

Feeling My Way from the University into the Wilderness and Back Again

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Abstract:

This narrative essay unfolds in two parts. Part 1—Feeling My Way into Embodied Research—reflects on my doctoral fieldwork, which involved living for a year in complete solitude in the remote wilderness of southern Chile. The life events that shaped this experience, including childhood, education, early career, and graduate studies, laid the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual groundwork for the project. A key challenge was to develop a methodology appropriate to the unusual context of my study. My methodology was grounded in mindful observation layered with analytic introspection, loosely based on autoethnography. Part 2—Feeling My Way into Embodied Writing—recounts the process of transforming my 900-page wilderness journal into a doctoral dissertation that was both academically rigorous and accessible to audiences. I abandoned the traditional academic approach of using a conceptual framework to organize the work in favour of a first-person narrative, punctuated with analytic essays. Rather than write a dissertation about solitude, I let the voices of solitude speak directly to readers and evoke for them the actual experience as I had lived it.

Keywords: embodied research; embodied writing; autoethnography; wilderness; solitude; interdisciplinary

Part 1: Feeling My Way into Embodied Research

Shortly before I left for southern Chile to begin my doctoral fieldwork, my supervisory committee gave me a valuable gift. We had been through the discussions about what methodology I would use to explore the effects of deep solitude as I lived alone in the wilderness for a year, and they had accepted that my approach would probably be a blend between social science and a meditation retreat. I wouldn't go with expectations, a set hypothesis to test, or a structured methodology to follow. My commitment was to remain mindfully aware of all aspects of the experience. I resisted even the obligation to keep field notes.

This approach grew out of the attitude I brought to graduate work. I began undergraduate studies at age 40 after a motorcycle crash left me with a below-the-knee amputation. I had immersed myself in biology and psychology and had at first felt like a dry sponge sucking up a flood of important knowledge. But by the time I graduated I sensed that something was seriously wrong. I went camping alone in the wilderness for two months to reflect. Out there I realized that in the classroom I had become an arid intellectual container filled with abstract theories and disembodied facts that had little to do with my own lived experience and fundamental questions about life. I am not suggesting this is everyone's experience as an undergraduate, but it was definitely mine.

My orientation to solitude and education grew from the soil of my younger life. For whatever reason—innate disposition, tension in my family, or, most likely, a murky mix of many factors—I had spent time alone in the non-human world since childhood. There among the southern California trees, meandering creeks, and scurrying lizards, I often felt more at home in myself than I did with other people. I wasn't big on authority, either. I barely made it through high school and when, a year later in 1965, I gave Berkeley a try, I didn't make it through at all. The classes distracted me from life on the street, and like the classes of my previous schooling, they seemed intended to mold me into a well-trained and productive worker. But I had other intentions for my life.

In my late twenties I found myself working as a logger on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Although I attempted to be a hard-ass macho as I believed the job required, that persona did not really fit. I became aware of a growing feeling of disquiet and alienation and sensed I needed time alone with myself. I purchased a canoe and food for three months and headed into the wilderness. Although I had previously spent time alone camping and fishing, and had developed the necessary survival skills, I was not prepared for what would happen to me psycho-spiritually during that solitary retreat.

I almost went insane out there; I almost didn't come back. In spite of deep resistance, I was forced to face the existential terror that had lurked in the dark corners of my mind for years. Such angst seems to be an inherent condition of our lives that we usually avoid through various social means (Becker, 1973). Alone in the wilderness, I could no longer avoid the fear. In opening myself to this facet of existence, I also began to experience other deeper aspects of my psyche, and at times my sense of being a disconnected and somehow alien individual dissolved, and I experienced myself as woven into a unified and flowing universe. The direct experience of being an integral element of something greater challenged one of my fundamental cultural assumptions: that each of us is a separate autonomous entity with free will. Although there was deep joy in surrendering myself to something greater, I could not make sense of the transformation in the context of my life with other humans. I decided that someday I would spend a year in complete solitude to further explore the experience and the questions that arose from it.

So when, 25 years later, I began graduate work, I insisted on two conditions: my research would involve living alone in the wilderness for a year, and I wouldn't leave any aspect of myself outside the university gates. I would focus on bodily sensations, emotions

and spiritual insights, as well as intellectual analysis in my research. I would ask questions that were profoundly meaningful to me. I would explore my relationship with myself, with the non-human world, with other people, and with my Spirit. Because I felt that the fractured compartmentalization of our minds and lives is a fundamental cause of social and ecological disruption, I chose the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program at the University of British Columbia as the academic context for my explorations.

