

KISMET: IN DEFENSE OF EDUCATION

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An entire industry of institutions that offers outdoor experience and outdoor education has developed during the last 20 years. Many of these institutions focus on the needs of children in crisis and have formulated a wide range of theories and methods for the rehabilitation and resocialization of children. These methods typically are accompanied by a vocabulary of words and phrases such as "teaching trust," "offering tools," "overcoming obstacles," and "developing self-esteem."

It is not just children who are the subjects of these methods and theories. Corporations spend vast amounts of money to send their employees into the mountains to hang on ropes, fall into each other's arms, and discuss the significance of their experiences. These programs, theories, and phrases create the impression that any organization that teaches in the outdoors engages in techniques of psychological intervention.

There is probably a place in the outdoors for programs that intervene in the lives of children in crisis. But both outdoor therapeutic institutions and outdoor educational institutions are often confused about that role. It is frequently not at all clear whether the theories that support therapeutic outdoor programs are valid or whether the methods used actually accomplish their goals. The concepts to which outdoor programs often refer (for example, "self-esteem") are often ill-defined. At times, immature instructors or instructors who are insufficiently experienced in counseling use aggressive interventionist tactics with clients while in profoundly threatening environments.

Three basic and pervasive contributing factors add to the confusion: First, outdoor educational programs and outdoor therapeutic programs have developed within a broader cultural context that perceives individuals as powerless and in need of protection from life and views children as in need of protection from failure and discomfort.

Second, outdoor education has developed within a broader educational context in which facts are treated as though they exist isolated from context. Ideas are memorized without the challenge of critical analysis. The attainment of goals takes precedence over the joy and value of exploration. Curricula are treated as though they exist independent of professions. And ethical behavior is expected in response to the threat of artificial consequences--rather than developing from an understanding and experience of real life consequences.

We have forgotten that facts have value only if we can see how they are connected to our lives; that to have power, ideas must resonate in our experience; that for goals to have value they must develop from our hearts; and that curricula can be relevant to us only when we see them as an extension of our being-in-the-world. Our fragmented perspective is so extreme that we barely understand that ethical behavior only becomes authentic as it emerges out of real consequences.

Third, lower income groups are often seen as poorly socialized, desperate, and lacking in character, so program directors and counselors are tempted to assume that children of poverty must need help in developing the self esteem, trust, social skills, and the sense of social responsibility that they presumably lack.

When middle class parents send their children to climbing schools, they pay for their children to receive an education in climbing. They do so because they understand that education is intellectually, emotionally, and physically empowering. They understand that all aspects of their children's education inform all aspects of their children's lives. Rather than paying for simulated challenges and metaphorical experiences they pay for education and expect maturity to develop naturally.

By contrast, we commonly assume that any outdoor educational institution that targets children of poverty intends to treat deficiencies in character. This arises from a dominant tradition of using outdoor education as therapy, subtle cultural assumptions concerning the powerlessness of individuals, and the prejudices embedded in our view of poverty. Thus, while children of means are given climbing lessons and taught technique, we are tempted to offer children of poverty "experience", lessons in "self-esteem" and exercises in "trust." For children of means, climbing is a sport. For children of poverty, climbing is a metaphor.

The alternative to offering "experience" or engaging in practices of socialization and counseling is to simply offer an education built on a foundation of well-organized courses. Thus, outdoor programs can be divided into two distinct categories: educational institutions and experiential institutions.

Outdoor educational institutions (Kismet, for example):

- * Offer courses in areas such as mountaineering, boating, skiing, and ecology thus providing access to knowledge and skills that pertain to the outdoors.
- * Allow character development to emerge naturally from a foundation of education, from the struggle by which expertise and knowledge are gained, and from healthy and direct relationships with peers and teachers.
- * Tend to see students as essentially "well" and therefore do not engage in

psychological and emotional intervention as primary strategies.

* View climbing and other outdoor activities as "sports" rather than "metaphors" and thus honor them as valid aspects of our lives.

Outdoor experiential institutions:

* Use the natural environment as a setting for therapy in which the emotional and psychological aspects of clients are addressed.

* "Treat" specific aspects of character and personality.

* Tend to see clients as essentially "unwell" in certain ways and engage in psychological and emotional intervention as primary strategies.

