

**MEANING AND PROCESS IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION: THE
WILDERNESS EXPEDITION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE**

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the wilderness expedition as a personal rite of passage - as a process of transition from society through liminality and back to society again. Through analytical discussions interwoven with narrative-descriptive passages and extensive quotations from expedition participants, this anthropological study of the wilderness expedition illuminates the underlying process of separation, transition/liminality, and reincorporation, focusing upon, as Victor Turner suggests, the meaningful experiences of personal transformation embedded within the liminal (or transitional) phase. Examining the expedition as a quintessential form of experiential education, we begin with the question: 'what do students learn from the expedition experience?' 'what do they come to know?'. Beneath all the explicit lessons in outdoor skills, natural history, leadership, and teamwork, participants also come to know an intense experience of *communitas* - a sense of self, a sense of community, and a sense of place - from which they return to society empowered by renewed creative energy, an expanded worldview, and a greater sense of hope.

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Ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath he hesitated, "I'm not sure I can tell the truth.... I can only tell what I know."

-James Clifford
Writing Culture

Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but ... life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Love in a Time of Cholera

"We are all going on an Expedition," said Christopher Robin....
"Going on an Expotition?" said Pooh eagerly. "I don't think I've ever been on one of those. Where are we going on this Expotition?"

"Expedition, silly old Bear. It's got an 'x' in it."

"Oh!" said Pooh. "I know." But he didn't really.

-A.A. Milne
Winnie-the-Pooh

Prologue

The great sea stirs me, the great sea sets me adrift.
It sways me like the weed on the river stone.
The sky's height stirs me, the strong wind blows through my mind.
It carries me with it, and I shake with joy.
-Inuit Song

August 23, 1994 - Double Mer Channel, Labrador Coast: It is biting cold. This morning we are paddling our kayaks eastward, moving silently through calm waters toward the opening of Double Mer Channel. If we continue onward, we will be exposed to the choppy and confused seas where the swells of the open Atlantic meet the currents rushing in and out of the narrows.

I take stock of our situation. From an early morning offshore breeze, the wind has been building and shifting to the northeast so it carries an arctic chill extending from the coast of Greenland across the Labrador Sea. Each breath I take condenses before my eyes. The cool wind cuts through our clothing still damp from yesterday's downpour and constant drizzle. The seas are protected here and each stroke splits the smooth surface like a skier's turns in fresh powder. Yet with the naked eye I can see a dark line across the more distant waters off Double Mer Point. Looking through binoculars, I see the line is composed of several sets of whitecaps formed where the outgoing current meets the wind and ocean swell. The sea conditions are not particularly hazardous, but the building northeasterly is a sign of change. Perhaps the beginning of another storm. I see no reason to land immediately. On this stretch of coastline there are plenty of sheltered places to pull off the water if conditions deteriorate. This would not be the first storm encountered on this expedition.

My eyes meet those of the other two instructors. Our role in this course has already shifted, from leading the group and teaching the skills of sea kayaking and coastal camping to more of a fine balancing act between fostering experiential learning and maintaining group safety. These students have acquired enough experience to judge the conditions and decide when it is prudent to land the kayaks and observe the changing weather from shore. With mere glances among the three of us, we communicate that we will keep an eye on the changing sea conditions which lie ahead while continuing for now to paddle silently among the group. In this way, we can provide a potential safety net while allowing our students to make their own decisions and act upon them.

The students bring their kayaks together to form a raft and pass around a bag of peanuts and chocolate while checking in with one another and discussing their options. They decide to continue paddling along the shoreline and plan to pull off before Double Mer Point to make hot drinks and reassess the weather. Looking into the faces of all thirteen members of this expedition - strangers less than a month ago with limited outdoor experience - I think about the progress they have made in their ability to assess sea conditions, make group decisions, and work together both on and off the water. I contemplate how far they have come since the expedition began.

Beneath the explicit lessons in basic camping and kayaking skills, natural and cultural history, communication and leadership, they have absorbed something else - something more difficult to describe. They have grown on a personal level and formed deep bonds with one another and with this place. I have seen this process over and over again on countless expeditions, and yet something still eludes me. When the expedition is over, they will tell me it was such a "powerful", "magical" experience. Some will say, "it changed my life." In the weeks and months to come, I know I will receive letters from participants relating the changes in their lives resulting from the expedition.

As we paddle toward the Inuit village of Rigolet and into the final days of this expedition, I find myself reflecting upon the numerous wilderness expeditions on which I have spent so much of my life. I want to understand more clearly why we do it, to know why this experience is so meaningful in people's lives. This is my last expedition of the season, yet I sense that in the coming winter these thoughts will continue to occupy my mind.

Introduction

What I hear, I forget.
What I see, I remember.
What I do, I know.
-Chinese Proverb

This proverb expresses the essence of experiential education - to do is to know. The obvious question arises: what do students come to know? What do they learn? This study, in its broadest sense, seeks to answer this question with regard to one of the most intensive forms of experiential education - the wilderness expedition. More specifically, my research focuses upon the meaning and process underlying the expedition experience. Beneath the explicit lessons in outdoor skills, natural history, leadership, and teamwork that are part of virtually every wilderness expedition, there is an underlying process through which the experience is rendered meaningful in the lives of the participants. The objective of my study is to investigate this process and gain a better understanding of the meaningful experiences embedded therein.¹

My personal and professional background includes extensive involvement with wilderness expeditions. After participating in numerous camping trips and taking introductory and advanced courses, I worked as an instructor in various genres of outdoor and environmental education - hiking and canoe trips, rope courses and initiative games, rock climbing and glacial mountaineering, outdoor photography and natural history. Then sea kayaking became my focus, my passion. I became absorbed in my work as a sea kayak instructor, spending more than a thousand days over a five year period as an outdoor educator and leader of coastal kayaking expeditions in British Columbia, Alaska, Labrador, the Great Lakes, Baja California, and Patagonia.

As a form of experiential education, these wilderness courses emphasize learning by doing. However, this approach does not necessarily involve a simple trial-and-error process of learning which in many outdoor situations (particularly an expedition) would be at best, unproductive and frustrating, and at worst, dangerous or even fatal. Rather, prior to undertaking any task or activity, students on an outdoor course are generally given some measure of instruction. Hence, the well-known experiential teaching model: Explain,

1. For a general introduction to the anthropological study of meaning, see Basso and Selby (1976); for further discussion of the interrelationship between meaning and process, see V. Turner (1986b:97-98).

Demonstrate, Do (and Review). After receiving some explanation and demonstration, students learn a great variety of physical and cognitive skills through the process of doing. On a coastal kayaking expedition, for example, students typically learn to paddle a kayak, assess sea conditions, use a compass, light a fire in the rain, pitch a tent and tarp, tie various types of knots, select campsites that least impact the environment, and minimize the risk of bear encounters, to name but a few of the many skills acquired.

The vast majority of students, however, will seldom use these newly acquired outdoor skills beyond their course. This is as it should be. Few outdoor educators would find their work personally rewarding if the main outcomes for students were limited to such skills as paddling and knot tying. For many outdoor education programs, particularly those within the school system, the value of such endeavours is often justified in terms of teaching such subjects as biology, geography, physical education, and social studies in a contextually relevant environment. While there is merit in experiential approaches to the traditional curriculum, such a limited conceptualization of experiential education tends to overlook more important lessons underlying the experience. In this regard, numerous outdoor programs state their commitment to broader educational objectives which are generally described with such labels as 'leadership', 'group dynamics', 'personal growth', and 'environmental awareness'. However, such categories still do not provide a conceptual framework with which to understand the underlying process through which the wilderness expedition becomes meaningful in participants' lives.

In the summer of 1995, I embarked on a quest to gain a better understanding of meaning and process in experiential education. My fieldwork spanned four consecutive wilderness expeditions - two to five week coastal kayaking outdoor education courses. On each course, there were six to twelve students spanning fifteen to fifty-two years of age, as well as myself and one or two other instructors. We carried all our own supplies, paddling a mixture of single and tandem sea kayaks. My kayak carried the added tools of ethnographic research: several notebooks (including one with waterproof paper for writing in the rain), a copy of my research proposal, a small tape recorder, two dozen spare batteries, and twenty 90-minute audio tapes. Although I usually keep some sort of trip log or journal, on this season's expeditions I wrote my observations in much greater depth. I also conducted individual and group interviews and collected student journal entries during the expeditions.

This fieldwork took place in several remote locations: the southern Labrador Coast, where, during the previous year, the seeds of this study first germinated in my mind; the northern region of the Great Lakes; the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia; and the rugged archipelago of Southeast Alaska.

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*June 11, 1995 - Bay of Pillars, Southeast Alaska: The potluck was a success, but the group interview was not. Each tent group prepared something for our feast and we gathered around a baking fire to share our food. The happy chatter ended abruptly when I pulled out my tape recorder and suggested that we talk about people's experiences on the expedition so far. An uncomfortable silence was broken suddenly by Jim's animated voice yelling toward the tape recorder from the other side of the campfire: 'No, Ken! Put away the whip! We'll talk, really!...' Smiles turned into laughter as Douglas interrupted Jim, enunciating his every word and pausing in an exaggerated speech pattern: 'This ... camping trip ... has changed ... my life ... and ... Could you hold the cue cards a little higher, Ken?...' More laughter. I put the tape recorder away and took another piece of pizza from the pan. The lively conversations resumed. Eating slowly, I continued to listen.*

*As the group talked around the campfire, I noticed how the nature of the conversations had changed during the past week. Unlike our first few days together, people were no longer speaking so much about their previous experiences, about their jobs and families back home, about popular movies and television shows. The expedition itself had become the focus. People were talking about the joys and challenges they had shared together - learning to pack and paddle kayaks, roughwater landings, camping in the rain, walking in the forest, and portaging boats and equipment to the west side of the island.*

*Initially, participants had experienced the discomforts and anxieties of entering a new situation which had rendered them incompetent. Even the most taken-for-granted aspects of their lives needed to be relearned - what to eat, where to sleep, and even how to deal with their own feces. No longer were they able to cling to their ordinary roles and behaviours. Whatever their backgrounds, they had to get used to new roles as peers within a group of diverse people who were now dependent upon one another for their physical and social well-being.*

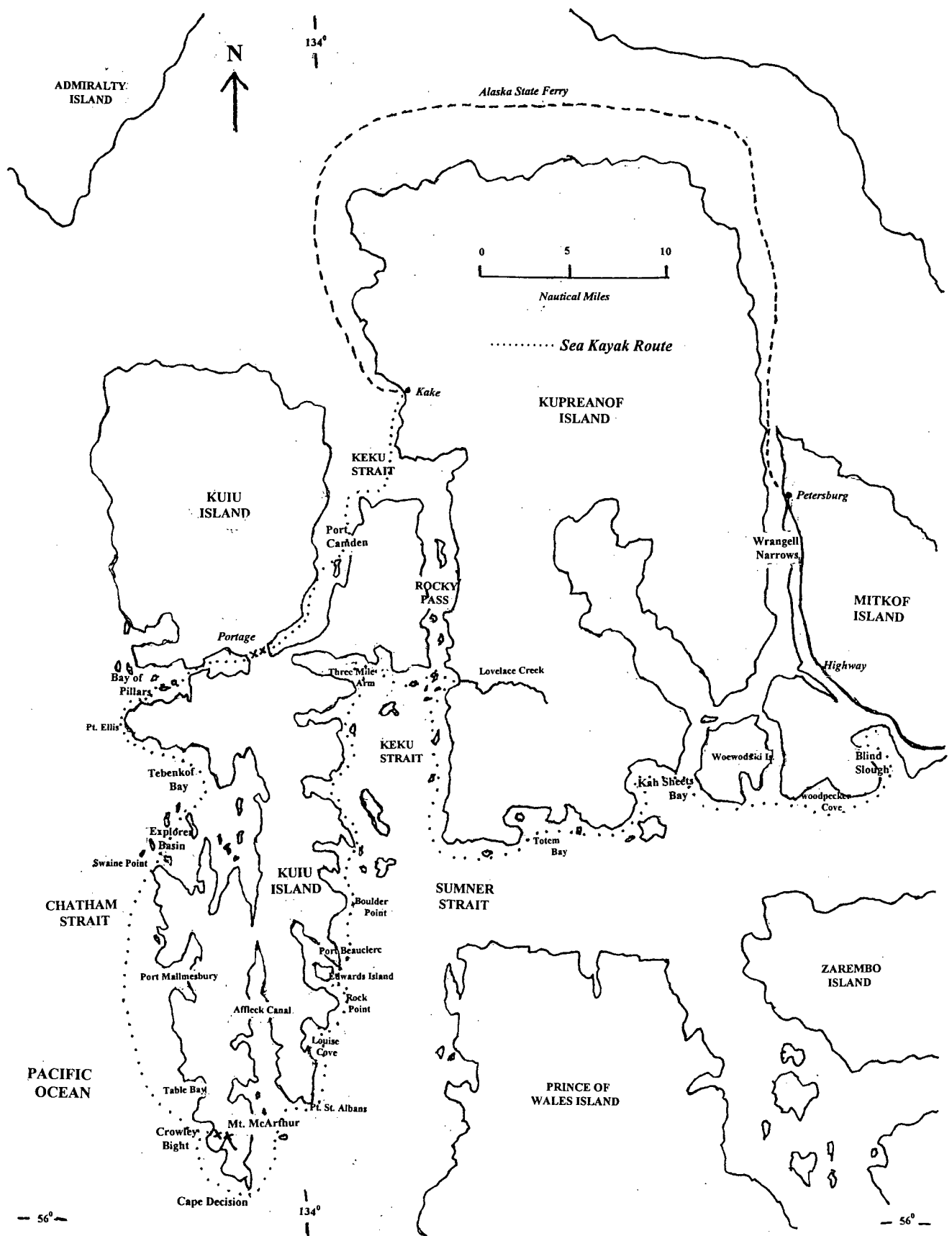


Figure 1: Map of Southeast Alaska Coastal Kayaking Expedition (June 4 to July 2, 1995)

