

Outdoor Education Is More than Meets the Eye

By Rob Shortill

Experiential education, adventure therapy, play therapy, outdoor education, emotional intelligence. What do they have in common? A meta-perspective crossing the boundaries of theology, education and science will attempt to answer this question.

Definitions

- Aura—the fluctuating, colourful radiant energy (visible light) surrounding all objects
- Emotional intelligence—the intelligent way of interpreting and managing your own and other people's emotions (energy in motion)
- Emotions—also known as e/motion, synonymous with energy in motion
- Energy—omnipotent, omnipresence
- God—omnipotent, omnipresence
- Spirit—the vibrating, atomic, molecular energy within all objects

Introduction

As outdoor educators and, of course, indoor educators, we affect our spirit and that within participants. Dewey (1938) expressed the idea that there is a moving force (or spirit) within us that is caught up during experiences. Wheelan (1990) argues for the existence of group energy (or spirit). Harper (2010), in his entomology dictionary, concurs with Wheelan. Harper states that as early as 1570, emotion referred to “a (social) moving, stirring, agitation.” So what is this so-called moving force, energy or, as I call it, “spirit” within us? How do we affect it with outdoor experiential education? What effect do we generate in participants?

To say that the spirit affects us or that we affect it is typical of segmented, compartmentalized education. Perhaps it is better to say that the relationship between our spirit and ourselves is an integrated, biophysical feedback loop, a thermodynamic relationship in which energy, the spirit, is never lost; it simply changes form. This relationship will be expressed later.

Body

So what is the spirit within? I would like to postulate that it is the vibrating atomic, molecular energy resulting from chemical reactions at the cellular level. In organic bodies, the reactions are caused by burning nutrient fuel (bound chemicals and elements); in inorganic bodies such as rock, the reactions exist between the structural elements during creation, weathering and erosion. According to a Native Elder in the Pryor Mountains of Montana and Al-Taie, in essence, there is a spirit within all things—even rocks. Is there another entity that lies within all things?

Energy is found in all things. It can be considered omnipotent and omnipresent. Energy exists everywhere in many forms such as heat, light and chemical. Like the spirit, energy vibrates at the atomic, molecular level. It radiates wave frequencies, in some cases as visible light (auras). Somatic psychology, which is organized around the laws of mechanical physics, considers energy as part of the body/mind feedback loop—a loop found in the laws of thermodynamics in which energy is neither created nor destroyed; it changes form. The body/mind connection of the feeling (the resonating energy) and expressing (the body movement or vocal sounds that resonate with the feeling energy) are undergoing constant change. This experience of feeling, expressing and changing energy creates the somatic feedback loop also found in thermodynamics. Participants in outdoor activities demonstrate this flux while experimenting with their behaviour during activities. Is there anything else that is omnipresent and omnipotent?

The Bible implies many ideas, two of which I would like to consider. One, God too is both omnipresent and omnipotent. As such, God, energy and spirit are the same. Two, (hu)Man is made in the image of God. If God is energy then (hu)Man too is energy. Science has proven that humans are a vibrating, jellous cellular structure of energy. We know that

(hu)Man is a mass of cellular structure built on a foundation of atomic and molecular chemical interactions. Organically speaking, humans consist of vibrating energy, or spirit, originating from chemical reactions. These reactions release the vibrating energy in the form of heat. Heat can be seen as different colours on the light spectrum. Sometimes heat and light are visible in forms we call the spirit, or auras. Parapsychology refers to the energy around the body (for argument's sake, I would call it the spirit) as auras. Therefore, if (hu)Man is made in the image of God, and (hu)Man vibrates with omnipresent and omnipotent energy known as spirit, God is the spirit, God is energy and God is (hu) Man. Thus, applying simple algebra, if the left side is equal to the right then both are congruent. In this case, energy, God and the spirit are alike.

As indicated, humans are composed of vibrating energy. Some authors argue that this vibrating energy is emotion. Cooper (1997), Neta (2001) and Carroll (2001) argue that the energy is energy in motion, e/motion or emotion. This emotional energy can be measured from a distance and, according to Cooper, radiates from the heart. Carroll supports the organic hypothesis by writing that emotions are biochemical events in glands that have different frequencies. For example, the frequency for the emotion of "fear" is low/fast Beta waves; "love" is high/slow Alpha waves. Thus, both our mood and our vibrating energy referred to as God, a spirit, an aura can be measured electronically. So what then is emotional intelligence and how does it relate to the spirit?

Emotional intelligence, according to Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1995) "describes the ability, capacity, skill, a self-perceived grand ability to identify, assess, manage and control the emotions of one's self, of others, and of groups" (p. 25). With a unique view of the spirit, God and energy, it is possible to argue that emotional intelligence is parallel to spiritual intelligence. In both cases, the emotions (energy in motion) and spirit are being assessed and managed in one's self and others during experiences of

interactions. This harks back to Dewey's and Wheelan's belief that individual and group energy is affected by experiences. How is the development of emotional or spiritual intelligence related to outdoor education? How is emotional intelligence related to what Dewey initially suggested as the moving force caught up during an experience or Wheelan's collective energy?

Ford (1986) argues that outdoor education is "education in, about, and for the out-of-doors." I would like to add the words "fun," "play," "unnerving," and "adventure" as intrinsic to the experience. It is a given that playing on adventurous high ropes courses can be unnerving and/or exhilarating. As such the experience is definitely emotional, filled with e/motions or energy in motion. Few students have the opportunity to experience this aspect of outdoor education. Some are lucky enough to muck about in a creek. However, many have a playground of grass and concrete. Let us consider this latter opportunity and two activities. An instructor randomly tosses hula-hoops on the ground and separates the class into groups. Each group is given a certain circle to explore. The students are instructed to search, document what they see within the circles and compete against the other groups to record the number of ants. The second activity is an archaeological dig. Students are instructed to dig up sections of a grid, record what they find and postulate what it was used for centuries earlier. Both activities stimulate excitement, adrenalin, energy, e/motion and curiosity.

Conclusion

Any activity that involves learning, whether it is for therapeutic purposes, traditional education or outdoor education, is experiential education. In particular, outdoor educators allow participants to experiment with their behaviour in the form of play, for the most part out-of-doors. Many in the industry refer to play as adventure. Those who combine adventure with therapy name it adventure therapy or play therapy. Engaging in any of the experiences offered by outdoor educators affects participants and staff. Engagement

stimulates the energy, spirit, e/motion, God-like essence. This e/motion is found in the body/mind feedback loop referred to in somatic psychology. Using fun, adventurous activities may create a playful atmosphere that can encourage further engagement. Further interaction increases opportunities “. . . to identify, assess, manage and control the emotions of one’s self, of others, and of groups” (1990, p. 25). These opportunities help to effect a change in behaviour or, as school boards name it, “build character.” Goleman and Salovey and Mayer portray character-building as developing emotional intelligence. This article argues similarly for developing spiritual intelligence. Outdoor educators, while developing character, emotional intelligence or spiritual intelligence, inadvertently tease emotions, energy in motion, auras and our God-like essence. They activate what is referenced to by Dewey as the “moving force within us” and what Wheelan calls “group energy.”

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