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CHAPTER 23

EXPERIENCE OF PLACE: LESSONS ON TEACHING CULTURAL ATTACHMENT TO PLACE

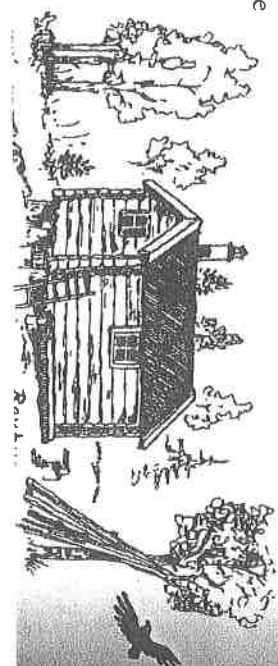
Brian Wattchow

For many outdoor and adventure educators in countries such as Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Australia and New Zealand, natural areas are often presented as ideal learning sites where participants can be challenged physically, mentally and emotionally. These learning places have become idealized educational terrains where, according to John Miles, "physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual faculties are all engaged" and "[a]ttention to one part of our being waxes and wanes, but there is connectedness, a continuum throughout the experience."¹ Miles went on to argue that the rare gift of teaching in these places carries an ethical responsibility:

[the educator] must teach responsibly for nature and wild land values ... must help their clients learn the special lessons about nature and human nature which may be revealed in wild places, lessons which may help them back home to do their part to assure sustainability of nature and civilization.²

However, educators often use universal terms such as "wilderness" and "nature" uncritically, taking for granted the heritage of ideas and values attached to these concepts. Why should some lessons only be available in the "wild" and how should that learning be "brought home"? Andrew Brookes has argued that such universalistic tendencies may be damaging to the prospects of an education that is more responsive to local places, traditions and practices, where what is taught is an outcome of a careful negotiation between people and place.³ An education like the one outlined above by Miles, that continues to be unaware of the local complexities and particulars of place experiences, may even pose a threat to local places. The American ecological philosopher, Aldo Leopold, was warning over half a century ago that most outdoor experiences had become, "a self-destructive process of seeking but never quite finding, a major frustration of mechanized society."⁴ He believed that the key to a more intimate relationship with nature lay in the development of genuine perception. Yet the most serious obstacle set in our path, according to Leopold, "is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, and intense consciousness of the land."⁵ What then is "place," and how might it provide educational possibilities that move towards, rather than away from, an experience of cultural attachment to local places? According to Edward Relph, "[t]he word 'place' is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities, and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other."⁶ Thus, it is precisely our experiences of a place, which exists in the tension between our sensing bodies and the cultural constructions that govern our interpretations of what a place might mean to us that stands to provide important lessons for education. In other words, we must apprentice ourselves to an experience of place, if place is to become our teacher.

The real challenge here is to consider what an education that is personally and



culturally responsive to a local place might look like in practice. My encounters with traditional Norwegian *friluftsliv* provide some thought provoking possibilities. Of course, considerable effort is required to reconsider what may be drawn from these encounters for our own contexts, and I will attempt to make some concluding statements later in this chapter that address this task. But first it is necessary to re-tell the stories of these experiences and draw the reader into those encounters with Norwegian people and places.

Traditional *Friluftsliv*: A Norwegian Education in Place

A few years ago I travelled and worked for a time in Norway and encountered *friluftsliv* in several forms. Norway has a wide range of natural environment, many of which remain ecologically healthy. It is a wealthy nation, though not heavily urbanized, that has maintained a strong sense of rural life. According to Arne Naess, "Norwegians walk, run, creep into nature to get rid of whatever represses them and contaminates the air ... They don't talk about going out, but in and into nature."⁷ Nils Faarlund has described several of the distinctive features of *friluftsliv* as a reliance upon the rhythms of nature, with roots in the in the European Deep Romantic Movement of the 19th century, and where nature becomes the site of human fulfillment.⁸ Modern outdoor recreation and tourism, as already described by Leopold, is considered a threat to traditional *friluftsliv*.⁹ Indeed, much of what we might call outdoor recreation is considered profoundly different to *friluftsliv*. Børge Dahle outlines the key differences as follows:

Outdoor activities are often motivated by pleasure in activities and social fellowship. Most forms of outdoor activities do not have a long tradition in Norwegian society. Often they are play and sports activities that are practiced in nature-orientated surroundings on the participant's premises. The activities are of a positive character for the individual and can be positive in a societal connection, but can be problematic from an ecological perspective.¹⁰

The international visitor to Norway might easily miss the rich meanings of *friluftsliv* as a form of cultural practice and education that is indeed a negotiation with local places, if their experience is confined to taking in the picturesque scenery and touring the many folk culture museums. *Friluftsliv*, as an active socialization to nature, must be lived intensely if the encounter is going to lead to meaningful comparisons with the visitor's home.

