

# How to Crap in the Woods: The Formation of Authentic Identity and Faith in the Praxis of Adventure Tripping

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The consideration of the intersection between youth, the sacred and popular culture is fertile ground for catching a glimpse of our future. Any conference entitled “Holy Crap” may suggest a downward point of view but in fact the suggestion is very forward looking as it considers the nature of two influences on what is, inevitably, our future. The focus of this contribution, “How to Crap in the Woods”, is also not downward but rather looks inward. While the saying might best be described as an American colloquialism it also speaks to empowering the individual in a concrete reality. Individual empowerment is important in the formation of authentic identity and thus speaks to the concern that follows: the journey of youth through a digital landscape. Youth, the sacred and popular culture all play a role in this journey in different ways. Popular culture enters into this concern in its role of influence on values and belief.

## The Role of Popular Culture

Popular culture can be understood through the formula by which the “popularity of a given cultural element (object, person or event) is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values”<sup>1</sup> This formula is offered by Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause in their work *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*. Taken as such popular culture is crucial for understanding beliefs and values in the lives of all humans and particularly useful in understanding the formation of identity. As Bruce Forbes observes, “If popular culture reflects values we already hold, that reflection also serves to reinforce our values and deepen our commitment to them.”<sup>2</sup> The reinforcement of and deepening of commitment to our values is vital in the formation of identity for youth. Problematic though is the manner in which popular culture has more recently effected this formation. Much of popular culture in its many facets is shared and disseminated through digital media. While it could be argued that some digital media is a popular culture itself the nature of this manner of formation is problematic for the fullness of formation. That is, in terms of identity, it is not a job well done.

## A Discussion of Identity in a Digital World

So it is in our day that we can stay in constant communication with one another. Facebook friends, Twitter feeds, Instagram, Snapchat, Vine and You Tube afford us access to each other in ways unthinkable twenty years ago. We share our moments on Facebook; our pictures on Instagram; our thoughts (in less than 140 characters) on Twitter; our feelings (in less than 140 Characters) on Snapchat; and our adventures on You Tube. Through these digital expressions we share a part of who are as individuals. With every statement, every evocation and every frame, we reveal a bit of our identity to each other. It is as Hannah Arendt describes in her seminal treatment *The Human Condition*, “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”<sup>3</sup>

Making an appearance and revealing our identity is an act of making ourselves vulnerable to those with whom we share. Arendt defines these people as a web. “The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.”<sup>4</sup> This is part of the human condition.

But by sharing identity and vulnerabilities through digital expressions we are now building relationships in new ways. And these ways in which we build relationships has continually increased with the evolution of our digital world. The limit of our communication is no longer face-to-face, pen-on-paper or even a through a telephone conversation. It is binary in nature, existing in ones and zeros, giving us immediacy in communication seemingly unaffected by geography. This ability for a seeming constant and instant communication that

has developed with our digital world is accompanied by a change in the nature of how we relate to each other. Through our digital media we relate with increasing frequency as we express ourselves bit-by-bit (or byte-by-byte). But is something lost in the changing nature of these interactions?

Does the increased frequency of our digital interactions result in a diminished quality and depth in the relationships within which those interactions occur? Can a thought be more than just a thought in less than 140 characters? Can the depth of a feeling be expressed in an acronym or emoticon? Is a snapshot more than a quick glimpse when shared without context? Is an adventure adventurous if it is scripted into a 5 second video to share? In essence, does the quality of our interactions suffer from the quantity? I suggest that it does. At best 140 characters can only offer a partial reflection of one's authentic self. At their worst they present a grossly distorted reflection of something other. Somewhere in between the reflection of our digital expressions becomes a hall of mirrors.<sup>5</sup>

Such is the landscape for our youth today. At a crucial point in the development of their identity they are pushed into the hall of mirrors that is our digital reality. Through this they must make a way in their search for identity. And any journey through a hall of mirrors is not easy. Through all of this I suggest that in a virtual world it is authenticity that becomes more rare and set apart from the norm, in this sense perhaps even holy. Authenticity, in this way, becomes sacred for youth and the discovery of authentic identity is a sacred journey through the world of popular culture.

