"I Just Feel Fully Alive": Enhancing Ecological Understandings Through Place-Based Experiences

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Abstract:
This paper delves into the phenomenon of being fully alive—*aliveness*—as a process for recognizing and attuning to holistic and ecological understandings. In the context of outdoor education, I narrate the experience of an initially reluctant hiker who expressed a profound sense of energy and connection during a backpacking trip. This story leads to a deeper inquiry into the meaning, ambivalence and potential of feeling fully alive for curriculum and pedagogy. I show how the sensation comes *as* and *with* mystery to offer counter-conventional insights rethinking paradigms of mastering skills and conquering nature. Then, I offer four pedagogical realizations to enhance ecological understandings through place-based experiences

Keywords: mystery; aliveness; experience; place; sacred ecology

« Je me sens tout simplement pleinement vivant » : Approfondir les compréhensions écologiques à partir d'expériences ancrées dans le lieu

Résumé :
Cet article explore le phénomène de se sentir pleinement vivant – d'être pleinement vivant – comme un processus permettant de reconnaître et de s'accorder à des compréhensions holistiques et écologiques. Dans le contexte de l'éducation en plein air, je raconte l'expérience d'un randonneur initialement réticent qui a exprimé un profond sentiment d'énergie et de connexion lors d'un voyage en sac à dos. Cette histoire mène à une enquête plus approfondie sur le sens, l'ambivalence et le potentiel de se sentir pleinement vivant pour un programme d'études et pour la pédagogie. Je montre comment la sensation de se sentir pleinement vivant s'accompagne et se présente comme et avec un mystère afin d'offrir des perspectives contre-conventionnelles pour repenser les paradigmes de la maîtrise des compétences et de la conquête de la nature. Ensuite, j'offre quatre prises de conscience pédagogiques pour approfondir les compréhensions écologiques à partir d'expériences ancrées dans le lieu.

Mots clés : mystère; se sentir pleinement vivant; expérience; lieu; écologie sacrée

On the fifth day of our backpacking trip in the Adirondack High Peaks of Upper New York State, we awoke to heavy rain. I stayed in my dry tent for a few extra minutes, listening to raindrops pattering on the nylon walls. It was the day we would take our longest hike, up the south face of Gothics Mountain, and I knew that the rain would add an extra challenge to the already grueling and technical climb. Having done the hike more than a dozen times with other students, I mulled over the best approach for stretches of high rock face, which I had only experienced in dry conditions. Once I emerged, I was met by the students' low energy as they trickled out to prepare for the day. While trying to be as optimistic as possible, I knew the gloomy mood and weather were not the best way to begin.

As we gathered around the map to brief our plan, Ian (a pseudonym) began expressing his distaste for hiking and resentment towards his parent for signing him up for the backpacking trip. It was now day five and tensions had been mounting over the past two days as the newness of the experience had worn off and the realities of camping—such as filtering water from the stream, long days of carrying a heavy pack and sleeping on uneven ground—became more of a struggle. The pinnacle of his frustrations came with his assertion that he was staying behind. I tried my best not to engage with him, even as he grew louder, until his comments were unrelenting. The other students remained quiet as the co-instructor and I tried to address his concerns without changing our plans. We left camp with him unhappy but walking up the trail. As the educator in this situation, I felt unsettled, and I worried that we were overlooking his vulnerability and "forcing" him to do something he felt unsafe or fearful to do.

The walk started quietly, with some grumbling from students asking if we were going the wrong way. I also overheard them commenting that the trail was different from what they had experienced on the first day—now wet with slippery rocks and wider river crossings—and that the conditions caused them to pay closer attention to where they were stepping. The rain, in this instance, became one of our teachers. After about forty minutes along the muddy trail, I could hear Ian, ahead of me, laughing with his peers. By the time we arrived at the east arm of Ausable Lake at the base of Gothics, the tension had subsided. The group, now drenched and covered in mud, expressed awe as we looked out onto the long, narrow opening of the lake that cut between two mountains, exposing sheer cliffs. During a short rest before we started hiking up Gothics, the students shared how the sound of rain provided a rhythmic undertone for their walking cadence, that the waterfalls were fuller and more animated than the first day, and that the low-lying fog was a source of intrigue. We were engulfed in ecological textures that were previously unknown and that changed how the place felt to us.

