

*The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia.*

Report by – Mark S Reeves – 2010 Churchill Fellow.

*To study the approaches to the adolescent experience of a Rite of Passage in contemporary education.*

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## Introduction.

I have been Principal of our school, a residential year nine leadership school, for 12 years and leading dedicated year nine schools since 1996. As the founding principal, I have been in the privileged position of being able to lead and observe many changes and evolutions as we grew into one of the larger year-nine specialist schools in Australia: from one to three campuses across Victoria. 135 students attend three campuses living with us 24/7 for 63 days at a time, with four new intakes a year. Every term we have a new intake of students, boys and girls, from most of the approximately 270 government education secondary colleges across Victoria.

This has provided a rich background for observation of an enormous cross-section of both the Victorian socio-economic and educational landscape. It has enabled deep understanding of so many students, families and schools and allowed interrogation of some of the issues in contemporary education. But the most amazing thing is the consistency in outcomes and feedback from all participants and their families and schools. They want more: every child in our education system needs to have this experience or something like it. But what is that “experience” that they all seem to be clamouring for?

We pursued research and sought to really understand what it was that made students want to go to school with us (this IS year nine after all, the most disenchanting year group), what made our program create such strong learning and social bonds and why these long-term outcomes kept reappearing. In our research and feedback, students, families and home-schools alike would refer to the “changed student”, the “transformation” of an individual. Parents would ascribe more adult-like behaviours to their children upon return from our program and moreover, the behaviours more often than not were retained. Schools would often talk about the focus a student had returned with, the drive, the goal setting and aspiration now present. True, most students have reintegration challenges but so do we all after a similar salient and life-changing experience. Teenagers are just not as well equipped emotionally, nor are schools structured in such a way that facilitating such a change can happen without a certain need to exhibit that wonderful teenage emotional response.

We sought to understand the changes and outcomes that were expressed in the words so often used: *transformation*. The term is often used in contemporary literature about leadership, and I would suggest sometimes ill-advisedly and in a less than informed way.

This was the basis of my Churchill Fellowship research: to understand this phenomenon of transition from child to adult in a contemporary education setting.

I will be forever grateful to the Churchill Trust, not just for the amazing opportunity provided me to travel, but for the opportunity to make a difference to education for young people in Victoria and Australia and hopefully to influence educational discourse. I felt honoured and proud to represent Australia and the Trust in the many and varied locations of my travels. My research has taken me to Canada and to first-nation’s people, embedding me in leadership retreats in the Rockies and undertaking courses to understand the concept and construct of “transformation”, especially when it is applied to adolescent learning. I have visited schools and centres across Nth America with the support of the Churchill Fellowship.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my referees, Mr Bruce Hartnett and Ms Lynne Kosky. Both have shown unwavering support for me throughout my career as Principal shown unambiguous advocacy for us even during the sometimes difficult operational challenges of the School for Student Leadership. Despite their onerous personal responsibilities and professional roles, they have always found time to take a personal and deep interest in our school and my passion for it.

It is also important I acknowledge and thank my family. My wife and children allowed me the freedom to travel and pursue my Churchill Fellowship. We discussed at length the possibilities of Alice and children joining me at some stage, but practicalities prevented this.

I would in particular like to acknowledge David Lertzman Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Environmental Management & Sustainable Development, Senior Associate of IRIS – International Resource Industries & Sustainability Centre, Affiliated with ISEEE – Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment & Economy, Business & Environment Area, Haskayne School of Business, Scurfield Hall, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

David's original paper [Rediscovering Rites of Passage: Education, Transformation, and the Transition to Sustainability \(Lertzman, 2002\)](#), sourced on-line, was one of the main inspirations to pursue my research and further my understanding of the adolescent Rite of Passage. He has an inspiring and astounding wealth of knowledge and generosity.

I would like to dedicate this report in particular to the First Nations Peoples of Canada whom I met on my travels, who shared their knowledge and passion for learning and also to all my hosts, new friends and international colleagues who welcomed me as a brother to their country. I never felt alone, always welcomed and cared-for, making my ability to immerse myself in the times and places of my travels all the more possible.

## Executive Summary

Mark S Reeves.

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Victoria

Principal: School for Student Leadership, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Winston Churchill Fellowship: To study the approaches to the adolescent experience of a Rite of Passage in contemporary education.

## Highlights:

- EPIC Sustainability Expo, Vancouver, British Columbia. Meeting and sharing with Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder and The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the end of Nature Deficit Disorder.
- Five Days at Nth Vancouver Outdoor School with Victor Elderton, Principal, and a subsequent re-visit.
- Two-week Rediscovery International Indigenous Leadership Training, Lester Pearson College, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, conducted by world-leading facilitator Tom Henley.
- Ten days at Palisades Youth Stewardship Centre, Jasper, Alberta, lead by James Bartram.
- One week with Michael Quin, director of Arundel Nature and Science Centre, Laurentian Mountains, Quebec, and attending Anglophile Maths/Science/Technology and Engineering conference, Montreal.
- Two weeks embedded as guest staff member with University of Calgary on the Haskayne Leadership retreat and program, Kananaskas and Ghosts River Wilderness areas, near Canmore, Alberta. Lead by Dr David Lertzman and Dr Julian Norris (Director, Outward Bound, Canada), this program was a post-graduate component of the Haskayne Business School MBA program.
- One week with Tom Henley at his new Soaring Spirits Camp, Terrace, northern British Columbia.

## Recommendations.

- My recommendations are at three levels: micro, macro and mega.
- At a micro level:
  - Introduce new practices that will assist our students in their rite of passage in our school and in their lives.
  - Share my new knowledge with our staff team in workshops, professional learning and through mentoring and direct modelling.
  - Make further contact with VAEAI to pursue the opportunities for dedicated “Rediscovery” style indigenous leadership programs.
  - Support my staff members to also pursue similar immersive experiences, possibly Churchill.

