

Tasting the Berries: Deep Ecology and Experiential Education

by Bert Horwood

Gary Snyder (1977) dedicates his little book, *The Old Ways*, to Alan Watts with the remarkable words:

*tasting the berries
greeting the bluejays
learning and loving the whole terrain*

This poem is, at the very least, an account of education at its simplest and best. Direct experience is central. The complete world, including one's self, is the arena. Learning and loving are linked together with a kind of easy light heartedness. If such thinking and feeling were to be taken seriously (but not too seriously), what sort of education might result?

One of the problems inherent in experiential education is that its modalities are morally flexible. They have no clear intrinsic moral value. This argument has been developed elsewhere (Horwood and Raffan, 1988a) and here I'll only assert the claim that an adventure event (for example) like a ropes course, could as easily train powerful terrorist teams, as it trains high performance management teams or promotes healing in a wounded personality. The special excitement in linking deep ecology with experiential education is to see what happens when the values of one are attached to the instructional methods of the other.

Joseph Meeker (1980) says that tragedies end in funerals but comedies end in weddings. The path of survival with joy is through the comic. This article

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attempts to "taste the berries and greet the bluejays" by examining the synergy when ideas from deep ecology and experiential education are brought together. I will compare the two movements and offer some guiding principles which will enable the people in any program to learn and love "the whole terrain."

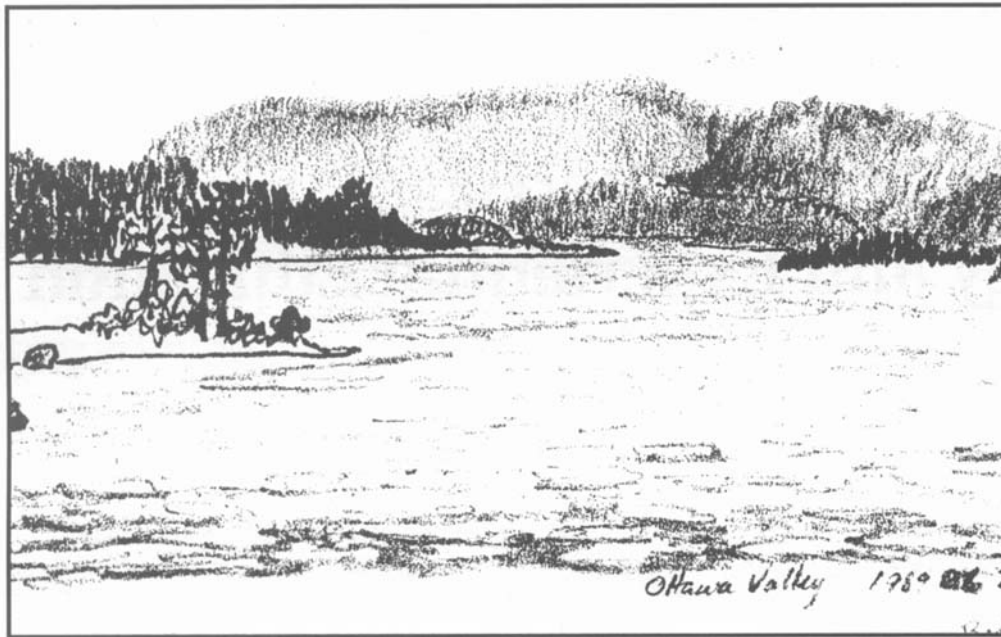
Deep ecology and experiential education have much in common. Both are products of the late twentieth century. Both take the form of a modern rediscovery and recreation of ancient ideals gradually lost in the materialism and alienation of Western culture. The two movements have experienced an increasingly powerful impact from the work of women. Both have

uncomfortable relations with their respective mainstreams; they are somewhat radical and touched with a distinctly disreputable air.

These similarities spring from the fact that both movements present a critical shift in central

values. In the case of deep ecology, it parts from mainstream thought by shifting the centre of its concern from human beings to the biosphere. In big words, it moves from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. Deep ecology also goes beyond science as the best, or only, way of knowing. Thought is taken to include feelings and spirituality, the entire range of mentality. Experiential education, likewise, shifts concern from what teachers can teach from their experiences to what the students could learn from their experiences; in short, a shift in the centre of concern from teacher to student. Like deep ecology, experiential education tries to see things whole.

Just as the experiential education movement seeks to eliminate those discriminations which exclude people from its processes, so the deep ecology movement seeks to remove discriminations which would put one species of life above another in terms of value and



Bert Horwood

importance. Respect is a key attitude. Henley (1989, 1991) shows how students, living in primitive conditions with experienced elders, gain respect for their knowledge. That respect for the person, in turn, generates respect for the place and important general learning results.

There are numerous accounts of deep ecology as a system of thought and as a way of life. The best of them are cited by Dolores LaChapelle (1991). Her article is an excellent primer, well suited for experiential educators.

The deep ecology literature is strong in its philosophical development. Its ends and values are clearly and powerfully stated. It lacks a matching educational framework for the transmission and inculcation of those values. Conversely, experiential education possesses powerful instructional methods which can be bent to a variety of ends. Most experiential education has served progressive social purposes but its literature and practice reveals a variable and relatively undeveloped moral framework.