I selected my supervisory committee carefully, which I believed (and still believe) may be the most important step in earning a graduate degree (Ives & Rowley, 2007). It is essential to keep in mind that a research project need not be approved by the university as a whole, but only by the supervisory committee, and, eventually, the examining committee at the defense. It seems to me that when selecting a supervisor and committee members, students often place too much importance on external factors, such as expertise in their chosen field of study and too little on interpersonal factors. Since I would be doing non-traditional research, it was especially important to build a committee of open-minded individuals who would be up for an adventure and with whom I could honestly communicate. For this to work, both I and the committee members needed to be strong, willing to experiment, and able to recognise possibilities. If I formed a committee that was supportive of what I wanted to do, and also capable of supporting me, the whole process could be profoundly joyful and rewarding. But if my committee tried to mould me into following their agenda and into seeing the world as they saw it, I might feel like I had stumbled into a nightmare.

From the beginning, my committee members were excited about my intention to spend a year alone in the wilderness, but they had two conditions of their own: I would need to fund the project myself, and they did not guarantee I would receive a PhD for my efforts. At that point in the process none of us were yet aware of literature I could cite to support my personal intuition that taking a holistic, lived experience approach to my research was not only valid, but in my case, vital. The second condition changed when I invited two additional professors, with more experience in non-traditional research, to join the committee. Once I passed my comprehensive exam, my committee was fully committed to my eventual success.

Even so, as I was leaving for solitude, their parting counsel was: "Have a good trip. If at all possible, come back alive. If you discover during the year that trying to shape the experience into doctoral research is distracting you from the process of self-exploration and discovery, then forget the PhD. It's not that important." They had invested more than three years working with me, and on my way into the unknown, they offered the gift of freedom to grow and transform myself in whichever way would be most meaningful to me. I believe this kind of trust and generosity is what students should look for in committee members and what we professors should offer to students.

Actually, I did, of course, go into the wilderness with assumptions and expectations. Like everyone else, I carry a load of conceptual baggage when I step into the unknown—a gift and a burden from my culture. But rather than embrace and build on my often unconscious assumptions, my intention was to unpack my bags and lighten my load. I took as one of my touchstones Jean-Martin Charcot's statement that "theory is good, but it doesn't prevent something from existing" (quoted in Freud, 1966, p. 179). As much as possible, I would go as a radical empiricist, willing to experience and value whatever entered my field of awareness (Carrel, 1935; Goldstein, 1976).

For me this attitude is, or should be, fundamental to all research. Rather than allowing a pre-given methodology to determine what aspects of the world are valid topics for research, my approach would be to discover what aspects of the world fascinated and called to me, then find or develop a methodology that would allow me to explore my fascinations.

But it was also important for me to remember that I was not doing this in a vacuum. I was part of an academic culture, and so I needed to learn to dance in the hallowed halls, and that meant grounding whatever methodology I adapted or developed in some recognized precursor. It also meant taking responsibility for framing my work in a way that would make it accessible to others and by building bridges that others could cross into my world.

During the year in solitude, I developed a methodology based loosely on autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In my lexicon this was an academically acceptable term for placing myself in the situation of choice, seeing what would happen, and working to make sense of it:

My method [was] mindful observation layered with analytic introspection, while recording my observations and ruminations in a daily journal. Exploring and writing about such an intensely personal experience is vulnerable to criticism. It may seem hopelessly subjective and self-absorbed. Yet as philosopher Michael Polanyi and psychologist Abraham Maslow, among others, point out, all knowledge is fundamentally personal knowledge. (Kull, 2008, p. 162)

In this case the knowledge was personal in the additional sense that I was not primarily studying something outside myself, but rather my own experience of living in solitude and how I behaved in that environment. My intention was not to prove anything or describe solitude in an abstract, objective way, but to offer my personal experience in the hope that it would resonate with others and deepen our collective and multifaceted understanding of solitude.

Part 2: Feeling My Way into Embodied Writing

During the year in solitude I did record field notes in a daily journal. These notes were empirical observations grounded in my inner and outer lived experience. Since the notes were research data, I wrote them as accurately and honestly as I could. But they did not adhere to a regular patterned structure other than being dated and reflecting the temporal flow of days and months. Sometimes I noted the time I made the entry; often, but not always, I included a brief weather report. Some days or weeks I made no journal entries; other days I made numerous ones. In the actual process of writing, I generally wrote whatever seemed important to me in the moment—descriptions of the outer world; descriptions of my inner world; reflections on what I was doing and thinking—although at times I also rehearsed ahead of time what I intended to write. My voice reflected my emotional and mental states: sometimes clear and logical; sometimes amused; sometimes dark and anxious; sometimes filled with joy and wonder. My intention always was to be aware, honest and reflective about what I was experiencing.