- At a Macro level:
- Education systems in the western world have become obsessed with measurement of literacy and numeracy through standardised testing. There needs to be a reconsideration of the approaches to education that this testing has created especially at year nine. To this end, pursue research with Monash to reframe how we measure success and learning at year nine.
- Because these education systems have their origin in the development of industrialised society, and from an age of enlightenment where deductive thinking prevailed, the understanding of the student as an organic being that exists in a societal context has diminished. Attempt to influence educational system on the importance of individualised learning and alternative measurement.
- At significant weigh-points in the life journey of a student in our school systems, there needs to be better explicit teaching of and support for the transitional stages of development. Influence the content of our curriculum at this stage.
- Our education systems would in particular benefit from a renewal of both content and approaches to what is generally known as “middle years”, age around 14 or 15 years, or generally grade/year nine. Continue to promote our school, the curriculum and practices as exemplars of practice.
- This age group at school has the unfortunate distinction of some of the following characteristics:
  - Highest absenteeism.
  - Least engaged in learning.
  - Most disconnected from peers.
  - Most disconnected from teachers.
  - Among others!

Because of these outcomes, attempt at this age and stage to promote alternative, more student-centred approaches to schooling.

- Influence to change one school term of year nine alone to incorporate more contemporary educational approaches and curriculum content that would promote a sense of transition from childhood to adulthood, the “rite of passage”, there could be a dramatic ripple-effect to other areas such as:
  - Benefits to student retention and completion at post compulsory education
  - Reduced binge, promiscuous and associated risk behaviours.
  - Improved school literacy, numeracy outcomes generally due to improved engagement.
- At a mega level:
  - On the international stage, promote the practices of our school and publish in international journals with cooperative and co-authored pieces.
  - Aim to participate in international conferences and pursue speaking opportunities at them.

## **Implementation and Dissemination.**

- Publish a series of papers and opinion pieces in conjunction with co-authors addressing aspects of educational discourse around middle years praxis.

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- Co-author a research paper with Dr Lertzman analysing the differences in approaches to rites of passage between Nth America and Australia, especially in light of our embedded practices and the year nine models in Victoria Australia.
- Advocate to political leaders to support expansion of our school.
- Participate in a series of speaking engagements to raise the profile of the concept of a rite of passage and youth leadership in education at this age as a necessary content.
- Embed learning and practices from my experience into the operation, curriculum and practices at my school, in others where possible and at system level aspirationally.
- Promote the practices at our school as an incubator of contemporary praxis.
- Continue to pursue research with Monash, set our sights on an ARC grant (currently in progress: a significant 5 year co-research program).

## Program.

- 2011:
- 13-15 May: EPIC Sustainability Expo, Vancouver.
  - Three day expo and meeting with Richard Louv, respected author and creator of our schools' construct "Nature Deficit Disorder".
- 24-27 May: North Vancouver Outdoor School, North Vancouver School District.
  - Embedded in the program with nature, leadership and indigenous cultural program with Squamish First Nation elders and staff.
- 28 May – 10 June: Lester Pearson College, Vancouver Island. Rediscovery International Leadership Training.
  - Two week leadership training facilitated by Tom Henley with 18 other participants from across Canada, many first nation people intending to conduct rediscovery Camps in their home reservations/communities.
  - Befriended first nation staff member Wade Charlie, indigenous mentor and drum-making instructor.
- 12 – 22 June: Palisades Youth Stewardship Centre, Jasper, Alberta. Conducted by Parks Canada.
  - Embedded into the program with middle-years school groups and much discussion time with James Bartram, Education Director.
  - Generously hosted by many of the staff.
- 24 – 28 June: Arundel Nature and Science Centre, Sire Wilfred Laurier School Board.
  - Visited the Arundel Nature and Science Centre, participated in a range of professional events with my host Michael Quin, including a Maths/Science convention, key-note addresses by respected presenters Yannis Misoulis, Director Museum of Science, Boston and Bill Nigh, renowned TV "Science Guy" in Nth America.
- 30 June – 5 July: Soaring Sprits Camp, Terrace, British Columbia.
  - Immersed in the place and knowledge of both Tom Henley and Soaring Spirits camp.
  - Privileged meeting with many first nation elders and communities including ancient sites of Kispiox, Gitskan and others.
  - Spent many long and valuable hours with Tom understanding his narrative, experiences and perspectives on youth, in particular in indigenous societies across the world.
- 8 -17 July: Canmore and Banff area with Haskayne Wilderness retreat and Outward Bound Canada.
  - Generously welcomed by Haskayne Business School lead by Dr Lertzman. Assisted in the facilitation of the Wilderness Leadership Program for MBA students from University of Calgary.
  - Long and privileged dialogue and sharing of ideas with both Dr Lertzman and Dr Norris from Outward Bound.
  - This was truly a culmination event: to have the "beginning" of my journey, the meeting with Dr Lertzman through his published paper, as the end-piece was an inspired coincidence to book-end my amazing personal "rediscovery".



## Main Body

### Background

The concept of the rites of passages has existed in human endeavour and history for time immemorial. The construct was introduced to contemporary popular literature by Belgian folklorist Arnold Van Gennep in 1960.<sup>i</sup> Rites of passage usually describe a progression through life from one stage to another. There are a number of such stages that can be identified in human existence as being these salient progression points. The very processes of birth and death are rites of passage. Various cultures and societies identify significant other stages that usually correspond to emotional, cognitive, spiritual or physical stages of a person development.

Contemporary rites of passage might include the first hair-cut, circumcision, the onset of menarche, puberty, bat or bar-mitzvah(s), first communion, first hunting kill, vision quests (more an adaption of traditional fasting and wilderness journeying rites), coming of age (eighteen or twenty-one depending on cultures), and perhaps more recently in western societies graduation ceremonies from elementary/primary school, graduation from secondary school, debuts, drivers licences and so on.

