**NIGHT HIKE**

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In my first year of teaching, I worked as an instructor at the Albion Hills Conservation Field Centre, an outdoor education centre northwest of Toronto. Students would come for a week, live at the centre and learn about the environment in this 1100-acre setting and through all four seasons. I lived and breathed that place. I was enthralled by how engaged kids became with this "learning by doing" experiential approach outside the four walls of the classroom.

In late March of that first year, I was working with a group of Grade Seven and Eight students from St. Daniel Separate School in Toronto. It was a Thursday evening. This was the group's fourth and last night at Albion and many were no doubt running on fumes by this time. When I took them out on a night hike around nine o’clock, I had forty energetic and excitable students noisily following me. I tried to get them to quiet down, to relinquish their animated engagement with each other in favour of opening their senses to Albion's still snow–covered winter milieu. I met with little success. And so, I took off on them. I ran away and then circled back so I was close by but unseen. There was immediate silence. Then a few of the girls started to cry and I felt compelled to re-emerge. I explained why I had resorted to this action and, this time when I asked them to be quiet and listen, they did. Some were impressed with how quiet and still it was. Others seemed impatient [quite ready?] to finish the hike. And so we did.

I was surprised when three boys came up to me at bedtime to recount how much they had enjoyed the hike, and "Wouldn't it be nice if we could go out there again?" Even though I was a rookie, I was already inoculated with the standard teacher "Yes, but..." reply and so they joined their classmates to settle in for a night's sleep. When I later told the classroom teacher about the wishes of the three students, he looked me in the eye and immediately responded. "Go ahead and do it, if you'd like to."

I was startled, and then excited.

And so, shortly after midnight, I awoke three city boys named Joe, Chris and Frank, and I took them back out into the night environs of Albion Hills. We were out there for a good hour and a half, having no particular plan for what or how or when. We opened our senses. We whispered only occasionally. We heard two owls calling through the deep and peaceful silence. We felt [smelled] the mild dampness of a late winter night on our faces. We made out the shapes of the trees and bushes, trails and frozen streams amazingly well, thanks to the snow reflection and our quickly adapting black and white night vision. We walked and then we periodically just stood still or sat down to soak it all in. We felt an unspoken kinship with each other and with our surroundings. We seemed to be caught up in a reverential awe of something so much larger than ourselves.

The experience was not over when we returned to the field centre. We all seemed to be deeply moved by this time, though later attempts to verbalize its impact always fell short. Joe wrote me letters for the next four years. While the night hike was seldom mentioned, it was clear that this shared event was the base of our bond.

Many years later, I was conducting an environmental awareness workshop for teachers at Albion Hills. One of my activities involved asking participants to think back to some positive experience in the natural environment. We then shared these memories and speculated as to why they are still so powerful and what meaning they had for us now. One young teacher spoke of the impact on his teaching of a late-night hike at Albion some 15 years earlier. It turned out to be Chris. We both revelled in the retelling of our story that evening.