

Healing Through Wilderness

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Healing in Wilderness

Recalling a pivotal healing experience on a hike in the Carmanah Valley.

As we hiked westward, I stayed behind the group, stopping occasionally to take in the magical coastal rainforest. I had never been to a true wilderness area before, where there was absolutely no sign of human activity: no distant hum of traffic, no metallic city scents or straight lines carving the way before me. Entering the dark Carmanah forest, I instantly felt its green and breathing power, but it took some time to feel present with it. In nature, shedding the city from us, although perhaps inevitable, is not always an easy process.

I recall the moment I stopped, and taking in the swaying giants around me, felt a sudden and beautiful connection with the world. At that instant I felt like a child of the planet. The old trees around me helped me lose my human self to become a larger self, one that encompassed everything around me. I experienced wholeness.

I sat down and took in this gift for some time. My heart and belly felt expansive and I was overcome with the feeling of being connected with what I now call the web of life. I was sustained by all that surrounded me.

The intensity of this feeling slowly dissipated as I eventually made moves towards finding my fellow hikers, now far along the trail before me. I stepped in and around the roots of the forest, smiling and feeling generally blessed by the whole experience, and knowing I had touched on something of a life changing quality. Although I still had personal work to do, this experience stands out as a clear turning point in my healing process, as well as in my life.



“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in, where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike”

John Muir

The following essay is an exploration of the healing powers of wilderness. Inspired by personal experiences, both as a guide and coordinator of wilderness therapy trips, and as an independent walker of many woods, this paper is a personal study of the restorative power of wilderness and how it has come to be a therapeutic medium in our modern society. My work in outdoor guiding and wilderness therapy has nurtured a deep love of nature, from which I have gained a more profound sense of the unique relation between humanity and the planet. However, despite my spiritual and physical experiences in wilderness, I had not, until a few months ago, attempted to articulate the healing experiences I have felt and witnessed there. Nor had I formally explored the therapeutic traditions and techniques of the now internationally practiced *wilderness therapy*.

People have always turned to wilderness¹ in search of wholeness, a term I equate with health, both spiritual and physical. We need only think of the many indigenous cultures that use wilderness experiences as rites of passage to see these healing qualities at work. Today, literally thousands of groups venture into pure and untamed natural areas in search of adventure, escape, and healing. What is the essence of this healing experience? Why are we touched and transformed by this experience? This study explores some of these questions as well as the traditions and techniques behind modern wilderness therapy itself.

Wilderness Therapy

Since the early 1960s there has been a growing interest in using wilderness as an environment for many of the new humanistic and existential therapies.² The spontaneous and somewhat mysterious healing that can occur for certain wilderness therapy participants is widely recognized,³ but in traditional wilderness therapy programs, the therapeutic benefits are mostly connected with a facilitated process involving specific techniques and treatments. Natural areas in this case become the backdrops for a series of processes that do not necessarily emphasize the psychological transformations offered by wilderness directly.

I have participated in three traditional western style wilderness therapy expeditions, where group dynamics and physical challenges (considered to be key elements in the therapeutic process) were both planned and facilitated. The natural areas we ventured into, however, were not mere backdrops to a series of “techniques and treatments”; they were the heart and soul of the expedition. We did not always talk about the inherent healing forces of nature on these trips, but many of the leaders felt that the positive psychological transformations experienced there were inextricably linked to environment.

Before delving into the essence of a wilderness experience, by which I mean a healing experience through reconnection with wild nature, I wish to explore the traditional techniques of wilderness therapy. Traditional western wilderness therapy is a facilitated process that aims to provide psychological healing to its participants. According to adventure and wilderness therapy expert Michael Gass, this intervention focuses on placing clients in activities that challenge certain negative or dysfunctional behaviours and reward functional change. In doing so, wilderness therapy attempts to allay people of learned helplessness, dependency, low self worth, and sadness.⁴ The techniques cultivate perceptions of capability, potency, and significance in the participant. The perceptual changes that can result are considered key to his or her emotional healing.

When looking at the formal processes of western wilderness therapy, it is important to note that this treatment is designed for clients with real psychotherapeutic needs. These people, who range from victims of abuse to people living with life-threatening illnesses, have generally already undergone some traditional psychotherapy and will likely continue to do so after their wilderness experience.

