

Wilderness: A Place for Ethical Inquiry

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Abstract—This paper describes an unusual use of wilderness for inquiry: a college course in ethics which includes a 10 day wilderness trip as an integral part of the course. Through a combination of traditional classroom learning and experiential education students are encouraged to develop a new vision of ethics – ethics as a kind of wisdom about how to live a full and richly satisfying life. Students come to rely on the awe inspiring sublimity and beauty found in the San Juan mountains of southwestern Colorado to explore first-hand what it means to live as an ethical community in the wilderness.

The course “Ethics as Wisdom” is offered during summer term at a liberal arts college in northern New York State. The first eight to ten days of the course are taught on campus in a classroom setting. It is highly intensive: We meet six hours each day, and students have reading and writing assignments on top of that. Of course, we don’t try to conduct intensive discussions the entire time. On a typical day, two hours might be devoted to intensive discussion of readings on ethical theory, an hour would go to watching a video, another hour or two would be devoted to discussing the video, and an hour would be devoted to planning our wilderness trip. All of these elements are related, since the video provides content for ethical reflection, and we approach the trip planning as an opportunity to practice foresight and forethought, and to discuss their role in a well-lived life.

Course Overview

After the intensive on-campus segment, course participants fly to Durango, Colorado, and we spend eight to ten days in the Weminuche Wilderness of the San Juan Mountains. This trip is the culmination of the course, after which students write a take-home final exam, explaining what they learned about ethics from the course. The role of this wilderness segment of the course is the main subject of the rest of our paper.

Obviously, the course is an exercise in experiential education. It makes no attempt to compete with a regular semester course in breadth of coverage. It would not be a good substitute for a regular classroom course in ethical theory or for a student preparing to take a standardized exam on

ethics. Instead, its purpose is to have a deep impact on the student’s thinking about a limited range of ethical topics.

In teaching this course, we make certain assumptions. One is that many of our students think of ethics and morality as a set of prohibitions imposed on the individual from without, prohibitions that prevent one from doing what one truly wants. The key ideas here are that ethics is primarily a set of rules, that it is imposed on the individual by some alien authority, and that it results in unwelcome and restrictive prohibitions.

We try to bring students to see ethics quite differently in our course. In the new vision, the key ideas are that ethics is not primarily external rules but internal know-how, that it comes not from without but from one’s own wisdom, and that feeling ethical living as a series of limitations is largely a result of failing to fully understand the relevant issues.

We present ethics as a kind of wisdom, wisdom about how to live so that one’s life is as rich, as deep, as satisfying as possible. As such, far from being an alien imposition, ethical knowledge is the most important kind of knowledge a person can have. Ethics, we teach, is not something handed down from above, but a necessity that grows out of the human condition. We have needs – not only for food and shelter, but also for security, love, approval, stimulation, activity, meaning – that cannot be adequately satisfied in isolation. The nonhuman universe may at times present a face of indifference and even hostility. And yet, this same universe is our home, and we are not ill adapted to live here. With a bit of luck, and a measure of wisdom, we can satisfy our needs, richly, and we cannot merely live, but live well.

Because we are social beings, because our lives necessarily at some points and normally most of the time involve life in a group, a great deal of ethics concerns interactions with others. This, however, is the endpoint, not the beginning, a consequence of the importance of others in a well-lived life, not the whole meaning of ethics.

Our course, then, is intended primarily to convey a vision of ethics and its importance. We try to shift our students’ viewpoints and to inspire them to begin to search on their own for wisdom about how to live. “On their own” does not mean without guidance from the great store of ethical wisdom to be found in the artists, philosophers and religious thinkers of our world. It means, rather, that we hope that students will be inspired, having understood the importance of ethics, to search in every source, living or dead, to learn better how to live.

We do not try to teach specific rules or guidelines. Students take away very little from our course about how to behave that they did not bring with them. Our belief is that learning how to live well, how to contribute to the well-lived life for others, is a life-long project. What we hope is not to telescope that project into a few short weeks, but rather to impress upon our students the dignity and value of undertaking such a project with dedication, attention and energy.

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Underlying Conception of Course _____

Since the object of ethics is living well, rules stand to true ethics as a textbook stands to good flyfishing. What is in the book may be perfectly true, but what matters is what one can actually embody in one's fishing. So with ethics, rules are fine so far as they go, but the trick is to embody them spontaneously, and with good judgment on all the occasions when they are called for. This is an art, not a science. It might be described as the difference between "knowing that" (the rules) and "knowing how" (in actual conduct). It is important, of course, to know that you shouldn't harbor a grudge, but this is only the starting point, for one must also know how to avoid doing this in all the many ways it is possible. This, then, is one major reason why our course must have an experiential component. One acquires skill, not from a book, but from practice, and so to the degree that ethics involves skill, students must practice. Our short course doesn't, of course, give them a great deal of practice, but still it is essential that students go beyond mere classroom memorizing or theorizing. However tentatively, they must try to live by the light of what they are learning, for what they are learning is nothing unless it is lived.

