

# Schooling Character in the Wilderness

## Outdoor Education and Waldorf Education

BY RONALD KOETZSCH, PhD

- Rappelling off a seventy-five-foot-high, sheer cliff
- Balancing on a pair of shaky ropes thirty feet up in the trees
- Eating oatmeal every morning for a week
- Paddling a canoe against the wind across a remote, pristine lake
- Spending twenty-four hours alone in the woods
- Being brunch for mosquitoes, no-see-ums, and other annoying insects
- Finding one's way in a trackless wilderness using map and compass
- Getting lost in that trackless wilderness using map and compass
- Sleeping on the ground in a more-than-slightly damp sleeping bag

These experiences—not common ones in our protected, urbanized, denatured lives—are becoming a standard part of the educational experience for students in many Waldorf schools. Outdoor adventure education has been discovered and embraced by many Waldorf educators as an appropriate element, in aims and methods, in a Waldorf schooling.



*Kurt Hahn,  
founder of  
Outward Bound*

### **Kurt Hahn and Outward Bound**

The scouting movement that began about a hundred years ago had the aims of giving boys and girls outdoor skills and of helping them develop self-esteem and citizenship values. But the main source of the modern outdoor education movement is the work of Kurt Hahn (1886–1974), founder of Outward Bound. Disillusioned with the intellectual, abstract nature of the German educational

system, Hahn founded a school called Schule Schloss Salem in southern Germany in 1920. In addition to

providing a strong academic program, the school taught wilderness rescue skills and emphasized social service, responsibility to the community, compassion and concern for others, and dedication to the pursuit of truth.

Born of Jewish parents but a convert to Christianity, Hahn was forced to leave Germany in 1933 after having publicly spoken out against Adolf Hitler. He went to Scotland and there founded Gordonstoun School. Several years later, in the early stages of World War II, Hahn was asked to develop a survival training course for merchant seamen. Thus was born the first Outward Bound school in Aberdovey, Wales. Its standard twenty-eight-day program included nautical survival skill training; confidence-building exercises including a ropes obstacle course; group expeditions; and a three-day solo experience. The aim was to give the young seamen the practical skills, but more importantly the inner strength, confidence, and willpower to survive and help others survive in extreme circumstances.

After the war, Aberdovey was the model for Outward Bound schools established elsewhere in the United Kingdom and around the world. The first Outward Bound school in the United States was founded in Colorado in 1961, followed a few years later by schools in Minnesota and Maine. Since then, through the Outward Bound schools themselves and through various spinoff organizations and programs (among them Project Adventure and the National Outdoor Leadership School), outdoor adventure education has become an important educational resource in North America. These schools and centers serve boys and girls, and men and women, of all ages through a wide variety of courses.

The various outdoor adventure programs share certain goals and methods. They provide a direct experience of nature and instruction in practical outdoor and survival skills, such as making a fire in various weather conditions, orienteering, foraging

for wild foods, and building a shelter from available materials. These programs also help students develop self-confidence and a positive self-image, the ability to work with others in a group, a concern and compassion for others, and tenacity in the midst of adversity.

These programs typically take place in a challenging, unfamiliar natural environment, such as the high mountains, inland waterways, or the ocean. The students are put in small groups and are taught basic skills, both practical and social. Team-building exercises and cooperative games are an important element. Then there are a number of incremental challenges and problem-solving situations that allow the individuals and the groups to use the skills they have learned. Most programs last between one and three weeks, though some courses take place over a weekend and some last a couple of months.

### **Rudolf Steiner and Kurt Hahn**

There are some interesting points of contact between Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and Kurt



*A group of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds paddle back to the Northwaters Wilderness Programs base camp on Lake Temigami in Ontario, Canada. They have just completed a three-week, 350-mile canoe expedition north to James Bay, which included long days of paddling, whitewater challenges, and rugged portages.*

Hahn (1886–1974). Steiner lived in Berlin in the late 1890s, when Hahn was growing up there; and in the first years of the new century, when Hahn was at Berlin University, Steiner was becoming a well-known figure in the German capital's intellectual and cultural life. Steiner founded the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919, just one year before Hahn started Salem less than one hundred miles to the south. Both men considered practical, experiential, and moral education very important. Steiner and Hahn each had an optimistic view of human nature and of the moral potential of every human being. They both wanted students to develop into competent, well-informed, independent-minded, creative, and compassionate human beings, capable of acts of altruism.

