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# The Values of Life and Living

**‘After all, life is right in any case.’**

by Chris Loynes

Some things are of value whether we know it or not. Try holding your breath for a while. We take the air we breathe for granted much of the time but we can't do without it for long. It is of intrinsic value to us. When we consciously give it value it is often through the rational process of science assuming it's role of explaining our biochemistry. Experiential learning gathered through the senses and often non conscious taught us a long time ago the value of the air we breathe. This understanding is so ingrained in us it is often left unarticulated only to appear in an emotional and aesthetic response to the feel of the wind on our skin, movement in the trees, the sight of scudding clouds, the scent of ozone - fresh air. Yet we draw on this knowledge all the time. It influences the very sounds and rhythms of our words, it provides a rich source of metaphor for our language, our rituals and our myths.

If you find those sentences a little poetic it's not surprising. When we have something of intrinsic value to explain and we are in touch with our experiential selves it is hard to use words in a logical form. Instead we choose to use words loosely and to suggest more than the words by their rhythm and sound. The listener, if listening well, will also respond differently, at a deeper level, intuitively some might say, perhaps from a subtly altered state of consciousness created by the form of communication.

## **The sensual in experiential learning**

The romantics knew this and are rightly recognised as an important influence on experiential and outdoor learning. Harold Drasdo (1998) wrote about the aesthetic heart of outdoor education over 20 years ago. Indigenous people knew it better without always 'knowing' in the modern sense of the word. By definition indigenous people are still intimately connected to their place and in their community in a way that 'civilised' people are not. We have become separated by our urbanisation, our rationality, our division of labour and our capitalist economics. We talk about rather than live in nature and community and increasingly experience it vicariously through the media.

Of course this is an over simplification. We are still a part of nature if only through such simple acts as breathing. Experiences of the air and of our breathing also remain an intimate part of our understanding of the modern idea of outdoor learning. We struggle with the terrain noticed in our laboured breathing and measured by our increased pulse rate. We are exhilarated at the top when we stop and the oxygen rush floods through our system. Our 'red blooded' response to life, our delight in the wind in our hair and on our faces needs no biology or ecology lesson to tell us of it's importance. Our senses and our emotional responses are enough.

One definition of experiential learning is that it is a process of attaching meaning and value to our experiences. As with the value of breathing this is often so intimate and sensual that we are not normally aware of this process in everyday life. Nevertheless the experience has influenced our values and so our actions. We have learned in a natural sense.

## **Experiential learning becomes conscious**

We can, however, become aware of our breathing. When some aspect of it's quality is altered our attention is soon caught. Perhaps a throat infection causes laboured breathing or coughing. We are embarrassed by an unexpected yawn in public. I'm sure you can all remember playing 'dragon's breath' as a child on frosty mornings. The air as it thins at altitude or the smell of a flower or a polluted street all capture our conscious minds. Our bodies can tell us things for example through our breathing when it becomes laboured during heavy exertion or gasping at moments of panic and fear. We gasp at a surprise view. We hold our breath at the moment we let ourselves fall into the arms of the group during a trust fall.

Attention to our breathing can also be deliberately called by another person. For example 'take a deep breath to gather yourself' said to steady us before a leap for the trapeze or a delicate move across a rock face. Breathing exercises might be used to pump us up before a physically demanding challenge or calm us down before a meditation or solo.

It will be useful for this chapter to separate these two sources of stimulation of our awareness into two sets of experiences, natural and cultural. The natural experiences are those in which the quality of the air or of our breathing captures our attention. Cultural experiences are those in which someone else draws our attention to our breathing.

This 'attention drawing' can be as simple as having been taught the name of something so that you 'know' it by name and talk about it with others. By this means your valuing enters the social domain. The value of certain things is illuminated by others or debated between people. Whilst the people involved in this process are also a part of the experience and so sharing the same context, like a group together on an outdoor journey, the truth, both personally discovered through 'natural' experiences and socially determined can be said to be authentic. However it can only be authentic to that group of people. This 'truth' also remains mutable. It is negotiated and changes; *'you know, that rock climb was tremendous after all, even though I was cursing the hard part at the time!'*

## **Attaching value to experience**

Giving an experience a value is our first and a constant creative act. By giving something in the outer world a form, by recognising it's shape, colour, texture, pattern, ways of moving, sound, smell we build a concept and, later, we are taught the name of this concept. It is both a personal and a social creation. We do the same thing with abstract ideas to which we subscribe feelings, images, words and a name. Breath is one such physical concept and 'red blooded' one such abstract idea. At first this valuing may be for utilitarian reasons. It is something we need or need to avoid - the warmth of mother, the

cold of night air. Curiosity also plays its part as we poke about the world around us and discover interesting things to play with or admire.