*We began the expedition as strangers coming from across the United States and Canada to meet for this sea kayaking leadership course at the small airport in Petersburg, Alaska. Based out of a local motel, we spent the first day getting acquainted with one another and preparing for our expedition. This preparation involved an intense morning together organizing our mountain of expedition equipment. Then we ate sandwiches while looking at nautical charts of the area.*

*During lunch, I noticed that one of the participants appeared particularly ill at ease. While the others talked eagerly about possible routes we could paddle, Nicole fidgeted nervously. In the afternoon, I decided to work beside her as much as possible as our group measured, bagged, and labeled nearly a thousand pounds of food for our month-long expedition. At some point I asked her if she was excited about exploring the Alaskan Coast. It was then that sixteen year old Nicole hesitantly told me she was thinking of quitting the course before we departed. She admitted her mother had registered her for the course, she had no interest in the outdoors, and would rather spend the summer with her friends back in Seattle. While most participants on the types of outdoor courses I instruct come highly motivated for the experience, there are often one or two less-than-enthusiastic students like Nicole. Of course, she still had the option to withdraw.*

*I let Nicole know it was her decision to make, and as we discussed the issue she told me about her life back home where she had been in trouble at school for using drugs. She said she was on the verge of quitting or failing out of school. She also said she did not mind spending a month without alcohol and drugs, but she did not want to be away from her friends for so long - several of whom were in trouble with the law, and most of whom had already dropped out or been expelled from high school. Many expedition participants over the years, particularly secondary and college students have told me that, not surprisingly, 'recreational use' of drugs and alcohol has been a part of their lives. For most, it is something they choose to do at parties and less a part of their day-to-day lives than in Nicole's case. Nevertheless, from her behaviour and the medical form which accompanies each student, I was quite sure Nicole did not have a chemical addiction, but was merely reluctant to embark on an experience so removed from her normal lifestyle. Perhaps she was encouraged by my 'give it a chance ... what have you got to lose?' speech or perhaps she feared the wrath of her mother if she quit. Whatever her reasons, she decided she would come.*

*We finished bagging our food by mid-afternoon and spent the rest of the day checking each participant's personal clothing and equipment. In the evening, we ate dinner together and discussed safety concerns such as bears, cold water, and our extreme remoteness from civilization. The next day, the fifteen of us boarded the small Alaska State ferry from Mitkof Island to the indigenous fishing village of Kake on the northwestern side of Kupreanof Island. Paddling out of Kake into Keku Strait, we spent our first days introducing low-impact camping skills and the fundamentals of sea kayaking. In the calmer waters of the early morning, we crossed from Kupreanof to Kuiu Island, continuing south into Port Camden. Through these first passages, Jeremy, Denise, and I led the group while our twelve students familiarized themselves with the equipment, and learned to paddle, navigate, cook, and camp in this often wet and cold environment.*

*During these initial days of the expedition, our group was in the 'honeymoon phase' during which everyone exhibited extremely polite and cooperative behaviour as they searched for a place for themselves within their new social group. Then the conflicts began. Problems that previously had been overlooked began to expose themselves through humour, body language, and for a few participants, eventually even tears and hostile words regarding everything from burnt food and damp clothing to unequal contribution to daily camp tasks and feelings of being taken for granted. Disappointment. Anxiety. Confusion. Frustration. Anger.*

*Learning to effectively communicate and work through these problems would be crucial to the expedition's success. After dinner one evening, we sat around the campfire and voiced our concerns, speaking one at a time and working our way around the circle. We discussed some of the problems developing in the group and shared ideas for getting along better and working together. Most importantly, everybody made a commitment to treat everyone else with respect, to give their best effort, and to work hard at group tasks. Obviously, the demands of living with former strangers in such an extended and intense situation would result in more conflicts in the days and weeks to come. But we agreed to deal with these conflicts in a constructive manner and discussed the importance of continually communicating our frustrations with one another, balancing tact with honesty as well as our personal desires with those of other group members.*

*As well as acquiring basic outdoor skills and learning more about conflict resolution and working together, we focused on the natural history of the area. We encountered black*

bears almost daily, sometimes watching them from our boats and other times finding them on the periphery of our campsites. When the tide was low, we walked along the seashore teeming with life - colourful seastars, crabs, urchins, barnacles, anemones, mussels, clams.... And when the tide came in, we wandered through the thick coastal rainforest where the shafts of sunlight pierced the dense canopy and danced along the moss-carpeted forest floor. A sense of wonder seemed to sweep through the entire group as we immersed ourselves in this wilderness.

The weather in the Alaskan panhandle changes continually. In Port Camden, we had to pull off the water twice due to strong winds and choppy seas. Jeremy, Denise, and I used these opportunities to teach our students roughwater landing skills. And once we had to get up in the middle of the night to tighten down camp during a sudden rainstorm.

Paddling south, we eventually arrived at the end of Port Camden, from where we carried our kayaks and equipment along a logging road and through the dense ferns beneath the enormous hemlocks and cedars. Sweat glistened and dripped from our flushed faces. By the time the last kayak and bag of gear had reached the western side of Kuiu Island, it was nearing slack current. So, although tired from our portage, we loaded our boats and paddled through the narrows. Where the channel widened into the Bay of Pillars we came ashore, slowly set our tents, and crawled into our sleeping bags. Exhaustion.

We stayed in camp the next morning, recuperating from the previous day's portage. Some people slept while others picked berries, wrote in their journals, and read about the area in our 'library' - a waterproof bag containing books about weather, oceanography, astronomy, and sea kayaking, as well as local trees and plants, marine mammals, seabirds, fish, invertebrates, and Alaska's indigenous peoples and early Russian explorers.

In the afternoon, we practiced solo and assisted capsize recovery techniques as well as advanced bracing skills to keep the boats upright in rougher conditions. A few students also learned to perform a kayak roll. We followed several hours of activity in the frigid Alaskan waters with mugs of hot soup and the warmth of a campfire. Denise played her wood flute and I pulled out my miniature traveling guitar. We made music and shared stories until late in the evening, until long after the twilight shifted into a darkness broken only by the stars casting shimmering reflections across the surface of the bay.

Today we left camp shortly after dawn, paddling close to shore through an early morning fog which burned off as the rising sun warmed the atmosphere. After exploring the



*little islands nestled within the Bay of Pillars, we eventually found a large pebble beach at the Bay's opening into Chatham Strait, near Point Ellis. We set camp there and decided to devote the afternoon to the art of outdoor baking. The tent/food groups gathered together on the stone beach with an array of campstoves, pots and pans, water bottles, and food bags. After activating the yeast in lukewarm water and brown sugar, some group members busied themselves kneading the dough until it acquired the spongy-smooth consistency of one's earlobe. Then the bakers placed the dough inside plastic bags which they tucked under their clothes, where their body heat would aid in the leavening process. Meanwhile, their tentmates collected bits of dead wood scattered along the beach. Those baking on campstoves formed a makeshift oven by building a little fire of twigs on the pan lid. Other tent groups lit small beach fires of drift wood, placing the hot embers above and below their covered baking pans. Three cooking groups made pizza, one group made bread, and the final group made cinnamon buns for dessert. We doused all but one of our baking fires around which we ate dinner and I tried to conduct my group interview.*

*Although my interview did not work out as planned, I did observe some of the changes that have taken place in the group so far. To some degree, everyone has been involved in the process of physically and mentally leaving behind parts of the world from which each of us came to this expedition. There has been a marked shift away from talking about our regular lives. Through the intense experiences we have shared together so far - from the portage to the day-to-day hard work of loading the kayaks, paddling, setting camp, and cooking meals together - we have been resolving conflicts and developing a sense of camaraderie, a sense of ourselves not only as individuals but also as a group of people dependent upon one another. Not surprisingly, most of the students have also become more comfortable with living in this place and more aware of subtle changes in the weather and sea conditions. They have been developing a sense of connection not only with other group members but also with this environment.*

*As I left the evening campfire and wandered back to my tent, I surveyed the campsite to make sure things were secure for the night. The kayaks were stowed high up the beach on the edge of the forest and our five tents were pitched with large tarps strung tautly overhead to provide a sheltered area for clothing and equipment. Earlier in the trip, the camp scene had been very different - a dismal collection of sagging tarps strung loosely over the tents and an*

*unorganized assortment of damp clothing, paddles, and sprayskirts scattered around kayaks left carelessly up and down the beach. But the rainstorm in Port Camden had demonstrated the importance of a tight, well organized camp. As instructors, we had been emphasizing the potential consequences of sloppy camping practices for a number of days. The weather proved to be a more effective teacher.*

*Inside my tent, I wrote my fieldnotes by the light of the candle-lanterns. I reflected upon the day - the beauty of the place, the effectiveness of experiential learning, and the challenges of conducting formal research in this environment.*

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Methodology and Theory

Of all the human sciences and studies anthropology is most deeply rooted in the social and subjective experience of the inquirer. Everything is brought to the test of self, everything observed is learned ultimately on his or her pulses. Obviously, there is much that can be counted, measured, and submitted to statistical analysis. But all human act is impregnated with meaning, and meaning is hard to measure, though it can often be grasped, even if only fleetingly and ambiguously.

-Victor Turner (1986a:33)
The Anthropology of Experience

In the field, I found most attempts at formal interviews - that is, posing questions focused explicitly on my research problem - were unproductive, although sometimes they engendered humorous responses. Even when participants responded seriously, as they did on most occasions, the discourse seemed artificial to me. Intending to assist me with my research, participants often constructed vague and generalized conceptualizations of outdoor education rather than just telling me about the experience as they experienced it. Not surprisingly, the natural flow of the interviews was compromised whenever I audiotaped or took notes during a session. Such forms of 'data collection' seemed to shift the focus away from participants' subjective experiences. Therefore, I frequently adopted an approach similar to that described by Barrett in the first section of his ethnography:

I did not use a tape recorder, nor did I take notes during the interview. Instead I followed a system of memorization that I developed ... when it became clear that I could not work openly with systematic techniques. Immediately after the interviews ... I would write down what I had memorized.... The fact that I did not use a tape recorder [nor take notes during an interview] fostered an informal, relaxed atmosphere, during which most of those who were interviewed talked at length and freely.
(1987:16)

Thus, the quality of the interviews - by which I mean the depth of understanding I could gain

into the meaning and process of the experience - was improved when I adopted a more 'conversational' approach.²

Furthermore, participants' journals also provided me with a better understanding of their experience. As well as structured journal assignments on particular events during the expeditions (e.g. watching the northern lights, learning to bake, dealing with a storm, kayaking near a whale, leading the group, etc.), participants had the flexibility to write about their experiences throughout the expedition in any manner they chose. This flexibility enabled them to share their thoughts and feelings in a personal way on an ongoing basis. Many participants aided my study by allowing me to read and copy parts of their journals which, along with the interviews, enhanced my understanding of the expedition experience.

My insights into the experience, however, were gained primarily through the participant-observation process itself - that is, through my own reflexive immersion in the experience. As Whittaker states, "Ignoring the anthropologist's experience is a little meaningless, even ludicrous, when the main epistemic underpinning of fieldwork is to use this very experience, sensemaking ability, and creative perception as the basis of the knowledge created" (1986:xix). Although such research may lack a rigidly defined and replicable structure, its objective is "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973:5).³ As an interpretation of meaning, this paper is a product of inductive reasoning - the result of my "sensemaking ability" and "creative perception", based upon over a decade of my "experience" on wilderness expeditions throughout the Americas.