My research and readings (see Lertzman<sup>ii</sup>, Gibbons<sup>iii</sup> and Norris *ibid*) reference similar experiences and processes in the construction of a rite of passage. It was a privilege to spend time with both Lertzman and Norris in the course of my Churchill journey and discuss these at first-hand, at length and with sufficient reflection time. All authors note the structure of a preparation phase, a separation phase and a reintegration phase. The preparation phase may have often been marked by ceremonial departures and emotional “packing-up”, by story-telling and legend-mythological telling and symbolic departures. There would often be community feasts, events including the wearing of ritualistic garments or regalia by senior members of the community. The departure and beginning of the separation might also coincide with important phases of seasons or equinoxes/solstices, for example.

The separation phase of the rite is usually identified in literature as having a liminal component- “liminality” refers generally to the state of “limbo” or disconnection, deconstruction or disorientation associated with an experience that unpacks ones emotional and spiritual being. That unpacking is necessary to deconstruct the previous self, in many cases the child, the “pre-pubescent” person, the pre-adult or the like. With this “limination” comes the necessary reconstruction of the “new” person, the person who has transitioned through the process and has emerged out the other side in a changed or different way.

Due to the more traditional societal referencing made in the research, most of the journeys in ancient times and hence the reproduction in a contemporary setting take place in mystical, natural and unspoilt landscapes. Nowadays these areas are often identified (in a contemporary construct) as “wilderness areas”, being of significant size and having significant biodiversity, biosphere or other ways to identify such significance. In more traditional senses, these areas may have spiritual and religious significance. They might be areas of extreme difficulty in access or be mountainous such that ease of access is unlikely. Often, these areas are traditionally said to be the domain and home of mythical creatures, the meeting with which would be part of the “quest” that might be associated

with the transition through the rite. Indeed, some translations of the descriptions of such journeys refer to a "vision quest". The notion of confrontation with a mystical being and the quest to both be at one and to gain knowledge from such an encounter is significant. Such creatures in my research experience include the legend of the Sasquatch, the mythical humanoid of the western Canadian areas.

These reconstructions are often internalised and hence the process of ritualisation and marking is necessary to both identify and create the ceremony of the rite. Behavioural expectations usually are associated with the rite, the passage and the ritual scaring. Such behavioural expectation might be, in traditional societies, around manhood, parenthood or perhaps marriage that may or may not have been pre-arranged.

Traditional cultures often marked the completion of progression in or through rites with ritual scaring or cicatrisation, the wearing of jewellery, rings, facial and oral adornments and other physical depictions. Such adornments were essential and signified recognition in the home community as to the experience and the new expectation that the returned person might now have. In those communities where the rituals of rites of passage were present, there was an embedded knowledge and understanding of the experience, process and recognition of the needs of the returning person.

This, the third stage of the process of the rite is where further ritualisation and ceremonial celebration would take place. Upon return from an intense liminal experience, returnees would come home to family and community celebration and recognition. Often the ritual feast, dancing, singing and drumming were accompanied by a ritual "marching in", welcoming into the home, village or community.

In the program I conduct in Victoria Australia, we unconsciously recognised this return stage and how to promulgate it by the embedding of a social enterprise as part of the program and in the curriculum. Unconsciously in that when we established the program 10 or more years ago, we sought modalities to ensure transfer of learning from the residential school model to the home in the reintegration. This has always been a criticism of the residential model: often the transfer of learning is difficult when behaviours and attitudes are difficult to translate to a normal home setting. We saw the social enterprise or community learning project as a conduit for this transfer; my travels and research has revealed another wonderful aspect of this inspired curriculum: it is an essential part of the reintegration of the rite of passage. Students work towards an action outcome to implement a socially beneficial project in their home communities on return. Unwittingly it appears from my more recent research and travels, we had re-enacted a metaphoric rite of passage for students on home coming or reintegration. In our school circumstance, the return home has community and societal expectations of mature behaviours and attitudes to undertake a social enterprise outcome (we call it a community learning project). In the Rite of Passage model, the return to community is associated with community expectations about behaviour and maturity as well.

This background reading and research is necessary to the understanding of both the individual and group societal construct of a contemporary rite of passage. In the particular focus of this research, the adolescent rite or transition at around puberty is the subject of the inquiry. While the conceptual and philosophical background is important, my actual journey is to rediscover this construct is the subject of this discussion.

In terms of linking this philosophical understanding of the rite of passage, the contemporary conceptual construct espoused by author, Richard Louv, is also of particular interest and was formative in bookending my journey. Louv in his book Last Child in the Woods<sup>iv</sup> identifies many of the circumstances, behaviours and attributes associated with contemporary childhood dysfunction. He argues among other things that the removal of unstructured play in the outdoors, the disconnection of young people from the natural world and the increase in childhood sedentary computer-related games has a direct relationship to childhood lifestyle-diseases and even ADD and other cognitive impairments. Moreover, argues Louv, the disconnection of young people from the natural world will create a devaluation of the future human capacity to value the natural world. Such devaluation will mean the intrinsic qualities of the natural world may not be connected to future decision makers who will then fail to see the regenerative and recuperative, psycho-social and emotional value of the natural world. Such lack of value will potentially mean decision-makers in future may be using destructive and extractive values to make decisions about areas which have been in the past seen as intrinsically valuable.

The link between Louv's work and the research around rites of passage is apparent as follows. Such adolescent rites involve connection with more unspoilt areas of what we now term wilderness. If Louv's assertions hold true, then the access areas necessary to undertake such a rite of passage journey may also be under threat. Moreover, the emotional and societal values associated with such natural areas, may also be a hindrance. That is, if the current paradigm of the wilderness being scary, dangerous and needing to be tamed and overrun holds sway, such areas will be both inaccessible and societally off-limits. This view was reinforced by the description of National Parks in Canada made by my host at Jasper Palisade Youth Stewardship Centre: "When originally created, National Parks in Canada were seen as outposts of civilisation in a sea of wilderness. Today, they are seen as outposts of wilderness in a sea of civilisation"<sup>v</sup> This change and resultant pressure on Parks is critical to the discussion around where and how we can recreate the rites as a wilderness journey, a "spirit or vision quest" and how this might also play out in contemporary litigious society.

