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## Winter outdoor trekking: spiritual aspects of environmental education

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This text deals with the potential spiritual aspects of being outdoors within the framework of non-formal and informal education. The course being examined was organized by the Vacation School of Lipnice – Outward Bound Czech Republic, and the participants in this course made up the research sample. While the research was not directly focused on the spiritual dimension of the human way of being, our analysis of the interviews ( $n = 12$ ) and the results of the Prague Spirituality Questionnaire ( $n = 10$ ) indicate a connection between the fortnight spent trekking through the winter landscape and spirituality in terms of the educational potential it has for personal development. The data obtained in the interviews may be structured into the following main semantic fields connected with nature: naturalness, the element of fire, senses, aesthetic perceptions, bad weather, and spiritual dimension. In the questionnaire respondents were inclined to include factors such as ethical enthusiasm, sense of belonging, and deep ecology. The results may be interpreted as suggesting that due to the immediacy of direct experience the two-week-long trekking journey in the winter landscape (snowshoeing and camping in tents) reinforces a dimension of environmental education that surpasses any rational verification and enters the spiritual realms.

**Keywords:** Winter trekking; spirituality; nature; naturalness; environmental education

### Introduction

There is a slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out, and which no cold can chill. [...] This subterranean fire has its altar in each man's breast, for in the coldest day, and on the bleakest hill, the traveler cherishes a warmer fire within the folds of his cloak than is kindled on any hearth.

Thoreau, H.D.: *A Winter Walk*. (in Thoreau 1863, 115–116)

Over 150 years ago, Henry David Thoreau expressed his belief in the educational potential present in nature – which offered those who consciously dwell in it an opportunity to restore their personalities by overcoming the dehumanization of civilization and to explore even deeper levels of their personality, deep enough to make such an experience spiritual. The following text presents the results of an investigation conducted among the participants of a winter outdoor trekking course held in the wilderness of the Slovak-Polish borderland and organized by the Vacation

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School of Lipnice – Outward Bound Czech Republic (henceforth VSL) according to the principles of outdoor and experiential education. The objective was to find out whether spiritual experience resulted from the course and, if so, what aspects were evoked. In other words, whether the participants in the course discovered ‘in the coldest day, and on the bleakest hill, a warmer fire than is kindled on any hearth’, as H.D. Thoreau put it. The course was conducted in the spirit of the discourse on the boundary between non-formal and informal education and entitled ‘Life Is a Gothic Dog’ (henceforth LGD). The title itself is rather a play on words (with an absurd meaning even in Czech, possibly as a Dadaistic game), nevertheless it became a trademark of this project, the concept of which might be considered legendary in the context of Czech outdoor and experiential education. The name was not our creation – it was proposed in the early 1990s, when plans were made to open such a course under the name LGD which, however, never took place and its creator died tragically. The thought of conducting such a course was revived by Miroslav Hanuš, partly in remembrance of this personality.

We have utilized an interesting model of personal growth through experience based on four directions proposed in the literature by Greenaway (1998), adapting a personal growth model originally developed by Giges and Rosenfeld (1976), which he terms the ‘four arrows’ model. This model includes: *upward* to achieve one’s full potential; *outward* to make contact with and encounter others; *inward* to increase our awareness of who we are; and *downward* to touch the earth. This model was also successfully used as a methodological basis for a literature review and thematic analysis of personal development through expeditions (Stott et al. 2015). However, unlike their study, we will concentrate on two of these directions. Firstly, we focus on the *downward* orientation, which is included in the course design and purpose, from which we can see the specific environmental aspects of this form of outdoor education as an intentional dimension of the course. Secondly, we survey the *inward* route, specifically the possible spiritual modus of participants’ experience, and its unplanned influence on participants which is rooted in being in nature and experiencing a natural way of being. Thus, our paper is primarily intended to appeal to environmental and outdoor educators rather than experts in tourism, sport science, resource managers, or other possible disciplines.

These courses (LGD 2011 and 2012) were researched repeatedly, using different methodological approaches, including systemic constellations (Jirásek et al. 2014), in-depth interviews and diaries (Svoboda and Veselský 2013), mind mapping (Jirásek 2015) as well as sociometric analysis and analysis of essays (Jirásek and Dvořáčková 2016). The goal of this survey is, however, to find a possible spiritual modus of experience directly connected with nature, the natural environment and human movement.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Environmental education and spirituality***

The possibilities of addressing spirituality in formal education have been discussed rather extensively during the last few decades (Carr and Haldane 2003; Glazer 1999; Jarvis 1993; Miller 2000, 2007; Miller et al. 2005; Moffett 1998; Palmer 1993, 2004, 2007; Wright 2001). English and Gillen, for example, argue for three factors that make spirituality more clear in an educational context: ‘awareness of something greater than ourselves, that moves one outward to others as an expression of one’s

own spiritual experiences' (English and Gillen 2000, 1). Apart from formal education, including learning that occurs through reflection on everyday experience (Watkins and Marsick 1992), informal education in particular has been recognized to have the potential to promote spiritual well-being (Nash 2009). This is all the more true if we wish to consider adults (English 2000), such as the participants in a winter outdoor trekking course, the subjects of our investigation. Here, however, it needs to be stressed that the spirituality we may encounter in the context of non-formal and informal education may not itself be formal.

The relationship between outdoor leisure and such spiritual well-being has been explored and reflected on (Heintzman 2010), however, the course we investigated was not based on simple outdoor leisure activities, but rather on a challenging March through snow-covered mountain terrain. The relationship between spirituality and movement – which played a crucial role in our investigation – has also been studied in a profound manner recently (Joslin 2004; Parry et al. 2007; Parry, Watson, and Nesti 2011). Needless to say, although the theme of the spirituality of movement has been well established in Czech academic circles (Bednář 2009; Hurych et al. 2013; or Jirásek 2010, 2011), the theme of spirituality in education – formal, non-formal, informal, or even directly environmental – has gained significance only very recently (Veselský et al. 2013).