A couple hours later, higher on the trail, my leg muscles burned as I tried to keep up with Ian. Between catching our breath as the air became cooler and thinner, we discussed how to navigate the terrain—for example, the best approach for a technical section—or identifying good spots to place our hands and feet. Throughout the hike, Ian and I had built synergy in climbing together. When we took a break to wait for the others, I asked about his frustration earlier in the morning. He responded: "Once we started moving up the trail, I don't know, I started feeling alive again. Right now, I just feel fully alive." Watching him endure the struggle of the morning, only to then hear him

say he felt fully alive, captivated me. *What was being revealed to him in this moment? What happened during the hike to make him feel this way?*

Within this experience, it seemed that the whole world was vibrating with significance to him. He pointed to rock formations that caught his attention and expressed curiosity in how some trees clinging to the side of cliffs survived and flourished. He shared elation at the sound of birds chirping, amazement with the wind as he pointed to the clouds rolling in on us, and he declared that this place was the highest on earth he had ever been. Graciously, he also helped other students through the challenging sections of the trail as they approached us. Ian was engaged in a way that I had not experienced during our previous two weeks together.

Later that evening, once we were back at camp, while sitting in a circle to debrief the day, Ian returned to his sentiment of being fully alive. His sharing sparked a lively, yet honest conversation amongst the group. The others easily resonated with his sense of connection and subsequently recalled their own deeply felt encounters. They also illustrated elements of vulnerability by reflecting on the challenges that they faced. In our discussion, as we shared stories and experiences, it became clear that we had each felt a sense of aliveness at some point in our lives. However, there remained an air of vagueness: it seemed we could collectively describe a similar, shared sensation, but we were unable to define the feeling of the sensation itself. It seems that aliveness is experienced in different ways and exposes different truths; it comes *with* and *as* mystery.

Seeking a Different Kind of Outdoor Education Experience

Throughout my career, I have taught outdoor education programs in urban and wilderness settings to hundreds of students of various ages. Two recurring themes have intrigued me. First, many students come with myriad fears and anxieties about being "in nature". Next, they often express a sense of surprise when they learn how humans are part of—*not separate from*—the natural world. Over the years, I have left these interactions satisfied by a possible shift in their understanding of the world, yet also troubled that many people have forgotten the simple ecological truth of our interconnectedness and the wider implications of such forgetting within dire times of social and ecological turmoil. What do their anxieties and understandings of separation mean about their perceived position in the world? Do they understand how deeply humans depend on a web of relationships for their survival?

Papaschase *nêhiyaw* (Cree) curriculum scholar Dwayne Donald (2012, 2019, 2021) has helped me understand how colonial and Enlightenment-based logics have generated conditions for such forgetting; a phenomenon he calls "relationship denial" (2021, p. 60). He details how the knowledge systems and ways of knowing stemming from these ideologies (for instance, ideas of progress, objectivism, individuality and human exceptionalism, among others) form layers of separation that restrict the flow of relationships. Accordingly, these logics assume a universal way of being human that separates the mind from the rest of the body, humans from more-than-human kin, and the worldviews of Indigenous peoples from those of non-Indigenous peoples. Since these separations are deeply entrenched in narratives about the world, they are naturalized and perpetuated in

educational contexts. Donald (2021) writes:

> Eventually, formal schooling became a primary means by which those with power could discipline the citizenry to conform to this [disconnected] model of the human being. As I see it, this has resulted in the predominance of curricular and pedagogical approaches that perpetuate these universalized behavioural norms by persistently presenting knowledge and knowing in written, objectified, desacralized, deplacialized and sedentary forms. (p. 60)

Through building my understanding of how such stories inform the contexts in which I teach, I became aware that although my passion for environmental sustainability drew me to outdoor education, simply facilitating activities with students outdoors might not do enough to disrupt destructive cultural patterns or to address the problems of separation so prevalent in education and society writ large. In actuality, I grew increasingly concerned that these outdoor activities *aligned* with such logics, and I sought to identify what might be missing within the experiences.

I can see now that the curriculum guiding these programs is often centred on mastering hard skills and building physical, mental and social aspects of *human* wellness. For example, the adventure typically involves applying a universal model of controlled challenge (Miles & Priest, 1990) to an inert and passive backdrop of place. Ideologies of conquering nature through individual resilience persist (Newbery, 2003). I became distressed that extended journeys *out there* for educational adventures disconnect the participants from everyday interactions and may not encourage considerations for how to live and relate differently within place-based[1] ecologies (MacDonald, 2020). Our task-based and performance-oriented schedules frequently occur on unknown lands and waters without any knowledge of traditional territory or consideration of the stories and wisdoms that live there. Of course, there are many benefits to outdoor learning programs (for various examples, see Child & Nature Network, 2024), but if colonial and anthropocentric mindsets are carried into outdoor contexts, I worried that the relational complexity that humans have with other lifeforms as part of an ecological system is inadvertently flattened. Therefore, I wondered how students might be guided to have more profound experiences that could garner questions about how such cultural assumptions might inform their relations: How could we invite students into ecological understandings on their own terms so that a view of interconnectedness may have lasting impact?

