

My Cyclical Holistic Educational Experience
with Camp Bellaleo

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A song by Harry Chapin, entitled “All My Life’s A Circle” (Chapin, 1972) is, to me, the embodiment of wholeness. Gathered around a camp fire with sixty children, leaders and senior staff, the labels and roles of the day fade as these lyrics move heart and spirit, the expression through voice and guitar chords speak of truth and wisdom. Camp is a sacred place; one of wonder and delight, challenge and frustration. It is one place where the range of emotion is explored during a given day and the challenge of life is inescapable. My experience with Camp Bellaleo has, and continues to be, an example of holistic education as its nature is one of balance, inclusion and connectedness while my personal role as holistic practitioner is highlighted through the relationship of teacher and eternal learner (Miller, 1996).

My work at Camp Bellaleo began in the summer of 1993. A residential camp for children and youth aged six and up is distinctive in that it divides the summer by offering the full month of July solely for boys and August for girls. I had never before experienced a solid month almost exclusively of one sex before. The experience provided me with a daily challenge in conflict resolution and flexibility. My role as a Counselor in boys camp for the youngest cabin was an awakening and frightening proposition as it was the beginning of a rich and involved journey that continues today.

My role progressed from counselor to senior staff, program director and drama director to my contribution today as guest artist and, I am proud to say, visitor. Campers who once looked to me for assistance have now grown to fill the positions of counselors-in-training and counselors. Staff who once enjoyed the gathering of children at program are now in the position of creating program and implementing it. People change as do influences, but the soul of camp remains true and alive.

The sounds of laughter and story resonate throughout camp in the cedar strip of a canoe, the pines surrounding Chapel Hill, the yellow Klondike rocks and the decorative painted windows of the dining hall. Each story unique, discovered and retold in some fashion through some tradition each summer. The activities that create camp program are a balance of physical, contemplative practice and social experiences. Each element can be found in every activity, the richness and uniqueness of different qualities inspire the involvement of mind, body, soul and emotion.

The effect of silent water sports (they are silent in that an engine is not employed) such as swimming, sailing and canoeing call for the physicality of balance, strength and coordination but more than that, water seems to have a nurturing effect that invites the spirit to be touched and inspired leading to contemplative thought. Water is a living entity that moves at different rates, ruled by the earth and weather but listening closely one can hear the whisper of spirit singing joyfully in the rough teaming waves and its calm stillness.

The magical experience of canoeing was brought as a gift to me my first summer at Bellaleo. Years before, as a young child, I had the terrifying opportunity to canoe around a lake near a waterfall. I had been taken with water activities, adept at swimming and would later adopt a love of sailing but the proposition of placing myself in this obviously unstable instrument was absurd. I remember being entirely puzzled as to why anyone would take such a risk and furthermore, why all these adults so desperately wanted me to try it. I was clearly the only one who had thought this situation through.

The best those leaders were able to do was to fasten a life jacket to my rigid body as I clung to a tree. Over the years, my memory of the leaders faces have vanished, along with my

fellow campers and even the camp, but I clearly hold in my mind's eye that bright day, the protective tree and the view of that waterfall across the small lake that terrified me so. I am grateful for the patience of those leaders and the proximity of the tree but until my second chance, I had regretted not taking the canoe trip.

My years at Bellaleo met a less terrified and more confident sea-legged me. However, my experience swimming and sailing did not hide the fact that canoeing was brand new to me. I soon discovered the magic inherent in this gentle beast and the sharing of my earlier encounter with the canoe helped other frightened children to venture into this volatile creature.

The craft itself seems mystical. Its circular beginning and end with its pointed bow and stern and swollen hull is shaped like a story in itself. The way it slips through the water in almost a dialogue between its whole and the many layers of water, furthers the story it tells. The canoe may not actually tell the story but it holds one and the traveler must learn of it in the private chant of their mutual excursion.

The balance required is physical in the stability of the particular canoe and its passengers but also the holistic balance of silence and sound in the quality of dialogue, whether discussion of direction, cooperation, battles, reflective thought or private confessions. There is always a balance of narrative in that there is a beginning, middle and end to the trip. Any extended weight or lack of one element would make for an unpleasant journey.

