

Brother Brennan Centre: An Ecological Shelter

By Chris Peters

I have repeated this journey enough that I know the particulars, down to the metallic jarring of the bus leaving Salmonier Line for the last third of the journey on a rocky, twisting slash of a dirt road, a tear in the boreal. The rutted and cracked Trans-Canada becomes a distant memory as the engine whines and struggles up steep inclines, the brakes grinding in descent. It's always too long, someone's bladder is always full and we have stopped more than once with motion sickness realized. Finally, finally the bus arrives and students, some nauseous, all of them ecstatic to be freed of the bus, come at a rush. I organize them into a line and we hand out packs, sleeping bags, rumpled rain gear and mismatched rubber boots from the bus.

When this accumulation of odds and ends is gathered the bus rumbles off. I give students a brief overview. Shoes off at the door. Coats and wet gear hung up. Girls dormitories to the right. Boys to the left. No mixing. Six to a room. Organize your sleeping gear. Pass in all electronics as you go—cell phones, tablets, the lot. They move like a wave, a tsunami of kinetic energy. You could, I often muse, do worse than try to harness the energy in 12–13 year olds. They've got an excess.

Then I will step outside. Down the wooden stairs, the paint chipped and worn from use. I will follow the gravel pathway that leads past the mess hall, the old bunkhouse. Past the vegetable garden and neatly stacked cordwood. I will follow the trail to the pond, a short, rocky beach tight against the lapping shoreline.

There I will stand, letting it overwhelm me. Sink in. The quiet so pronounced after the raucous ride. And I will begin to notice the world beyond me. The startle of a grey jay, the solitary sweep of an eagle. I will let my eyes follow the jutting spires of fir and spruce that sweep out along the skyline. I will breathe in, out. Again. A fish will rise to the surface, jump clean and away with a splash. Gone. It's restorative, this quiet.

I don't linger too long. A minute, maybe two. All that adolescent energy, after all, finds trouble of its own volition. But I breathe deeply as I head back up to the bunkhouse. Listening to the trees sway in the wind. The birds calling. Glad to be back at the Brother Brennan Environmental Education Centre. At the end of the road, perhaps an hour and a half from Town (as everyone in Newfoundland calls St. John's).

Not far. But far enough.

We have been coming out to the Brother Brennan Centre for a few years. We bring with us a junior high class. We focus on science and social studies, try to pick out the common ground and the places beyond.

The science teacher will lead classes in ecology. If it's spring she will point out the emerging growth. Sometimes we have lucked into fiddlehead season, and I always share how fiddleheads are a New Brunswick delicacy. I'm not sure why I pass this along. My memories of fiddleheads are of greens that alternatively tasted too strong, or were wilted and mushy and I had to fight against my gag reflex. But somehow, standing in the boreal of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula looking at fiddleheads bring me back to my childhood along New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy coastal forest. If it's fall the science teacher will usually instruct students on what is edible, although the blueberries, raspberries, partridgeberries stand out, inviting.

We will walk through the forest, looking at lichens and examining the ecosystems that cohabit quite nicely beneath boulders, the carpenters crawling for the dark and millipedes scurrying into unseen crevasses. I am astounded by the limits of what I know. Every time.

The science teacher, in some ways, has an easier time. Her course outcomes readily connect to the experiences students have. There are lessons in ecology and biology that, even in our brief encounters here, are rich and nuanced. I always take away lots.

We will play some games. Camouflage is always fun. The students and teachers scurry for hiding places behind the too-thin black spruce, underneath the emergent spring foliage or yellowing fall die-off. We have had contests of who can skip rocks the furthest out on the pond. And the ever popular Find Your Tree, where students are blindfolded and step out (with the aid/hindrance of a partner) to a tree, and feel its knots and contours. Then, liberated from their blindfolds, they try to discover, again, their trees. It's always a lesson in how we see and hear the world around us, and how often we limit ourselves to one or two senses. Nature demands more attention.

There are campfires. There's something in the spit of flankers into the night air, the smell of wood smoke winding through the forest that draws us, all of us in. It speaks to a shared human experience that stretches beyond the here and now, the emerging Anthropocene we have imposed. It brings to the fore the human experience over millennia. Stories told before the flicker of a fire. The means by which the values and ethos of generations were passed on before the intrusion of mass media, screens and social media.