As a non-Indigenous, Canadian educator and researcher, my learning in this regard has been greatly influenced by the teachings of Elder Bob Cardinal. In 2016, I began a course through the University of Alberta with Dr. Dwayne Donald and Dr. Christine Stewart, alongside Elder Cardinal. The course was unique in several ways and exposed me to different sensibilities of time, attunement, expression, collaboration and ethics. We met once a month over the 13 moons of the *nêhiyaw* calendar, learned in a circle, participated in ceremonies and visited sacred sites. Between meetings,

[1] Aligning with Donald (2020), who writes that becoming wisely aware of the animacy of place is an urgent curricular concern, I use the term "place-based ecologies" here, instead of more generic "ecologies", to signal the importance of honouring the more-than-human entities that give and sustain life in specific localities and temporalities. To counter universal models persistent in the field, more can be done to acknowledge the ways that knowledge flows from unique place-based ecological patterns and seasonal changes, and, as such, informs experiences.

one course assignment encouraged us to choose a specific place to closely observe and attend to during the course process. Though I was previously aware of the importance of place in practice (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), paying attention to the ecological insights of my selected place became more personally meaningful than I anticipated. It guided me to feel at home in the Foothills of the Rocky Mountains, a place where I had previously felt alone and isolated, and it started me on a journey of understanding my rights and responsibilities as a treaty relative (MacDonald, 2024). In this way, I understood that Elder Cardinal provided seeds of wisdom for us to grapple with in our own lives and contexts—for example, regarding slowing down, acknowledging the spirit, engaging peaceful co-existence and honouring the gifts of where we are—wisdom for us to grapple with in our own lives and contexts. By having the opportunity to listen to his stories and teachings, each student had to nurture and care for the seeds to enable their growth in different ways. His teachings were most times indirect and asked each of us something different based on what we needed at the time. The goal of learning from the Elder was never to become Indigenous, but to participate in a process of learning to be oneself, to be a good relative, and to balance all four parts of being human: emotional, spiritual, mental and physical.

My learning with Elder Cardinal began to provide me with knowledge and language to counter the logics of separation that I had previously witnessed in my outdoor education practice. For instance, I become more attentive to whose traditional territories we travelled within; I asked for permission, learned about ecological processes of specific areas and incorporated activities to slow down, express gratitude and build relationships. Through my learning, it was confirmed to me that the world is far more alive than I could comprehend and that I (and we) already existed in relationships. I grew more interested in how students might become present to and participate with various lifeforms during their experiences, and the meaning such connections might have for them in their everyday lives. Therefore, while on the steep upslope with Ian, the once reluctant, now enthusiastic hiker, a few years later, his expression of being fully alive—what I also call *aliveness*—caught my attention. This moment felt like a gift that characterized the type of transformative experience that I was seeking—an experience that had the potential to bring knowledge systems into dialogue in ways that could inspire renewed, and more ethical, ways of being human, in contrast to embodying relationship denial.

Understanding *Aliveness*

This paper, accordingly, explores what it means to be fully alive and what this phenomenon may offer a curriculum and pedagogy oriented towards healthier relationships within life-giving systems. The experience with Ian and the conversations that followed the hike have led me to reflect on instances when I have also experienced enhanced aliveness. When I try to describe what the phenomenon feels like, the closest articulation that I can come up with is a sense of renewal and validation that my past experiences prepared me for an exact moment when everything is connected and makes sense. When this feeling happens, it most often takes me by surprise, cannot be planned for and is mostly fleeting. The sensation has occurred while riding my bike, listening to music, or even bonding randomly with a stranger. Other times, it has surfaced in moments of overcoming

adversity or encountering beauty, like on the first warm day of spring after a harsh winter. In these moments, any stress or heaviness that I carried dissipated, and I felt content, fully myself, more present and at one with the world. In other words, I was more attuned to my holistic self—what Elder Cardinal sees as the interrelatedness of emotional, spiritual, mental and physical aspects of being human—in flow with the fullness of life.