## **Good and bad**

Valuing, then, takes several forms. We notice something and give it an identity and perhaps learn its name. We also add values of worth to this concept - it's a good thing to take a deep breath of fresh air - we relish it; it's a bad thing to breathe in the smog and we mask ourselves from it. We develop an aesthetic sense. A wilderness journey can therefore be understood as more than simply an aesthetic experience but as a work of art created by the traveller to integrate a set of 'good' experiences.

We not only value the world around us but also ourselves. In Yungian terms we come to know the 'dark' and the 'light'. A great deal of our language and so our ideas about our inner landscapes draw on metaphors from nature. Simon Schama (1996) shows how this two way projection of ourselves onto nature and nature onto ourselves has intimately informed our personal and social concepts of ourselves throughout European history. Jung among others argued that it was necessary to have healthy natural experiences in order to fully understand these rich archetypes of the mind. The words alone are a poor substitute without the meaning that is attached to them through experience.

It could therefore be said that we imagine ourselves and the world around us. This created world is then influenced by the imagination of others. A social group have or, if they are newly formed, soon develop a dominant world view or paradigm. As individuals in the group we learn how to relate to this cultural norm. In an egalitarian group we have the power to influence the norm as well as be influenced by it. I am doing this with you now as you read this chapter in the group of English speaking outdoor educators.

## **Right and wrong**

Not only do we discriminate by attaching 'good' and 'bad' to our experiences, we learn to overlay them with another set of values, 'right' and 'wrong;' - 'you might enjoy soloing on the climbing wall but it's the wrong thing to do in front of the group. It might give them bad ideas.'

## **Attaching Meaning to Experience**

So far I have described a way of understanding the processes by which we attach values to our experiences. I have argued that this is, first and foremost, an intuitive process involving the emotional and aesthetic self. However, the process of meaning making is also occurring. For the purposes of this chapter I understand meaning to be the abstract understanding of our experiences that is created personally and socially. This is a cognitive and rational process that involves the use of language but in a different way to the loose, metaphoric and poetic forms discussed before. It is a language intended to be more literal and specific and which builds models and theories.

We all build personal theories of our experience, making sense of, rather than sensing, our experiences. These theories are heavily influenced by the dominant theories of the social world. We use the abstract ideas of our culture to make sense of our personal worlds. It is hard to imagine a world without a concept of zero. What would such a world understand by the idea of nothing? But such a world existed.

We can get some idea of what it must have been like if we consider an area for which our language is deficient. We often find ourselves in confusion over the word 'love.' It has many closely related and potent meanings which, when misunderstood or used incorrectly cause much embarrassment. It would seem sensible if our language developed a richer vocabulary for these ideas but we struggle on without. Sanskrit, on the other hand, had over 20 words for love. In a similar vein the reader could reflect on the number of times I have used the word 'experience' in this chapter. German is a much better language for discussing experience as it has a rich vocabulary around this idea which is inaccessible to us.

In outdoor learning we use accepted meanings to help people on our courses understand the processes they are engaged in such as concepts of ecology or teamwork. We are also aware that there are alternative or complimentary meanings available. We tend to draw on the most appropriate 'view' of the world to help the group at the time.

## **Experiential learning and indigenous learning**

So far I have described a process of valuing our experiences that builds a set of concepts of our inner and outer worlds. We identify objects, processes and ideas and we develop a sense of worth in relation to these concepts - it's a good thing or a bad thing. We also come to realise that this may depend on the context we are in and that others may share our views or differ from them. Through this social interaction we develop a sense of right and wrong. The whole process is possible through lived natural and social experiences.

Charlene Spretnak (1997) called this approach and the trend towards understanding our relationships with nature and with each other in this way the resurgence of the real. By this she means the building of our worlds on the foundations of natural, personal and so authentic experiences.

Mary Midgley (1995) discusses whether the development of values is a natural or cultural, nature or nurture, process. She concludes that we have a genetic predisposition to develop values and a morality but that this trait is what she describes as having an open genetic propensity. The predisposition is not deterministic but lends itself to influence by experience. Learning, she argues, is also a natural and open trait that creates the urge to seek such experiences from which to learn and so evolve our personal world views.

I could identify more natural human tendencies for which we have a genetic predisposition and which are developed by experience, developmental processes that we have learned to value. So far, in this chapter, I have referred to learning, socialising, exploring, valuing, moralising and meaning making as human attributes valued as a part of human nature. Colin Mortlock (1979), in his book *The Adventure Alternative*, proposed a list of six virtues that he believed were developed by adventure experiences.

Like Graham Ellis-Smith (1999), who has studied the personal, communal and natural relations of the indigenous people of south west Australia, I would like to call this authentic development of personal and social values 'indigenous'. Indeed, like Ellis Smith, I would argue that much of our attraction to outdoor experiences is a desire to return to indigenous learning situations.