Although my own experience in wilderness therapy has not entailed working with people in therapy, or as organized an approach as

suggested by Gass, I recognize some of his techniques from previous wilderness therapy trips. These methods, which centre on building self-esteem and creating a caring and supportive social environment, are powerful therapeutic tools. Gass does not delve deeply into the inherent and “unexplainable” healing that can occur through a participant’s connection with the wilderness setting, but he does acknowledge its ability to render powerful psychological transformations in certain individuals.

Defining traditional wilderness therapy is challenging, because there is such a wide variety of organizations and programs employing this approach. One model that appears to be widely recognized however, has its roots with the Outward Bound program⁵ and thus focuses on providing physical challenges and a positive community to its participants. In *Adventure Therapy: Therapeutic Applications of Adventure Therapy*,⁶ Gass defines this traditional model of wilderness therapy by describing its three critical components: providing community, the wilderness environment itself, and focusing on the participant’s potentialities versus pathologies.

Community

Group processes lie at the very core of Gass’s wilderness therapy. He maintains that because personality is formed and shaped largely through our contact and involvement with others, it can be reshaped through this same intimate contact. “Wilderness Therapy involves living together, not just carrying out a particular program.”⁷ In wilderness therapy, fulfilling physical needs, healing, personal growth, and even physical triumphs are experienced in relation to and with the support of others.

During a typical wilderness therapy venture, a group of guides, participants, and support staff form what resembles a village of people working and living together. This “family” cooks, eats, sleeps, plays, and works together and interacts constantly which, in my experience working with youth in recovery from cancer, invariably leads to true, and often tender, personal connections. Yet, according to Gass, certain clientele who have abusive or dysfunctional relationships in their backgrounds can find the group dynamics one of the more challenging and provoking aspects of the entire outdoor experience.⁸

Whether a challenging or a natural process, the village dynamic on these trips appears to be conducive to an important healing process for participants, no matter what their backgrounds. On a practical level, attaining personal comfort and security in backcountry settings often requires group co-operation and, therefore, inspires positive and effective group dynamics. These requirements present opportunities for the participants to help and be helped, which provides a sense of mutual

dependence and trust that can be very therapeutic.⁹ In wilderness, individuals who may have never felt important to others discover that the group depends on them.

I have personally witnessed, both on personal and professional backcountry trips, how group cohesiveness develops as members struggle against the daily challenges of hard hikes, tough climbs, or bad weather. With the support and power of the group, participants move through psychological barriers and discover hidden resources and new limits. Group bonding results in an atmosphere that promotes honest emotional experience and sharing. This is key to the healing experiences that can result from group counselling sessions. In the participants' new community, where they feel safe to be themselves, they can begin to truly open up and express their feelings honestly in a supportive atmosphere.



Ellesmere Island 2000: The community of an expedition

Through my work, I have noticed how the experience of a wilderness community can have an especially strong and enduring effect with adolescents. I believe this is because adolescents have a real desire for community and need opportunities to contribute to others to feel important. These opportunities, which tend to be rare in modern society, abound in the context of wilderness adventure. In this way, discovering a sense of place in a backcountry village and connecting with others is a key element in the therapeutic value of a facilitated wilderness experience.

Potentialities versus Pathologies

Most traditional psychotherapies are centred on the idea that patients suffer from particular psychopathologies. Adherents of this perspective place a great emphasis on the obstacles that keep a client from leading a functioning and healthy life. In keeping with this approach, a client's problems are explained through past traumas and there is a strong ever-present focus on the negative and the problematic.¹⁰

Although this orientation has met with many successes and may be the most appropriate treatment approach in certain instances, wilderness therapy chooses to focus instead on the strengths, capabilities, and potential of the individual. Trip leaders believe that adventure and challenge give people a chance to discover new parts of themselves. Consequently, participants who may consider themselves incapable of certain tasks are encouraged and shown through example that they can accomplish a perceived impossibility, such as completing a long arduous hike or climbing a steep rocky pitch. "Rise to the occasion," "Go for it," and "You can do it" become the new vocabulary and the basis for new perceptions of psychological strengths such as courage, self trust, and confidence.¹¹ With these new perceptions in place, participants can transfer them to other life experiences, and experience increased self confidence and renewed self respect. Most traditional treatment programs define the client as sick or incapacitated, in wilderness, the therapeutic experience is largely one of self-discovery and autonomy.

Rather than using "talking therapies" to modify attitudes and behaviour, wilderness therapy assumes that changes in self perception issue from real and stimulating experiences that reveal psychological strengths and capabilities¹². Indeed, the results of this positive approach can be powerful. The behaviours that result often exceed the expectations one might have of patients, such as teens with cancer, youth with behavioural problems, or survivors of violence.

