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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern  
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*methods for teaching  
Travel Literature  
and writing*

*exploring the world and self*

Eileen Groom,  
EDITOR



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## Chapter 8

# “I Wake to Sleep”: Traveling in the Wilderness with Writing Students

*John Bennion and Burton Olsen*

In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “I have traveled a good deal in Concord” (4), proving with his essays and his life the importance of local travel. More recent natural history writers have emphasized that essential discoveries come from close observation of the home region. Edward Abbey made the nation conscious of the beauty of the red rock arches and canyons in the West. In similar manner Annie Dillard pioneered on Tinker Creek in Virginia; Wendell Berry helped readers explore the Red River Valley in Kentucky; Gary Snyder through his writing reveals the Rockies of Northern California; and Terry Tempest Williams has claimed as her literary territory the Bear River Bird Refuge on the edge of the Great Salt Lake. As Dillard states, “Like the bear who went over the mountain, I went out to see what I could see. . . . I am no scientist. I explore the neighborhood” (11). Through Wilderness Writing—a program formed out of a partnership between the Youth Leadership and Recreation Management Department, the English Department, and the Honors Program at Brigham Young University—we have discovered that a combination of traveling locally, reading natural history essays, and writing meditative narratives transforms students in unpredictable ways: a woman with agoraphobia finds the inner strength to walk down a steep, slick rock canyon; a man ready to summit turns back to help some behind him who are becoming wet and cold, in danger of hypothermia; a woman from the East with a prejudice against the Utah desert learns solace in the pine forest on Mt. Nebo.

The program consists of two classes: an honors writing class and an introductory recreation management class. In the recreation class we take the students into the wilderness; in the writing class the students read natural history essays and write about their experiences. Utah is exceptionally rich with red rock, Alpine, and desert areas. We have hiked in Zions National Park (the Narrows and the Subway), Grand-Staircase National Park (Coyote Gulch and Calf Creek Falls), and the San Rafael Swell Wilderness Study Area (Virgin Springs Canyon, Devil’s Canyon, Eagle Canyon, the Lower Black Box, Cow and Calf Canyons, Wildhorse and Bell Canyon, and Goblin Valley). We have

day-hiked in canyons close to our campus, explored Nutty Putty Cave, kayaked through the rushes at the edge of Utah Lake, built snow caves high in Utah and Sanpete counties, and snowshoed and skied in the Uintah and Wasatch mountains. We have backpacked to some of the highest peaks in Utah: Timpanogas, Nebo, Deseret, and Ibapah. We have watched a biologist tag bears in the Book Cliffs of Ashley National Forest.

How do we open students' eyes to what is there? How do we introduce them to wild environments and return safely? These are the questions we propose to explore in this essay, primarily through an examination of two student narratives. Both were written after a backpacking trip in October of 1999 to Deep Creek Canyon, close to the border between Utah and Nevada. One essayist describes an epiphany experienced after leaving the group and walking at night alone; the other describes a situation that felt emotionally edgy to her. From these two we can begin to discover the effect on students of an unfamiliar natural environment.

### Student Journals

#### Case #1, Andres

In the following extract a young man, Andres Almendariz, climbs up to the top of a massive chunk of granite where he has a transcendent experience. We encourage students to walk in pairs, and we would ardently discourage climbing unprotected in the dark. However, he attributes part of his exhilaration to stepping outside the rules and being in some degree of danger. Early in his essay, Andres describes his desire to leave the campfire where the other students are talking and telling stories. He wants to have some alone time, so he heads off into the night.

