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Inextricably Season 1, Episode 1: “Now what”

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Inextricably Season 1, Episode 1: "Now what"

Adam F. Bates, Western Washington University

Abstract

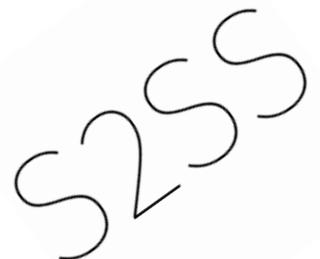
This is the transcript of a fictional weekly podcast called Inextricably, performed in front of a live audience at North Cascades Institute's Environmental Learning Center in North Cascades National Park in March 2017. The author outlines and examines the personal themes and seasonal cycles throughout an entire graduate school residency, a Master's of Education in Environmental Education offered in partnership with North Cascades Institute and Western Washington University. A search for the purpose in the way information and knowledge is transferred, a sense of disillusionment with traditional models of education, and the unexpected learning outcomes of this experience are the basis of Season 1, Episode 1: "Now What?"

"Each week on Inextricably, we feature stories about events and experiences in our lives that serve as a catalyst, a tipping point, or a kick in the teeth; that send our lives in a direction we hadn't anticipated. Experiences, relationships, traumas that are impossible to disentangle from who we have become. Each episode we welcome a new guest to the show to talk about those things we are inextricably linked to. Things we sometimes wish we weren't. Today's program in 11 short acts feature's yours truly, and the graduate school experience I had, and almost didn't have. Join me, won't you?"

Keywords: environmental education, podcast, identity, transformative learning

Hello, and welcome to *Inextricably*, a new podcast from A.F.B. Media. Our program today is being recorded in front of a live studio audience at North Cascades Institute along the shores of Diablo Lake in North Cascades National Park. A warm welcome and deep gratitude to our listeners far and wide.

Each week on *Inextricably*, we feature stories about events and experiences in our lives that serve as a catalyst, a tipping point, or a kick in the teeth; that send our lives in a direction we hadn't anticipated. Experiences, relationships, traumas that are impossible to disentangle from who we have become. Each episode we welcome a new guest to the show to talk about those things we are inextricably linked to. Things we sometimes wish we weren't. Today's program in 11 short acts feature's yours truly, and the graduate school experience I had, and almost didn't have. We'll be exploring themes that arose throughout the graduate program with the help of my personal field journals and notebooks, although not necessary in the order that they occurred. I'm your host, Adam Bates. Join me, won't you?



EPISODE 1: Now What?

I would like to begin today's program by acknowledging the lands we are on in North Cascades National Park are those of the Upper Skagit, Nooksack, Sauk-Suiattle, and Nlaka-pamuk tribes who have lived in this area for time immemorial. I would also like to acknowledge and give thanks to my parents Mike and Diane, my brother and sister-in-law Ryan and Amanda, and dear friends Mike and Emma for being in the audience and for their unwavering support throughout this program and my life. I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to each member of my cohort as well as my mentors and instructors Joshua, Lindsey, and Nick, without whom none of this would have been possible. My deepest gratitude.

The question was so simple: "What has been working for you in this program?" I was taken aback, and initially at a loss for words. My frustration had mounted to the point of disillusionment. I was operating in a low-level state of fight or flight; tension and dissatisfaction were a constant while I struggled to validate my graduate school experience as anything but an extended break from reality. The phone was cradled between my shoulder and ear as I scribbled nonsensical notes and watched another soft, wet spring day unfold outside. He asked again...

"What has been working for you in this program?"

Why am I here?

Now what?

But let me start at the beginning...

In the summer of 2015, I began my graduate studies with a residency at North Cascades Institute where class involved place-based lessons on natural and cultural history in which students were able to see, touch, smell and experience that which we were learning about. For the first time, I was encouraged to make the learning my own, to find the things that resonated and sparked a desire for learning and further inquiry. This felt novel, as though I were being deprogrammed from passive consumer and regurgitator of information to active participant, taking responsibility for my own learning. What an incredible thing to be engaged and active in the learning process, discourse, and analysis of ideas!