Although interpretive approaches in the social sciences may free one from the quest to discover a single, objective truth⁴, they are still susceptible to "instances of epistemological fanaticism" (Eco 1994:24). Most important among these is "radical subjectivity", described by Lakoff and Johnson as the "surrender to subjectivity and arbitrariness - to the Humpty-Dumpty notion that something means 'just what I choose it to mean....'" (1980:185). In order to avoid potential 'flights of fancy' which can result from entirely self-reflective applications

2. Such 'collaborative' approaches have been advocated particularly in feminist methodology. See Whittaker (1994); DeVault (1990); Oakley (1981).

3. There is an enormous body of recent literature on interpretive anthropology. My understanding of the interpretive approach stems primarily from the works of Crapanzano (1992); Geertz (1988, 1983, 1973); Clifford (1988); and Clifford and Marcus (1986).

4. See: Clifford and Marcus (1986:6); Whittaker (1986:xxxiv, 1981:448-49); Bellah et. al. (1985:302-03); Holy (1984:28); and Geertz (1973:20).

of the interpretive method, this paper is based upon extensive collaboration - talking and interacting with hundreds of other expedition participants during the past decade as well as conducting research involving participant-observation, fieldnotes, and the collection of interviews and journal entries of those immersed in the experience.

In keeping with anthropology's current focus on the nature of ethnographic writing and use of experimental techniques (see Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986), my interpretation is presented in an unconventional manner in which analytical discussions are interspersed with representative and illustrative quotations from expedition participants as well as narrative-descriptive passages.⁵ These passages have been constructed to provide the reader with a better understanding of the expedition experience. They are based on my field experiences. However, to respect the confidentiality of individual participants and to provide the reader with a better grasp of an expedition from start to finish, I have blended descriptions and quotations from various outdoor courses into a single expedition from June 4th to July 3rd, 1995, on the coast of Southeast Alaska. In doing so, I have changed some of the ethnographic details (names, dates, locations, etc.) yet remained true to the essence of the expedition experience.

The passages and quotations are presented in italics unencumbered by explicit theoretical analysis, as suggested by Y.F. Tuan in his discussion of the narrative-descriptive approach. Echoing the words of Turner in the quotation beginning this section, Tuan states:

[T]he object of study [is] a human experience, which is almost always ambiguous and complex.... For this reason, the [narrative-descriptive] approach is favoured by cultural and historical geographers, historians generally, and cultural anthropologists - scholars who are predisposed to appreciate the range and colour of life and world. Their best works tend to make the reader feel the intellectual pleasure of being exposed to a broad and variegated range of related facts and of understanding them a little better (though still hazily), rather than, as in specialized theoretical works, the intellectual assurance of being offered a rigorous explanation of a necessarily narrow and highly abstracted segment of reality. (1991:686)

Thus, the narrative-descriptive approach in interpretive anthropology generally seeks to provide a better understanding, rather than a rigid and abstract explanation, of the patterns and textures that make up the fabric of the shared human experience we call culture.

5. Since this is an anthropological study of an educational experience, it is worth noting that ethnography, a hallmark of the anthropological method, has more recently been propounded by scholars in other disciplines, particularly education, as an effective method for approaching and presenting their research. See Eisner (1994) and McLaren (1993 [1986]).

Each italicized passage and quotation serves as an ethnographic window into various dimensions of the experience. As such, the italicized text provides a context as well as numerous illustrations of the topics discussed throughout this paper. As "strategic textualizations" (Pannun 1994:2), the passages and quotations provide ethnographic data and present a type of interpretation in their own right - in what is written, how it is written, and of course, what is not written. As Tuan points out: "All narratives and descriptions contain at least interpretive and explanatory strategems, for these are built into language itself" (1991:686). Thus, individually and in their totality, the italicized text forms a kind of "incipiently analytical, enacting theory" (Narayan 1993:681) about meaning and process in experiential education.

Although the fields of education, psychology, human geography, and recreation have produced a great deal of academic literature on experiential education, little has been written about this subject from an anthropological perspective. This study draws upon my background in anthropology, examining the wilderness expedition as a meaningful cultural phenomenon. When I began my formal anthropological fieldwork in the summer of 1995, I was already playing with the notion that the wilderness expedition constitutes some sort of 'rite of passage' in my own life and in the lives of many other participants. In the interpretation of my research, the anthropological concepts which have germinated from rites of passage theory have continued to provide me with rich insights into the expedition experience.

Les Rites de Passage was first published by Arnold van Gennep in 1909, examining the ritual transitions from one stage of human life to another. Regardless of the content of specific rituals accompanying a particular rite of passage in a particular culture, he notes that the process of transition remains essentially the same:

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition.... It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross.... Beneath the multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage*. (1960 [1909]:189-91)

According to Van Gennep, a rite of passage is a universal phenomenon involving three phases: *separation*, in which one is removed from the structure of everyday life in the social order; *transition* (or *margin*, or *limen* signifying 'threshold' in Latin), in which one undergoes an intense experience with different norms and characteristics from those accompanying the

regular patterns of social organization; and *aggregation* (or *(re)incorporation*), through which one re-enters the social order in a different place, status, or state of being. This model remains flexible, as Van Gennep notes that while every rite of passage includes "preliminal", "liminal", and "postliminal" phases, "these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated" (1960 [1909]:11). Thus, as a descriptive framework, 'the rite of passage' engenders a broad application and has become, as Terence Turner puts it, "an anthropological commonplace" (1977:53).

The widespread recognition and use of the Van Gennep's model in both anthropology and society-at-large is due to no one more than Victor Turner. He first read *The Rites of Passage* in 1963 when he was on the "threshold" of a journey from England to a "long-awaited new life in America" (E. Turner 1985:7). Perceiving himself to be in the midst of his own rite of passage, Turner began the first detailed explorations of liminality in over fifty years. He later reflected:

Liminality is a concept, borrowed from the French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, which, like a pebble, I tossed speculatively into the pool of my anthropological data about a dozen years ago.... Since then it has been spreading rings in my work and thought over wider ranges of data drawn not only from preindustrial societies, but also from complex, large-scale civilizations. (1992:48 [1977:36]) ... Much of my recent work in social and symbolic anthropology has been on the nature of those passages from one state of society or mind to another, when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape. (Turner 1992:132)

Turner's expansion and reformulation of 'the rites of passage' remains one of his most enduring contributions to cultural anthropology and the social sciences in general.

For Turner, 'the rites of passage' model provides a framework not only for examining community rituals ascribing new status, but, more importantly, for understanding liminal experiences which transform people and, in turn, play a role in the transformation of society. Since Van Gennep was most interested in the structure of rituals accompanying publicly recognized changes in social identity - that is, the transition from boy to man, single to married, etc. - all three phases of a rite of passage bore a great deal of significance. For Turner, the "first and last speak for themselves" (1992:48). He is far more interested in the transitional (or liminal) phase, stating that the other two merely "detach ritual subjects from their old places in society and return them, *inwardly transformed and outwardly changed*, to new places" (*ibid.*:48-49 [emphasis added]).

This focus on the middle phase of Van Gennep's tripartite framework is due largely to Turner's interest in the anthropology of experience. In both name and disposition, 'the anthropology of experience' provides an illuminating approach to the study of meaning and process in experiential education. As Turner states:

In my professional life as an anthropologist, the terms 'function' and 'structure' have had almost talismanic value. Both are borrowings from other disciplines: function from biology and mathematics, structure from architecture, engineering, and linguistics. I am not going to linger on plains of contention littered with so many broken spears. Too much time is wasted on negative polemics. I would like to revive our abiding anthropological concern with 'experience'. We have not borrowed this term from other human studies; it is peculiarly our own. (1985:205)⁶

Turner's enduring if understated critique sounds a cautionary note against a prevalent tendency of anthropological theory to substitute explanation of the *structure* and *function* of cultural phenomena for understanding of the *underlying process* and *intersubjective experience* of those phenomena. The outcome of this tendency can be found in introductory anthropological texts which generally illustrate the existence of rites of passage in complex industrial civilizations through such religious and/or secular examples as a confirmation/*bar mitzvah*, high school graduation, fraternity hazing, or wedding ceremony. These phenomena involve some of the same structures and functions as their counterparts in nonindustrial societies - that is, participation in ritualized behaviour which results in a socially recognized shift in status. However, within industrial societies, such rituals rarely involve that which Turner most associates with rites of passage - that is, the intense transitional/liminal experience through which one is "revitalized" (1969:129), or at the risk of being repetitive, "inwardly transformed and outwardly changed" (1992:48-49). Thus, for Turner, a rite of passage is less about shifting social status and more about personal transformation - a process of transition from which one returns to society empowered by renewed creative energy, an expanded worldview, and a greater sense of hope.⁷

Turner's reformulation of 'the rites of passage', with its emphasis on personal

6. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986, edited by Victor Turner and Edward Bruner), which includes an interesting collection of related articles by Bruner, V. Turner, Abrahams, F. Turner, R. Rosaldo, Myerhoff, Babcock, Geertz, and others.

7. In 'The Liminal Experience' below, this paper discusses in more detail the subject of liminality and the meaningful experiences through which it manifests itself on the wilderness expedition. These experiences comprise what I have elsewhere described as 'a sense of hope' (in "Educating for Hope: A Conceptual Model") - see Andrews (1995).

transformation rather than shifting status, provides a conceptual framework through which the wilderness expedition can be understood as a personal rite of passage. First, the expedition involves a distinct *separation* from the normal social order. Participants are socially, spatially, and temporally separated from their regular world. They leave their family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances as well as their everyday urban, or sometimes rural, surroundings to join other participants for an extended period of time in a faraway wilderness environment. Second, the expedition itself is a *transitional* (or "*liminal*") phase in people's lives during which they are - to adopt a phrase coined and used extensively by Turner - "betwixt and between" their ordinary social roles and expected norms of behaviour and thought (1992:132; 1974:273; 1969:95; 1967:93-111). Finally, many participants return home from the expedition feeling transformed by the experience. This sense of 'inward transformation' often manifests itself through noticeably altered behaviours and dispositions - 'outward change' - during the latter part of the expedition and in participants' lives when they return to their regular surroundings where they are *reincorporated* into the social structure from which they came.⁸

The following points are worth making in anticipation of those who might argue that wilderness expeditions cannot be classified as rites of passage because they lack such elements as a community ritual through which participants are publicly recognized as moving into a new social status. For some outdoor education programs, particularly those designed for youth, a counter-argument could be made that the experience does involve such community rituals - special events following the expedition which are attended by participants' families and friends to share the meaning and mark the significance of the participants' experiences and accomplishments. My intention, however, is not to debate whether the wilderness expedition has all the structural elements of a rite of passage as set out by Van Gennep at the turn of the century. I am more interested in using the concept of a rite of passage - particularly as it has been reformulated by Turner to focus on personally transformative experiences taking place outside of the regular social structures - as a theoretical lens providing insights into the expedition experience. To some extent, all expedition participants are engaged in the

8. Illustrative examples of the transformative nature of the expedition experience are embedded in the narrative-descriptive passages and selected quotations of participants throughout the rest of the paper. While my study focuses on the expedition itself, a brief look at some of the changes in participants' lives beyond the expedition is provided in the conclusion.

underlying process of *separation, transition/liminality*, and *reincorporation* into society. Thus, my interpretation conceptualizes the expedition as a personal rite of passage and focuses, as Turner suggests (1992:48-49; 1985:205-207; 1969:110), upon the liminal experience.

As a rite of passage, the wilderness expedition is a quintessential form of experiential education. As Vaclav Havel states: "Every education is a kind of inward journey". Through the physical (outward) journey, expedition participants undergo a personal (inward) journey. Insights into this inward journey, this personal rite of passage, are explicitly discussed throughout this paper and embedded into this segmented sketch of an outward journey - a coastal kayaking wilderness expedition - along the Alaskan Coast.