### Why travel to Canada?

When originally researching the background to my contention, driven as it was by observations of trends in the feedback from our research into the program outcomes, my textual analysis of many online papers lead me to that published by Dr Lertzman. Victoria, Australia's has a preponderance of residential year nine programs These must not be confused with the stigma associated with the term in Canada: the "*Residential School*" experience in Canada refers directly to an aspect of government policy of forced removal of indigenous people, separation of families and taking of children and placement in state or church-run boarding school facilities. Such an experience has an unfortunate parallel in Australia with what is now recognised as the *Stolen Generation*. This nomenclature had to be carefully and sensitively negotiated in and during my journey. We openly and without fear or favour use the term "residential school" in Australia. In Canada, it has the same trans-generational trauma and dispossession associated as the term "stolen" in Australia. In this report, the term "residential school" refers solely to the year nine experience in contemporary Victoria Australia. Lertzman describes...the... "residential school system, which was enacted through a formal marriage of church and state, expressing the government policies of assimilation and termination (Barman et al. 1986, Titley 1986, Assembly of First Nations 1994, Lertzman 1996). The residential school system, which operated into the 1970s, left a legacy of violence, sexual abuse, alcoholism, suicide, family

disintegration, community disruption, intergenerational dislocation, loss of language, and erosion of culture”<sup>vi</sup>. The author acknowledges the associated pain and suffering of the many indigenous people of Canada who survived the residential school trauma there, and whose descendents continue to suffer in many ways. I had the sad privilege of having many first-hand accounts of the Canadian residential school experience shared with me and I feel a need to ensure that this aspect of my journey is made clear. One elder asked me specifically to ensure such experiences are shared so that such will never happen again.

Dr Lertzman’s paper was a concise and compact collection of the contemporary thinking around such a construct as “rites of passage”. What was of particular interest to me was that here we were in Australia, apparently conducting the world’s largest year nine educational experiment and research program around rites of passage for adolescents, in an unconsciously aware way! That is, there was such an embedded historical element of these schools in Victoria Australia and the conduct of them was seen so ubiquitously as “of great benefit to teenagers” that it seemed no-one had questioned what might be happening at a deeper or more psycho-emotional level.

Timbertop school, the well known and respected year nine boarding campus of Geelong Grammar in the Victorian Alps, had been operating since the mid 1950’s. It was followed by a number of other similar programs by several independent schools over the subsequent 50 years. Timbertop is still a reference point for many people when explaining the nature and concept of these schools. The fact that Prince Charles attended Timbertop in the 1960’s added to both the prestige and profile of the campus.

Such schools and their operational ethic owed much to the background provided by the likes of Dewey<sup>vii</sup> and Hahn<sup>viii</sup> Both are considered foundational practitioners and authorities in both the experiential and outdoor educational fields. Hahn in particular founded Outward Bound, still operational and considered one of the contemporary organisational authorities in this field of endeavour and education. Julian Norris, one of my hosts in Canmore, Alberta, is the Director of Canadian Operations for Outward Bound, Canada. Julian’s own Doctoral work is cited in this paper.

The ecologies uncovered in Lertzman’s paper showing the links between contemporary Canadian practices and the natural and indigenous environments and practices, was of particular interest. Here was a published, researched and reviewed piece that for the first time linked a conceptual understanding of the transitional phase of adolescence to a contemporary educational practice tied to indigenous culture and a deep understanding of the connection with the natural world. Subsequently, over three years, Lertzman and I began an e-dialogue which revealed a connection and unity of both spirit and educational soul. Lertzman’s paper and subsequent connection made possible my exploration and the ever widening circle and ripple of praxis.

Most fascinating in a reciprocal sense: my hosts in Canada found the operational model of our school in Victoria, Australia, and the proliferation of similar year nine schools in the independent sector, amazing. No such systemic or school model of year nine programs exists in Canada. The programs and experiences I participated in were largely small scale, intense but endemic to a variety of local indigenous bands (tribes/nations). There is some learning to be taken from this fact as well. We could and should do more to mine the knowledge and practices of our indigenous brothers and sisters in Australia around the practices of transitional rites, practices, ceremonies and celebrations.

## The Journey.

My journey began with meeting Richard Louv at the EPIC sustainability expo in Vancouver in May 2011. Richard is an unassuming person and the location was at the Canadian launch of his second book, The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the end of Nature Deficit Disorder.<sup>ix</sup> His assertion to me and the gathered crowd that “the future will belong to the nature smart....the more high tech we become the more nature we need” rings true to me personally and professionally.

The Expo was a shameless trade show, rather than being the esoteric and aesthetic intellectual event that I thought it would be. Never the less, meeting and having devoted time with Louv was nearly impossible in any other sense. We discussed our various passions, shared stories and I was able to describe the nature of my work, travel and research with Churchill. I hope that this meeting was as beneficial for Louv as for me, for him knowing that in the far-off antipodes there is a school that seriously assumes the principles he describes and espouses. Moreover, they ring true both philosophically and practically for us, and have assisted our school in creating a sound contemporary moral basis for the operations we undertake, the content we deliver to students and the teaching approach we adopt.

Louv is hopeful that ours is not alone in the way of education: that there is a growing groundswell of educators and educational leaders reading his work and hopefully this influence will permeate educational policy and practice in future.

My visit to Nth Vancouver Outdoor School (NVOS) was insightful and fascinating. NVOS is lead by an enthusiastic dynamo in Victor Elderton. Victor and the school welcomed me generously into their operations and I was able to spend 5 initial days there observing and participating in the programs: I returned later. It is a fascinating place, with several components operating simultaneously. I found particular interest in a recreation of the Squamish First Nation Big House program. Year 4 students would spend a night living in a reproduction cultural and physical first nation big house, learning and enacting many ceremonies and practices including cooking “stone soup”. In traditional days, before metal pots, water was heated by placing large stones from the fire into cedar boxes of water, an efficient and clever means of heating.