This graduate program is made up of a variety of parts with a different focus or purpose in each section. Beginning in the summer of 2015, the 18-months of this program can be broken up chronologically and seasonally. I will now walk you through each season with excerpts from my personal field journals and writings throughout. My

process was to begin with a description of each season and what the fifteen graduate students in this cohort were focused on during those times. I will then examine my own primary documents from those times, sifting through a stack of journals for personal, social, and psychological context for what I was experiencing as I was experiencing it. This proved to be an extensive journey. I became lost in the memories and complexities of my personal development throughout this program and the practice of thinking critically with the support of a cohort and community of active learners. This community was essential in the further development of these critical thought processes. I will revisit journal entries and other primary documents of my experience throughout each act as supporting documentation of those experiences. Now, let's begin at the beginning.

ACT 1: Summer 2015

Consisting almost entirely of camping and living out of two fifteen-passenger vans, the cohort learned from experts in the field about geology, glaciology, and the biodiversity of the North Cascades. The focus was primarily on northwest natural history, but included invaluable lessons about how to live and learn together as a cohort. The summer culminated in a ten-day backpacking trip to the isolated town of Stehekin on the northernmost shores of Lake Chelan, and back out through the iconic Cascade Pass. We continued to have field-based natural history seminars once every season, but would never replicate the rigor, breadth, and depth of the summer natural history course.

July 21, 2015

Sitting on the beach at Deception Pass, remembering a line from Developing Ecological Consciousness (Christopher Uhl, 2003). The sun is not rising or setting. It is us, glued to the surface of the earth by gravity, that are moving. The pull of the tides, the number of times one's heart beats in a day, the complex cycles of life. Meditating on my place here now: in the cohort, in the program, in experiential education, community, the world. Looking for purpose, I suppose.

August 15, 2015

This summer's experiential education has turned the mode of education and learning I've been conditioned to upside down...As C15 (Cohort 15, the 15th cohort of students to pass through North Cascade Institute and Western Washington University's M. Ed. program) has formed into a community nested within the larger community of North Cascades Institute, we have grown to learn from one another. The enthusiasm shown by my peers over the last six weeks, we have come to rely on one another. We have become a community of educators, and a community of learners.

ACT 2: Fall 2015

Time and energy shifted from field-based learning to training and beginning to teach Mountain School, the flagship program of North Cascades Institute (also known as NCI) for 5th grade classes from around the region to visit NCI's Environmental Learning Center for three days. Instead of laying a strong foundation of teaching theory and best practices in environmental education, graduate students were given the curriculum to teach and an opportunity to sink or swim. And there were most certainly times in which I felt I was sinking. Throughout the Fall the cohort had semi-regular practicum class and all-cohort days for us to gather as a community in an effort to continue to learn from and with one another.

October 14, 2015

I have decided working a Mountain School-like job may not be the best fit for me. I am in graduate school to pursue and experience what else is out there and what will become available to me. This [natural history] retreat reminded me of that. Still, I wondered if I should try to make a lot of money. Try to stash it away as I did before. But then again, that didn't really work for me, and that's exactly why I'm here.

November 12, 2015

During the fragmented Fall season of teaching Mountain School and juggling the myriad of other things happening at NCI and as a graduate student, it's easy for the cohesion we had as a cohort to lose some strength. For everyone to be back together [on our Fall Natural History Seminar], sharing meals and lessons for two solid days, I felt reconnected and excited to be a part of this community again. I was transported back to our summer session, experiencing a peace and calmness hard to come by during Mountain School. It was so inspiring to see everyone together again.

ACT 3: Winter 2016

By the end of the Fall Mountain School season, classes began. The cohort of students went from an active community of learners who were being encouraged to find meaning in their learning, to sitting in a classroom for three months of lectures on non-profit administration and curriculum design courses. Each course culminated in a final project. By Spring, I was struggling to find meaning in the graduate program and the role of us grad students in the residency program. This continued to varying degrees through September.

December 4, 2015

I just completed my check-in with Nick regarding transformative inquiry [what would ultimately be my capstone/thesis/culminating project for graduate school]. I told him this whole thing does not feel relevant to me. Instead it breeds frustration and annoyance through discomfort. He asked me an interesting question in response: "How can we make this relevant for you?" Because if grad school is merely hoops to jump through while

glossing over things more poignant and substantial, what is the point? At least that was his suggestion.