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*June 18, 1995 - Mt. McArthur, Southeast Alaska: To the south lies Cape Decision. We look down upon its rocky shoreline from our vantage point on the peak of Mt. McArthur. From several thousand feet above, it is difficult to discern the large waves and whitecaps, but the continuous flapping of our windbreakers is a dead giveaway that sea conditions are indeed rough today around the exposed coastline of southern Kuiu Island.*

*Our day-hike through the early morning mist into the afternoon sunshine has rewarded us with a spectacular view which encompasses virtually the entire region of our expedition. To the north lies the coast of Kuiu Island, leading back to the Bay of Pillars, Port Camden, and the village of Kake on the northwestern shore of Kupreanof Island where we began our paddling journey two weeks ago. To the east, we look down at Affleck Canal and across Sumner Strait to Prince of Wales Island and the southern edge of Kupreanof - the final leg of our journey back to Mitkof Island which will begin when we have rounded the Cape. And to the west, we look out at the seemingly infinite expanse of the Pacific Ocean.*

*A week has passed since our potluck at Pt. Ellis. We left the Point in the early morning, paddling across the inside of Tebenkof Bay and through the islands of Explorer Basin. We found a beach near Swaine Point where we set camp in preparation for our journey along the outside coast of Kuiu Island to Cape Decision. Successfully rounding the Cape would depend upon the weather and the group's ability to handle challenging conditions. While everyone wanted to travel the open coast around the Cape, we still had the option to double back to the same portage and take the more protected route between the islands*

*through Rocky Pass.*

*After spending the night at Swaine Point, we arose to a cool land breeze and gentle swells on the ocean. While some of us cooked breakfast, others stuffed sleeping bags, took down tents, and carried kayaks to the water's edge. Everyone kept busy with the various tasks necessary to break camp and soon we were all fed, packed, launched, and paddling out to sea.*

*Although our students had learned enough to make and implement generally sound decisions on the water, we felt our experience as instructors was necessary to lead the group safely along the exposed coastline to Cape Decision. The students had plenty of challenges before them just striving to be competent and effective team members in this extremely rugged place, and we planned to turn more leadership responsibilities over to them once we reached the somewhat protected waters on the inside of the island.*

*Normally, a sea kayaker's safety is enhanced by paddling near the shoreline; proximity to land enables one to pull off the water quickly if conditions change for the worse. However, when moving along the open coast, it is generally better to paddle further off shore, beyond where the swells feel the ocean bottom and rise up to become either the white breakers of the surf or the dangerous boomers of the hidden reefs. There is a tremendous difference between the 'swell' and the 'chop'. While the former is due to residual energy in the ocean and generally raises and lowers the kayak in a rhythmic and stable pattern, the latter is caused by local and present wind conditions forming smaller and steeper waves which have greater potential to capsize a kayak.*

*There was virtually no wind and only a gentle swell running from the northwest when we launched our kayaks. Conditions still seemed stable when we reached the entrance to Port Malmesbury. With few protected places to safely pull off the water among the long stretches of cliffline and rocky reefs that lay ahead, we decided to take advantage of the calm weather and continue moving toward the safe haven of Crowley Bight further down the coast near the Cape. In doing so, we committed ourselves to paddling far from shore for most of the day. The sunshine warmed our faces and we felt the rise and fall of the large swells as we paddled south toward the Bight. Some felt it more than others, turning ever whiter shades of pale until they heaved their seasickness into the ocean to a mixture of sympathy and amusement.*

*As we approached the opening of Crowley Bight, however, there was no longer even a trace of amusement on any of our faces. Suddenly, a wind had started to blow from the*

*southwest. The swells began to steepen and roll more quickly toward shore. As my boat fell into a trough, most of the group was obscured from my view behind other swells. Rising back up upon a crest, I quickly surveyed the entire pod, only to sink into another trough. As well as the wind upon the surface, the swells were feeling both the ocean's bottom and the magnifying rebound effect of the waves crashing into the rocky point at the bay's entrance. With a designated lead, starboard, port, and sweep kayak, our pod moved in a tight diamond-shaped formation which we had been practicing on every paddling day since the expedition began. Moving only as fast as our slowest boat, we kept our formation and worked our way further from shore to the center of the bay's entrance where the swells were less steep and more even. The deafening silence of the open ocean was broken only by the dull rumble of the swells breaking on the rocky reefs deep inside the bay.*

*We watched the white spray of the distant boomers. The group was extremely quiet. They held their position at the center of the bay's entrance, struggling to keep their boats perpendicular to the swells. With the marine radios in our cockpits, Denise and I paddled our kayaks into the bay to scout the landing. The nautical chart indicated an open slot through the boomers which would offer access to the protected beach on the other side of the reef. Peering through our waterproof binoculars, we spotted a small area of calm water between the white spray. With the increasing winds, we wanted to get everybody off the water as quickly as possible. Denise paddled hard for the slot while I used a pre-arranged paddle signal to beckon the group toward me. When they arrived, we set up an order for landing. Taking a new transit, Jeremy remained with the majority of the group while I escorted the first two students toward the slot. Denise did not respond to my calls on the radio. Just as I began to think she might be in trouble, she appeared in the slot, jubilantly signaling the first boat toward her. Positioned on either side of the narrow opening, Denise and I sent the kayakers through the slot one at a time. On the other side lay a calm and sandy beach with a freshwater stream flowing into the bay from the dense forest. By the time all the students had landed and Jeremy and I were making our way through the opening, the bay was filled with large whitecaps atop the steepening swells.*

*That night we sat around a campfire retelling our day's adventure, listening and contributing to the multiple perspectives which make up a shared human experience. With the Cape only one move away, Crowley Bight took on the same feeling as 'highcamp' on a*

*mountaineering expedition. We would wait here for a period of calm weather to attempt our summit - Cape Decision.*

*For the next three days, we gathered on the beach for 'weather check' long before dawn. We walked through the darkness to a rocky prominence where we could feel the wind coming in from the sea and hear the rumble of the boomers. Always keeping one eye on the weather for signs of change, the rest of the day was spent in a variety of activities - from beach walks and journal-writing, to baking bread and cookies, to bracing and rolling lessons in the kayaks, to instructor and student mini-classes on everything from the intertidal and bird life to marine mammals and the constellations in the night sky. We also used these winded-in-camp days to begin mid-course talks, which involve an instructor and student reflecting upon the experience together and giving each other some feedback on one another's performance so far. As on most courses, these talks would begin formally and usually end up becoming informal conversations about the expedition and life in general. Each evening, the whole group sat together around a campfire on the beach, voicing frustrations and working through interpersonal problems, sharing stories and games and laughter, and reexamining the charts and tide tables for our move around Cape Decision.*

*This morning, we gathered for our fourth day's weather check at Crowley Bight. With the wind still coming in from the sea, the prospect of paddling seemed unlikely. We decided to make the most of the day by hiking to the peak of Mt. McArthur. We bushwhacked through the forest up to a ridge, above the treeline, which we could follow to the summit of the mountain. With an obvious route to the top, the group was able to spread out and take long breaks along the way. The other instructors and I used this opportunity for more one-on-one mid-course talks with some of the students.*

*One of the most interesting conversations I had was with David, a father of four children and a very successful high-level executive in the United States. This course was a fortieth birthday present from his 'very supportive wife' who remained in Washington D.C. with their children. Although David knew next to nothing about camping or kayaking, he taught us all something about leadership almost everyday through his outstanding ability to motivate and work with everybody in the group. Throughout the course, David had been outgoing and lighthearted, his intelligent comments, thoughtful behaviour, and easygoing sense of humour adding to everyone's enjoyment of the expedition. During the past few days*

at Crowley Bite, however, he had become a little more withdrawn as he contemplated our next move around Cape Decision.

The Cape had taken on a symbolic significance for all of us. While our success depended upon everybody everyday, rounding Cape Decision would mark the transition between the instructors using their knowledge and experience to lead the group 'there' and the students synthesizing and applying what they learned to lead the group 'back'. As the summit of our expedition, it was the halfway point of our journey, the place which divides there and back, departing and returning, going away and coming home.

As we wandered slowly along the ridge, David shared some of the thoughts weighing heavily on his mind. The responsibilities and stresses of his job were enormous, and he had come on this expedition to 'rejuvenate' himself and consider his future goals in an environment removed from both his work and family. Although he and his wife had discussed the idea before his trip to Alaska, it was during the past few days that David had decided he would hand in his resignation upon his return to Washington. He wished to pursue work which 'contributes more to society' and 'spend quality time' with his children. Rounding Cape Decision, even in its name, had come to symbolize this particularly significant turning point in his life. The first half of this journey had been a time for David to 'cut loose' from the pressures of his everyday life. Although he knew starting a new career would be very stressful, he was looking forward to the new challenges. As we spoke, he became more enthusiastic. The expedition had shown him that his leadership skills were transferable to new situations. He was looking forward to the second half of our course when he would be more directly involved in the decision-making process. He was looking forward to applying his leadership skills in new directions both on this expedition and beyond.

My conversation with Nicole was very different. After deciding to come on the expedition, she had contributed only minimal effort to our daily tasks. On two evenings in Port Camden, she had come to me in tears, upset that she could not operate the stove nor tie the 'trucker's hitch' used to secure the tarps. As I worked with her on these basic skills, it was apparent that Nicole's frustrations were caused by a lack of self-confidence, not incompetence.

Nicole reminded me somewhat of Sharon, a student of the same age I had taught several years earlier. On the third day of our course together in the remote fjords of Patagonia, Chile, Sharon had come to me with tears in her eyes. As we sat together below the

tide line on a couple of boulders, she told me that she was feeling 'miserable' and 'alone'. Sharon felt she was 'not liked by anybody' and 'incapable of doing anything right'. I have found among my students that such an extreme lack of self-esteem is not uncommon, particularly in young women. Wondering how much of Sharon's feelings were related to this experience, I asked her if she missed her home. She said things were 'even worse there' and she simply felt 'useless at everything'. I said something about the need 'to believe in yourself' and sat quietly with my arm around her for several minutes while she cried and the tide crept in around our rubber boots. Then she wiped her eyes, thanked me for listening, and we began sloshing our way from the boulders through the intertidal mud toward the tarps.

Before we rejoined the other group members who were cooking dinner under the tarps, I wanted to say something supportive to Sharon. Although I am never sure what to say to students experiencing a deeply rooted sense of despair, I generally tell them that I do care and will help them in whatever ways I can. I usually say something about the solution having to come from within, although they are welcome to talk to me about their feelings at anytime during the course. However, with Sharon I took an unusual approach. It struck me that what she needed most was not to dwell on and talk about her feelings of despair, but to build her self-esteem through experiences which build a sense of competence.

'Since we're going to be here for a month,' I said to Sharon, 'we'll have a lot more chances to talk about this stuff if you want to. So I have a suggestion: let's not talk about this stuff for one week. Instead, for the next week I want you to work hard on all the day-to-day tasks of being out here - pitching the tarps and tents, cooking meals, scrubbing pots and dishes, lighting fires, learning to paddle, everything - and you can get any help you need from any of the instructors or other students. I want you to focus not on your inner feelings but instead on the task at hand. Learn to tie all the different knots, maneuver your kayak, use the stove, light the campfire in the rain, and feed yourself and your tentmates. Then, one week from today we'll sit down together and see how things are going for you. Okay?'

Sharon looked at me quizzically and then nodded. Although she was only sixteen, she had been feeling unhappy for as long as she could remember and she was willing to try virtually anything.

A week later, I had just finished a stir fry dinner with my co-instructors when I noticed Sharon squatting by the shoreline washing her tentgroup's pots and pans. I grabbed our dirty

dishes and headed down to the water to join her.

'So, it's time for us to talk,' I said, as we scrubbed our dishes in the sand and rinsed them in the sea.

'About what?' she asked, looking up from her work.

'It's been one week.'

'Oh my God!' she blurted out loud, 'I nearly forgot!' After a pause, she smiled and said, 'I guess that's a good start!'

Her face shone with confidence and enthusiasm. We laughed about the day we all launched and landed six different times in three hours because of the strong Patagonian winds which kept whipping up suddenly and then dying out just as quickly. We laughed even harder about the night we all spent huddled together on a small slab of rock between the thick rainforest and the sea. After hours and hours of paddling, the outgoing tide had exposed this little area of respite and we finally had pitched camp there when we could find nowhere else to land.

As we finished washing our dishes, we looked up at the half-moon. 'See how it makes a D-shape,' I said, 'that means it's waning toward the new moon. Check out the moon sometime when you're back home and you'll see it's the other way around - a D-shaped moon will be waxing toward the full moon. It's the opposite here in the southern hemisphere.'

'And those changes affect the tides somehow,' she said.

'Ah, that's tomorrow's lesson. It's good to see you doing so well, Sharon.'

'Yes, it is.'