Though it is not the case with academia as a whole. Environmental education and spirituality has already been explored and reflected on with inspiring findings. The relationship between outdoor leisure and such spiritual well-being was the subject of research of Behan, Richards, and Lee (2001) who surveyed 62 mountain bikers and 49 hikers in the wilderness (gaining a sense of peace and serenity and experiencing a sense of oneness with nature and cosmos); Trainor and Norgaard (1999) interviewed 100 wilderness users in California's Eldorado National Forrest (69% of them acknowledged the spiritual value of wilderness, 13% did not, 18% were unsure) etc. As for defining spirituality within environmental education, in spite the previous research, it still seems to be an ambiguous word with multiple meanings, and we partly agree with the question Stuart (2001) raises in the title of his article 'Is the Term "Spirituality" a Word that Everyone Uses, But Nobody Knows What Anyone Means by it?' Such ambiguity may also fit to the observation of Heintzman (2003), who – when summarizing the research findings on the wilderness experience and spirituality – realized that researchers usually let participants self-define the concept of spirituality. Nevertheless there have also been specific attempts at defining 'wilderness spirituality'. Our approach is very close to Ashley (2007, 65) who was going through various definitions of spirituality in environmental context and suggested a following definition of 'wilderness spirituality':

A feeling of connection and interrelationship with other people and nature; a heightened sense of awareness and elevated consciousness beyond the everyday and corporeal world; cognitive and affective dimensions of human understanding embracing peace, tranquillity, harmony, happiness, awe, wonder, and humbleness; and the possible presence of religious meaning explanation.

Though we find this definition satisfactory and fitting for our paper and research, we also assume that there may always be a kind of ambiguity connected with the subtlety of the concept of spirituality in environmental education. Thus, alluding to the opening quotation of Thoreau again, we may suggest: there seems to be no subterranean fire in nature and no physical altar in each man's breast, though there may be

some real experiential momentum beyond these words, words that may not fully express it, only symbolically point to it. Moreover, the experiential course LGD has never been explicitly oriented towards pursuing a spiritual experience, so it is only within the research that we took steps to frame the experiences of participants as spirituality in an environmental context. The participants were not directed to conceptualize their experience in relation to spirituality. Here it may be necessary to more precisely delimitate spirituality from religion, we perceive spirituality as a common aspect of shared humanness and at the same time as something that is highly individual and personal in the sense of being a specific human approach to interpreting and showing what brings the experience and the context. So we understand spirituality as a concept based on Scheler's philosophical anthropology (Scheler 1981) and Eliade's differentiation between the profane and sacral spheres (Eliade 1959), that is as a centre of personality, the vertical dimension of life that struggles for high ideals and deep ideas, for realization of ethical and aesthetical values (Jirásek 2013). To clarify the context of the research, we should sum up the specific characteristics of non-formal and informal education and briefly introduce the course itself.

### *The Czech way of non-formal and informal education outdoors*

We can generally think of the educational function of an experience on several levels (Hofbauer 2004; Păduraru 2013; Schwier and Seaton 2013):

- formal education, i.e. education and training in the institutional form of schools and educational institutions at all levels, the educational context of which is generally shaped by the relationship between curriculum and teachers and students, as well as the certification system;
- non-formal education, i.e. voluntary education based on interest, but institutionalized through Child and Youth Centres and clubs, as well as museums, libraries, theatres and other cultural institutions or non-governmental organizations which focus on organizing free-time educational activities or on professional development for interest groups and community initiatives;
- informal education, spontaneous, unsystematic, non-institutional and unorganized, often without direct educational objectives, but with behavioural effects; unlike the forms previously mentioned this is a lifelong process of accumulation of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The project that we have examined can be seen to lie on the boundary between the second and last categories – we can see some characteristics of non-formal, as well as informal education. The implementation of such a project naturally has educational parameters in terms of furthering the personal development of its participants; it does not, however, fit under compulsory or extracurricular education but is rather a leisure-time activity with no specific educational objectives.

Contrary to typical international Outward Bound courses, these are 'authorial courses' (which, like methodic courses, commissioned courses and others, are often quite diverse), prepared and realized exclusively by volunteers, who are members of VSL with different professions (teachers, as well as businessmen, doctors, coaches, even students). Courses are offered to the public through the web pages of VSL and

their participants are not only young people (such as school classes), but also adults. (Every authorial course at VSL is typically focused on a chosen age cohort.)

The goals of the projects were described in the project's 2011 final report as follows:

For us, it was a significant dramaturgical challenge to achieve our goal of intellectually framing this winter journey in such a way that it is not thought of as winter survival course or an endurance march through the mountains, but rather as a pilgrimage. Not only a pilgrimage to reach a destination, but more importantly a pilgrimage to discover oneself. (Hanuš 2011, 7)

We have to add at this moment, the word pilgrimage was understood by the team not as a religious activity (there is a difference between the Czech terms 'pout' and 'putování', both of which can be translated into English as 'pilgrimage'), but rather as wandering, peregrinating, trekking, without any sacral meaning. The main aim of the project was:

To provide, through the winter trekking experience, a space and opportunity for the participants to think about their values. To try to influence the attitudes of the participants and direct them towards a commitment to activity, responsibility, self-reliance/independence, voluntary modesty, initiative, a healthy sense of self and service to others. (Hanuš 2012, 12)

Thus, we can see, that there are some features of non-formal education (goals, aims, guidance and organized programs, etc.); however, it is also possible to identify some aspects of informal education (which were not prepared by the team of organizers, instructors). The question we are dealing with in this survey is focused on the spiritual modus of experience, which – as we see in the project's aim and proposal – was not included in its explicit formulation; thus, this modus was not among the intended impacts of non-formal education, only an unplanned result of informal education. Our question, whether the possible spiritual modus of experience (informal) is connected with nature, environmental and outdoor education (non-formal), is derived from the boundary between these educational approaches.