January 6, 2016

The winter has certainly been challenging. The weather is trying, and the classes are the opposite of what we'd grown accustomed to over the summer: to learn experientially and in a self-directed way. It's difficult to sit in a 'classroom,' feeling as I have for much of my schooling: this is just another thing I need to get through. Today I sat outside, listening to snow melt and while feeling the sun on my face, I watched it dip behind Pyramid Peak at 1:40pm. Suddenly it was dusk...

ACT 4: Spring 2016

Spring Mountain School began with more regularly scheduled days as a cohort and for our teaching practicum throughout the season. The Winter wore on us as a cohort, prompting us to revisit and redefine our needs in the community agreement we had created for ourselves on our first day the previous July. With a skeleton year-round staff and few programs happening at the Environmental Learning Center from November through February, we were more reliant on one another than ever for social, emotional, and academic support which ultimately took its toll. Spring offered a new batch of seasonal employees for social stimulation, a slow thaw and a return of warmth and sunny North Cascades weather. Along with the seasonal changes came a cautious optimism.

April 27, 2016

I'm feeling a bit like my time in grad school will lead eventually to just another desk job, in just another city. This does not appeal to me...After spending several days with my brother in San Francisco, I realized that yes, I can adapt to life anywhere and do what must be done. But grad school is not about what must be done, but about what can be done. What can I do?

In preparation for what would eventually become our capstone presentations, every season each cohort member prepared a seasonal count to illustrate where we were in this process known as Transformative Inquiry. This could be a simple sketch, painting, detailed drawing, or chart of our progress. After turning in my Winter seasonal count in which I illustrated my feelings about Transformative Inquiry, I received an email from my professor expressing concern.

May 20, 2016

I got this email from Nick a few weeks ago, and we finally talked over the phone for quite a while last week:

April 7, 2016 - 1:26pm from Nick Stanger

"Hi Adam, It seems like you are resistant to the idea of Transformative Inquiry - or is it you don't feel inspired by the process - or your topic area? I want to suggest that both of these things are really just natural curiosity - rather than something that must manifest as a capstone. What bothers you, intrigues you, or keeps you thinking within the process of teaching~learning~researching? Take time to explore these things... One thing to think about is where is the resistance coming from? Is it content-oriented, instructor friction, or some other place? Think about students that might resist your teaching style or content...or simply feel scared, annoyed, uninterested. I am not saying that you need to look at me empathetically here, just that it is a common thing to happen. What do you do when you are teaching and someone doesn't jive with what is going on. Do you have techniques etc...Basically I am suggesting that this might be a place to explore, consider, pontificate about. I am happy to chat about this more - and can be reached on my cell if you need that support. XXX-XXX-XXXX. I see that this is a bit frustrating to you and want to support you in whatever way that works."

While we talked on the phone, he told me that resistance is an important trait in a learner. It shows you are thinking critically. I think we're starting to understand one another a bit better, which is to say... he's growing on me.

ACT 5: Summer 2016

Each graduate student was assigned a leadership track, which ultimately resembled an internship either at North Cascades Institute, in partnership with the National Park or U.S. Forest Service, or with neighboring school districts. As an instructor for Youth Leadership Adventures, I learned hard skills leading backpacking and canoe-camping trips for high school students during 8-day back country excursions. Each day I made notations in my journal about the things I had learned or thought were noteworthy for the next trip I led.

July 3, 2016 - Day 6 of 8 in the backcountry

Notes: Nearly/mostly out of stove fuel. Nearly/mostly out of toilet paper. More instant coffee next time. Stewardship project great, satisfying for students. Bear sighting near camp. Need to tighten LNT (leave no trace) practices. Looking forward to sleep, beer, shower, and doing it again.

Instead of being pulled in multiple directions as a graduate student, it felt more like a summer job with a single objective, allowing each grad student to focus our energies and efforts in one place and apply the things we had learned during the previous seasons. This experience allowed me to feel that I was fully present in the leadership track I worked.