The sacredness of authentic identity for youth is defined in contrast to the virtual world of clicks and screens by simple, concrete reality. More specifically this reality consists of concrete relationships and concrete experiences within our natural world. Or simply put-touch.

The book *Last Child in the Woods*, written by Richard Louv, is the manifesto for a movement afoot in America calling attention to what it has termed "Nature-deficit disorder". The term is self-explanatory and among its many prophetic observations is that we are literally out of touch with the natural world and with each other. "As we grow more separate from nature, we continue to separate from one another physically" Louv states, adding the fact that "without touch, infant primates die; adult primates with touch deficits become more aggressive. Primate studies also show that physical touch is essential to the peace-making process."<sup>6</sup>

The concrete experience of touch and feel defines us as humans and it is in those concrete relationships that are defined by touch that we find authentic identity. Thus relationships, with both the natural world and with each other, find their depth in the concrete experience of touch as we define ourselves by its necessity. These concrete relationships pull at a compass in our blood leading us in the direction of authentic identity and away from the virtual world of abbreviated digital expression.

## The Touch and Time of Wilderness

It is my claim that adventure tripping is an ideal praxis for the nurturing of concrete relationships with each other and with nature. Furthermore it is within these concrete relationships that the formation of authentic identity occurs. It then follows that the concrete experience of adventure tripping is praxis for discovering authentic identity.

Adventure tripping is a term is used to describe a wilderness camping experience taken with a group of people. To understand this term it is necessary to define wilderness and discuss what specific aspects of wilderness are key to the experience of adventure tripping.

For a working definition of the idea of wilderness the U.S. Congress provides a most succinct and concrete example. Over fifty years ago the U.S. Congress passed landmark legislation giving legal definition to the term. This legislation, termed "The Wilderness Act", was written with the intention of defining lands that would be intentionally set apart. The definition therein is surprisingly simple. "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."<sup>7</sup> With this straightforward definition of wilderness in hand it is the key aspects in the experience of wilderness that next must be discussed. Experiencing wilderness is profound in and of itself. But in juxtaposition to a life increasingly filled with screens, cars and cities the profundity of wilderness grows and two key aspects emerge: touch and time.

Central to the wilderness experience of adventure is a simple life in which concrete experiences are accomplished literally by hand. Shelter is carried on the shoulders and built everyday with the hands. Fire for heat and cooking is gathered and started by hand. Food is carried, gathered and cooked by hand. Simple living is the concrete accomplishment of providing food, shelter and warmth on a daily basis. Confidence in oneself grows out

of this creative work done by hand. Also present in this creativity is a magnetic tug on a compass in our blood. Few who have lived simply would deny the primordial satisfaction of being pulled by the tug of that compass. In the touch of the hands-on experience of providing for oneself and others is the first profound aspect of the wilderness experience.

The profundity grows with consideration of a second aspect: the re-appropriation of time that the wilderness experience affords. In terms of re-appropriation of time consider Joshua Ploetz, a combat veteran of two tours in Afghanistan with the U.S. military. Ploetz “found direction-and became an inspiration-paddling a canoe the length of the Mississippi River. Ploetz said he needed every inch of the river’s more than 2,300 miles to paddle away the demons of war, or at least calm them a bit. ‘It slows life down so you can appreciate things in life,’ he said.”<sup>8</sup>

A slow life of wilderness living is juxtaposed to the fast life and immediacy demanded by digital connectivity. Time is re-appropriated for the consideration of necessary thought-time to think. As Ploetz articulates it, “all you have to do is think about things that you may not want to think about, things that just appear or things that you should think about, and you kind of work things out in your head.”<sup>9</sup>

The experiences of touch and time are integral to the experience of life in a place set apart-wilderness. But these integral aspects do not stand alone in the praxis of wilderness tripping. The development of sacred authentic identity within the experience of wilderness tripping involves others. That is, as praxis it also involves community. A wilderness tripping experience must be had within the context of a community. A small group is ideal, even one other will do, but it cannot happen alone.

To help understand the importance of community in the praxis two partners enter into the conversation from the last century, Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For both Levinas and Bonhoeffer the idea of the authentic was essential. Each enters the conversation from a different perspective but both provide deep insight into sacred authentic identity. With the limitations of this paper only a brief overview of their thoughts as pertinent to our conversation is manageable. Neither treatment is authoritative in scope but rather suggestive for a continuing conversation of sacred authentic identity.

