

# The Field Trip

## PART TWO

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### FIRST NIGHT

Once our group reached Stone Seats, I estimated that there were a few hours left before dark. While the chilly morning beckoned me to wear three layers of clothing, by now I had shed two of them, which provided me with a clue that the sun was just past its peak in the sky. The plan, I found out when we got to Stone Seats, was that we'd be at this camp for two nights. Group Luna was not aware of this. As mentioned previously, students at SUWS are not given "FI" (future information) so that they focus on the present moment and the tasks at hand which now were setting up tents, cooking and eating dinner, and group time to process the day. Setting up camp required that the tents and tarp were sturdy, sleeping bags and backpacks were in appropriate places, and that group gear, especially, was unpacked so that water from the nearby river could be filtered, and utensils, food, and hygiene items were available. I was impressed, once again, at the organization and structure that Liz, Emily and Juliet provided. Rather than assign tasks, students were given the opportunity to choose one of these responsibilities, just as they had chosen which group gear they would carry to the camp. It was notable that how having the freedom to choose a task, within the structure of the setting, not only promoted self-efficacy but also group communication and resolution of any conflict related to individual choices. Things that seemed simple and concrete also had great therapeutic benefit. While the field instructors held boundaries, the students were given the opportunity to take care of themselves.



## THE RITUAL OF MEALTIME

Dinner and breakfast are the two group meals of the day, in contrast to eating lunch only from one's P-food bag, and very much anticipated. I haven't participated in daily group meals such as this since I was young; meals that are one center of attention in the day, prepared with others, eaten with everyone in the family, focused on gratitude for the food and those present, and cleaned up by all in a joint effort. Since families get so busy that sitting down for meals together is a challenge, the practice of group meals during my field trip was cherished.

The dinnertime ritual on this first night began with the head instructors', Liz, determination of what we'd eat. Just like in any family, not every member likes the choice equally, but they do have the choice of eating what's prepared or not. Group meals are one pot meals, and dinner on the two nights I was with the Luna group was beans and rice and mac and cheese. Field instructors protected the propane burner, cooked the meal by pouring ingredients into the boiling water, and then carried the pot of prepared food to the site designated for eating. This site was several hundred yards from where we slept so that any animals attracted to the food would be at a safe distance.

Once we got to the meal site, everyone put their tin cups, with spoons in them, on the ground. A traditional looking tin cup is the only 'bowl' a student receives during their stay at SUWS. Each student had marked their spoon in a unique way (such as with drawings or cords) which I noted, reflected their unique personalities. A spoon positioned with the handle up meant you wanted a full cup of food; handle down meant only a half cup. I initially underestimated how much food I needed to feel satisfied. As I often try to watch the size of my food portions, I asked for a half cup, but thankfully there were second helpings. I suspect I needed more food for the mental and physical energy I expended that day. No wonder students receive a 3,500 calorie per day diet; out of the question for my typically sedentary life.



While I initially thought we'd all just grab our food haphazardly and start eating, this was definitely not the case. First off, we stood in a circle. By this time, I began to realize that any "circle time" was a ceremony that promotes student camaraderie. Since hygiene is very important, especially in the wilderness, one student took the responsibility of pouring hand soap into each girl's hand and then water for the rinse. Only now have I recognized the intimacy of this cleansing routine. Even a mundane and thoughtless act, such as washing your hands, was a moment of solidarity and a blessing from one girl to another. Finally, each of us stated one thing we were grateful for which included anything from a special person, a behavior by someone else, or even a particular food; no judgment to be offered by others.

Now we could eat! Another student doled out servings of food into each cup and all cups were filled before each person could claim theirs. Not until everyone had retrieved their cup and was

seated could we start eating, and not until everyone was done with their first serving would second helpings be given, repeating these steps. Students and instructors engaged in chit-chat while they ate, which remained appropriate, respectful and humorous as you might imagine a group of five teenage girls could be. After everyone was done eating, Liz called “CCBT” (pronounced ca-ca-ba-ta), an acronym for clean cup, brush teeth. As it sounds, everyone must clean their cup and we brushed our teeth every morning and night. As part of wilderness training, I learned that in order to clean your cup you have two options; sump or self-sump. Sump means washing your cup with water, straining the food particles through mesh, putting the particles into a sump bag and dunking the cup in bleach water for sanitization. Self-sump is for hardcore, no waste folks. You put drinking water in the cup, wash, then drink the water, and the food leftovers, before dunking the cup in the bleach water. I found neither method appealing as I fondly remembered my dishwasher at home.

Before we went back to Stone Seats, there was one last responsibility to be completed, and this left a lasting impression on me. The bear hang after the evening meal is, as it sounds, when the group hangs all their food in a tree, out of reach of any bears that may visit during the night. Remember this is at a site removed from where we were sleeping. Set up near the site was a rope hung between two trees with another rope strewn over it and a large carabineer attached at one end. All the P-food bags were tied together and connected to the carabineer. This was a pretty heavy load that required all students and instructors to muster their strength in order to lift the bundle up into the tree. Standing in a line, holding the free end of the rope, and with several “heave-hos” the bags were lifted into the air out of reach. What energized me about this event was the rhythmic motion and sounds of all of us to achieve this goal.