* View climbing and other outdoor activities as "metaphors" and thus identify them as somehow less real than other aspects of our lives.

Clearly, there is a vast and fundamental difference between these two types of organizations. However, the traditions and biases described above make it necessary for any outdoor institution that provides an education to children of poverty to be particularly clear in defining its goals. Such institutions must understand both the motivational foundation for those goals and the limitations and dangers inherent in the methods used to achieve them. Without clarity, such institutions will easily lose their way and find themselves engaging in therapeutic techniques. Instructors will be tempted to act as counselors and therapists. Donors might assume that their donations will be used for therapy.

Following is a detailed analysis of the common problems in outdoor education and an explanation of the philosophical basis that supports Kismet as an educational institution:

***Teaching Trust: Fragmenting Concept From Context**

Many years ago I witnessed a local guide belaying a student who was falling repeatedly. While the student's frustration grew to the point of despair, the teacher relentlessly hollered, "Trust your feet! Trust your feet!!" I wished that the student would holler back, "They're not trustworthy! They're not trustworthy!! Teach me how to make them trustworthy!!!" The teacher's advice was, of course, inappropriate since the student's feet were not trustworthy. The teacher's real job was to help the student learn to assess the dependability of his footholds and to teach techniques that would make the footholds more trustworthy than they were.

Recently, I read an article describing an outdoor educational organization that begins its courses by "teaching trust": "Right from the start of the weekend, youths are encouraged to trust others with their safety -- an

essential in rock climbing and a symbol of their commitment to participate safely in the program.... Part of this commitment entails a trust fall off of a picnic table into the arms of the other participants."

In each of the above cases, there exists an assumption that the students are somehow lacking because they don't trust enough and that their ability to trust exists independent of real experience. However, it is likely that any student's hesitation to trust represents a reasonable attitude that has grown out of either an accurate assessment of the situation at hand or out of past experience of a world that has proven to be untrustworthy or dangerous. Therefore, expectations of trust, and exercises that are meant to instill trust, are often inappropriate.

In climbing, as in all other aspects of our lives, we must learn not to trust! This is not an irrational distrust but rather a healthy skepticism proportional to the potential for danger that lies before us. Mature and well-functioning people learn to carefully assess the trustworthiness of their worlds: their neighbors, their doctors, their friends, and the cars they drive. In addition, they learn to manage their lives in such a way that their worlds become as trustworthy as possible; they look both ways before stepping into the street and they acquire second opinions from doctors.

The potential for danger in climbing is considerable. Therefore, our students must learn to question everything, reassess constantly, and they must require of their partners the highest standards of behavior and attitude. I often tell my students that they must even learn to distrust their own eyes (!). They must relentlessly reassess the systems that they have built and they must ask others to check those systems.

Even the organization quoted above unwittingly affirms this wisdom by later refusing to trust its own participants: "a scared participant can harness his or her courage to let go and swing out from the rock, thus trusting his or her partner (who is always backed up by a {company} volunteer)." What kind of lesson is being taught when children are told to trust but are then not trusted? What is the message when children are told to trust their partners and the partners are then not trusted by the staff? What assumptions lead to teaching children to trust when they must often return to dangerous environments?

The above confusion is born of two sources: First, it emerges from a romanticization of the concept of trust. It seems like such a warm and fuzzy idea to imagine complete trust between us all. Second, it is erroneously assumed that lack of trust is a disorder which can be treated as a specific and independent condition by simply imbuing appropriate amounts of the ingredient. The confusion is perpetuated by organizations and teachers who have not asked hard questions about the nature of trust.

If we attempt to teach trust to our students as though it is a skill disconnected from context, we will confuse and frustrate them and we will waste their time. At worst we will cause emotional damage and contribute to their vulnerability.

Our responsibility is to give students a good education. We must teach our students how to build good anchors, assess their dependability, and correct the anchors' deficiencies. We must provide them with the knowledge necessary to assess the reliability of their partners and belayers.

If we accomplish these basic goals, an appropriate degree of trust -- one that finds its foundation in context -- will follow naturally. It is ironic that by treating the concept of trust as though it is a skill or strength that is independent of context, we unwittingly expose our own distrust of the human spirit. We must learn to have faith that when armed with truth, a capacity for critical analysis, and knowledge, our students will naturally learn to assess the dependability of the world that lies before them.