Encounter 1: Walking in the "Barnas Naturverden"

The *sælehuset* sits on a rib of ancient rock that runs as a shallow shelf across the flank of the hill. As I approach along an undulating yet gently rising trail, it merges and disappears into the countryside, then suddenly reappears, surprisingly close as I crest a little ridge. Its earth-covered roof, with grasses and flowers pulsing in the breeze, creates the impression that it is an extension of the hillside. It is a dwelling completely in and of its place. For some time the massive pine-log construction, six by twelve long paces around the perimeter, overwhelms my sense of the detail. Then I get up close, run my hands across its structure, and begin really looking at the building.

Despite the size of the logs I cannot find a single gap where a winter wind might penetrate. The door reaches only to my biceps and I have to stoop as I step across the foundation log that forms the base of the door frame. The door jam is lined with a layer of sheep's wool to keep out even the slightest flurry of winter snowflakes. After exploring the two rooms I sit on a low bench, leaning my back against the pine logs, and brew some tea. A shaft of sunlight enters through a small window. I hear the wind rush down the flank of the hillside, and curl around building. I feel the building resist its pressure. I hear the grasses growing on the sod roof lie down in the breeze. The *sælehuset* speaks: "I've been here forever. This is where I belong."

But am I deceived? For I already know that the dwelling is only a few years old and that it was constructed as part of a unique project to design an outdoor experience specifically for the children and people of Rennebu county that would embody the local landscape and culture. Yet there are

no construction marks on the ground outside as the heavy logs were cut only a few kilometres away, lower on the mountain, and then dragged up here above the treeline over the winter snows, and left here for the actual building to begin in the summer. The design was extensively researched to reproduce a Viking dwelling of around 1,000 AD. The *sælehuset* is one of three such buildings that encircle a small mountain region and make up the legs of a walk that can easily be undertaken by young children.

I was introduced to the *sælehuset* and the area on a day walk some weeks earlier by Børge Dahle, the founder of the *Barnas Naturverden* (Children's Nature World) project. We had sat for a while, taking in the mountain sun, on the hillside above the house in a rough circle of stones. After a while Børge pointed out the stones, which I had hardly noticed other than their angular pressing against my back, and told me that we were sitting inside the circle of a 2,000 year old hunting hide (blind). Reindeer would have been herded up the valley until they galloped over a subtle fold in the hillside just beside the hide, from where they could readily be speared. Flint arrow and spearheads could still be found in the grasses nearby. The flintheads were made from an exposed seam of rock within view further up the hillside: "I've been here forever."

I returned on my own to complete a three-day walk, experiencing the different dwellings and the pathways that connected them through the mountains and forests. The Children's Nature World project took several years to research, plan and complete and involved negotiation on multiple levels from national government through to local communities. Diverse groups informed the project, ranging from anthropologists to keepers of local legend and lore, and farmers and community members undertook the construction. But the dwellings are only one of several integrated features that make



the project "work" as an education in *friluftsliv*, and one that models a responsiveness to local

The trail into *sælhurst* climbs up gently from the road head and can easily be walked by a young child in half a day. This simple approach walk is an extraordinary experience in itself. A "retired" local farmer took it largely upon himself to design and build this section of the trail. In places where it makes sense to pause you will find a large flat rock or rough-hewn wooden bench waiting. This is especially the case if the place is one that would be attractive to children, such as beside a small running stream. Sections of the trail are stepped with flat pieces of slate, which were sledged from a nearby range in winter. But the most stunning feature is the sign-stones.

Where the track breaks out above the treeline a rough row of angled rocks (like small cairns) stand in place and mark the way. An adult can see between them from one to the next. But when you bend down to a child's perspective, the way forward is not so clear. It takes a small adventurous journey to leave one sign-stone behind to find the next, just beyond the little slope, and then the next just out of sight around the gentle spur, and then the next ... The sign-stones seem to have been adopted by their place. They are covered in moss and lichen and some have weathered during the freeze and thaw of a few cold winters. As I walked the little track small alpine birds would flit ahead of me from one to the next, using them as vantage points. I have never encountered a pathway so recently conceived and constructed; yet so evolved into its landscape. This small walk is, in its own right, a profound lesson in friluftsliv philosophy and practice.

