

Guy Fawkes River National Park Trip

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A river journey from youthful high ground to the wide and more mature stretches: a cross-curricula adolescent initiation journey.

"Geography is too much pushed into the background these days and treated like the step-child of education. In geography the achievements of all the other lessons should meet and flow together in all sorts of ways."

– R.Steiner in *Practical Advice to Teachers*,
lecture 11 2 Sept 1919

For someone who had been told "not much hope for him in Geography" and then to be fortunate enough to wander the world for 5 years living geography, it was with a great sense of relief, (almost a homecoming) that I entered into a life path of Steiner teaching. When I read what Rudolf Steiner indicated about geography in the first lectures to teachers in 1919 (Steiner, 1976) a whole world opened before me, a burgeoning awareness of how geography could be the weft that draws the curriculum threads together into the rich tapestry of Steiner education. This journey towards the geographical cross curricula study still continues.

Field studies, educational excursions and camping trips are taken on in many forms in Rudolf Steiner schools and so whilst discussing initiation pathways years ago in a main lesson on world peoples, the students questioned, "Where is our initiation?"

Unlike Thoreau in his wanderings, Rousseau with his interest in nature or the pilgrimages by many of the peoples of the world, past and present, a large percentage of students don't even have the luxury of the early morning walk to school

(possibly a mixture of an inherent laziness, modern conveniences and parental fear).

To take an initiation journey of self-sufficiency following the course of a river – with many crossings – is not a new phenomena, but nonetheless a pleasant enough one with students and supportive of their transition into adulthood. In today's world of either extreme sport or more often vicarious 'participation' the good old stroll in the country side is an often overlooked pastime and the modern day initiation into adult hood can sometimes be met by the students or young adolescents, via a case of beer behind the bike shed, not really a significant way to step into the adult world although apparently satisfactory for many.



Team work at crossing river

Twenty years ago I began taking students into the Guy Fawkes River National Park whilst I was teaching at Chrysalis Steiner School in the Thora valley near Bellingen and every two years for the past decade the adolescent year 7 and 8 students from the Armidale Waldorf School have taken on this wilderness initiation process for 10 to 12 days.

The Steiner schools in the Coffs Harbour, Thora and Armidale are fortunate to have in their midst some reasonably large tracts of wild but semi-accessible countryside, mainly State Forests and National Parks. The Guy Fawkes River NP is a unique combination of designated wilderness where you can follow a section of the National Trail through the park - a horse and walking trail from Healesville in Victoria to Cooktown in north Queensland. The Guy Fawkes river flows northward from it's origins on the flanks of the old Ebor volcano over the Ebor falls and along the Demon fault line through a mixture of dry sclerophyll and dry rainforest before heading eastward to join the many tributaries of the Clarence river system.



Choosing a suitable path

Time wasn't to be a determining or limiting factor initially but the ability to carry enough

food was a consideration (due to weight on growing teenage bodies). The offer of pack horses from an old friend in exchange for covering the price of the horseshoes solved this initial logistical dilemma and support from the regional National Park's offices has been of great assistance ever since (and the purchase of a food dehydrator).

As for all good lessons, its purpose evolved, leading to not just an initiation, but also, as a cross-curricula study, to a preliminary investigation into the 12 senses for both students and teachers alike. A journey: like life's journey with the river as metaphor; a journey into the world of nature with – quiet meditative walks, – reflecting on reflections, – developing the social sphere – studying the key learning areas within this context whilst awakening and using all the senses in the world of nature.

Steiner spoke of the nature and function of the human sense-organism in a number of lectures and books and we can gain a small picture of this field of investigation in a quote in Aepli (2008):

'We possess our senses in order to perceive the world, to enrich the kernel of our being through them and to transform them to a higher degree of perfection ... Man has become the sense being he is within the physical world, in order to be able to enrich his inner being through that which he absorbs...'

The following experiences are just a glimmer of what is possible. Here are just the surface layers, revealed both during and in later drama production preparation.

What the students undertake on these excursions is a conscious beginning of this process. They begin by being exposed to the physical world in a strong way through the body senses. This then leads on to a growing ability for self expression.

