

Questions

by Haley Kuntz

As a canoe trip guide for young people, you get used to the never-ending flow of questions. Kids are constantly inquiring about how many kilometres have been traveled that day, how many kilometres to go that day, what is for dinner and when the next set of moving water is coming up. If you've ever worked with kids, you'll understand what I'm saying. I've heard of kids asking how many cups of water make up the lake or how many fish live in the lake.

With kids, the questions are endless.

Questions often are used as a teaching opportunity, or as an introduction to a conversation or debate. Sometimes questions from kids are conveniently discarded by tossing a question back at them, or answering their many questions with the same random number. On occasion, a question really stumps you, and can't just be left hanging in the air.

During a trip last summer, I was leading a group of energetic and curious 13-year-olds. After dinner a wasp was doing its duty as a wasp and while doing so, bugging the kids. It was then that the first question came from an especially inquisitive and talkative kid: "What is the purpose of a wasp?"

I answered, explaining how, like bees, wasps help flowers reproduce by picking up and spreading their pollen. Then came the second question: "What is the purpose of a human being? All we seem to do is walk around and strip the Earth."

I looked at the other guide who was as caught off guard as I was. How do you answer the question of existence to a group of incredibly impressionable 13-year-olds? This is a question that entire subjects of philosophy are devoted to, a question that some spend their whole lives pondering. I explained that everyone would say life is something different and we're all allowed to have our own answer.

Upon returning from that trip, I received an e-mail from a friend. She was questioning to her closest friends about what we're all supposed to be doing in between gathering food, building shelter and finding a mate to share life with. Basically, she was asking the same question as the kid on my trip.

By saying that everyone would have a different answer to *the* question, I feel that I answered the question correctly. I suppose it would also be right to say that there are no answers to those kinds of questions. We all give meaning to our lives in different ways. And we all have the freedom to do so.

Time to think is one of the luxuries of a canoe trip. Life on trip allows for time to daydream, time to question. There are no deadlines or pressures while paddling a lake or hiking along a trail. Getting lost in your own thoughts and socializing are the only things that can be done. The less hurried lifestyle of outdoor trips is a well deserved break from daily life. At work and school we are flooded with information. From the time we wake up to the news on the clock radio, to the time we go to sleep after reading a book or magazine, we are bombarded with information. Most of this information is discarded. We are programmed to only take in the important details. In the outdoors, the information overload is put on pause. The mind is clear of distractions. Maybe this is why some of my most important "life decisions" have been made while on a canoe trip. The mind has time to digest things that have happened in life in the last few months.

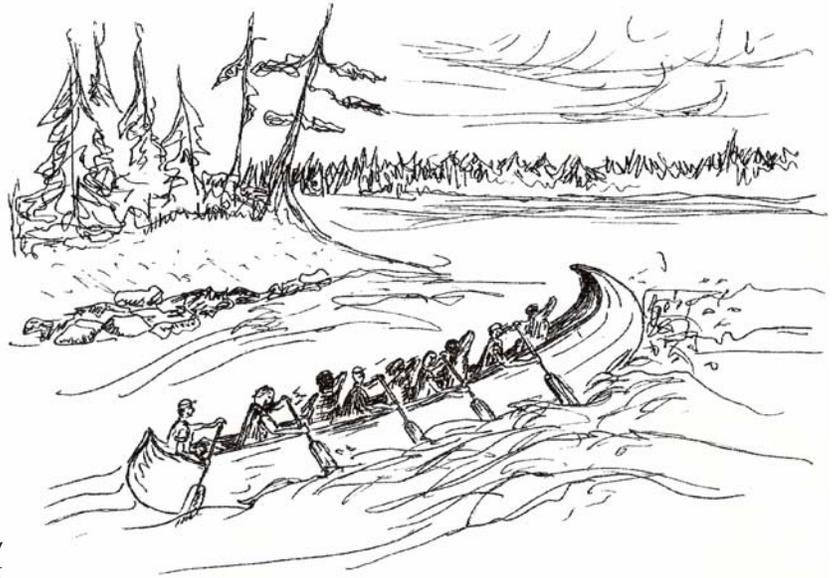
Asking questions is what outdoor education and canoe tripping are about. Trip gives us time to observe things going on around us in the natural world, and time to question. Kids need this time to think. The school system doesn't always give the time and allow kids

the freedom to think and learn in their own individual ways. Hurried lessons and regimented day schedules are necessary to complete all required lessons. Oftentimes, lessons are catered to one type of learner, leaving many intelligent and creative thinkers behind.

Outdoor education and experiential learning allows for, and actually encourages, different avenues of thought and methods of learning. A huge challenge of education is sparking an interest in learning, getting kids to *want* to learn. Sometimes sparking this urge to learn is not as much of a problem on canoe trip. Perhaps it is the rule of reverse psychology; because kids aren't being forced to do something they will do it.

On trip kids learn voluntarily. With time to think, they are free to learn at their own pace. They learn so that they may better understand the world around them, not for the sake of a test. With a greater understanding of the natural world from outdoor education comes a greater appreciation of the natural world. There is no better thing to pass on to someone than that.

It can be difficult not to expect kids to share your enthusiasm for a topic ("who cares what kind of tree this is?") and hard not to lecture. Good outdoor educators don't preach. They don't tell kids *what* to think about a subject, or the world around them. They teach kids *how* to think. A quote I recently came across perfectly illustrates this point. It went something like this: A teacher needs only to put a spark in the head of the student. If there is some good flammable stuff, the spark will ignite, allowing creative thoughts and original ideas. Effective teachers encourage students to



question reality and think with a critical mind. They teach them not to believe everything they hear, and to form their own opinions based on their ideas and life experiences — not someone else's.

Canoe trips, like learning and thinking, are not about the end result. It is the process that matters. On a trip, the take-out or end of the trail is not engrained in one's memory as vividly as the northern lights on Day 3, or that fabulous view from the top of the ridge on Day 5. Similarly, the mark on a test paper or written paper may not do justice to what a student took away from the test or paper.

So, until the next baffling question comes along, I will go to school, paddle lakes and rivers, hike mountains, be sure to scare myself from time to time, and try to remember the words of environmentalist and Greenpeace founder, Robert Hunter. In describing a canoe trip he could be describing the journey of life: "You don't canoe to get somewhere; the purpose of the trip is the trip. You are where you are going as you get there."

Haley Kuntz is a student at Laurentian University completing a Bachelor of Physical and Health Education degree in Outdoor Adventure Leadership.