### *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*

Rising out phenomenology’s reaction to the neo-Kantianism of the nineteenth century Emmanuel Levinas sought a concrete answer to the move away from the autonomous I. In doing so he located the concrete in the face of the other-the actual real face that can be touched.

How Levinas accomplished this was by shifting the subject from the autonomous I of the self straightaway to the other. Utilizing his own terminology Levinas removed subjectivity from the same, the autonomous I which he named “Totality”, and placed it outside of Totality in the other, which he named “Infinity”. Totality is understood to define the limits and boundaries of selfhood. We are unable to breakthrough those limits in our objectivity, of our own accord, hence it is our Totality. In its subjectivity the other appears as Infinity to our objectivity, irreducible and lying beyond a divide. This divide Levinas names “Exteriority”. Because of this divide the other is completely foreign to the same and exterior to it in every way.

Articulated as such, the title of his masterpiece, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, is revealing. We began to understand Levinas’ concern in the work as the articulation of a whole new system in which the search for truth is in the transcendence of totality’s exteriority toward infinity.

What is more, while the search for truth is in the direction of Infinity from Totality, the origin of the transcendence manifests itself in the opposite direction, in the demand of Infinity on Totality. Which is to say that while the gap is bridged from “the same” to the other, it only happens because of the demand presented by the presence of the other. This demand of the other is, as Levinas puts it, “the stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself.”<sup>10</sup> The demand is an epiphany and a shock to the totality of “the same.” It is revelation.

This epiphany and shock that is revelation occurs in a very concrete manner between “the same” and the other. It occurs concretely, in the face-to-face encounter between totality and infinity. This encounter is the realization of transcendence. It is revelation. It is touch.

As Adriaan Peperzak explains “the infinity of the other’s face, that is, its exteriority and absoluteness, its impossibility of being ranged among the phenomena of my world and of being seen as a figure against a wider background, is the only possible revelation of the infinite.”<sup>11</sup> This is to say, the face-to-face encounter prevents any manufacture of an idea on the part of the self in which the other may be taken in and constituted within the same. The face presents an exteriority that cannot be overcome.

“The idea of Infinity is *revealed*, in the strong sense of the term. There is no natural religion. But this exceptional knowledge is thus no longer objective. Infinity is not the ‘object’ of a cognition, but is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*.”<sup>12</sup>

Infinity arouses desire for the concrete face-to-face encounter. Desire plays an important role at this point. Desire is not to be confused with need, which drives our consumer culture as it is directed at fulfilling what is lacking. Desire, on the other hand, takes on a transcendental role in the relation with the other. It takes the form of the transcendent relation between the desiring subject that is totality and the desired other that is infinity. As such, desire cannot be truly satisfied. True satisfaction of desire would be the closing of the relation, the outcome of which would be the death of the subject, the end of the relation.

Lastly, we must consider the demand of the other. “The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> The nature of the response to this demand is simple. It is ethical. The response is one of responsibility, care and concern for the other. The nature of this response forms the core of Levinas’ system.

To place Levinas into our conversation is to articulate that the face on the other side of the campfire demands a responsibility from us from which we cannot turn away. We must care for the other-for each other-in the daily life of adventure tripping-in our daily life together.

## Bonhoeffer and Stellvertretung

For anyone familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that term rings like a bell. *Life Together*, after all, is his reflections on the life he lived together with the students of his underground seminary. The book also contemplates what would be necessary for renewal within the church community. At the heart of this book is Bonhoeffer’s idea of “*Stellvertretung*”. The idea is central to Bonhoeffer’s work throughout and consideration of his contributions cannot be complete without it. *Stellvertretung* is Bonhoeffer’s contribution to our conversation as well.