## **Facilitating experience**

Experiential and outdoor education are both founded on the belief that the natural or indigenous process of learning can be enhanced and accelerated by facilitation much as elders or shamans would have steered the development of people in their communities. As an outdoor facilitator I both orchestrate the experiences on which people are drawing and influence the conversations about these experiences. Just as shamans might have chosen dramatic and novel experiences to aid development during a rite of passage for example so I use unusual and adventurous experiences to enhance and accelerate the events I design.

Even our theories are based on models and ideas about the natural processes researchers find, for example learning - Kolb's learning cycle, groups - Bion's group development and leadership - Adair's action centred leadership.

## **Detaching meaning from experience: the politics and institutions of experience**

This ability to influence a natural process is powerful. It also allows other approaches to education and training to disturb or interrupt the indigenous learning process so that it is no longer experiential. This can occur accidentally or it can be deliberate for some ulterior purpose.

The process of acquiring a body of meaning in our field is relatively new. Most of this knowledge has been introduced from the related fields of psychology and ecology. When the fit is 'good enough' the theory has become established. Several books illustrate this eclectic process for example Ken Ogilvie's (1993) 'Leadership and Management in the Outdoors' and Peter Barnes' (1997) 'Outdoor Education: Theory and Practice'.

Every leader has been on a steep learning curve applying these theories in their own particular context. One result of this professional evolution has been a loss of value attached to the personal or indigenous knowing developed through the experience. These understandings are suppressed by the provision of readily applicable abstract alternatives. The facilitator listens less attentively to the group whilst the group listen more attentively to the facilitator instead of to their experiences and to each others interpretations of those experiences. The creative and imaginative process of value and meaning making are essentially switched off and the experience is no longer interpreted authentically. This tendency is supported by the fact that it is easier to market the outcome of predetermined ideas than it is to sell an experience with no predictable outcome.

The use of experience as the carrier for an idea has occurred before in the evolution of outdoor experiential learning although from different motives. The power of outdoor and other sensual group experiences was tapped very successfully by the leaders of the Hitler

Youth Movement to carry their messages of fascism. The processes of imparting and indoctrination are on a continuum. This might seem an extreme point to make. However, the power of outdoor experiences to carry established messages about the right way to behave has not gone unnoticed whether the context be fitting employees to organisations, young people to society or people to nature.

My argument is not that such applications are necessarily a bad thing. It depends. Provided the participants are connected to the context of a place and a culture, they are, as in the words of my title, necessarily doing the right thing or at least following the right process. It becomes a problem when some authority is attached to established and abstract ideas that are not authentic to the experience of the group. This can be justified as part of the development of young people emerging into adulthood and exploring the context of their culture. It is more like oppression when it is applied to an adult. Such an approach needs a more rigorous defence such as a therapeutic or corrective situation before it is used in this context.

## **Real experiential learning**

The approach of using experiences to impart abstract ideas is not I believe experiential education. In this situation experience is being used as a proving ground of a fixed idea. As I have explained above experiential learning is, by its nature, a source of emerging ideas rather than a place to demonstrate them.

An example will illustrate the difference. Team working is a common theme of outdoor and experiential learning programmes. Outdoor experiences provide many and varied team work opportunities. It is also a topic which is rich in abstract ideas such as models and theories of team roles, group dynamics and group development familiar to most outdoor and experiential educators. It is common to use one or more of these theories to help a group understand its process. This is a valid approach but not I would argue an experiential one.

How would an experiential approach be different? For a start I have argued that, for learning to have occurred from an experience, it does not need to be articulated. Much of value is learned sensually. But, we are social animals and team work is a social process. Conversations considering teamwork are inevitable and provide another opportunity for important learning to occur. However, instead of providing a ready made theory with which to understand the experience the experiential facilitator would work with the group to build a theory in action based on their own experience. The participants already have an understanding of what it feels like to belong to groups and to this group in particular. By facilitating a discussion it is possible to build their own language and concepts about groups based on their experience and specific, and so functional, to their context. This would by my definition be an indigenous approach to learning and I believe much more likely to have an impact on values and behaviours than the simple acquisition of abstract knowledge informed by an experience.

## **The value of outdoor experiential learning**

Many people believe that outdoor learning is a good thing. In a world that is increasingly disconnected from the real and that relies on vicarious and abstract ideas I believe that outdoor learning when it can be recognised as truly experiential in its indigenous form is not only a good thing but a better thing. It develops our natural learning tendencies and allows the emergence of a personal moral framework in a way that restores the connection to the real in nature and culture. It is a sustainable way to a participative democracy and a fulfilling life. Instead of creating an audience holding its breath we can create participants breathing deeply.

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