Ironically, the girl who chose to be in the back of the line was actually the leader of the practice as she called out directives and was responsible for tying the loose end of the rope around a tree and securing it. Once again, a task very important in wilderness training was also teaching the students to be part of a larger community through physical endeavors.

### THE MOMENT OF TRUTH AND SUPPORT



With full stomachs, our group meandered back to the main camp. Time for hygiene, another seemingly ordinary exercise, took place while seated in the always significant circle formation. Antibacterial wipes, baby powder, floss, and lotion, were passed around. The third “foot check” of the day was completed. This is when the girls took off their shoes and socks, and field instructors checked their feet for signs of trench foot. The girls handed their journals to instructors who then recorded their progress and made note of what daily assignment were accomplished that day.

After hygiene was finished and paperwork was organized, it was time for the “truth circle”; the space allowed for the girls to share their feelings in a place impervious to judgment of each other. I felt the energetic mood wind down into one more tranquil as we committed to intentionally listen to each other and validate the emotions of whomever girl decided to share. I found it thought-provoking that some girls shared thoughts and feelings that I would not have known about during the day; frustration or delight about what parents might have written in a letter, anger or complacency after finding out they are going to boarding school; annoyance at interaction with another student that day, or happiness that they completed a skill. Those who shared were acknowledged by others who stated the word, “support”. It was really sinking in how everything we did that day was a process leading to self-discovery.

### MAKING FIRE



Awakening five teenage girls on a cold morning, I would say, is not the easiest thing to do, but making expectations clear and setting goals does make it smoother. Peering into a tent where several of the girls laid, one could find groggy teenagers moaning about taking on the challenge of another day. I suspected this was a common occurrence for their parents. Right off the bat, they were given responsibility by being asked how long they thought it would take them to complete their morning duties which included getting dressed, getting water, completing a hygiene routine, and ultimately being ready to assist with breakfast. I learned that each day was broken up into these types of segments in which students set their own goals, and if students completed, say, three of five segments in the self-determined time frame, they achieved a reward. In this case, the girls were working toward getting their fingernails polished. Unfortunately, the Luna girls did not reach their goal that morning, but reprimanding was not, and is never, considered since the students are given control of what they can achieve.

The first part of the day was chosen for “skills”; more specifically the girls were asked to practice making fires. Each girl found her own spot and set up rock platforms on which the fire would burn; in sight of each other yet far enough away from each other to focus on their individual fire and for safety. If you have not had the opportunity to start a fire, it can be frustrating and tedious as one continually bangs a quartz rock with a striker. Imagine doing this over and over until a tiny spark falls perfectly on a tinder bundle and ignites. Not only is the technique of striking, which requires the physical movement of the wrist, forearm and elbow, important, but equally important is the patience and focus that is required to be successful.

When one strikes a fire, the feeling of excitement is unexplainable. During my orientation at SUWS, I was lucky enough to strike a fire, and words cannot capture the feeling of elation about what I accomplished or the permanent grin I kept on my face all day as I told others about it. Making something so powerful, such as fire, was amazing. After about 20 to 30 minutes of striking, two of the five students simultaneously began the event of making a fire. Not only were the girls who caused the spark excited, but the enthusiasm for that student was evident when field instructors and other students gathered around them.





Despite the commotion, the two girls were reminded that there was still work to be done in order for the spark to develop into a fire. After the initial spark was seen, students blew breathe onto it so that it became strong enough to alight the tinder bundle. They first added small twigs to further strengthen the fire, and finally added larger sticks. Notably, you don't just throw the sticks onto the flame in a haphazard manner. You do so gently and with intention, until the fire can stand alone. In fact, one of the set goals for students is to have their fire burn unattended for 15 minutes. Similarly, that's a goal for SUWS; providing gentle, intentional support to help students stand independently as young adults. Like the sparks that need to be fueled and stoked to grow into a full blaze, students are supported and fed with opportunities to be successful in their undertakings. I emphasize that sustaining a fire takes patience, self-restraint and self-discipline. This opportunity to make a fire, to me, was an incredible way to practice these.

I've heard it is unusual for a whole group of students to make a fire at essentially the same time, but after the initial two girls struck fire, so did the other three. When asked about their reaction to their accomplishment, one said, "That fire, we made that, I'm so proud of us, so, so." Another said, "I am feeling successful about getting my second fire, because I'm closer to community (phase)." Also, "I feel accomplished about my fire, because I've struck so many times, except one, and it never worked! I'm closer to community also."

While fire skills were not the end of our day, it was a pretty exciting start. The latter half of the day was spent at base camp since this was the day the girls took showers and did laundry. Like every other routine, this was done in a creative and low impact manner. The girls took turns showering in the bathroom and were given privacy. Those not showering found opportunity to journal or sit in a med-spot (meditation spot).

### **CLOSE AT HAND**

While up until this point, I may have not mentioned these three women, have no doubt that their presence was always felt by all. Like when building a house, they designed the framework for the day; one designed with rooms specific to each student



and decorated with their individual pictures, memories, relationships, challenges, emotions, self-expression and support. Remaining loyal to the process of change, Liz, Emily and Juliet did not impose change, but allowed for change by empowering these girls by giving them choices, responsibility and opportunity.

**THE END**

**Next month read the end of The Field Trip and the Journey Home**