Victor has lead this school for 27 years. It is undertaking a \$10m refurbishment and reconstruction. He has plans to expand the cultural, leadership and natural learning components into a boarding school not dissimilar to ours. What was of particular interest was that the school and the program were completely self funding: they received income from neither the provincial department of education nor from the school district. Victor has been very creative in how he has sourced income from the recurrent or operational model of the school with fee for programs and yet keeping them at an accessible level. He also has developed a Trust to support the school (to which I contributed as a matter of course for the school’s generosity in hosting my visit).

I thank Victor and his team for their hospitality and generosity in sharing the operational and conceptual model of NVOS. We will stay very much in touch and I plan to link the school more closely to our more specifically focussed Outdoor Education schools in DEECD Victoria, namely Rubicon and Bogong.

The Rediscovery International Leadership Training Program was an intense and transformational experience for me. Tom Henley, the founder and facilitator become a friend and mentor. His life

journey is a book and legend in itself. He is non-indigenous, but through a series of extraordinary events while being ship-wrecked on Haida-Gwai (previously known as Queen Charlotte Islands) in his sea-kayak in the early 1970, he developed a kinship and connection with the Haida indigenous population that led him to create the rediscovery programs. Rediscovery camps were seen as ... "A place for science ... reflected in the many environmental education games and ecological teachings in camp. The goals of Rediscovery were as simple and encompassing as they are today, "to discover the wonders of the natural world around us, the cultural worlds between people, and the worlds within oneself" (Henley 1996). It quickly became evident that something unique had been created. As the program in Haida Gwaii grew, people began to hear about and replicate its success in other communities and even in other countries. The next Rediscovery program began in Four Corners, Arizona, and then in the Stein Valley of British Columbia..."\* There are now more than 40 programs running throughout Nth America, and as I understand some internationally as well. There may be scope to introduce similar programs through The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) here in Victoria Australia, tying into potential interest in year nine Leadership training that we have initiated in our school.

Henley's aim is now to train as many accredited trainers to operate and conduct Rediscovery courses throughout Canada. Most of the participants on the course I was involved in were sponsored by Indigenous Bands/Reservations. Their aim was to return and conduct rediscovery programs in their home communities.

My chief interests were to be immersed in the course, mine Henley for his knowledge and develop meaningful relationships with the participants. I am pleased to say all have succeeded. Henley and I developed a mutual respect and he generously invited me late in my Churchill journey to join him at his new Soaring Spirits Camp on the Seeka River in Northern British Columbia, which I did. I have brought back renewed passion for games and interpretive activities for both our staff and to apply directly in my praxis. The course was a welcome immersion for me after many years of being the facilitator and leader of such programs. It was delightful to be a participant and be immersed in the cultural landscape of the program. One of the co-facilitators, Wade Charlie, is an indigenous man, an alumni of Henley's rediscovery program. Wade described to me some of his own past demons and how rediscovery assisted him in his new path following the "red road" (a term introduced to me by one of the participants referring to following a path consistent with one's first nation indigenous cultural heritage in a contemporary western world). Wade and I developed a fine friendship. He is an honourable man with deep family connections to the local first nation bands. He is deeply committed to social justice and has taken a political stand on matters around corruption in politics and resourcing of first- nation communities. I sometimes fear he may be in some sort of danger because of his firm stands on corruption.

Wade taught me to make a raw-hide traditional drum, and moreover some songs and chants to play on it. This was a metaphorical moment for me: the drum represented for me a departure from my normal learning and cultural mores. I thoroughly loved the days spent with foul smelling raw hide, learning ancient practices of working with hide strips and removing hair/fat/sinew with ones hands. Wow, it is impossible to describe the smell! My drum still smells....but this is now an endearing olfactory reminder of the fine times together with Wade and the four other participants in that aspect of the course.

Other aspects of the course involved learning new first-nation games, many workshops involving diversity, cultural awareness, ceremonies often adopted from indigenous lore but sometimes also original in origin and able to be redefined for local indigenous circumstances.

Every morning, I was introduced to “smudging”, a first nation smoking ceremony that involved burning of sweet-grass, tobacco, sage and cedar among other ingredients. The ritual around this was very enlightening and meaningful, a wonderful start to the day and very community centred.

I am proud to say I have a trainer’s certificate from rediscovery International, and have already implemented aspects of the course into my and our school’s practice.

In between the travels from Rediscovery to my next destination, I met with some research colleagues from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. We have been conducting research in our school since our inception, now into twelve years. This longitudinal research has contributed to an international discourse around experiential learning and residential schools like ours. Dr David Zandvleit and Dr Carlos Ormond and I shared some hours together discussing my practice and their research, and maybe how this can be combined in future. Our links with Monash University in Victoria Australia could enable such a co-research relationship in future. I am grateful to Dr Dyson at Monash Gippsland, for his introduction to our new colleagues at Simon Fraser, Vancouver.

The next part of my journey took me to Jasper Alberta: The Palisade Youth Stewardship Program conducted by Parks Canada in conjunction with the Yellowhead School District, Alberta. A wonderful aspect of this journey was The Canadian, a train that runs from Vancouver through the Rocky Mountains to get to the quite remote and beautiful location of Jasper.

The program at Palisades is unique in its operational model but not so in its aims and outcomes. A new program in an old historic setting, the drive and inertia has been provided by the enthusiastic and encyclopaedic James Bartram. In just five years of operation, the Palisades is a program that is now on the experiential education map. Some of their key innovations include the outstanding use and coordination of traditional outdoor education practice with cutting edge technology. At Palisades, I was able to link into our home school High Definition Television system and meet with staff and students. Most impressive! And we did so from a remote portable unit. It was really astounding to conduct a video conference meeting with students in my schools in three locations in Victoria Australia and introduce students from Hinton Alberta while outside with the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. This potential technology for us is really interesting: as noted earlier, Louv’s comments regarding the more technology we have the more nature we need. Would the use of such imposing and instant communication be a help or hindrance to our deeper connective experiences with students in the Australian outdoors? Or would it add to the learning, and for whom?

