Getting away to get it together

Temporary community empowering families to change

Digby Hannah

Camping as an effective tool for change in the lives of individuals and families is well established. However, models which provide a theoretical base for camping with families are rare. This paper provides one such model. Drawing upon many years of experience of camping with disadvantaged groups, the author develops three broad principles which underlie this family camping model. First is the importance of diversity in defining community, enhancing mutuality and encouraging volunteerism. Second is the unique opportunity which temporary community affords for empowerment – releasing the insidious grip of relational power, structural authority and learned helplessness which can stifle personal change, especially for disadvantaged families. The final key element is the natural world and its therapeutic potential to spawn images and experiences which provide the basis for individual and family change.

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A series of structured, residential programs have been developed for families facing stress and breakdown or who carry extra burdens arising from low income, social disadvantage, disability or psychiatric illness. Integral to the development of these 'temporary communities' has been a philosophy of diversity and empowerment coupled with a range of outdoor experiences, intergenerational exercises and formal groupwork for parents and children. For many vulnerable families, traditional didactic models of parent and family education have not been effective. Temporary community is one of many alternative and innovative responses to the need for nurturing systems for families experiencing breakdown and crisis. This paper draws on many years experience and the insights gained from operating a seaside camp for disadvantaged groups and the literature on camping and outdoor activities as a therapeutic experience.

CAMPING AS A TOOL FOR INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STRENGTHENING

The effectiveness of camping programs as a tool for human development has been reported in a range of publications. A useful overview of camping and outdoor activities as psychosocial interventions has been compiled by Norman Kelk (1994). This review describes outdoor and camping programs designed to effect change within many groups commonly seen by social workers. Research is cited which indicates that camping programs can be effective in bringing about psychological change and contributing to personal, physical, social, and spiritual development. Programs have, for example, reported the effective reduction of the rate of offending youth, the raising of the self-esteem of participants, the improvement of the subsequent school performance of underachieving youth and the relief of core psychiatric symptomology for chronically ill, long-term psychiatric hospital patients.

Most studies referred to in Kelk's (1994) overview are concerned with individual personal growth rather than family strengthening. There are, however, several separate reports of residential programs geared towards family intervention. A therapeutic program to prepare parents and children for the return of a child to their family following incidents of abuse or neglect has been described by Schulz, Wilson, Newton, Van Epenhuysen and Holzworth (1991). This residential program, involving intensive work over the period of a week, claimed largely positive outcomes. Benefits to the families included new personal understandings and skills; improved interactions between family members; new parental insights into children's needs and behaviours and into the effects of their behaviours on their children; an enhanced ability to express feelings and control aggressive actions; a greater understanding of intergenerational patterns and traditions; and a new hope that established patterns could be broken.

Berger (1981) reported a series of weekends for client families with

children who were at severe risk of abuse. These residential programs were designed to reduce the social isolation of families, to model positive parenting skills, to enhance the self-esteem of parents and to allow workers to more accurately observe parent/child interactions. One reported consequence of these programs was an improvement in the relationship between families and the workers of a statutory agency which had tended to be viewed with suspicion by client families.

Developed in the early 1990s, the *Endeavour Model* has extensively used camping as a tool for the strengthening of vulnerable families. Various theoretical concepts from personality, adult education and group work theories have been incorporated into one generic model. *Early Endeavour* programs involved young mothers and their children and offered structured residential programs designed to offer experiential learning opportunities that would lead to informed choices about life goals. A very useful package of material, entitled *Challenge, Choice and Change*, has been compiled by Chapman, Brewer-Eizele and Stevenson (1994) which effectively describes the rationale and methodology of these innovative programs.

Many of the aspirations and observations reported by the above authors are consistent with those experienced in the programs to be described in this paper. These programs will be referred to as 'temporary community', a term borrowed from Tom Slater (1984). The approach has been eclectic and its aims diverse. Program goals have incorporated individual and family goals as defined by participants and their workers. Examples of these have included the provision of respite care; a safe and supervised environment for children to spend time with a natural parent from whom they have been separated; support for a parent caring for a child with a disability; and a significant element of a family reunification process. In a more general sense, the temporary communities have aimed to provide opportunities to families who would not otherwise have such chances to gain confidence and self-esteem, to enhance family relationships, to experience harmonious community living, to learn social and parenting skills, to appreciate the outdoors and to develop spiritually.