In the Czech context, there is a special term used to address the specific characteristics of the activities underlying such a concept (in particular, the courses offered by VSL): experiential education and 'course dramaturgy' is the elementary method of designing such a program. The term was adopted from art studies and given the new specific meaning of working pedagogically with the place, time, goals, themes, program means, people, etc. It has been employed in the educational context since the turn of the 1970s and 1980s (Drahanská 2009; Franc, Zounková, and Martin 2007; Gintel 1982; Holec et al. 1994; Hora et al. 1984; Paulusová 2004); in the international literature, the concept has been called program design or course design (Leberman and Martin 2005; Martin 2001; Martin, Franc, and Zounková 2004).

The particular course investigated was conducted under the title LGD. The course dramaturgy had been developed over more than a decade of its existence (in the past, its dramaturgy involved winter camping in teepees or programs inspired by mushing, involving dog sleds); in the years 2011 and 2012, when our research was conducted, it was based on three distinct program blocks, one following another. The initial weekend session was used to select the participants and provide them with information; the main part of the course was a fortnight trekking on snowshoes in the Bukovsky Hills in eastern Slovakia (along the borders of Slovakia, Poland and Ukraine); the final weekend was dedicated to social service in social welfare

institutions. The participants carried all their gear (tents, sleeping bags, cookers, food, tools, etc.) in backpacks as they snowshoed along a ridge on a route more than 100 km long. Apart from camping (erecting their tents, cooking, making fires), the evening program consisted of philosophically oriented conversations around the campfire (on themes such as the archetypal pilgrims Gilgamesh and Odysseus; the difference between tourists and pilgrims; the horizon, the journey and the destination; love: Eros and Agape; the horizon of death; the purpose of life; and service). The program also included a one-day stay in the village Osadná, a discussion with the local Orthodox priest and a visit to the local crypt to honour the remains of soldiers from the First World War.

The stay in a winter landscape and the physically demanding activities associated with it (enduring pain, gusts of wind, and the freezing cold) is a traditional program means of outdoor and experiential education. Nature, as well as paying tribute to the legacy of those who died young, opening up intellectually to themes related to deeper questions about the purpose of life. Also meeting and helping one another within the newly established collective contributed to the course LGD. It is already known from the literature that spirituality and traditional religious practices can inspire environmentally aware lifestyles (Haluza-Delay 2000), and contrary, wilderness experience should be a source of spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). If we think about specific wilderness spirituality (Ashley 2007), this raises questions about whether such an outdoor and experiential course without direct religious, or spiritual goals (or selected moments from it) can be regarded as spiritual and whether possible spiritual experience is due to this education taking place in a natural environment and can be a form of environmental education.

## **The method**

In order to understand the topic of spiritual experience it is appropriate to use a combination of approaches; therefore, we have chosen to make use of a mix of several techniques and approaches in our empirical investigation to answer our question about the spiritual experience of the course participants. The core of the data collected was the qualitative technique of unstructured interviews, complemented by a parallel questionnaire of a quantitative nature. By choosing this approach, we hoped that it would be possible to capture a variety of different aspects of the subject of our investigation. Similarly, in his review study Heintzman (2010) substantiated his thesis about the complex relationship linking trips in the wilderness to spirituality using a sample including quantitative and qualitative research focused primarily on this issue.

We did not proceed from a priori theory which should be tested in our research as a classical positivistic approach would suppose. However, neither did we want to formulate a posteriori theory based on our data which is a goal of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Instead of this we aim at understanding of participants' experience as made possible by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA deals with a detailed survey of living human experience without predefined categories. Analysis flows from reflexion on the researchers' experience with the topic through reading and repeated reading to initial notes and comments, to the development of emerging themes, to looking for links and connections, and the essential moment is interpretation going beyond the text itself (Řiháček et al. 2013).

### Sample

Our research was conducted with 12 (10M:2W) respondents, all of whom were participants in the course LGD in the years 2011 and 2012. These participants agreed to spend another weekend together in a holiday resort in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, a part of which consisted of the research program. All 53 participants were invited (M33: 20W). The sample of respondents is representative of the initial pool of participants in terms of characteristics such as age distribution and occupation. The main factor limiting the representativeness of the sample is the low number of women who participated in our research. In our investigation, women constituted one-sixth (2 out of 12 respondents), while the proportion of female participants in the course was much higher (20 out of 53). Although our research sample may not seem to be comprehensive enough, the qualitative methodology that was selected for this investigation anticipated such a possibility. Any follow-up collection of data from the remaining participants would not, due to the change in the research environment, bring results that could be included in the subsequent analysis (Table 1).

More specifically, our research sample consisted of two women and ten men. The age of our respondents varied in the range of 23–51 years, with the majority in the age group of 25–30 years. The participants in the VSL's experiential courses were quite varied in terms of their profession (a number of students along with entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, etc.). Their motivation for enrolling in the course as well as for their participation in the research weekend was quite diverse. The foremost reason for taking part in the course was a desire to acquire experience in an outdoor winter expedition along the lines of the course dramaturgy as defined by the organizers. One of the reasons may also be the fact that LGD is one of the most renowned courses offered by VSL, and has gained considerable popularity over the course of its existence – so the motivation here may also be to 'take part in the legendary course'. The motivation for participating in the research weekend was, most often, to meet their new friends from the course, to talk about their experience, and to remember the most intense moments. We should also consider the possibility,

Table 1. Sample.

Respondent	Age at the time of the course	Profession at time of course	Portion of course completed
1 female	23	Student	Entire course
2 male	25	Student	Entire course
3 female	26	Student	Entire course
4 male	27	Teacher	Withdrew after first week
5 male	36	Teacher	Entire course
6 male	25	Student	Withdrew after first week
7 male	32	Computer programmer	Entire course
8 male	32	Technician	Entire course
9 male	33	Economist	Entire course
10 male	51	Construction engineer	Entire course
11 male	44	Personnel manager	Entire course
12 male	25	Student	Entire course

however, that this may also have been why some of the invited participants felt discouraged and reluctant to take part in the meeting.