### **Outdoor Education and Waldorf Education**

Given these correspondences between Rudolf Steiner and Kurt Hahn, it is not surprising that the educational movements they founded would in time discover each other. In recent decades, many people associated with Outward Bound and the broader outdoor education movement in North America have sent their children to Waldorf schools. And more than a few former Outward Bound instructors and outdoor educators have become Waldorf teachers.

A number of Waldorf schools have realized that outdoor adventure education is an excellent, even necessary, part of a Waldorf schooling. The twelve- or thirteen-year-old, emerging from childhood into adolescence, needs and wants to test him- or herself against external challenges. Children at this



*Eighth graders from the Kimberton Waldorf School build a shelter while on a course at Hawk Circle Wilderness Education, in Cherry Valley, New York. Executive Director, Ricardo Sierra, is a Waldorf graduate, and the center has worked with many Waldorf groups.*





*Up, up, and away. A student leaps for a trapeze swing high in the trees on the ropes course at the Hulbert Outdoor Center. Located in Fairlee, Vermont, Hulbert offers various outdoor challenge experiences besides a ropes course.*

age need to experience their competence in the new, suddenly larger and more complicated world. "Impelling young people into experience"—a key aim of Outward Bound according to Hahn—through individual and group challenge activities is an effective way to help these budding adolescents gain self-confidence, to realize that they can meet the challenges of the world. Such experiences also help them develop important social skills, such as cooperation and compromise.

Many Waldorf schools in North America and other parts of the world incorporate outdoor adventure activities into their seventh- and eighth-grade and also high school curriculums. These include ropes obstacle courses, team-building initiative exercises, solo experiences, and extended outdoor adventure trips.

The Kimberton Waldorf School in Pennsylvania, for example, has for years incorporated outdoor education into its high school curriculum. The outdoor program there is directly connected to main lesson topics. Each grade has at least one one-week trip when students study in nature. Ninth graders study geology while doing backpacking or rock climbing. Tenth graders work with Homer's *Odyssey* while on a canoe and backpacking trip. In the eleventh grade, students study *Parzival* and do social service. In the twelfth grade, there are two outdoor trips, one for marine biology and one for the study of the Transcendentalists.

Some schools organize and run their outdoor education activities in-house with their own staff. Many schools, though, turn to established outdoor adventure learning centers, particularly for longer experiences. The eighth-grade trip, the culmination of a class's eight-year Waldorf journey, readily lends itself to being an outdoor adventure experience. While some Waldorf eighth grades decide to experience London or New York City, others opt for a wilderness adventure. For example, a recent eighth-grade class of the Washington (DC) Waldorf School went on a wilderness trip in Costa Rica organized by the Costa Rica Rain Forest Outward Bound School. And in the spring of 2007, the Charlottesville Waldorf School graduating class spent a week on a trip organized and run by Kroka, an outdoor education center based in New Hampshire. (Please see the article that follows on page 30.)

There are at least a half-dozen outdoor education centers in the United States and Canada that have worked with Waldorf schools or are interested in working with them. Thus standard and customized courses are available in various parts of the country and with different emphases. A list of these centers and their Web site addresses can be found below.