*** The Fabrication and Fragmentation of Self-Esteem**

During the last few decades, attempts to artificially manufacture self-esteem have significantly diluted the effectiveness of education in the United States. We have decided that struggle, disappointment, and failure are too harsh for our children. We have concluded that the human spirit cannot face adversity.

As a result we have inundated our educational systems with "feel good" methods: We push our children through grades whether or not they have satisfied established standards. We lower standards in an attempt to avoid failure. (If we lower them enough, standards can be met by everyone and thus everyone can "feel ok" about themselves.) We freely bestow praise whether or not there is actual basis for the praise. We attempt to enhance students' egos by comparing them to other students. We even downsize their clothes in an attempt to help them deny the actual size of their bodies.

As with the concept of "trust", the loosely defined term "self esteem" has become a buzzword phrase that conjures up impressions that too often go unchallenged and untested. Once again, accompanying the term is a vague sense that self esteem (whatever it is) can be treated as though it is detached from concrete experience and separated from the whole person and therefore can be taught as a strength or skill in and of itself.

In a recently published article about one outdoor educational institution, the institution describes itself as: "a non-profit corporation committed to providing experience that will deeply impact the self image of young persons at

risk, and to providing them with the building blocks to carry that image into creating a positive future for themselves and their community." The article goes on to note; "Of course, conquering fears and overcoming obstacles comprise integral components in the ...program." And.. "trained volunteer instructors encourage them to continue, helping them to build up the inner strength to push themselves beyond the personal limits that they have set." And finally, "Our goal is to get kids and volunteers to do things they didn't think they could do." Simply put, the primary goal of this organization is simply to instill self-esteem -- whatever it is -- by "offering experience", "conquering fears", and "overcoming obstacles". The attainment of this ill defined "self-esteem" is the whole mission.

What is this "self esteem?" How exactly is it enhanced by "experience"? Does any experience enhance self-esteem or must obstacles be overcome in an alien environment? Are these children's lives otherwise devoid of experience? Do these children not have enough obstacles to overcome and fears to conquer in their daily lives? If "pushing through perceived limits" does develop some kind of self esteem, does it last? We are not told.

We also see reference to the commonly abused technique of pushing students through their fears. If one's essential agenda is to "get kids and volunteers to do things they didn't think they could do", there arises a considerable temptation to carry the technique of "pushing through perceived limits" too far, thus inflicting significant emotional damage on students.

Notably absent from the above self description is any reference to education or to specific course work. This is because the concept of self esteem has been separated from education, knowledge, and skill and is associated solely with fabricated exercises and the attainment of arbitrary goals (i.e. falling into the arms of peers or reaching certain points in a climb).

Because self-esteem is often seen as an attribute separate from the whole person, programs are prompted to "teach" or "instill" it as an independent ingredient. However, techniques that ignore the integrated nature of their students are ineffective and risky.

In an attempt to enhance self-esteem, climbing teachers commonly use three inappropriate techniques, one of which is coercive and can be abusive. They are:

1. Pushing students through their fear.
2. Heaping too much praise.
3. Creating the illusion of personal value by comparison.

Pushing children through their fears is an extremely dangerous method of helping students to reach their potential. Although gentle prodding is a perfectly reasonable strategy, and although very occasionally, a student when pressed hard, will break through an emotional hurdle unscathed, pushing

students while in an alien and perceived dangerous environment is extremely risky.

Outdoor instructors too often press frightened students to a state of absolute panic, pushing them to continue on and refusing to lower them to the ground. While climbing, instructors have absolute power over students. Students are entirely dependent upon their instructors both physically and emotionally. In addition, this power is wielded in an extraordinarily alien environment that can tap into a child's deepest and most primal fears. Profound responsibility accompanies this tremendous power and any abuse of that power constitutes abuse of the child.

Presumably, the idea is that by pushing these students past their "perceived" limits they will somehow "conquer" their fear and gain the primary objective of developing "self-esteem." However, some limits related to fear are not merely perceived and therefore cannot simply be "conquered". For example, fear of exposure is deeply established and therefore cannot be "conquered" or "broken through." Thus, it must be seen as a real, rather than a perceived, limitation. It is not unusual to meet people who, after having been pushed against limiting fears, have refused to ever climb again.

