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Finding Wonder in the Everyday

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Abstract

Good morning and welcome to my capstone presentation, Finding Wonder in the Everyday. Humans have lived, traveled through, and told stories here in the North Cascades for thousands of years, particularly those in the Sauk and Suiattle tribes. Today I hope to honor that tradition as I tell a few stories while exploring the possibilities inherent in storytelling.

Keywords: storytelling, environmental education, nature-based play

Everything has a story - William Connelly

I fell in love with the grand vistas of wild places from an early age. From visits to national and state parks, to summers at camp in Colorado, I loved the sense of accomplishment I felt from hiking and backpacking and the reward of stunning views. Facts like the name of a tree, a flower, or the geological feature hardly mattered to me and when told those details, the words went in one ear and out the other. Similarly, when in cities or towns the trees lining the streets and the gulls flying overhead were an uninteresting and familiar sight.

But hearing and learning some of the stories behind these details brought magic to the mundane. As my dad has always said, “everything has a story”. That concept combined with my own experiences inspired this inquiry into the power of storytelling. Intertwined with storytelling throughout this capstone is an exploration of the dichotomy between wilderness and the nature we encounter everyday.

Sir David Attenborough narrates this feature on the North Cascades. It's spring and bears are waking up from hibernation. In search of a meal a large, majestic black bear lumbers into a clearing. Suddenly a puma pounces from the treetops and onto the unsuspecting bear. The pair go tumbling and . . . Beeerrrrnnnn BeerrrrnnnnnBeerrrrnnnn. Alex woke to the alarm with a start, certain that mountain school would be just like a nature documentary. Overflowing with excitement, Alex got ready in a flash and gobbled down breakfast in moments. With an overnight bag in one hand and a sleeping bag in the other, Alex rushed out the door and right through Mom's prized tulip garden. Alex had trampled the garden before and Alex would definitely be in trouble, but at that moment the school bus



rounded the corner and nothing other than getting to mountain school mattered.

An hour later we find Alex chatting with friends on the bus headed for mountain school. Alex's friends sat on the edge of their seats as Alex recounted the exciting dream from that morning. After a long discussion they all agreed they would see at least 7 bears at mountain school. Alex changed the topic and said simply, I wonder what our rooms are like? One friend responded with hopes that they could all share a room together. As the conversation quieted Alex daydreamed about finding the perfect field in which to play tag. It had been a long year and they were ready to spend three days out of the classroom and having fun.

Several hours later we find Alex at mountain school orientation in the amphitheater. Alex didn't remember anyone saying that there would be so much sitting and listening in Mountain School. Sitting was the last thing Alex wanted to do after sitting on the bus for hours, but there had been hardly any time to move around after lunch before it was time to settle down again. The mountain school instructors acted out a few silly skits, each represented the rules of mountain school. Alex squirmed throughout, aching to jump up and run around. Finally an instructor announced that it was time to break into trail groups. But every instructor had to call out their name and the students in the group. This was all taking way too long!

Next we find Alex walking on a trail in their small group. The trail leads them into a cool dark valley. Stepping onto a bridge, Alex slows down to inspect the muddy banks of a stream for puma tracks, Lost in thought Alex nearly runs into a classmate, realizing just in time that group has stopped . . . again. As the group assembles in a circle the instructor asks "As you look around the forest, what thoughts or questions do you have? What are you curious about? Without a moments hesitation, Alex blurts out, "It's ugly here..."

Ugly? That is hardly the word I would use to describe this place. Alex is a fictional portrayal of a student I encountered last spring. Before I share how I responded, how would you respond to Alex? Turn to your neighbor and discuss for about 5 minutes. When it is time to come back to the group I will do a wolf howl.

Would anyone like to share some highlights from their small discussions?

Thank you for sharing, each of you had better approaches than I did at the time. To be completely honest I was triggered or baffled for a few moments. When my brain finally started working again all I could say was ", What? Why do you say that?". After a moment the real Alex responded simply, "just because". Unfortunately that was where the conversation ended, but it has continued affect my teaching philosophy and thoughts on environmental education in general.

What else do you see in this story? Please take a moment to consider and raise your hand if you are interested in sharing your thoughts with the rest of the group.

I think the real Alex saw messy ugliness where I saw beauty. Alex and I seem to have different world-views or cultural backgrounds concerning nature or wild places.

Before that fateful day I had approached Environmental Education with the assumption that everyone sees value in wild places like the North Cascades. Of course the value an individual saw would be unique, possibly ranging from intrinsic to aesthetic or utilitarian. Yet the real Alex did not seem to fit anywhere on that scale. At the time I felt unequipped to engage a student like Alex, yet isn't that exactly what environmental educators and education programs should strive to do?

For an education program to be successful, affective cross-cultural communication is necessary. Cross-cultural communication is defined as verbal and non-verbal communication with people from a different culture. Furthermore culture is defined as the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a particular group of people. These groups of people can be defined by social habits, religion, language, ethnicity, and age.