August 18, 2016

I've been thinking a great deal about place. This includes my place in the world, as well as at North Cascades Institute, Environmental Learning Center, Bellingham, the North Cascades...Presenting about our leadership tracks to C16 (Cohort 16, the cohort of graduate students following C15, starting as my graduate residency was ending) and staff today has me nostalgic for last summer, and jealous of C16's year ahead. (Roommates) Joe, Aly and I still don't have a place to live, which makes this transition even harder to get excited about. I wouldn't want to spend another winter here, but the weight of leaving this place I feel a strong connection to is heavy. Much of today felt like a closing. It feels that this whole thing is done, not just the residency. Perhaps that's where my current anxiety stems from: I have no answers for what's next. I'm worried about that and how I may find out: 'now what?' It was also 92 degrees today...that could be contributing to my despondency. It's so fucking hot.

ACT 6: Fall 2016

The cohort moved from the Environmental Learning Center at North Cascades Institute and the surrounding areas to Bellingham to complete two quarters of study at Western Washington University. It was begrudgingly that I began classes that September. It felt like undergrad: I went through the motions. I read the assigned articles simply to say that I read them, with no real comprehension or intention of participating in class discussions. It made me angry and sad, which translated to cynicism and apathy towards learning.

October 12, 2016

I'm having a struggle with school at this time. I want to make this time and money worthwhile, to "make the learning my own." Yet there's a struggle and rub there. This all feels like something I have to get through. I don't want to be in Bellingham or at Western. I don't find value in the things I'm doing...I'm making a list of things I'm looking forward to between now and March graduation. What's feeding me in a positive way at this time? It feels as though there's very little. I'm considering taking up smoking as an outlet.

The final paper that I produced at the end of Fall quarter focused on the learning process I engaged in throughout the quarter. This is an excerpt from the introduction to that paper:

December 1, 2016

Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra Benjamin Zander wrote of the damage done by the public schooling systems and the use of letter grades as a hindrance to actual learning. He posits that students that appear cynical and disinterested in learning are not bad students, quite the contrary. Instead he suggests, 'A cynic, after all, is a passionate person who does not want to be disappointed again' (Zander, 39). The challenge in education is to speak to a student's passion instead of their cynicism.

I felt validated in my disenchantment with higher education! I was simply not learning in a way that I found meaningful. I doubt that Zander's intention was to validate my resignation, but shortly after reading his work I began an independent study plan with the help of one my professors, which eventually gave way to the final paper I have quoted from. I stopped attending classes with the rest of the cohort in attempt to find meaning in my own work being done.

ACT 7: Winter 2017

During the final quarter of this program, much of my time has been spent trying to make sense of this intensive learning experience. I reintegrated with the cohort with a regular class schedule and a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to intentional learning and engagement. As during the previous quarter, much of my learning was self-directed with guidance from professors in an attempt to synthesize the last 18-months of personal and professional development. The personal weighs heavily on the professional.

January 30, 2017

I survived last quarter with the support of Nick and the allowance to make the learning my own. Now trying to determine how to translate that into a meaningful capstone presentation. Six weeks left of my graduate experience. Working through the logistics of now-whats and where-tos.

February 15, 2017

After class yesterday several of us went to the bar for beers and debrief. After making goal lists and personal mission statements, I was surprised by how valuable I found that exercise and how fully others rejected it. To think of what my needs and goals are in the short and long term seems important at this time. Some of it gave me something measurable to shoot for.

Do you remember that question? "What has been working for you in this program?"

I have found it to be much easier to identify the things that are not working or fulfilling me than it is to articulate the things that are. In the categories of what has worked for me and what has not, there are several consistent themes running through my field journals and notebooks in each seasonal portion of this program. Relationships, romantic and platonic, were a dominant theme. Other themes included community, a search for purpose and meaning and self-worth, self-doubt, regret, guilt, a sense of duty and responsibility, memories, optimism and dread about the future, growing up, connection with the natural world, privilege, personal sustainability, and a sense of place.

Another dominant theme has been learning styles and education, which I will now examine.