The programs were first established in 1979 at the site of a former boys' home located at Phillip Island, Victoria, overlooking Westernport Bay. These experiences of temporary community, typically five or six days in duration, have involved groups of approximately 10 families or fragments of families who live in residence together with several paid staff and approximately 15-20 volunteer workers of wide-ranging skills and ages from late teens to elderly. The programs have been ostensibly recreational with activities including storytelling, drama, singing, groupwork, craft work and inter-generational games. A great deal of time has been spent in the outdoors, at the beach, along diverse and beautiful coastlines, cycling, walking, swimming, surfing, canoeing and camping under the stars. While careful program planning and purposeful structuring of activies were necessary, in order for the experience to be genuinely empowering of all participants, a degree of open-endedness and flexibility of program elements were also essential. As an adjunct to the family camps an adventure program has been established for teenagers. These programs have incorporated some more challenging activities such as bushwalking, rock climbing and abseiling. The model, developed over an eighteen-year period, has several key ingredients which include:

- a diverse community;
- a genuinely empowering process;
- the therapy of the outdoors.

A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

There are camps for asthma sufferers, for young people with cancer, camps for parents with children who endure arthritis and for those who have an autistic or cerebral palsied child. Specialist camps have been designed for all manner of purposes – like the program described by Schulz et el (1991) for parents whose children have been removed and who are hoping for family reunification. We believe there is great potential in all such specialist models due to the inherent qualities of the residential environment. The model for which we have opted, however, is that of a diverse albeit disadvantaged community. Whilst this approach makes more difficult the task of setting circumscribed goals, it also has some practical and philosophical advantages.

Diversity which avoids stigma

Where a temporary community is being used as a therapeutic process to enhance a person's development, it is important to ensure that there is sufficient diversity within the make up of the community to avoid stigma. It is also important to give consideration to other elements of community life.

In some programs, such as that reported by Schultz et al (1991), certain limits are consciously placed upon the community experience. Some programs require the therapists to maintain distance and objectivity from the community process in order to maintain the therapeutic relationship. In other programs the therapists are required to fully participate in the community life. This approach is often criticised because the therapeutic relationship can become confused and the family can lose sight of its goals.

As distinct from the above approaches, the temporary community program at Phillip Island recognises that positive change and the reframing of self-perception tends to occur as a product of life of the community rather than from any specific formal therapeutic relationship. The program very much relies on the therapeutic process and change occurring without any apparent influence from therapists or helpers. This is not to say that individuals and families don't gain from their relationships with workers and volunteers. Indeed they can gain a great deal from such relationships. The program just stresses the role of community life rather than individual therapeutic relationships as the means of change and positive growth.

✧ ***As dusk settles on the second day of camp a contented group of campers mingle around the camp-fire as others finish erecting their tents for the overnight camp-out. Amongst the eager campers is Jason, aged 12, who suffers from a congenital disorder which displays a number of physical and***

psychological symptoms. Jason has been in perpetual noisy motion ever since setting foot at camp. Particularly intrusive has been his loud but unintelligible shouting and gesturing during times such as story telling and community singing, especially when silence or cooperation has been sought. How to cope with Jason's intrusions is a problem as yet unsolved by this temporary community. But could a solution be already in the making? Surely not in the form of 'Big Brian'.

Big Brian is large. The bus, with its wide sliding door, made a special trip to collect Brian from his home as he was too big for any of the volunteers' cars. Apart from his voluminous presence, Brian has so far made very little impact on camp. He has no desire to interact with any other campers, preferring to control his private world by means of a Walkman with head-phones permanently attached to his ears. But as we survey our generally industrious community we could be excused for not noticing two communing figures, one small and another very large, comfortably reclining on the sand under a tree. For the past hour or more, headphones off, Brian has been deep in conversation with Jason. Till now neither party has been known for conversing with anyone! While the substance of the conversation can only be a matter for wildest conjecture, here is the first sign which heralds a change in behaviour for two important members of this community. (Hannah, 1991)