My background in physical education has schooled me in mechanical and physiological explanations of the body where organ systems that function well are key indicators for human life. With Ian, I could assume that certain bodily processes occurring as we hiked could have influenced hormonal and chemical responses contributing to his enhanced experience. Likewise, I am aware of the recent contributions in the field coming from theories of *physical literacy* for improving health and longevity. To counter many pressing societal concerns of health and wellness, this form of literacy aims to develop confidence, motivation and physical competence in a wide range of activities to support being active for life (International Physical Literacy Association, 2014). The assertion here is that movement is important for maintaining healthy bodily function and that social aspects of being active can support overall well being. For me, however, being *fully* alive denotes something more than having a pulse and cycles of breathing. In qualitative *and* poetic terms, aliveness also includes developing a sense of intrinsic purpose, joy and connectivity.

Ultimately then, by peeling back what aliveness might be, I am led to acknowledge the deeper life of the body and the puzzlements that bind us within various relations. David Abram (1996) writes:

> Underneath the anatomized and mechanical body dwells the body as it experiences things, this poised and animate power that initiates all our projects and suffers all our passion . . . the body is our very means of entering into relation with all things. (p. 47)

Through attending to the bodily senses, we can come to better know the animate medium in which we, as humans, are immersed. Andreas Weber (2017) also writes about aliveness *within* aliveness. He maintains that feelings are a guide to understanding corporality and that the feeling of being alive suggests an entanglement with the whole of existence. He writes:

> In the natural world, aliveness appears as the poetic principle, and this includes birth and death, growth and decay, ecstasy and grief. The natural world is a home, not a site of salvation, though many people still make it into that nowadays. . . . But what draws us to the natural world is the fact that it encompasses the whole of aliveness, all of the jubilation and torment—the fact that it is the embodied side of the yearning to be and to come into form, the poetic space from which everything comes and to which everything returns. (p. 201)

In other words, aliveness invites us to recognize one's being-in-the-world[2] (Heidegger, 1953/2010) and dwelling within a community of other living beings. As Weber (2017) conveys, attuning to the poetics of aliveness in the natural world can act as a generous mirror for humans to encounter

[2] Being-in-the-world comes from Martin Heiddeger's conceptualization of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is a subjective mode of being, not as merely objectifying subjects, but as deeply engaged and never fully knowing how the world is working on us. Therefore, aliveness comes with a temporal quality as each person is born into the world with which they interact, shaping both themselves and their world over time.

themselves as richly enmeshed with other lifeforms.

The more I reflect on what it means to feel fully alive, the more difficult it is to pinpoint a precise explanation. I am convinced that layers of relational renewal, validation and conviviality are involved. When I turn to think with Abram (1996, 2010), Heidegger (1953/2010) and Weber (2017), I am further intrigued by how the sensation could provide openings to introduce and reiterate that humans are whole beings participating inside a deeply connected and alive world that is full of meaning. In this regard, my conversation with Ian seemed more than just sharing a special moment together during our hike. I believe a deeper, more profound process was taking place. Being alongside Ian as he shared his experience and expressed the connections that he was feeling also made me feel more alive, and his energy shifted the morale of the entire group. As we continued walking up the mountain after this moment, the vibrating energy followed us, and I recall hoping that the sense of aliveness he experienced would become a memory that would stay with him for guidance into the future.

Establishing Dialogue Between Worldviews

The narrative I shared of Ian revealing his sense of aliveness surfaced in a wider study of mine that inquired into students' interpretations of the living world during outdoor education programs (MacDonald, 2022). This study was informed by hermeneutics of understanding, experience and relationships (Gadamer, 1975/2004; Heidegger, 1953/2010), in dialogue with the holistic wisdom—being fully human and in a web of relations—kindled through continued visits with Elder Cardinal. As part of the project, I sought his guidance to carry forward my prior learning of ethical ways of being and relating, but in different territories (ecologies) from where I learned from him on Treaty 6 lands and with students who may have no prior practice understanding the world and their experiences through a holistic frame. Before and after the multi-day outdoor programs, I had an opportunity to discuss the experiences with Elder Cardinal.

