

Why We Head for the Woods, and Why I Love My Job

Modern-day humans crave the landscapes of the distant past

Talk by Ben Gadd¹, originally given to the Alberta College Institutes Faculties Association meeting in Jasper, May 2006

It hit me in high school. Unhappily stuck in math class on lovely June afternoons, I would look out the window toward the Rocky Mountains. The peaks, the forests, the streams, the cliffs, the trails that led to it all—there they were, so close at hand, so real, so utterly different from *algebra*. My heart would lift, and I would get an excited, tickly feeling in my tummy as I thought about heading for the high country on the weekend.

A couple of friends and I had recently discovered what would soon become known as “backpacking.”

In 1959 we called our trips “overnight hikes.” Overnight hikers we were, spending single nights in the woods. We carried heavy canvas packs with unpadded straps and no hip belt. We slept on lumpy beds of conifer boughs hacked from some luckless tree, and we sheltered under a lean-to covered with more of those branches. Our fondest hopes were that it wouldn’t rain and that some animal wouldn’t attack us in the night. We would lie awake at three a.m., shivering under our blankets, imagining the swish of paws through the grass. The wind, the sound of the creek nearby ... these had somehow become animate, perhaps dead.

We loved it.

Back then we were ignorant of the true dangers of the Rockies—the weather, mainly—and we were equally ignorant of the damage we were inflicting around our camp. We were unaware of the world of mountaineering, with its storm-tight nylon tents and goose-down sleeping bags. Even if we had known of these things they would have been well beyond our means. A fifty-cent weekly allowance and money earned by mowing lawns bought only what was available at the Army and Navy store. But it was enough to get us out there. Wilderness ethics had to wait until we could afford them.

As time went by I did discover the camping equipment used by climbers. My first purchase was a Swedish white-gas stove in 1964. A proper sleeping bag would have been a better choice, but the stove was much cheaper (\$8 rather than \$25) and it appealed more to me anyway. I would hold that polished brass in my hands to warm the tank, then the fuel would squirt out the top in fine Freudian fashion. I would light my stove. Five minutes later I would have boiling water for a cup of tea—anywhere I wanted it. Wow!

Ah, the backpacker’s obsession with *gear*. Think of the great toys we have today. Shock-corded tent poles that snap together when you shake them out (hard on them, but so cool to do), packs that magically transfer the load from shoulders to hips, electronic gadgets that tell us exactly where we are. Just think of all the clever, beautifully made and

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rather expensive things that enable city-dwellers to play house in the wilderness—and to do so without making a mess out there.

Yes, it's wonderful. But I don't think it's what camping is really about. I don't think it's actually much about *stuff* at all. I think it's more about where we go with the stuff, and what we do with it.

More pointedly, it's about where we *used* to go with it, and what we *used* to do with it. Because we used to go hunting and gathering with it, back when we were aboriginal people who lived in the wild. I think camping is mainly about being aboriginal once again.

Let me explain. Way, way back, people used to go hunting and gathering all the time. We travelled the wilds in little groups of family and friends, picking plants and knocking off animals. It was a landscape unfenced, unfarmed, unsullied by cities. As the Navahos would say, "We walked in beauty; in beauty we walked." We did so nomadically, using temporary shelters we built from whatever came easily to hand. Through most of the 200,000 years of our existence as a species, this is how we made our living.

We were very good at hunting and gathering. Perhaps too good. Our population began to increase. By 10,000 years ago there were so many of us in the Middle East that we ran out of space in which to hunt and gather. This must have led to constant fighting over territory. Whip-smart apes that we were, we solved the problem by inventing agriculture. Why not just settle down, turn the forest into fields, plant crops and keep animals close at hand?

There was the ongoing need to defend the borders, of course, and greater organization was required generally, which led to centralized authority, standing armies, class-ridden social structure and all the other side effects of civilization. But for keeping us fed, this worked pretty well.

However, our beauty-walking days were over.

Agriculture spread worldwide. One tribal culture after another either overpopulated itself into farming or was conquered by the neighboring civilization. Or they just bought into the idea. We became very proficient at filling our granaries and raising our livestock. We also raised a lot more humans. Our population grew and grew, doubling and doubling with Malthusian efficiency. We invented the town, the city, the nation-state, the cash economy, the division of labor.

Into the industrial age we went, the planet brimming with us. Our vocations became bizarrely specialized. Who among the Inuit of the 1920s, say, would have thought that a good life consisted of spending the whole day in a single room, taking papers from one pile, writing on them and placing them in another pile? Or nowadays, how many of us can honestly say, despite what we put in our résumés, that we delight in tapping our fingers on little pieces of plastic hour after hour while staring into a computer display full of accounting data?