On the final days of that sea kayak course in Patagonia, I suggested to all the students that they write letters to themselves about the expedition which the instructors could mail to them a year later. This exercise is one of many activities which can be incorporated into the transference days at the end of a course. For some students, the self-letter is an entirely confidential matter. Others choose to read their self-letter to the group as part of a sharing session toward the end of the expedition. During our final evening together in Patagonia, we listened to Sharon read the following:

Dear Sharon,

I am writing to you to tell you what I am feeling inside. I know that we have had some problems, but out here we have reached a new plateau. We definitely have grown. Inside, we know that it's not the instructors who made us grow, but us, by doing hard work - simple things to survive. We are finding ourselves and we are

*loving who we are. We have self-confidence, we know how to take care of ourself on our own, we have so much to offer others, and we will not be stopped anymore. No more will we say 'I'm stupid...' because we're not. Sometimes shit happens and that's just a part of life. Out here, I feel that we haven't been concentrating on memorizing everything about the outdoors, but we've been learning about ourself. This is our time to grow. Let's make it happen. We have come so far in such a short time. Never forget how we have grown, no matter what!*

*-Sharon.*

*I had attempted unsuccessfully to approach Nicole's problems in the same way I had approached Sharon's dilemma. Her tentmates were frustrated by her lack of effort in camp. We were all frustrated by her seeming inability to paddle at the same pace as the rest of the boats. During our moves around Point Ellis and along the outer coast, I had placed Nicole in a double kayak with one of the strongest paddlers in the group. She was irritable, particularly when it rained or we had a long distance to paddle. Several times, at the end of long paddle-days, she came to my camp complaining and sometimes crying. At the same time, her tired tentmates were pitching their group's shelter and cooking dinner. Each time she had come to me, I had tried to be supportive and understanding while encouraging her to try harder. Nicole told me she was extremely unhappy with herself, not just on the expedition but with her life back home as well.*

*I felt a great deal of compassion for Nicole. Yet I decided to try another, perhaps seemingly less supportive, approach. As we sat on the ridge of Mt. McArthur for our mid-course talk, I told her that I felt I had been putting too much of my energy into her problems at the cost of giving my time to other group members. I said that from what I had seen on the course so far and from everything she had told me about her life prior to the expedition, I thought she was headed for a lot of trouble. I said that although I would like to see her make some changes on this course, in the end it would not matter too much to me one way or the other. After all, I pointed out to her, she was just one of tens of thousands of troubled youths, most of whom I would never meet. I told her that the decision to change (or not) was hers to make and that I would help as much as I could but first she had to make the effort. I said that the students would be handed over a lot more responsibility once we rounded the Cape and that could be a time for her to really step into the group and be a strong and supportive team member. I told her that one way or another we would make sure she made it through the expedition, but whether she contributed anything to the group would be ultimately up to her. I said that in less than a month she could be back home with her old friends in the same scene as before she came on this expedition. Or this journey around Cape Decision could be a point*



*of change for her, an opportunity to strike out in a new direction.*

*Believing my words sounded too much like a 'lecture from the school principal', I left Nicole sitting there and walked away. She sat on the ridge looking out at the ocean for a long time, then made her way up the gentle slope and quietly joined the rest of the group on the summit.*

*Now everyone is sitting together on the broad peak of Mt. McArthur, sharing lunch and enjoying the panoramic view of the archipelago. With a few crackers and some cheese in my hand, I take the VHF radio and wander away from the group. From this vantage point, I am able to communicate with the Manley Station marine operator further up the coast. She links me directly into the Alaska State phone system. I relate my call sign and provide her with a telephone and calling card number. After listening to several rings, a voice I recognize says 'hello' from a phone in Vancouver, British Columbia.*

*'Hi Dad,' I respond, squeezing the button on my radio, 'Happy Father's Day! I'm standing on a mountain in Alaska and I had to test the radio so I thought I'd call you. I'm glad I caught you at home. How are you? We can only speak one at a time, okay?'*

*'I'm alright, Ken. How are you? Mom's out right now....'*

*And so, through a bit of static and a touch of confusion, I speak with my father. I picture him with the telephone in his hand, sitting on the edge of his bed in the house in which I was raised. Like most of my students, I grew up in a city. Like them, I am a visitor in this wilderness. I tell Dad about the trip so far and he tells me about the family. We speak of September when we'll meet again.*

*As I say goodbye and stand clear, it occurs to me that for the first time in five years I will return to Vancouver this Fall for more than just a visit. During these many years of instructing outdoor courses, I have felt an increasing distance from the world in which I was raised. Although I will continue to lead outdoor and environmental education courses on a seasonal basis, I feel the need to re-establish myself in the modern world, to lead a less transient lifestyle, to grow roots and contribute something from what I have learned on these many expeditions. It strikes me that this moment, this expedition, this summit and the rounding of Cape Decision, marks an important transition in my life too.*

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The Liminal Experience

I end this study with an invitation to investigators of ritual to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition. It is these, I hold, that paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture....

-Victor Turner (1967:110)

"Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage"

As previously discussed, expedition participants are involved, to some degree, in an underlying process of separation, transition, and reincorporation - a personal rite of passage. The meaningful experiences embedded within that process share the common thread of liminality. This section explores both liminality and, through the italicized words of expedition participants, the meaningful experiences through which liminality manifests itself on the wilderness expedition.⁹

During the liminal phase of a rite of passage, participants (or "liminaries", "threshold people", "passengers", etc.) engage in an intense experience through which they are momentarily released from what Turner calls *social structure* - that is, "the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969:95). Liminaries are "betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life", and the liminal (or transitional) experience is therefore associated with what Turner calls *social anti-structure* (*ibid.* 1974:273).

By anti-structure, however, Turner does not mean *without* (as in *an absence of*) any structure. In fact, rites of passage are all about the performance of rituals and these, of course, have their own structures. It is through the performance of rituals that one's actions take on symbolic meaning. On a wilderness expedition, repetitive and isolated acts become

9. Since 1967, when Victor Turner first published "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", liminality has been the subject of extensive investigation in the social sciences, literature, and the performing arts. The discussions of liminality are therefore numerous and varied. Even Turner's own work examines liminality from many perspectives and his descriptions of the liminal experience involve a variety of different, though not disparate, characteristics. Turner set out his general theory of liminality in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), upon which he continued to build for the rest of his life. My discussion of the liminal (or transitional) experience on wilderness expeditions draws upon much of Turner's work (1992; 1986a; 1986b; 1985; 1982; 1979; 1977; 1974; 1969; 1967) as well as Kenelm Burridge's *Someone, No One: An Essay on Individuality* (1979). For further reading about Victor Turner's life and work, see *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism* (edited by Ashley, 1990) as well as Edith Turner's prologue "From the Ndembu to Broadway" in *On the Edge of the Bush* (1985). Also, for an in-depth application of "Turnerian" concepts of liminality to the education system, see Peter McLaren's *Schooling As A Ritual Performance* (1993 [1986]).

meaningful rituals with their own symbolic value.¹⁰ Analyzing the weather each morning becomes a daily ritual known as "weather check". Still bleary-eyed with sleep, we crawl out of our tents at dawn and gather quietly by the edge of the sea where we look, listen, and feel - the air, the water, the motion of the trees. A suggestion to paddle together silently one morning is adopted by the group in the days that follow, becoming known as the "silent paddle" - a morning ritual, following weather check, through which the group moves quietly along the surface of the water, 'feeling its rhythms', 'listening to its sounds'. In our regular world, we tend to be social beings, only unconsciously aware of our natural surroundings, drawing most of our conscious stimulation from direct interactions with people and technology. The ritual weather check and silent paddle come to symbolize our conscious effort to develop a sense of connection with the natural world.

Similarly, the process of sitting together in a circular formation for a group discussion gradually becomes known as "the circle" - no longer merely referring to the geometrical configuration of our seating pattern, but rather to a symbol of the process itself - a symbol of communication and equality, inclusion and affirmation, commitment and community. Such symbols abound on a wilderness expedition. There is "the pod" - our group of kayakers paddling along the coast in a tight formation - a ritualized expression of support and community in the vastness of the ocean as well as a symbolic reference to the formations of whales and dolphins which inhabit this place. And of course, there is the ritual campfire - an archetypal cultural symbol of 'getting back to nature', of communion, of shared warmth with fellow human beings within the serenity of the natural world.

These ritual behaviours of expedition members are not only symbolically meaningful, but often pragmatically essential for group safety - carefully *structured actions* designed to promote a constant awareness of environmental conditions and clarity of communication between participants. Thus, as Turner recognizes, rituals associated with liminality and anti-structure are not structureless, but have their own social norms.

Furthermore, the study of a liminal experience is illuminating precisely because these norms are so different from those of the social structure which shape our everyday lives

10. Although repetition is a general characteristic of ritual, in *Secular Ritual*, Moore and Myerhoff note that some rituals are spontaneously generated and performed only once. In the case of a unique and isolated ritual, the stylistic rigidity and repetitive features *internal* to its form and content infuse it with symbolic meaning (1977:8).

(Turner 1969). "Borrowing from Victor Turner (1969), then, one may think of the ritual process as potentially an active thing, not invariably as a restatement of a static or even cyclic state of affairs, but equally capable of making and marking a shift in a situation" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:10). This "making and marking" of a transition lies at the core of a rite of passage. Myerhoff points out that the "most salient characteristic of ritual is its function as a frame" (1977:200). While the everyday rituals of structure frame *ordinary* experiences in a manner that *affirms* the established social order, the liminal rituals of anti-structure frame *extraordinary* experiences in a manner that offers *alternatives* to that social order. Thus, by anti-structure, Turner does not mean that the liminal experience is without any structure, but rather that it provides fertile ground for cultural experimentation and the creation of new social structures.

By anti-structure, neither does Turner mean that the liminal experience is *opposed to* (as in *against*) structure, but merely that one is released from the "many different kinds of privileges and obligations, many degrees of superordination and subordination" that make up the ordinary social order (1967:99). "In the liminal period such distinctions and gradations tend to be eliminated" (*ibid.*). This break-down of the social distinctions which delineate people and separate us from one another leads to a strong sense of connection between participants during the liminal phase.

Normal social boundaries seem to fade away and people are easier to communicate with....

Liminaries spontaneously engage themselves in an intense experience characterized by a sense of "the generic human bond" - "a strong sentiment of 'humankindness'" - which Turner calls *communitas* (1969:97,116).

We started to respect and trust one another. Then, after awhile, we started to love one another. And it's unconditional love, I think, in that, I can't explain it, but I found myself loving people who I wouldn't even like and wouldn't choose to spend time with back home....

Turner states:

Liminars are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure ... and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal.... Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, or *communitas*. (1979:149) ... The bonds of *communitas* are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct ... relationships. (1974:274)

Thus, a sense of community among those in the liminal/transitional phase of a rite of passage

results from their shared ordeal and common release from the social order.

Out here you hang out with people you'd never hang out with at school. They'd belong to a different clique. Out here, what you wear, how you do in school, whether or not you're into drugs - none of that matters. There are no drugs, you all eat the same food, you all have to wear the same type of clothing for survival....

On the trip we had to communicate with each other and deal with problems as they arose whereas in 'regular life' it's very easy to ignore problems or conflicts.... On the trip, there was no way that you could avoid a person or ignore conflict. We had to listen to one another and see things from other people's perspectives. I think this led to a greater understanding and allowed us to get closer than you normally get with even your best friends or family. It's that feeling that you've gone through something together and shared such an incredible experience.

This camaraderie between liminaries - Turner's 'communitas', or what I refer to as 'a sense of community' - is a central characteristic of the expedition expressed over and over again by participants.

We started out as a bunch of separate people with separate lives and separate identities. Over time we became a group with a group identity....

The development of a group identity among participants during the liminal phase of a rite of passage should not be associated with a loss of individual identity. As Turner states:

Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms, ... representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship, ... a relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness. (1974:274)

In fact, the bonds of communitas are dependent upon participants' individuality as socially undefined human beings. Thus, Turner describes communitas as "a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes...." (1974:202). As Kenelm Burridge points out in *Someone, No One: An Essay On Individuality* (1979), one generally identifies oneself through the cultural lens of *social structure*. In our regular lives, social roles and hierarchical relations shape our worldview, our actions and interactions, and our definitions of ourselves and others. The social structure *identifies* one as a 'person', as 'someone' with a clearly defined status and specific roles. By contrast, during the liminal experience, one becomes an 'individual', Burridge's 'no one'. Liminaries find themselves in a situation of *nonidentity* which provides the potential for personal change. (Turner 1992:141-45; Burridge 1979).

For the first time in a long time, I had no role. I was nobody's wife and nobody's mother. I was nobody's boss and nobody's employee. I was just me. Being no one meant I could be anyone.

In your normal life you can put on an act and be certain ways with different people in different situations. And sometimes you have to act a certain way because that's what's expected. Sometimes you don't even know that you're acting. But out here you're with people all the time and you need to do everything together. So you can no longer hide yourself, from yourself or from others. You get to see the real side of people - their strengths, weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, everything about them - and they get to see the real you, not some made-up part of you they might see in the regular world.... I think that's why you become so much closer out here. In the end, you talk about everything, even things you would never talk about with people in your normal life.

The development of *communitas* is therefore dependent upon feelings of authenticity - a sense of "being true to oneself", as Rebecca Erickson puts it (1995:123). In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah *et al* argue "that a strong group that respects individual differences will strengthen autonomy as well as solidarity; that it is not in groups but in isolation that people are apt to be homogenized" (1985:307). In liminality, participants' entrance into the group is generally accompanied by a shedding of their distinctive and often alienating roles in the social order.