At some point, on clear nights, there will be a brief lesson on constellations, on the wax and wane of the moon. The students are always more settled around the campfire than they are upon returning to the bunkhouse. When we get back to the bunkhouse there is always a sudden emergent, manic energy. Inevitably, I am left waiting out adolescents in the Going-to-Bed game. Going to sleep as an endurance event, purgatory at its worst. So I try to maximize our time round the fire, the purity of wood smoke and the stories that almost always end up dripping in gore.

My role as the social studies teacher is more convoluted. The outcomes in my courses don't readily lend themselves to an immersion in Nature. When Canada's or Newfoundland's connection to the surrounding environment is discussed, it is almost always within the prism of resource extraction. Cutting down timber. Hauling in the bounty of the seas. The fur trade. Mining for ores and tapping bitumen deposits. There's a wealth of history and social geography touched upon here, myriad stories of the boom and bust cycle of an extractive economy. But it is primarily a one-way road.

Where is the importance of Nature to our sense of well-being? Or the interconnected relationship humanity has forged with its surroundings, in manifold ecological contexts? For the most part, any sense of the beauty of the world and sustenance it offers us, physically, mentally and spiritually, is muted to a commercial transaction.

Instead I lead students on a silent walk, where they are forced to listen to the wind, the scatter of rain upon leaves and needles, the feel of the forest floor underfoot. I usually do this with the rising sun, and in their bleary-eyed, sleep-addled state it is usually successful. We have been blessed with a pond that comes with a loon. As the loon's cry, haunting, fades out over the pond into the tangled boreal, I will mention that a loon's song is particular to place. When one loon dies, usually a relative will take over the pond or lake. But in circumstances where the pond is left empty, another loon will take it over. But the song remains the same.

This puzzles the students. Confounds. This continuity to place realized in such a strange fashion is hard to reconcile in a hyper-individualized, human world. Or maybe it's just that, for a moment, they are forced to see the world beyond themselves. This is what I try to do, in the brief moments accorded to me: to offer students and myself a glimpse of a world beyond the pall of the human shadow.

Any definition of shelter would suggest it offers us a respite from the biting elements. It's a place of refuge. We might think of a thin-skinned nylon tent on a calm summer evening, the whine of mosquitoes safely on the other side of the walls. We may conjure up an image of a cabin in the woods, the fireplace glowing gently as cold autumn rain-snow showers blow through, interspersed with moments of golden luminosity radiating off the lake. Or perhaps even a lean-to, rough and smelling sweetly of spruce sap as we nestle into the freshly cut boughs before a roaring fire, the blackened kettle balanced precariously atop the flames promising a warming, reassuring mug-up in the February freeze.

I would like to suggest that the Brother Brennan Centre is a shelter, but not in the way we tend to think of the word.

We live in a world where Nature is relegated to the periphery. We focus ourselves on the dictates of an increasingly demanding consumer, digital society. As teachers we must make time for outcomes and tests, and be accountable and transparent and successful in this. Our jobs have been circumscribed down to this. There isn't a lot of time and place for breathing in the boreal forest. Or listening to loons. Or watching flankers arc in searing flares that quietly die away into the night.

The Brother Brennan Centre is a respite. It is a refuge. For a spell, not nearly

long enough, students and teachers are immersed in the natural world. The hope is that our students hold onto some of those lessons. That they recall the feel of a spruce tree, or the joy of skipping a stone across the lop of waves. Perhaps they remember a good campfire story, and add another twist to it. The hope is that they have tapped into the world, have glimpsed that it is larger than their smartphone screen or SnapChat conversation.

Not so long ago, two generations past but not more, lives in Newfoundland were lived outside. The realities of life were harsh, but there was a clarity of connection to one's surroundings. To heat your home you cut wood. To cut wood you needed to use a saw and axe. To get to the woods, you walked or rowed. To sustain yourself you kept a garden. To keep the garden growing you added compost and fish guts and saw dust. It was a life lived in communion with Nature.

That our lives aren't lived with such clarity demands the need for the shelter of places like the Brother Brennan Centre—to remind us of our affinity for and connection to Nature.

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