The final feature of the Children's Nature World project involved the publication of a children's picture storybook, written by Børge and beautifully illustrated by Signy Ramsen. It also includes an excellent map of the area. The book, *Smaingulur: I Barnas Naturverden*,¹¹ tells the story of a small group of young children who go on an adventurous journey through this same country. They have to learn to live in the dwellings, to fish the streams and to "read" the mountain weather and terrain. Along the way, they encounter many of the mythological characters and stories of the region. It would be quite possible for children to read the story, or have it read to them, as the young adventurers make their own journey of many small footsteps through the *naturverden*. A copy of the book can be found in each of the huts

All of these features, the path through the land, the dwellings and the book, make up a remarkable encounter between people and place, and the sensitivity given to the child's experience points to a finely tuned pedagogy-of-place. In planning the project, Børge told me, it took many years for him to learn to "see" again as a child, and I suspect that this is the genius of the project and a lesson for us all. There have been several worthwhile attempts to describe an education that is responsive to local places,¹² but rarely do they escape an adult conception of place. In the *Barnas Naturverden*, it is place that is the teacher.

Encounter 2: Friluftsliv as Coast-Life

Later in my visit to Norway I worked with Børge and students from The Norwegian University of Sports and Physical Education who were completing a friluftsliv leaders program. As part of their final examination students were required to develop a program that teaches the friluftsliv of a particular region. I participated as an international "censor" (examiner) for the ten-day long "exam." Students had already completed extensive inquiry into the local culture, and had collected stories and histories of the places we ventured into. For example, students had discovered from locals that an old pathway crossing a mountain range had several different names for different sections, each depicting a storied aspect of local history. A large boulder might be the home of a troll-spirit, for example, that should be spoken to in order to request safe passage. There seemed to me to be both an aboriginal sense of the land and a commitment on the part of the students to gather these local stories, carefully interpret them, and build them into a friluftsliv education experience.

A feature of this particular program was an experience in "coast life" in the Hardanger Fjord region. We were given access to two traditional boats of the region. One was a reconstruction of a Baron's boat from the previous century, completed by the local community. The other was an authentic Hardanger Attring (eight oars) in-shore fishing boat, which was over 100 years old. Boats such as these were not uncommon, and they were not stored away in dusty museums. Instead they were in use on the waterways to maintain access to

side-by-side in the boats and rowed around parts of the fjord for several days, often singing as we rowed, with the students conducting "lessons" in local fishing techniques, storytelling aspects of local history and lore, and painting and writing.

Later, I was also fortunate to spend some time with Børge Dahle and his family at their coast house in an archipelago of granite islands at the outer limits of the Trondheim Fjord. Børge had several "old boats," 90 to 120 years old, all in use. The students from the friluftsliv program would visit this place for several weeks and physically, emotionally and intellectually learn to live a "coast life." They would row and sail the old boats, camp out on the islands, fish and collect seafood, paint, draw, write and work on the boats.

We took out Børge's *Affordbat*, the traditional small fishing boat of the Trondheim Fjord region, and tied it up alongside a small jetty. Seawater immediately began to fill the boat through numerous small splits in the timber planking and this continued until the water level inside the boat matched that outside. The boat was then left in the water overnight to allow the timber to pick up the water and swell until it became watertight. The following day the water was bailed out with a small-carved wooden scoop. One or two small splits, or leaks, were still evident and Børge pulled some woollen thread from his jumper and used a sharp knife to push it into the leaks until the water coming in slowed to a trickle.

As it is with many wooden boats, the apparent connection with the "tree-ness" of various sections of the boat's construction is striking. The "knees" that provide rigidity as the internal framing of the hull, can easily be recognized as sections of tree where the trunk runs into the more horizontal root system. The rowlocks were small cross-sections of narrow trunks with short sections of branches left attached. A flat was cut or planed onto the split trunk and it was pegged to the gunwale. A leather or rope "keeper" loop was then tied through a hole drilled through the branch "stump" and the oar handle passed through the loop. When pressure was applied on the oar it would snug neatly into the "V" formed by the old branch and trunk. Even the lapped planking that made up the clinker construction of the hull was sectioned and deliberately chosen for specific parts of the hull. As the planks rose higher away from the keel of

the boat, a twist was needed to create the distinctive "Viking" shape of the bow and stern.

Boat builders use no plans to construct these craft. In the same way that the traditional builders of Greenland sea kayaks measured them off of their own body dimensions, the small boat builders of Norway developed a system of measures based on arm spans, forearm lengths, hand spans and so on. Virtually all of the materials were sourced locally. Timber would be sourced from nearby forests, as would various tars and sealants that would be distilled from the trees. The sheets (ropes) and sailcloth would be soaked in a boiling tannin brew made from spruce bark to proof them against rot in salt water. Each boat was a symphony of human/organic knowledge and practice centred in its local place: "I belong here."