On the trip I feel more at ease with myself. I don't feel that I am being pressured by anyone into being something different than what I am. Without the media and social pressures of 'normal' life I find it easier to define who I am and what I stand for.

Liminality, then, involves a release from the ongoing and often unconscious performance associated with what Erving Goffman has called "the presentation of self in everyday life". As Goffman states, in many aspects of ordinary living,

the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show.... In everyday terms, there will be things he knows, or has known, that he will not be able to tell himself. This intricate maneuver of self-delusion constantly occurs.... Perhaps here we have a source of what has been called 'self-distantiation', namely, that process by which a person comes to feel estranged from himself. (1973:81-82)

Observing the bonds formed amongst members of a liminal group, Turner notes:

This comradeship, with its familiarity, ease and, I would add, mutual outspokenness, is once more the product of interstructural liminality, with its scarcity of jurally sanctioned relationships and its emphasis on axiomatic values expressive of the common weal. People can 'be themselves', it is frequently said, when they are not acting institutionalized roles. (1967:101)

...

Thus, the "moments of antistructure are felt to belong to one's 'authentic self', beyond playacting...." (Turner 1992:135-36).

Here I am 100% me.

Turner states that "the attributes of liminality ... are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally

locate states and positions in cultural space" (1969:95). He describes some rites of passage "as a passionate attempt to heal the breaches caused by social structural conflict and competition and by egotistical or factional strivings for power, influence, wealth, and so forth by reviving feelings of an underlying bedrock *communitas*, a generic human relationship undivided by status-roles or structural oppositions...." (1985:233).

I can hardly believe that only three months ago I was sitting on the coast of Alaska. It seems like another lifetime. Sometimes my regular life seems so superficial. I spend my time running around from school to hockey to soccer, trying to be a million places and do a million things all at once. I think society focuses us on getting as many things done as quickly as possible. In my regular life there is no time or space to just stop and think, feel, or see. The course was an incredible opportunity for personal growth and discovery. I find that getting away from everything that I am used to in my life allows me to really look at my life and myself from a different perspective. The priorities are different and therefore the criteria by which I judge myself are different as well. For example, while living my regular life, I am 'a good student, a great athlete, etc.' This is how I am defined by myself and others in my regular life. The expedition gave me the opportunity to look beyond those superficial attributes and see that there is a great deal more to me as a person besides being a brain and a jock. I've learned that I can get along with people even when conditions are harsh; I've learned to keep a positive attitude at all times; I've learned valuable lessons about leadership and resolving conflicts. Basically, I've developed confidence by knowing that I can deal with whatever is thrown at me. I think in part this is because the type of person valued on a trip is not necessarily the smartest or most athletic. In my regular life, academics and athletic competition have earned me a great deal of success, but in the 'expedition life' it is the person who is the team player who is the most successful. In my regular life I push myself to become better than my competitors. On the expedition, I push myself to help the group to succeed as a group. There were no medals, or trophies, or finish lines, or points to score, or championships, or awards, but somehow the value of what I accomplished there seems greater than my successes in my regular life. Competition can be a very isolating, lonely pursuit. The expedition allowed me to push myself, both physically and mentally in a group setting where the welfare of the group was the top priority and I increased my connection to everyone. I felt so much closer to people.

Thus, the liminal experience is characterized not only by deep feelings of connection with others - the development of *a sense of community* - but also by the commonly used phrase 'finding oneself', or connecting with one's 'authentic self' (Turner), or exploring one's 'individuality' (Burridge) - in other words, the development of *a sense of self*. In contrast to our regular lives, the liminal experience of *communitas* therefore involves an intense sense of connection with humanity - the humanity within others as well as within ourselves.

The feeling of disconnection we experience within the regular social structure - from humanity, or from the "real you" and the "real me" (Erickson 1995:121) - also manifests itself as a sense of disconnection from the natural world. As Clifford Geertz states:

The everyday world in which members of any community move, their taken-for-granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies,

faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determined persons characterized and appropriately labeled. And the symbol systems which define these classes are not given in the nature of things - they are historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied. (1973:363-64)

Burridge's 'no one' (1979) - that is, the liminary in the midst of a rite of passage - is able to transcend the social order and momentarily glimpse the "natural facts" (Turner 1974:252) that lay beyond our culturally constructed reality. As Turner states:

In a sense, where man ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of man, he also ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of nonhuman beings. It is culture that fabricates structural distinctions; it is culture too that eradicates these distinctions in liminality, but in so doing culture is forced to use the idiom of nature, to replace its fictions by natural facts - even if these facts themselves only possess what reality they have in a framework of cultural concepts.... Thus, symbolically, their [liminaries'] structural life is snuffed out by animality and nature, even as it is being regenerated by these very same forces. One dies *into* nature to be reborn *from* it. (1974:252-53)

What I get from being here, having the mud squelch around my boots, seeing bears and hearing waterfalls, is some intuition of the wilderness within me - that dark unknowable, percolating beneath all the layers which education, culture, society have built up. Somewhere in me I have dimly lit forests, creeks, mud flats, bears and wolves that I'll never completely know.... What's fascinating about being alive is that you never completely know yourself. You are your own mystery, enigma, puzzle.

Thus, as a rite of passage, there is great deal of symbolism associated with the fact that the expedition takes place in *wilderness* - a physical as well as a symbolic journey through a region (of both the earth and the mind) that is outside the regular structure of our ordinary lives. Participants' experience of *communitas* on a wilderness expedition involves not only a sense of self and a sense of community, but also feelings of connection with the natural environment - *a sense of place*.¹¹

I began to realize that we are animals just like the whales, the caribou, the birds, and the fish. Like them, we are part of the food chain. Rarely do I think of myself as this. I've always bought meat at the A & P and never really thought about where it came from. The process of catching, killing, cleaning, cooking and eating fish led me to a feeling of appreciation, respect, and connectedness to the rest of life on earth. We are not above, beyond or apart from the natural world, we are a part of it.

Many aspects of participants' wilderness experience are encompassed in Turner's descriptions of *communitas* - camaraderie, sacredness, and humility (1969:96) as well as simplicity, nakedness, and an altered sense of time.

11. 'Sense of place' is discussed here as one component of the broader *communitas* experience of liminality. For a more thorough discussion of 'sense of place' and its significance in the domain of environmental education, see Raffan (1993; 1992).

Swimming naked, I felt like I was natural part of the world. It is hard to feel this sort of connection to stone buildings and paved highways. It is a humbling feeling to be in the wilderness at the mercy of nature. It is sorta nice to know that there are still things that humans cannot control - the waves, the wind, the tides, and the rain.

As Turner states:

A 'natural' or 'simple' mode of dress, or even undress in some cases, signalizes that one wishes to approximate the basically or merely human, as against the structurally specific by way of status or class. (1974:244) ... Clocked time and experienced time are quite different, as we all know. (1992:135) ... Communitas is almost always thought of or portrayed by actors as a timeless condition, an eternal now, as 'a moment in or out of time', or as a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable" (1974:238).

As I look back on the trip, our month together seems like it was a fleeting instant and simultaneously like it was ten years of my life. Time seemed to stand still, and in that moment I felt complete.

Participants' feelings of connection with humanity and nature along with such associated attributes as simplicity and an altered sense of time can lead to epiphanies - to momentary experiences of communion with all of creation. "Some might say that communitas knows only harmonies and no disharmonies or conflicts...." (*ibid.*:208).

I felt like there was a place for me and that I was as much a part of the earth as the ocean, the whales, and the trees.

The liminal experience is therefore described, both by Turner and by some expedition participants, as 'magical' or 'sacred' - as a time of infinite love and awe, power and creativity.

Here I find my sacred space. I know that I'm competent, that I belong. I feel like the whole world has strived to create this place, this situation, specifically for me. I feel love for the whole world. And I guess the bottom line is, I love myself. I feel like I can be anyone and do anything.

Turner describes these various aspects of the liminal state of communitas as follows:

Spontaneous communitas has something 'magical' about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power.... It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. (1969:128,139) ... [C]ommunitas is brief, as measured by objective time, though subjectively powerful and the seedbed of many subsequent thoughts, words, and deeds. (1992:159) ... Communitas strains toward universalism and openness.... [It is] a spring of pure possibility.... And because communitas is such a basic, even primordial mode of human interlinkage, depending as it does neither on conventions nor sanctions, it is often religiously equated with love - both the love of man and the love of God. The principle is simple: cease to have and you are; if you 'are' in the relationship of communitas to others who 'are', then you love one another. In the honesty of being, people 'naturally' relate to or 'dig' one another. (1974:202,266)

For me, a guitar, a campfire, singing, stars and a beach make up a 'magical moment'. It is at these times that I feel so much a part of the group and feel so connected to everyone and everything.

I often feel awed by how much I feel a part of my surroundings and by how much I feel alive.

I think that more than almost anything else, I've felt an incredible feeling of wonder. The whale that circled our pod and kept getting closer and closer. And when it surfaced right near my kayak, it seemed almost unreal it was so perfect. And when it suddenly got really windy. I have never felt such an incredible wind in my life. It was so powerful. Our tent was being blown down and it was so loud. I was in absolute awe of the wind's power and magnitude. It was a feeling that I can't really put into words. There's a magical feeling I get with every whale, every shooting star, every perfect shell, every sunset, every storm, and the seemingly endless sea, full of more life and excitement than I could possibly imagine. It is the wonderful feeling of being a part of something bigger, deeper, and more real than anything in the city. This is wilderness, this is freedom, this is magic, and this is living.

Communitas therefore manifests itself spontaneously as intense, positive feelings of 'connection' and 'being alive'.

This sense of communitas is a product of the anti-structural experience that characterizes liminality. By stepping out of the social structure, one is provided with an opportunity to reflect upon that structure. As Turner states:

Major liminal situations are occasions on which a society *takes cognizance of itself*, or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos.... In such situations as the liminal periods of major *rites de passage* the 'passengers' and 'crew' are free, under ritual exigency, to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men, the difficulties that peculiarly beset their own society, their personal problems, and the ways in which their own wisest predecessors have sought to order, explain, explain away, cloak, or mask ... these mysteries and difficulties. (1974:239-42) ... We find social relationships simplified, while myth and ritual are elaborated. That this is so is really quite simple to understand: if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs. (1969:167)

Without all the distractions and noise of the city, I get the chance to think about things. About my life, my family, and the world in which I live and work. About the problems we hear about daily in the news. I feel like I can put things in perspective when I'm away from it all, and think about ways we should change so we'll have a better future.

What coming out here has given me is a greater capacity to serve because just knowing there is an enigma within yourself is knowing that nothing in society is clear and established. Only in questioning all previous assumptions can you improve it and contribute to it.

Thus, anti-structure is not an enemy of social structure, but rather "something positive, a generative center" for improvements to that structure (Turner 1974:273). The participants in a

rite of passage do not just follow prescribed ritual behaviours, but learn to think in new and innovative ways.

[E]ach society requires of its mature members not only adherence to rules and patterns, but at least a certain level of skepticism and initiative.... [During a rite of passage], accepted schemata and paradigms must be broken if initiates are to cope with novelty and danger. They have to learn how to generate viable schemata under environmental challenge. (Turner 1974:256)

One could not find a more apt description of the flexibility and creativity necessary for successful participation in a wilderness expedition.

We continually had to deal with new situations, to figure out how to handle whatever came our way. And it was continually changing so there could be no fixed ways of doing things.

Thus, as a liminal experience, the wilderness expedition provides an excellent opportunity for questioning the existing patterns and structures of societal as well as personal behaviours and experimenting with new patterns.

Furthermore, the liminal experience, the wilderness expedition itself, is only a temporary state. Eventually participants return to the social structure from which they came. Turner notes that this structure, the hierarchical and compartmentalized arrangement of the social order, is necessary to achieve so many of our physical needs. He therefore criticizes those 'millenarian' and 'enthusiastic' movements - from religious cults to the hippies - for whom "the ecstasy of spontaneous communitas is seen as *the* end of human endeavor" (1969:139). Turner argues that "there is perhaps greater wisdom" displayed when

this state is regarded rather as a means to the end of becoming more fully involved in the rich manifold of structural role playing ... for human beings are responsible to one another in the supplying of humble needs, such as food, drink, clothing, and the careful teaching of material and social techniques. Such responsibilities imply the careful ordering of human relationships and of man's knowledge of nature. (*Ibid.*)

As a liminal experience of anti-structure, the wilderness expedition offers a rich opportunity for personal growth and experimentation with group dynamics, which can be incorporated into, and eventually modify, the social structure.