James was a very generous host, shared much of his knowledge and experience in the set-up of Palisades. It conducts a variety of programs for teenage students and, like Nth Vancouver Outdoor School, requires a fee for service for successful operational income. It does receive a co-grant from both Parks Canada and Yellowhead School District, but not enough to fully subsidise the programs.

We particularly enjoyed sharing much of the recent works for Sir Kenneth Robertson<sup>xi</sup>, English Educational Commentator and consultant. James and I seemed to be united as one on many aspects of both personal and professional beliefs and values. While it is good to be challenged by alternative

thinking, it is also very reassuring to find a like-minded person in an outpost of education! The relationship James and I developed will take both our schools and centres further than would have otherwise been the case had we not met.

One way this can happen is for us to share our knowledge and operational expertise in year nine, longer term residential schooling. Palisades has recently been refurbished with fine contemporary accommodation for 40 or so co-gender students. It would make an excellent base to conduct such programs, uniting James passion and expertise in technological applications, outdoor pursuits, skill development and environmental-stewardship programs.

This would be consistent with Parks Canada's newer focus on education. Indeed, the Palisades was the training centre for Parks Canada's Ranger interpretive education. The centre has an historical connection with providing training (even though it was constructed as a private "Dude Ranch" in the early 1900's. A Dude Ranch is a type of resort for hunting, horse skills and the like. The change in focus again is reflective of the change in nature of Canadian Parks, as noted earlier). The demise of the interpretive education program has in retrospect created an opportunity for such a site as Palisades to become an incubator of contemporary Park education and Youth Stewardship in Parks Canada. Unlike the Parks model in Australia which is a state jurisdiction, Canadian Parks is a federal authority. There are some issues around distance and management locus, which is in Quebec, on the opposite side of the country!

Another interesting outcome from the Palisades visit was to realise that the employed staff at the centre were not necessarily teachers nor were they required to be so: they were not employed by the education district or system as such. While the staff members were outstanding educators, this may be a limiting factor in the long-term. We hope to be able to entertain the idea of exchanges in future. Indeed, one of the Parks staff at Palisades is a Victorian who is on secondment to Parks Canada as part of a reciprocal relationship between Parks Canada and Parks Victoria, Australia.

I must thank James, Cynthia, Jenny, Teresa, Jane and Lisa, as well as the other operational staff at Palisades for their generosity and boundless willingness to share and adopt me into their program and lives for that wonderful two weeks.

The journey across Canada to a very fascinating centre and program in Francophone Quebec was my next destination. Needless to say, there is no easy way to traverse the Rockies and then a continent as large as Canada. I am indebted to Qantas for their wonderful organisation and travel support in this regards.

The Arundel Nature and Science Centre in the beautiful Laurentian Mountains north of Montreal is an interesting and anomalous place. Lead and recently reinvigorated by the extraordinary Michael Quinn, here was another example of Canadian hospitality and generosity. Arundel was until a few years ago a sagging, dilapidated outdoor experience (not even necessarily an education site per se). It was described as sad and having lost its way and purpose. It exists in the Anglophone School District in Montreal, which in itself was an eye-opener for me. Here was an English program, where English is the minority language in the province! Never-the-less, despite the threats of closure, some fine words and a dedicated team have taken Arundel into a new and certainly 21<sup>st</sup> Century model of what an Outdoor centre can be.



I was impressed at the technology and enthusiasm that was apparent with the staff and in Michael as their manager. Interestingly, Michael is an (astounding) neuro-scientist, published and with PhD. His field of expertise is neither outdoor nor experiential education. This has created a wonderful circumstance where the content (that is an outdoor skill, for example) is less important than understanding true deep learning and the adolescent cognitive processes to maximise it. Such a rich combination, such an amazing enthusiasm and yet self proclaimed innocence of process combine to give Michael and his on-ground education team a unique place in our educational world.

The centre is in a beautiful location in the rural mountains of Nth Montreal, near Saint Savoir. It is not as imposing and dramatic as Jasper, but the program has a different focus, less of a technical outdoor skill and more of an environmental and enquiry-learning direction. It is again only new in its operation, but very old in its facilities, and reflects what I have witnessed in Australia as the demise of the "traditional" outdoor education centres. These sites were where camp-crafts and fire-side singing prevailed, for example, an extension of the Scout Jamboree or Woodchuck model from Nth America in the early 1900s. This is no doubt a lovely aspect of these places, but schools and education districts, ministers and commissioners are now looking for more.

This search for more and better defined outcomes is perhaps some of the more reflective learning I have as a result of my Churchill travels. There is a place for Outdoor Education Centres and they provide a meaningful opportunity for connection with nature and for an activity focus. There is a place I see now for specialisation and more specific educational focus, a new lens to be applied to our old craft. Maybe this notion we have apparently stumbled upon, of the rite of passage and the connection with adolescent neuro-development is an example. The activity-centre school camp is a thing of the past. We all want more and better, improved and definitive outcomes from such experiences. There must be a more explicit connection with real world, contemporary learning and with a sound moral and philosophical base. Whether that is about youth stewardship which ties (inexorably) into the construct espoused by Richard Louv (Nature Deficit Disorder and reconnecting youth with the natural world), through enquiry learning modalities as seen at Arundel or through a combination of these and with a clear enterprise approach as shown by Victor at Nth Vancouver. They all place the experiential/outdoor education industry on notice: as do we, the School for Student Leadership. We have taken a model of residential and outdoor/experiential learning and redefined it for the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and so have my colleagues visited in Canada.

