

The Teachings Of Nature

by Kevin Riley

What's that noise?

There it is again.

We all sat quietly and listened.

We heard the steady purr of a distant waterfall, the assertive call of the wren, the wind gliding through the lodge pole pines. Behind and in between and through it all was that most rare of sounds: silence.

I sat in a circle with six 13-year-old boys in a meadow near the Low Divide in the Olympic National Park. Chris, the other mentor on the trip, was leading us through a guided meditation. He asked us to close our eyes and focus on our other senses. What did we smell? What did we feel? And, what did we hear?

The idea of looking for silence while hanging out with a pack of teenage boys may seem like an exercise in futility. It is, however, an often overlooked strength of the Coming of Age Journey.

The boys on this coming of age trip (along with the rest of us) spend most of their lives in a noisy world. Whether in the city or the suburbs, they have long ago succumbed to the cacophony of our modern age. The roar of the jumbo jet, the screaming jackhammer and the dull drone of the interstate keep most of us from hearing the gentle symphonies of the natural world. In some houses, the TV screams almost 24 hours a day. How many of us would drive 3 blocks without the radio on?

For these young people, the silence out here in the woods is startling at first. The boys usually notice it on their first night. Voices get swallowed up in the quiet darkness and kids stay close to camp.

On the journey, we use the silence like a sweet medicine that induces introspection. It provokes a calm and creates a space for the boys to take a look inside. As the noise outside recedes, the voices in the back of all our heads start to shout. These are the voices that ask big questions. What kind of man do I want to be? What do I want to do on this planet before I leave it? Of course, just in case the voices aren't loud enough, the mentors encourage them by asking those questions during evening circles.

The silence is also crucial as we discuss our relationship to the spirit world. Spiritual connection is a big part of Coming of Age Journeys. The silence inside the pitch black sweat lodge can be deafening. Staring up quietly at a sky littered with stars usually brings talk of our place in the universe.

Of course, silence is also a challenge for these boys. The distractions at home keep us from feeling the full weight of the inevitable pain involved in human life. Sometimes we don't have answers for those voices and so we turn on our Walkman to keep them away. And so out in the meadow giggling ensues.

Boys are suddenly afflicted with tubercular coughing fits. For many of these guys, sitting quietly in a meadow with no distractions and thinking solitary thoughts is a harder task than carrying the 40-pound pack up the hill we just conquered.

Peter Jennings recently did a story on a man who has spent many years of his life searching for just such silence. Gordon Hempton lives near the Olympic National Park and spends a lot of his time in this and other national parks. He carries audio recording equipment around to national parks and records the sounds that are revealed when the human world quiets down. He calls his project "Square Inch of Silence" and that is what he seeks. Little cells of space among trees or desert or sand where no jets fly overhead and no logging trucks rumble past. It is in those spots that he records the babbling brooks and the waves crashing and other natural serenades. Mr. Hempton hopes to record these places before they are lost. He believes that there is an intrinsic value in places where the natural world still speaks the loudest.

As we continue to sit, the nervous laughter and excessive sneezing subside, and a peaceful energy falls over the group.

After 20 minutes of waterfalls and birds, we are presented with a new sound that bursts out of the silence. I hear some branches breaking behind me. Marshall stares past me with eyes bigger than the top to his water bottle. .About 20 yards behind me, a black bear sits casually chewing on the bark of young tree saplings. We move to a more comfortable distance and watch the bear. It is remarkable the rewards that will present themselves if we quiet down for a little while.

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