There is one other danger associated with this method of pushing against fear. If the primary goal is for students to gain self-esteem by "doing things they didn't think they could do", then what of the student who after all the urging, prodding, pushing, and threatening ("you'll be disappointed in yourself later!"), cannot continue, and instead must return to the ground, shaking and in tears? What do our students learn when they discover that just as they suspected, they could not "do the things that they thought they couldn't do"? They learn, of course, that they are not deserving of self esteem.

When such tactics fail, commonly heard responses are, "You'll do better next time" and, "That was great. You got higher than you thought." (inappropriate tactic #2). However, such lies and manipulations fall on the deaf ears of a shaking, bawling, and embarrassed student.

The second inappropriate esteem-enhancing tactic is one of heaping too much praise or offering praise that has no basis in reality. It is sometimes imagined that by pouring on large amounts of praise that students will integrate such praise and magically transform it into self-esteem. Of course, it is very tempting to offer praise. It allows teachers to feel successful, important, and valuable for having done such a great job. It offers an opportunity for students to feel important and talented. And by inflating their students' abilities, teachers are relieved of having to watch the emotional discomfort associated with struggle, disappointment, lack of talent, and limited success.

However, the dangers in offering excessive praise are considerable: First, inappropriate stroking feels shallow, manipulative, and dishonest to students. Once they sense such dishonesty, teachers lose credibility and lose students' trust. Students want and need the truth. Second, by inflating their abilities teachers rob students of the incentive to reach for excellence. (If excellence is so easy then why be ambitious?). Third, when teachers inflate students' abilities, their students can not know where they actually stand and are thus more vulnerable to disappointment in the future. Fourth, a misleading representation of students abilities may induce them to move too quickly and to try things that are too dangerous for them when they leave the teacher. Without a realistic understanding of their abilities, students will be unable to safely and efficiently manage their own development.

The third questionable tactic is that of offering praise by comparing performance to the performance of other students. ("You're doing great! I seldom see such great technique develop so quickly!"). Real success in climbing is a function of the use of one's potential, the joy of movement and the joy of acquired knowledge and skill. It also is found in the relationships we develop with our partners. It cannot be found by viewing our lives through a lens comprised of the accomplishments of others. By rating our students' success in relation to the success of others we distract them from the direct experience of climbing, thereby robbing them of real success.

Again, such behavior is very tempting because it is a masked self praise for the teacher and offers the student a temporary conviction of superiority to other students. However, it places students on a hierarchal ladder on which they feel superficially valuable for only a short time. The competition that such a strategy creates sets students up for future discouragement and frustration when they either witness achievements that surpass their own or identify accomplishments that are unattainable by them. Pride associated with competition is very fragile and leads to an insatiable appetite for evidence of self worth. It also prevents access to the joy and value associated with actual progress and the realization of potential.

We must be extremely wary of one other pitfall regarding attempts to instill self esteem. It relates to a somewhat hidden prejudice in which we too easily assume that "at-risk" children and children of poverty are, by definition, deficient in self esteem, and that this deficiency is the essential challenge with which we are faced in teaching these children. Such assumptions lead to misguided instruction and condescending attitudes on the part of institutions and instructors.

This is not to say that there is not some quality reasonably described as "self-esteem" that many at-risk children and children of poverty are lacking. It is rather to point out that all children (and most adults) struggle with the

dauntingly complex, elusive, and painful issues associated with self-definition and self-value. In addition, it is to argue that instead of being the *essential* issue of children of poverty and children at risk, lack of self esteem is likely a function of fundamental problems such as marginalization by one's culture, deficiencies in education and knowledge, limited access to material security, and inadequate family stability.

Inappropriate assumptions concerning the nature of self esteem easily lead to an uneven dispensation of education. Thus children of poverty and "at-risk youth" are "provided experience" and given "tools", while children of means are offered climbing courses and education. At-risk youth are given "building blocks", while children of means are given organized instruction. Children of poverty are shown that they can "conquer their fears" and "overcome obstacles" (do they not conquer their fears and overcome obstacles in their daily lives?), while children of wealth are empowered by knowledge.

One of my clients recently hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "I very much agree with your insight that people like me do not bring you their children wanting you to teach them trust or self-esteem; we ask you to teach them climbing. You would agree, I think, that character grows out of doing things well (or badly)."

