

## **The Stoneleigh Project: An outdoor retreat based approach to spiritual development for young adult volunteers**

The Stoneleigh Group is a network of organisations formed in 1999 to promote the spiritual development of young people. The network includes national and regional voluntary youth organisations, charitable funding agencies, retreat centres and educational consultants under the umbrella of the Wrekin Trust. The voluntary organisations were invited by the funding charity to provide a spiritual development project for young adults aged 18 to 25 volunteering in their organisations and showing leadership potential. The idea was inspired by the idealism and passion young people have for changes in society. The project set out to support them in realising some of their dreams. The full report of the project (Loynes, 2004) is available for those wishing to find out more and details are given at the end of this article.

The ideas behind the project are drawn from a number of sources. The Rank Foundation, a charitable trust involved in funding youth work, supports strongly the role of young people in transforming society and believes in the value if not necessity of the spiritual development of these young people. This view coincides with that of Dick Allcock (2002), the founder of the Group and, before retiring, the director of Endeavour Training, one of the Group partners. The idea of spiritual development has been developed through international research and practice by the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. As an early partner in the project, their concepts of living values and right living were formative to the Group's approach (Gill-Kozul, 1995).

A major influence on the retreat style came from the involvement of the staff and volunteers of Camas, the residential centre the Group worked with to develop their approach and part of the Iona Community (Ferguson, 1998). The facilitators employed by the Stoneleigh Group to develop the retreats held a psycho-dynamic approach to group work (see Ringer, 2002) thought by the Group to be congruent with the aims of spiritual development. It is a relational approach that encourages experiences with landscape and community to be voiced and explored in a culture that values diversity and acknowledges the felt and unconscious inner landscapes of participants that would be central to the task of spiritual development.

Lastly the evaluator adopted a participative inquiry approach to evaluating the project (see Reason, 1994). Again, it was thought that this style of conducting research would be congruent with the learning processes of the project as it is underpinned philosophically by a similar psycho-dynamic view of human interaction and development. The methods that support this methodology would add to the developmental process rather than interfere with it.

### **Beginnings at Camas**

Camas is the first retreat centre to which the Stoneleigh Project took a retreat group. It is on the west coast of an island off the coast of Scotland. It is part of the Iona Community, a Christian community based on the nearby island of Iona and involved in various social justice projects. Camas is a row of cottages by the sea two miles from the nearest road or house. For six months of the year a group of young people live as a community in this simple place without mains water, electricity or transport

growing their own food. Their aims are a sustainable lifestyle and spiritual development. Their purpose is to welcome groups of young people to stay with them for a week at a time. The approach to retreat work adopted by the Stoneleigh Project has been significantly influenced by the Camas style and our three visits there.

Being by the sea the retreat can be a literal as well as metaphorical immersion in a remote landscape! However, this is only one part of the programme. The first step is for a young person to ask to become involved and to choose a mentor from within the organisation for which they volunteer to accompany them. The role of the mentor is to support the young person in their development. This work will start well before the retreat, will continue well after the event and may already be a part of the organisation's support work.

During the retreat the mentor experiences the week as a participant alongside the young person. The facilitators of the Stoneleigh retreats ask them all to consider three questions, 'who am I?', 'what do I believe in?' and 'where am I going?' After the retreat the mentor's role is to help the young people with the projects they set out to undertake in their communities.

### **The natural setting**

The retreats are set in remote, beautiful and dramatic settings. These characteristics are familiar to many outdoor projects. However, remote does not need to be far away. The project has been successfully conducted in a wood only three miles from a town and on a golf course! The key is providing a secluded space in which people feel secure, removed from their everyday worlds and stimulated by the surroundings. Contact with nature is significant. It somehow allows people to encounter their own natural selves. In this state it is easier for people to connect with their own sense of being. At the same time it is possible to take a more critical look at the culture in which they are normally immersed.

