

A Gift from the Woods

John Lubans Jr.

A recent walk in the woods set me to thinking about the many insights—“lesser epiphanies” I call them—that occur to me while I’m outside.

There’s something about the wilderness that opens me to learning. Maybe it’s giving up control: the remote, the thermostat, the car—all those comforts that, while nice, can confine our horizons.

Anyone meandering down a pine forest logging road, hiking in a desert’s solitude, or, on a brisk morning, seeking out the first rays of sunshine gains a heightened awareness of self, an appreciation above the mundane.

What, you may be wondering, does this have to do with the indoor work of running a library? If you are a manager who appreciates metaphors and alternate ways of learning, keep reading.

Experiential learning—going to the woods—can be a powerful tool in staff development.

The Outward Bound (OB) organization has done the most to make the out-of-doors a classroom for individual and team growth. It was OB’s success in helping merchant seamen survive torpedo sinkings in WWII that led eventually to the development of adventure education, as we know it today. The principles of leadership, teamwork, and service that were developed and practiced in the field by Outward Bound now extend far beyond the original clientele of prep school students. The founder, Kurt Hahn, hoped that OB education would promote the survival of these individual qualities: “an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and, above all, compassion.”

In the 1980s, corporations, led by many executives who had experienced the 21-day Outward Bound sailing program (a sort of coming-of-age ritual in New England prep schools) turned to OB-type wilderness programs in hopes of building better teams and identifying potential leaders in their companies. While the corporate adventure education glory days of the ’80s and ’90s may have fizzled, there are still plenty of actors in the adventure education industry who will happily tailor programs for the corporate sector.

John Lubans Jr. (Lubans1@aol.com) is Visiting Professor at the School of Library and Information Sciences at North Carolina Central University. His workshops include sessions on followership and performance appraisal.

As you might imagine in the corporate setting, these offerings tend to be far removed from the rustic OB camps and, perhaps due to ethical disinterest, from Kurt Hahn’s desirable qualities. Corporate campers are cosseted in four-star accommodations and chow down on haute cuisine. However comfortable the habitation, the curricula can still offer plenty of challenge, from high ropes and “pamper poles” to rock climbs and whitewater rafting.

To my knowledge, very few libraries engage in adventure-based programs. This is perhaps due to misgivings about spending scarce staff development dollars on what might be seen as exotic and, therefore, potentially embarrassing training. Or, there may be genuine concerns about the physical fitness of graying participants. More likely, the villain is the profession’s unhealthy disdain for any training not patently pragmatic. Yet, practical training rarely encourages the participant to stretch beyond existing boundaries, to question professional norms, to reach out for the profession’s brass rings. I once asked a recently returned trainee from a multiday library leadership training program if she had been challenged. She was perplexed by the question. What did challenge have to do with it?

When wilderness learning is successful—and it usually is more successful for the individual than the group—the experience can alter what we think of ourselves and of our work mates. The controlled risk and adversity, never found in the usual indoor venue, offers each of us a great opportunity to extract relevant lessons for how we lead, for how we follow.

In my weeklong OB experience on Maine’s Hurricane Island, I was literally yanked out of my comfort zone and plunked down in an open “pulling boat” with a dozen strangers (along with supplies and two instructors) and expected to get from point A to point B in Penobscot Bay, regardless of fog, rocky shoals, or lack of sailing skills.

We cooked for ourselves and slept on an improvised deck. When we messed up, like sailing into a lighthouse’s “red zone”—in other words almost certain disaster—we were responsible. Extreme? Yes, but those experiences did much to alter our self-imposed limitations. Things in the workplace that had seemed large and intractable diminished and appeared much more manageable. Surviving inhospitable weather, miserable sleeping conditions, and erroneous navigation changed us, emboldened us. Our newfound boldness transferred to our lives away from the

pulling boat, heartening us to act rather than to react. Our camaraderie, developed in response to the lead instructor's martinet tendencies and the heated competition with another pulling boat, gave us insights into the workings of groups—both good and bad.