Once classes began in Fall of 2016 at Western Washington University, I struggled to reconcile or choose between two views of education that I found diametrically opposed. On the one hand, the conditioning of my entire academic career up to this point telling me to put my head down and power through. In Fall my heart was certainly not in it, and my head barely was, but in two short quarters I would graduate with a Master of Education, get a job, and move on with my life. On the other hand, the invitation I had embraced over the last year to make the learning my own.

While it is necessary at times, I hold the firm belief that to put my head down and power through would be a great disservice to my graduate school experience and my personal and professional development. With the struggle to translate this into a job that I will find meaningful and worthwhile, I felt that slogging through articles and completing assignments for any of the three classes I was taking would bring me no closer to my objective. Educator and founder of Summerhill School, A.S. Neill states, "I hold that the aim of life is to find happiness, which means to find interest. Education should be preparation for life" (Neill 36). My education was no longer feeding my passion and interests, so how could I find happiness?

What began as a quest to make this education relevant to me and find a way to translate it into real and meaningful work shifted throughout Fall quarter at Western Washington University. Those questions compliment what became deeper questions and inquiry: What is the purpose of education? How do I as an educator fit into it while finding meaning, happiness and a sustainable balance in the work that I do? Is the current model of the public school system nationwide really serving the needs of students and of society as a whole? Is there a better way?

It is within the framework of the last 18-months and each seasonal change in roles and responsibilities that the question can be revisited: "What has been working for you in this program?"

ACT 8: Learning Through Community

The greatest value in this program and the conduit by which my sense of self and identity has blossomed is the strong emphasis on community. The cohort model of education allows each member to learn not only from the instructors, but to share of themselves and their gifts to enrich the learning experience for everyone else. Living, working, studying and recreating in a small and intentional community is not without its challenges. There are personality differences, exclusive relationships, and a struggle to assert one's own needs within the scope of the larger group's needs. For me, the positives greatly outweigh any negatives.

The question that was posed to me last year about what has been working for me in the program gave me pause for a number of reasons. Ultimately, while I found value in the things the program offered, I was finding very few things bringing me a sense of joy and fulfillment. I found the greatest opportunity for learning happened in the way we lived, worked, and studied together. The learning that happens in the hallways, in between classes, while cooking a group meal or laying in the hammock while camping during a natural history seminar. These often benign tasks provided the backdrop for reflection, transformation, and relational development that I credit as the greatest takeaway from my graduate experience.

ACT 9: Sense of Place – La Querencia

One of the major tenets of this graduate program is a strong sense of place. It is built into nearly every aspect of the program. When Cohort 15 began in July of 2015, we embarked on a five-week field-course in Washington state taking us from the shores of the Salish Sea in the west across Skagit and Whatcom counties to the east side of the Cascade crest into the Methow Valley and Okanogan County. Armed with field guides, binoculars and hand lenses, we set out to identify and learn the plant and animal life and its incredible diversity across the Northwest portion of this state.

In the spirit of place-based education and creating a strong sense of place in the North Cascades, students were encouraged to reflect on and identify what and where our own places were. In Barry Lopez's book *The Rediscovery of North America*, he invites the reader to rediscover this continent that has been defined by conquest and occupation for the last 500 years. To view North America not as a source of wealth and resources to be extracted and exploited, but as our home and a place that we may draw strength and character from. He defines that strength found in place as *la querencia*. Barry Lopez said:

In Spanish, la querencia refers to a place on the ground where one feels secure, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn. It comes from the verb querer, to desire, but this verb also carries the sense of accepting a challenge, as in a game... The idea itself is quite beautiful - a place in which we know exactly who we are. The place from which we speak our deepest beliefs.

I would like to take this word querencia beyond its ordinary meaning and suggest that it applies to our challenge in the modern world, that our search for a querencia is both a response to threat and a desire to find out who we are. And the discovery of a querencia, I believe, hinges on the perfection of a sense of place.

For Lopez, one's sense of place is inextricably linked to a sense of one's self.