There is the connectedness with the wooden paddle, the ever changing water, the song between fellow canoes and the birds, fish, weather and land masses that are inclusive to compose the excursion. The experience on the water seems to reflect one's inner state, for if I am considerate and connected to my higher spirit, the canoe will be balanced and safe. If I try to

control the circumstances, I will find myself in battle with the canoe regardless of the weather. It would not be truly magical without the sound of the paddle on the canoe rim, the sore, aching knees, the smell of the water, wood and musky life jacket, the fears uncertain adventure and of course, opportunity.

My journey in the canoe led up to the most unlikely event where through camp, I was invited to attend a race with fellow staff members. We tripped to Peterborough where the Nationals were being held and I found myself paddling with incredible scullers and canoers with whom I will never see again unless I spot one in Sydney during my television viewing of the Olympics. A beautiful photo was published in Canadian Geographic that fall of numerous canoes in one of the locks achieving a record for Guinness. I embody one small dot of the ariel view. The small child who would not let go of the tree has come a long way.

The full circle of my experience is echoed in the nature and weather at camp. The warmth of the sun and cover of cloud become substantial in all aspects of camp life especially during water sport and land activities. The cooperative aspect of sport and drama encourage imagination and creativity. Both bring out the most interesting conflicts and ideas, as children and leaders work towards a common goal, however fictitious it may be.

The connections formed in cabins with campers and staff and the interconnectedness and support of staff help to make for lively days and comforting nights. The lessons offered are rich and profound if one allows for their influence, and in my experience, camping is enhanced if one does. It is almost impossible not to be affected by the environment, personalities and the challenge inherent in activities.

Each Sunday there is a short service in this non-denominational camp where time is spent

reflecting on a particular principle. The root of all principles discussed are that of connectedness with spirit. On one particular morning, the Director spoke of the land and the sacredness of the environment. He read from a speech written in 1851 by Seattle, Chief of the Suquamish entitled “How Can You Buy or Sell the Sky?” (Canadian Camping, 1983).

It amazed me then how relevant this passage was even today. Chief Seattle spoke of the white man proposing to purchase land from the native population. In his speech, he describes the rivers as brothers, the perfumed flowers sisters, and the shining water, the blood of their ancestors. “The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man - all belong to the same family” (Canadian Camping, 1983). Energy and spirit are described in a most impassioned way.

Seattle details the white man’s city of 1851 as a city that “pains the eye of the red man” (Canadian Camping, 1983) where “there is no quiet place... no place to hear the unfurling of leaves in spring or the rustle of the insect’s wings. The clatter only seems to insult the ears” (Canadian Camping, 1983). The portrait painted by Seattle is very moving and seems to speak to the soul and heart while appreciating intellect but the part of being that truly is touched by his words is the spirit deep inside me who longs for the delicate hum of nature.

Respect of land, water, wind, air and the earth as a whole is the lesson in Chief Seattle’s timeless wisdom. His is a keen reminder that the “earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected” and that if one mistreats his home it is the “end of living and the beginning of survival” (Canadian Camping, 1983). We see it everywhere we look today in our cities. Survival. It may explain the relief and satisfaction gained from spending time away from the commotion of vehicles and cell phones and why upon returning to the odor of the city,

it's harshness is realized.

As one is appealed to make connection with the earth, it is inevitable that connection is made with one another. The friendships formed in a camp setting run deeper than any other I have known. All relationships in life are invaluable but there is something magical and unspoken in the ones created at camp.

I've found you a thousand times
 I guess you've done the same
 Then we loose each other
 It's just like a children's game
 And as I find you here and now
 The thought runs through my mind
 Our love is like a circle
 Let's go round one more time.
 (Chapin, 1972)

There is a feeling of knowing prior to meeting. The playful advancing of each journey is true yet always tied to this entity of camp life which sustains years after the original experience to reveal this magical friendship, unworn by time and distance. There is a sharing, an inclusiveness and connection that is spoken through the eyes not the mouth.

As a senior staff member I was graced with the honour of planning with my fellow leaders in the fall at a weekend retreat at another camp. Kilcoo Camp is beautiful, especially in the fall with its layer of leaves, a sense of settling down for winter and the breath of the water. This weekend was always an incredible experience where a reuniting of friends and ideas occupied the warm cabin. It was a time when this small group of staff could embrace camp and contact the spirit in us that communicated with the experience of camp. There was time, good food and laughter, bundled sleeps, reminiscing and planning. For me it was a time of stretching and challenge to embrace nature and its knowing.