Movement – the packing up on days of travel, walking beside the flowing river each day downstream toward the unknown, looking back to gain a vision of the distance travelled in a day.



Reflections on reflections

Balance – in preparation, between what to take and what to leave behind, the sort of issues young Parzival had to deal with, and the more tangible reality of slippery rocks at each creek crossing.

Touch – experiencing the boundaries twixt one's body and nettles, ants and hot coals as well as touching the earth lightly, whilst walking or sleeping.

Life – the life nurturing properties of sleeping under the stars and the subsequent joyous awakening at dawn, kookaburras and students alike.

Senses that relate more to the feeling life bring a sentient perceptiveness in the soul life:

Taste – nourished by the wonderful organic/ bio-dynamic menu organised by the students prior to departure, simple meals prepared by the students and eaten together.

Smell – breakfasts to leap out of bed for or sweet perfumes on the air, their sources to be investigated.

Sight – endless new vistas in a natural world, the eddies in the river, shadows of vortices, reflections of ripples undulating on rocks and riparian vegetation, circular patterns on dew laden casuarinas, all optics lessons awaiting to unfold for young and old.

Warmth – the friendships that strengthen by time spent together, mostly happy but not always so, a preparation for community life in adulthood.

And senses that relate more to thinking as a mental capacity, stimulating an awakening and sensitiveness to those around us:

Hearing – after a week of detoxification away from the street lights, sweet shops and video arcades of modern life, we engaged in silent walks,



Quiet moment after breakfast writing poetry.

at first terrifying for some but a relief for others, to stimulate the hearing process.

Language – encapsulating images into word students spent time alone under shady trees and wrote of rocks, water, air and fire and how these elements influence one.

Thought – to give the modern child time to think requires a certain balance of quiet reflective, meditative space in our modern cluttered and fractious world.

From the National Curriculum :

Awareness of self and of others – the care and attention needed on river crossings, sharing the work load around the activities of meal preparation or setting up camp and the general awareness of everyone’s needs as the excursion evolves.

As well as being able to explore the wilderness and oneself within this “common sense-ical” framework of the twelve senses, it is a privilege to have access to the students on a dawn to bed time basis enabling the ‘teacher - guide’ to observe them in their many moods, social interactions and

offer a variety of venues for education via the cross curricula aspect of geography in a teaching day that runs from dawn ‘til dusk and sometimes a little later.

English – conversation, from morning to evening and into bed the yarns of brothers and sisters in a starlit bedroom. Listening to the sounds of the river, forest and so comes the inspirations for writing about the elemental world they are surrounded by and how they see themselves within this world.

Maths – much interest is shown in pre camp calculations of amounts of food needed and how best to divide the weight up. The magic of mapping and distances, pre walk calculations and the visual reality of a good days walk.

Science – mainly Natural Science from a Goetheanistic phenomenological¹ approach, effects of volcanism, faults and the geomorphology of weathering; the life engendering qualities of a young river and the meandering qualities (of river and walkers) as the journey progresses. The curvaceous forms and fragility of Angophoras, wind in the casuarinas and delicate perfume of the native frangipani are just the beginnings of Botany lessons.

The territorial effects of brumbies in the sclerophyll woodlands, the discreteness of rock wallaby colonies, patterns on the river bed created by nesting catfish, channel billed cuckoos challenging currawongs and clusters of beautiful yellow frogs on gravel banks heralding a fresh in the river.

Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) – walking on this journey, one soon becomes aware of walking along a frugal / fruitful fishing path of ancestors for millennia. Although predominantly a

¹ Bortoft, H. [1996]. *The wholeness of nature goethe’s way of science. harrison gardens, Edinburgh: Floris Books.*

vegetarian excursion, the young hunters could oft be seen to crouch beside the stream in search of a little riparian ‘tucker’. The geography of the river journey linking all subjects together as the valley brings together all the elements of her landscape.

Design and Technology – from preparation and dehydration of foodstuffs prior to departure to the culinary delights of campfire cooking - soups, curries, porridge and chapattis, flat or even cylindrical filled with jam or honey, to woodcarving dining utensils and spears, just in case.