Within a hermeneutic paradigm, humans find themselves in-the-world, not separate from it, interpreting the particularities of experience contextualized through history, culture and language (Davey, 2006). Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1975/2004) hermeneutics help me see that interpretations come as a living conversation with what is available to us. Experiences should call what we know into question and overturn assumptions in order for new, improved or expanded understandings to occur. For example, on experiencing art, he deliberates that "the power of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of [their] life, yet relates [them] back to the whole of [their] existence" (pp. 63-64). In my inquiry, I was drawn to the ecological application of hermeneutic experiences (van Buren, 2014), recognizing that within outdoor programs students and I are already caught up within the otherness of various more-than-human entities, that places provide a unique text requiring interpretation, yet are often obscured by our built environments and daily routines. As I brought guidance from Elder Cardinal into play, however, I became more aware that the visceral response in what Gadamer (1975/2004) calls *the address* does not go far enough to explicitly include the connectivity humans have with other lifeforms, or to acknowledge that other lifeforms have their own knowledge and sentience. Therefore, with a commitment to honour my learning from Elder

Cardinal as best as I could, my hermeneutic engagements were necessarily nuanced by teachings of sacred ecology.

Joe Sheridan and Roronhiakewen Dan Longboat (2006) articulate that sacred ecology, from a Haudenosaunee stance, serves as "modernity's guide to recovering the necessary relationship between healthy ecologies of land and human minds" (p. 368). All beings that make up the place-based ecologies where we live and learn are alive; thus, any efforts to mature a sense of connection within experiences, such that students might recognize and engage with the presence of their connections, must not consider place merely in the physical realm, but also the metaphysical (Marker, 2018; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006). Sheridan and Longboat (2006) refer to this as *animist realism*, which "attempts to mirror Creation's temporal and material totality by accounting for the unseen and the dreamt in a complex implicature that intersects with and provides passage to other domains of knowledge and understanding" (p. 368). Thus, processes to enable the richer diversity of experiences may require understanding that as human beings, we always already embody multidimensional teachings of the sacred—as the unpredictability and mystery of life and living.

From a *nêhiyaw* understanding, Willie Ermine (1995), describes that *mamatowisowin*, or a "great mystery", makes knowing within the complex metaphysical terrain possible. He writes: "mamatowan refers not just to the self but to the being in connection with happenings. It recognizes that other life forms manifest the creative force in context of the knower" (p. 104). Therefore, to give heed to the dynamic wholeness of experiences, to being in connection with the happenings of other lifeforms, it is necessary to note that knowledge and understanding can emerge through the kinetic energy of actively participating in dialogue with other living beings; otherwise known as spiritual connectivity (Bouvier & MacDonald, 2019; Simpson, 2017). Along the same lines, Elder Cardinal once told me that "when the spirit returns, it will make things come alive again" (personal communication, Dec. 10, 2016). Therefore, if I endeavour to acknowledge place-based relationships as alive, I am nudged to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of being as a necessary part of growing abundant experiences.

As someone who grew up in a secular environment, *being spiritual* was frequently associated with being part of a religious institution and was not something that my family or peer group participated in. Now, through establishing dialogue with teachings of sacred ecology, I can reflect on activities that have given my life purpose and see that the spirit was there all along. Through my participation in physical activities and ultimately my passion for outdoor education, I was chasing something greater than myself. This excitement surfaced through pushing myself to physical edges, for example, by long-distance running and competitive rowing, where sometimes the rhythmic movements provided transcendence. In those moments, I appreciated a feeling of connection, but I was drawn to the something larger that I could not fully explain.

Arriving as and with Mystery

In the previous sections, I attempted to bring aliveness, as I have experienced it, into view to unravel its significance based on my involvements as an educator and as a learner. As I outlined, the

moments I have experienced, just as the one with Ian seemed, were fleeting and often vanished as quickly as they appeared. It was a not a sensation that I could have planned for, but an experience that happened *to* me. Within the moment of experience, I felt lifted up, more aware of the world and transformed by the immediacy of my position. It opened new possibilities with a web of relationships. As I interpret and reflect on the past events now, I can see that the singular moment of enhanced energy exposed deeper existential questions and unexplainable connections that have lingered. The fullness of the sensation remained indescribable. Thus, I see aliveness as an experience that comes *as* and *with* mystery.

Aliveness comes *as* mystery since it is impossible to ascertain or control the specific conditions that will trigger an event, or to determine the meaning the experience will hold. When I have felt fully alive in the past, I can recall inclinations to get to its source or to later recreate the conditions that I thought made such aliveness possible. However, the feeling withdrew and could not be replicated. Likewise, in the case of the backpacking trip, it was curious to me that no other students expressed amplified perceptions of life-giving energies while hiking. Of course, the mood may have been quieter and understated in their experiences, but no other students responded in ways that were out of character. I wonder if Ian's predisposition to misery that day might have actually opened him up to a greater, more noticeable shift. It was remarkable to me that a student I expected to be distressed the entire day had such a profound encounter.