✧ *Karen, Adrian and Sheree met each other at camp. Both Adrian and Sheree were student volunteers and Karen was a mother of five children. Her two very young children were with her on camp; two of her older children had been placed in care; and her eldest child, whom she had not seen or spoken to since birth, was 17 years old. Karen, Adrian and Sheree were enjoying a late night yarn in the dining hall when they happened to touch upon the subject of adoption. Karen deeply regretted adopting her eldest child. She wished she could make contact with him but felt too afraid as she was sure that he would resent the fact that she gave him up as a baby. Coincidentally both Adrian and Sheree, who had not known each other before volunteering on this camp, were themselves adopted. Adrian had lately been giving a great deal of thought to the idea of tracing his birth mother but he, in turn, was very anxious that his reappearence in her life could be an unwelcome event and consequently a very hurtful one for both of them. Sheree had recently arranged a successful reunion with her natural mother and had met other members of her extended family. These three people had an enormous amount in common. They talked long into the night and were able to express hopes and fears which they knew were understood by others who shared key roles in the equivalent life-dramas. Their conversation was uncontrived. It was cathartic, enlightening and reassuring. It left each person with fresh insights, new empathy and a sense of hope.*

Diversity which allows for the integration of people with disabilities

To have a disability is not necessarily to be blind or in a wheelchair. One in every eight Australians has a disability. If the definition of disability is extended to those with psychiatric illness then the proportion of the population is greater – one in five Australians will suffer from such an illness at some time in their lives. Many people with disabilities do not at first *appear* to be disabled. Some disabilities like Down's syndrome and paraplegia are apparent. Others like ADHD, asthma, hearing or visual impairment, epilepsy and schizophrenia are invisible. Many people who have not had the chance to interact with people with disabilites have a natural fear, or even revulsion, born of ignorance. It is easy to assume that because a person cannot walk, hear or speak, they cannot think or feel. However, conditions which affect bodily functions, including the mechanics of speaking, do not necessarily affect intellectual functioning.

Disability has been described as one of the 'last bastions of segregation' (Owen 1985). There remains a stubborn reluctance for generalist programs to allow for, let alone encourage, the involvement of people with disabilities. One of the reasons for this is the *invisibility* of people with disabilities. If their condition is not within our realm of experience, we simply do not see them. It is similar to the person who, on becoming pregnant, suddenly notices all the other pregnant women in her immediate environment. Socialising all too frequently covertly counsels the maintenance of a comfortable distance from those people who are different. In addition to this invisibility, says Owen (1985), is the psychological resistance arising from our *fear* of including people with disabilities:

> Not too many years ago, otherwise observant white folk admitted having difficulty recognising differences between one black person and another ... In the same way that differences of race may have threatened a racist society, so may we be intimidated now by the realisation that disabilities and physical vulnerability are a natural part

> of the human condition. We worship a physical perfection that few of us can possibly attain ... When our aspirations exceed reality by such a degree, it is small wonder people with obvious handicaps assault our ideal of ourselves and raise frightening questions about our own vulnerability. (Owen 1985)

Crossley (1984) furthermore suggests that our prejudices are graduated and the community at large is first of all more willing to accept an individual who is blind than someone, say, who is hearing impaired and with whom it is difficult to communicate. Other disabilities, she says, are even further down the scale:

> Attractive people in wheelchairs do reasonably well in the esteem stakes, but people with obvious deformities, or whose limbs jerk and twitch, or who dribble, come very low down, and will generally be considered as having intellectual impairments as well as physical. They are the 'spaccos'. The bottom category of all contains those who are perceived as 'mental' – people who are intellectually disadvantaged, people who have a psychiatric illness. (Crossley 1984)

For many people, disability means exclusion – exclusion from resources which most take for granted, exclusion from normal education, normal holidays, normal friendships and exclusion from the opportunity to *contribute*. Not only is this alienation unjust, but the remainder of the community thereby deprive themselves of an array of experiences, interests, skills and insights.

Parents of children with disabilities are sometimes blamed rather than given extra help. They are frequently exhausted by their attempts to provide for the needs of their disabled child. A family camp provides an ideal opportunity to assist such parents and to create a temporary community in which the contributions of *all* people are welcomed. The inclusion of people with disabilities in the camp community has in our experience necessitated the recruitment of extra volunteer helpers who are briefed as to the particular requirements of the participating campers who have disabilities. People with disabilities are delighted to be accepted as a legitimate part of a *normal* community. Their presence brings all sorts of educational and other benefits to campers.

It is our belief that children from socially damaged backgrounds are sometimes more adept at the process of integration than are those of us from 'more respectable' backgrounds. Those 'with nothing to lose' who are accustomed to speaking their minds, frequently establish quite straightforward relationships, while others hang back. There may also be a certain affinity between individuals who are familiar with some of life's more painful knocks. There is no doubt that the intense experience of living at close quarters with others is a very effective remover of the artificial barriers which separate one person from another. Film Victoria has produced an excellent video entitled *All in together* (1984) which effectively discusses and promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in camping programs.