When we had finished bailing out the *Affordbat* we stepped the mast and rigged the sails. Prior to sailing we made several trips to a nearby small cove and carried back a few dozen roundish granite stones, each one weighing perhaps five to seven kilograms. With this ballast we made two neat stacks, one in a box around the base of the mast and the other at the back of the boat close to the rudder. Børge explained that the roundness of the stones was a "good feature" as they would roll out of the boat more easily if we capsized and leave the wooden boat to float. Angular stones might stick in the boat and sink the hull. In the North Sea, where water temperatures may be less than seven degrees Celsius, and survival times if immersed would be measured in minutes, I was motivated to find the roundest stones possible!

There is that magical moment, in any sailboat, when you leave the land, the sail sheets are pulled in, the wind fills the sail, the hull heels over and boat is pushed forward before the breeze. In this case we were in a tight, granite-bound channel created by several islands and we sailed away on a broad reach before the fjord opened in front of us. The fjord was several kilometres wide and we sailed a straight course all of the way across. A stiff breeze had the boat leaning well over, and the granite boulders jostled each other into position. Several leaks sprung from sections of the hull that had been above the waterline and had not yet "taken up" any water, and the hull ground away.

small swell. The sail hummed in the breeze and the timbers and sheets creaked as they took up the strain. The *Afordbat* was speaking.

When we reached shelter in a small cove the sail was lowered, an oar placed in one of the rowlocks on the leeward side of the boat, and the boat rowed through the turn. Then the sail was raised, sheeted in and we sailed away on the next tack (a course set at an angle into the wind) of several kilometres. Børge explained that fishermen using these boats had been very conservative sailors. Few could swim and a capsize was more likely during turning manoeuvres. A capsize at sea could cost the lives of most of the male members of an extended family. Sailing the boat, out to the fishing grounds could accurately be described as a complete “applied local ecology.” The technology of the boat, the sailing knowledge, sea lore and the skilled body of the sailor, all were extensions of a close relationship between the person, local culture and place.

Lessons on Teaching a Cultural Attachment to Place

Why have I gone in to so much detail re-telling these stories of my experiences of Norwegian friluftsliv? There are two answers to this question. First, the stories and places are inextricably linked. The telling and reading of stories such as these can stand alone as a lesson in cultural attachment to place. Each of us becomes compelled to interpret the story and consider our own teaching and life contexts, and the places where we live and work. In essence, the stories remind us to ask the questions so eloquently framed by Wendell Berry in his book *Home Economics*: “What is here? What will nature permit us to do here? What will nature help us do here?”¹³ Even more than asking such questions, friluftsliv “lives” them as a daily practice.

Second, it seems to me that we stand in danger of forgetting or erasing the fundamental role that these types of place experiences play in our lives, particularly as we continue to further “industrialize” our teaching practices. I refer here to the application of technocratic practices in education such as the rationalization of the curriculum, the quest for uniformity of educational goals and practices regardless of local conditions, and the belief that learning experiences must be fully investigated, predicted,

rendered into factual accounts, and thus controlled. Outdoor and adventure educators are no less immune to the impact of these so-called “developments” than other educators. They would seem to deny what is most needed in education; an ongoing personal and cultural negotiation built upon a carefully listening to our local places. This is precisely what a lived experience in friluftsliv offers.

Lucy Lippard provides an important insight when she reminds us that children, as well as adolescents and adults I might add, will learn about places quite simply by being allowed to be-in-place.¹⁴ Yet, even more than this, friluftsliv provides an important opportunity for educators to extend this understanding into a meaningful pedagogy that responds to place. If we present learners to outdoor places where we, as educators, have already forgotten or erased the “local,” and replaced it with our preferred visions of outdoor spaces (such as wilderness), we diminish the experience in a profound way.

Friluftsliv in Norway is, of course, itself one type of privileged encounter with place. Certainly it has many culturally specific values and practices that would not easily translate to other cultures and places. Encounters with a friluftsliv that include versions of recreation that Leopold would call “endless frustrations,” or even an “extreme” friluftsliv of hyper-individualized risk takers are also possible. Yet the friluftsliv I encountered seemed largely to have embraced experiences where possibilities were expanded and open, and where potentials were not curtailed, and where elements of the personal, the cultural and the natural were “free” to roam and connect. All that it seemed was required of me to experience such a friluftsliv was to step into these stories, suspend some of my taken for granted beliefs for the outdoor experience, and turn an ear to the speaking land: “I have been here forever. This is where I belong.”