In this way, I conceive that aliveness includes an element of *aletheia*, as an event when something that was hidden or forgotten appears (Heidegger, 1953/2010). In this case, the disclosure has to do with a proximity to uncertainty, or the unforeseen possibilities that are beyond our control. Perhaps Ian was more uncertain, *and* so more capable of being surprised. Since we are constantly moving in an unfinished world that is always in flux (Davey, 2006), when events happen to us, they cause us to lose sight of what is familiar and bring something that was once forgotten to life. At the same time, while aliveness may appear to us as an opening—or *clearing* (Heidegger, 1971/2013)—to what has been forgotten within our ecological relationships, it is never rigid or permanent, but happening within a particular time and place. The event of *being* fully alive reverberates not as precise information nor as knowing about life but lies in the midst of what it could be.

When something addresses us or is disclosed to us through *aletheia*, this address, as Gadamer (1975/2004) conveys, comes with feelings of being caught up, or being called into question, and that this is where understanding begins (p. 310). We find ourselves in the world, but in ways that change or disrupt what we have already settled in our pre-understandings. It seems to me that within the character of *aletheia*, the openings to knowledge and knowing are personal to our being-in-the-world and will reveal differently situated truths. In this way, the sensation cannot be finalized; rather, we interpret the details based on what is at work in our frames of reference. Encountering otherness from what is exposed in our experience can offer a process of becoming whereby our self-understanding grows deeper. Experiences can expose the limits of our worldviews and help us become more familiar with our doubts, uncertainties and questions, which can then allow us to step into other ways of knowing and being.

A critical part of aliveness is that the address of the unknown is *aletheia*—coming to know through the emergence of the unknown, so that we might know differently. Rebecca Solnit (2005) writes about the significance of leaving the door open for the unknown to appear, in order to find ourselves. Articulating why the unanticipated is important, she writes,

> It seems to be an art of recognizing the role of the unforeseen, of keeping your balance amid surprises, of collaborating with change, of recognizing that there are some essential mysteries in the world and thereby a limit to calculation, to plan, to control. (pp. 5-6)

Circling around the premise of needing to get lost to find ourselves, she leads me to wonder how recognizing our aliveness, as a form of being lost within an alive world, can support finding our whole selves differently. Learning to let go of control and calculation—at least beginning to recognize their limits—can open doors to attend differently. Aliveness itself *is* mystery; our fleeting encounters with unknowability draw us to look out at the vast vistas of possibility and acknowledge a world greater than the limits of our own understanding.

Aliveness also comes *with* mystery, as these experiences cannot be fully known or explained. Through my learning with the Elder Cardinal, I can now interpret that the unexplained intensity of some of my past experiences—the deep feelings of contentment, shifts in energy, humility and enchantment—were connections to spiritual ways of knowing, or of acknowledging the spiritual aspect as part of holistic understandings. Sherri Mitchell (2018) asserts that "spiritual teachers are all around us. We begin to recognize them once we connect with the teacher within. . . . [And they are] only meant to help open your access to the divine wisdom that already lives within you" (pp. 143-144). We are always connected to the wisdom alive in the world, but I take to heart the lesson of beginning to recognize and interpret the lessons for ourselves. The more we recognize, the more the unseen teachers will teach us.

I have grown fascinated with aliveness, in the sense that it may support expanding capacities beyond those of controlling and objectifying the natural world, towards enhancing life-sustaining relations. However, I am also given pause by some guidance that I received from Elder Cardinal. He cautions that some things should be kept a mystery:

> You know that it is there, but you need to leave it as a mystery because one day you will see that mystery; you'll say, ah, that is what he was talking about. That is how you have that spiritual growth. Try to understand your own being in your own way . . . but keep the mystery to yourself—don't give it the mystery away. (B. Cardinal, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

In this discussion with Elder Cardinal, I learned the importance of not prescribing an exact label on experiences with mystery. That would be impossible, and if I were to try, then those experiences may no longer *be* a mystery. As I turn to consider what curricular and pedagogical implications I derive from this inquiry with aliveness, I therefore want to respect the Elder's teachings. It is not my role or intention to dissect the spiritual aspect of the experiences, or even anticipate when occurrences of aliveness might surface. The tension here is to preserve mystery for mystery's sake and to nevertheless propose conditions conducive to nurturing the *possibility of* mystery. While we need to be careful, I do believe there is importance in allowing space to validate feelings of aliveness—

mystery—as a source of knowledge and knowing in educational contexts such that they might teach us to live with other beings in responsible, reciprocal ways.

