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Story and the Outdoors, fiction or non-fiction?

The landscape is storied.

The landscape is cloaked in multifarious stories. 'Scape' is a suffix derived from the French meaning to cloak, as in 'to cloak in meaning or stories'. Some of these stories are from the past 'written' in the features and names in the landscape or the memories of people. They tell of ice ages, forests, long extinct animals, human settlements and lives, invasions, agriculture, industry and leisure. For example 'Grizedale', the name of several valleys in the English Lake District where I live, is constructed of old Norse words integrated into the local dialect from Viking settlers 1,200 years ago (Rollinson, 1989). A 'grize' is a wild boar, extinct in Britain since the thirteenth century (though recently returning to the wild in the south of England). A 'dale' is a U shaped glaciated valley. Just one word holds so many interweaving stories. As in this case, some of these stories are natural histories and some are cultural histories.

Other stories can also be thought of as social or personal in their content although still full of cultural significance; the finding of the reputed remains of a crashed aircraft from World War II high on a fell, the plaque on Helvelyn to the loyal dog that stayed with its dying owner, the stone by which Wordsworth last said farewell to his brother.

One example from the story of adventure is that of Millican Dalton and his cave (in fact an old slate mine), a well known and frequently visited spot in Borrowdale, another Lakeland valley (Entwistle, 2004). Dalton lived a hermit's life in the cave and is sometimes described as the 'Professor of Adventure and Caveman of Borrowdale'. He lived simply travelling the 8 miles to Keswick for supplies on a makeshift raft and climbing on the crags in the valley. He guided friends and visitors introducing them to the climbing and walking in the area. His life epitomises and now has come to symbolise the romance and freedom associated with the outdoor life. The story is so persistent people bivouac in the cave to this day in his memory. When an attempt was made to prevent this from happening on safety grounds, it had to be abandoned.

Overlaid on these old tales are new stories based on current experiences, 'written' and told by people through their voices and their actions. Sometimes they build on the old stories, adding to them and even transforming them. The Lakeland mountains, once described as places of horror became, through the retelling of the romantic poets such as Wordsworth, awe inspiring towers of beauty (McCracken, 1984). Later again other narratives told new tales of an emerging playground for climbers (Jones and Milburn, 1988). These personal stories are told in action as much as in words leaving partial footprints on the land for others to see, the building of walls, the erosion of paths, the naming of climbing routes on what were once featureless buttresses.

These stories become part of the social world told in the pub or read in a guide book, tales of epics on rock climbs, sheep rescued from bogs or crags, unfriendly shepherds, trespassing walkers, the discovery of old trees hidden in remote valleys, rare sightings of wild animals, dramatic weather, memorable fell runs and bike rides. Each community has its special tales and there are many communities overlaid on any one

place, the residents, the landowners and the visitors, with their many and varied interests.

I navigate by stories

I typically navigate by stories that I have been told. I also add to them and pass them on to other travellers following similar paths. I realised this when I first learned to map read in the mountains. Although I had been walking for years in the mountains I had not spent much of that time using maps. I had followed someone who knew the way. The story telling would open with discussions about where was worth going and what routes were the best to travel to these destinations. Once on the walk we would talk about what we saw around us; dramatic views, sightings of mountain birds or herds of deer, swimming spots in the rivers, previous camp sites and lunch stops; or how we coped with certain tricky sections over exposed ridges or difficult wayfinding at critical turns and junctions in the path. I would listen to tales of past adventures and stories of the local history and natural history told by my guide. When it was my turn to lead the stories returned to mind as surely as a cairn by the path or a waypoint in a GPS. Even on unfamiliar terrain, or a place made unfamiliar by snowfall or darkness, stories came to my aid telling of how others had coped in similar situations. They helped me to find my way in my own unfolding stories of these places.

That is not to say that maps were of no use. However, even when they were used it was the meaning behind the curve of a track, the shape of a basin or the name of a peak that caught in my mind. The map, despite the way in which it is an abstraction, still holds elements of the stories of place that we are taught to read in geography classes. And I take great pleasure in that reading and in the telling to others of these stories.

Lay knowledge

Reading and listening to the telling and re-telling of the story of a place is one dimension of the stories that are available to an outdoor educator. The traditional aural passing on of this lay knowledge is often said to be lost. But in the outdoors, on a mountain, river or sea, the art is alive and well, full of the embedded meaning of a place and the people that encounter it. These stories are redolent with the grand narratives of power and knowledge through the history of our culture; ownership, dispossession, mass trespass, despoliation, restoration, flight and fight, death and life, people lost and found, freedom and escape. A landscape 'well read' offers the seeds of many lessons for our own time (Wynne, 1996).