Diversity which encourages a range of voluntary contributions

A diverse community exhibits a variety of needs which calls for a breadth of skills. In addition to the professional groupwork or casework skills which may be required there is room for recreational, leadership, artistic, musical, dramatic, cooking, cleaning, nurturing and listening skills, to name just a few. Volunteers of all ages can be placed – those of grandparent vintage included. Volunteers with limited skills and with few opportunities to contribute to society can be welcomed with open arms. A small extract from a description of a day in the life of a temporary community will suffice as an illustration (identifying details have been altered).

✧ *Arthur, along with his able assistant, Russell, are in the kitchen preparing a batch of their famous coleslaw for the evening meal. Arthur is 28 years old, currently out of work and living on his own. He is tertiary-trained but has for years found it difficult to gain employment. He has a variety of skills which are put to great use on his regular visits here as a volunteer. Several years ago at camp, Arthur met the twins Russell and Brent. These brothers both suffer from a congenital condition which exhibits a collection of physical and intellectual disabilities. As Arthur resides quite close to the boys' family group home he has become their good friend.*

While Russell works contentedly in the kitchen Brent is equally happy in the playground helping Kerryn supervise the toddlers. Brent is running awkwardly, ball in hand, with several toddlers in hot pursuit while Kerryn retrieves a runaway from half way up the slide. Kerryn, a 17 year old girl from Mildura, first participated at the camp 18 months ago as one of several homeless teenagers in the company of their social worker. Kerryn enjoyed this experience and expressed her keen desire to return as a volunteer. At the time volunteers were plentiful and her attendance was not strongly encouraged but she was told that if she could arrange her own transport from such a great distance, she would be welcome. Kerryn duly arrived with eager smile on day one. Already she has proven herself to be a most reliable helper, especially with young children. One of her favourites is two year old Dillon. Having rescued him from the slide she distracts him with tickles and cuddles. Dillon is the youngest of three children who are in the care of their father, Ray, who has taken advantage of being child-free today and has retreated with Craig and his borrowed fishing rods to the jetty. (Hannah 1995)

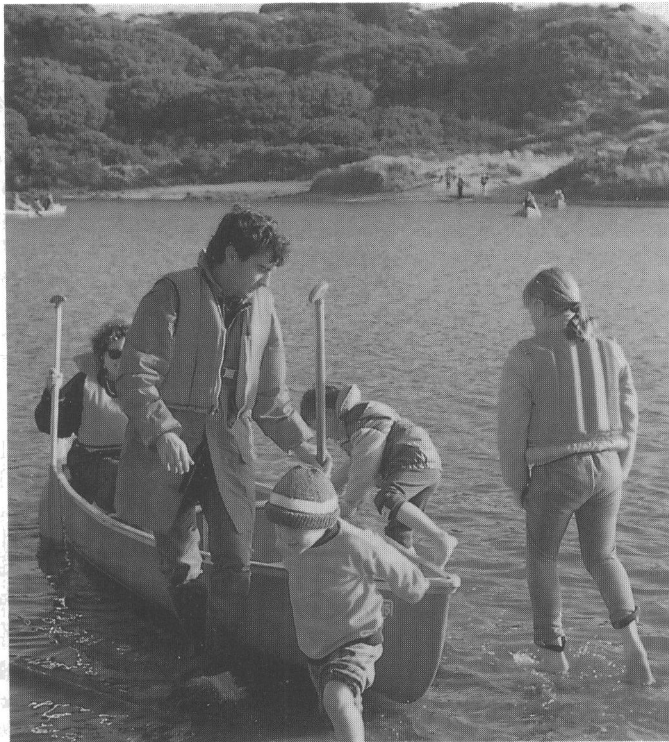
A GENUINELY EMPOWERING PROCESS

Empowerment and learning

In an influential article on parent education for vulnerable families, Wendy O'Brien (1991) drew attention to the failure of most available packaged parent education programs to reach acutely vulnerable families in most urgent need of parenting support. Parents who are unaware of the impact of their own behaviour upon their child's development will not be motivated to learn. Parents whose culture does not extend to 'discussion groups', who have had negative experiences in schools and who have limited reading skills will be unlikely to respond to formal invitations to

parent education programs involving a didactic or groupwork approach. Other models of learning must be developed in order to achieve the purposes of parent education. Practitioners must invest time in the development of trust with vulnerable parents, in overcoming negative associations with traditional learning settings, enhancing self-esteem, dealing with past hurts, addressing powerlessness and imparting a sense of hope. The temporary community is an ideal context in which to begin achieving these objectives. According to O'Brien (1991):