We must not imagine that by intervening with pop-psychological methods we can infuse our students with artificial doses of self-esteem so that they will magically begin functioning with strength and clarity. We should remember that any attempt to intervene in the emotional life of a child -- especially in an environment of implied danger -- is serious business and carries with it tremendous responsibility. We must be careful not to assume that because children are poor or because they are in crisis, that their essential problem is lack of self esteem and that such a lack of self esteem is a "condition" that we should treat in and of itself.

We need not protect our children from truth by attempting to artificially bloat their egos with praise. We need not create artificial challenges that are disconnected from the fundamental development of their minds, their bodies, and their awareness of others.

Like a flower in rich soil, self esteem emerges naturally from a solid foundation of education, skill, and fulfilling relationships. It arises out of direct experience in which we have real and positive affect in the world. It is born of meaningful mutual engagement with our friends and with our culture. We will serve all of our children best by simply offering education, skill, and respect.

*** Climbing As Metaphor: The Fragmentation and Symbolization of Experience**

During the years that Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer were battling for the international championship in chess, both were asked what chess meant to them. Spassky's response was, "Chess is like life." In contrast, Fischer boldly stated, "Chess *is* life."

In a recent interview, the executive director of an outdoor educational organization commented, "We are taking at-risk youth in the Denver-Boulder area and using climbing as a metaphor." Another staff member said, "I like the way (our organization) really makes an analogy with their lives." Hidden amidst these responses lies a clue to one of the central problems in education in the U.S. and one of the central problems with the outdoor educational movement. Climbing is not a metaphor for life. Climbing is life.

To characterize climbing as a metaphor, we must make two basic and invalid assumptions. First, we must assume that climbing is separate from the rest of life. One might reasonably argue that in a certain way this is true. We seldom balance our check books while on the cliff. Nor do we achieve a satisfying aerobic workout while sitting at our desks.

However, climbing is merely superficially separate from the rest of our lives and the boundaries that we imagine that exist between particular aspects of our lives are false boundaries. The peace with which we are imbued while feeling the wind and while watching birds soar below deeply alters our perspective and informs all areas of our lives. Our potential for success in climbing is enhanced by the strengths and limited by the weaknesses and fear that we have previously developed. Who we are in every way becomes embodied in our climbing and the ways in which we are transformed by climbing deeply affect all aspects of our lives.

In viewing climbing as a metaphor, we imagine it to be not only separate, but also somehow less "real" and therefore inferior to other aspects of life. We are unlikely to suggest, for example, that life is a metaphor for climbing or work a metaphor for life.

Presumably, climbing is merely a sport or an activity but our jobs are real. But in fact, even if one were to mistakenly separate climbing from the rest of life, it could be easily argued that climbing is, in some ways, *more* real than other aspects of our lives. One of the most appealing and even seductive aspects of climbing is that in climbing, consequences are absolutely concrete in a world that is otherwise filled with abstractions. If our businesses utterly fail, we simply start over. If our climbing systems fail we might be killed. No consequence is more "real" than free fall.

In addition, if climbing is less than real, by what criteria do we decide which aspects of our lives are real and which are not real? How are we to rate the degree to which activities satisfy the reality test? Is work more real than chess -- love more real than friendship? Such distinctions are ridiculous. All of what we do is merged as one life. All of who we are becomes embodied in all that we do.

By separating climbing from the rest of our lives, we imagine that while climbing we learn specific lessons that we can "have" and "use" -- and that we are able to store these lessons ("tools") in some mental bag of tricks, carry them into areas of our lives that presumably *are* real, and then apply them at will. Certainly the experience of climbing and the challenges with which we are presented while climbing change us. By learning climbing we sharpen our problem solving skills, gain a better understanding of physics, become more athletic, and gain clarity in regard to responsibility and communication in relationships. However, these are not "lessons" that we carry and then apply with intent. Instead they are ways in which we become transformed.

These distinctions are not trivial. Because they ignore the fundamental relationship between knowledge and all other aspects of their students' lives, teachers who merely impart isolated lessons tend to be ineffective or even destructive. For example, teaching "trust" as an independent quality ignores the context from which trust must emerge and thus increases students' vulnerability in the world. On the other hand, teachers whose programs emerge out of an integrated vision and thus direct their instruction toward whole lives tend to be effective, interesting, and respectful.

