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Rediscover, Reawaken, Renew: The Potential Role Of
Spiritual Retreat Centres In Environmental
Adult Education

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REDISCOVER, REAWAKEN, RENEW: THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SPIRITUAL RETREAT CENTRES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

Do spiritual retreat centres have a role to play in fostering environmental awareness and action? Using an interpretive case study methodology, this research study explored the perspectives of staff members working at two religiously based spiritual retreat centres in Western Canada to explore this question and to determine how this is translated into practice through educational programming and daily operations. The findings reveal that while place based pedagogical approaches is relied upon as an entry way into environmental adult education, there is a realization that more overt programming, focused on the environment, is required to catalyze awareness and action in their retreatants. In addition, the level of alignment between espoused environmental values and operational practices played an important role in communicating, implicitly, each retreat centre's level of commitment to fostering environmental citizenship.

Résumé

Les centres de retraite spirituelle ont-ils un rôle à jouer pour promouvoir la sensibilité et l'action environnementales ? S'appuyant sur une méthodologie interprétative des études de cas, cette étude explore les perspectives des membres du personnel travaillant dans deux centres de retraite spirituelle religieuse dans l'Ouest du Canada afin d'explorer cette question et de déterminer comment cela se reflète dans la pratique à travers les programmes éducatifs et les activités quotidiennes. Selon les résultats, les approches pédagogiques basées sur le lieu constituant un moyen d'entrée à l'éducation environnementale des adultes, la programmation plus explicite et axée sur l'environnement est nécessaire pour catalyser la sensibilité et l'action parmi les retraitants. En outre, le niveau d'alignement entre les valeurs environnementales défendues et les pratiques opérationnelles joue un rôle important pour communiquer,

- 1 This study was undertaken from 2012 to 2013, prior to the closure of the Centre at Naramata in January 2015. At the time this article's publication, the board of Centre at Naramata is in the process of determining if the centre will reopen. For more information please go to the following web-site: <http://www.naramatacentresociety.org>

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de manière implicite, le niveau d'engagement de chaque centre de retraite en matière de la promotion de la citoyenneté environnementale.

Introduction¹

The Centre at Naramata, a retreat centre located in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, describes itself as follows:

Our property covers 23 acres along the eastern shore of Lake Okanagan. We're intricately tied to the town of Naramata, yet we maintain our own unique space. Relax on an expanse of green lawn, meander through stone pathways, lose yourself in the meditative calm of the labyrinth, or explore the beauty of nearby wooded hillsides. There's a sense of something wonderful here—we invite you to discover it for yourself. (Centre at Naramata, n.d.)

King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre, in Alberta, beckons us to explore various sections of its website with the following phrases:

Find the courage to withdraw in search of rediscovering, reawakening and renewing... With so much to explore, each person can find a sacred and solitary space... Through our hospitality and sacred spaces, encounter the open-hearted welcome of God. (King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre, <http://www.kingsfoldretreat.com>.)

The Centre at Naramata and King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre, two places where I have personally gone on retreat, are part of a growing phenomenon of spiritual retreat centres in Canada. While such centres used to be the purview of religious orders, there are large number of active centres, listed in the “Find the Divine” directory (<http://www.findthedivine.com>) now open to visits from the public. The growing number of spiritual retreat centres appears to mirror our increasing interest in religion and spirituality. Bibby (2004), tracking Canada's religious development over the past 30 years, indicated, “The findings point to a religious and spiritual renaissance in Canada—new life added to old life, sometimes within religious groups but often outside” (p. 40). Note Bibby's reference to both “religious” and “spiritual”; it is important to highlight the overlap of and the differences between these two terms. Religion is based on both individual and collective relationships, belief systems, and practices, while spirituality usually focuses on the individual and the quest for meaning and purpose, connection to a higher being, and interconnection with others and nature (Groen, Coholic, & Graham, 2012). However, I align myself with English (2012), who argued that religion and spirituality are not totally separate; “rather some people express their spirituality through religious practice (i.e. in more formalized and institutional ways) and others through alternative means” (p. 18).