> All human beings need to feel wanted and appreciated: belonging to a social group is a basic human drive. When people have a strong sense of belonging, they feel good about themselves, are more willing to be outgoing and join in the group's activities.



The development of an atmosphere of trust and of a sense of belonging is possible within a community in which all are equally valued and where the contribution of each member is recognised and appreciated.

✧ *It was several years before her worker persuaded Rhonda and her very shy son to come to camp. Rhonda was a recluse who appeared unwilling to be 'touched' either emotionally or physically. The idea of living for several days with strangers was quite terrifying. Upon her arrival at camp Rhonda immediately expressed her desire to return home. She and her son were offered a self-contained flat which was separated some distance from the rest of the accommodation. She reluctantly agreed to stay, with the proviso that she and her son would only join in when they felt comfortable about it. Though she found it very difficult to mix, she persisted. At the end of the first camp it was apparent that the ice was melting – a genuine hug signalled change. During several camps and subsequent visits to her worker she commenced the slow process of healing her past hurts. The emergence from her cocoon was symbolised by her eventual decision to move out of her secluded quarters to join the rest of the temporary community with whom she now belonged.*

Reframing established power relationships

Temporary community provides a microcosm in which the power structures familiar to vulnerable families and individuals can be reframed. It can be a temporary sub-culture aspiring more closely to the ideals where all have equal dignity and value. Such an environment challenges the learned helplessness which characterises many disadvantaged groups. The phenomenon of learned helplessness occurs when individuals are faced repeatedly with humiliating events over which they have no control. The ensuing sense of resignation leads to an inability to take control of life events when opportunities to do so are available (Myers 1992). Given the right environment, perceptions of helplessness can change.

A common discovery within temporary community on the part of single mothers who care for several children is that they have for a long time neglected their own needs – the need to have an interest beyond their family or their need for adult friendship and interaction. The boost to self-esteem experienced at camp is often all that is required for a mother to resume control over this important part of her life. For women who are isolated, the effort required to establish meaningful contact with others in the community can be daunting. The friendships which occur at camp are therefore quite anomalous to them. These friendships come to them as welcome showers in lives accustomed to the desert of mere survival for the sake of their children. It is little wonder that these friendships are treasured and vigorously pursued in the months and years that follow. One mother explained, prior to camp, that the reason she had no telephone was that she had no friends to talk to. Upon her return home she immediately arranged for a phone connection – apparently she now had 40 friends!

The lessons of empowerment occurring within the temporary community transfer to other life situations. Dan Dustin (1989, cited by Chenery 1993) expressed the potential for the small human-scale community to be a force for ongoing change:

> It affords campers the opportunity 'to family ... to sense their connectedness to other living things ... to have a glimpse of what can be ... to come home eager and enthusiastic, ready to take on the world.

There is no doubt that experiences of temporary community have significant and ongoing effects upon family relationships.

✧ *Two sole parent families were independently invited to the same temporary community. It was not known that the two families were well acquainted. Nor, indeed, were organisers aware that they had not been on speaking terms for a long time. The central metaphor of camp was that of the rainbow. Its colours, for example, were seen as a*

symbol of the diverse and colourful people comprising that temporary community. The rainbow's promise of sun after rain was a reminder of hope and change. Mid-way through camp the two mothers were innocently placed in the same group whose task was to explore ways of mending broken promises and making new beginnings. During this session the two women talked to each other. They wept together and were reconciled. The families returned home together – in communication.

✧ *One member of a family comprising three generations spoke of some changes as a result of camp. 'We now eat meals together, whereas before we did not.' she said. 'We thank God at the beginning of the meal like we did on camp. Things have changed in our family life, there is more harmony.'*

Removing the helper/helped distinction

A carefully structured temporary community minimises the distinction between those who need help and those who are offering help. The assumption made here is that all of us are on pathways which we hope are leading towards growth and maturity. Few have reached Maslow's or any other person's perceived peak of human existence. Our lives are *mutually* enriched, often in most surprising ways. If this belief is sincerely embraced then the distinction between those who have 'arrived' and those who have not is erased.