Personal Development , Health and Physical Education (DHPE) – *walking* (a pilgrimage) an aspect of life some don't get a lot of in our automotive world, the journeying laden and those joyous day outings unladen. To experience the joys, “trials and tribulations” of a long walk are always a bit hard to fit into the quantitative slots desired by the Board of Studies outcomes but to look into the students eyes at the end of the journey one would have to be blind not to notice that something big and significant had happened in that person's life. Sleeping out under the stars seems to have an extremely nourishing effect, an invigoration of the life forces, as well as a deeper social understanding of classmates.

Arts – although the term ‘visual art’ can often be a synaesthetic experience for some as the Goetheanistic observation process progresses and sketching / drawing combine with experiencing the landscape in a multi sensorial way; musically, lyrics and tunes are composed and sung along the way and in performances. Various plays have evolved out of this arena, “Million Star Hotel” with Kym Pitman in the late 80's (Dr K Pitman's work on Wilderness Theatre has evolved into a Ph.D along with ongoing theatre work from this rich environ) and more recently a work arising from an exploration of the 12 senses “Twelve Bends in the River” was performed by years 7 and 8 at the Armidale Waldorf School.

Language other than English (LOTE) – I need to apologise to our custodians of the land on this issue as there is a lot more work to do on finding time with the elders.

And so it is with an awakening consciousness of the 12 senses and a merging of the Key Learning Areas along with the effects of the Nature Spirits, that we can take a fresh look at regaining what Rudolf Steiner was talking of as geography having the ability to unite all subjects.



Another one of natures wonderful displays.

Moving with students into this out of classroom context with a Goetheanistic approach to learning is not only developing a “... life-attuned thinking into the world that helps us to act in more life-engendering ways” as Craig Holdrege states on the back cover of Nigel Hoffman's book, *Goethe's Science of Living Form*, but also gives the students time; time to study the ripples in the rivulets and the way water returns toward the rapids, to develop those qualities, moving from peak experiences or epiphanies towards the exact sensorial imaginations as discussed in various contexts by Andreas Suchantke (2001), Craig Holdrege and Nigel Hoffman (2006). We may appreciate the pace of education that led the likes of Schaumberger to develop the way he did instead of the premature intellectualisation demanded by our current educational system.

Hopefully with these sorts of projects we, as Steiner teachers, are attempting to work toward an idea-driven education with an idea-driven curriculum keeping well clear of the normal nominal institutions that Christof Wiechert challenged teachers with as a question in the 09 Journal of the Pedagogical Section, lighting the fires of imagination, inspiration and intuition within the students, discernible to parents and others upon their return from the wilderness.

*"The sphere of the Spirit is the Soul's true home, and we will surely reach it ,
By walking in the path of honest Thought ;
By choosing as our guide the fount of love implanted in our heart;*

By opening the eye of our soul to Nature's script spread out before us through all the Universe, Telling the story of the Spirit in all that lives and thrives, and in the silent spaciousness of lifeless things, and in the stream of time – the process of becoming."

R. Steiner

NB: Years 7/8 in Australia is the same age range as American grades 7/8 or Steiner School classes 7/8 ie 13 and 14 year olds.

The author took over this particular class in their year 7. They had had the same class teacher from class one to six. He would like to acknowledge the wonderful assistance from parents and friends in all these endeavours.

Biography Bob Sutherland,

Educated at Otago University, Dunedin and imbued with the strong etheric forces of the lower South Island, before travelling extensively along the mountain chains and river systems of South America and Asia. Teacher training at Lorien Novalis, Sydney before helping co-found Chrysalis Steiner school in the picturesque Bellinger valley and class teaching through the 80's. A sabbatical chasing underground rainbows in the opal fields of Lightning Ridge before returning to teaching and helping take the Armidale Waldorf School into it's year 7,8 phase over the past 14 years.

A keenness to share my passion for craft and the outdoors with adolescent students whilst carrying the research question; what is the healing quality of Nature on the modern youth?

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On a recent Dr Hauschka photo shoot in the Himalayas.

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