*I wanted to turn my flashlight on, not knowing exactly what the bleak darkness promised to present, but I kept it off. Somehow the thought of navigating my way in the dark intrigued me. The adrenalin associated with the thrill of the dangerous terrain was driving me forward. Relying on past experiences of overcoming physical challenges such as this one, I rationalized away any real possibility of personal injury. I had somehow broken the bounds of normal human experience, and the thought endowed me with a power to traverse the slope.... I imagined that I was in a professional rock-climbing contest and found the courage to keep climbing. I began scrambling up a crack that ran up the face of the rock.... Although the rock's surface was rough and covered in barnacles I kept a good pace. After about twenty feet up, the crack shrunk (sic) until it measured no more than two feet wide....*

Finally, through some frightening gymnastics, he pulls himself to the top of the huge granite boulder. He continues:

*The display of celestial splendor that played out above my weary body was spectacular. I don't believe that what I felt can be effectively put into words.... My body felt like a balloon being filled with helium, and for a moment I was afraid that I would burst and splatter myself all over the universe. The stars pulled at my desire to stay within myself. I felt my will to stay on this planet slowly being consumed. I desired to live a lifetime as bright and memorable as the stars I was gazing upon....*

*I nearly lost my balance trying to gaze up towards Ibapah Peak, shrouded in a gray haze as it towered over me in the silence of the night. I salvaged my equilibrium, with the help of a sustaining boulder, and realized that I had come within inches of falling from the top of the granite temple. This reality rushed over me like nausea, and I dropped to my knees.*

*Lying back on the incline of the boulder I felt a need to chant.... The magical beauty of the high pitches I achieved with my voice transcended me (sic) to another realm of spirituality. I was a part of the human family, in a mystical place where ethnicity and the color line did not exist. Speaking words that I did not know vocally, but understand intrinsically with my heart, I became enthralled in the chorus of shouts and lulls that accompanied my praise.*

*Spiritual fatigue, combined with mental and physical exhaustion of limb and cranium, made me feel as if I had just completed a championship-wrestling match.... But with this fatigue came a power of sound, of environment, and of memory that synergized enough to propel me into another reality. So focused in its aim of discovery, whatever I wished to be true and applicable existed in this realm, and everything else became irrelevant. My re-creation of this consumed me with spiritual illumination....*

While Andres's heightened awareness depended on being outside convention and the rules of safe outdoor behavior, it also grew out of what he'd observed before and out of his view of the stars, undimmed by any close city lights. He had this experience because he stepped away from the other students and made himself available to the shower of beauty. Gary Snyder in *A Place in Space* describes the pleasure of living open to the influences of the natural world. He writes, "permeability, porousness, works both ways. You are allowed to move through the woods with new eyes and ears when you let go of your little annoyances and anxieties. Maybe this is what the great Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness means when it talks of 'things moving about in the midst of each other without bumping'" (198). Openness to the environment may be instinctive but so are mistrust and fear. The reading

done by Andres in the class made him open to a positive interpretation of his adrenaline rush and the expanse of the stars. Other students, reluctant to be alone in the strange place, had different, perhaps less ecstatic experiences. Still their perceptual faculties were aroused by the foreign environment, and this alertness helped most of them to produce strong essays, essays which generally become meditative.

In "The Journey's End," Wendell Berry describes how he felt upon first entering the drainage of the Red River Gorge. "The strangeness, as I recognized after a while, for I went in flying no flag and riding no machine, was all in me. It was my own strangeness that I felt, for I was a man out of place. . . . It became possible for me to leave the place as it is, to want it to be as it is, to be quiet in it, to learn about it and from it" (227). Later as the place becomes familiar to him, he writes,

Our fear has ceased to be the sort that accompanies hate and contempt and the ignorance that preserves pride; it has begun to be the fear that accompanies awe, that comes with the understanding of our smallness in the presence of wonder, that teaches us to be respectful and careful. And it is a fear that is accompanied by love. We have lost our lives as in our pride we wanted them to be, and have found them as they are—much smaller than we hoped, much shorter, much less important, much less certain, but also more abundant and joyful. We have ceased to think of the world as a piece of merchandise, and have begun to know it as an endless adventure and a blessing. (232)

To produce good writing, the surroundings must be familiar and foreign at once.