I submit that we do this only because we have to, that we are basically unsuited for the world we have made. Famed psychoanalyst Carl Jung might have agreed. He believed

that we have “archetypal memories” of our collective past, hard-wired recollections of great days spent gorging ourselves in the Pleistocene berry patches and sticking spears into mastodons. Sure, those were rough-and-tumble times. You could starve, or you could die from a simple ailment. Heaven help you if the sabre-tooth cats got you. But oh, life was fun! And we got to walk in beauty a lot.

So here’s the point. When we hike and backpack, I think we are recreating (there it is: “recreation”) an essential element of that era, the journey taken on foot through wild surroundings. And here is the really terrific part. When we are tired and dirty we can come home to a hot shower and a soft bed. By golly, we have the best of both worlds.

Few of us actually hunt and gather on our simulated foraging ventures. The gathering we can do at the supermarket and at Canadian Tire. The hunting we mainly forego, although we are inclined to hunt one another, which is a topic for another talk. Hunting and gathering have to be tightly restricted or prohibited entirely in many of the places we like to go for recreation, because in our modern hordes we’d hunt and gather too much. The wildlife would be gone, the wilderness wrecked.

However, we still get to do the roving-around part, patrolling the commons—meaning national and provincial parks and crown land, mostly—with family and friends. We put on our packs and head into the wilds. We walk in beauty once again.

And it brings out the best in us.

For example, having pitched my tent in a back-country campground ten kilometres from the highway, I note with initial displeasure the arrival of the folks popping up their digs beside me. Yet soon we are getting acquainted, and midnight may find us all sitting happily around the fire telling each other things that we haven’t told our best friends. Judging from the recorded activities of cultures untouched by the outside world’s population explosion, that’s typical of what we used to do when we were a rare and thinly distributed species. We valued each other a great deal. An encounter was typically an occasion not for a fight but for a party.

Nowadays we live in crowded, hyper-competitive cities. We act accordingly hyper and competitive. When we get ourselves out of those surroundings and onto the trail, though, things are different. If we hike for an hour and see no one else, what do we do when we meet another person? We both smile and say hello. Perhaps we make a little small talk before moving on. “Nice morning, eh?” “Sure is!” One doesn’t do that when passing strangers in downtown Calgary.

Some of us live for the difference between Calgary and the great outdoors. I am one of them. Maybe you are, too.

But never mind this squishy-science rationale. There are lots of other good reasons for going hiking and backpacking. Here are a few of my favorites.

There’s the fundamental pleasure of putting one foot in front of the other. Walking is very good for our bodies, no question about that. It’s good for our minds, too, especially when the cares of the world are bearing down on us. And strolling along can produce spectacular results when we are mulling over a problem. Many great ideas have been brought home from a walk in the woods.

Given an empty space big enough to be worthy of the label “wilderness,” we get something back that urban-dwellers lost long ago: the night. Human-generated light is a form of pollution. But in the middle of Banff National Park, after the long Canadian twilight fades away the sky becomes truly dark. On a clear night one can see at least 3500 stars instead of the thirty-odd that are bright enough to be visible against the glare of a lit-up city. Watch the heavens above your campsite for two or three minutes and you will see the streak of a meteor. Watch for a few nights and you will find yourself wanting to learn the constellations.

For some of us—I think of Al Brawn of the University of Calgary, Canada’s dean of outdoor-pursuits educators—the wilderness is a spiritual place, as it was for the Navaho. It humbles us and opens our hearts to the oneness of things. Experiencing wildlands in good style helps to put the world right. To quote from Al’s writings about backpacking:

Will you follow in the footsteps of St. Francis?²
Will you be part of the solution and not part of the problem?
Let me show you the way; walk with me.

—From *Eco-Backpacking*, University of Calgary Faculty of Kinesiology, 2001, page 3

My role as a naturalist and hiking guide has been to get people out of their cars and into the woods. It’s a rewarding job, never more so than on August the eighth, 1991. I’ll conclude my talk with a brief account of what happened that memorable evening in the woods near Jasper.

The group arrived at 7 p.m. in a rental van, as so many natural-history tours do. But there was a difference. These folks were from Japan, while the others had always been from Canada, or the United States or Europe. This was going to be interesting.

The leader of the group, like his companions, was young. He explained that they were university students from Tokyo, here in North America for the summer to research their cross-cultural term projects and try out their English.

“Mister Gadd,” he said, “we want to see beavers. Beavers, please, Mr. Gadd.”

“Sure,” I replied. “We can see some beavers at Cottonwood Slough. It’s only a five-minute drive from town. Plus a short walk. Shall we go?”

Yes, indeed. To the beavers, please! Soon we had left the van at the trailhead, everyone happy to be hiking among the aspens. Along the path the students asked me questions after question—trees, wildflowers, birds—and then we got to the topic of bears.