So the purpose of our course is to convey to students this perspective, and thereby to motivate them to begin their own lifelong search for ethical wisdom. We think that experiential education is essential for this purpose. Arguably, information and purely intellectual skills are best taught in the traditional classroom setting. So the traditional classroom approach—suitably enriched by art (videos) and practice (the planning) – is important. But to reach our students in a way that is likely to have a lasting effect on their motivation, and to help them understand fully how ethics is practical wisdom rather than a body of abstract rules, we need the power of experience. This is the reason for the field trip.

Importance of the Wilderness Setting _____

It would be natural – one might even expect – that we would teach environmental ethics using a wilderness trip as a vehicle. And to a small degree we do this. Naturally, we teach students to travel lightly and with minimal impact, and naturally conversation turns at times to the disturbing and ambivalent relationship we moderns have with the natural world.

This isn't, however, the main focus of course. Our subject is the more encompassing one, ethics, of which environmental ethics is a part. So the question is, why? What are the qualities of the wild setting that enhance our ability to teach ethics? Why do we think wilderness invites students to explore more deeply than they would in a classroom the way they have, do and shall live their lives? The answer to these questions can be organized under four headings: The Self, Life With Others, The Sublime and Beauty.

The Self

The quality of one's life depends, of course, on a great many outside things, some of them wholly outside one's control.

Pure luck plays a big part, as do the people one interacts with and the nature of one's society. Still, there is one constant we all have to live with and through – ourselves. With enough malevolence or incompetence, a person can even turn heaven into hell: In fact, some might describe that as a great part of the human story.

We can tell students this in our classroom. We can illustrate it with films and stories. We can arrange discussions in ways intended to make it more personal and more memorable. But the beauty of backpacking together in the wilderness is that it gives us constant little reminders and illustrations of how one's happiness depends on one's self. A sleeping bag badly stowed can mean a wet, cold night with no one to blame but oneself. A harsh word can mean a conflict everyone sees, and an occasion for self-examination one can't escape. A wrong turn on the trail can spell the difference between an easy hike and an exhausting one. On a wilderness trip, the reality that happiness depends on how a person lives is all there, all the time, and all that most instructors have to do is frame it so it gets noticed.

It would be a mistake, however, to think, that all the lessons are negative. On the other side, our students will typically come away from this trip with a new or at least renewed sense of their own capability and competence. These are young people, and for most of them, backpacking up to 14,000 feet is a big adventure. They learn new skills, they tire even their young bodies, and they confront fears and obstacles well beyond those of familiar suburban life. As a result, they come away "high" on themselves, with a sense of their own capability and, we hope, with the thought that they may be able to live their lives a little better, a little differently, than when they entered the course (Bandura, 1977; Ewert, 1983; Gass, 1987; McDonald, 1983; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1983; Schlein, Lais, McAvoy and Schatz, 1990; Young and Crandall, 1984).

Life With Others

The quality of our lives does not depend on us alone. It also depends deeply on the people we interact with, as the quality of theirs depends on us. When we take a small group – never more than 10 people – into the mountains together, we constitute a microcosm of the greater society. That small society does not contain anything like the full range of people and interactions that will appear in a person's life, but it has the great advantage of being eminently observable.

One of the principal reasons our students misunderstand the nature of ethics and its importance to their lives is that our modern society is so big and so complex. Size and complexity frequently insulate us from the consequences of our actions and from the consequences of others' actions as well. If we mess up one place, we can move to another. If we mistreat a friend or lover we can always, we think, find a new one. In the wilderness, however, one can't just move away or move on. Fences have to be mended, or everyone sees the consequences. The whole course lasts only three weeks, and the wilderness trip only eight to ten days, but it is a metaphor, or maybe a laboratory. It gives us a dimension of reality well beyond the classroom setting and a chance to illustrate those classroom lessons (McDonald, 1983; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Zook, 1986).

The Sublime

Theorists about aesthetics in the Romantic period expanded the traditional categories of appreciation from beauty alone to include the sublime. Briefly, beauty is pleasing. The sublime, by contrast, is awesome, overpowering and perhaps even on the edge of frightening.

We find both of these in the wild mountains where we take our students. And we enlist both in the service of our course. We want our students to feel the connection that Immanuel Kant made when he wrote that two things – the starry heavens above and the moral law within – filled him with unending wonder.

From the starry heavens above, from the ancient mountains around them, from the isolation of being miles from towns, roads and the signs of the life they've known – we want our students to feel wonder toward their lives. We want to disrupt the sleepwalking attitude toward life that the comforts and familiarity of the modern world call forth in nearly all of us. We want to disrupt it so students can call into question their normal ways of being and appreciate the possibility of living in new, more deliberate, committed and meaningful ways. They need to feel awe before the immensity of the heavens, the fathomless sweep of time in the ancient mountain stones, the indifference of the elements to whether they live or die. They need this because it is the path that leads them to feel what the Lakota people call the Great Mystery. They must walk that path to be shocked into questioning, in the heart of their hearts, whether they really know exactly who they are, what is important, what kind of life is worthwhile. The timeless rhythms of the natural world remind us of the wonder and mystery of the human situation. They call us to sincere and serious ethical reflection. This is the attitude with which the truly ethical life begins: openness, deep wonder, feeling that one might need and want to live in a radically different way.