It is this, not so much the danger, that enabled Andres to garner insights about his relationship to the world. In any unfamiliar environment, the students are open to making new connections and seeing new patterns. In his introduction to *Words from the Land*, Stephen Trimble quotes Barry Lopez, who comments on the interrelatedness of things. He states, "When you pick up something in the woods, it is not only connected to everything else by virtue of its being a set piece in an ecosystem, but it's connected to everything else by virtue of the fact that you have an imagination" (13). Standing on his rock, Andres made connections between the stars and Native American poetry. Because he was wandering without an overt or practical purpose, he opened himself to the possibility of these new insights.

Perhaps any change of surroundings or deviation from habit can serve as a catalyst for self-discovery. In "Street Haunting" Virginia Woolf extols the virtue of wandering the streets of London without specific purpose. She writes that when the door to her apartment shuts behind her: "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for

themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" (256). As teachers, we can enable students to see that wandering can be productive. Many students believe that outdoor experience is just another kind of physical exercise. These students have a propensity to turn hikes into races to the top of the mountain. While no teacher can force students to change their minds, we can give them the opportunity to see time differently by talking about cultural values such as efficiency, speed, and hunger for thrills. We can also provide time for them to be alone and time to write and meditate. None of these behaviors can be forced. Both the active and passive mind sets are legitimate ways of experiencing the wilderness. The best alternative is to open to ourselves and our students the range of ways we can apprehend wilderness and then discuss the inherent virtues in each mode.

#### Case # 2, Melissa

While Andres was dancing on top of the granite boulder, Melissa Haslam allowed a male student, Josh, to braid her long hair. Despite the fact that Josh was a sensitive and courteous man, Melissa felt uncomfortable because he was invading women's territory. The event enabled her to focus on the different ways males and females view the act of touching a woman's hair. As with Andres, her epiphany came as a result of allowing something new to happen in an unusual environment. She meditated through writing on her experience at the fire. In her own words:

*There is an innocent bond between women and girls [who] braid each other's hair. The act of braiding is among the purest acts of service they exchange. It is more relaxing than a massage, it is more intimate than an "I'm thinking about you" note. It is a skill that is passed down from mother to daughter to granddaughter to great-granddaughter.*

She then describes her mother braiding her hair, making clear how this ritual felt. Then she continues:

*This bond built between women when they braid each other's hair is one reason why it felt so awkward to have Josh's fingers weaving my hair at a campfire. He did a great job. The braids were tight and stayed in. But it was almost like he was an outsider when he braided my hair. The initial awkwardness came when I rested my back on his legs and he picked up my hair with his fingers. Where were the fingernails that usually scratched against my scalp? Why were his knees so tall? Victoria coached Josh through his braid, and Heather, a veteran braider looked on from the side overseeing the process. But there was that female wisdom that they could not pass on to him. There is almost no way to convey that wisdom through words, and it is*

very difficult to convey it through actions. But the fact that Josh was unfamiliar with the art of braiding made him try more earnestly to get it right.

Josh was a little thrown by my request for two French braids instead of one. He tried the first one three times before he listened to Victoria and did a few practice runs with one single braid. When he got back to two braids, Josh got down to business. Doing the braid became an attempt at perfection.... His long fingers moved through my hair like a novice weaver that has no confidence in his ability to work with a new medium. I can picture him staring at my hair in his hands, a little puzzled, trying to figure out where the pieces fit. He tied the hair into place very tightly to make up for his lack of experience. I was surprised when one clump of hair was flung over my forehead in front of my eyes. The slight shock almost made me laugh. It felt like Josh was making a boondoggle for a key chain instead of weaving a braid. However, this simplistic activity has left my head and his hands connected in some minor story of creation.

The next day, our group drove away from camp, back to civilization. When our group stopped for lunch at the bird reserve at Fish Springs, Josh came over to check on my braids. His braids stayed in well, but did not last through my tossing and turning during the night. I had redone them a few hours earlier in the van. He came over to inspect the new braids, to see if he could improve on what he had done before. There was a moment when we exchanged understanding: [H]e was the braider, and I had displayed his braid.