After reading an excerpt from this book, we were asked to reflect and write about our own querencia; the place that we are strong from, the place that we know exactly who we are. Oddly, I was at a loss. There was no single place in which I could draw strength

from, nowhere that I felt entirely at home and comfortable in exactly who I was. Not my hometown and city where I went to college, and not the city that I left to start this graduate program. During a 10-day backpacking trip at the end of the summer field course, I sat along the shores of Rainbow Lake on our third day in the backcountry reflecting on my querencia. In my field journal I noted:

August 7, 2015

It's difficult to distinguish whether querencia is indeed a physical place, or one of emotional and spiritual significance...To apply for and attend this program was a direct response to a fear of obsolescence. Working in an office, making money, becoming a functional stable adult. Feeling stuck and stagnant in that.

While searching for a physical place to call my querencia, I began to establish the solace and strength that I draw from learning, from asking questions of myself and of others, and from the allowance of curiosity. What is the opposite word of querencia? The place where one is weak from? A fear of obsolescence and listlessness were the ultimate draw to this graduate program. Why am I here? It has been in front of me from the beginning, so obvious and easy to look past.

ACT 10: Personal Sustainability

By September of 2016, I was failing to maintain personal sustainability, and was unable to participate at the graduate level of education that was expected of me. When I say personal sustainability, I am referring to the combinations of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance and wellbeing. If one does not take the time to feed and maintain one area of wellbeing, it will ultimately have an impact on the others and eventually lead to burnout if left unattended.

My own reasons for attending school were becoming increasingly unclear, and I began to question whether or not I should complete this program. With the help and direction of one professor, an independent study plan began to take shape as we honed my topics of inquiry and learning, ultimately a journey often bordering on the existential. I decided upon a plan of inquiry in which I would research schools and organizations that I was interested in. I would then prepare case studies for the top five in order to critically examine them against an evolving set of criteria. I was identifying and acting upon my needs as a student and became proactive in planning for the future instead of letting outside forces dictate what may come next.

December 3, 2016

The criteria I used is ultimately a product of the things that I've identified as desirable in my future employment, community, and life. A way for me to turn the eighteen months I am spending engaged in graduate school into meaningful work and purposeful living.

The search for meaningful work and purposeful living is not isolated to grad school. It has been ongoing and seemingly unending.

I am well aware of my own hypocrisy and am guilty of some of the very things that I am condemning. Today is a lecture-style presentation delivered at a predetermined time on a predetermined topic without input from or inclusion of my audience. I am also aware that educators exist within a framework of expectations and learning outcomes, and I have chosen to deliver my message in this way because I am a product of my public school education. Before this graduate program, I believed this was the best way to learn. It is what has been modeled for me, but is also the medium that I have selected as most appropriate to deliver my message. I come once again to these questions: What is the purpose of education? What is my role as an educator? Let's return to one of my earliest journal entries.

August 15, 2015

*While exploring themes in *The Leader Who Is Hardly Known* (Steven Simpson, 2003), I was especially taken with the concept of teaching when the time is right. If one is not open to learning, it will make the lesson impossible. We must teach when the time is right the lessons we are ready to embrace. Everything in due time.*

ACT 11: Finding My Querencia

I have spent hours poring over my journals and notebooks beginning in January 2015 and the lead in to starting this program up to the present. I have identified and shared several themes that appeared and reappeared throughout the last two years. I have talked about relationships and community, personal sustainability, and sense of place. I would like to revisit the theme of sense of place.

"What has been working for you in this program?"

Why am I here?

Now what?

These questions are not isolated to this graduate residency or Master's program as a whole. They represent the arc of my life. I ask a lot of questions. I ask questions when I meet new people, I ask probing questions of those I have known for years, and I ask questions of myself. I want to know about others, I want to learn from their experiences and about who they are. Strong relationships are the cornerstone of my life. Sense of place need not be defined only as a physical location. Indeed, my querenca, the place where I am strong from, is not a physical location.

I am strong from my relationships and my community. I am strong from a search for purpose and meaning and self-worth. I am strong from optimism and dread about the future. I am strong from growing up and growing older, from my connection with the natural world, from privilege, and from personal sustainability. I am strong from all of this. That is my sense of place. That is my querencia.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is written in black ink on a light blue, diamond-shaped background that is tilted at an angle.