Turner states that "man is both a structural and an anti-structural entity, who *grows* through anti-structure and *conserves* through structure" (1974:298). He argues that society (*societas*) involves a continual balancing of these two modalities, for too much anti-structure leads to anarchy and too much structure leads to fascism. He states that

in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic. (1969:129)

Therefore, the wilderness expedition, like so many other liminal experiences associated with modern leisure, should not be dismissed as merely recreation or play. Rather, it should be recognized, like most intense leisure activities, as a form of 'serious play'. Turner states that in a complex, industrial society, "our lost liminality" exists in the activities of "modern 'leisure' ... [which provides the] freedom to transcend social-structural normative limitations, the freedom to *play* - with ideas, with fantasies, with words..., with paint..., and with social relationships...." (1992:54). Thus, on the wilderness expedition, participants *play*, and in so doing, they transcend the realm of the ordinary social structure through the extraordinary liminal experience of *communitas*. This liminal experience characterizes the rite of passage and lies at the core of participants' 'inward transformation' and 'outward change'.

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*July 2, 1995 - Kah Sheets Bay, Southeast Alaska: It is the final evening of our expedition. We have gathered around a small campfire on the beach for the closing ritual of our expedition - a final sharing session.*

*... and for me, this trip has been more than a route and a kayak. It has changed me and my outlook on life. I write now as a different person than at the beginning of the summer. I'm happier, more self-confident, and filled with a desire to excel....*

*Faces are momentarily illuminated by flickers of light amid dark shadows. With a backdrop of warm silence and a waning moon, we share our reflections on the expedition with one another. Sarah is clutching the talking stick and reading her most recent journal entry to the rest of the group.*

*... I can't list everything I will take away with me. I am forced to leave my precious wilderness and kayak behind, but the person who paddled it is mine to keep....*

*As she expresses her thoughts and feelings, I reflect upon all that has occurred since the mid-point of our expedition, since we descended Mt. McArthur and rounded Cape Decision.*

*I think back to Father's Day and our return from the summit to our tents in Crowley Bight. There we found animal tracks in the sand around our campsite. We stared at the imprints of the clover-shaped pads with the four oblong toe and claw markings of a canine. Wolf! During dinner, the atmosphere was charged with excitement as Denise described the hunting and mating patterns of wolves and talked about the distinction between their long*

*descending howl and the more staccato yipping of coyotes. As Denise finished speaking, Douglas let out a howl and one by one we joined in. Silence. And then, a response from somewhere in the rainforest.*

*... There were magical times when I felt almost as if I were under a spell....*

*As Sarah reads about her experiences on the expedition, I recall the air of mystery in our camp that night when the distant wolves howled in reply to our calls. We crawled into our tents without speaking and lay in our sleeping bags listening to their howls resonate through Crowley Bight.*

*The next morning, we gathered on the beach before dawn for weather check. The air was almost still. While the rest of the group walked out to the rocky point to evaluate the conditions, two students and I launched our kayaks to get a feel for the water. Our kayaks rose and fell in the large but gentle westerly swells. After five nights in the same camp, Cape Decision finally seemed within reach. We turned our kayaks to the east and paddled back into the Bight as the light of dawn began to fill the dark sky. The group on shore let out a howl as we approached. Still paddling, the three of us smiled at one another and howled back. As our voices trailed off, we heard a deeper howl. There, between the group and the tent, stood a wolf, silhouetted against the dawn sky. For a moment, the world seemed motionless. Then the wolf vanished into the forest. Our focus quickly shifted to the paddle that lay ahead. Few words seemed necessary. We broke camp.*

*The swells were large on the west coast of Kuiu Island that day, but there was not even a breath of wind. Humpback whales surfaced near our boats as we drifted past the Cape Decision lighthouse and into the more protected waters of Sumner Strait. The whales moved toward our pod of kayaks and a sense of wonder swept over us. The sheer enormity and power of these creatures whose length dwarfed our boats.*

*I was kayaking near the tandem boat paddled by Douglas and Nicole when a humpback surfaced beside them. Its breath misted us.*

*"Cape Decision!" yelled Douglas, "I will never forget this day!"*

*I paddled even closer to their boat until I was beside Nicole. She had said virtually nothing since we had spoken on the ridge of Mt. McArthur the previous afternoon. She stared in awe as the humpback sounded nearby, its giant tail flukes rising above the surface then disappearing into the sea. Nicole turned to face me. It was the first time I had ever seen her*

*smile. We continued moving across the entrance of Affleck Canal, parting ways with the whales when we headed to shore near St. Albans Point.*

*That evening, we celebrated our successful rounding of the Cape with another potluck dinner during which we enthusiastically recounted the events of the day to one another. Everyone spoke of the whales and the wolf, and several students suggested these encounters had been a sign of good fortune for our passage.*

*... It felt as though the wilderness was a living, breathing spirit. I felt as if I belonged there, I was a part of her....*

*After dinner, we formed a circle on the beach to discuss the second half of our expedition. I spread out the charts and traced our route from Kake to our present location. The instructors had led the journey along the west coast of Kuiu and around the Cape. The students would now be responsible for leading the journey back to our van and boat trailer on Mitkof Island where the expedition began. I spoke about the importance of applying the skills they had learned so far in new and innovative ways. I pointed out that no matter how long any of us spent on the coast, nobody could ever know 'the' right way to deal with every possible situation. Each day would offer unexpected challenges of both coastal weather and group dynamics, and the students needed to use their experience and creativity to individually and collectively meet these challenges, to find 'a' right way to deal with each situation as it arose. I spoke of peer leadership and group safety, of the importance of balancing decisiveness with flexibility, confidence with humility. I stopped speaking and quietly placed the tools and symbols of leadership into the center of the circle - a deck compass, a set of large scale charts, a log book, a marine radio, a first aid kit, a tow rope, and a package of flares. The air of excitement and nervous tension was broken by Laura, for whom this expedition was a momentary hiatus from her role as a business manager and mother of three children.*

*"I feel like I'm sixteen again and have just been handed the car keys," she laughed.*

*The students began discussing ideas for a system of leadership, arriving at a plan to have pairs of leaders rotating on a daily basis. The group became quiet when David asked the others who would like to lead first. His question hung in the air as Denise, Jeremy, and I withdrew from the circle. As the three of us walked toward our tent, I heard a voice break the silence.*

*"I will. "*

*A momentary pause was followed by Douglas' booming words. "Right on, Nicole!"*

*The other instructors and I lay in our sleeping bags that night listening to the group sketch out a plan for the days which lay ahead.*

*... During this time, we had control over our lives....*

*As we sit by the fire and Sarah continues reading from her final journal entry, I remember when she joined Nicole to form that first student leadership team. They were to develop a very close friendship in the days that lay ahead. Nicole and Sarah's day as leaders began on the beach in the early morning drizzle where they served us steaming tea. Weather check. Breakfast. A silent paddle. And finally a break near the entrance to Louise Cove to put on raingear, have a snack, and drop a fishing line.*

*We had planned to paddle past Boulder Point that day, but our plans changed when Laura hooked into a large halibut. Halibut is an extremely powerful fish which thrashes violently when its head is pulled through the surface of the water. It can be dangerous to pull up a large one, particularly when one is fishing from a kayak. Laura held tension on the line, keeping the halibut just below the surface while we contemplated the next step. As several students paddled over to give Laura a hand, I recalled reading about how the Inuit used seal bladders tied to their harpoons as floats when they hunted whales from their kayaks. While Laura worked to keep the tension on her line, I set several group members to the task of inflating their paddle-floats (an emergency device used for solo capsize recovery) which Nicole then tied to Laura's fishing gaff. Meanwhile, Sarah and David tied tow ropes between their kayak and Laura's boat. As Nicole leaned across Laura's cockpit to form a stable two-kayak raft, Laura gaffed the fish knowing that she could let go if necessary (it would now be held near the surface by the floats, we hoped). Despite the halibut's strength, however, Laura was able to hang on to the long handle of her gaff with her arm stretched into the water. She thereby kept the halibut a few feet below the surface while Nicole braced her kayak and Sarah and David towed them to shore. Several other students already had their kayaks up the beach and were finding heavy pieces of driftwood they could use to club the fish. When their raft reached the shallows, Laura leaped from her cockpit and with the help of another student, dragged the halibut up the stone beach to where she and Douglas killed it with swift blows to the head.*

*Breathing hard, we stood around the dead fish in the rain, a mixture of adrenaline and awe and perhaps a touch of squeamishness among those who had never before directly taken*

part in the killing of anything. Denise, the most experienced fisher among us, estimated the halibut weighed about one hundred and ten pounds, noting that it was the same length as Kate who stood five feet tall. As Denise demonstrated how to clean and fillet the flat fish, she taught a hands-on biology lesson and discussed the ethic of respecting the life taken by not wasting any meat.

Some of us made hot drinks on the campstoves with the last of our fresh water supply while Nicole and several students left in their kayaks to scout the shoreline of Louise Cove for a new source. The sun had just broken through the overcast sky when Nicole informed us through the static of the handheld marine radios that they had found a good camping area with a freshwater creek a nautical mile away. After filling plastic bags with nearly seventy pounds of halibut steak and reloading our kayaks, Sarah led us to the creek where we set camp.

... There were times when I felt so free, so alive....

With Denise's assistance, Sarah and Nicole barbecued the halibut over a campfire and several group members put their newly acquired baking skills to work. We enjoyed an afternoon feast of halibut, fresh bread, and pasta salad. Lunch extended into dinner. The sky cleared and the sun shone brightly. Kate and Laura were the first to strip off their clothes and run into the ocean. Douglas and Jeremy followed their lead. And soon the entire group was splashing one another in the bay and laughing together. Then we lay on the rocks, letting the sun warm our naked bodies.

The following day was the summer solstice. The sea was already choppy in the early morning, so the student leaders, David and Kate, dropped by the tents to let everyone know they could sleep in. Later that morning, the winds calmed down and they decided we would make our way along the shoreline while the conditions permitted.

We launched our kayaks and rounded Rock Point in moderate seas, tucking into the entrance of Port Beauclerc to cross its opening. During our crossing, the winds built suddenly and violently from the southeast. David called to the group to follow Kate's kayak into Port Beauclerc where he hoped we would be able to tuck into the lee of Edwards Island. The bay filled with whitecaps. The following seas made our kayaks unstable, and some boats were having difficulty steering. Kate signaled the group to hold up and turn our bows into the waves while she and David quickly revised their plan. They led us back to the south toward the nearest point of land. Heading into the waves slowed our progress but we were more



*stable and able to keep our pod in a tighter formation. The rain beat down upon us. The dark sky was momentarily illuminated by flashes of lightning followed by the crash of thunder. Kate and Denise landed first while David supervised the rest of the group who were by this time a soaking wet bundle of exhilaration and nerves. Kate used her paddle to signal the next boat to shore and within fifteen minutes she and David had led the last boats off the water in an extremely efficient roughwater landing.*

*... We worked and lived together, depended on each other, and grew so close to one another....*

*Standing on shore, we felt the dampness against our skin rapidly cooling our bodies. Some of us moved kayaks up the beach while others pitched a large tarp in the forest under which we all gathered with our campstoves. Soon we were huddled together out of the downpour, sipping hot chocolate and tucking nalgene bottles filled with warm water into our layers of pile clothing. David picked up a stick of wood and began to hit the pot with a steady rhythm which was barely audible over the rumble of the thunder and driving rain beating against the tarp overhead. One by one, with makeshift drums of spoons and stones, cups and bowls, we joined his rhythm. With a steadily increasing tempo, our drumming built to a crescendo which drowned out the noise of the storm and celebrated the summer solstice.*

*During the next several days, we made our way north to Keku Strait, camping along the shore of Kuiu Island. We eventually crossed to Kupreanof Island, pulling off the water at Lovelace Creek. There we unloaded our kayaks, set camp, and gathered on the beach to discuss the day's passage. We talked about our paddle from Three Mile Arm across the southern opening of Rocky Pass to our present location. Several people mentioned how much they enjoyed beginning the day paddling silently through the early morning mist. Douglas and Laura, the student leaders that day, described the frustration they had felt when the pod spread out and communication became difficult. While agreeing everybody should paddle nearer to one another, Sarah responded that the communication problems were partially due to a lack of group focus which resulted from participants feeling their ideas were not welcomed as input in the student leaders' decision-making process. Similar frustrations had been addressed on previous days, though I noticed group members were learning the effectiveness of expressing criticisms in a less accusatory, more solution-oriented, manner. They had learned a great deal about living and working together through dealing with the conflicts and frustrations which had arisen earlier on the trip. After a lengthy discussion, the students*

*decided that in the future they would try harder to paddle within speaking distance of one another and agreed that student leaders should act as facilitators rather than directors, soliciting group input and working toward a consensus. Jim then pointed out that there would still be exceptional circumstances, such as a sudden storm, when a more directive leadership approach might be necessary to accomplish tasks quickly and efficiently. The other group members nodded in agreement, bringing the circle to a close.*