If Josh had braided my hair in the middle of a crowded subway station I am sure we would have some pretty interesting looks thrown at us. Most people do not stop to braid hair in the middle of commuter traffic. They do not take the time to stop and soak in the richness of communing spirits. Nor do they take time to give in to the urges of their simple child-like desires. Both are essential to braiding.

I think at some time in every boy's life he wonders about the bond that women exhibit through braiding. They [boys] may look at two girls and wonder why the one can show such confidence and security with her own hair in the hands of the other. Maybe they even think that they would someday like to stroke her hair, to seduce her to give in to her girlhood vulnerabilities and become his playmate for life. Some try to braid and some just stand on the side, amazed by the skill of the braider. That skill lies in the braider's ability to produce something beautiful while the skill of the braidee is to communicate a complete sense of trust and confidence in the braider. The act is not seductive, but innocent and caring.

*A boy or a man could be an expert braider, although, I have never met one. As fun and pure as the act of braiding is, I have not resolved why it feels awkward for a male to braid my hair. Have I placed men and women in gender roles so tightly that I cannot fully accept the braid of another sex? Maybe I hold the act of braiding to be a sacred communion among women. In that case, my awkwardness would be fully justified.*

As Melissa notes, her experience would not have happened in many social settings. The isolation in the wilderness and the closeness of the group of students allowed a relaxing of convention. While her experience was not as physically dangerous as her classmate's, the strangeness of the environment helped produce an epiphany about the importance of this woman's ritual in her life. At first she did not understand why Josh's braiding made her nervous. The foreign, complex terrain is an inner one in this case. As with Andres dancing on the rock, no teacher could plan the wonder of what happened. The context—a group of students sitting inside the circle of light with dark wilderness surrounding—aided the approach to intimacy, but other students sat at the same campfire and did not discover something that they felt like writing about. Even though there are no guarantees, teachers can through careful reading and talking urge students to open themselves to the universe, to process that experience through writing, and to avoid narrow interpretation of what happened.

### "I learn by going"

Through experience with these two students and hundreds of others, we have discovered that a heightened awareness occurs when the surface occupations of the rational mind are distracted by an unusual and partially foreign environment. This edge of unfamiliarity enables students to see newly, and then to make further discoveries through writing about what they see. This is an essential kind of recreation—placing ourselves and our students in unfamiliar locations, breaking down some of the traditional barriers between us as individuals, and getting outside the tradition-laden walls of the classroom, where every act is governed by expectation. As can be seen from the two examples, many of their epiphanies are connected to ritual and performance, actions such as singing, gaming, and storytelling. In most cases, students begin a conscious exploration of something their subconscious already knew.

In "The Waking," Theodore Roethke describes the paradoxical relationship between the conscious and subconscious aspects of our being. New bridges between the two, his poem implies, can result from walking in unfa-

miliar paths instead of planning each act and thinking in abstractions. The two lines he repeats throughout the stanzas of his villanelle are:

I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I need to go.

The waking that we experience while hiking or camping and then talking and writing about that outdoor activity is like sleeping because thought and image are bound into one entity; the conscious and subconscious aspects of our minds become more open to each other.

In "Seeing," one of the essays in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard describes this paradoxical act of unconscious looking. It requires one to release the conscious occupations of the mind and to forget usual modes of seeing. She writes, "But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied" (33). After describing an evening spent on Tinker Creek when she was transported by what she saw, she writes,

When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses.... But I can't go out and try to see this way. I'll fail, I'll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes. (34)

She writes that seeing this way requires tremendous discipline, developed through long practice.

The world's spiritual geniuses seem to discover universally that the mind's muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash, cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness. Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights; you look along it, mildly, acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance. (34)

But sometimes a film of familiarity blinds us to the world.