While increasing numbers of adults are coming to spiritual retreat centres, typically located in beautiful natural settings, little research has explored what role, if any, these places play in environmental adult education. Indeed, Walter (2009) noted the paucity of research within the humanistic orientation: “Case studies would be very valuable... on the learning that takes place within humanistic environmental education in deep ecology or spirituality” (p. 21). Personally, I began to wonder what role the two centres I frequented

as a retreatant played in environmental adult education. While both centres hosted many visitors like me to walk their labyrinths, gaze at the incredible scenery, and revel in the peace and quiet, did staff members at these two centres believe, as part of their role, that they had a part to play in environmental adult education? And if so, how did they see their role and what education interventions did they use with their retreatants?

In this paper, I present findings from a research study that focused on the role of the religiously based spiritual retreat centre in shifting our relationship with the natural world and in turn fostering environmental awareness and action among adults. Using an interpretive case study methodology at two spiritual retreat centres in western Canada, the Centre at Naramata and King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre, this study pursued the following research question: Do staff at religiously based spiritual retreat centres perceive that they have a role to play in fostering environmental awareness and action and, if so, how does this translate into practice in areas such as programming and daily operations? Prior to presenting the findings and analysis of this study, I offer a literature review and overview of the methodology and research design.

Context and Literature Review

My interest in this area of research draws on my previous research on spirituality as an emerging force in the workplace (Groen, 2004) and in higher education (Groen, 2009). The field of adult education has been engaged in the burgeoning interest in spirituality, examining its historical and theoretical understandings (English, 2005), applications within various contexts such as the workplace (English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003), community development (Bean, 2000), higher education (Tisdell, 2003), and self-directed learning experiences of adults (Hunt & West, 2006). Across this research, a spiritual dimension repeatedly highlighted was interconnectedness, not only with each other, but also with the natural world. Secondly, in studies that explored the spiritual experiences of adults (Lange, 2008), participants expressed a desire to intentionally seek this quality of interconnectedness with the universe and creation through time spent in nature.

Parallel but separate growth has also occurred in the area of environmental adult education, resulting in a substantial network of practitioners and activists in this field. However, we are only at the beginning stages of theorizing our understanding of environmental adult education (Walter, 2009). In an attempt to address this shortcoming, Walter (2009) provided an overview of the emerging philosophies of environmental adult education, drawing on the five major philosophical frameworks used to describe the broader field of adult education (Elias & Merriam, 2005): liberal, progressive, behaviourist, humanist, and radical philosophies. Despite highlighting examples of environmental adult education programs situated within various orientations such as the Outward Bound program, with its experiential emphasis (progressive orientation), or the interpretive programs found in our national and provincial park systems, which focus on knowledge dissemination (liberal orientation), what became apparent, not only in this review, was the dominance of the radical orientation to this field. This orientation emphasizes activism that aspires to raise our critical consciousness of political, economic, and social systems of oppression that are at the root of environmental degradation and in turn push us toward environmental citizenship (Clover, 2003; Sumner, 2003; Walter, 2009). As an example,

environmental protest movements that engage in the arts, street theatre, or humour (Roy, 2000) would be associated with a radical environmental adult education approach.

While raising critical awareness does serve as a potential catalyst for environmental awareness and action, I support scholars (Coates, 2003; Korten, 2009) who have argued that responses, including adult education programs, that focus on systems of oppression within the present worldview of modernity are not enough. These actions need to be predicated on a deeper conversation on such existential questions as why we are here, what it means to be human, and what our proper relationship is with the world (Coates, 2003), which call on an environmental adult education approach that draws from the humanistic philosophy of learning. “Learning in this tradition is deeply personal and holistic, stressing the intrinsic biophysical and spiritual connection of human beings to nature” (Walter, 2009, p. 3). Indeed, Edmund O’Sullivan (2002) was prophetic in his call, more than a decade ago, for expansive transformative learning that requires us to fundamentally change “our horizon of consciousness to the universe itself...a system of larger meaning that can help create an organic planetary context for educational endeavors that transcend the myopic vision of the global marketplace” (p. 8). Therefore, researching the role of religion and spirituality, through spiritual retreat centres, in environmental adult education could potentially provide a powerful exemplar of an approach that goes deeper to transform our relationship with the earth.