This dynamic can be disconcerting for professionals who have a clear understanding of their role boundaries and approach to therapy. David Andrews (1993) has elaborated on the diverse ways in which professional carers and therapists, often unwittingly, control the balance of power in their dealings with clients. They have a unique jargon which contributes to a mystique about their profession; it is in the interests of their own livelihood and status to have clients dependent upon their expertise; and placing oneself accountable to clients creates discomfort. According to Andrews, the specialisation of professionalism can also be destructive:

> Specialisation tends to fragment reality. Most of us break up the whole in order to deal with it bit by bit. In so doing very seldom do we deal with people as whole people. Most of us categorise problems and try to solve them in terms of their various parts. Many people find it frustrating to run around from one office to another in order to meet the various specialists who can attend to the various parts of their problem. When their problems are serious, when they have very few resources and are dealing with a lot of stress, the situation is not just frustrating, it is infuriating. (Andrews 1993)

Temporary community is an experience which is holistic and integrated, where relationships are mutual, where needs can be met in myriads of ways and where all members can experience empowerment.

✧ *Kevin had been unemployed for many years since a lifting accident at his work place left him with an injured back. An active man whose physical skills formerly allowed him to contribute to society and provide for his family, he was now languishing. After a couple of days at camp his family were enjoying themselves but Kevin indicated his intention to pack up and go home – this just wasn't his cup of tea. 'That will be fine', agreed the camp organiser. 'We were intending to ask if you could help us organise the overnight camp, but we can get others to assist.' Kevin's eyes lit up. 'If you need a hand with the camp-fire and with packing up, I'll stick around till it is done.' Kevin soon found his niche in a community where he became truly needed. He stayed to the end of camp and was keen to return whenever he could.*

THE THERAPY OF THE OUTDOORS

> Yes, the earth speaks, but only to those who can hear with their hearts. It speaks in a thousand, thousand small ways, but like our lovers and families and friends, it often sends its messages without words. For you see, the earth speaks in the language of love. Its voice is in the color of evening sky, the smell of summer rain, the sound of the night wind. The earth's whispers are everywhere, but only those who have slept with it can respond readily to its call. (Van Matre 1990)

Time spent in the outdoors can be richly rewarding. The moods and voices of nature enhance and reflect some of the deepest emotions and longings of human experience. The songs of the seasons in our own country speak of parched, tired, awesome, wind-scoured deserts; of the sweet smell of refreshing, relieving rain; of cold, relentless, flooding rivers; and of lush spring growth and shining yellow wattle. The Aboriginal people have always listened to the songs of the earth. The more recent migrants to this huge country arrived with less well-trained sensors and ambivalent feelings towards their new environment which, from the outset, appeared harsh, alien and forbidding.

The exhilaration derived from confronting earth, wind, fire, thunder, rain, sun, darkness and the like has unfortunately become all too rare for many of us. We have become more and more adept at insulating ourselves from the sights, sounds, smells and sensations of the natural world. We westerners spend on average 90 per cent of our time indoors. All manner of human devices have rendered us oblivious to the seasonal variations of heat, cold, wind, dust, rain and glare. The times when we return to the natural world have therefore become precious and memorable. One of camping's essential ingredients is spending plenty of time outdoors.

In reflecting upon the tendency of white Australians to retreat from their environment, David Tacey (1995) has recently argued that if as a nation we are to come of age spiritually we must allow ourselves exposure to our rugged and timeless country. Our writers such as Marcus Clarke, Patrick White and Randolph Stow and poets like Henry Lawson, Judith Wright and Les Murray have long sought to lead us in this direction.