Another reflective learning that has only become apparent from my view of our operation at the School for Student Leadership, and because I had to explain our operation many times, was that of the importance of niche and specialisation. All the sites and operations I visited are vying for reduced or limited resources, and all suffer the same contemporary issue of needing to do more with less, faster! It appears to be an organisational and enterprise concept, but it rings true for education. As a year nine school, we truly know an awful lot about apparently very little! The area of year nine education is but a wafer slice across the spectrum of the educational field and industry. However, our knowledge has allowed us to make significant contributions to the educational discourse, and hopefully continue to do so. What is apparent is that the slice of expertise we provide is a critical hinge point in the success or otherwise of school and system-based education: get year nine right and most other areas of measurable improvement in schools will follow. Teach to engage year nine, and literacy and numeracy, wellbeing and transition to post compulsory education outcomes will also improve.

At Arundel, that slice of expertise has been adapted from a clever combination of using science and technology as a pedagogical construct to focus enquiry-based learning in an outdoors setting. There are the spin-offs that Louv appreciates: students are connected to the natural world, are cooperatively creating new knowledge and ordering it, and through technology processing and sharing it on a contemporary world stage. The interaction with contemporary social media and other sharing formats is paramount and allows an engagement that is wonderful to observe. Take all this and add the fun of mountain bikes, ski-touring in winter and so on because these are the vehicles of transport and mobility in this environment. There is then also the opportunity to link this contemporary technology with traditional or first-nation knowledge and begin a dialogue about "science and knowledge". Truly inspirational education in a remote, small, and only recently almost dismantled centre: well done Michael and his team, Peter MacLaurin and Kelly Fahey to name a few.

It must be noted that while it may appear Arundel is the node point of my experience, it was in reality the place of my educational and research epiphany: sometimes it takes a small and fascinating close-up view combined with an eagle perspective to gain the full insight!

I wish to acknowledge and thank Michael and his wonderful wife Annie, recently recovering from a significant car accident. Michael adopted me and allowed me to immerse myself in his fascinating world of being a Science Consultant for the School District, and at the time of my visit, (he was) also convener of a Science, Maths, Engineering and Technology Conference. I thoroughly enjoyed the conference, especially the ability to meet the famous Nth American, Bill Nigh the Science Guy, key-note speaker!

The later parts of my journey enabled me to spend more time with the wonderful, generous and inspiring Tom Henley in his Soaring Spirits Camp in Nth British Columbia. This was also privileged time to allow reflective discussion and to interrogate him on his experiences and the events that took him to this place as an advocate of nature, indigenous people and youth rites of passage. Tom's journey is not to be told here: I hope he will publish an auto-biography in future. It is amazing: to be adopted as an indigenous brother on Haida-Gwaii, to establish the rediscovery International Program, lead conservation campaigns and more recently to advocate on behalf of threatened indigenous peoples in South east Asia are stories in themselves.

Tom connected me again to some of the beautiful legendary stories around this part of indigenous Canada: The legendary pre-ice age city of Tamlahan for example. While steeped in hundreds of generations of oral histories, it is becoming apparent that this city did exist and archaeologists are discovering evidence. More than anything, this time with Tom, surrounded by his books, the scenery and meeting more First Nation brothers and sisters impressed on me how much contemporary western society undervalues oral traditions and how accurate oral histories can be. Far from being like the whisper game where the true meaning of the initial conversation is totally misinterpreted, true Oral History Transmission is a complex and culturally embedded construct. It does *NOT* allow for deviation from the "truth" of the story: there are so many checks in the process to ensure accuracy with the new exponent. This learning for me was a realisation that in our education praxis, we also need to support our students in providing opportunities for oral histories, to explicitly teach the skills of story-telling and to allow them to express their feelings and emotions from salient experiences in safe and formative ways and places. That is, we rely a great deal in contemporary

education on the transmission of knowledge through text (or txt.), and this does not (always) suit many of our teenagers.

The last weeks of my journey were a bookend: I ended where I started with privileged time with my new friend, mentor and colleague Dr David Lertzman. In this time with David I was also able to write several reflective opinion pieces which I hope to have published. This information is important because it reinforces to me the ability of a Churchill journey, well researched and coordinated, to elicit in one some powerful learning. Moreover, as a Churchill Fellow, I feel a great onus and obligation to make a difference in not just my chosen craft, but in society. I hope that I can achieve this.

Lertzman is an astounding man: one is drawn to him because not only is he an eccentric individual but that eccentricity is alluring. Far from driving one away, Lertzman is a black-hole of gravitational pull, drawing one into his ever increasing knowledge of this particular craft: that of combining traditional first-nation knowledge with a deep knowledge of contemporary educational constructs. That he does this not specifically in an outdoor education system is even more fascinating: he works in the Haskayne Business School of the University of Calgary. I was welcomed into this fold in a way that still makes me stop and think how privileged I am.

The program I was specifically involved in with David and Dr Julian Norris (noted elsewhere) was a Wilderness Leadership Program for MBA Students at The Haskayne Business School. It was Primarily at the Kananaskas Research and Field Station of The University of Calgary, near Canmore, Alberta. It is another astoundingly beautiful location in the Rocky Mountains. Also facilitating the program were Aunty Dilah, a Picane Blackfoot Elder, and Marcus Belmont. Marcus, "Ica Wilasa Pejuta Wakan": Holy Medicine Man, Cultural Educator and Spiritual Advisor from the Stoney Nakoda Nation. Joining us also was Gitz, youth worker and Indigenous Leader.

This was an intimidating group of people, both the students who were industry leaders mostly from the petro-chemical businesses of Alberta, but also the list of facilitators. I was however welcomed and felt so connected to these people.

It was serendipitous that I had made the connections with Dr Lertzman so early in my Churchill planning and then been able to participate in many of the courses he referred to in his initial paper<sup>xii</sup>. From the connections to rediscovery, the various first-nation people and then the centres I had visited all provided for me an essential apprenticeship prior to being with these learned and engaging educators in this amazing program. He created for me a "circle of friends that ripple on forever", to paraphrase a line in one of his many indigenous-inspired drumming songs. I have subsequently used this song with my staff.