Research Methodology and Design

Using two religiously based retreat centres in western Canada that I had frequented as a retreatant, I employed an interpretive case study methodology to undertake this research study’s focus: How do staff at religiously based spiritual retreat centres perceive their role in fostering environmental awareness and action, when this is not an explicitly articulated part of their mission or educational focus, and how does this translate into practice in areas such as programming and daily operations? Focusing on specific retreat centres that are religiously based, as a bounded system, meets a central criterion of this methodology: “They are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or a bounded system such as an individual, program (*italics mine*), event, group, intervention, or community” (Merriam, 1998, p.19). In turn, Merriam (1998) described interpretive case studies as complex and multilayered and particularly useful for their rich description and heuristic value as the emphasis shifts to interpreting and theorizing the phenomenon. For example, in previous research (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011), as we explored the offering of a liberal arts program for marginalized adult learners, we moved beyond a description of the program to theorize how to cultivate transformative learning for this particular sector of adult learners. In addition, as is reflected in this research study, “when more than one case is studied, the researcher can conduct cross-case analyses for comparison purposes” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pp. 104–105). Finally, case study methodology is appropriate when a variety of approaches for data gathering are required. In this study, I first reviewed the websites and historical records of each retreat centre, as well as other documents shared by staff, so I could gain a preliminary understanding of their respective histories, visions, and goals. In turn, I also spent five days in retreat at each centre to re-engage in each place as a retreatant. I wanted to experience the daily operations of each centre firsthand from the perspective of a visitor. This participant experience informed the semi-structured interviews I held with

staff members at each centre as we focused on their vision and the reality of engaging in environmental adult education. I spent approximately 90 minutes onsite with three staff members from each centre (N = 6); we reflected on their role at the centre; their vision and hopes for their retreat centre in fostering environmental awareness and action and how this translated into action; and finally the existing and potential role of spiritual retreat centres in cultivating environmental awareness and action. Returning to my desire to (1) determine if staff members at these two centres believed, as part of their role, that they had a part to play in environmental adult education and (2) if so, understand how they saw their role and what education interventions they used with their retreatants, I engaged in comparative thematic analysis with the staff in these two retreat centres throughout all phases of data collection to determine commonalities and differences. The resulting profiles of each centre and my thematic analysis were presented to staff members at each centre for feedback.

Findings and Discussion

Retreat Centre Profiles

King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre. Located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre is 80 kilometres northwest of Calgary, Alberta. It is an easy drive on paved roads to the centre, but it feels remote, as the nearest town with any facilities is 40 kilometres away. Situated as the centre is on 166 acres of land, with the Ghost River running through the middle, one quickly realizes that one is on the edge of wilderness. Only the acreage around the buildings is tended, and the hiking trail, down to the river and across the riverbed, quickly leads into forest and meadowlands. Cougars, bears, and coyotes share this space, and at night wolves can occasionally be heard howling in the distance.

The main lodge, where almost all guests stay, has 14 bedrooms, a dining room, a kitchen, a well-stocked library, several conference spaces, and smaller living room-type rooms and corners for reading, drawing, and sitting. While all meals are provided, the fridge downstairs has healthy snacks for sale. When guests wander out of the main lodge, they have access to a larger chapel, a very small chapel with room for just one or two people, and a day-use building filled with craft supplies. The buildings have huge windows facing southwest, capturing the view of the river, the mountains, and the dramatic weather systems racing eastward across the sky. Grounds close to the buildings feature a labyrinth, several hiking trails, and two cabins, slightly set back, where it is possible to go on solitary retreat for several days.

Eight live-in staff members run the daily operations of King's Fold with the assistance of regular volunteers. Duties range from groundskeeping and maintenance to cooking, menu planning, grocery shopping, and housekeeping. While staff members have some specific duties, everyone assists with meal preparation, hosting guests at mealtimes, and being on rotational duty on weekends when King's Fold is especially busy with group retreats. Two members are also trained as spiritual directors and are available to guests upon request.

King's Fold has its origins in the First Baptist Church in Calgary, with the late minister Bob Ball and his wife, Janet, being the driving forces in its creation. Having just returned from L'Abri, a retreat centre in Switzerland, they wanted to create a space where younger people could gather to become an intentional community. They envisioned a place to

“minister health and healing,” (Lowen & McIvor, 2003, p. 15).and they instinctively understood the key role a natural setting played in their dreams, as they described the ideal location: “A river and lots of trees were essential, as was a view of the mountains” (Lowen & McIvor, 2003, p. 15). Thirty-eight years after the initial groundbreaking ceremony, King’s Fold’s primary focus is to provide a place for individuals to engage in solitary retreat.