For the sake of organization, it is reasonable -- even necessary -- to separate out compartments of our lives and of ourselves. However, we quickly forget that this fragmentation-for-the-sake-of-organizing-the-world is merely a convenience and that fundamentally, all aspects of our lives are immutably bound together; that climbing is thoroughly connected to all other aspects of our lives, that climbing is just as much life as our work is life, and that lessons are not isolated "things" that we carry around, intentionally applying them at will. If we forget that our constructs and boundaries are mere conveniences and therefore lose sight of the thoroughly integrated nature of our lives, our effectiveness as teachers and as friends as well as our effectiveness in our jobs will, at the very least, be diluted. At most, we will harm ourselves and those with whom we interact.

Boris Spassky was mistaken in describing chess as "like life" (incidentally, he lost the tournament), just as educators are misguided in treating climbing as a metaphor. Chess and climbing are no less a part of our lives than our families, our homes, and our jobs. All of who we are, all of who we have been and will be, and all that we do, are inextricably blended together

into one life. Skills, fear, and wisdom derived from every aspect of our lives span and therefore dissolve all boundaries that we imagine that exist between aspects of our lives.

Not until we thoroughly know this -- not until our goals and programs arise out of this wisdom -- will we be able to, with grace and efficiency, aid others to their power. Not until we engage as integrated beings with other integrated beings will we avoid the danger of doing damage to our students.

*** The Problem With Helping; Condescension Cloaked in Compassion**

As every college sophomore knows, any conversation concerning philosophy or morality can quickly lead to the question of whether or not human beings have the capacity to act selflessly: Is there always, hidden beneath the seemingly most selfless deed, the motivation to satisfy only one's self?

This is an important question because it presses us to explore our deepest motivations and reach to understand the foundation upon which our moral principles rest. The question is particularly problematic -- and interesting -- because to address it, we must assess from within the very system that we are attempting to assess. How can one trust one's own conclusions when the motivations for such self investigation are themselves suspect?

Those of us who very much need to "feel good about ourselves", rush to argue that we can (and often do) lead selfless lives. Cynics on the other hand, hurry to claim that ultimately, we always merely aim to please ourselves. Hastily formed conclusions, however, are likely to be overstated or wrong since the issues surrounding this subject are very complex.

For the sake of this discussion it is not necessary to explore all aspects of this troublesome question. However, because it is not uncommon for considerable selfishness to hide amidst claims of benevolence, it is important for "helping" organizations to direct a persistent and critical eye toward their own attitudes, assumptions, and motivations. Otherwise, such organizations are in danger of wasting much money and time in addition to causing harm to those they claim to help.

Outdoor programs are often designed to "help" "at-risk" children and children who are economically disadvantaged. That fact raises two areas of particular concern regarding the motivation of these organizations and their employees. Each area of concern leads to programs and methods that are at best wasteful and at worst, harmful to students. The first is a pattern I will call the "savior complex". The second is a behavior I will call "idiot compassion."

Everyone struggles with the need to feel important and valuable. It could

reasonably be argued that much of that need is natural for human beings -- even fundamental and necessary. However, it is not uncommon for individuals to acquire an appetite for self verification that is both inappropriate and insatiable. Occasionally that appetite takes the form of saving others.

This "savior complex" finds a natural home in outdoor educational institutions. However, when programs become driven by false altruism, all significant benefit to students disappears. Ironically, programs that are essentially motivated by a hunger for self esteem often develop programs that attempt to "teach" self esteem.

It is easy to see how this happens. We tend to project our own deficiencies onto others. In addition, individuals driven by a need for self verification are blind to the strengths, limitations, desires, and real needs of their students who are reduced to mere objects with which teachers attempt to acquire their own satisfaction. These dynamics are more common than we would like to think.

Recently I observed a relationship between a middle class white suburban school group and an inner city black school system. The inner city children had visited the suburban homes several times but the white suburbanites had not been to the city. Adults in the suburban town assumed that their environment had much to offer the inner city children and openly said as much. Presumably they thought that the city had little to offer their own children. Significantly, the middle class adults had not the slightest clue of the prejudice guiding them. Ironically, the city may have offered the white suburban children more than suburbia could offer the inner-city children. Minorities always know more about the ruling majority than the majority know about the minority. Such knowledge is a prerequisite for survival.