“Grizzly bears live here, Mr. Gadd?”

“Yup. Lots of grizzlies in the park. But not down here very often. Not around the town. They like it up high. I seldom see grizzlies here.”

² St. Francis is the patron saint of animals and the environment

“Mr. Gadd, when do you see them here?”

“Well, in fact I saw one here just a few days ago. Rare thing, but ...”

“You see grizzly *right here*?!”

“Yeah, but, like usual, it was too busy doing its thing to pay any attention to me.”

We reached the overlook at Cottonwood Slough. The evening was warm and windless. There was birdsong in the willows. Several beavers were leaving their V-shaped wakes in the ponds. Everything was perfect. I got out the spotting scope.

And the beavers put on a terrific show for us. They snipped off willows in plain view, carried them hither and thither, worked on their dam, entered and exited their lodge. Young ones swam about, pestering the adults. My group was ecstatic. They talked excitedly, cameras going flat-out. An hour went by, two hours.

Then it occurred to me that everyone had stopped speaking. In fact, the whole crew was bunched up beside me, silent, looking worried.

“Out of film?” I asked.

The leader peered around. “Mr. Gadd, it is getting *dark* now.”

“True enough,” I agreed. “Can’t see much any more. We’d best be heading back.”

They all looked toward the place where the trail entered the forest, a wall of black.

“Not to worry,” I smiled. “I know the way quite well.”

As I led the group along the wide bridle path, I could hear them in lockstep behind me, breathing in tremors, speaking in low tones. Every now and again the word “grizzly” came back to me.

Clearly, they were terrified. This wasn’t good. What to do?

Reassure them, of course. I stopped. “Okay, okay. I know it’s dark. You must be a little scared, right?”

All heads bobbed.

“But listen. We humans are the scariest things in the woods. Nothing is going to bother a group this size. Not even a grizzly bear ...”

Out came a collective gasp. Oops. I was dealing with folks whose parents, on their 1970s trips to the Canadian Rockies, had walked in fear between the bus and the gift shop, certain that bears lurked between buildings in Jasper.

This was not as silly as it sounds. Sometimes at night bears really *did* venture downtown.

Only one thing to do. Complete immersion. I stepped off the trail and into the woods.

Another gasp! But what could they do? They followed me.

Twenty steps farther, we reached a small meadow. I sat down, gesturing for them to do the same, in a circle. They formed a very *tight* circle.

I said, “Now we are going to lie quietly here and enjoy the Canadian Rockies in the evening. No speaking, please, for ten minutes.” I set the timer on my watch and leaned back into the feather moss, soft and dry. My clients felt behind themselves gingerly for whatever it was in Asia that might bite them. Then they, too, lay down.

I looked up. The first stars were appearing overhead. This was going to be lovely.

But then some creature snapped a twig nearby. Big intake of breath from the circle. However, no jumping up and running away. In Japan you wait for instruction, and you do what you are told.

I broke the silence briefly. “Deer. See it over there? Now, let’s relax again.”

We did. There were other noises. A nighthawk said “peentz, peentz.” We could see its silhouette against the sky. A snipe went off in the marshes, “woo woo woo”—a ghostly wail that I thought would unsettle my charges, but this time there was no startled response. Good. Maybe this was going to work.

A light breeze came through the clearing, stirring the leaves. Then all was still. Within five minutes the peace of the mountains had overtaken everyone. I was just nodding off when the timer beeped.

“Okay. Time to go.” I started to get up. No one else did.

“Please, Mr. Gadd. Ten more minutes?”

“Uh, sure. Definitely!” I lay back and started the timer again. We were quickly back into the zone. This time I *did* go to sleep. Then “beep beep beep ...”

“Mr. Gadd, just one more ten minutes? Please?”

“By all means.” I couldn’t doze this time. It was too wonderful. If this were the sixties we’d have all been holding hands.

But soon the watch told us yet again that it was time to go, and it really was. The evening was growing chilly. We stood up, brushed off moss bits and conifer needles, picked our way carefully through the woods—the evening was now very dark—and reached the trail.

All we could see of our path was a strip of starry sky overhead. Our feet had to find their own way among the rocks and the roots. Yet this time the group followed me quite casually, the students stretched out one from the next, talking in a relaxed manner, laughing. Something major had changed.

We reached the van. As the group loaded up, I noticed that one of them, taking her seat in the far corner, was sobbing.

I turned to the group leader. “Is she okay?”

He smiled. “Oh, she is fine, Mr. Gadd. She is just fine.”

“But—”

“No, she is really okay. She cries because she is happy. She is very happy. We are all *so* happy.”

He reached out and took my hand in both of his, an act of intimacy in his home country. I looked at his face. There were tears on his cheeks.

“Mr. Gadd,” he said, “this is the best day of my life. Best day.”

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