The Centre at Naramata. When it was in operation, the Centre at Naramata, one of four centres then under the auspices of the United Church of Canada, was unique in its location in the middle of a village. Naramata, situated on a peninsula jutting out into Okanagan Lake, has a population of approximately 2,500, with Penticton, a large town offering all needed facilities, located 15 kilometres away. The drive from Penticton to the village meanders through orchards, vineyards, and an increasing number of award-winning wineries. The Centre was located on 23 acres bounded by a creek and a beautiful large sandy beach shaded by mature willow trees. At the time of my visit, two large cherry orchards had recently been removed, as the trees were becoming old and could be maintained only through the use of pesticide—a direction contrary to the philosophy of the Centre.

Since its opening in 1947, the Centre’s “facilities [had] gone from a hostel with one sink and classes in the village church basement to [a] comprehensive retreat centre” (Trainer, 2009, p. 98). The first building, a former officers’ quarters and mess hall building purchased and transported from the Canadian Forces base in Vernon, BC, was converted into the Centre’s bookstore, administrative offices, and meeting/teaching spaces. Space was subsequently cleared for campgrounds, and several cottages and dormitories were constructed in the 1950s and 1970s. In 1961, Columbia Hall opened with a large kitchen, dining hall, and gymnasium. More recent additions were a large chapel, a labyrinth, a healing house, the sacred garden, and two more accommodation buildings featuring six bedrooms opening onto a common living, dining, and kitchen space. The year before my visit, a large outdoor kitchen and dining space had been created for campers involved in summer programs. A tour of the site showed wear and tear on many of the buildings, and the septic system needed to be replaced; however, funds were not readily on hand for these significant updates.

Staffing numbers at the Centre ebbed and flowed, depending on the program offerings. An executive director, finance and marketing director, funding director, and four program directors represented the core salaried full-time and part-time staff. Other staff members, responsible for the grounds, kitchen and dining room, administrative functions, and housekeeping, were employed on a seasonal basis and had been unionized since the mid-1990s. In addition, several young adults were hired for eight weeks to run children’s programming as part of the Centre’s intergenerational summer weekly programs, and other independent programmers led sessions, three to seven days in duration, during the spring and fall shoulder seasons.

As already alluded to, the Centre ran a diverse range of programs, with the summer drawing the largest number of participants. A board member indicated that it was impossible to create the ambience of being on retreat in the summer, when there were up to 500 people on-site. This was in contrast to King’s Fold, where self-directed retreats occur throughout the year, including summer, and are initiated by retreatants who simply choose the timing and length of their stay.

Returning to the Centre, the shoulder seasons focus on programs for adults—more specifically, young adults. Of particular interest to this study were the scheduled

self-directed retreats under the spiritual nurturing theme. Several three-, five-, and eight-day predominantly self-directed silent retreats were programmed during the spring and fall offerings. A spiritual director connected with retreatants during lunch and dinner, offered evening vespers in the chapel, and was available for one-to-one spiritual direction. Retreatants spent the remainder of the time on self-directed activities.

Thematic Analysis

This thematic analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with three staff members from each retreat centre (N = 6). Staff participants from the Centre at Naramata were Janet, executive director; Lois, program/spiritual director; and Mary, program/healing touch director; and from King's Fold were Oz, executive director; Mary-Lou, office member; and Chris, staff member (note that roles are not as clearly defined at King's Fold, with the exception of the executive director and office manager). After providing an overview of how staff understood the mandate of their centres and in turn their roles, the thematic analysis considers how these staff members perceived their role in cultivating environmental awareness and engagement through the programming and operational practices at their centres.

Why Retreat?

While the ultimate focus of my time with each staff member was to determine if they felt that they and their spiritual centre had a role to play in fostering environmental awareness, we began our time together discussing the underlying mission and heart of their work. In sum, they described their mandate as supporting people who feel compelled to "go on retreat," particularly within natural settings. To elaborate, when we reflected on the motivations for people to come to their centres, what emerged was our need to step away from the busyness of our lives and our need to step into a space of peace, quiet, and tranquility that is provided by a natural setting. Mary-Lou described this in the following way: "The purpose of King's Fold is to provide a place for people who are weary to come away and to rest and renew." Focusing specifically on what exactly people were stepping away from, Lois suggested that "people are so tired, so beaten up, so exhausted...the best we can do is to drag ourselves to this door (place of retreat) to be watered and fed." Oz was quite visual in his exploration of the toll that the rapid pace and lifestyle many of us lead take on us: "We're cultured to medicate, we're cultured to keep tremendously busy. So we don't know what to do with the carnage and the shrapnel. So we continue to meditate or we trap people in cycles of manic up and down." Oz then turned his focus to the resultant need for spiritual retreat centres: "I'm convinced of the value of a place where people can just come and be silent, be unprogrammed and unscheduled." Continuing to shift our focus to the notion of what we are stepping into, Mary-Ann said that "people come to the centre to connect with, to get some nurturing, to get fed...in resting there could be a sense of peace." Janet believed that retreat "moves you from something common to something a little different. Perhaps we can reframe for people some of the practice that they are doing in their daily lives."