As an example lets think about how to communicate with someone who speaks a different language, assuming that you and that person both speak a little of the others language. How do you communicate with them? The effort has to start with intentionality, patience, empathy, flexible behavior, and a willingness to actively listen. The process of telling and listening to stories requires the same approach.

Writing and telling the story of Alex was a great opportunity to engage my own experience in a new way. Though it is not possible to know what the real Alex's story was, my own process of writing and telling a possible back story for Alex allowed me to critically engage with the character on a deeper level. Stories set up for the listener a new context which opens the door to critical thinking about personal experiences and the story. As we interpreted the story of Alex you all utilized critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is an extremely useful skill to develop and maintain throughout life.

The next story is about Anansi, a West African spider god who is often referred to as a trickster. Tricksters are a type of god or character archetype found in stories around the world, Raven in the northwest and coyote in the southwest are two examples. Tricksters are some mixture of cunning, foolish, clever, intelligent, funny, and morally ambiguous. They frequently bend or break the rules, and at times they are even heroic.

Long ago, Anansi the spider had all the wisdom in the world stored in one giant pot. Nyame the sky god had given it to him with instructions to share it with everyone. Everyday Anansi would look in the pot to see wonderful new ideas and learn new skills. So one day Anansi greedily decided to keep the pot and all of it's wisdom for himself. Anansi decides to hide the wisdom at the top of all tall tree. He made a strong string out of vines and tied the pot snugly around Anansi's waist so that the pot hung in front of him. Then Anansi started climbing the tree, but he struggled. The pot of wisdom kept

getting in Anansi's way and bumping into his belly. At that moment Anansi's son was passing by and stopped to watch in fascination as his father struggled. Finally Anansi's son called out, "If you tie the pot to your back, it will be easier to cling to the tree and climb." Anansi jumped down, retied the pot to his back, and began to climb the tree with ease. As Anansi reached the top he became angry. Anansi had all the wisdom in the world at his finger tips but still he needed help from a youth with nothing more than common sense. In frustration Anansi threw the pot of wisdom with all his might. As the pot hit the ground it shattered sending bits of wisdom in every direction. To this day people find bits of wisdom every where.

What do you see in this story? What is wisdom? How is wisdom different than knowledge? What is common sense? Where can wisdom be found? What or who can be wise? Please turn to your neighbor, it can be the same person or a different person, to discuss for about 5 minutes. I will do a wolf howl to bring you back to the group.

Stories have the power to plop anyone into entirely new experiences, or familiar experiences from a new angle. Think of the journeys we have already been on today! By engaging in a story you have the opportunity to become an entirely new person for a day, and the empathy that exercise produces is strong.

Last May I went for an evening walk on buster brown road which is just out behind me. I walked to welcome the spring season, and the forest bursting with life, walking slowly to take it all in. Every few steps I made an effort to look all around me. As I started up the small and steep hillside something caught my eye at ground level a few feet up the hill from me. Staring, I waited to sate my curiosity, and saw another flash of movement. A few inches below my gaze a small mammal toddled out from under the leaf litter carpeting the road. It was fuzzy and black with an elongated, tapering nose and a long tail. Its' tiny feet were a whirlwind propelling it forward. Seemingly unaware of my presence the creature waddled just past my feet, occasionally bumping into my shoe. I moved then, trying to get a better look at the tiny creature, but the noise startled it into the vegetation at the side of the road. Disappearing as quickly as it had appeared, I was left in the twilight with a vague impression and a feeling of awe for this tiny unsung wonder.

By last March deer had become a routine part of my day, a part of the scenery that neither added nor detracted from the view. It had been months since I had last stopped to watch a deer.

On the second day of mountain school, the students had woken up excited and ready to go. With rain gear, warm layers, and lunches packed, the group headed out at a fast pace to get to the waterfall before lunch. About 15 minutes into the journey, I looked back to see the rest of the group stopped in the trail, pointing and whispering. My gaze followed their fingers to see 2 deer foraging by the stream. I had not even noticed the scene, and

could have moved on right then, but the students stood in awe of the wild animals grazing no more than 20 feet away.

Describe a time when you were in awe or wonder. What has recently made you feel awe or wonder? Please turn to your neighbor, it can be the same person or a different person, to discuss for about 5 minutes. I will do a wolf howl to let you know when it is time to come back to the group.

One can feel wonder in response to the sight of the smallest details and of magnificent views, of a forest in the wilderness and of dandelions growing through cracks in the concrete.

The intentional use of storytelling has the potential to transform environmental education to all new heights. Even more impressive, stories have the potential to bridge seemingly insurmountable gaps between cultures, world-views, or individuals. The interpretation of stories accentuates the unique perspective and knowledge that every individual contributes to the conversation. Furthermore it is through the sharing of stories that we can see the wonder in the world around us. Thank you for your participation this morning, and before I take questions I would like to share two quotes. Please leave a moment of silence before starting the questions.

But wildness is not limited to the 2 percent formal wilderness areas. Shifting scales, it is everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bound across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners. - Gary Snyder

We must create and find our own stories, our own myths, with symbols that will bind us to the world as we see it today. In so doing, we will better know how to live our lives in the midst of change. - Terry Tempest Williams



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