The methodological implications of deep ecology are highly compatible with experiential methods and the value implications of experiential education are close to the values of deep ecology, although more restricted to the human species. The logical end for progressive value-based experiential education is the adoption of deep ecology values. Together, there would emerge a more powerful way to influence the transformation of the world toward some set of comprehensive, biospherically benign principles.

There are two reasons for believing that such a transformation is critically needed. First the principles are right because they include virtues such as respect, wholeness, justice, and community among others. Second, the world, and our place in it, will not survive

if we do not undergo such a transformation.

What would experiential programs look like if they were to include the values of deep ecology? There are such programs already in existence. Dolores LaChapelle describes one. The Institute for Earth Education programs such as Sunship Earth and Earthkeepers (Van Matre, 1990) are other examples. Rather than provide a specific program description here, I will give a set of general guiding principles which any such program must have. It is important to note that I mean to include all forms of experiential education including

adventure, therapy, work experience, and so on, because the synergy is general.

I have chosen five principles that are convenient and useful, but I do not claim they are absolute. The many connections among them invite other patterns of organization. The principles are: place, wholeness, identity, integrity and wildness.

Place includes both knowledge and feeling about one's place, in this case the program site. Whatever the

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special goals of the program, participants should know something about the other inhabitants of the place, where they come from and go to. What plants and animals are there? How is the land formed? Where is the north star? the sunrise? Where does the drinking water come from and where does it go after it has been drunk? Similar questions apply to the food, shelter and materials in use.

Dolores LaChapelle (1991) speaks of the use she and Rick Medrick make of the concept of "affordances." Self-propelled expeditions in remote country invariably teach people that the terrain affords people certain opportunities and denies others. For example, strong head-winds make paddling impossible on an

arctic lake and the open tundra offers no shelter for pitching tents. But a short distance away there is a grove of shin-high willow. Here travellers are afforded shelter and a place to rest. They gratefully recline under the willows among musk-ox scat and learn to see the sky through a different screen.

Experiences like this teach participants that the world affords people opportunities to climb, to sleep, to eat. When participants look for what the place affords, and use the affordances, they live and work in the place harmoniously. They force things less. Place also becomes more personified and less objectified. We become a little like Schultz's cartoon character, Sally Brown, who knows that her school building is a person and talks to it regularly.

Such knowledge should promote feelings of belonging to the place, of experiencing its hospitality, first as a guest and later as a full member of the household in that place. To feel like a guest leads to different behaviour than to feel like an invader. To feel owned by the place has very different consequences than to feel like an owner. For example, travellers who feel like guests feel less guilt for being in the place. They also take care due to motives of profound gratitude and respect rather than from duty, which is more likely to fail. There is more to be said about hospitality as an analogy for the principle of place, but I will reserve it for another occasion.

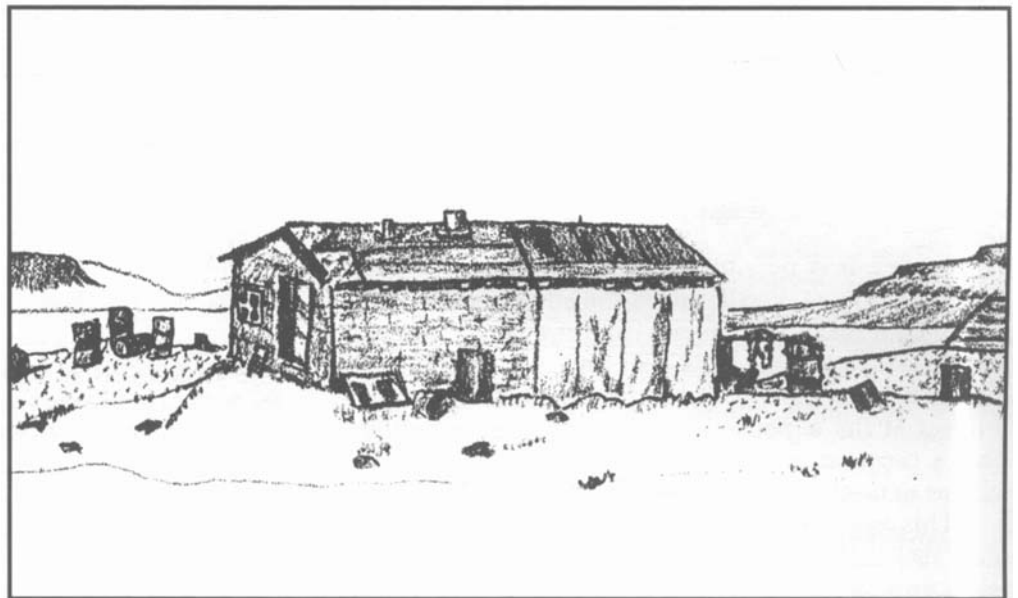
In my dream program, there would be no water on tap. Participants would, as a matter of routine, need to pump or haul it to meet their daily needs. If I could, I'd extend that to all the ordinary aspects of everyday life, including shelter and food supply. Participants would routinely kill their own food, whether animal or vegetable. The principle of place, whether the program was therapeutic, recreational or environmental, would require participants to be able to live their lives harmoniously within the affordances which the place offered.