We are in an era when education is becoming increasingly intellectual, abstract, test-oriented, and competitive. Waldorf Education, with its concern for



*Participants in a program at Deer Hill Expeditions help whitewash and plaster the plaza on the Hopi Pueblo's Second Mesa, near Saupalovi, Arizona, in preparation for a Kachina dance. Such service projects are an important aspect of most outdoor adventure experiences. Deer Hill is based in Mancos, Colorado.*



the practical, experiential, moral, social, and spiritual education of the child, often finds itself standing alone in this educational landscape. It is reassuring to have, in the outdoor adventure educational movement, colleagues and allies who can enrich our own work of educating young people to become whole human beings. ☉

RONALD KOETZSCH is a graduate of Princeton University (AB 1965) and Harvard University (PhD 1981). He was a full-time seasonal instructor for the Dartmouth College Outward Bound Center for over twenty-five years. He currently teaches at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California, and is the founding and current editor of *Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education*.

### Some Outdoor Education Centers in North America

Deer Hill Expeditions, Mancos, Colorado:  
[www.deerhillexpeditions.com](http://www.deerhillexpeditions.com)

Hawk Circle Wilderness Education, Cherry Valley, New York:  
[www.hawkcircle.com](http://www.hawkcircle.com)

Hulbert Outdoor Center, Fairlee, Vermont:  
[www.alohafoundation.org/hulbert](http://www.alohafoundation.org/hulbert)

Kroka Expeditions, Marlow, New Hampshire:  
[www.kroka.org](http://www.kroka.org)

Northwaters Wilderness Program, Westport, New York, and Ontario, Canada:  
[www.northwaters.com](http://www.northwaters.com)

Outward Bound Canada:  
[www.outwardbound.ca](http://www.outwardbound.ca)

Outward Bound USA:  
[www.outwardboundusa.org](http://www.outwardboundusa.org)

Siskin Ecological Adventures, East Charleston, Vermont:  
[www.siskinea.org](http://www.siskinea.org)

## Books in Brief

### DEVELOPMENTAL SIGNATURES: CORE VALUES AND PRACTICES IN WALDORF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AGES 3-9

by Dr. Rainer Patzlaff and Dr. Wolfgang Sassmanshausen, et al.

In Europe, as in North America, there is increasing pressure from governments to enroll children in school and to start intellectual and academic education at an ever earlier age. In Germany, this pressure has caused Waldorf educators to work with anthroposophical physicians to present and document the Waldorf approach to education in the early years. The result of this collaboration is contained in *Developmental Signatures*.

The central idea is that there are definite stages in the development of the child. Each stage, characterized by certain physical, emotional, and mental signatures, is important in itself, but also is a necessary foundation for the stage to follow. To compress or rush a child through a certain stage undermines later healthy growth and development. Each child goes through this process in his or her own way, but there are certain basic laws of human development that apply.

Part 1 of *Developmental Signatures* presents the Waldorf approach to educating the child from ages three to nine. It deals with:

- the kindergarten child's need for free play, rhythm and repetition, and adults worthy of imitation;
- the transition to elementary school learning—how one can tell that a particular child is ready; and
- the key elements in the early grades—a loving authority figure and a balance between activities of the hands, head, and heart.

Part 2 is a systematic presentation of the educational goals, areas, requirements, and practices of Waldorf Education from ages three to nine. Among the aims stated are: good health; competence in all academic areas—language, math, science, arts, and music; self-reliance; a sense for ethical and moral values; and the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. The role of the Waldorf curriculum and pedagogy in the achievement of these goals is also described.

AWSNA Publications, Ghent, NY, 2007  
158 pages, \$20.00

# Learning to Live Deliberately An Eighth-Grade Journey

BY VIVIAN JONES-SCHMIDT

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The rain fell delicately, hesitantly, as we sat in a big circle emptying our backpacks under the watchful eye of our guides, Misha and Emily. Had anyone packed contraband—cotton leggings, blue jeans, an extra fleece, or other items not recommended or deemed unnecessary? Long johns were found for the one student who hadn't brought any. We stuffed our backpacks again, took a quick tour of the camp, and headed for shelter. The rain hadn't even wet our hair. The students split into groups for chores: fetching water, collecting firewood, grating cheese. They were all busy and safe; I could finally relax.