This is not to say that we teach our students that all they have believed about ethics has been wrong. That would be ridiculous. It is not that we want them to give up all their previous beliefs and start anew. Rather, we seek an attitude of openness, a readiness to commit – or to recommit – to live consciously, deliberately and conscientiously. And this is a big part of why we seek wilderness.

Wilderness affords a timelessness and permanence that can be a model for students. They can seek, that is, for ethical certainty in a world full of distasteful uncertainty and ambiguity. At the same time, however, they must remain open and receptive to the inevitable change that constitutes a life fully lived – not without risk, painful at times – but deeply gratifying and enriching, if one is willing to engage in deep, ongoing ethical inquiry.

Beauty

In the wilderness, our students encounter not only the sublime, but the beautiful, and this quality of wild nature has a place in our course just as important as that of the sublime. When confronted with the sublime, we hope our students feel awe and eeriness, their apparent insignificance, and the presence of powers far greater than they are.

They need to be shaken out of their everyday complacency so that they can entertain the possibility of transforming

their lives, giving them a new seriousness and deliberate-ness. But awe and disorientation, by themselves, could be stultifying instead of inspiring. One might respond with despair rather than dedication to the immensities of time and space, the indifference of the physical universe toward our lives.

Here, then, is the role for beauty in our course. By “beauty,” we mean not only the sensuous beauty of the mountain vistas, the setting sun, the fragrance of the forest and the song of winds and birds. We mean all the simple pleasures, the feelings that life is good, that we associate with a well-planned trip in wild nature. We mean the grateful ease of rest much needed, the rich taste of food well earned, the peace of a world of gentle sounds and deep silence, the satisfaction of personal limits transcended, hard tasks accomplished. Not least, we mean the quiet calm of a simple, uncluttered and deeply satisfying life of the kind one lives, when skilled, in nature. With the right knowledge and the right companions, with effort and skill and a bit of luck, the sublimity of nature is not the final word on human life, but the environment within which we can and must create our own happiness.

By the end of the trip, the beauty, peace and satisfaction of life in the wild resonates within all who participate, and its message is unmistakable. Despair in the face of the sublime is not the justified response, for if we choose to live with wisdom, we can live in joy and happiness – we can live in beauty. The message is part of a Navajo song from long, long ago:

In beauty, I walk
To the direction of the rising sun
In beauty, I walk
To the direction traveling with the sun
In beauty, I walk
To the direction of the setting sun
In beauty, I walk . . .
All around me my land is beauty
In beauty, I walk
Navajo (Yebechi) chant

Conclusion

This is why we take our students to learn ethics in the wilderness. We do not seek to teach them a list of “do’s” and “don’t’s” or even much at all about how to act in specific situations. We seek, instead, to inspire them to dedicate themselves to a passionate and personal search for ethical wisdom. We think we can show them a microcosm of their lives in wilderness, one small enough to be comprehensible, but rich enough to teach valuable lessons about how their own happiness and the happiness of those they care for depends on their possession or lack of ethical wisdom. We count on the sublimity of a life in nature to unsettle the students and open them to the possibility of a life-transforming experience. And we enlist the beauty of a life in nature to give them the experience of how rich a life well lived can really be.

What our course says about wilderness is not, we think, new or unexpected. It merely confirms what those who know wild places in fortunate circumstances have always said.

In wilderness, we are reminded of the essentials of the human condition. Because it is wild, we are there alone or in

small numbers. We are thus reminded of the dependence of our happiness and even survival on our own wisdom and the qualities of those around us. In the classroom, a student will often ask, in a tone that makes clear that the question is purely rhetorical, "Who's to say what's right or wrong?" In the wild, by contrast, it begins to dawn on them that they know a great deal about right and wrong, and that if they make the wrong choice, misery could follow with dismaying swiftness.

Wilderness also reminds us of how small and fragile, how temporary and tentative our lives are in the scale of nature's great sweep. In the city and the suburbs, one hardly notices the moon and stars, even with effort. In the wilderness, by contrast, you can't ignore them, and you can hardly ignore the messages of mystery and grandeur they convey. Life loses its settled nature, and we are called to see it for the great and uncanny mystery that it is. From such understandings can flow a greater depth of living.

Finally, we find great beauty in wilderness. It is, after all, our home, and it should be no surprise that we can find there the source of all art and music. We find peace and joy as well, in a life stripped down to its essentials so that each moment, each sensation, has the possibility of shining like a jewel.

"In wildness is the preservation of the world," Thoreau said. We hope the students in our course will say, "In wildness is the beginning of a new and richer life."

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