

Ecological Autobiography Assignment

ENVS 487

HUXLEY COLLEGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

ENVS 487 Win. Dev. Env. Resp.

Ecological Autobiography Assignment

Briefly describe what in your behavior or life demonstrates your environmental concern.

Write a short autobiographical essay describing those experiences that led you to this concern. Another way to put this: What you consider to be the most significant influences leading to your environmental concern? Please be reasonably thorough. Which years of your life were particularly memorable in the development of attitudes and behaviors toward the environment? Tell what made them memorable.

Some further suggestions:

A well-developed autobiography can be a tool for learning in several ways - it provides a chance to assess how past experiences have shaped one's outlook, preferences, and values. One might think writing an autobiography is self-centered, but as Krall has said, "Self-understanding, when pursued reflectively, rather than leading to a constricted and egocentric view, is the primary link with the world" (1988, p. 468). Well-developed autobiography demonstrates "coherence, based on a particular standpoint taken by the writer as a reflection of his or her present philosophy" (Wilson, 1995, 306). In other words, the process may cause the writer to integrate childhood and adult experience, transcending a narrow "I" point of view, and leading to the perception of patterns and wholes which reveal the interdependence of self and context.

A *focused autobiography* is one that treats a specific aspect of one's life, such as religious belief, educational experience, or the different environments in which one has lived. Ecological autobiography is similar to, but broader than, this latter focus on place. Its focus is the entirety of one's relationship with nature. We are not interested in just what one did in nature, but in the experiences nature evoked, and how one's relation with nature is affected by changing desires, memories and visions. It is an examination of one's "inner standing" (Paschal, 1960) in relation to the natural world. It is based on the inner self, and so someone writing an autobiography must be willing to seek out and share part of this identity.

Remembering and writing about one's past is actually a subtle process. It is more than just reporting on what one remembers; it involves recalling detail, trying to distill the essence of experiences, searching for themes, critical reflection and integration, and creating a description that conveys the vivid heart of past experiences now set in present perspective. Here are some suggestions for the process - to be understood as different interweaving aspects, not linear steps. They can help bring depth to the process. (The following draws on the work of Krall (1998), Steiner (1975), and Wilson (1995).

1. Begin by trying to recall as much detail as possible. Focus on experiences you recall with a "special clarity." Don't try to use or sort through all your experiences. Work from the perspective of an outside observer, with the faith there is "something there" to be understood. Think of memories of nature, including elements like water, sky, plants, large or small animals, special places, nature-related activities (special places, gardening, walking, local "wild" spots, etc.). What did you enjoy or dislike about these nature experiences? Was there a time you felt well-being or a sense of caring, joy, ecstasy, or at-

oneness with nature? Were there moments when you felt the power of nature; were afraid of it; felt responsible for it? Or were your experiences of nature of a different type than these? In what ways did your family, school, or other group put you in touch with nature? Sit with any vivid episodes and reconstruct them in detail.

2. Next go beyond a detailed chronological description and focus on the essence of the experiences. This requires re-working the memories to get a sense of their significance. It is as if the memories were a pile of old photographs and your job is to sort and sift and rearrange them for a new album. This requires a willingness to reconsider the way you have previously understood the meaning of your past. You might also ask what lessons or insights you've gained from your experiences with nature, or how they have influenced your decisions.

3. The work of autobiography involves a search for major propositions about, and recurrent themes in, one's experiences. Re-read your work with an eye to major themes; list these, and group them under headings. Read works on related ideas.

4. It helps to compare your experience and your interpretation of it with those of others. An integrative stage is needed to bring the ideas of others into relationship with your own experiences. How do your experiences *and* interpretations (as reflected in your lists of themes, etc.) compare with those of others?

5. How will you weave all your analysis and interpretation into a description? Try to restore the original essences; place them in a framework that makes real sense of them, without making too much of them. Autobiography involves restoring the past, as well as setting forth a stand on what you now believe and value. This is how it can lead to self-transforming realization. You might ask how your present relationship with nature compares to previous stages. You may find yourself re-evaluating experiences. What about your previous values and understandings of nature - how do they compare with the present? What led to the changes you've identified? How do you feel about those changes?

You'll probably not write a final version of this at your first try. Some stages especially may take time. For example, after digesting others' ideas over time you may discover new meanings - and roots - of your own experiences and thoughts. Seldom is our experience entirely original or unique - a lot is to be learned about oneself and one's world by attending closely to what we make of our experience. And realizing the real nature of one's connection to non-human nature is an on-going process.

References

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