Although the location can be close by it cannot be anywhere. The historical and cultural setting of the place will support the project if it has stories to tell about simple living and spiritual development. For instance, Camas' link with the Iona Community, which was founded on the location of the first Christian church in northern Scotland set up by St. Columba in the sixth century, works well for the retreat. His version of Christianity was heavily influenced by egalitarian principles and the Celtic connection with nature. This background gives the project a rich source of relevant values on which to draw.

The present is also a living lesson. The daily rhythms of night and day, the coming and going of the tide, the growing of fruit and vegetables and the ever changing weather add to the rhythms of the community and a relationship emerges with the landscape rather than a sense of trying to control it. The emphasis is on 'being with' the landscape rather than 'active in' or 'looking at', approaches that better describe many other outdoor projects. It is only possible to be with a place if you are also with yourself. The relationship is two way and this supports naturally and gently the inner reflection the retreats hope to promote.

### **Community life**

A special feature of the project is that the group join an existing community already living simply together in the chosen place for the sake of their own development. These community members are volunteers and can be from a wide age range. It may include young members of their families. The older mentors and younger participants compliment this age range further. The result is a community that is not dominated by any age group. This further enriches the potential for exploring values across the generations.

The communities are intentional, that is they have come together for the specific purpose of self-development. They are also egalitarian. They have no hierarchy and make decisions collectively day by day. One person acts as a facilitator. To collaborate with the community in residence the visiting group are also supported by a facilitator who's only tasks are to hold the space so that it is safe and to hold the purpose so that the group stay with their intention. The Group have experimented with retreats from six to ten days long. All have been worthwhile and the follow up weekends three months later have been especially important and well supported.

This approach to living, working and learning together is a novel experience to many visitors. It is often most explicit in the daily routines of cooking, cleaning and gardening. It is also evident in the twice-daily meetings at which the stories of the day are told, news is passed on, problems are resolved and plans made. This experience of every voice being respected and heard is a critical element in the early stages of the retreat. It creates possibilities for a quality of relationship between people not normally experienced by the visitors. As it is with the landscape, the experience of being with others in this way allows people to be with themselves in the same gentle and open manner.

### **An emerging experience**

Once the visiting group have begun to settle in to the routines of the place the main work of the retreats is to discuss in what way activities each day might help them to explore the three central questions posed to them. Activities can get in the way of being together and they can also enhance it. The potential of the surroundings, the weather, the mood of the group and the needs of the community all contribute to an emergent plan that unfolds at the meetings.

No one is expected to do anything if they do not want to. Several things can happen at once. Activities may involve journeys, camps, adventure, creative arts, ceremonies, solos, yoga, martial arts, celebrations, rituals, music and more. What is possible emerges out of the resources of the whole community and the imagination and aspiration of the visitors. Themes such as self, others or the environment may be used to frame a day. It is never the same twice! To an outsider the activities may look very conventional. However, it is the way they are agreed upon and the intention with which they are conducted that makes them different.

The evaluation of the first pilots at Camas taught us much about what worked. It also demonstrated that the participants, mentors and their parent organisations, considered the outcomes highly effective. It helped us identify which young people were most likely to benefit and the importance of supporting them after the retreat back in their communities. It also taught us to be patient. It takes a long time for a young person to

develop into an agent of change. Much of the follow up work involved investing in the social capital each young person felt they had acquired.

We also discovered that the mentors benefited as much if not more from the personal development opportunities. We identified which of our group had the capacity to become facilitators and we found out that some of the young people valued the chance to return to the project as mentors or community members.

### **Developing meaning and value**

The next phase of the piloting gave us the chance to see whether we could recreate the approach we had evolved with Camas by ourselves in other places. This would be crucial if the project was to grow beyond the occasional weeks available at this one special venue. We chose venues in north Wales, Cae Mabon, and northwest England, Gillerthwaite. Both we felt had the landscape qualities we needed and could provide stimulating retreat venues that we could populate with our own host communities ahead of the arrival of the main visitor group.