These intuitively selected dollops of life scooped from the vast swirl of daily experience told one among many possible tales. I returned to UBC with 900 pages of notes, and I had zero idea how to turn them into a dissertation. Still tentatively obedient to my idea of standard qualitative research writing protocols, I believed I needed to create a coherent conceptual frame to structure my dissertation and discuss the effects of my year in solitude. Within that overarching framework, I would embed excerpts from my journal to add a layer of lived experience that would embody my findings and increase authenticity.

But I had a problem. After living alone in the wilderness for a year, I felt I no longer knew anything for sure and that I hadn't brought back from solitude any original conceptual knowledge. What I'd learned, and what mattered most deeply to me had come through daily living rather than through analysis, and I felt it could be shared only by telling a story of that living. It was knowledge of body and heart as much as of mind, and I wasn't sure I could even put it into words, much less concepts. Slowly, I began to realize that I didn't want to write about solitude, but to let the voices of solitude speak directly to readers; to evoke for others the actual experience as I had lived it. Little by little I recognized that an

edited version of my wilderness journal would have to be the heart of the dissertation. The unifying element would not be conceptual, but temporal—a living narrative out of which I would step from time to time into interlude essays that would both create a broader cultural context and cast an analytic eye on my personal lived experience.

It was difficult to switch to this storytelling approach, and I think one main reason was that I didn't yet clearly grasp the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, or between qualitative and arts-based approaches, within which stories resonate as research. My undergraduate background had been in quantitative science, and I still thought that qualitative explanations are more or less the same as quantitative ones, but use personally descriptive, often ambiguous, words instead of precise numbers that yield repeatable results. I finally recognized that this isn't the case. The difference between these approaches does not lie in degree of rigor. They are fundamentally different modes of explanation and reflect distinct ways of knowing the world (Ellis, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988).

In everyday life I don't consider an event senseless because it cannot be explained quantitatively or located within an abstract category. Rather, an event seems senseless when I cannot fit it into the stories I tell about the world. When asked why I'm doing something, I usually answer with a personal narrative rather than a mathematical equation or statistical analysis. However, quantitative knowledge is also important. It can help to maintain perspective and place my own immediate experience into a broader context. One style of knowing and explanation is not better; both are valid, and each complements the other. Once I became clear on this distinction, I felt much more comfortable in writing my dissertation as a first-person narrative.

During this time, I was also questioning what I understood to be the traditional standard for academic research writing. From the perspective that the fully embodied person is always involved in any research, the impersonal, supposedly objective, voice seemed misleading to me. I also felt that in many of the research papers I'd read, too much power and foresight were attributed to the rational mind; too little recognition of other aspects of being. It seemed to me that the widely used format of the five chapter dissertation—introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion—gives the impression that the research process is more linear and controlled than it often is. My own work was a messier and more organic unfolding. Although I kept trying to imagine how to fit my research into the traditional format, I couldn't, and I finally acknowledged to myself that I needed to allow the structure of the dissertation to follow where the experience of a year in solitude led:

In editing the original journal, I at first believed I should carve that mass using a single consistent narrative voice for the whole year. That dream slowly faded as I sat [in front of my computer] for months trying to develop a coherent plan. I finally gave up and let each paragraph emerge in its own way. Instead of one, there are many voices. Some are cultured and insightful, full of analytic critique and aesthetic caress. But there are also frightened, enraged, and uncivilized voices—howling from dark distant places. (Kull, 2008, p. 44)

I still needed to orient readers to my exploration, contextualize my experience in the literature and in the physical and cultural world, report what had happened, and attempt to make meaning of it all—or openly acknowledge that for me life is its own meaning and profoundly mysterious (Maslow, 1966; Polanyi, 1958). But the form of the work would emerge organically from within the process of writing and would be shaped by the actual content of what I wrote, rather than being constrained by an external standard. With joy, I tossed the APA guide out the window and celebrated my freedom to follow my heart and the emerging narrative . . . wherever they led me. Writing the dissertation became as much a process of exploration and discovery (Richardson, 1997) as the year in solitude had been.

