

NAFSO Annual Conference Girton College 5-7 January 2011.

Paper in support of workshop -

### “Spirituality in Outdoor Learning”

Since the 1960s there has been a growing interest in and discussion surrounding 'spiritual awareness'.

As an aspect of personal and social development 'spirituality' is firmly embedded in some detail within the National Curriculum (SMSC) for Schools and the Youth Service.

For teachers and leaders working in the outdoor setting, it offers an unrivalled theatre and opportunities for the exploration of this sensitive area for children and young people of all ages. Not to be confused with religion, what we now term 'Contemporary Spirituality' emerges from all the diverse traditions and embraces both those with a faith background and others without.

*“In modernised and free societies, where people have access to diverse views, up to seventy percent of the population have moved away from a single faith tradition. These people have not become atheistic, but have adopted a more general and inclusive approach to spirituality where beliefs and values are holistic and recognises the interdependence of all life”*

(Foundation for Holistic Spirituality).

*“Spirituality is a state of connectedness to life.  
It is an experience of being, belonging and caring.  
It is sensitivity and compassion, joy and hope”*

(U Thant)

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### Spirituality and Spiritual Development with Children and Young People.

Given the opportunity, it is generally agreed that children and young people discover or find their own 'inherent spirituality' through a wide variety of experiences and particularly so in an outdoor setting.

One of the most significant and interesting studies carried out in this respect was that by Michael Paffard of Keele University under the title - “Inglorious Wordsworths” and published by Hoddart and Stoughton 1973). As a keen student of Wordsworth, he set up a study involving sixth form students and under graduates in the Keele area.

Giving no hint of the purpose of the exercise and with the use of questionnaires with 22 answers, one key question relating to a paragraph from the autobiography of W.H.Hudson - “Far Away and Long Ago” in which he describes a transcendental experience in his youth. Respondents who'd had an experience in any way similar were asked to describe it fully.

In response to this key question, there were an astonishing variety of experiences but notably 80% described, occurred out of doors, specially mentioning the countryside, nature, mountains, hills, moorlands and also the sea, lakes, and rivers. They were also more commonly associated with solitude than company and with evening or night.

In a government funded study of young people and spirituality, the National Youth Agency undertook a study in 2005. The consultation carried out by Maxine Green under the heading- “Spirituality and Spiritual Development in Youth Work” was wide ranging and again identified the significance amongst others, of the 'outdoor environment’ in the resulting report - “A Journey of

Discovery”.

In relation to the 'developmental process', the report also draws attention to the National Occupational Standards in Youth Work and the need for leaders - ' to recognise and understand their own spiritual self, and its influence on the way in which they work with young people - of being rather than doing.

For those seeking a greater understanding of the learning or development process of spirituality and outdoor learning, the- “International Journal of Children's Spirituality” may be of assistance in the analysis of experiences.

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### Early Years

For those working with Early Years children, the Steiner Waldorf approach with Kindergarten (3-7) year age group is worthy of study together with its surrounding associated literature. The nurturing of this age group, the preservation of childhood and connection with nature is seen as a vital foundation since -

*“Children come into life with a sense that the world is good, beautiful and true. They live in a dreamy, fairytale consciousness - different from adults- within which they feel completely connected with all that surrounds them.*

*Stillness, peace and time to be in the natural world are essential to experiencing the wonders of life. Through the nourishment of their senses children deeply experience sunlight and darkness, sparkly frosts and fires, muddy puddles and flower-filled meadows as they joyfully celebrate the seasons of the year through all that nature brings”*

( Kindergarten Parents' Handbook)

### Spirituality and Working with Secondary Age Group.

Experience shows that the subject be approach initially through the exploration and use of **values**, **relationships** and **ethics**. Because of the confusion surrounding 'spirituality' - the use of the 's' word is best left until identified by the individual or it emerges from group discussion. This age group is likely to have strong views of 'right and 'wrong' surrounding these topics and can produce lively debate.

A four year programme funded by the Rank Foundation aimed at self selecting young disadvantaged youngsters within an existing voluntary organisation explored this approach successfully 2000 – 2004.

The programme sought to challenge the general 'outdoor residential' experience with the concept of a week-long small group retreat within an intentional residential community in a remote setting. Every 3 youngsters making up the group of 12 -18 in number was required to be accompanied by a 'mentor' who took part in all activities and also retained contact with the participants after the event to the follow-up week end some months later. The retreat had no formal programme but was allowed to evolve by mutual consent and negotiation by the group and adult facilitator and included some demanding household chores.

The experience included a twice daily 'review' session in what participants called a 'safe space' where their contributions would not be judged or ridiculed.

In addition to discussion participants also used art, including collages using natural materials or flotsam found on the beaches together with drama and writing to explore the recurring and key theme of relationships in respect of -

Relationship to Self, Relationship to Others, Relationship to Nature and Relationship to the transcendental, the Divine, the Eternal or the Infinite.