*Stellvertretung* is a term whose use was expanded by Bonhoeffer. The editor’s footnote in his first work, *Sanctorum Communio*, defines it as, “literally the word means to represent in the place of another-to act, advocate, intercede on behalf of another; we translate this as ‘vicarious representative action.’ As a theological concept in the strict sense it is rooted in Christology”<sup>14</sup> but throughout his body of work *Stellvertretung* evolves. Initially in *Sanctorum Communio* it is “solely the reality of the divine love for the church community; it is not an ethical, but a theological concept.”<sup>15</sup> But more than ten years later, in his compiled *Ethics*, the use and the realm of the concept have expanded, both beyond doctrine to include moral action and beyond the church to include to whole of humanity. “As vicariously representative life and action, responsibility is essentially a relation from one human being to another.”<sup>16</sup> As life and action, from one human being to another, *Stellvertretung* concerns itself with the whole of a human’s life.

Understanding *Stellvertretung* as the heart of the new life lived in the mandates requires something further to be stated. Returning to Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* he states “vicarious representative action and therefore responsibility is possible only in completely devoting one’s own life to another person. Only those who are selfless live responsibly, which means that only selfless people truly *live*.”<sup>17</sup> *Stellvertretung* is devotion to the other.

Larry Rasmussen finds the importance of the “other” in Bonhoeffer’s Christology and articulates it as such. “The ontological structure of man is thus located in the self-other relationship, just as the ontological structure of Christ is located in Christ’s being-for man, nature and history.”<sup>18</sup>

Lisa Dahill explains the “other” in drawing on the sociological work within *Sanctorum Communio*, “Bonhoeffer overwhelmingly identifies the “other” (whether divine or human) as the experienced locus of transcendence, drawing a person’s attention away from one’s own self as “totally claimless,” sterile, and isolated to find authentic life and reality in surrender to the “absolute demands” of the other.”<sup>19</sup> The authentic life and reality that Dahill mentions is *Stellvertretung*.

Rather than life viewed as a series of events from which one proceeds in ethical action, life is lived in *Stellvertretung*. The selflessness of *Stellvertretung* is not something that is achieved but rather the freedom given in the new life formed in baptism. In this we are free to live our lives for the ones gathered around the campfire.

For both Levinas and Bonhoeffer it is the real concrete persons with whom we come face-to-face that make us who we are. Our identity is defined by the other and comes to us from outside of our individual selfhood. In this way identity is made manifest by the authentic relationships we have with the other or, each other.

In conclusion the conversation returns to our campfire of adventure tripping as the praxis for the development

of authentic identity in youth. In a landscape filled with the virtual identities of a digital reality the nurturing of authentic relationships become more rare, often limited to the face-to-face interactions with another. This is a problem for youth as the limitation of concrete relationships at a crucial point in the development of their identity inhibits the development of an authentic identity. But the praxis of adventure tripping can remedy this for youth. Sitting across the campfire from the face of another brings one up against one's own limits in the concrete world of flame and firelight. The limits revealed in the praxis of flame and firelight reveal a responsibility for others, offering a true glimpse into the reality of one's authentic self.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Nachbar, Jack, and Kevin Lause. "An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What is this Stuff that Dreams are Made Of?" *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*. Ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992. p. 6. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Forbes, Bruce. "Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places." *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Ed. Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p.5. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, Hannah *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) p. 179. Print.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 184

<sup>5</sup> (1) A carnival or amusement park attraction consisting of a maze or series of passageways lined with mirrors, especially curved mirrors giving distorted reflections. (2) A confusing or disorienting situation in which it is difficult to distinguish between truth and illusion or between competing versions of reality. "hall of mirrors". (1, 2) *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*. 5th ed. 2013. Web. 24 April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Louv, Richard, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008) p. 66-67. Print.

<sup>7</sup> United States. 88th Congress. Second Session September 3, 1964 section 2 (c) Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S. C. 1131-1136). Print.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert, Gerald. "Former Marine paddles away 2 tours in Afghanistan." *Washington Times*. 7 Aug. 2014. Web. 7 Aug. 2014.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Levinas Emmanuel *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 39. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Peperzak Adriaan *To the Other* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993) p. 142. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, p. 62

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich *Sanctorum Communio Vol. 1 DBWE* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) p. 120, footnote. Print.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 156

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich *Ethics Vol. 6 DBWE* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) p. 259

<sup>17</sup> *Ethics*, p. 259. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Rasmussen, Larry *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reality and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) p. 19. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Dahill, Lisa "Jesus for You: A Feminist Reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology." *Trinity Lutheran Seminary*. October 2005 p. 3. Print.