

Is Wilderness Therapy Effective in Treating Troubled Adolescent Girls?

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Abstract

In the spring of 2012, I did an internship and service learning project in Southern Maine with the Fort Williams Arboretum Project, a group whose main goal is bettering the community by preserving the natural space of Fort Williams. In conjunction with this project, I did research on wilderness therapy programs for adolescent girls. This paper asks whether these programs are effective and, if so, in what ways. My interest in this topic stems from my personal history as a troubled adolescent and my belief that there is something inherently healing in nature.



Growing up in South Africa in a white, middle-class, outdoorsy family, I had the privilege not only to be surrounded by nature but to be brought to it regularly on wilderness outings. Before I was old enough to walk, my dad would strap me on his back, and we'd go hiking together through Cape Town's mountains and forests. Sometimes we didn't go far—we lived next to a small meadow, a prime place for picking up caterpillars and bringing them home to watch their metamorphosis.

Then there was my grandmother's garden. For the first few years of my life I spent every day at my grandmother's while my parents both worked. She was an avid gardener and had an enormous magical garden surrounding her entire house; elaborate and Japanese-style, it was featured in many magazines. It was truly a beautiful place where I could wander through miniature trails and stumble upon little ponds, feeling like I was in a world of my own. It was as if the gentle goldfish and swirling lilies were carefully left there for me. The garden was so big that one could really feel disconnected and at peace in the middle of it. My grandmother would find me lying on patches of moss, and she would tell me stories about the fairies who lived there. The softest white roses would fall around me; the scent of flowers was always in the air. I couldn't imagine anything better.

At night, I would go back to my parent's house, and there would be waiting my dad's collection of screen-topped glass boxes that I would dreamily stare into, watching as life slowly unfolded in front of me. I loved the idea of a whole other world happening so near to me, a world so small that it usually isn't noticed but so large that it permeated my childhood.



In my pre-adolescent years I was known for being one of the class nerds. I wasn't popular; the few friends I had were social outcasts as well. I was relatively content devouring every book I could find. If life could be divided neatly, my next phase was the polar opposite of that; I went from being an awkward geek to being the exotic girl from Africa. I began the 21st century by moving to the U.S. on December 31st, 1999. At age 13, as a young immigrant with pre-occupied parents and no identity to speak of, my new existence became focused on bodies,

specifically my own. I found what seemed to be the feminine ideal and fell into it, a little too hard. After a rude culture shock, several abusive boyfriends, and a long-term eating disorder, my only connection to my childhood was the time I would spend in the woods of Maine getting high when I should have been in class. Even at what felt like the most chaotic moments, something outside kept me sane. The wilderness was my home, no matter what country I was in.



“If I had influence with the good fairy I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strengths.”

–Rachel Carson (Carson and Kelsh 1998).



It is with these nostalgic feelings for nature that I found myself interning for the Fort Williams Arboretum project. It was also with these feelings that I found myself researching troubled adolescent girls and how they respond to wilderness therapy. Most researchers agree that troubled adolescent girls are prone to certain self-destructive behaviors and conditions: losing interest in school, drinking, drug use, unsafe sex, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, self-mutilation, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia nervosa, and suicidal behaviors. At one point or another I had experienced all of the behavioral problems mentioned in the numerous studies I had read on adolescent girls in wilderness therapy (Caulkins, White, and Russell 2006; Autry 2001; Levitt 1994).

In the following pages I will discuss my research findings on the role of so-called “wilderness therapy” on the lives of adolescent girls, drawing on both my service learning project and published research. Three articles proved to be especially significant. “Adventure Therapy with Girls At-Risk” by Cari Autry offers a thorough investigation of adolescent girls in a wilderness therapy program. “What is the Therapeutic Value of Camping for Emotionally Disturbed Girls?” by Lynn Levitt discusses the limitations of research on wilderness programs, particularly in regard to adolescent girls. And “Wilderness Therapy: What Makes it Empowering for Women?” by Irene Powch delves into the spiritual and healing side of wilderness therapy, specifically for women.

One prominent theme in the above-mentioned research is how wilderness therapy affects girls’ confidence and sense of self-accomplishment. These studies show again and again that after going on hiking trips and working through outdoor therapy, such as ropes courses, girls felt much better about themselves (Autry 2001, 297, 300; Levitt 1994, 129; Powch 1994, 18). Cari Autry researched nine adolescent girls who stayed at an outdoor psychiatric facility where they went on hiking trips and did ropes courses. Her subjects showed improvement in several areas, including self-esteem (Autry 2001). Low self-esteem seems to be one of the most pervasive issues confronting adolescent girls. As one of Autry’s research subjects reported:

The ropes course helped me learn that I can do certain things and that there’s always hope for me... it helped me to learn who I am and what I can do, and made me feel like well, right now, I can do this. And I’ve done it. I’m on top of things right now... it makes me feel like *I can* instead of *I can’t*. (298)

