

A good article to read if you are looking for evidence and understanding that retreating from your habitual lifestyle for a period of time can bring about greatly needed change within. The Body Harmony One Month Retreat has the benefits of offering the possibilities of bodily felt change as well and an exquisite natural environment to awaken more of you from.

Retreat to Return: Reflections on group-based nature retreats

By Mark Boulet & Anna Clabburn

"In wildness is the preservation of the world"
– Thoreau

"To some extent the personal spiritual journey is a contradiction since the great spiritual truths are collective, transpersonal – anything but personal: They are ...ageless...shared... It is conversation and dialogue for which our heart longs and this realization draws us back into community again." – David Tacey (2000: 209)

This paper about retreats is part of a paper we wrote for the Monash University course, Social and Sacred Ecology. This unit is premised on the belief that environmentally destructive patterns of behaviour and social organisation can only be altered by changing the mindset from which ideas emerge – ie by 'changing consciousness' (Bohm & Edwards, 1991) The idea that the entire developed world needs a mental paradigm shift is not new and a growing number of contemporary writers are stating the need for 're-enchantment' of humanity's psyche (Seed et al 1988; Rozak 1992; Rozak, Gomes & Kanner 1995; Tacey 1995; Abram 1996; Gottlieb 1996; Suzuki & McConnell 1997). These voices are part a global movement calling for fundamental change within the living and working systems of the world's dominant economic cultures, largely motivated by a perceived state of dislocation between mainstream capitalist lifestyles and the ecological world (Hawken et al. 1999; Theobald 1999; Tacey 2000).

Although there is evidence that global business communities and governments are finally paying heed to the imperative of environmental duty of care, there is a sense that this paradigm shift is still largely motivated by economic drivers rather than social and or spiritual vision (Bennett & James 1999). Mainstream society has yet to make an embodied response to the intellectual idea of environmental sustainability. Creating opportunities for physical immersion in nature, such as those offered by Social and Sacred Ecology, is one step towards

awakening a sensory, lived commitment to honoring environmental connection and guardianship (Abram 1996).

The Process Of Retreat - Precedents And Parallels

How can meaningful concern for environmental and social sustainability be embodied? How can the importance, and indeed sacredness, of social and ecological connections be made manifest? This report argues that group wilderness retreats are one medium through which these issues can be explored and experienced. What follows below is an overview of historical and traditional precedents for retreating to nature as a means of healing humanity's rift with the natural world. This research is a prelude to a deeper analysis of certain aspects and processes of retreats and forms the theoretical foundation a wilderness retreat outlined at the end of the report.

The process of retreat is, by nature, a social experience as it usually presupposes reintegration into society at the conclusion of the retreat period (Housden 1995). As writer Peter Timms observes; "solitude is a preparation for social interaction. Retreat is not an escape from society, but a way of dealing more effectively with it. It is...a way of making ordinary life strange"(Timms 2000:203-04).

The section below explores four different types of retreats; those which were historically part of a monastic, contemplative life, those which underpinned the age of the Romantics, indigenous traditions of retreat and contemporary versions of wilderness therapy and experiential education.

Religious/ascetic retreats

Historically and today, religious or 'ascetic' retreat is commonly regarded as a path to awakening the retreatant to the true nature of human existence at a transcendent level - beyond the temporal experience of everyday life. Author James Cowan offers an apt summary of asceticism over the ages, "the ultimate objective of all ascetics, whether they are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or Moslem...is associated with the desire to transcend contingent reality in the expectation of experiencing another order of reality altogether" (Cowan 1992:121). As Elizabeth Roberts notes, this urge frequently took the seeker out into the natural world to find objectivity: "Buddha reached enlightenment under the bo tree on the floodplains of the Ganges...Mohammed first heard the voice of the angel Gabriel in the lonely cave on Mount Hira outside of Mecca" (Roberts 1996:261).

In a Judeo-Christian context, the tradition of retreat dates back several centuries prior to Christ's birth, to the practices of early Greek 'Desert

Fathers' hermits who dedicated themselves to 'interior prayer' and sparse personal trappings in pursuit of direct contact with the deity. Later anchorites and monastics who spent time in solitude, such as the various Saints from the 4th – 6th century AD (John the Baptist, Anthony, Paul, Augustine etc), continued seeking retreat as a form of spiritual discipline, in pursuit of metaphysical insight (Housden 1995). Later monastic centres, emergent throughout Medieval Europe in the 13th century, were often founded on the original sites occupied by these early solitarie a significant indicator of the sacred relationship built over time between place and spiritual practice (Besse 1996).