One may ask how conducting a Wilderness, Indigenous-based, MBA leadership course in the Canadian Rockies could have a parallel with my core interest: rites of Passage for Teenagers. More than one might expect. The course and experience outcomes and intentions are remarkable similar and refer to similar if not identical intentions: transformational learning. The intention of the course was to fundamentally deconstruct the beliefs and values of a group of industry leaders and open their eyes, hearts and souls to new possibilities for understanding. That understanding might be about indigenous knowledge or value systems, natural landscapes, how resources are valued or not

valued. How is the displacement of indigenous communities justified in the quest for extraction of oil-sands, for example?

The course content and program were remarkably similar to those run by my colleague, Tom Henley, and had resonances with our leadership program at my school. This was not surprising as Dr David was a graduate of Tom Henley in the 1980s. The fundamental difference was the access to the knowledge, skills and experience of the embedded indigenous leaders, elders and cultural advisors. Some of the practices and experiences were beyond my expectation: I have undertaken wilderness solo experiences before and had led them for year 10 students: but not with black bears! I had never experienced a "sweat-lodge" a traditional first-nation type of steam house. This also involved amazing ceremonial and symbolic chanting, ritualistic calling and singing. It was truly a "rediscovery" for me and a salient experience for the MBA students who were also participants.

I must note with particular sincerity my thanks to Aunty Dilah, Marcus, Gitz, Drs Norris and Lertzman, for this opportunity in particular. The Sweat Lodge is so far from the Australian contemporary or indigenous experience, I feel humbled and full of gratitude to have been able to undertake such an experience. I am not sure that we will recreate a "lodge" in my school, but the transformational aspect of the experience and the links to traditional culture are fundamental to my learning. Also, that we should embed ceremony and ritual into our program, as a way of marking the transitions and progress through a rite of passage, is very clear to me. If we can move our participants along the journey through an experience with more explicit ceremony and symbolism, it will assist them in their ultimate transformational leadership.

## Conclusion

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust has provided me with the opportunity of a lifetime. I feel humbled and honoured to have been able to travel to Nth America and represent Australia, Education in Victoria, our School and to return with renewed enthusiasm and knowledge. The opportunities to learn first-hand are consistent with my educational moral purpose: to provide meaningful experiential learning. I learn from doing and participating, and strongly believe our teenagers do, too. My experience has been a metaphor for how we conduct our school, with a strong emphasis on separation and the liminal experience: a life-changing experience.

My Churchill Fellowship began many years before my separation and journey, and will continue for many years after, just as a rite of passage does. I feel an overwhelming sense of privilege and obligation and aim to use this as impetus for influencing educational practice in Australia and abroad. I hope my report is just the beginning of this momentum.

## Recommendation

- My recommendations are at three levels: micro, macro and mega.
- At a micro level:
  - Introduce new practices that will assist our students in their rite of passage in our school and in their lives.
  - Share my new knowledge with our staff team in workshops, professional learning and through mentoring and direct modelling.
  - Make further contact with VAEAI to pursue the opportunities for dedicated “Rediscovery” style indigenous leadership programs.
  - Support my staff members to also pursue similar immersive experiences, possibly Churchill.
- At a Macro level:
  - If we were to change one school term of year nine alone to incorporate more contemporary educational approaches and curriculum content that would promote a sense of transition from childhood to adulthood, the “rite of passage”, there could be a dramatic ripple-effect to other areas such as:
    - Benefits to student retention and completion at post compulsory education
    - Reduced binge, promiscuous and associated risk behaviours.
    - Improved school literacy, numeracy outcomes generally due to improved engagement.
  - Education systems in the western world have become obsessed with measurement of literacy and numeracy through standardised testing. There needs to be a reconsideration of the approaches to education that this testing has created especially at year nine. To this end, pursue research with Monash to reframe how we measure success and learning at year nine.
  - Because these education systems have their origin in the development of industrialised society, and from an age of enlightenment where deductive thinking prevailed, the understanding of the student as a person that exists in a societal context has diminished. Attempt to influence educational system on the importance of individualised learning and alternative measurement.
  - At significant weigh-points in the life journey of a student in our school systems, there needs to be better explicit teaching of and support for the transitional stages of development. Influence the content of our curriculum at this stage.
  - Our education systems would in particular benefit from a renewal of both content and approaches to what is generally known as “middle years”, age around 14 or 15 years, or generally grade/year nine. Continue to promote our school, the curriculum and practices as exemplars of practice.
  - This age group at school has the unfortunate distinction of some of the following characteristics:
    - Highest absenteeism.
    - Least engaged in learning.
    - Most disconnected from peers.

- Most disconnected from teachers.
- Among others!

Because of these outcomes, attempt at this age and stage to promote alternative, more student-centred approaches to schooling.

- Influence to change one school term of year nine alone to incorporate more contemporary educational approaches and curriculum content that would promote a sense of transition from childhood to adulthood, the “rite of passage”, there could be a dramatic ripple-effect to other areas such as:
  - Benefits to student retention and completion at post compulsory education
  - Reduced binge, promiscuous and associated risk behaviours.
  - Improved school literacy, numeracy outcomes generally due to improved engagement.
    - Reconsider the content and approaches to adolescent education in Australia with a view to embedding the concept of a rite of passage.
  - Allow greater connection with, valuing and appreciation of nature in education.
  - Reduce the emphasis on standardised testing and more emphasis on neuro-cognitive-developmental growth in teenagers.
  - Reconsider how we define knowledge in adolescent education.
  - Build more programs and operate more education facilities that are aligned with the model of operation that we have in The School for Student Leadership. Seek to surround oneself with the people who can assist this to happen and then to seek political processes to enable it.
  - Develop closer understanding of Indigenous Australian constructs around rites of passage:
    - This might take considerable effort in some areas of Koorie South Eastern Australia where access to elders can be at times difficult.
- At a mega level:
  - On the international stage, promote the practices of our school and publish in international journals with cooperative and co-authored pieces.
  - Aim to participate in international conferences and pursue speaking opportunities at them.

## Endnotes

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Publisher: Algonquin Books.
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- <sup>vi</sup> Lertzman *ibid* 2002.
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