Other participants also indicated that they had clearly gained a sense of confidence, which likely came from their sense of self-accomplishment. According to Autry, “the empowerment the girls gained as a result of participating in the adventure activities was significant for them... [It] brought out feelings and attitudes the girls usually did not experience in their everyday lives” (298). Autry claims that after hiking trips and ropes courses, the girls’ “initial inhibitions and negative self-concepts” were overcome with “a sense of accomplishment, control, and feeling better about themselves” (298). Autry’s participants explained,

I felt totally awesome after the hiking trip. I knew that I accomplished it. At first I didn’t really want to go... afterwards I was like, wow! I wanted to go back and do it again.
(298)

At the ropes course you all learn how to work together to accomplish something... There’s something big and you know it’s like, standing in your way, and you all have to work together. You gotta pull each other and help each other over or you won’t be able to move on... it just kinda helps you realize what you had and what you need, you know.
(299)

I just think, how can like a hiking trip... make me feel so good about myself? I mean why doesn’t everybody just go on a hiking trip! ... I feel like that’s, like, an instant remedy... it’s like, if you’re having bad thoughts of yourself or somethin’, try that out! (298)

“There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.”

—Rachel Carson (Carson and Kelsh 1998).

No matter how shining these anecdotal examples, the question remains: are therapy programs successful on their own or is there something inherently healing about nature? Researchers have not been able to come up with a definite answer, but many suggest that wilderness is indeed beneficial in itself. In “What is the Therapeutic Value of Camping for Emotionally Disturbed Girls?”, Lynn Levitt contemplates this question and suggests that “perhaps, the therapeutic changes occur because wilderness evokes coping behaviors rather than defensive behaviors; it is a different, natural or healthful environment; it provides restorative experiences; or it affords the opportunity to interact with and/or observe animals and plants which in itself has been found to be therapeutic” (1994, 129). Levitt concludes by suggesting that if systematic research can really prove that there are healing powers in nature, those aspects could be drawn on for later therapy. “If it is discovered that there is something inherent about wilderness that is therapeutic, such as the floral or fauna, then community support services might arrange to take emotionally disturbed girls to city parks, zoos, or botanical gardens” (129).

My internship work with the Arboretum Project reinforced the importance of natural spaces and of how people use the wilderness in their own therapeutic ways. In making a promotional video for the project, I had the opportunity to interview London, a 13-year-old girl. She’s not as “troubled” as the adolescents in my research, but she is a still female developing in a patriarchal world. London came to Fort Williams because she loves nature; she actually hopes to be a landscape architect someday. Her sentiments reveal themselves when she talks about being outdoors:

When you're in school all day it's just not fun to be inside. I like coming outdoors... the fresh air is just cool and I like the quietness and everything. Nowadays I'm in 8th grade and all the boys and most of the girls are always on Facebook or playing video games, and I always say I go outside and they're like 'oh, that's weird.' And it's kind of crazy that they don't go outside or do anything like that.

London's computer-bound generation will not experience nature in the same way as generations before, but she shows by example that there are still exceptional kids that love being outdoors. I watched from a distance as she trailed off by herself, and as she walked and walked it seemed like a peace came over her body. Even on the coldest of Maine winter days, London happily drugged through the trails of Fort Williams, surrounded only by ocean and the crisp sound of leaves crunching beneath her boots.



In her research on wilderness therapy, psychologist Irene Powch (1994) asks, what makes it empowering for women. Powch focuses on abuse survivors and makes a point to discuss marginalized women. She acknowledges that women of color and other marginalized groups (lesbians, older women, women with disabilities, etc) have typically been excluded (or excluded themselves) from wilderness experiences. An important point she makes is that women may experience wilderness differently depending on how safe they feel outside—conditioned to fear rape, many of us see the wilderness as an isolated and dangerous place. In order for wilderness therapy to succeed, participants must feel safe. Once safety is secured, Powch claims that “the wilderness is inherently empowering for women and other marginalized groups in the evenhandedness of consequences” (1994, 18). Ki, an African American recreational therapist, illustrates Powch's point: “In dealing with mother nature there's no favoritism... if it's going to rain, it's not just going to rain on me. I'm not going to run into 'isms'... and I have a sense of me trying to take care of myself. In cities I feel more subjected to racism and sexism... I feel the wilderness is a place that I can not expect curve balls or run up against macho-ism” (18). Sixteen-year-old Naomi, co-leader of the group Inner City Outings, agrees: “There's just more acceptance in the wilderness, you have to depend on people and it's no time to be prejudiced for any reason (racism, sexism, homophobia)... nature's blind to everything” (18).