### ***The research tools***

The results of the research were derived from a triangulation of data collected by means of several research methods. In the course of the first day of the meeting, an individual in-depth interview was conducted with each participant and recorded on a voice recorder. The theme of the research was not disclosed to the respondents until the beginning of the interview. Every interview always started with the same question: 'Is there anything that really touched you during the course?'; our assumption was that if anyone encountered a spiritual moment during the course, it should be something that was remembered and sustained, something that stuck with them – in other words, something that really touched them. An approximately 30-min interview was conducted on the basis of this question.

We also chose unstructured interviews because we expected each to be highly personalized, following its own course according to the actual experience of the respondent – something that was fully confirmed by our research experience. Respondents were expressing their spiritual (and other) experiences in different words, following their personal and cultural constitution, and the format of the unstructured interview was ideal for grasping such subtleness of meaning. Although it could have felt a little intimidating for the our respondents (even if we clearly explained our reasons), all three researchers participated in interviewing each individual respondent in order to clear up any differences in language meaning we followed up each interview with a discussion between the interviewers. Our preliminary findings from the individual interviews provided general topics for the subsequent qualitative research techniques – focus groups. After the respondents learned about the objective of our investigation, the theme of a potential spiritual dimension was further developed by a moderator in coordination with all the informants.

After transcribing all the recordings, an analysis was made. We selected every sentences said by respondents which mentioned any topic dealing with nature and naturalness. These statements were then structured by means of repeated reading and sorted into tables using various categories which could be created from the collected material using content analysis.

The research design was then followed up with the Prague Spirituality Questionnaire (PSQ) (Říčan 2005; Říčan and Janošová 2004, 2005) as the only original Czech psychometric tool to measure spirituality in individuals. By using this research tool we hoped to obtain some sort of confirmation of the image formed during the first phase of the investigation. The questionnaire was completed by the respondents in an electronic form within one week after the meeting. We received 10 completed questionnaires that we used in order to complement each respondent's profile, based on the interviews. The questionnaire was thus used as a means of measuring how each respondent is tuned to the spiritual mode of experience; it allowed us to measure whether the described spiritual aspects of the course correlate with the individual respondent's inclination towards this mode of experience. This tendency is tested by Říčan's PSQ questionnaire with 36 assessed statements where the respondents express their degree of non/identification on a five point scale (Table 2).

Table 2. Prague Spirituality Questionnaire.

Prague Spirituality Questionnaire
1. Deep ecology
2. Ethical enthusiasm
3. Sense of belonging
4. Mystical experience
5. Conscientious concern
6. Latent monotheistic orientation

The individual statements are always anchored in one of the six factors of spirituality which are deep ecology, ethical enthusiasm, sense of belonging, mystical experience, latent monotheistic orientation, and conscientious concern (Říčan 2005). In his understanding of spirituality, Říčan applies Pargament's concept of spirituality as the experiential core of religion (Pargament 1999a). According to Říčan, such a definition implied an accentuation of imagination, metaphors of pathos, and experiences of mystery and fascination in the design of the questionnaire statements. Říčan and Janošová (2005) had originally proposed a five-factor model that was later, after statistical testing, adjusted by adding one more factor in order to maintain validity and inner consistency.

The first factor of deep ecology (Eco-spirituality) captures the sense of unity with all nature and sacred responsibility for it – considering the Earth as the mother, seeing trees as the brothers, respecting all animate or inanimate existence. Ethical enthusiasm (complemented with the last factor, conscientious concern) expresses a desire to begin again and in a better way, a dread of the possibility of ruining one's own life irreversibly, admiration of extraordinary good will in others, compassion for those who suffer, and aversion to the evil. The third factor, sense of belonging (togetherness), stands for the joy of human belonging and closeness in the 'unity of the spirit', the immense unity in diversity, etc. The factor of mystical experience involves a sense of unity with something that exceeds us, absolute tranquillity of the mind, ecstatic fascination with art, etc. The fifth factor, latent monotheistic orientation, expresses the fascination with 'the ultimate truth' and 'ultimate reality', death as a 'homecoming', etc. Each of the six factors in the questionnaire is tested by six items. Unlike Lorencová (2011), we assessed complete identification with a statement with a 1 point score, whereas complete disagreement scored 5 points. In the definition of items associated with the factor which is particularly significant for our purposes – deep ecology, Říčan follows the interpretation of Kohák (2011) concerning deep environmental identification, as described by John Seed, Joanna Macy and Pat Fleming in 'Thinking Like a Mountain' (1993), referring to a genuine emotional return to the essential self, which is not I, but the unity of the whole universe.

## Results

Our main attention was focused on the interviews compared with the results from PSQ. On the basis of our assumptions with respect to what spirituality is, the analysis of the interviews brought out several potentially spiritual dimensions of human experience, which may be structured into the following areas: community, nature, temporality, death, and transcendence. While nature is a main topic of this paper, we should shortly mention why these other phenomena should also be seen as spiritual.

Community was presented by respondents as the intensification of open relationships, the closeness and coherence of the group, etc. The relationship with others, empathy and dialogue, genuinely deep interpersonal relations explicitly express the spiritual dimension of life, or even the ‘embodiment of spirituality’ (Robinson 2007). Temporality was perceived as a specific possibility for introspection, thinking about oneself, allowing the participants to take time out, calm down and a sense of spontaneous flow. Death and transcendence were experienced as a form of the transgression of the mode of everydayness, reaching one’s physical or physiological limits and as the basis for exceeding and overcoming oneself.

Since some of these topics have already been examined in other articles (Jirásek and Dvořáčková 2016; Jirásek et al. 2014), here we have chosen to focus (in line with the subject of this journal) primarily on the dimension of nature and to consider this category in greater detail. This decision lent special importance to some of the data from the PSQ. The highest degree of identification, across the group of respondents, was found in two statements concerning the dimension of deep ecology, namely statement No. 25 (even inanimate nature deserves the utmost respect) and statement No. 1 (I strongly feel that our Earth belongs to animals as well as humans).