Religious retreat can be regarded as metaphor or rehearsal for human death. The isolation, deprivation and physical pain often associated with, for instance, ascetic or zealous Buddhist retreat practices are envisaged as necessary lessons, leading to transcendence and a heightened awareness of the interconnection between the impermanence of all living beings (Mackenzie 1998). In this light, solitary retreat is very much a prelude to broader social and ecological connection, ideally framed through an awakening to the sacred significance of these links. As Timms suggested above, it is a journey out into nature that involves keeping the mind on the return.

Interestingly, contemporary permutations of these early religious practices, such as the United States Creation Spiritualists of today, tend to emphasise the more corporeal aspects of Medieval Christian tradition, such as the nature-based work of Hildegard of Bingen. This proclivity indicates a desire to move away from the physical remoteness of historical asceticism and return instead to an earth-oriented, embodied sense of sacred connection (Fox 1991). In this context retreat is envisaged as a path to realising closer communion with the natural and social world as well as a path to sacred meaning in itself.

Romanticism and the creative tradition

"To Nature.

*It may indeed be phantasy, when I
Essay to draw from all created things
Deep, heartfelt, inward joy that closely clings;
And trace in leaves and flowers that round me lie
Lessons of love and earnest piety.
So let it be; and if the wide world rings
In mock of this belief, it brings
Nor fear, nor grief, nor vain perplexity.
So will I build my altar in the fields,
And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be,
And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields*

*Shall be the incense I will yield to Thee,
Thee only God! And thou shalt not despise
Even me, the priest of this poor sacrifice"*

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1836

There is a long tradition of artists turning to nature for solace and inspiration (Gablik 1991). Among the most salient periods of nature worship was the Romantic age of 18th - 19th century Europe. Artists and poets of this time became renowned for their heady love affair with wild or 'sublime' nature: wilderness that literally dwarfed mankind yet evoked an ardent spiritual sense of connection, often blending fear with elation (Burke 1891).

This vision is well captured by a painter of the time, Carl Gustav Carus (a disciple of the great sublime painter Casper David Freidrich) in a letter about landscape: "When man, sensing the immense magnificence of nature feels his own insignificance, and, feeling himself to be in God, enters into this infinity and abandons his individual existence, then his surrender is gain rather than loss. What otherwise only the mind's eye sees, here becomes almost literally visible: the oneness in the infinity of the universe" (Rosenblum 1975: 22).

During the Romantic period it became common for writers to sojourn into nature in search of personal and universal enlightenment. Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary* is perhaps one of the most well known examples of literary nature retreat, in which the writer walks out among trees and animals to ruminate on his society and himself in relation to it (Rousseau 1927). This form of retreat, by contrast with the experience of a religious recluse, was oriented towards social and individual enlightenment and, as such, conceived nature as a backdrop to human activity rather than as a source of organic relation. Although the Romantics often anthropomorphised nature, their musings and images also evidenced underlying expectation that communion with nature might result in a more intimate understanding, or sacred sense, of self in the world (Housden 1995: 141).

Housden observes that all creative work—whether painting, dance, poetry or making music may indeed be regarded as a form of 'retreat' in that it usually demands suspension of normal activity for the purpose of translating personal observation into forms that can be shared with others (Housden 1995). The creative mind is accustomed to retreating into itself as a means of gaining subtle insight into the natural world. The results of this engagement are then returned to society, often in forms capable of eliciting equally ardent personal response in the observer/ audience.

Indigenous retreats

Indigenous creativity and ceremony are perhaps one of the most pertinent examples of how retreat into nature enhances sacred links with living ecology beyond the self. Many traditional cultures around the world use time apart from the habits of communal life to mark significant rites of passage or ritual moments such as death or birth. In the majority of cases there is an intimate link between what occurs during the retreat process and how this informs social and spiritual behaviour back amid one's community.

Australian Aboriginal custom involves nature retreat as an important stage in the initiation of adolescents. James Cowan writes about the significance of the dream journey undertaken by young men, both on the cusp of maturity and later in life as a reinforcement of their traditional bond with their home country (Cowan 1992). As in traditional ascetic and Buddhist retreat practice, physical pain in this context is viewed as a tool for enhancing the individual's sense of place in the broader living world.