To prepare themselves for the happy accident of seeing with new eyes, students first read writers, like those mentioned above, who have spent much of their lives learning to observe closely. We've used several anthologies of natural history writing: *Words from the Land*, edited by Stephen Trimble; "This Incomperable Land": *A Book of American Nature Writing*, edited by Tom Lyon; *Being in the World*, edited by Scott Slovic and Terrell Dixon, and *A Place in Space*, a collection of essays by Gary Snyder. Reading these an-

thologies, students create images of the natural world from words, replicating the writer's original act of describing a place. The students learn to see geologically through reading "Basin and Range" by John McPhee. They begin to sense the romance in the language used by geologists and begin to imagine the dance of the great geologic plates under the skin of the earth. From Anne Zwinger in "Cabeza Prieta," they learn the patience to focus for hours at a time. From Gretel Ehrlich, they learn the preciousness of water. From Edward Abbey in "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," they find out how to mingle someone else's text with their own observations. From David Quammen in "Chambers of Memory," they recognize the power of metaphorical vision. From Wendell Berry in "The Journey's End," they discover the importance of seeing oneself as the stranger rather than constantly thinking the environment is foreign and uninviting. From Peter Matthiessen in "At Crystal Mountain," they learn to imagine what they might have missed while they looked elsewhere.

Focused by what they have read and strengthened by the community of the class, students then experience the mountains, canyons, plateaus, forests, and desert flats of Utah. They carry journals to help them think about what they are observing. In their self-evaluations, students describe how knowing they would have to write affects their habits of observation. One student writes, "Generally speaking it made me more observant of my surroundings. In fact, last night as I was walking during the snowfall, I began thinking about how I would describe my experience and the effect the snowfall has on my senses. I loved the thoughts that came to my mind. I am much more aware of my surroundings when I write about them. It makes all my senses more acute." Another student writes that she found herself actually composing as she hiked: "As I participated in each activity my mind would formulate phrases and descriptions that I planned to use later in my writing." A final example is from a student who focuses on the fact that writing amplified the experience for her: "I seem to think and sort things out a lot more clearly when it's done in writing, rather than my head. I don't consider anything that has occurred in my life real until I have written it down." Whether or not they are conscious of the links between observation and language, the act of carrying a journal makes them focus on the landscape, trees, and streams before their eyes. Talking is one way of re-imagining, seeing again; journal writing and essay writing also help. When students sit in front of their computers and visualize again what they described in their notes, they push this matter of seeing to a new level.

To write his introduction to *Words from the Land*, Stephen Trimble traveled across the country, interviewing many writers about their composing

habits. He discovered that they think of two overlapping arenas of exploration—research in the field and research in their study. Both parts of their writing lives had to do with seeing newly. Anne Zwinger has said that being a “writer of natural history is a visual discipline. It requires a great deal of observation, a lot of research. Every question you ask—why is that flower blue? why is a sunset red? why is the grass green? every time you get an answer you get ten more questions. And somehow you have to put it in a form that somebody can read, and in sentences that have some life of their own” (Trimble 5). Gary Nabhan writes that “writing is the major vehicle through which I sort out the universe” (qtd. in Trimble 5).

The act of writing about their experiences in the wilderness becomes an exploration of a second undiscovered country, one which requires students to turn inward to explore. Annie Dillard: “When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory” (3).

In summary, we have discovered that reading, observing, and writing are various aspects of one thing—the sharpening of vision. The precursors of the students’ transitional experiences are reading carefully the observations of professional natural history writers, carrying their journals, and wandering without overt purpose. Their writing is made stronger by an edge of fear at unfamiliar surroundings and the sensory overload resulting from the complex and uncontrolled wilderness.

