himself without the need to think about group or the tasks at hand.

I wasn't thinking about the pain in my legs, going up the hill, I wasn't thinking about who was talking behind me, I was just in some little void that I could get into and there was nothing there and I didn't have to worry about anything...I didn't have to be that sort of funny person to make everyone else laugh, I didn't have to be that clown all the time...I mean it's probably like a rest, a mind rest I guess.

Given a number of intervening conditions, effecting the retreat was not difficult: Pete "slips off" to his tent; Mick liked to: "just walk off and find (his) own little spot and sit down. Dean finds opportunity even whilst walking along the track.

I'd just simply stop and everyone else keeps walking, but they're still all around me and simply be, literally in the middle of everybody and just stop and have, just have a thirty seconds of total alone time right there and then.

How long does Quiet time last? Koch (1994) proposes 'Attentive time' rather than chronological time as a measure of the duration of solitude. This concept sits well with the research findings. Ranging in duration from "Just a minute to stop and take it all in" or an hour or so to "take some time out" the solitude of Quiet time was typically a brief experience of 15-20 minutes. As Koch suggests, when the focus of attention was disrupted or the need for focus fulfilled, awareness of the group recurred and Quiet time gave way to social re-engagement.

The concept of 'Attentive time' also sheds useful light on why some participants found the 15 minute time frame for a facilitator initiated "quiet sit", challenging. When Charlie felt the "sit" was "getting a bit long" he experienced a mis-match between his capacity to attend and the time frame determined by the facilitator.

The temporal and cyclical relationship described above was not always at play. Certain intervening variables were found to impede the occurrence of Quiet time. Physical, emotional and environmental conditions that challenged participants' basic needs or stirred negative mind frames inhibited the occurrence of Quiet time. For example, programs characterized by a focus on physical prowess and individualism, or targets and time frames that precluded, for example, opportunity to linger on a summit, sit for 'smoko' or take time to examine the depths of a rock pool exacerbated performance anxiety and diminished the sense of "having time to take time" for Quiet time. In contrast, factors such as a stunning vista, the managing of physical challenges, pleasant weather, the development of empathy and acceptance, a campfire and low levels of noise fostered the kind of positive mind frame and focused attention conducive to participants' taking time for Quiet time. Most important, was that the wilderness journey be infused by a process oriented and "No Rush" approach.

Third reading: The experience of community and the experience of Quiet time impact upon and transform each other.

One of two key ways in which the experience of companionship impacted upon the experience of being alone was in the way that it contributed to the sense of connection and containment found essential to positive experiences of 'being alone'. Koch (1994) refers to the notion of engaged-disengagement to make the point that solitude is always structured by an implicit sense of containment in some human community. Without that, solitude "is soured by loneliness." The research findings support this concept. No accounts of Quiet time were identified in the early stages of group development when levels of trust and security were low. Once group development moved from 'surviving' towards a thriving sense of camaraderie and companionship, incidents of Quiet time occurred.

The second key way in which the experience of companionship impacted on the experience of Quiet time was in the way that it influenced how participants' utilized their solitude. Motivated by a drive for the privacy of "personal time" participants utilized their Quiet time either as an opportunity to reflect on their experience or to simply focus on nature.

Responding: Letting Nature In

Although the level of euphoria in the following extract differentiates it from most other Quiet time accounts, Dave's experience of relative solitude on top of Mt. Trestle is typical of other Quiet times broadly categorised as *Responding* to nature. That is, it occurs when Dave is socially disengaged from his companion and is characterised by an intense sense of being alive within the moment. The experience is essentially non-verbal, embodied, sensuous, emotionally charged and difficult to explain.