In this column I offer you three gifts from the woods.

A Different Mountain

San Pedro, an extinct volcano, rises from the shores of Lake Atitlan to about 9,000 feet. Often ringed by a halo of cloud in a brilliant Guatemalan blue sky, San Pedro looks placid, with its seemingly gentle, green slopes. When the sun hits the slopes at an angle, you see the deep ravines, like million-year-old wrinkles. It's been a decade since a friend and I set out on an ill-planned hike up San Pedro.

Assuming it was two hours to the top, we started out in the afternoon from our "base camp," a hut in an avocado grove on the lakeshore. We figured we could make it back before dark. In keeping with the spontaneity of our decision, we tossed a few water bottles into our backpacks, added a snack or two, and headed out in our sneakers, shorts and t-shirts.

Once past the *milpas*—a cubist quilt of family farms growing corn, avocados, and pepper plants, running midway up the volcano—the trail grew thin, eventually disappearing into a tangle of underbrush and towering trees. San Pedro's top proved elusive—each ridge conquered, each ravine traversed, led to another ridge, to another ravine. Bushwhacking, we'd reach a clearing only to slip and slide on the loose shale.

Taking a break on a massive tree branch laden with bromeliads and jutting out from the slope, we rested in the gentle breeze and admired the calm blue and sun-filled lake, far below us.

We were heartened momentarily when we lucked into a muddy little trail—cleared by the Guatemalan Boy Scouts, according to the peeling sign. Adding a dash of anxiety was a fresh paw print the size of my hand in the black mud. It was pointed in the same direction we were headed, up.

At dusk we reached the top. The frigid wind cooled us off, but, as it rushed through the treetops jutting out of the caldera, we knew we could not bivouac. The temperature was probably already in the 40s and going to get colder. As a propitiation—we had enough sense to know we were in trouble—we left a little tobacco in a crevice on the rim.

Our downward scramble took us only a few hundred yards when dusk turned into night.

Shivering, we decided to keep moving to stay warm and to get away from the cold air. We had two tiny flashlights—the squeeze kind—but the small circles of light did not prevent us from tripping into bushes or slipping on the volcanic dirt. It was like walking downhill on loose ball bearings! Increasingly uncertain of foot, after numerous falls, I was worried about the ravines. A misstep could send

us over the edge, dropping into a tangle of vines, boulders, and broken trees.

Our tobacco offering must have mollified the Mayan gods: at 4 A.M., many hours later than we had figured, we made it down, begrimed and bone weary.

Some years later, I was reminded of that climb when I heard a story about a Buddhist teacher who takes his students on a hike.

"Come," he said early one morning. "We will go up the mountain today."

Without any special equipment or extra supplies they set forth to master the mountain that loomed over their school. Their happiness about having a day off was short-lived. To their chagrin they found themselves breathing hard in the high altitude, dripping with sweat, struggling and sliding on the loose rock. Losing the footpath, they had to bushwhack.

The students began to doubt the teacher—did he really know the way? The cliffs offered spectacular views but were perilous to cross. Yet, the teacher persisted and slowly they made their way.

At the top they discovered several other hikers, enjoying a leisurely picnic. They had strolled up a wide path on the other side of the mountain.

The students complained to their teacher, "Why did we not take that trail?" The teacher's reply: "These others have climbed a different mountain."

Likewise, my friend and I had climbed a different volcano. After our near catastrophic venture, the farmers near our hut—no doubt amused by these *dos gringos locos*—pointed out that in the village of San Pedro, a mile or so around the bend from our hut, was a trailhead to a wide path leading to the summit.

Whenever I contrast these two stories in my classes, I ask the students to reflect on the lessons in each. What does adversity—even when we bring it on ourselves—teach us? Are the consequences of poor planning, of arrogance, of underestimating the volcano, all bad? What are the costs and benefits of leaving a trail, any trail, and setting forth on your own?