In the summer of 2000, on an expedition to Ellesmere Island with 10 teens in recovery from cancer, I witnessed how the challenges met in wilderness, whether climbing a mountain or enduring the rigours of extended backcountry travel, became opportunities to transform the participant's self image. Labels changed. "Sick kids," became competent, strong, beautiful, and daring people. *Life Is Beautiful*, the documentary film made during the excursion, recorded the teens' metamorphosis when they struggled up Mt. McGill as cancer survivors, but arrived as heroes at its summit. The challenge of the climb transformed them, for instead of seeing themselves as weak or unable, they saw themselves as strong and capable of greatness.

Wilderness Environment

One of the many gifts of facilitating a therapeutic venture in nature is the peace and simplicity it provides. Many of the distractions that can prevent a client from looking at his or her issues and challenges are removed in a wilderness setting. The props of culture are left behind, allowing participants to enter fully into wilderness and reconnect with a simpler existence.¹³ In this way, a natural setting can be an excellent medium for therapeutic techniques because it is difficult to repress feelings without the noise and haste of modern life.

A wilderness experience can also offer a rare opportunity for individual freedom, especially the freedom to find a new sense of identity.¹⁴ According to Gass, the wilderness environment enhances this experience of *positive self-identification* through several factors. First, the wilderness setting is so new, and mundane life seems so far away, that participants sometime enter a kind of altered state of consciousness. This state is conducive to letting go of the past and embracing positive personality strategies. Second, the participant is exposed to positive role models. Staff and peers serve in this capacity, but more importantly, the outdoor challenges can direct a person into a heroic role—sometimes for the first time in their lives. Finally, the overall wilderness setting encourages a feeling of renewal and realization.



Lake Hazen, Ellesmere Island, 2000

"All that is in my universe is not merely mine – It is me"

John A. Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*

The last element of Gass's definition of wilderness therapy involves the inherent healing quality of the natural environment. This healing is set apart from the other processes at work in wilderness therapy, in that it requires no facilitation. Gass refers to this healing experience as issuing directly from the land and compares it to a rite of passage experience. According to Gass¹⁵ and Bacon,¹⁶ wilderness landscapes represent an archetype, which Jung refers to as *sacred space*. A wilderness experience is, therefore, in our human memory and we are drawn to it as birds are drawn south in the winter.¹⁷ Thus, when someone enters a natural area, she or he associates it with a place of magic and transformation. A profound healing experience can even be expected, for *sacred space* works in a mysterious and spontaneous fashion.

Healing through Wilderness

Eco-psychologist and wilderness guide Stephen Harper has led people in wilderness practice for over 20 years. Unlike Gass, he does not employ specific therapeutic techniques in wilderness therapy, but is instead interested entirely in those transformations offered directly by nature. For Harper, wilderness therapy is not a treatment, it is a practice. The term practice implies process to which there is no beginning or end, but a life time engagement of discovery. In this way, Harper tries to simply put people in contact with wilderness and have them learn by nature's example.

“When we are truly willing to step into the looking glass of Nature and contact wilderness, we uncover a wisdom much larger than ourselves.”¹⁸

“Uninterrupted and undisturbed Nature takes care of itself.”¹⁹ Thus Harper encourages us to trust and support process and allow personal evolution to progress like nature. Our “process” towards healing ourselves, uninterrupted and undisturbed, becomes unfolding growth. Wilderness teaches us that the personal transformations occur from within ourselves.

Whether we speak of a facilitated process, such as the Outward Bound model of wilderness therapy, or the natural process suggested by Harper, there exists a spontaneous and profound healing experience that occurs in natural settings. Harper suggests these transformations issue from ourselves, but how does the landscape influence our experience?

What is the essence of this profound healing that takes place in wilderness?

According to so many (Harper,²⁰ Greenway,²¹ Macy,²² Thoreau,²³ and Naess²⁴), time in the wilderness is inherently restorative because it allows one to experience moments of wholeness and belonging. Hence a reconnection to Nature is conducive to a reconnection with the web of life. This feeling of wholeness that a wilderness experience can inspire is the healing experience. Our human psyche, with its self-created sense of individuality, slips away and a larger self, or as Naess calls it, an eco-self, emerges in its place.²⁵

As literally thousands of groups arise to lead people into various kinds of wilderness experiences, for a wide variety of goals, the resulting, healing, wilderness effect is increasingly accepted as a given.²⁶ It is said that without intimacy with nature, humans go mad. It is also said that our western culture is at odds with natural processes. In this way, it seems healthy to attempt to retreat from culture and embrace natural forces in their fullest and most pristine forms such as we find in wilderness settings.