Then in a moment of sudden clarity I realized what I'd begun to do, and I shrank back. Because, having given up the traditional form, I no longer knew what a dissertation was or how it should differ from a memoir. I requested a meeting with my committee and humbly (abjectly, some might say) asked for guidance on the academic bottom-line for a dissertation: What were the minimum requirements? They smiled with compassion, but refused the bait and wouldn't let me off the hook. They told me that I'd fought for the freedom to follow my own unique path in my research and they were not going to tell me what to do now that things were getting juicy. They encouraged me to give up my preconceived notions about what a dissertation is or is not, and to simply write from the heart with no ulterior considerations. Then my task would be to convince them that what I'd written deserved a PhD.

I tried to describe to them my still nebulous vision of what I felt I needed to write. They counseled me that including the full journal, or even an edited version of it, in the body of the dissertation wouldn't work, and that it should be included, if at all, as an appendix. But I believed the edited journal needed to be the heart of the work and that I would have to write the dissertation on my own and then show them a completed draft. I also suspected I wouldn't be able to write only about spending a year alone in the wilderness. Exploring my relationship with myself and with the non-human world while in solitude would be the central theme, but to be fully inclusive I would need to add another layer: a description of the process of earning a PhD.

I went into solitude again for most of the following year; not physically since I was working in my office at UBC, but I didn't discuss the details of what I was doing with my committee. I began to work the swing shift, coming into campus late in the afternoon and working until two or three in the morning. With so many hours at the computer, the shoulder I'd injured in a nasty fall during the year in solitude started to trouble me again, but I kept writing. During that time, and still now, my friend Patti Kuchinsky contributed enormously to the process of editing as she mirrored back and helped to clarify what I was doing. Sometimes writing a dissertation is portrayed as a solitary endeavour carried out by lone individuals, but for me, even though I was in and writing about solitude, the work was always collaborative. It was just too damn hard to do alone.

My commitment to honestly share what had happened during my year alone in the wilderness presented another challenge. At the beginning of the year, I'd intended to write about the experience using purely secular language, but as the days and months rolled by that became impossible. Little by little I had to acknowledge to myself and to include in my journal, the numinous Presence I sensed around and within me. For me, that Presence was, and is, mysterious and sacred. It can be directly experienced, but not defined.

When I finally came out the far end with a completed draft, I started to feel seriously anxious. It had been a huge task, as all dissertations are, and if my committee rejected my idiosyncratic approach, I didn't think I had the energy to begin again. Happily, they thought it was acceptable and we started to work together to polish it into the finished product I would eventually submit and defend.

In the defense I continued to follow the path I'd been creating with my footsteps. Rather than simply talk about my research, I evoked for the examining committee and audience a small taste of the spacious stillness I'd experienced deep in the wilderness. Following the form of my dissertation, I moved back and forth between reading passages from my journal (while projecting photographic images from solitude) and discussing some of the conceptual ground I'd covered in the analytic essays. During the questioning, one of the examiners asked: "What is solitude?" I reflected on the question in silence for some time and finally acknowledged that I didn't know. On January 14, 2002, near the end of my year in solitude, I wrote in my journal:

The frog calls and I hear: life calling to life. Telling me that I too belong. In these moments it doesn't matter if others are interested in my experience or whether I have anything to teach. More and more I must admit I know less and less. It may be hard to turn such awareness into a PhD dissertation, but that's ok too. This is worth so much more. (Kull, 2008, p. 278)

It was both liberating and a bit scary not to assume the role of expert authority. My committee was pleased with my (our) work, and the event was a joyful celebration.

Bringing all of myself into my research and writing was one direction of flow; the complimentary direction was to take my research and writing beyond the university gates where I offered slide show and storytelling presentations about my work and participated in interviews for radio, television and print. I continue to believe that if we don't share our explorations with the communities that support our universities, we are not fulfilling our mandate.

Once I'd defended my dissertation and had taken some time to recover, I began to translate the work. My intention all along had been to write the dissertation in non-academic language, and I thought I'd been successful. But as I started to rewrite for general readers, I began to realize how deeply academic tone and terminology had crept into my aesthetic sense. I would rewrite a section of the dissertation using what seemed like conversational language and feel I'd been successful, but on returning to it later, I realized it still sounded stilted and that I wouldn't write that way if not under academic constraints. Removing the technical terms was a fairly straightforward task. It was much more difficult to perceive and soften the subtle formalisms of academic writing that over the years I'd internalized so deeply I could no longer easily see them. Learning to tell the story using more relaxed language was challenging and rewarding.

As academic writers we can easily slip—and take students with us—into a linguistic bubble that is sometimes impermeable and often aesthetically unappealing to others, and then wonder why the broader culture is not interested in our work. I believe we can challenge this temptation in ourselves by remembering that we are physically and culturally embodied beings with a story to tell to other actual people.

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