This led to some honest from the heart statements of astonishing revelation and so unlike the traditional 'residential' usually following a full and activity packed programme. The substantially more relaxed and calm approach together with a feeling and security of 'safe space' where they could speak freely, resulted in some interesting insights reported thus -

*“At first I found it hard to sit and relax and take time for myself. It didn't feel natural for me having nothing to do and my body couldn't not shut down from its normal routine of rushing around. It took me a while to fully relax and start appreciating the time I had”.*

*“ On my solo in the woods I attained a stillness of my mind and I became aware of my own thoughts. I could no longer block my thoughts out because I had no pressures or demands being thrown at me so I had nothing else to detract me “.*

*“ At the beginning of the week I felt as though my mind was a big waterfall with thoughts tumbling down like rushing water. By mid-week it had begun to settle down and become a quiet river and then by the end of the week it was like a peaceful ocean without waves”.*

*“Creating space where trust, love, belonging, peace and grace became living practices while walking at the leading edge”.*

*“Living so simply in the natural surroundings, the experience was like being high on nothing”*

### Wonder and Awe.

Used frequently to define reaction to a 'wow' experience of maybe a landscape or feature, a spectacular view or a clear night sky, but what is the child or young person really experiencing in this 'personal moment'? Here lies the opportunity for discussion or reflection and the capture of that 'magic moment' in drawing or writing ? However care is needed in this area of sensitivity -

*“I believe that spirituality can only be experienced and as such cannot be taught. We should not to try to label experiences as 'spiritual' but rather to allow young people the possibility that there is another dimension to all our lives that can nurture us in a way that is unattainable elsewhere. This might be left as a private experience but sharing such beliefs can also validate young people's feelings and not leave them feeling weird, strange or isolated”*

Steve Witt-Youth Development Officer.

*“Few of us know how to gently approach the mysteries and wonder of nature, to find real simplicity in the wilds, to set the stage for an experience of the eternal. The infinite, the ineffable. With few exceptions, organisations that lead people into wild country simply hope that that such experiences will occur, for those are the moments we remember and cherish the most. We know we are moved by our experiences in nature, but few of us can really articulate how or why?”*

( Brown / anon)

Why such magic moments can be so profound perhaps lies in the review by Ian Skelly of “Harmony” a recent book by HRH Prince Charles in Jan/Feb issue of Resurgence Magazine -

*“Our mechanistic-based culture persuades us that we can travel off tangentially in a straight line; that we can stand apart from Nature's patterns and processes and remain immune to her necessary limits; that we can do all of this without the balance of Nature's sustaining systems suffering any form of 'dis-ease'. The truth is that, for these complex systems to sustain us, we also have to sustain her. We must operate in synchrony with the grammar of life's patterning in order to serve the coherence of the whole. This also explains why I found the Prince takes a slightly different view to that oft-quoted idea in environmentalism. To say “we are apart of Nature not a part from it” could*

*still be seen as remaining in the mechanistic model. It suggests that life on Earth is a device constituted of a series of parts. Yet, the most recent studies in astrophysics serves to support what many ancient sages freely taught: that it would be far more precise to say that we are Nature. Not only do we inhabit the universe, but the universe inhabits us. There are no parts as such: everything contains the whole, just as the whole contains its teeming diversity. And this is why we have to recognise that what we do to the Earth is intimately fused with what we do to ourselves. If we fail the Earth we fail humanity”.*

(Resurgence Magazine No 246 Jan/Feb 2011)

### Magic Moments and Nature

The evolutionary biologist Dr Elizabeth Sahtouris talks of 'rejoining nature' and taking our lead from nature's secrets while Dr Stephan Harding, co-ordinator of the MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College holds similar views and has collaborated with James Lovelock in the development of the Ghia theory.

Coupled with the Dr Rupert Sheldrake's work on morphic resonance and consciousness which brings into the debate, the creative activity of God, we can perhaps have a greater understanding of the child's absorption or even ecstasy experienced in the magic moment.

In addition to the sages and mystics referred to above, the romantic poets captured this interconnectedness also-

*Man, tread softly on the Earth  
What looks like dust  
Is also stuff of which Galaxies are made.  
The green of Earth's great trees and simple grasses  
Is the same music played in red throughout our trunks and limbs  
The first eye broadcast thought. /-----*

*O Earth, living, breathing, thinking Earth  
On the day we treasure you  
As you have treasured us  
Humanness is born.*

Evelyn Nolt  
(The Glory Which is Earth)

To fully appreciate the the importance of the connection with the natural world and the bigger picture or what we can term the - 'Evolutionary Challenge of Our Time' this is captured in the following statement -

*“A Universal Human is one who is connected through the heart to the whole of life, attuned to the deepest intelligence of nature and called forth irresistibly by Spirit to creatively express his or her gifts in the evolution of self and the world. Above all, a Universal Human has shifted identity from the separated egoistic self to the deeper self that is a direct expression of service. To become a Universal Human is to evolve consciously, a path of development that has never been mapped before in a world that had never existed before.”*

Barbara Marx Hubbard

January 2011.

## References-

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Academy Hereford.

[www.steinerwaldorfschools.org](http://www.steinerwaldorfschools.org)

'Resurgence' [info@resurgence.org](mailto:info@resurgence.org)

Evelyn Nolt from anthology 'Magic Casements'  
[www.sirgeorgetrevelyan.org.uk/magiccasements](http://www.sirgeorgetrevelyan.org.uk/magiccasements) [see also www.wrekintrust.org](http://www.wrekintrust.org)

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Stephan Harding. [www.schumachercollege.org](http://www.schumachercollege.org)  
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Barbara Marx Hubbard.  
[www.barbaramarxhubbard.com](http://www.barbaramarxhubbard.com)

Other useful websites -

[www.spiritualengland.org.uk](http://www.spiritualengland.org.uk)

[www.greenspirit.org.uk](http://www.greenspirit.org.uk)

Roger Orgill MBE.  
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