Focusing more pointedly on why the idea of retreat is so often associated with a natural setting, Lois explained:

When people talk about their spirituality, they often come to understand the deeper meaning of life through their observation of the natural,

through their experiences. There is just nothing like standing out in a big windstorm to clear our minds. There are so many ways to be nourished in that deep, deep level by the environment we are in.

Finally, Chris challenged the premise that people are escaping the real world when they come to King’s Fold by offering the compelling idea that a retreat in nature is about returning to the real world:

I would view retreat as actually entering the real world. We escape so much in our day-to-day routine—through TV, noise, the busyness of work and relationships—that it is very easy to not listen to God or to your own interior life....A retreat provides that unique space where slowing down and where listening is supported, [and] helps us enter into the real world of what is really going on with me and what is really going on with God.

Nature as Sacred

As these staff members considered the centrality of nature to the retreat experience, many ascribed a sacred identity to the natural environment: an identity that is multi-dimensional, powerfully evocative, and spiritually undergirded. Mary-Ann began to paint a picture of what this meant for her:

It feels sacred. People come and it’s peaceful. Over a lot of years, this place has spiritually grown and people feel it when they arrive. It feels safe... and people can connect to the ground in a way, particularly people that come from the city, that is very spacious.

Lois also reflected on the identity that the Centre had evolved over several generations as a place where the natural setting was almost hallowed space:

There is something at the spiritual level, the cumulative effective of people coming to pray and meditate and listen and discern over time that shifts an environment, and it is a two-way thing; the environment affects what happens and hopefully our attention and quality of our presence has an effect back.

Oz reflected on the sacred identity of King’s Fold’s natural setting by focusing on the power of the sensory experience within nature:

We see these things that overwhelm our sense, our ability to conceptualize. They are a sense experience and a kind of transcendence. That’s the allure of nature when we are willing to let nature speak to us and for sure that’s the lure of King’s Fold because of the mountains...so nature presents the invitation, for those who are willing, into “wow there is something outside of me that I don’t control.”

Additional images offered by other participants in describing the power of nature were “God’s natural palette,” “all the static is gone,” “absolute solitude,” “a change in rhythm,” “this is a living being that has feelings...trees have feelings and they are very wise; we need to treat them that way.”

Get out of the Way

While all of the staff members agreed on the incredible ability of their setting to draw retreatants into a powerful experience with nature, I still wondered if the staff members felt that their centres and they themselves had a role to play in environmental adult education. Their responses revealed that they were mostly relying on retreatants to make the connection to nature on their own. For example, the natural settings of the two retreat centres invited retreatants to engage however they wished: to sleep, to read, to meditate, to journal, to sit, to draw, to walk... In considering the implications for adult learning and environmental education, the focus of these retreat centres was not in the design and animation of overt programming, but in the thoughtful development of the natural setting so it could do its work. Chris explained, "The philosophy and the mission of King's Fold is that it is not up to us—we do not have to create or manufacture something to experience King's Fold as a spiritual retreat. Mostly we have to get out of the way." Mary-Lou, like Chris, also believed that the role of the staff was to recede into the background in order to cultivate the possibility of retreat:

The way we define hospitality is by providing space... usually hospitality means doing everything for you but here, for me, it is a backward concept and it is more about making sure that everything is in place so that you can support yourself in the journey that you need to go on.

Therefore, much of the programming energy at these spiritual retreat centres was devoted to creating places of hospitality and invitation, not only in the obvious places such as the chapel and the labyrinth, but also within the living spaces. "Every piece of furniture is moved with lots of discussion about how it lends to providing space and the options of learning more about contemplative spirituality" (Oz). Lois also spoke to the importance of intentionally creating spaces that enhance the natural setting as she described the creation of the Spiritual Directions cottage at the Centre: "Simple, clean, but considered. The images are nice and calming and it's a good-sized space for a two-person conversation... it was a very intentional development."