...The moon was rising, (I was) sitting on top of one of the columns. That was just brilliant. The wind was blowing, damn cold...I definitely felt alive, again the tingles, the excitement, the adrenaline, it was fantastic. It's hard to describe really because...I've experienced things like that before but they've all been different, this was like "Wow!"...It had so much more of an edge to it, probably because I was straight, and I had no other thoughts about anything else but what I was doing at that particular moment. That was it, nothing else mattered...There was no concern about anything else apart from

what I was doing at the time and getting the most out of it, and, I think I pretty much did that. (I felt) pretty pleased with myself actually, because I was heading towards the end of the program, I felt good about that I'd completed it, and I was nearly there. I was out there enjoying things, with a straight mind, no artificial toxins in me whatsoever, and the feelings that I was getting were great, the jubilation. My chest was pounding. It was great! And I realized "Hey, wow, you don't need that other crap (laugh) to really enjoy these things. (Dave)

The data suggests that participants turned their attention away from the social context of the group in order to simply focus on nature for at least the following three reasons: 1) to savour experience, 2) to process experience, and 3) as an expression of self-care.

Savouring

Pete expresses a sense, shared by all of the participants, of privilege to be journeying through the natural landscape. He stops frequently to savour his experience:

I just sort of took it all in, I didn't hang near the edges too much but, just looking at the views, taking it all in 'cos I doubt that I'll ever go there again.

That participants utilise Quiet time to savour nature is also apparent in the way they regard the beauty of their environment as an appropriate reward for physical effort. Gus "had to have" brief moments of Quiet time on the track to savour the view " or "I'd have walked all day and not seen anything." On attaining a small summit Charlie rips off his shirt and lays spread eagled on his back on a large flat rock.

I just took me shirt off and let the wind blow through...A lot of them Quiet times there was nothing, like I just shut my eyes and I can still see the green glow from the sun, so I just did that so that it was total blackness or pull me cap down, so total blackness. That is just, what, like a total, muscle relaxant or whatever (Charlie leans back in his chair, outstretches his arms his arms and expels the air from his lungs in a manner of total relaxation.) Phew! Letting go. (Charlie)

For someone whose mind is "always on the go" the relief from physical effort and release or "letting go" of tension is difficult to express. Charlie resorts to body language and advises the researcher to "Get a video!" as a way of recording his deep sense of *Relaxation*.

Processing

Choosing to simply focus on the sights, sounds and feel of the natural world during Quiet time gave some participants a chance to stem the tide of novel experience and time to process and adapt to the various physical, emotional and social challenges within the Mountain Challenge. For example, Dan "just felt like (he) needed a little bit of space just to settle into everything and get used to what was going on". Joe and Col utilise Quiet time as an opportunity for a 'mind rest'. In the solitude of their respective sleeping quarters they focus on the sounds and sights of nature as a deliberate way of

calming the mind. Lying by himself under the tarp at night, Col calms his “racing mind” by focussing on the stars. Joe goes to bed early “to get that Quiet time” by listening to the running water in the creek nearby. In similar vein, staring into the coals of the dying fire provides Gus with an unfamiliar opportunity to still his mind.

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 at the fire, checked out the fire and tried to listen out for some animals around and just took some time out and that was good for me cos' mentally all day I was going, my brain was going, 15 to the dozen...And I haven't done that in so long I probably couldn't even pinpoint the last time I did do that. Just sit, just sit, and stop thinking and relax.

Reflecting

In line with conventional expectations some participants did use the privacy of Quiet time to reflect upon their personal and group progress. Charlie explains: “When you get Quiet time you can think, I did a good job, like, pulled me own weight and a bit more...”

Participants also use their time to ruminate on current concerns outside of the Mountain Challenge and particularly their roles and responsibilities as parents and partners. As a corollary of years of drug and /or alcohol abuse, family life is, for many participants, fraught with significant domestic and custodial issues.

The following two extracts are included not only because they exemplify the content of participants' reflections but also because they illustrate a ponderous and ruminative style of thinking characteristic of reflective Quiet time.