The phenomenon of nature as it appears in the statements of our respondents can moreover be structured into six subcategories:

- naturalness;
- the element of fire;
- the senses;
- aesthetic perceptions;
- inclement weather;
- the spiritual dimension.

We believe that in terms of their spiritual aspects all of these are important, since the category of naturalness (which makes it possible to think more deeply about what it means to live in nature or in the trappings of civilization), experiencing nature with one’s own senses, perceiving fire as one of the elements, the aesthetic dimension gained from a deep perception of the beauty of nature in the form of wonder, the pathos inherent in inclement weather has an overwhelming influence on the modus of the experience as well as on the perception of the spiritual dimension of the experience.

*Naturalness* was mentioned by half of the respondents as a typical form of consciousness arising from the course. Its deep significance, of course, is the result of the relatively long and, for the participants non-trivial, period of time spent living outside of civilization: ‘We did not encounter anything civilized, the only thing there that was civilized was us, that was strange; thus, we had to rely on the natural environment of the forest.’ (6) This feature of nature represents a contrast to one’s everyday lifestyle, it allows individuals to concentrate on themselves and become aware of deeper dimensions of their own life:

I’m always at the computer in the office. (...) I see it differently than people who go there every weekend. Maybe there is someone who knows every tree or bird, but for me it is a moment to think about myself. I did not even communicate very much, many times while I was hiking I simply lost track of everything else and looked deep inside myself. (7)

We can also see the situation described in the strong identification with statement No. 10 in the PSQ (it happened to me that time, space and distance lost all sense for me).

This transformation is perceived not only in terms of temporality, but also in terms of transparency:

For me it is a sort of return, not really to my roots, but to a kind of simplicity, because life today is quick and hurried while there in the wilderness the cycle is given, a person knows what to expect, for me it is more predictable than say life in a city, where everything is hurried, neurotic, rushing here and there, there are a lot of options and you do not know what to do first, to me that is not very clear and transparent. (8)

This could also, however, be a comparison of the effectiveness and desirability of action compared with the motivation found in games and other activities, which VSL courses usually make use of – without the need for any motivational legend the reason for action is obvious:

We will go there because we have to go somewhere. And we will unpack our tents because there is no reason to ask why we have to unpack them. The reason we collect wood is absolutely clear. (...) What attracts me to hiking is precisely the fact that it is natural. (1)

The necessity and the indispensability of particular activities and actions generally emerge on their own, there is no need to explain or rationalize them at all:

Once I arrived at the station, I was very tired, so tired that I fell down in the snow, and I thought to myself ‘I’ll just lie here,’ and after a while I started to get cold, and I realized that I probably needed to get warmed up and eat. And then I looked around and I found that I was completely surrounded by a forest I did not know and it was getting dark, in a few minutes I would not be able to see anything and it dawned on me that I needed wood. So, I got up and went to collect wood. (6)

Nature, however, is also characterized by the necessity of accepting whatever comes along, existing in the present, concentrating on the ‘here and now,’ without the need to address everyday duties, ‘I see a squirrel, so I look at it, here’s a cobweb, you accept things as they come, you do not think about anything else’ (2). What is important is that being conscious of nature (in terms of the environment as well as one’s relationship to others) is not an active – free or rational – decision:

The forest is actually a natural habitat for humans and, as we have said, with some people we feel natural, but not only because of the environment, but also because in the forest people do not pretend (...) it is as if people are natural there, not that they do not have any alternative, but it’s so automatic that they fit in. (3)

It should be noted that in completing the questionnaire this respondent indicated that she was rather lukewarm about the statements testing for spirituality. The only dimensions on the PSQ with she identified was that of deep ecology.

This kind of stay in the wilderness leads to deeper thoughts which can only be apprehended on a philosophical plane:

I was more able to think about that issue, not only about myself but also about the essence of the world. Now this sounds very general, but perhaps that is how things work, but perhaps also landscapes, hills and valleys, the horizon, skylines ... (1)

However, unlike the previous respondent, this young woman showed a degree of identification with the statements in the PSQ to which strong spiritual significance

has attributed, as is also evident from her other statements. Of course, it is possible in exceptional cases to be aware of the deeper dimensions of nature through scholarly reflection,

I'm studying philosophy, so I'm very used to thinking about the natural world. But the interesting thing was that I began to realize this only retrospectively. I feel that there I experienced it emotionally rather than intellectually. I just took pleasure from the fire, it was not so cold there, and I liked seeing the stars, it was only after a few days I realized that it was something that was quite easy to rationalize. (6)

*The element of fire* is an expression of nature which links together natural and social processes. Although the natural setting of the course allows for direct contact with other elements (the earth upon which the participants tread, the frosty air that they breathe, and water, especially in the form of snow, which needs to be melted in order to drink), the most visible element and the one most commonly mentioned by all participants was fire.

Without question, this was helped along by the central role fire took in the evening program, at which very visible social sharing also took place. While during the day the participants followed one another single file without much opportunity to communicate, the evenings were deliberately structured as a social meeting, the centre of which was the light and heat provided by the fire.

Since the fire was always there when all the participants stood together, and the fire roared, warmed us, one of the elements, a magical moment, and this community was even stronger there. That is not characteristic only of this fire, it was also in the connection between fire and people, when we stand like that, for me, the fire has power, added to that it crackles, it provides warmth, thanks to which we can survive, without fire we could not make it. (1)

The fire also defined the space in which life was possible, 'simply, this contrast of limitation together with the present and the heat that emerged from the fire and the energy that is returned from the fire, and most of all from the people, they were important.' (5) The part of the sentence in which the respondent emphasizes 'most of all from people' fully reflects the strong affection for the dimension that the PSQ labels sense of belonging. In this dimension aligned with any statements, like the dimension of deep ecology. In other cases, it was rather dismissive.