People seeking identity find a rich source of meaning with which to connect in the traditions of each outdoor activity and each place visited. In the UK this finding of meaning in the outdoors has driven the expansion of the outdoor recreation movement since urbanised working class people started to return to the countryside for their hard won leisure time and wealthy Victorians sort to escape from the straightjackets of their social lives (Glyptis, 1991). It has underpinned the more liberal understandings of outdoor education in which young people can find a form of self-expression, discover and explore places for themselves, create communities in which they are valued; 'it was like being an explorer on the Nile...'; 'it was a place where I could just be myself...'; 'at last I found something I was good at...'

Story Making

The outdoors is not only place to find stories already 'written' or waiting to be retold. For many the outdoors is a blank 'on the map'. It is a place where they do not know the stories and so are not defined by them. It becomes an extraordinary space, a liminal space of change and possibility. This landscape becomes a space for projection and fantasy arising out of the imagination of our own inner worlds. These myths can be lived out in the outdoor space away from the constraints of the everyday world. In this situation the landscape is valued as a space of story making, a space where people can act out new or alternative identities. Whilst this landscape is not defined by lay knowledge it still contains many elemental resonances that speak at a sensual level, the same symbolism perhaps that underlies the dramatic landscapes of aural and written myths (MacFarlane, 2003) (Loynes, 2002).

At its best experiential education values these unfolding narratives. An able facilitator will listen to the stories of his or her groups giving them voice and respect. At its worst what is called experiential education fails to listen to these creative minds forming their own worlds and, instead, tells them what their experiences mean.

I have written elsewhere about the meta-narrative of the hero, a story that I believe is embedded in much outdoor practice (Loynes, 2003). In the UK it is a story that comes from our cultural past. Voyages and expeditions to explore the world, conquer and occupy nations and return with resource and knowledge 'capital' to underpin the development of our economy have been transmuted into the conquest of summits and the building of social 'capital' with which to make the transition to power in the modern adult world. Our long honed cultural values are retold in this modern form of adventure and travel. Through these cultural rituals our values are reproduced for another generation. Each culture has its own relationship to the outdoors with its own meta-narrative underlying the story re-making and cultural reproduction from each outdoor experience.

But the outdoors is also a wild place, a place not so well defined by cultural norms, a place of transformation where tales of social mobility, of the overcoming of oppressive personal circumstances and the healing of the wounds of modernity can be told. Our aural telling of heroic myths has been partly replaced by the living out of personal myths in the extra-ordinary world of adventure. On these occasions the current story of outdoor adventure being lived out in the moment is not the only story that can be told. In this extraordinary space untold stories of a person's past can find voice and these can even be retold in a new and empowering way.

It is not only the past that can be reviewed on these occasions. The future can also be introduced into the narrative. Stories of hope and possibility are told as people imagine a future building on the trajectory of a re-motivated, more resilient or transformed self. I would argue that outdoor participants who become their own 'story makers' in this way become agents who can contemplate writing the next chapter of their life story for themselves. This agency, this story making potential of outdoor education is what, more than anything, is most highly valued by outdoor educators. This is so whether the story told is a reproduction or a transformation of the self in its

relationship with its social world to which it is returning. Both have significance in the transition to adulthood and citizenship.

Identity Making

These two aspects of the stories available to outdoor educators, the transferring of and involvement in the natural and cultural history of a storied place and the creation of personal narratives acted out in a wild space, are captured in the names of some outdoor organisations. 'Outward Bound' conjures up the broadening of horizons of young people as they explore their identity and power in the world, emerging story makers seeking agency in their lives. 'Homeward Bound', a recent UK initiative, offers journeys that take people back 'into nature' rather than 'out of doors'. It seeks to restore the connections people have with the places they live in through revitalising story telling on the move through the landscape. It aims to rebuild identity through a renewed belonging to a place.

These are quite different ideas about the role of the outdoors in the construction of identity. One seeks to escape to a wild and free space away from the constraints of everyday life that define people. The other understands people as having escaped too far from their links with the natural world. It attempts to restore those links re-establishing relationships with nature, defining people in relation to place, re-creating a sense of belonging.

Which Reality?

Both approaches seek to influence culture. Outward approaches are attempting to release people from the unconsidered definition of their identities by the established culture of their communities creating the possibility of self-expression, personal realisation, social mobility and even cultural change. It has been described frequently as a chance to escape from the constraining reality of every day life in order to enjoy the 'breath of fresh air' that comes from living in a fantasy world. Despite the physical engagement with place this is a landscape of emotion and intellect, of inner games. However much this world provides a setting in which to explore the personal values of the explorer this space can be disconnected from real questions of social or environmental justice embedded in the place that is the setting of adventure.

Homeward approaches are attempting to re-engage culture with nature making it meaningful and of value, placing culture back in nature rather than apart from it. This approach understands urban and everyday life as in some way unreal, a consumer oriented celebrity culture in which identities are lived out virtually or purchased temporarily. This is a world disembedded from the one essential reality that all people share, our place in nature. This place is a sensual as well as an emotional and intellectual landscape but one that understands the realness of the nature that is being explored.