Actions Speak Louder than Words

Finally, staff members at both spiritual retreat centres expressed a desire to develop more intentional overt educational programming that would explore our relationship to the natural world and, in turn, how we could live differently in the world. Lois articulated this aspiration when she stated that it would be good if "we could nurture and give people some of the practical tools for dealing with the challenges of life and some of the practical tools for activism. I think we would be doing a good thing." After visiting another spiritual retreat centre with a more overt programming focus on the environment, Oz said, "They've got a full-time person working on ecology and spirituality." He found this "intriguing, compelling, and I came back with some ideas and visions of my own for [how] King's Fold might be involved in a comparable manner."

In the meantime, however, all of the staff members in this study believed it was critical that their centre model environmental stewardship within its daily operations, such as housekeeping practices and menu offerings. Indeed, the daily practices of spiritual retreat centres and the ways that staff members animate their belief in the sacredness of the land

come into sharp focus under the observant eyes of retreatants who have little to distract themselves. These daily habits become a critical, unspoken aspect of programming. What food is served and how is it prepared? What are the practices for waste disposal and reduction? How are the grounds cared for and what chemicals are used?

Operational practices were an area of significant difference between the two centres in this study. For example, the staff members at King’s Fold had made it a priority to incorporate more sustainable practices in their daily operations. “If our mandate is stewardship, hospitality and care, there are certain things we can take steps towards” (Chris). Specifically, they were becoming more intentional about recycling and composting, modelling careful use of the water in the Ghost River Watershed, using naturally based cleaning products, and providing menus that were more health-conscious and based on locally sourced food, where possible, given the challenging climate. Oz described the potential learning opportunity for retreatants in how King’s Fold went about tending to its own operations. “There are guests who are intrigued...they want to know everything you are doing and why...there’s tremendous opportunity to invite them into some of these other concerns and considerations.”

In contrast, the staff members from the Centre at Naramata felt they had a long way to go; there was a fundamental lack of congruence between the values they espoused about environmental awareness and justice and their actual practices. For example, while located within an area abundant with produce, most of their food was not purchased locally. As well, there was concern about food waste and food offerings. Mary-Ann expressed her frustration with the overabundance of food—“Can’t we eat simpler, can I just have a salad for lunch?”—and she saw this incongruity as a powerful opportunity: “My big thing is we as a team, we as a staff at Naramata, we need to be absolutely congruent and living all this.” In response, Janet was beginning to devote her energy to shifting current practice by addressing meal portion control and waste management practices and reducing the reliance on disposable items. However, this push for increased congruence between environmental values and operations was happening within a tense culture of “us and them.” As a reminder, roles were more defined at the Centre than at King’s Fold, and the staff members who actually cooked, cleaned, and maintained the grounds at the former were unionized, whereas programmatic staff members were salaried and non-unionized. Lois also acknowledged that lack of congruence between environmental values and practice involved working with the whole staff, not just those involved in educational aspects of the Centre. “There is a long way to go in terms of changing some of the practices on site,” she said. “But the truth is that is our reality and is a critical area to focus on and be creative with.”

Discussion

As I consider my underlying quest to discern the role that the staff members of these particular spiritual retreat centres did and could play in environmental adult education, I return to my own experiences as a retreatant at King’s Fold and the Centre at Naramata to inform my discussion. Revisiting the participants’ description of a retreat centre as a time to step away, I instinctively understand what this means. Before each of my retreats, I was stressed, worried about work and home issues, and far too busy. The idea of a retreat centre as a time to step in also resonated with me. It took me only a few days in both of these astonishingly beautiful natural settings to unwind, relax, and somehow feel like I was

returning to something that I instinctively recognized and understood. Taylor (1991) would suggest that going on retreat reflects a profound feeling of disenchantment with modern Western society and our desire for re-enchantment (see also Berman, 1981; Tisdell, 2003). To elaborate, our current understanding and practice of spirituality include being aware of and honouring our interconnectedness with each other and the natural world through God or a transcendent higher power (Tisdell, 2003). In turn, then, times spent reconnecting with nature at a spiritual retreat centre open us to the mystical and a sense of wonder, sating our hunger for something that is essential, yet typically missing, in our daily lives: re-enchantment.

