



Coming Back to the Campfire: How Solo Trekking Made Me a Better Communicator

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<http://picasaweb.google.com.au/treeoctopus/SoloTrekking>

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Once, in the Florida Everglades midwinter, I set out through the grasslands to the sparse and lonely pine groves. Where the fan-leaves of the saw palmetto crowded close to the trail, I set up a tent and awaited the coming of the New Year. Exposed by the cut of the walking path, the bedrock of porous Florida limestone held little puddles, destined to evaporate. In these little bubbles, silver flashes of small fish shined in their cages. The water would evaporate, and the fish would die, trapped. There was no other drinking water. When I crouched down in the mud to drink with a straw, I was hastening the inevitable process. But I had to drink.

Until now, I have never put that event, and my observation of it, into words. There need not always be a lesson in every story, but my description has value on its own. It reminds me that I was an actual observer, able to put significance on the value of the water, and to think out the impact of my own need to drink. But, until now, this event only existed as a secret, encoded in a proto-language. While I value my own memories of the incidents I have experienced alone, I value even more the stories and lessons I have to share.

It may seem like a paradox, but the experience of being truly alone, trekking and engaging with the wild landscape, can teach good communication skills to the attentive student. When the explorer, traveler, or adventurer returns to the campfire, they will have stories to share. In today's

modern world, few people have any acquaintance with solitary existence in true quiet, because few people ever have the opportunity to disengage from the rest of humanity.

Solo trekking in the wilderness has, for me, been the activity that has given me a window into what it means to be a human. Humans entering the ocean, climbing into the rocky mountains, and delving deep into the Earth's caves, are all finding places where their consciousness is a tiny candle alone in the darkness. The geographical location of those wildlands is unimportant, as is the distance from other people. In a scarred and gouged Earth, wild is a subjective state of mind. What is important is the quiet space and mindset that allows one to look through the window of nature. The lessons learnt by gazing through this window, and the practice of those lessons upon the return to the campfire ring of human society, are different for each person who has ventured out on their own.

For me, it is the occurrence of events to which there is no language, and the transformation of those wordless events into story-defining words, that is the critical alchemy. The application of that alchemy to daily life is an ongoing process of being a member of society.

Gravity, water, sunshine, and cold are all concepts for which our brains need no words. But beyond these forces of nature, there are many other things that are not always named: other organisms, our elemental fears, and the consequences of our own actions. When you are surrounded by humans, few events happen that do not involve another actor or observer. When multiple people experience an event, it is understood through a shared perception. When they discuss it and integrate it into their shared memory, the raw potential of the pure event is solidified into a remembrance. When one is truly alone, having expended a measure of effort to find that solitary place, what you observe is your own secret treasure. It is raw material hiding in the dark, and it is only when it shared as a story that it is forged and illuminated as artwork.

Imagine, if you will, that you have been walking alone in the mountains, and that you have found a crystal clear lake nestled in an amphitheatre of stone. As you settle down for the night, the stars pinwheel up from the horizon and the peaks are seen revealed as the uncaring monsters that they truly are. Without a sound, a meteor screams across the sky and shoots just over the horizon. At exactly the same moment, an avalanche of snow and mud shakes itself loose from the far side of the valley and thunders through the night. When the sun rises, you begin your walk down to the valley, and soon your thoughts drift ahead to seeing your friends at the evening campfire.

The meteor, the avalanche, they are yours and yours only. If you do not tell anybody about it, did it really happen? What if nobody even knew that you were there on the trail? It is for you to find a way to value that unformed treasure, but it is only raw material.

As you walk down the trail, it is just you and the memory. You may feel the urge to share the story, though. Perhaps you'd like to teach people about meteors, or direct your friends to such a beautiful spot, or simply warn people about the risk of avalanches. The wordless memory begins to solidify as you decide what you will tell them. What did the event mean? Why was it significant? What words will you choose? If you choose poorly, then you are not doing the magical events justice. So you will choose your words carefully.

When one returns from their solitary adventures to the campfire, they bring back their valued stories, hammered into shape from the unformed material or experience. Communication is at its core a sharing of significance, and by practicing this alchemical transformation from observed incident to meaningful episode, one becomes a better communicator.