This duality of real and unreal worlds creates problems of transfer. Stories developed in one world are hard to sustain in the other whether these be stories of elemental and heroic agency and self-fulfilment or stories of relationship and belonging in nature. It can be difficult to sustain the transformed sense of self that was achieved whilst away on an adventure once re-embedded in the social relations of everyday life at home.

Equally, it can be hard to retain a sense of connection with a landscape when returning to another, perhaps, very different and probably urban place immersed in media and consumer influences.

Outdoor Education's Dilemma

It is possible that both sets of narratives of the outdoors, whether describing an elemental space or a natural place, are of value in the development of our culture. Ideally they can both contribute to the building of democracy and to the living of a sustainable life. At times the leader takes the role of storyteller on behalf of society offering a narrative of the landscape for the visitors to engage in. At other times the leader must be a listener on behalf of the participants paying attention to the story makers and offering experiences that support the unfolding narratives of the group members as they explore the space they are in.

We all live in a world on the brink of major cultural changes, a world in which it is impossible to predict the future and so impossible to prepare young people for a particular role in a particular society. Our world needs new stories of transformation on both a global and a local scale in order to support people in bringing about these changes and in coping with them as they impose themselves on us at an ever faster rate. But is it the telling of the story of a place or the making of a story in a space that has the most to offer this process?

Some educational thinkers argue that it is an imperative to the living of a sustainable life that the stories of the landscape are readily available to inform the creative transformation of society. They argue strongly that we cannot act sustainably unless we know about and care for the natural landscape (Orr, 1991, Henderson and Vikander, 2007). They suggest that it is essential to learn from how it has been cared for and how it has supported us in the past. For these educators it is important that what they understand to be the real world of places is restored in the hearts and minds of a population distracted by the unreal expectations and unsustainable economics of the modern way of life. Their critics argue that these inevitably aesthetic places in which it is still possible to encounter wildlife and human lifestyles engaged directly with nature can only create a romantic view of certain places that become special in isolation from the everyday lives of the visitors and the larger picture of their impact on the world's social and ecological systems. These critics suggest that these educators ignore the socio-economic and political realities.

At the same time other educators argue that, in order to create and support the development of active change agents who can contribute to the construction of new realities, we need spaces in which the experiences of the past and the values of the mainstream can be questioned (Loynes, 2005). They suggest that the alternative culture, wild spaces and the creative spirit of adventure provide an essential space in which such questions can be posed. For them it is the escape from the 'reality' of mainstream life that makes this possible. Their critics point out that it is easy to live a different life away from the dominant influences of the everyday world. The challenge is in bringing these values back to the real world and that, they suggest, rarely happens. These critics are also suggesting that these educators are ignoring the socio-economic and political realities.

According to the critics, then, both schools of practice, the creators of story making outward spaces and those of story telling homeward places, need to 'get real' (Spretnak, 1997). One school is, it is claimed, living in a romanticised landscape, the other in the heroic actions of outdoor adventures. Outdoor education is faced with a conundrum in which it is not clear from this analysis which of the stories it is able to tell is fiction and which non-fiction and whether these stories are in or out of mainstream culture, part of the answer to or part of the problem of our current situation. For the sake of this discussion I will assume that both approaches have something to contribute but that neither is yet making the impact that it could and that it is this latter concern that leads both approaches to be labelled as 'unreal'. It is now possible to ask what it would take to 'get real'.

Perhaps the issues of which world is real and how to transfer the learning from one world to the other is not, in the end, a dilemma for outdoor educators alone. Perhaps it is a matter of creating the spaces in the everyday world in which new narratives, new ways, new identities can be explored. Perhaps what is needed is the creation of spaces that have the opportunity to influence the mainstream of our culture rather than spaces that allow for different ways to be acted out 'safely' in the outdoors hidden away from mainstream culture unable to do any 'harm'. Perhaps it is time for the outdoors to move on from providing just a therapeutic 'breath of fresh air' in a romanticised bubble, an 'escape', a fiction; to an engagement with the changing world.

It is attractive to the leaders, the storytellers or the makers of space for story making, to live in these bubbles of romanticised landscapes and heroic actions. Their challenge is to come out of their bubble and engage with the socio-political world of the everyday and the mainstream. The goal should be to become political, even radical. Whether through changes of venue, changes of curriculum or pedagogy or through effective partnerships with other educational agencies, the story telling and the story making, to be of more value than an escape from the pressures of life, needs to attempt to realise their narratives in the urban and everyday lives of its participants.

It is something the field has done before. The transformational power of outdoor experiences has worked for many years at a personal level creating restored individuals and social mobility. Many organisations, notably those working in the voluntary youth sector, still maintain this role today, and the evidence is that they do it very well. Some would argue outdoor education has also previously come to the aid of society at times of change. Both Baden-Powell and Kurt Hahn claimed that it was not what outdoor education could do for the individual that counted but what the individual could then do in the service of society (Smith, 1997b, Smith, 1997a). It might be time to review that ethic and see if it is not too late to restore it and update it as a central core of outdoor practice.

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