The fire as the centre of events, as a factor in defining the shape life takes as a phenomenon that provides order.

People made a circle and suddenly, the chaos of the forest, which was really scary, I knew that nothing would happen to me, but if I had been alone, then something could have happened to me. All of a sudden it formed so tightly. That the centre was the fire, the heat, where everyone is facing, because it makes sense, behind our backs there is darkness, the chaos that we are not afraid of because there we are together. At the same time each person knew that if someone left the fire and walked somewhere 300 m away and fell down, they could well die, but the way it was framed here and what's in the middle and the stars above us. (6)

In an unfamiliar environment *the senses* take on a much more important role. How we feel about ourselves in the overall context of the natural system emerges from our direct experience. People take more note of events that take place in nature, this results in a fuller realization of what anchors human existence:

You just touch the ground, that it is in fact wet or is mossy, taste what you can, once you perceive nature as a living thing, you're part of it much more than before, you

walk through it as if you are on a trip, you see that the grass is green, but suddenly you feel like walking barefoot and touching nature, and then find a sacred peace, that perspective. You perceive the intensity of nature much more strongly with certain senses. The sunset, wind, so alive, what you can touch, you feel a part of it, like where you are. (2)

Such an experience may involve specific sensory cues comparable to animist ideas which animate nature:

I was fascinated by how the trees creaked. I heard something; it was the crunching of the snow, the creaking of the trees and breathing. It was as if you had just pulled yourself together. So, it was still strong, the weather was not very good, it was as if the snow was sometimes mixed with fog, that generated such a simple space where it was twice as strong, those vertical trees were simply very intense. (...) You had so few of those stimuli, but they were more intense. There was not much of an outside world, few colours, but then in the evening when the fire started to burn, the colours were even more intense. (...) Even there it was strange how those trees groaned loudly, it was strange that I particularly noticed that it was not as if they were just rustling, but they emitted strange, guttural noises. (...) And even more I would say that nature is alive, not just that a particular tree is alive, but not alive merely in an abstract way, it has a hoarse voice and it is almost as if, the tree is a little frustrated, twisted, it is murmuring something. It is explicitly alive. (6)

Respondent No. 6, was one of three respondents (another was the respondent No. 2 from the previous quote), who alone identified with statement No. 19 of the PSQ (sometimes I feel deeply that the earth is my mother).

*Aesthetic perceptions* are an essential part of time spent in the wilderness. From the experience of the beauty and the unique purity of nature, environmental education can draw considerable impetus for personal growth and value changes, not thanks to intellectual or cognitive understanding, but rather due to feelings and emotional experiences affecting the whole person.

And then I have a second image, I am perfectly happy, in front of me an immaculate horizon, the group was full of energy, I took no notice of the group, I came up over the crest of a hill and found beautiful gleaming snow, a spotless field of powder. (1)

The impact of such an impression is even stronger on a person for whom spending time in the wilderness is an exception 'for people from the city it can be a powerful experience if the weather turns out right and you encounter snowy meadows, trees covered with snow, a blue sky, the landscape, it's a beautiful experience' (8).

Of course, reactions relating to light can be perceived in their own way, 'and when the sun came out, I could walk with a light heart, we were happy at these moments, when the sun came out we had a clear view, that completely diffused our fears' (9), as can reactions relating to the landscape, 'the surroundings were beautiful, they were not in disharmony. We make progress, long, snow, ridges ... wonderful' (11). Perhaps paradoxically, however, aesthetic experiences are not only bound up with the visual qualities of sunny days and the night skies; new experiences are also brought on by limitations in sensory input 'the night march, actually the night-time part, you trod alone through the forest under a full moon, the moon was shining, it was a very beautiful, you could enjoy the solitude, that it was just me, the forest, nature, and nothing, no interference' (8).

*Inclement weather* is also a facet of the natural way of being; nature does not offer only aesthetic impressions, wellbeing and nice weather. What is even more

paramount than discomfort or inclement weather, however, is fear and one's own imagination, which can lead one to give up on the course prematurely:

I was hit by dampness and rain. I was not able to get over that, and that it would not change, because when the weather changed for the worse everything was wet, I knew that I had packed a wet sleeping bag, tonight I will unroll a wet sleeping bag and go to bed in a wet sleeping bag, I fought with that all day and it was quite tough, it was one of those factors that broke me. (...) I was thinking all day about how I would sleep in that wet sleeping bag. My problem is that I make my own trouble this way. (4)

'Yes, it is hard to escape the discomfort we face it every night, that you will sleep in the snow, if the weather does not get even worse... that was too much' (9).

*The spiritual dimension* was not expressed by all the respondents. It seems that a certain background is required in order to first experience and then, more significantly, to verbalize this dimension. One of the reasons why only a minority of respondents describe such states is the problem of capturing the essence of such an experience in language:

... it is something indescribable, you start to behave differently, it is not like ... for me to talk about visualization is a bit lofty, I say that I passed *goťák* [internal slang for LGD] with a 50%, as for visualization ... I am blind in one eye, or rather I can see only badly with one eye ... your pulse increases, your temperature begins to change ... you're in a different world, it's impossible to describe, you have to experience it ... it sounds like a cliché, for those who were there, that phrase is not (...) that the spiritual world is a third world, the spiritual world that *goťák* demonstrated, that was there only when things were happening that normally do not happen. (10)

With respondent No. 10 the issues examined resonated so strongly that in completing the questionnaire he mostly or fully agreed with all the statements, in some cases he was the only one to do so.