The principle of *wholeness* is meant to be comprehensive. It refers to wholeness within each individual and to wholeness in the context of the place. It also implies a healthy balance among factors of risk and safety; intellect and spirit; giving and getting; sacred and profane. Wholeness means that there would be moments of profound solemnity and moments of total hilarity. Demands on muscles would be matched by the demands on brains. The community of participants

would be matched by times of solitude and independence. Planning would be larded with spontaneity.

The principle of *identity* is an antidote for the alienation which most of us carry to some degree. The malaise of our dominant Western culture is alienation from self, society and our fellow creatures. Arne Naess (1985) provides a full development of the concept of identification in deep ecology. When persons move from alienation to identity they begin to know themselves and to recognize that they share a common identity with other beings, human and non-human. It is the difference between a person trying to protect a wild river from a dam and feeling that one is the wild river protecting itself. This is an advanced stage of identification known to be achieved by aboriginal people but reached in the present Western culture by only a few.

There was a country woman driving into town who noticed a neighbor holding a small pig up into an apple tree to reach the apples. On her late return, he



Bert Horwood

was still there with the pig. She stopped and observed that he had been holding the pig up for a long time. He replied, "What's time to a pig?" That's identification.

It will take continued exploration to learn how to do the hard work needed to increase identity within participants. Certainly there must be ceremonial and celebratory events because they emphasize relationships and kinships. There needs to be sensitive and respectful living in the place, not accidentally, but with deliberate intention to know it in a new way. One example is to experience a place alone for the purpose of coming to know it rather than for the purpose of personal trial or vision-questing. For LaChapelle and Medrick, Tai Chi is an essential ingredient in the mix. In other programs, paying close attention to the world with all the senses is a means to increase identity. It is impossible to do this fully without the presence of poetry, chanting, drumming and dance because they

arouse sensory acuity and permit expression of it beyond the limits of rationality.

There are also things that need to be avoided. One is any programmatic tendency to promote ideas of domination. No one can develop identity when one is trying to dominate, predict and control. Rather, program operation should be accepting of times and events. Searching for affordances and enjoying them is the way to set aside our desire to dominate everything around us.

The principle of *integrity* refers to the congruence between the values espoused by a program and those actually driving practice. There is a strong tendency in Western culture for organizations to become self-serving while claiming to serve others. In attempting the radical shift to deep ecological values, any person or group may easily fall into shallow lip service by making superficial changes on a fundamentally unchanged perspective. Walter Raleigh was asked by his executioner whether he wished to face east. He replied that it mattered not which way the face was, so long as the heart was right. The principle of integrity requires that both heart and face be right.

One difficult example is the practice of no-trace camping. It is fatally easy to adapt a kind of doctrinaire self-righteousness that leads participants to believe that they can travel and live in a wilderness area without impact. It is possible to go lightly, but even shadows have impact. Furthermore, the advanced technologies which make low impact camping possible invariably have very large impacts elsewhere in our earth home. It is not clear why one region should enjoy low impact at the expense of another. Integrity requires that a program practice, to the fullest extent, what it claims to teach.

This example also raises the point that, as abundant mammals on the earth, human beings are bound, even entitled, to have an impact. Just as I assert the right of skunks and mosquitoes to be here in harmony, I assert the right of my fellow humans to live out their lives likewise.

The principle of *wildness* comprehends all the others. It calls for high value to be placed on the cultural and technological power of the primitive (Horwood 1988b). By primitive, I mean that state of things which people can do entirely with their own personal resources and energy. The word is not meant to have any negative context nor to imply any sort of deficiency. Here, primitive is the cultured counterpart of civilized.

Wildness also refers to the ultimate in freedom to be: to be oneself; to be in relationship and community with one's fellow beings; to live and die as a full-fledged, mature animal. To accomplish that kind of wildness, there must be appropriate initiation leading persons to know themselves and to know their respec-

tive paths. Wildness is both serious and comic, rich and frugal, but it never includes licence and irresponsibility because there are always dire, inescapable consequences.

The primitive quality of wildness also provides for simplicity in everyday acts and materials. Bannock baked on a stick is wilder than when baked in a reflector oven. Labrador tea is much wilder than instant coffee. This is not to oppose technology, but rather to choose, always, those techniques which are simplest and most direct.

Robert Bly (1990) presents a vivid account of the potential within humans to be wild, to find the low, the wet and the simple. "Little dances are helpful in the middle of an argument as are completely incomprehensible haikus spoken while in church or buying furniture (p. 223).

I have tried to show that there is a good match between experiential education and deep ecology. From the latter come principles which are recognizable, even friendly, to experiential educators. To integrate the two is to reverse the mainstream and to embrace a very long-term view of things. It is like the very old woman who wanted to plant a black walnut tree in her garden and was advised against it, "Because they take a hundred years to mature." She insisted, "That was all the more reason to plant the tree to-day." I think that woman knew the taste of berries and how to greet the bluejays.

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