> In Australia, landscape carries our experience of the sacred other. For two hundred years the majority of Australians have shielded themselves against the land, huddling together in European cities, pretending we are not in or part of Australia. But the land-scape obtrudes, and often insinuates

> itself against our very will, as so much Australian writing testifies. (Tacey 1995)

There is a well established claim that the natural world is an ideal arena for learning and human development and a place of solace and healing. Ray Handley (1992) who has for many years employed the outdoors as teacher and therapist for at-risk teenagers expressed this in the following terms:

> Since the dawn of history the wilderness experience has been an inspiration for harmonising people with their world. It has enabled an opportunity for insight and self-examination, providing a gateway to the soul and a means to understand the place of individuals in the complexities of both the natural and human world. Moses spoke to God, Jesus battled temptation, Mohammed sought refuge and Buddha enlightenment through experiences in the wilderness. The thoughts of Rousseau, Thoreau, Emerson, Merton, Whitman, Leopold and countless others echo the signigicance of the wilderness experience in the understanding of ourselves. (Handley 1992)

The family-based programs described in this paper have, for the most part, been quite different from the rugged ten-day wilderness adventures described by Handley. The natural world has nevertheless been a primary element in the model of temporary community employed. The variety of coastal habitats surrounding the site have been fully exploited by the programs. Isolated and rugged coastal cliffs afford scope for strenuous walking; inter-tidal zones teem with fascinating marine life; powerful, tumbling surf offers challenge and excitement; huge sand dunes allow energy release for rumbustious children and inhibited adults; sheltered coastal dunes provide for secluded campfires and comfortable nights sleeping under starry skies. Time spent in the outdoors is invigorating, renewing and restorative. But it is much more than just wholesome activity – the symbols and metaphors derived from the natural world can be powerfully incorporated into human learning and development. Experiences in the outdoors, furthermore, can provide the beginnings of significant change in self-perception and behaviour.

Symbols and metaphors from the natural world

The natural world has always been a source of imagery which speaks powerfully to the human condition. The natural imagery of germination, nurture, growth, decay, death and rebirth echoes our human experience and is present in cultural ritual and in religious language. The Australian environment is rich in natural imagery – a tired desert as dry as death springs into green life with the relieving rain; the diversity and interdependency of life teeming in an inter-tidal rockpool; a grotesque crawling insect which spins a cocoon and later emerges in winged beauty; or the epicormic shoots which burst from the black skeleton of a eucalyptus tree following a bushfire. An inexhaustable supply of such images lie often unnoticed all around us.

Each temporary community has chosen, almost at random, an image from the outdoors which has become the 'camp theme' and magic thread for integrating the various experiences which make up the week's program. Whether the image happens to be a rainbow, tree, footprints, stars, grain of sand, sun, rock pool, butterfly, or bird it seems not to matter. A grain of sand camp, for example, may appear to involve a peculiar fascination with something very mundane. But there will be monster sand castle building and creative sand sculpture on the beach; young and old will lose inhibitions as they tumble down steep dunes and feel sand between toes, under shirts, in hair, ears and nose; there will be stories and songs about sand, and various craft activities exploiting sand will be offered. Sand collected from different beaches turns out to be quite diverse. Grains viewed under a simple microscope are of all shapes sizes and colours – just like us. They comprise a very pleasing collection. They all have interesting histories – some quartz crystals derive from weathered rock in the mountains, some white flecks were once part of the skeleton of sea creatures. We can identify with those grains of sand. As we have learned to delight in the diversity of ordinary grains of sand so we learn to delight in one another. We too have histories which, as our temporary community welds, we will reflect upon together. Other examples of the use of such metaphors in learning have been referred to elsewhere (Hannah 1994).

Isomorphic experiences in the natural world

The educational and therapeutic value of experiences in the natural world has long been a theme of wilderness camping (Kelk 1994). Much of what has been gleaned by those engaging in adventure camping with young adults can be applied to family camping. Our own experience of adventure camping with teenagers in mountainous country has confirmed the value of these experiences. For a 'wilderness experience' to be significant, however, it has not been found necessary for it to be 'at least ten days duration in rugged conditions', as Handley (1992) has suggested. While the biblical precedent seems to have been the regulation 40 days it is also true that Jesus gained enormous refreshment from just one night in the mountains! The principles outlined by Handley and others, however, are most instructive. He refers to the idea of 'generalisation and transfer' whereby a person's experience in the outdoors is employed as a metaphor for personal growth and applied to future areas of life (Handley 1990). The same idea is conveyed by Shoel, Prouty and Radcliffe (1988) who observe the effectiveness of 'isomorphic experiences' which are characteristic of adventure camping. An isomorphic experience – one with 'the same structure' – provides a template upon which an individual's future experience can be based. These authors call this process 'generalisation'. Thus a student who had suffered a very disrupted home-life and struggled with her senior studies gained much sustenance from the memory of a marathon rowing trip which involved her staying up all night. 'I keep thinking of that trip when I am doing my school work ... that I can do more than I ever thought I could.' A similar process of transference has been described by John Scott (1991) who emphasises the importance of the individual's responsibility for changing his or her own behaviour:

> In many respects this form of therapy has direct links with behaviour therapy, rational emotive therapy and transactional analysis in that it stresses the individual's current behaviour and does not focus on the past, unconscious attitudes or insights. The therapist works with the dynamics that the natural setting can provide and the activities which challenge the young person's in a very practical and immediate nature. The therapist or outdoor instructor aids in using these situations to evaluate one's behaviour back in the 'real world'. (Scott 1991)

Experiences in the outdoors do not necessarily have to be epic and isolated for them to be significant and potentially 'isomorphic'. A young mother with three small children was no candidate for an adventure camp. However she included amongst her cherished memories such camp experiences as:

> ...being able to often leave my children in bed in the early mornings while I borrowed a wetsuit to go body-surfing while the others were board-riding; lying on my back on a cliff top in the moonlight watching what seemed like thousands of mutton birds dive and glide over my head; enjoying with a traditional Lebanese woman in her thirties running and rolling down the sandhills.

Other wilderness camping exponents such as Stolz and West (1995;1996) have recently drawn upon theorists like Gregory Bateson and practitioners like Michael White in furthering their understanding of the potential of experiences in the outdoors. According to White's (1991) narrative theory, all people nurture their own life stories or 'dominant narratives' by which they live. These stories, which provide a certain continuity and coherence to people's lives, have real and not imaginary effects upon their behaviour. The members of socially dysfunctional families tend to have debilitating and 'problem saturated' narratives and descriptions of their own lives which have self-fulfilling consequences. White's approach involves a search for past facts or events in a person's life which provide the nuclei for the generation of new stories which contradict existing problem-ridden stories. The development of an alternative story reframes old problems and becomes the basis for changes in self-concept and behaviour (White 1989). White's search for new facts or events is primarily a historical one. But what better place to find this information than in the midst of a memorable outdoor experience and in the presence of others who can validate the emergence of a new story? Thus Stolz and West (1995) argue for a wilderness context in which:

> ...the problem which has dominated students' and parents' views of themselves and their world becomes secondary. By exposing participants to a variety of experiences the new and therapeutic context – the wilderness – helps students discover new information about themselves ... If they can see themselves as being able to behave differently sometimes, this may provide the basis for developing a different and empowering way of thinking about themselves and for behaving differently in the future. (Stolz & West 1995)

From eighteen years' experience of using the temporary community model with families it has certainly been observed that small events in the lives of families have ushered in long-term change. Something as small as the songs sung at camp may have a profound effect. A young teenager who had visited camp several times was suffering from a terminal illness. As he faced death during the last weeks of his life he exhibited great courage. In planning the songs and other details for his funeral his memories of camp figured prominently.

Many of the children who participated in programs during their younger years have returned as volunteers. Lessons learnt and memories of camps have been of great importance to these young people who have experienced deficient and chaotic versions of family life. For some, the photographs taken during camps have been the only ones they possess. Many mothers, likewise, have found ongoing supportive networks comprising solely of other parents and volunteers whose acquaintance they have made at camp.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers a qualitative and descriptive picture rather than a quantitative and measured study. This will not please some. The nature of temporary community is complex, diverse and not easily quantifiable. While outcomes are not always predictable and are often surprising,

this is not to say that some rigorous measurement cannot be achieved. It is hoped that this paper may go some way towards making a case that more carefully designed evaluation studies using this model should be put in place. While the methodology has been eclectic, this program has operated from a clear philosophical and theoretical base. This paper has endeavoured to expound three essential elements of this basis – diversity of the community, a genuinely empowering process and the therapy of the outdoors.

After eighteen years of experiencing the outcomes of temporary community with socially vulnerable families, the evidence for the value of this model is compelling. There are many for whom brief experiences of temporary community have born long-term effects beyond imagining. In attempting to summarise the range of therapies which are demonstrably effective in helping people who are distressed, anxious, depressed or suffering from low self-esteem, certain common ingredients have been observed. The three important strands which have been recognised are:

- *hope for people who are dispirited;*
- *a new way of looking at oneself and the world; and*
- *empathetic, trusting, caring relationships* (Strupp 1986).

What better environment could there be for the expression of these three aspects of encouragement, enlightenment and healing than that of a temporary community? □

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