Not only is nature blind to human identities, it is adamant that each person survives on their own. The wilderness gives women confidence by forcing them to prove that they are just as capable of survival as anyone. Even women with the most painful bodily experiences can heal themselves through nature. A young incest survivor in Powch's study admits that after her first wilderness therapy program, “I learned to like my body again... it's not just for abuse, it's for other things, good things... I'm learning that it could be strong and that I can go hiking with it and do things that I love doing” (1994, 20). The body is a site of many identity struggles, but through wilderness experiences it can become a site of resistance as well—and not just for adolescents who are only newly acquainted with the meaning of their bodies, but for women of all ages.



While I did not find any research that explicitly discusses wilderness as the primary mechanism for healing in these programs, I have come to the conclusion that the programs would not be as successful without it. Being in nature is a key component in the healing process, not only within these programs but in itself. The vastness and depth of the outdoors encourages adolescent girls, so tied to their bodily experiences, to let go and becomes one with the beauty around them. The wilderness connects us all to our earthly existence; it has the ability to ignite in us the carefree spirit of children, as it implicitly reminds us where we come from.

I suspect that if adventure-based therapy programs occurred only indoors (such as ropes courses), they would not be as effective. I also suspect that if adolescent girls had significant wilderness experiences even without all the structures of a therapeutic program, they would still emerge healed. Their level of success would depend on such factors as: how long does the outdoor experience last? What activities are done in the wilderness? How much supervision is there? How much pressure exists to be part of a team? The programs offer leaders, activities, and rules, but even without those elements it is rewarding enough in itself to be in the wilderness. The success of these programs may largely be attributed to something that anyone could find during a silent hike through miles of forest: peace and quiet and a fundamental reminder that we are part of everything, and that our problems are human-made and manageable.

Another critical aspect of these programs' success likely has to do with girls feeling a sense of belonging within them. Stranded between childhood and adulthood, many teenagers feel like outcasts; while there is a huge array of problems that any particular adolescent girl could experience, the feeling of being alone and misunderstood is quite universal. With the combination of therapy groups and the wilderness, girls have a chance to feel a sense of belonging in two very powerful ways. They are part of a group that spends a significant amount of time together, practicing trust exercises and overcoming obstacles collectively. The bonds that can be formed in these atypical life experiences are complemented in these programs by the bond each girl can form with the wilderness. During the long hikes there are surely moments of peace (and exhaustion) in which the girls are in the perfect condition for open-mindedness to nature, and I believe it is in these moments that the most profound healing can occur.

It is perhaps impossible to determine whether being in the wilderness is as effective by itself as it is in combination with therapy programs. For some adolescent girls the wilderness might be more effective in helping them to overcome problems, while for others it may be the sense of belonging and solidarity in the group. In any case, nature is indeed healing in itself, but this realization (and its usefulness) may be hard for some to come by without the guidance of therapy programs.



I think a large part of the reason that adolescent girls are vulnerable to so many problems is because they feel disempowered. Throughout childhood most of us are free to be ourselves and show our personalities—too young to guess what others think and too fascinated by everything to care. Going through adolescence and puberty can make even the most confident kids uncomfortable, and adolescent girls have a unique set of problems. They go from being wild and basically gender-free to being confined, silenced, objectified, and judged. Young, toned bodies are flaunted and idealized across an ever-imposing media machine, and many girls don't know how to respond. There is so much pressure to emulate photo-shopped "feminine" bodies, to

exhibit sexuality that is intimidating; it's foreign territory, territory for which they are often not ready. They are expected to transform from curious children into hot adults and have the wisdom to do so gracefully. That teenage predicament made me feel pretty helpless, and I don't think I'm alone. At some point in adolescence many girls realize that as women they don't have much power to resist cultural programming, and to lose that sense of control, that sense of okay-ness, leads many of us down troubled paths.

But there is hope, and it's often found in nature or even in realizing what is not natural but socially constructed. Even though the research is not conclusive, I believe that wilderness therapy is effective in treating adolescent girls. The wilderness has the strength and beauty to help them feel powerful. It can remind all of us, regardless of identity, that we are made from the same matter and that we are as strong and as weak as the Earth. If adolescent girls feel confused and alone, nature reminds them that their pain—and joy—is unconditionally shared, that they are stronger than they know, and that their place of belonging, their home, is everywhere.



“As I go into Earth, she pierces my heart. As I penetrate further, she unveils me. When I have reached her center, I am weeping openly. I have known her all my life, yet she reveals stories to me, and these stories are revelations, and I am transformed... Her renewal washes over me endlessly... I become aware of all that has come between us... Now my body reaches out to her. They speak effortlessly, and I learn at no instant does she fail me in her presence. She is as delicate as I am. I feel her pain and my own pain comes into me, and my own pain grows large and I grasp it with my hands, and I know why she goes on under great weight, in every act does she survive disaster. I love how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know. And I do not forget what she is to me, what I am to her.”

–Susan Griffin (Powch 1994).



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