Yes I went down on the rocks just in front of the hut there and just looked out over Hobart. I tried to put the thoughts of what I'm going through with my kids and their mother out of my head but in fact that's what I ended up basically thinking about. I, and 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 that I knew I was but I felt at ease with it, if that makes sense. (Gus)

I'd seen the sun there, so I went and sat there to warm up, and I just sorta got me cards out on the table so to speak, I had me troubles sort of in front of me. Although I didn't come up with any solutions I still thought it through. At least I thought about it instead of dismissing it, I just sort of dwelled on it a little bit, which was good and it turned out not as serious as what I thought. (Joe)

Quiet time spent reflecting or responding to nature stirred various senses of euphoria or ‘natural’ high, self-worth, peace, belonging, physical relaxation, anxiety reduction, or ‘a mind rest’ as well as provoking mental clarity and intuitive insights. Participants frequently resorted to metaphor to convey experiences of Quiet time that were easier to “feel” than describe or witness. For example, Col tries to “suck up the good energy”

inside of him, Ben felt someone had “taken the broom and swept all the shit out of (his) brain”, events “Blew (Gus) away.

In her integration of some of the principles of Buddhist psychotherapy with some of the theoretical and practical aspects of Adventure Therapy, Trace (2004) emphasises the significance of the ‘felt sense’ and introduces the concept that we remember in the body as well as the mind.

When we remember a trip, we remember the felt-sense of the trip, as well as the physical part of the journey itself. We remember stories about ourselves on that trip. The stories contain and evoke emotional themes. Just as trauma can ‘leave an individual with a profoundly reorganised sense of self’ [Grigsby & Stevens 2000, p. 336] so too, strong positive emotional experiences alter sense of self.’ (p.113)

The personal insights and embodied sense of wellbeing frequently accompanying Quiet time spent in reflection or responding to nature echo those identified by McKenzie (2003) in a study of the Outward Bound process of change. McKenzie proposes that traditional understandings of reflection as a predominately cognitive and linear process are incomplete and fail to recognize that reflection “may also be non-cognitive in character and include embodied interactions such as intuitive insights and a sense of “coming to know” (p. 20). Understanding Quiet time as a route to alternate and valid ways of knowing finds support in recent research findings in the cognitive sciences.

We know that the brain is made to linger as well as rush, and that slow knowing sometimes leads to better answers. We know that knowledge makes itself known through sensations, images, feelings, 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).

Many of the emotions and feelings associated with Quiet time parallel those identified by Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) and Stringer and McAvoy (1992) as indicative of spiritual experience. Might Quiet time characterised by attributes, feelings and emotions, associated with spiritual experience have value beyond the immediacy of the experience? The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (1998) identifies spiritual or existential wellbeing as one of seven dimensions of health and holistic wellbeing.

As part of the long term rehabilitation process participants in the Mountain Challenge attend group and individual, therapy aimed at addressing habitual, destructive patterns of thought and behaviour. Participants come to the Mountain Challenge motivated by a desire for personal growth, reinvigoration and refreshment. Against this backdrop it is conceivable that experiences of peace, belonging and other such emotions and feelings described here as spiritual, carry an especial significance.

Whilst it was beyond the scope of the study to ascertain the impact of Quiet time on the overall group process it is conceivable that these kind of outcomes and the sense of

reinvigoration of mind, body and/or spirit that participants brought back to the companionship of the group impacted positively and an individual and collective level.

Fourth Reading: The place of Quiet time in a healthy life

Classic and contemporary research affirm that humans have a developmental need to balance the drive for companionship with solitude and that the ability to use and enjoy solitude is a learned skill and correlate of mental health and wellbeing (Buchholz & Catton 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, 1997; Long & Averill, 2003, Maslow, 1971; Winnicott, 1965). Dowrick (1993) writes extensively on the subject and explains:

At the heart of many of our difficulties is a lack of conscious understanding that each of us needs closeness with others, and also a knowledgeable, nurturing relationship with our own self. Each of us needs to find a delicate shifting balance between dependence and independence, between being open to others and taking care of ourselves. (p. xxii)

On return to the rehabilitation centre, the participants were unanimous in the sense of wellbeing and accomplishment that they attribute to their Mountain Challenge experience. How much of that positive sense of self can be directly attributable to participants' experience of Quiet time is speculative. However, within the data it was possible to identify a number of examples that illustrate clear links between Quiet time during the Mountain Challenge and a newly found and sustained appreciation of the place of solitude of Quiet time in a healthy life.