*... We all had a lot of time to think about the things that really matter in the world and in our lives....*

*The group decided to spend several days at Lovelace Creek, where a magnificent waterfall cascaded down rocky ledges to a deep pool below. With no plan to move, we all had more time to ourselves and took to a variety of activities. In the early mornings and late evenings, people wandered through the large tidal flats. And the days were filled with fishing and hiking, cooking and bathing, sketching and journal writing. Evening conversations around the campfire took on a new focus. People began to talk about personal and social concerns in the world beyond the expedition, from their family and school or work relationships to overpopulation, violence, pollution, overstimulation, and alienation. They began to speak of changes they intended to make in their personal lives and their communities when they returned home.*

*In the days that followed, we moved more quietly along the southern coast of Kupreanof toward our final destination, each of us absorbed in our own thoughts of returning to our regular lives. Two days ago, we pulled into Kah Sheets Bay. We stayed here yesterday, conducting our extensive evaluation process, providing one another with written and oral feedback on everything from paddling technique and camping skills to leadership and communication. We also evaluated the course itself, from the equipment and food to the curriculum and instruction.*

*We decided to remain in Kah Sheets Bay again today. The group wanted to wait until tomorrow before paddling across the major shipping lane leading into Wrangell Narrows, for this crossing had come to symbolize our return to civilization. Much of the day was spent picking salmon berries and baking pies with the last of our flour. Many of us also took some time to write down our thoughts and feelings.*

*... Perhaps eventually, we will forget how to kayak, we may even forget each others' names, but there are some things that will never be forgotten....*

*Some, like Sarah, wrote concluding journal entries and others wrote letters to themselves which I have promised to mail to them in a year's time. This afternoon, I walked slowly along the shore. Momentarily clearing my mind of my responsibilities as the expedition leader, I breathed in the clear air and listened to the wind moving through the trees. I thought about what I have been learning on these many expeditions and about the world to which I would soon return. Far from the tents, I sat down on the sandy beach and scribbled my thoughts on a scrap of paper.*

*This evening, when we gathered around the campfire for our final sharing session, Jeremy introduced a talking stick to the group. Nicole was the first student to take hold of the stick and she began by reading the letter she had written to herself this morning:*

*Dear Nicole,*

*We've had quite a time out here, full of ups and downs. Before coming to Alaska, we were doing a lot of drugs - everyday, all day - and rarely did anything else. We had doubts about going to Alaska because of family problems, but mostly we were afraid that we could not make it through a month of pressures and stress without the drugs. As the trip drew closer, we were becoming more and more worried about how we were going to manage. But on June 4th we got on the plane and flew to Alaska. It was rough at first, not knowing how to deal with our frustrations. But as time went on we learned and we grew.*

*We've met great new friends here, friendships I will treasure always, and learned new things which will never be forgotten. We've learned that there are more important things in life than booze, drugs, boyfriends, and possessions. We've learned that there is another world out there and people in it that could use a person like me to help them out.*

*We've found in ourselves the real us, not just another bad-assed high-school girl hiding behind drugs and make-up trying to be like everyone else and fit in.*

*We've realized that if we put our mind to it and work hard, we can do anything.*

*It's time for some changes in my life and I know that if I work at it and believe in myself, slowly it will happen.*

*'Bye for now. See you back in the city.*

*-Nicole*

*Nicole's words opened the gates for others to share their thoughts and feelings. One by one, each of us held the talking stick and read our journal entries or self-letters to the group. When the stick came to David, he told us he had written nothing but would share the words in his head and heart. He spoke to the group of the things he had told me on the ridge of Mt. McArthur just before we rounded Cape Decision - of his desire to make changes in his life, to contribute more to society and to spend more time with his family. He spoke of his plans to resign from his executive position in Washington and apply his skills and resources to environmentally-oriented work.*

*David passed the stick to Kate, who pulled out a leather pouch full of bracelets she had*

*been making out of embroidery thread ever since we rounded Cape Decision. She said that these bracelets would signify our bond with one another and the experience we shared together. We sat quietly as Kate made her way around the circle tying a colourful bracelet on each of us.*

*Along with his bracelet, Kate handed the talking stick to Jim. He told us he was thinking about the work he would do when he returned home. He had just graduated from medical school in Montreal and would soon begin his residency in the Maritimes. In the fading light of dusk, Jim opened his journal and read the following:*

*It's been a long expedition and I would be lying if I didn't admit to the countless times I wished I were home. Life in the wilderness is hard. That one has to allot so much time just to get water rather than turning on a faucet shows how daily functions require extraordinary effort.*

*So what is all this for? Walking through the tidal flats, I came up with something that satisfies me. It has to do with what "wilderness" really means. It isn't malevolent, bent on testing and destroying humankind. Neither is it a transcendental harbor of new age platitudes of eternal goodness. It merely is....*

*I know, in spite of how much I've domesticated and cultivated it, there is a wilderness somewhere in the thickets of my heart. It is just like the one outside - untamed, amoral. It's the last bit that resists culture, that's ridden with us on our evolutionary roller-coaster....*

*There is an Alaska of sorts within me. And as we gradually move back into the civilized world with its detritus of aluminum and plastic, I have to return to a different state of being. I won't pretend to have contempt for all the niceties of urban living. I do enjoy them. But I do regret that those thickets, those creeks in me, are going to fade out of the foreground of my consciousness. Going back to the activity and bustle of city living I'll have to push the wilderness back and occupy myself with returning to society the advantages it has bestowed upon me. For me, this is equally important. The land cannot resist us. We can only resist ourselves. We have to be conscious of our choices and we have to be aware of the consequences. This is what I bring back from thirty days of bears, mountains, whales, and creeks.*

*Jim's insights resonated through the group like ripples through a pond as he passed the talking stick to Douglas. The perpetually gregarious Douglas was too full of emotion to speak. He stuck the stick in the sand and stood up. With tears streaming down his face, he walked around the group hugging each of us in the warm silence of the night. When he had returned to his place in the circle, he handed the talking stick to Laura.*

*Laura spoke briefly of how important it had been for her to step away from her ordinary roles as a mother and a business manager, and how much she was looking forward to returning to her job and family and sharing her rejuvenated energy and creativity. Then she quietly passed around a candle and a collection of drawings she had made throughout the expedition. From our first camp, to the portage, to the summit of Mt. McArthur, to kayaking around Cape Decision with the humpback whales, to the waterfall at Lovelace Creek, her*

*sketches brought back special moments of our journey.*

*And now the darkness of the night has settled upon us and Sarah is in the midst of reading her final journal entry to the group. She concludes:*

*... We all walk away a little bit wiser and a lot more self-confident. We have rediscovered the joys of learning and effort. We depart new people, with our heads higher, our hearts fuller, and our minds open to new ideas.*

*Sarah's words fade into the night and we stare into the fire, listening to the sea lapping upon the shore.*

~~~~~

Conclusion

Let no one be deluded that a knowledge of the
path can substitute for putting one foot in front
of the other.

-M.C. Richards

This paper has explored the wilderness expedition as a personal rite of passage - as a process of transition from society through liminality and back to society again. Through analytical discussions interwoven with narrative-descriptive passages and extensive quotations from expedition participants, this anthropological study of the wilderness expedition has illuminated the underlying process of separation, transition/liminality, and reincorporation, focusing upon, as Victor Turner suggests, the meaningful experiences of personal transformation embedded within the liminal (or transitional) phase. Examining the expedition as a quintessential form of experiential education, we began with the question: 'what do students learn from the expedition experience?' 'what do they come to know?'. Beneath all the explicit lessons in outdoor skills, natural history, leadership, and teamwork, participants also come to know an intense experience of *communitas* - a sense of self, a sense of community, and a sense of place - from which they return to society empowered by renewed creative energy, an expanded worldview, and a greater sense of hope, or as one participant put it, with their *'heads higher, hearts fuller, and minds open to new ideas.'*

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that the process of a rite of passage is not merely a vehicle through which the meaningful experiences of liminality are transmitted, but rather the process itself is meaningful. During the expeditions, participants spoke of (and acted out) the significance (or meaningfulness) of particular dimensions of the liminal experience. In the months and years following, many participants reflect upon their expedition as a whole - the

entire journey itself - as a meaningful experience, as a pivotal moment of transition in their lives.

Six months after her expedition, I received a letter from Sarah which included the following passage:

The trip was made up of a thousand tiny parts which don't seem to add up to anything, but somehow changed my entire world. It's been like a domino effect. I am trying out for soccer and basketball. I started taking guitar lessons. I smile at my reflection in the mirror. I've had an incredible year and it was all started by the feelings I experienced on the trip.

Shortly after Sarah's letter, I received one from Nicole:

My life has changed a lot since Alaska. I've grown a lot and realized that I don't need drugs to fit in or be liked by people. I smoke pot now and then because I want to, but not so often and not because I need to anymore. I realized that the life I was leading wasn't what I wanted for myself and the person I was, wasn't me (if that makes any sense). I can't really explain what it was about the experience that changed my life, but I know that it did. I'm a much stronger person now than I was then.

David called from Washington to tell me that he resigned from his previous job and he was finding his new work extremely rewarding. He had begun teaching environmental sciences at the university and started a new environmental consulting agency with two other colleagues. Most importantly, David told me, he was deriving a great deal of happiness from his new role as coach of his daughter's softball team.

These are particularly poignant examples of the types of changes which have taken place in participants' lives following their wilderness experience. I have received letters from dozens of former students and engaged in countless conversations which indicate that the wilderness expedition has lasting significance and many participants look back on the experience as a personal rite of passage into a new phase of their lives.

Finally, to return to the topic of experiential education, it is important to note that the personal meaning derived from the expedition is a manifestation of the experience itself. In a rite of passage, meaning is embedded in ritual, and ritual is performed not merely discussed and conceptualized, thereby distinguishing experiential education from more cognitively-based forms of education.

Never have I learned as much as I did. The experiences and knowledge gained couldn't be replicated in a classroom, yet they are helping me to do better at school.

From paddling strokes and compass navigation to communication and conflict resolution to the natural history of the rainforest and intertidal zone, much of the knowledge and skills provided on a wilderness expedition could be taught through other means. However, the bedrock

experience of *communitas* requires an intensely affectual component - a sense of self, a sense of community, and a sense of place - which is achieved through active participation in the wilderness expedition. Thus, as its name implies, experiential education is grounded in experience itself.

Epilogue

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from ...
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

-T.S. Eliot

"Little Gidding," in *The Four Quartets*

May 27, 1996 - Vancouver, British Columbia: As I reflect back on the time I spent leading wilderness expeditions throughout the Americas, I realize that, like many of my students, I too have experienced a personal rite of passage. The months away soon became years and I found myself in a perpetual state of transition, continually betwixt and between. Somewhere off the coast of Cape Decision, I decided that it was time to move onward to a new phase of my life. Returning to Vancouver, I have been seeking ways to contribute what I have learned on my journey. And perhaps this paper marks an end to my process of transition, to my long struggle to reincorporate myself back into society. I could not have foreseen the challenges that lay ahead when I sat on the beach in Kah Sheets Bay at the conclusion of the Southeast Alaska expedition and wrote the following:

*another journey ends
the depth of place
 etched into your mind
 your soul
and friends will part ways
 deep connections that formed
 through the moments of the journey
but now that journey's over
and now that moment's gone*

*five years on the road
five years of convenience stores in unknown towns*

*and the pathways have taken you deep beyond
into the ancient mist-shadowed forests of rain giants
through the slow hot desert of cactus, raven, and coyote
over rolling green tundra of wildflowers, grizzly, wolf, and caribou
within steep-walled canyons of wild waterways of history and power
up to snow-peaked heavens of pillowed white clouds
and upon the sea of teeming life and relentless energy*

*and you've had to pay attention to the finest details of the task at hand
in order to survive...
 and so you've learned precision*

*and you've had to be patient enough to gently guide others
letting them learn from their own mistakes...
and so you've learned patience*

*and you've had to be strong enough to climb the canyon wall again
to help another make it down safely in the dusk...
and so you've learned strength*

*and you've watched the 'rich and powerful' quiver in awe and frailty
upon a vast mountain under infinite sky...
and so you've learned perspective*

*and you've had to accept all sorts of people with their different ideas
along with your own weaknesses and hypocrisy...
and so you've learned acceptance*

*and you've watched masks and costumes disintegrate into outpourings
of raw emotion and honesty...
and so you've learned compassion*

*the extraordinary humanity you've met along the way
the searching people, suckling earth-wisdom and running scared
peaceful warriors of inward battles and outward fears
you've touched minds, bodies, spirits*

*but always you're left in that same old place
airports, bus stations, pick-up trucks moving along the highway
some late-night convenience store
in some unknown town
a stranger passing in the night
...and now it's time to find your way home.*

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