The spiritual dimension as a substantive link to experience may, however, also be expressed through a symbol, the metaphoricity of which can help bring significant understanding. In exceptional cases it is also possible to encounter spiritual references, which acquire religious connotations, wherein – and for us this is essential – the religious dimension of experience is opened up and made possible by the time spent in nature and the symbolic perception of trees:

I was really out in the country, the beech forests, they are such a temple, it was amazing for me. It looked so religious, but still I was living it, I do not know how to describe it (...) So, while there I wrote these two simple poems, where my relationship to God was, or to what people call God linked very strongly with nature and the simpler it was, the stronger it was, I would say (...). So a lot of things. It can be a symbol of the world, the vertical, on which we climb up and down, from hell and into heaven, it is also a cross. Lately I have been experiencing times when I have come a little closer, from a kind of lack of clarity about religion, I am not entirely certain yet, but increasingly I have been gravitating to Christianity and one of the symbols that has fascinated and moved me is the cross, it blossoms, or rather the cross as a symbol of life. But I've never seen it depicted better than by a real growing tree and those beech trees were particularly beautiful. (6)

It is therefore no surprise that the PSQ of this respondent fully aligned with four of the six propositions associated with Latent monotheistic orientation. The only ones that he rejected were those statements that equated death with the gateway to the supreme secret or returning 'home'.

### ***Summary of the PSQ***

As mentioned above, two statements from the dimension of deep ecology gained the highest degree of agreement across the group of respondents. On the other hand, even this environmental category contained several statements that were met with disagreement in most cases, such as No. 31 (sometimes I think I should tread carefully on the stones in the forest because they might have a soul) and No. 19 (sometimes I feel deeply that the Earth is my mother). It turns out then that the respondents preferred mild statements. Out of the six spiritual factors, the least inclination was shown towards the factors of latent monotheistic orientation and mystical experience

Questionnaire data confirm our assumption that people enrolling in this a type of course have a positive relationship with nature and show a higher degree of sociability and enthusiasm for their environment, which may be reflected in the preference for certain dimensions of spirituality. This was demonstrated in two statements concerning the factor of ethical enthusiasm, both scoring 1.8 points on average: specifically No. 18 (I'm sometimes filled with compassion for all the beings that are suffering) and No. 32 (there are times when I long with all my heart for all beings to be happy), both are formulated to extend even beyond the limits of humanity. In the factor of sense of belonging, to name just one example of majority identification, it is statement No. 33 (I can feel a deep harmony of souls in the company of people with whom I have important bonds and shared understanding). To name a few examples from the other end of the spectrum, that is, statements where respondents indicated a high degree of rejection, we should point to No. 6 (sometimes I feel to be in touch with the ultimate or superior reality; factor No. 6) and No. 22 (I have experienced a feeling of complete unity with the Earth and all life; factor No. 4).

Should we proceed to the level of the individuals in our analysis, the group investigated appeared to be comprised both of individuals who manifested strong spiritual tendencies according to the PSQ and individuals who were rather indifferent or even negative in regard to the issues of spirituality. Both these poles, however, copied the tendencies described above. For example, statement No. 31 in the strongly accepted dimension of deep ecology (sometimes I think I should tread carefully on the stones in the forest ...) met with rather indifferent responses even from spiritually oriented individuals. In the dimensions of ethical enthusiasm and sense of belonging, these individuals showed strong or prevailing agreement with all statements. Upon closer inspection, their higher spiritual attunement was manifested mainly in contrast with majority answers in the dimension of mystical experience, where the degree of identification with the statements presented was always positive. However, even these spiritually responsive individuals showed disagreement with statements No. 12 (death is a return somewhere 'home') and No. 30 (death is the gateway to the ultimate mystery) in the generally most unaccepted dimension of latent monotheistic orientation.

On the other side of the spectrum of respondents, according to the degree of their spiritual inclinations, there are individuals who declared their disagreement or strong disagreement in all six dimensions (with one exception in the first dimension, deep ecology). Their rejection and sceptical attitude is most apparent, once again, in contrast to otherwise accepted orientations, such as number two (ethical enthusiasm) or five (conscientious concern). Although these dimensions contained statements that were more or less met with agreement, it could be assumed, in the context of their

other negative answers, that these respondents might have been using their own, non-spiritual interpretations. These statements are No. 5 (I'm sometimes overwhelmed with the desire to change my life and 'start anew'), No. 11 (I'm sometimes afraid of how I could ruin my life), and No. 17 (there are quite a few things I'd never do because I feel it would destroy my human essence).

### ***Research limitations***

We are aware that our research runs up against several constraints, which we will deal with in the next section. The first difficulty with which we had to deal was the quite low level of participation of invited participants from both years of LGD, which represented little more than a quarter of the total.

This presents a problem for the use of quantitative tools in data collection and means such tools cannot yield any more rigorous results. Therefore, we used the PSQ results exclusively to determine the respondents' general inclination towards spiritual experience.

Another fact that must be taken into account is how the wide range of individual definitions of and approaches to the theme of spirituality adversely affect the combination of individual conceptions. However, this was also a problem for Řičan and his PSQ. As a psychologist Řičan recognized Parament's definition of spirituality as the experiential core of religion. For our purposes what is more important is the source of the understanding of the notion of spirituality as the centre of personality, as an expression of human existence.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This course conducted in the discourse of non-formal and informal education was intended to influence the development and personality of the participant indirectly. For instance, by setting the course in a specific environment, one which is unusual for Europeans used to living in an urbanized society – hence the long trek in the winter landscape. We assumed also that such a setting might make it possible for the change experienced by the participants to take on a spiritual meaning. Despite the fact that the number of people declaring their religious affiliation has generally been decreasing in Czech society, this does not necessarily have to mean that such individuals lose their ability to have a spiritual experience. Moreover, we expected that the spontaneous quality of nature would lead the participants in the course to develop a personal and natural kind of spirituality (closer to the human-human and human-nature experience), expressed in informal language – something that was confirmed during the research. Unfortunately, while researching this personal and natural kind of spirituality we did not collect data on the formal beliefs and religious affiliations of the respondents, so it is not possible compare these factors, regardless of how relevant such information may be.