This second phase also gave us a chance to explore more fully the ‘curriculum’ and the ‘practice’ of the retreats.

### **A curriculum for spiritual development**

Four curriculum themes emerged from our discussions during this second phase. Whilst ‘leadership’ had been a goal at the outset the participants felt ‘mastery’ was a better term to encapsulate the range of outcomes young people experienced. It described to them the experience of feeling stronger in themselves and so more able to express their values and dreams. Some would express this as leadership that influenced other peers or set out to support others young people.

Participants also felt they had learned a new way to think critically about themselves, their life stories and about the communities they were a part of. This perspective on their family and culture gave them a sense of agency and an ability to act in areas where previously they had felt unable.

The retreats encouraged discussion about values more than any other topic. Sometimes abstract and often practical and very real issues would be explored. In many cases the chance to do this with adults but in a way not determined by adults was a critical factor.

All three of these themes could lead to discussions about spirituality. Again the freedom from authoritative voices from amongst the adults gave young people a rare chance to discuss and explore their thoughts about spirituality. This happened whether they already belonged to a faith tradition or not. Participants described many experiences during their retreats as spiritual and this theme was held to be the most significant element of the ‘curriculum’.

### **Ways of knowing and being**

As the retreats were active so the opportunity was available to try out ideas in practice. Long and deep discussions would crop up at any moment. People would reveal previously unknown talents unexpectedly. Rituals such as sharing the lighting of candles or the opening of a meal would express emerging feelings. Often, the

everyday tasks of watering the plants or baking the bread would become rich in meaning. An abseil could be undertaken to symbolise a person's transformation. Knowledge comes from many places. In the modern world it is often abstract and generalised or it may be rooted in fantasy or fiction. The retreats are very real. For a while knowledge that comes directly from experiences in nature and with others is privileged. It can be expressed and explored with others who will not challenge it or submerge it in their 'expert' knowledge but will help the individual explore and celebrate it. Meaning becomes grounded in the everyday life of the community and can take on a tangible form.

This tangibility applies to beliefs as well. The experiences and values that make up an identity are connected with real events acknowledged by others. They come alive. The chance to assert a way in the world is perhaps the element of the retreats that supports the choices participants make after the retreat. It is not behaviour change that is the result, though this can happen. It is more likely a change of meaning and intention that occurs along with a different sense of power and confidence in being this way. Ultimately we think this could make a difference to the paths people take. We suspect, as a result, these young people are more likely to change the world around them for the better.

In this way a fire by the sea can be just a barbeque about to happen. It can also be symbolic, perhaps of things that are to be left behind, a change or commitment to something new, a representation of the life within us, a centre from which to draw strength or a centre, which connects the friendships, formed.

A circle in which plans are being made for the day can feel entirely different. After the retreats many people report feeling a very different energy in themselves when they join groups. In some cases, others in those groups who have never heard of the Stoneleigh Group report a different atmosphere when Stoneleigh participants are present. This is not something mysterious. We think it is simply the result of a confident person grounded in their beliefs and purposeful in life engaging with the world.

### **Education for justice and sustainability**

The Stoneleigh Group is by no means the only project to achieve such outcomes. However it has given us the opportunity to explore, with different ways of thinking, the dynamics present in the process of informal education. We have been able to experience, describe and reproduce an atmosphere that is considered special, even unique, by the informal educators involved. As a result the project will enter a third phase of development and growth.

We have also found some new ways to think about the process of experiential learning and have begun to make explicit some ways of describing the value of outdoor education that have previously been implicit in practice but hard to articulate. We hope this will support the future work of the Stoneleigh Group partners, informal education with young people and the part that can be played by outdoor learning retreat style. We believe this approach has the potential to make a contribution to the emergence of active citizens for a more just and sustainable world.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Further information**

The report on the evaluation of the Stoneleigh Project by Chris Loynes is available from Threshold, Hallan End, Skiprigg, DALSTON, CA5 7AN, UK for £10 inclusive of postage within the EU.