The staff members at these two spiritual retreat centres reinforced this desire we have for re-enchantment through nature as they spoke about the powerful and sacred identity of nature and the need to let nature serve as the environmental adult educator. Indeed, this approach taps into an experiential domain of knowing where the retreatants “encounter a subject, person, place, or thing personally and directly. There are kinesthetic, cognitive and emotional connections we make when learning becomes personally experienced with multiple senses” (Goralnik, Millenbah, Nelson, & Thorp, 2012, p. 417). I would extend the connections made while on retreat to include the spiritual.

In considering the implications for our practice as adult educators, I see an affinity between their pedagogical style and the underlying premise of ecological place-based experiential education. Specifically, Sobel (1993) described this approach to education as providing guided experiences within a natural setting that allow learners to connect, explore, and discover. While focusing on children, the following statement by Sobel (1996) could certainly apply to the aspirations the staff members of these spiritual retreat centres had for their adult retreatants: “If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it” (p. 39). In turn, Gruenewald (2003), in his push for a critical pedagogy of place, would also agree that our desire to transform oppressive conditions must first begin with experiencing an “empathetic connection to others, human and non-human” (p. 8). Religiously based spiritual retreat centres are naturally positioned to cultivate this empathetic connection with the natural environment with their retreatants, both implicitly and explicitly.

Implicitly, ecological place-based pedagogy asks environmental adult educators at spiritual retreat centres to take a back seat to the natural setting and allow the self-directed learning activities (Tough, 1971) of retreatants immersing themselves within the natural setting to move to the foreground. And yet, as reflected by the observations of the staff members and my own experiences at these two centres, the implicit and hands-off approach they offered does not appear to be enough. Indeed, while these staff members conceded that many of their retreatants enjoyed and almost revelled in the beauty of the natural setting, these self-directed experiences may not translate into deep engagement without some guidance and overt programming that makes the connection between the natural setting and how we relate to and care for the environment more explicit. Returning to the quote offered by Sobel (1993) in the previous paragraph, the focus is on guided experiences within a natural setting. Subtle guides might involve showing retreatants how to enhance their ability to pay attention to the natural world around them, having articles and books about eco-spirituality on offer, and/or having artistic and writing materials and prompts available that create a responsive opportunity to consider one’s relationship with nature. More overt environmental adult education programming might include offering retreats

that have an intentional environmental focus, such as eco-spirituality or food sustainability. Staff members at both centres expressed interest in offering several retreats on a yearly basis that deal directly with environmental awareness and engagement.

Finally, whether environmental adult education programming offered at these retreat centres was implicit and/or explicit, the functional aspects of the centres should reflect sustainable and environmentally sensitive practices. Again, returning to the perspective of the retreatant, I noticed the careful attention paid to food preparation and waste management, as well as the cultivation of invitational places to “be in nature,” at King’s Fold. Conversely, the lack of congruence between the use of implicit place-based experiential learning and daily operational practices at the Centre at Naramata was almost jarring, reinforcing the notion that unstated modelling is an extremely powerful pedagogical tool.

The question, however, still remains: Did staff members at these spiritual retreat centres believe it was important to move beyond the implicit place-based experiential learning approach they were using to infuse more explicit ecological place-based experiential learning approaches in their programming—for example, by developing courses, seminars, or other programs that intertwine spirituality and environmental awareness and engagement? Indeed, while Hitzhusen (2006, 2012), drawing on the cultivation-of-environmental-citizenship model developed by Hungerford and Volk (1990), affirmed that offering experiences that tap into a deep appreciation and sense of awe regarding the natural environment is an excellent beginning, more deliberate and overt environmental education approaches are required to foster environmental citizenship. Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that the staff members at these spiritual retreat centres, while not yet actively engaged in overt or explicit environmental adult education programming at the time of the study, were beginning to see that they had a potential and powerful role to play in this arena. They were beginning to consider their role in the argument put forth by many scholars (e.g. Hitzhusen, 2006, 2012; McFague, 2013) that, although fields of study such as religion have devised their deepest and best solutions to our ecological crisis, this is fundamentally a spiritual problem that requires the changing of hearts and minds about our relationship to the earth so we begin to live differently. These religiously based spiritual retreat centres are positioned to play an important role in environmental adult education. They just have to get started.

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