Implications of Aliveness: Offering Curricular and Pedagogical Insights

I admit that had I not been doing a study focused on students' interpretations of the living world during outdoor education programs, I likely would not have dwelled on what happened with Ian. The occurrence could have been missed or cast aside in lieu of gratitude that his experience turned around for the better. I am not sure that Ian recognized the moment with the same significance that I did, either. Building on the foundation that feeling fully alive is a process of becoming more human within the totality of experience (emotional, spiritual, mental, physical) in connection to place-based relations, I now wonder how many potential moments have passed me by in instances where I mobilized a curricular approach centered on skill and performance instead of attunement to holistic ways of being in the world.

In our last conversation together, a few months after the backpacking trip, Ian reflected on the day of the Gothics hike. I asked him to describe what he remembered, and he offered this:

> We just got moving and then I was halfway up and was like, it's too late to go back now; I might as well be in a good mood. And then I was really enjoying myself, even in the crappy weather, and started to have fun climbing up the steep cliffs and just being so dirty because of the mud and not caring about it. Then once we got to the place where we could look out and I could point down to where we came from and the clouds rolling in on us. . . . I have never experienced anything like that before. I was so glad that you guys made me do that hike because it was my favorite part of the trip. (Ian, personal communication, December 2019)

In the way he tells the story, I am taken by how he let go of his expectations after he raised objections and frustration, deviating from what I initially expected of him. He came to see connections and expressed gratitude for having been pushed. Of course, I did not push him in anticipation that he might have a transformative experience. I felt quite tense earlier in the day and was unsure if and how far I should in fact push. I also know that each outing and each student are unique, so this encounter would likely not transpire the same way again. However, with my intention to build more whole and sensuous experiences to help repair relationships in outdoor practices, this work of understanding aliveness and how mystery is involved in its manifestations has led to some key realizations and learnings to carry forward.

The first learning is to *begin with an understanding that place is a living curriculum*. I have learned that place-based, ecosystem-specific lifeforms—such as water sources, animals, plants, winds, among many others—that support human life and living can guide all of us if we attend to them. Acknowledging that places are already alive, and that they are expressing knowledge all the time, may help us reorient ourselves to see and to participate with what is in front of us, but also with a humble spirit that our understanding will only ever be partial. These understandings can arrive in unexpected ways and can surface as deeply felt forms of knowledge. However, we need to be open to their address in order to hear, see and experience them. When we participate in ways that honour place as a living curriculum, my suggestion is to emphasize how learners (both students and myself)

may be positioned differently, wherein human teachers are no longer viewed as the sole experts of knowledge. This reframing has the potential to open space for students to have experiences in shared dialogue with the places where they are, beyond guided and contrived models of ecological engagement mediated through the teacher.

As an educator, this means instead of merely focusing on applying curricular models and concepts *in* places, I need to pay attention and allow the curriculum to emerge in response to what happens. Such understanding involves more than labeling different bird calls, for instance, but studying the shape and influence that one call has in relation to the rest of an ecosystem that includes humans. Knowledge will differ depending on the ecology we are in, but it is constantly appearing. While I am still learning how to do this meaningfully, in my own practice I have shifted my pedagogy to include simple access points for students to recognize the living curriculum and how they are embedded in it. For example, this can be done by pointing out relational features and patterns they might not notice, providing landmarks for them to attend to instead of them simply following me on the trail, incorporating opportunities for sustained listening and observation, and encouraging open questions in order for them to make meaning of happenings in connection to their lives.

The second learning is to *honour life*. The belief that the world is animate suggests that other beings will speak to us in ways that disrupt a set of isolating cognitive norms and allow for more holistic knowledge to transpire (Bouvier & MacDonald, 2019). Honouring the presence, intelligence and spirit of all beings means that we are all active subjects interacting through layers of connectivity, and that knowledge tends to surface in unknown ways. While I have long grasped the need to unite and balance mind, body and spirit, prior to this inquiry I remained hesitant to use the words *spirit*, *spiritual,* or *spirituality* in outdoor education. I was concerned that I may receive skeptical responses or misinterpretations and cause undue tension. I knew that my discomforts with naming the spirit signaled compliance with the rules of dominant society and a quantitative, secular mindset, but I was unsure how to proceed. These tendencies also caused me to overanalyze my feelings and connections to spirit. Essentially, I now recognize that I had been trying to *think* spirit and emotions into being, without just allowing the mystery to flow. To honour life is to allow it to act upon me, without willing it to bend to my demands or deliver upon me an anticipated experience.