The Rope

I was near the top of the cliff, secure as one can be on a narrow supporting ledge of rock eighty feet up. Below, blocks of granite littered the quarry floor, their sharp edges upraised like so many molars. I rested against my unreasonably thin safety line and wondered. How was I going to get to the top? Less rational was the incessant trembling in my legs.

The coach's voice invisibly hailed me from above.

"See the rope? Grab it and I'll pull you up!"

To the right, several feet away and up, he'd dropped a sturdy looking rope with a knot tied in the end. The kind of rope I never could get up in gym.

"You'll have to jump to catch it," advised the voice.

Jump?

"To the side. You can do it."

What? And leave the safety of my ledge?

"Sure. You're ready to stretch yourself. Try it."

What if I miss?

My first shaky try failed and I scraped against the granite, cursing, scrambling back to the few inches of the ledge. I assessed my bruises and composed myself. I heard the encouraging shouts of my teammates below.

The voice again, from above. "Nice try. Think about where you want to go and how to get there. Use your resources. Now, tell me a joke."

I don't want to tell anyone a joke.

"OK, then sing me a song."

Go to \$%^#@ hell. I definitely don't want to sing.

"OK, take your time." The rope slithered away out of my view.

It got quiet. The beauty of the late afternoon sank into me. There was a sky above me, and not far away I could see and hear the wind soothing the tremulous trees. Closer in, the quartz crystals locked in the cool stone face glimmered, coming into focus.

Gee, there's got to be a joke I can tell. Oh, yeah. The one about the armadillos.

My teammates hooted and hollered in appreciation. Feigned or not, it was a tonic, lifting my spirits.

My coach lowered the rope.

I thought about what it would take to make this leap, a leap of faith for my coach and me.

I told myself: "From the toes and up, over to the side, and close to the cliff."

With a prayer, I launched myself . . . and soared across the miles.

Participants in my workshops ponder these questions:

How does the coach help? Why does he do what he does? Why not drop the rope into the hands of the climber, hoist him up, and get it over with? What role does the team play? What moves the person to leap? Is the leap successful? How would you measure success?

Full Circle

November's LAMA National Institute in Palm Springs gave me the opportunity to visit, at long last, the high-desert Joshua Tree National Park. By car the park is 50 miles east and uphill, rising from Palm Springs' 150-foot elevation to about 3,000 feet.

A library colleague preceded my visit by a decade. He was one of two library staff who took part in a rare library staff development event, a week at one of the Outward Bound schools. Travel and tuition were funded by a library board member. One chose the California OB school and joined a crew backpacking in the Joshua Tree National Park.

The other, a support staff member, opted for the school in the Pacific Northwest; she trekked—in rain gear all week—along the magnificent Washington coast. On their return, it was his story and photos that planted the desire for me one day to get to the desert, to feel the sun on my back and the sand under my feet in that extraterrestrial landscape.

At the park's visitor center I asked the ranger what trail she'd suggest for a day hike. Her recommendation: a walk from the Cottonwood Spring Oasis to the Lost Palms Oasis, an eight-mile roundtrip—perfect! This time I had placed in my backpack three bottles of water, a lunch and snacks, compass, sunscreen, hat, and a jacket. I had learned something from San Pedro!

The farther from the visitor center, the more enchanting the landscape became. The trail led me through sand-filled gullies, arroyos, and canyons, set in a landscape of borax-colored sand and large tumbles of rocks, dotted irregularly with clusters of creosote bush and stands of spidery ocotillo and cholla cactus.

A mile in, I was out of sight of anything human-made, except for footprints of previous trekkers and the occasional contrail in the sky.

In a couple of hours, I was dropping down into the canyon of the Lost Palms Oasis. I settled near a water puddle barely visible at the base of a sixty-foot-tall fan palm. Out of curiosity, I dug out a few handfuls of sand near the puddle and a sweet-tasting water seeped into the depression. That became a metaphor for how a harsh and barren landscape can nourish and flower when conditions are right and, by extension, for how my library's adventure learning program helped us achieve new growth and clarity of purpose.