In their survey of tribal Aboriginal custom, Anna Voigt and Nevill Drury describe how indigenous initiation is informed by a powerful legacy of environmental duty-of-care, via emphasis on guardianship over tribal country: "once a man has been initiated he has clear obligations, as a custodian of specific sacred lands and totemic spaces, to safeguard his country and help propagate the natural species which are within his sacred domain" (Voigt & Drury 1997: 154). Such formal retreat into nature re-enforces social and sacred links with place in a way that nurtures both tribal society and local ecology over generations.

Although Aboriginal dream journey retreat involves private psychological ordeal, the fact that it takes place in nature reinforces its role as a communally oriented experience, linking the individual to relatives (human and non-human) and place. Cowan notes how the notion of solitude, in the sense that it was conceived within European spiritual tradition, is completely alien to Aborigines: "*(where) the anchorite deliberately attempts to deprive himself of the significance of his physical reality...the Aborigine sets out to consort with his....He does not want to attain spiritual knowledge outside the tribal forum ...even when he is physically alone (he) lives in and is sustained by a metaphysical community ...An Aborigine is conscious that wherever he walks he confronts the remnants of mythic drama and its concomitant prohibitions... A man does not walk free into a desert landscape...instead he is forever living within mythic territory created by ancestral heroes.*" (Cowan 1992: 117-128).

This sense of profound mythical connection between individual and collective spirituality echoes through many tribal cultures today, in spite of the mass desecration of traditional wilderness homelands. As David Abram writes, a vital key to the health of such ancient social and sacred connection lies in the hands of elders or shamans who ritually retreat from their community to sustain primal links with "the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded." (Abram 1996: 8) In this way indigenous cultures regard ecological and spiritual knowledge as a living narrative inheritance, vital to the survival of their own society.

Wilderness therapy and experiential education today

"To go on a wilderness retreat is to return to our instincts and begin to open the sluice-gates through which the authentic feelings for life – awe, dread, wonder, marvel, joy – can pour." (Housden 1995: 167-169)

Historical and indigenous forms of nature retreat provide the basis for a growing number of organisations offering intensive outdoor programs as a means of healing contemporary social problems. (Tiggelen, 2002) The adventure therapy course is premised on the notion that human beings are limited to habitual patterns of behaviour by the way they envisage their own life stories. It is believed that these paradigms can be shifted by the natural challenges arising from living in wild nature. As Michael Gass of the Association of Experiential Education suggests, "Experiential learning is predicated on the belief that change occurs when people are placed outside positions of comfort (ie homeostasis)...and into states of dissonance. In these states, participants are challenged by the adaptations necessary to reach equilibrium. Reaching these self-directed states necessitates... resultant growth and learning" (Gass 1993: 4).

Widely recognised international programs such as Outward Bound and contemporary versions of native American Vision Quests regard nature as an 'outdoor classroom', capable of awakening people to their higher 'integrated' self (Foster & Little 1989). Course participants retreat to wilderness to face physical and psychological challenges that act as metaphors for real-life ordeals. In this context the natural realm becomes a mirror reflecting the participant's reactions, strengths and weaknesses enabling a shift in habitual mindset and the potential for positive life change (Gass 1993).

Although these courses tend to emphasis goals such as personal growth, learning outdoor and camping skills, and improved social dynamics, there is often an implicit intention to increase participants' environmental consciousness. One website advertising an Oregon-based Vision Quest program claims to, "deepen the sense of connection and belonging to the

natural environment, helping heal the separation from the earth that is the condition of modern times”(Tilt 2002). Similarly, Outward Bound claims aptitudes commonly acquired by course participants include skills that are also valuable real-life tools for environmental activism and advocacy, such as “emotional control, hardiness, leadership ability, open thinking, social cooperation” (Neill 1998).

The act of placing oneself in the wild and of tuning into the intricate texture and dynamism of the natural environment is a vital step towards awakening a sense ‘ecological’ self. “In wilderness solitude we are challenged to affirm and confirm our creaturehood in relation to the whole of reality chaos. From this perspective, our being is severely tested, and that which remains is respectful in the sense that it is derived from regard for the infinite.”(Vest 1987: 329). By taking groups of individuals into wilderness, the nature retreat is perhaps one of the most effective ways of alerting human beings to their intimate relationship with (and co-dependence on) the rest of the organic world, of “making the ordinary extraordinary” once again (Timms 2001: 203-4).

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