As I carry teachings from Elder Cardinal, I carry forward that spirit is not about faith. While it may be for some students, I approach spirit as honouring life and living in our own ways with the intention that it may provide an access point for all students. Therefore, I find it is important to create awareness of what gives us life—in its various rhythms, generosities and textures—beyond physical sustenance. What gives students purpose? What gifts do they carry that can be contributed to the whole? Aliveness has allowed me to see that students will be called by different encounters and that these encounters will be personal. Therefore, I have made an effort to resist my inclination to over-explain to students. When planning experiences, I try to keep instructions more open so that students can experience and express themselves in their own ways, in relation to what surfaces for them.

The third learning is to *trust the process* of learning. While I have characterized aliveness as intense moments that include mystery, I do not want to suggest that the goal of attuning to life is to seek a utopian destination of enhanced disposition. Instead, it is about generating conditions to learn through connectivities; struggle and uncertainty are therefore also necessary. Teaching and learning through emergent modes necessarily involve committing to the unknown. Aliveness has shown me that important pieces are often missed when we plan too much in advance or busy ourselves focusing on quantifiable outcomes, such as how far we traveled, how many mountains we climbed, or how accurate our time-control plans were for the day. To allow for the unfamiliar to appear, it is important to be part of the process, so that the vastness and strangeness of the world can call on the limits of our knowledge. For Ian, life became fuller when he let go of control. For me, besides the necessary measures needed to mitigate risks and keep students safe, I see that guiding students to be more aware of how other humans and more-than-humans address us comes with vulnerability. I am not outside of the experience, looking in and assessing, but rather I am in the process with them. This shift means that I have to trust that students are learning and making connections, even if these processes are not readily apparent in the moment. The unknown of aliveness will find us if we are ready, when and how it is supposed to.

Finally, the fourth learning is the *importance of language*. I find that since many of us have been trained to forget important connections, due to our societal conditioning to resist or deny our relational existence, we lack the language to make meaning of deeply felt experiences. I am still struck by how the language of being fully alive resonated with the other students and conjured rich stories after the hike. I have since used this language as a prompt with other groups, and I find, over and over, that it provides a beginning point for students to pay attention in more embodied ways. When I provide this language—"I invite you to attend to moments you feel fully alive"—students tend to *know* the feeling I am suggesting, though they do not have the words to describe it further. I know that they are all likely interpreting, experiencing and responding to aliveness differently, and leaving it open is important, so that they may build and articulate meaning on their own. Likewise, I find that when students are in a practice of recognizing these feelings for themselves, the more common the occurrences will become.

Verbal exchange is often privileged in teaching and learning in outdoor contexts. We provide verbal instruction, have debriefs each day and commonly share our experiences. I have learned, however, that we cannot always rely solely on talk to bring moments to life, and that embodied responses may not be revealed by words alone. Abrupt pauses, tone and lingering moments can also signal learning with various relations. Following Elder Cardinal's guidance that some things should remain a mystery, that the exchange might be invisible but deeply felt, I am more mindful that the objective is not to develop language in order to express learning to others, but for students to recognize when connections happen so that they can build deeper relations in their own ways.

Concluding Thoughts

Aliveness, as a deeply felt and intensely present sensation that is difficult to fully describe and interpret, can encourage a shift toward experiences that foster ecological understandings through

holistic connections within life-giving systems. For educators—and certainly for myself—the central lesson I draw from Ian's experience is the importance of mystery and of surprise, in those fleeting moments of feeling fully alive. We cannot curate or control when those moments of aliveness might emerge for a student; rather, we can only make space for their transformative address.

This paper highlights the potential of the being fully alive—and the knowledge that flows from such experiences—as a way to counter relationship denial in outdoor education, because the moments have potential to bring other knowledge systems and innate place-based connections into dialogue. Likewise, aliveness can provide openings that go beyond cognitive intellectualizing by sinking into the body and being attentive to what is. I also contend that aliveness has relevance for curriculum and pedagogy in other disciplines and contexts. I see the curriculum as the living world, as the place-based ecologies in which we are embedded, and pedagogy as including ways of feeling, connecting, processing and moving with various relations. In the age of climate crisis, when many students are becoming more anxious and filled with fear of existential threat (Van Kessel, 2020), perhaps reorienting ourselves to responses that support life-enhancing narratives can help balance these fears and promote more ethical, humble and relational ways of being human.

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