We offered backpacking trips, rock climbs, ropes courses, orienteering, and several "days in the woods" full of team building and problem solving. Our program was built around metaphors and designed to show new juxtapositions and possibilities. Our point was that none of us was immutably fixed in place: we were all capable of new things and new ways of working.

Over the course of our adventuring, about a fifth of the total library staff volunteered to take part, mostly support staff. In my area of administrative responsibility—technical services—a much larger contingent took and met the challenge. That our facilitators were two former Outward Bound instructors raised the probability for success. Their background gave them an outstanding ability to challenge us and to help us extract relevant, sometimes profound, meaning from each experience.

I've come to believe that our days in the woods had much to do with the success of my work group's change efforts, our rethinking traditional ways, our questioning why we did what we did. Unprecedented productivity increases followed. I doubt it was coincidence alone that several of the people driving change in the library were active participants in outdoor learning. Of the many staff development programs we offered during those years, it

was the outdoor variety that best moved staff beyond personal and organizational limitations. With the library's top leader encouraging risk taking and experimentation—while expertly fending off those seeking to keep the old ways—we were able to achieve major successes on behalf of the library's users.

I recently heard from the Pacific Northwest trekker. While no longer with the library—with a leadership change, the library reembraced the comforts of the hierarchy—she has moved on, gotten an advanced degree, and was interning in a consulting organization, making good progress in

her new career. She has not forgotten that soggy trek on the Pacific coast, nor what it taught her about herself and what she was fully capable of doing.

The hike at Joshua Tree National Park took me full circle—literally, from the Cottonwood Spring Oasis to the Lost Palms Oasis and back, and metaphorically, from my colleague's trip to the park (and what it meant for that library back then) to my visit in November and how it prompted my reflections on where we had been and how far we had come.

Happy trails.

Key Actions of the LAMA Board of Directors ALA Midwinter Meeting 2005

These are the key actions of the LAMA board of directors taken during two sessions at its 2004 Annual Conference Meeting. (Housekeeping votes are not included.)

- Approved consent agenda, after discussing the LAMA FY2004 year-end and the LAMA FY2005 1st quarter reports.
- Approved the proposed FY 2006 preliminary budget.
- Charged LAMA division committees and sections to develop strategies and specific actions, along with timelines, to implement the financial strategies adopted at the 2004 Annual Conference meeting, and to report back to the board.
- Approved the concept and content of the list of 16 programs and 3 preconferences for the 2005 Annual Conference in Chicago.
- Approved disbanding the following groups: 2004 National Institute Planning Committee, Regional Institute Promotion Task Force, HRS Economic Status and Welfare Committee and PRMS Trends Awareness Committee.
- Approved the following awards: LAMA Leadership Award—Don Leslie, 3M Corporation; Group Achievement Committee—2004 National Institute Planning Committee; Diana V. Braddom Scholarship—Alissa Ulrich, Pekin (Ill.) Public Library.
- Approved the reconstitution of the Education, Research and Governmental Affairs committees as Interest Groups, pending the approval of the bylaws change on the Spring 2005 ballot. The LAMA president-elect will appoint the chairs for 2005/2006 for the interest groups.
- Approved a bylaws change to create the LAMA Secretary office, as a voting member of the board of directors and the Executive Committee.
- Approved the creation of the BES Library Building Projects Committee.
- Decided that the position of section Webmaster be an appointed position.
- Revised the charge of the SASS Program Committee.
- Agreed to create a task force to develop a marketing plan for LAMA.
- Agreed to create a task force to develop institutes and Web CE offerings to support the requirements for the Certificate in Public Library Administration.
- Agreed to review the Leaders of the Pack project.
- Accepted, with thanks, the final report of the LAMA Regional Institute Promotion Task Force, and agreed to address the recommendations contained therein.
- Approved creation of a biennial ALA-International Interior Design Association award.