The key to preventing outdoor educational organizations from being driven by false altruism is to offer the same programs to children of poverty as are offered to children of means. Avoid programs that claim to address issues that are specific to specific populations. Develop organized courses with high standards and expect exemplary behavior from every student.

All children need and want the same sustenance: respect, love, knowledge, skills, security, and the freedom to develop their potential. Any organization whose courses are guided by this wisdom will nourish its students and will avoid exploitation by those whose main agenda is to satisfy themselves.

"Idiot compassion" has its source in ignorance, condescension, in a reluctance to witness the struggle of others and, in a profound lack of faith in the human spirit. Once again, the irony is that this lack of faith often results in programs that claim to teach trust.

Idiot compassion can be easily understood in witnessing a young mother

who, rather than putting her child on a bus on the first day of school, drives the child to school in an attempt to save him from the fear, isolation, and separation that she imagines will accompany the child's first independent steps into the world. Ostensibly she is helping her child, but in fact she is robbing him of the opportunity to develop the strength and maturity that can only arise out of adversity. Although she believes that her behavior is entirely born of a desire to protect her child, it actually reflects a need to protect herself from the discomfort of witnessing the struggle; it is her struggle and not his that she is attempting to avoid. Hidden within her strategy we find disrespect disguised as love and selfishness disguised as generosity.

It is easy to understand (and forgive) the behavior of this young mother. In this example, the term "idiot compassion" even seems a bit harsh. (It is a Buddhist term and since Buddhists tend to have great faith in the human spirit, they are not known for insulating themselves from discomfort). Any strategy that underestimates the potential of the recipients of gift devalues them and robs them of an opportunity for growth. Some of these strategies are far more difficult to tolerate than a mother's decision to drive her child to school.

Organizations that make it their business to offer help to disadvantaged children are particularly vulnerable to attitudes and assumptions that devalue the children themselves, and lead to the development of misguided programs and harmful teaching techniques.

We are tempted to assume that because someone needs help that they are somehow deficient in character. (In America, our story is that anyone can achieve anything they choose if only they take responsibility and work hard. Thus, it is entirely one's own fault if one is in need). So we decide to enhance character by teaching self-esteem and trust.

We assume that if someone is deficient in a certain way (education or income for example), that they must be deficient in other areas such as diligence, intelligence, bravery, potential to love, etc. Such common errors of inductive reasoning persuade us to attempt practices of socialization by offering "experiences" and "tools" rather than courses and education. We seem to think that those we are helping have had limited access to real experience in our culture. So we offer "metaphors" in an attempt to prepare them for the real thing (whatever that is).

It is very difficult to honestly and accurately assess our own complex motivations in regard to our service in the world. However, there are ways that we can limit the degree to which we hide our faithlessness in a cloak of love and our fear in a pretense of generosity. If we are to be of service we must do everything possible to be aware of our own motives, fears, and needs. To combat our ignorance of others, we must presume as little as possible and reach to understand their lives. By doing so, we will become empowered not only as

teachers but as students ourselves.

To temper our condescension we must remain open to the potential, the wisdom, the strength, and the beauty of every student. If we do so, we will naturally honor the life within them. In an effort to provide a service that has value we must offer the same courses and education to all of our students. If we do so, the appropriate trust, self esteem, satisfaction, and contributions to society will inevitably follow.

To release our students to their full potential we must learn to give them the space to struggle amidst adversity. We must be patient and we must be brave enough to witness struggle. If we do so our students will rise to the challenge. And in an effort to maintain clarity of purpose we must relentlessly reexamine our motives and our behavior. If we do so, we will keep to our path.

SUMMARY

Knowledge, Skill, and Relationship: Creating a Foundation From Which Character Naturally Arises

The considerable confusion associated with outdoor education and the potential to do harm to children when using interventionist strategies make it extremely important that any outdoor educational institution be very clear about its goals, motivations, and techniques.

Outdoor therapeutic programs that are led by qualified and experienced counselors might be appropriate for children who are so emotionally defeated, broken, or unstable, that it is difficult to offer them education. The wilderness itself has much to teach. New challenges met among competent and caring professionals in the wilderness offer opportunity for growth. However, emotional and psychological intervention is serious business and such intervention carried out in an alien and implied threatening environment has great potential for abuse. If real limitations are seen as merely "perceived", children will be pushed to terror and may be permanently scarred by the experience. If manipulative techniques based on vague concepts of "trust" and "self esteem" are used, children will be misguided and confused. If therapeutic programs are run by non-therapists, "at-risk" children will be vulnerable to much additional risk.