A holistic educational experience to me is one of growth and challenge through my participation. It can take many forms but each touch my mind, physicality, and spirit. These elements are equally questioned and asked to stretch as the experience imposes the balance of delight and obstacle. There is no one way that I have learned as a student and not a single way I have taught, but I know abundantly when the occasion has moved me holistically, the experience is fully engaging and calls on every element I rely on and for new ones to be found.

I think, once a camper, always a camper, an adventurer, a team participant, a creative soul. These people are teachers, perhaps not professionally, but a child who spends time at camp teaches all about the uniqueness and fragile strength of individuals. A successful leader at camp teaches the same things. The adventure lies in the recognition of the multiple representations.

Another Harry Chapin song that is sung around the campfire at night is entitled “Flowers are Red” (Chapin, 1978). It tells of a little boy who went to school and began painting flowers using a multitude of colours. The teacher scolds him for painting when it was not time and for using all the colours. Clearly, in her mind, “flowers are red, green leaves are green and there’s no need to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen” (Chapin, 1978). The little boy responds “there are so many colours in the rainbow, so many colours in the morning sun, so many colours in a flower, and I see every one” (Chapin, 1978). After a long, hard lesson of exclusion, the child is broken into believing that the teacher’s way is how it should be done.

When the child moves to another town and meets a new teacher, this teacher encourages creativity and development but the doctrine is set in the child. The song made me tear every time it was sung as I know, as a student, this imprint of ideas. My fear as a teacher is that I may trip into this mistake. Not one of ridicule and exclusion but of selecting a belief and perhaps with the

pressures of the day and agendas, supporting a value that I, myself, may change opinion of through further experience. I would hope that through the practice of respect and critical refrain, my way of being would teach the spiritual and natural laws that are authentic in my life. It is up to the student to choose what is right for their life. However, the mutual existence of the group in the educational experience calls for a mutual agreement of respect and trust.

I have seen, in my work at Camp Bellaleo, times of trust that have excelled the group and its leaders to a higher place of being. I have also seen when trust is lacking and the group cannot further themselves. It is like the canoe, when one is against the spirit of the journey, it is a great effort to propel the craft. As it is true with teaching and learning, it is a craft, an art, a holistic experience. My emphasis as a teacher has been to express the sacredness of each other, the space in which we work and the natural laws of drama. Without this understanding the magic remains hidden, but with it, the possibilities soar.

The profound growth in the children is not always evident in the chaotic moment and perhaps may not be determined concretely from summer to summer. I have had the opportunity to return to camp where some of the same campers and many, many new faces have grown filling new, older bodies, minds and roles. It is upon returning that I am given the privilege to find the evolution of these people. They are still energetically struggling with life which is promising. I see that as a tremendously positive sign.

As far as Camp, I can see where my influence has remained and thrived and where other's have developed it. The food may have improved, the equipment newer but the shady tree where drama took place daily still stands tall and leafy and the sounds of camp life are music to my ears. The advantage now is, I get to carry this bundle in my heart down the road to the city and

live it here.

The holistic nature of camp demands participation and commitment to the children, environment, colleagues and the program. It asks of challenge of one's beliefs, always revising, and consistently implementing them in all dealings with a diverse population. Maintaining a holistic educational experience of balance, connectedness and inclusion is paramount. I have built a great deal of my foundation during my years at Camp Bellaleo and I carry it closely with me in all my affairs. It has been a terrific learning experience and continues to be a practice for teaching. In the great words of Harry Chapin, the circle continues, as:

It seems like I've been here before, I can't remember when,
and I've got this funny feeling, that we'll all get together again;
There are no strait lines make up my life, and all my roads have bends,
there are no clear cut beginnings, and so far no dead ends.
All my life's a circle, sunrise and sun down,
the moon rose through the nighttime, till the day break comes around;
All my life's a circle, and I can't tell you why,
the season's spinning round again, the years keep rolling by.
(Chapin, 1972)

And so it is.

References

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