*I went to the woods thinking that I would change. I'm going to pay more attention to the way I effect [sic] the environment because of what I learned.*  
[This quote and those that follow were written by students after the trip.]

Our group of eight (seven students—three boys and four girls—and myself) had left a mild and sunny early May morning in Virginia. After two plane flights and a van ride, we had arrived at our destination: the base camp of Kroka Expeditions in southeastern Vermont. I sat under the tarp and pondered the enormity of what lay ahead of us. We had planned eight nights in the wilderness: three days of hiking and four days of navigating canoes on the Batten Kill River from its source



Charlottesville Waldorf School eighth-grade class of 2007

in the Green Mountains, west down into New York State. For those eight days we'd have no running water, no hot water except what we heated over the fire, no toilets, and no electricity. Friends had openly questioned my sanity; now I had my own moment of doubt. The rain, no longer shy, was dampening the footpaths beneath the trees.

*I went to the woods and came in unsure. Throughout my experience I learned to overcome that and to trust myself more.*

As many Waldorf teachers do, I had begun planning for my class's eighth-grade trip in the fall of our seventh-grade year. I gathered brochures, searched Web sites, spoke with colleagues, and kept copious notes. Eighth-grade trips are intended to be journeys of initiation, bringing students into situations that will force them to confront and overcome previously assumed limits. Eighth-grade students are ready to test themselves and to strike out into an unfamiliar and demanding world. Depending on the teacher's view of the needs of the class, these long-awaited trips can focus on community service, for example, or on the challenges of nature. I had long envisioned the trip for this class as one involving an encounter with the natural world and navigating on water. It had to be far enough away that the students would know they had passed out of the zone of comfort offered by home and family.

*I went to the woods to be challenged. I learned how to make important decisions quickly and to look ahead at what other challenges might be coming.*

Eventually I chose the company I wanted to work with—Kroka Expeditions in New England—and selected three of their programs to



bring to parents and students for their responses. Each of the three programs met my requirements, and parents offered no objections to any of them. After the parents and I had discussed the alternatives, I presented them to the class. We studied and discussed all three options, and then each student ranked the three trips in order of preference. In the end, most students preferred the trip involving both hiking and canoeing, and those who preferred other options soon joined in the general enthusiasm. For the next two years, this enthusiasm drove the class to create and engage in activities that would help us meet our fundraising goals. For example, the students prepared and served lunches to students in the lower grades and made craft items—jewelry, felt scarves, ornaments, and origami kits—for the holiday bazaar.

*I went to the woods to change my lifestyle. I learned not to waste and that you should appreciate everything. I learned that if you only take what is needed, there will always be enough.*



*Gourmet Waldorf one-pot cuisine*

Wrapped in wool, I sat as close to the cooking fire as I could get, while the rain fell steadily. Students quietly went about their assigned tasks, hurrying to get supper made before hunger and darkness caught up with them. After supper everyone moved into the big yurt for an early bedtime. Hoping that a day's delay would bring an end to the rain, Misha decided to devote the next day to teaching us canoeing skills on a quiet stretch of river nearby.

*I went to the woods and drank from a stream and ate food that I would ordinarily hate. I learned*

*more about everyone else, and a few things about myself. I learned what it's like to wear the same clothes for a week, and to accept that I would be wet all the time. I also learned that if you keep going even if you're tired and wet, you can have fun.*

We worked hard on the river the next day, but the rain never stopped. By the following morning, I had gotten sick. I had planned for the possibility that one of the students might come down with something, but it had never occurred to me that I might get a virus. It wasn't in the plan. Our guides, ever resourceful, took the students spelunking in a private cave a couple of hours away. They were familiar with commercial caverns, but a "wild" cave was a new experience. Cold, wet, muddy, dark, and tight, the cave offered its own challenges. The group that returned to base camp that night was quietly triumphant. The rain had never stopped, though, and I was still sick. Misha realized that the trip we had so carefully planned was not going to happen.