The reason for this may lie in the rather secular character of Czech society, at least in the sense of its dereligionization. The gradual increase in concern for non-religious spirituality may be seen in contrast to the decreasing influence of the church. It has also been documented by the data collected in the 2011 Census of the Czech Republic: between the years 2001 and 2011 (searched on 4 September 2014 at [www.scitani.cz](http://www.scitani.cz)), the number of people declaring their religious affiliation decreased from 32.2 to 13.9%, while the number of atheists (or persons without

religious confession) decreased from 59 to 34.2%. The only group which grew significantly in number in this area was people who declared no religious affiliation while also not identifying as atheists. In the above-mentioned decade, their percentage in the Czech population grew from 8.8 to 45.2%. Although the census cannot capture the living reality of the world, represented by such macro-data, we may justifiably assume that these data reveal a form of non-religious, alternative, distinctly non-specific spirituality – albeit this assumption still needs to be verified by future research.

Considering that Czech society is one of the cultures in the world where the majority of the population has apparently disengaged from a religious way of life, we may concurrently assume that individual spiritual needs may be fulfilled in another manner, one that does not manifest any imminent spiritual (or even religious) bond to the common concept of spiritual life. After all, the differences between religiosity and spirituality have been intellectually and empirically investigated to a significant extent (Elkins et al. 1988; Emmons and Crumpler 1999; Pargament 1999a, 1999b; Stifoss-Hanssen 1999; Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). The secularization of society and the decline in religiosity, evident in the present era (even though the symptoms of the decline of the authority of the church in the Czech lands may be traced back to the phenomenon of the Hussites and the Bohemian Reformation) does not have to indicate a loss of the ability to experience the spiritual. On the contrary, various alternative or quasi-religious movements are on the increase, perhaps reflecting the existential vacuum perceived in the consumerist and dereligionized society. Instead of following the well-tried paths of traditional belief systems, many people today choose to follow the paths of their own subjective seeking, while selecting and adopting impulses from various religious and spiritual sources. In the last fifty years, people have turned to Eastern spirituality as well as to Native American spirituality, feminist or environmental spiritual movements (Lužný 2004), worshipping pagan goddesses, shamanic rituals or even new spiritual practices, while older ones like astrology, theosophy, and transcendental meditation remain popular – in short, a growing individualism in religious culture has appeared (Lužný and Václavík 2010), along with the privatization and personalization of religious expressions, outside traditional religious institutions. The claim that we are ‘living in a time of spiritual disorientation’ (Elkins et al. 1988, 7) is perhaps more valid now than in the year this claim was originally made.

While taking into consideration the character of the event investigated and the size of the research sample, we tried to answer the question of whether the course evoked a spiritual experience in the participants and if so what aspects were evident by conducting individual unstructured interviews and a subsequent focus group. The research design also included the PSQ (Říčan 2005). We are aware of the fact that our findings cannot be easily generalized, however, we can claim with certainty that, in view of the research assumptions, many participants in the course LGD experienced some of their journey in a spiritual mode. Although we focused here only on the nature and naturalness criterion, the other dimensions, visible in the interviews, also have spiritual connotations: community, temporality, death, and transcendence. The natural environment in the area that we consider to be spiritual was reflected explicitly when some of the natural phenomena or elements present were named; however, the PSQ demonstrated that the environmental aspect of spirituality (deep ecology, eco-spirituality) was dominant in six tested domains, too. There were some statements in this dimension that all of the respondents identified with.

We believe that the results of our investigation demonstrate that a firm bond to the natural environment may be cultivated not only rationally, that is, by deliberate formal education and scientific research, but also, by direct experience. This finding brings us closer (although our investigation dealt with an adult population, not children) to conclusions formulated by Tseveni (2011) who claimed that activity in environmental education might be more significant than scientific knowledge, technocratic considerations, or blind faith in a scientific perspective on environmental problems. Information as such is insufficient, because the human way of being is not defined exclusively by reason. The trans-rational aspects of the experience, emotional engagement, and immediate contact facilitate overcoming even such a complex problem as the barrier between environmental knowledge, environmental awareness, and pro-environmental behaviour (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Direct experience is irreplaceable and makes a clear impact, and this is reflected by the respondents themselves retrospectively. Such an experience has a distinct educational effect that supports the educational potential of environmental and sustainability education (Sund and Lysgaard 2013), and it is, in fact, also a possible way of introducing the theme of environmental sustainability as an educational issue in early childhood education, without the need to use discursive constructs (Duhn 2012). Our investigation also confirms the assumption that non-formal and informal education projects (which are thoroughly reflective, engaging in dialogue, mentoring, and self-directed learning) using the natural environment and outdoor stays – which offer an immediate experience through our senses instead of screens and technological devices – stimulate spiritual well-being (English 2000; Nash 2009).

The objective of the course LGD was not to educate the participants in the area of environmental studies, but rather to educate them through the environment. On the basis of our findings, we can declare that in this particular case, which falls under non-formal and informal education, spiritual aspects were present. Coming back to Ashley (2007) and his definition of ‘wilderness spirituality’, not all but many of the participants described strong connections with the nature, a heightened sense of awareness and elevated consciousness beyond the everyday and corporeal world (‘the trees emitted strange, guttural noises’). They were cognitively and affectively moved to deeper understanding, experiencing tranquillity, wonder and humbleness. Because of the secular character of Czech society, there was no religious explanation vividly present, but the spiritual dimension was addressed clearly (‘spiritual world is a third world ... things were happening that normally do not happen’). What Stringer and McAvoy (1992) suggested was also observed – that spiritual experiences are not based only on the wilderness environment, but also on other people on the trip (standing participants around the fire). From this, though, we may argue that not all, but many of the participants referred to their experiences of spirituality evoked by the course – experiences that had the power to make them reflect on their lives from a new perspective and thus find deeper meaning. And more than this finding, we can see the strictly environmental quality of such experiences. While a particular activity or educational course does not *explicitly, directly and intentionally* aim at environmental education as its target, it is possible to use the methods of outdoor and experiential education for environmental goals.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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