Prior to entering the rehabilitation centre, at the height of their drug and alcohol abuse, participants typically regarded opportunity 'to be alone' as an experience to be avoided or endured. Lacking the positive mind set characteristic of Quiet time, 'being alone' was equated with the kind of confused thinking, negative self-beliefs, anger, shame or feelings of loneliness apparent in the following extracts:

I didn't like myself that much so I hated being by myself, (Joe)

I had heaps of reflective time and it was all negative really. (Pete)

I haven't had any Quiet time I can tell you...it would give me time to think...deliberately I go out of me way not to (be alone). (Andy)

I didn't like the person I was changing into. So I suppose in that sense it was loneliness for me, but I didn't want to be around anybody anyway 'cos I always felt shameful, like everyone was looking at me and pointing the finger at me. "Oh she's nothing but an alcoholic' which I was...The shame and the guilt. And even when the children came home from school I still wanted to be on my own so I wouldn't be very nice to them. Always being a real bad mother because I just wanted to be on my own. Didn't want anyone around me. (Sally)

I had bugger all (Quiet time)... at work always on the go...I'd drive all night long just wondering what the hell was going on, you know. Me head was screamin' ...Just down on m'self, down on everyone. (Charlie)

On return to the rehabilitation centre Dave, Dean, Gus, Col, Charlie and Andy, spontaneously commit to the habit of incorporating Quiet time into everyday life for much the same reasons as those identified by Burger (1995). That is, they anticipate that Quiet time will bring benefits that outweigh any social or personal inconvenience. For example, despite the threat of ridicule by other residents and being labeled 'fucking mad' Gus persists with his regular "yak" to himself on the balcony as a way of gaining perspective and insight. Despite the effort and challenge of writing Andy finds that with practice Quiet time spent journaling gets easier and provides him with a new found capacity to acknowledge the positive and take control of destructive thinking patterns.

Dave associates the habit of Quiet time with an improved ability to cope with the demands of everyday life, the rehabilitation process and the "days ahead." Dean, a carpenter, draws on his trade to explain the way in which he anticipates his experiences of Quiet time during the Mountain Challenge will assist him deal with "the dark forces" and support him through the lifelong process of recovery from addiction:

(Quiet time) is definitely time for me, and I never really knew how to... be able to consciously find my own time. 'Coz I could have gone away for ten minutes everyday and I would not have known how, from a bulls roar, how to find my own time and how to do a little bit of soul repairing...So that was excellent, that is a tool that has gone into a tool box that stays with me now.

Prior to the Mountain Challenge the same participants regarded solitude as undesirable or unimportant. It is plausible, that for these participants at least, Quiet time within the context of the Mountain Challenge provided an experiential opportunity to discover some of the benefits of solitude and, importantly, to develop confidence in their personal capacity to use Quiet time constructively. These participants valued the relaxation and contemplation they associate with Quiet time as a self-help and life enhancing strategy and an important part of their path to well being.

CONCLUSION

The interrelated, interdependent and ever changing character of the Chinese symbol yin yang has provided a dynamic representation of ways in which the opportunity and experience of Quiet time can be appreciated as a natural compliment to the predominately social focus of a challenge based wilderness therapy program.

Understanding Quiet time as a participant initiated response to the need for privacy, and as a self-structured opportunity for reflection or focus on nature provides insight into at least one of the ways in which participants in a challenge-based wilderness therapy program exert agency over their wilderness therapy experience.

In addition to the therapeutic benefits associated with communal living, shared reflective and adventure activities this study underscores the therapeutic merit of promoting opportunity for solitude through a 'no rush' approach to the wilderness journey.

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