Nevertheless, it was time for the students to begin their river trip. The next day they took a large whitewater raft out onto the West River. This normally quiet river flows southeast into the Connecticut River, which forms the border between New Hampshire and Vermont. The water level had risen by now, and the day brought opportunities to practice maneuvering the raft, as well as portaging around a dam.

*I went to the woods to calm down when I had a problem. I sort of took [my problem] apart and looked at it in different ways. This calmed me down and worked better than locking it up*

We spent that night in the cramped—but dry—shelter of a state park. Each morning and evening the same routine was followed: some students packed or unpacked while others cooked. At night everyone searched for the driest fallen wood they could find for our fires. Each day Misha gave the students a choice: we could continue our journey downstream, or we could return to base camp where we'd at least have shelter from the unending wet and cold. He pointed out that most adults would not be able to endure the conditions we faced. Each day the students unanimously elected to continue their journey down the river. We rested for only one day, staying by the fire and carving our own wooden spoons, fashioning them as northeastern Native Americans had in times past.

*I went to the woods to learn new skills. I learned how to take care of myself and make food. I learned to paddle, to make a spoon, and to help others.*

By this time, the adults had realized that we were in the midst of no ordinary rain. Reading news reports of flooding New England towns, anxious parents back home in Virginia had been calling the Kroka headquarters. The West River was indeed much higher than usual, but as the water release was carefully controlled by a series of dams, and as the students were sensible and alert paddlers, the risk was minimal. On the sixth day of our adventure, we floated amongst the treetops in the enchanted, bird-filled lake that had formed behind a dam, and then spent the night in a shelter. The parking lots and trails that normally provide access to this site were under fifty to sixty feet of water, so we had no sense that the shelter was at the top of a steep hill!

*I went to the woods and was amazed. All the rain brought millions of new plants to life: ferns and moss and new leaves. I loved watching the streams and rivers running constantly.*

Portaging the dam the next morning took hours. Then we continued down the river, looking for a flat, high area for the night. This final night was the climax of the trip. The adults set up their own campsite nearby in the woods, and the students were left on their own. They were to use the skills learned over the previous week and take care of themselves during the night, preparing their own food, and packing and launching the rafts on their own the following morning. Everything proceeded without a hitch. When the rafts appeared at the rendezvous point downstream, the students were singing at the top of their voices and triumphantly waving their paddles aloft. We adults waded out into the mudflats of the Connecticut River and helped pulled the rafts ashore. When everyone had changed out of wetsuits and all the gear had been cleaned and stowed, we drove into Brattleboro for Vermont ice cream.

*I went to the woods and discovered complaints will do me no good. Under the starlit sky they shrink in size till they're naught but a buzz in the ear. I discovered that to work hard and to be kind and to*



*Rafting down the West River on high water*

*listen to others' words will get me much further in this land of silver and green.*

The crew that arrived back in Virginia the next day was tired but confident and poised. The students (and I) had indeed endured conditions that most adults would avoid if at all possible. Most adults, in fact, probably would have balked at the first sign that their plans would have to change. These students left the comforts of modern civilization behind them. They worked through every challenge and learned to live in the natural world. Upon our return, I asked the students to use Thoreau's musings on his quest for meaning in nature—cited at the beginning of this article—as a starting point for writing reflections on their experience. Their responses speak eloquently to the importance of allowing students of this age to experience an appropriately chosen eighth-grade trip.

*I went to the woods to try something new. I wanted to make and do everything myself without a pre-made house or equipment. I wanted to be able to take care of myself. I succeeded. ◊*

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VIVIAN JONES-SCHMIDT was led to Waldorf Education when she wandered into the Charlottesville (Virginia) Waldorf School many years ago trying to find the owner of a pair of mittens. That child was never found, but a new career was launched, and Vivian has been involved in Waldorf Education since 1985. She has taken two classes from grades one through eight, has taught handwork and chorus, and has been very active in the administration of the school. Vivian currently is the enrollment coordinator for the Charlottesville school. She is a longtime member of the editorial advisory board of *Renewal*.