Joanna Macy in *World as Lover, World as Self* states that the mystic impulse in all of us intuitively reaches beyond the restraints of our western culture to seek union with the universe. Touching this larger picture, and transcending separateness and alienation from the natural world, results in a “spiritual change” creating a profound sense of interconnectedness with all life.

I equate this expansion of the self with healing and restoration, but also with a liberation of our limited sense of self. Realizing that we do not end at our skin, but are in fact a part of a beautiful resonating planet, releases us from our suffering. This release is liberation from a culturally imposed belief that we are somehow very separate from the world around us. It is also a release, albeit a temporary one, from our personal uncertainties and problems. During a “wilderness effect” experience, we are no longer the centre of the universe, we are the universe. Our focus finally leaves our small ego self and looks out into the pulsating and breathing world that we are, and always have been, a part of.

This experience can also be equated with the mystical view of consciousness, which is based on the experience of reality in non-ordinary modes of awareness.²⁷ Traditionally these modes are achieved through meditation, but they can also occur spontaneously in other contexts, such as time spent in pure wilderness. Indeed, when one slips into nature, the experience seems to resemble that of a meditation.

Harper describes such an experience in the following lines from *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Mind, Restoring the Earth*.

Near the end of a long day of paddling the sun was low in the sky and my mind had long ceased its normal chatter. I had the sensation of becoming my paddling and all that was a round me. Stroke after stroke I was called to merge with my experience until "I" was no more. Only perception existed, a perception that was more complete than any I have known in a usual state of consciousness.²⁸

Modern psychologists have come to call non-ordinary experiences of this kind "transpersonal," because they seem to allow the individual mind to make contact with collective and even cosmic mental patterns.²⁹ I think an awareness shift is particularly powerful in a wilderness setting because we are immersed in a place where natural processes are at work. Our eyes, ears, and noses open up to the living, breathing world we have stepped into, and our perception altered, we shift into a non-egoic awareness.

Coming Home

An expansion of the self and the feeling of wholeness that this inspires can feel as though we have been repaired on some deep level. I believe this is because we must have an awareness of our place in nature to have a true sense of wholeness and therefore feel healthy. "I know that to be whole, humans need wilderness, to know the wild. We need to experience our wild self in harmony with a larger home place"³⁰

In *The Wild Way Home*, Alan Drengson tells us that the inherent healing quality of wilderness is due to the fact that reconnecting with nature fulfills a very basic human need. Drengson's "wilderness walking," which can be interpreted as the wilderness experience of Bacon, Macy, or Livingston, gives rise to insights and direct awareness of the natural forces in the world. Drengson explains we have a natural draw to seek an expansive understanding of life. This is a very human desire and pursuit, for it is a part of our nature to seek and know the powers of the world.

I think many of us are, in fact, hungry for time in nature because we spend most of our lives in a state of perceived separateness from the natural world. We all need to slip into a wilderness experience to not only understand, but also to feel our integral place in the web of life. The perceived fragmented world we have created causes the dis-ease in ourselves and in our planet. Without experiences that bring us in touch

with our greater eco-self, our awareness is limited and we can never feel genuine health or wholeness.

The dissociation we so often feel from nature is merely perceived, since consciously or not, we are in a perpetual state of interacting with everything around us. For me, this is why a transpersonal experience is “sudden” and “spontaneous”: it simply results from a shift in awareness and we see once more what was always before us.

Hans Gelter in his article “Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life,” echoes this idea in his study of friluftsliv, which is the Scandinavian philosophy of the wilderness experience. Friluftsliv fulfills a basic human need and thereby creates a feeling of wholeness. Gelter explores this concept by explaining the human biology behind the deep sensations associated with spending time in wilderness.

Gelter states that in order to understand the biological roots of a wilderness experience, we must look to pre-civilized culture and to the ecological habitat where most of human evolution took place. Humans have evolved as an integrated part of an ecological system, in close relations with other organisms and the environment, and our characters have developed as an adaptation to these ecological demands and changes. In this way, human nature is adapted to a natural habitat and not to the modern civilized world. He explains that the feeling of wholeness we experience in wilderness comes from the fact that our brain developed in natural settings. By re-entering our evolutionary environment, our primordial self emerges and we interact with the world on a different level.