### A Word on Safety

Any teacher, who leads students away from the relative safety of the campus environment, needs to be aware of potential dangers. Because many of the students may be foreigners to the desert, we encounter some risks on our adventures. Hiking narrow desert canyons involves danger of flash floods. Hiking on slick rock involves the chance of falling. Winter camping exposes students to the risk of hypothermia. Wherever we go, students who are not in shape are subjected to fatigue and the emotional stress of an unfamiliar environment. Any hiker in Utah risks exposure to hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, which is a serious, often deadly, respiratory disease passed to humans through infected rodent urine, saliva, or droppings. We travel to these wilderness areas on highways where there is the chance of accident.

Despite these dangers we have a remarkably low accident record. Ours is not a program that emphasizes adventure at the expense of safety. It is the

strangeness of the natural world, not its danger that opens students’ eyes to beauty. Specifically, we begin class with a formal session on safety in the out-of-doors; then we continue to stress safety throughout our program. We teach students to work together as a team, all realizing the importance of watching out for each other. We obey all local, federal, university, and Parks Service laws and rules, and we have two or more qualified instructors on each major event. When we have activities that require specialized training we use qualified and certified instructors. Good writing is produced when an edge of strangeness accompanies an assurance of safety.

### Conclusion

Much of Roethke’s poem “I Wake to Sleep” talks about the revelatory beauty in the natural world. When we go over, under, or around the mountain with students, they can make remarkable discoveries about their relationship to the natural world. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Annie Dillard discusses this same idea:

If the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever-fresh vigor. The whole show has been on fire from the word go. I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn’t flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames. (9–10)

Although any foreign environment would enable students to explore themselves in new ways, the local wilderness is an ideal environment for this kind of travel. Another student from the same class as Andres and Melissa, Colyn Payne, writes in his final essay:

... *Using the environment as the context for creative writing would have to be the most inspirational way to motivate students to write. I appreciate the context as well in being the background to cultivating friendships with amazing and artistic classmates and professors. The “other” activities that were performed without classmates (in many cases classmates participated together) helped me to realize how much fun it is to be alive.... I felt alive every time I was outdoors with our class.... I can say that this is my only class...that taught me to explore my heart.*

Through teaching them to link outdoor experience and meditative writing, teachers can help students like Andres, Melissa, and Colyn develop life-



time habits of exploring themselves and their environments, of learning by going where they need to go.

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## Chapter 9

# Writing to Host Nationals as Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning in Study Abroad

Leeann Chen

In contrast to education in the home country, where academic life generally separates itself from other aspects of students' lives, study abroad opens up the classroom to the whole society. Students' learning about cultural differences occurs, to a large extent, in their leisure time and in serendipity: with host families, in dorms shared with host-country students, in restaurants, parks, on the streets, and so on. All these out-of-classroom aspects are where ambiguity starts. Many students find study abroad appealing exactly because these aspects resemble vacationing (Altschuler).

Thus, in the context of study abroad, traditional classroom education, independent of students' experiences, falls short of guiding students to reach their learning potential. Experiential education, by contrast, rests on drawing students' daily experiences into a "process" of "collective" learning (Carver 8-9). Such pedagogy answers the unique challenges of teaching study-abroad courses.

What specific methods have study-abroad instructors been using to carry out experiential education? One of the most common seems to be writing, defined in this article as nonprivate journals and essays, in order to provide students with a process of discovery and learning. To name a few, Mildred Sikkema and Agnes Niyekawa's *Design for Cross-Cultural Learning* centers on journal writing. "Spanish Culture and Civilization," a course taught in Spain by an American instructor, requires students to write about their "cultural observations" and turn in the writing weekly for class discussion (Talbert and Stewart 4-5). So do Professor Ghislaine Geloin's French culture course in Nantes (Geloin), and Professor Donald Vanouse's course "Contemporary British Writers" in London (Vanouse). Indeed, with a relatively informal format, journals, as well as essays, invite students to reflect frequently on and make sense of their serendipitous experience. Furthermore, writing functions as a tangible record of students' learning outcomes. This essay is thus written for study-abroad instructors and directors who have been or who are interested in using writing as an effective structure of experiential education in study-abroad programs.