Because there has developed such a tradition of using the wilderness as an environment for therapy, outdoor educational institutions must understand from their inception that their mission is not therapeutic. They must clearly define and consistently be reminded of their goals and methods. Without such care, educational programs easily become infused with therapeutic techniques.

To be effective, an outdoor educational institution must function on a solid foundation built of the following insights:

First, that all children -- rich or poor, black or white -- have the same fundamental needs: They crave freedom and opportunity. They hunger to use their great potential. They desire verification that they belong in this world. They need to know through experience that their presence has effect. They long to be positively engaged with the rest of humanity (indeed, with the rest of life) in such a way that their lives are imbued with meaning.

Second, programs must be thoroughly organized and conducted by teachers who have expertise in the course material.

Third, teachers must be responsive and caring. In addition, they must nourish the strengths and honor the limitations of every student.

Fourth, programs must respond to the integrated child. They must reflect a knowledge that information and ideas are most valuable when they arise out of our experience; that the joy and value of exploration takes precedence over the attainment of goals; that authentic ethical behavior must emerge out of genuine engagement with family, friends, and society; that goals are most infused with value when they reflect the longing of our hearts.

An education in climbing and mountaineering can be of tremendous value to children (and adults). There are three major sources of this value:

First, wilderness resonates with an intense and pervasive message of mystery. This is the absolute and vast mystery that we are seldom forced to confront when surrounded by our own designs since our designs merely reflect back upon us the affirmation and limitation of our own vision. Anyone who has spent nights alone in the mountains gazing at the stars knows the awe, the humility, and the gratitude that accompanies such experience. This particular wisdom offered to us by wilderness is not imaginary nor is it specific to certain individuals or certain cultures. Instead, it is a concrete wisdom offered to all of humanity. It is a wisdom born of direct engagement with the infinite and integrated whole of this universe.

Second, climbing requires the application of all aspects of our being. It develops superb overall muscle tone. It teaches body movement and grace and sharpens sequential problem solving skills. It presses students to develop a concrete understanding of certain aspects of physics and mechanics. It demands the development and use of good judgment and sharpens one's capacity for critical analysis. It requires focus and presence and teaches that real consequences ensue from our actions. It demonstrates that to live effectively we must honor our intuition and seek verification through analysis. In addition, because safety in climbing depends on team effort and because it challenges us considerably both emotionally and physically, climbing demands that we develop and maintain the highest standards of behavior and attitude in relation

to our partners. We must catch our partners when they fall. We must display compassion in the face of their fear. Rather than finding success and happiness in our partners' defeats, we must learn instead to contribute to, and find satisfaction in, their success. And we must learn humility in the face of our own fears and limitations. Climbing illustrates how ethical behavior arises naturally out of concrete circumstances.

Third, education is the natural vehicle through which children can satisfy their hunger for development. Education offers opportunity for freedom and for access to material security. It develops potential and tends to exponentially expand opportunity for the development of that potential well into the future. By increasing children's power, education helps verify for them that they have effect and that they belong in this world. Through education, children gain the skill and knowledge required to contribute to others and thus gain access to a resulting sense of meaning and purpose.

Because we are accustomed to viewing all outdoor programs as therapeutic and because it is so tempting to be the saviors of children in need, we typically assume that any outdoor institution will make it its business to actively intervene in the lives of children. Even an educational institution such as Kismet can easily lose its path and default to therapeutic techniques. However, in doing so we will underestimate the extraordinary potential that an education in climbing offers. And we will underestimate the extraordinary potential of the human spirit to rise up in the face of challenge and to soar amidst the adventure of life.

Except with those children who are too damaged to benefit from education it is our job to offer opportunity, knowledge, experience, respect, and honesty. And it is our job to offer children access to ourselves. While doing so we must possess the wisdom, patience, and humility to step aside and allow children's spirits to face truth and to persevere amidst struggle.

It is our responsibility to offer these gifts to all children -- not out of altruism or out of some idea that we have about "goodness". Instead, we should offer these gifts because there is nothing else to do with the gifts that have been imparted to us. We long to share them as much as our children long to receive them.