Having a brain that developed for millions of years in a rhythmic and natural world, we feel we are “coming home” when returning to nature.³¹ Gelter points out that we are biologically the same as we were in pre-civilized times. “The only difference between people of today and those living 10 000 years ago is their fundamental philosophy and cultural context.”³² The time we have spent in a technological, urbanized habitat has not been long enough to permit biological adaptations.

Gelter is telling us that although we have new lifestyles, attitudes, and language, we are the same animals, biologically, as we were when we developed in natural settings. In this way, our basic needs have not changed, and when we return to Nature through friluftsliv we are not satisfying our primitive needs but rather our human needs. Wilderness, then, is a place of healing and solace because we are fulfilling a human need to feel a part of nature.

Integrating the Wilderness Experience

Behind this mysterious expansion of the self is a physical and psychological experience in which we find ourselves inhabitants of a sensuous world that had been always there at the fringe of our awareness. The sacredness of a wilderness experience is profound and beautiful, and does indeed, as Alan Drengson said, “come to us as a gift.”³³ If this experience comes so magically, how can we find this same sacredness in everyday life? Like any powerful personal transformation, the incredible and often overwhelming experience of wilderness can be difficult to incorporate into our daily lives. We emerge from it changed, but we can also take with us feelings of sadness and confusion, for in feeling wholeness and holiness we experience parts of ourselves that have long been forgotten. Going back to regular life, where the sacred of life seems so rarely perceived by society, can be painful.

Robert Greenway suggests that if we begin to incorporate other practices that include the body and encourage awareness, such as yoga or meditation, we can begin to see that the sacred is everywhere and that we need not go to physical wilderness to experience wild nature. He asks us to bring back from wilderness more than ideas and philosophies and to practice and embody what we discover to find integration. “The example of Nature is that life is meant to be lived, to be experienced.”³⁴ If we are not able to incorporate what we have learned in a real and practical way, wilderness work loses its meaning.

Incorporating a new awareness of our place in the web of life may also help us heal our fragmented relationship with the planet. We may then begin to transcend the human idea, now centuries old, that we are above natural processes rather than immersed in them. Perhaps the wilderness experience can help us reconnect with an old wisdom that teaches us what it means to be whole and thus help us heal our present rift with the natural world.

Conclusion

The mysterious and profound shift in awareness that can occur through a wilderness experience provides us with the opportunity to know our expanded self and experience wholeness. We feel reconnected with Nature and know in that moment that we are a part of the sacred web of life that is both within and around us. This experience of wholeness, however brief, is perhaps the most healing experience available to us.

The wilderness effect is recognized by many of the leaders of wilderness therapy, whether involved in a facilitated process such as the Outward Bound model of wilderness therapy, or the natural process suggested by Stephen Harper. It seems that, regardless of intentions, venturing into wilderness can elicit, for some, a profound transpersonal change that leaves them transformed.

This profound shift in awareness does not occur for everyone who steps into a wilderness setting, but I feel any time spent in wild, natural areas to be deeply restorative. Time in true wilderness, where there is no sign of human activity, no distant hum of traffic, no metallic city scents or straight lines carving the way before us, gives us reprieve from the craze of modern-day life and from the perceived gap between humanity and nature. Silence, fresh air, and a glimpse of wild nature spreading out at our feet heals us, for we feel as though we are coming home.

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Endnotes

1 In this paper, I use Alan Drengson's definition of wilderness as a point of reference. His is a place where nature is unrestricted by man's creations but does not exclude man from the picture. For Drengson, wilderness is a place where we can rediscover natural rhythms due to the "natural forces at work" (2002, 7), and have the opportunity to "slip into Nature" (2002).

2 Harper 1995.

3 Gass 1991; Greenway 1995; Harper 1995.

4 Gass 1995.

5 Outward Bound is a nonprofit, adventure-education organization supporting personal growth through experience and challenge in the wilderness.

6 Gass 1993

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

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- 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Gass 1993; Harper 1995.
 - 15 Gass 1993.
 - 16 Bacon 1983.
 - 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Harper 1995
 - 19 Harper 1995, 185.
 - 20 Harper 1995.
 - 21 Greenway 1995.
 - 22 Macy 1991.
 - 23 Thoreau 1993.
 - 24 Naess 1995
 - 25 Ibid.
 - 26 Greenway 1995.
 - 27 Capra 1982.
 - 28 Harper 1995, page no.???
 - 29 Capra 1982.
 - 30 Drengson 2002, 6.
 - 31 Gelter 2000.
 - 32 Gelter 2000, Page number ???
 - 33 Drengson 2002, 9.
 - 34 Greenway 1995, 133