RE-ENGAGING DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Transformative Learning through Restorative and Social Justice Education

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Program Design and Implementation

> I'm probably not the only one, but up until not that long ago, no one really saw me. No one got to know me. No one gave a crap who I was or what I was about. Anything. But, in the past year, I've met some of the most amazing people and I've connected with more people then I ever thought I would have. And I never thought I would trust to tell people the things that I have. Especially this group. It's hard to talk about the things that hurt you most, but we talk about it and I finally feel that I'm not so alone. Everybody's unique, but everybody's so much the same. It's nice to figure that out. To find that connection.
>
> —Hannah, Westward Bound Summer School Student, 2006

This student and twenty-eight others, whose names have been changed to honor privacy, all shared in an experiential education summer school program that was designed and implemented at an alternative school in Minnesota. Students were offered credit in history, English, and science via a course that included an in-depth look at Westward Expansion history. During the three- to four-week course, students traveled from Minnesota to Wyoming stopping at historical sites along the way. The course, which included using restorative justice Talking Circles, hands-on learning, and curriculum that centered on human rights and social justice was designed by two other teachers and I because we saw that our students needed to reconnect with learning, with other individuals, and with their communities. Having worked with youth labeled "at-risk" for seven years, I had seen the fall-out of disconnections and loneliness. Drugs, alcohol, neglect, abuse, distrust, violence, criminal activities, truancy, disengagement with school, and feelings of alienation appeared time and time again at my alternative school. Over the course of three summers, 29 students experienced the program. Through qualitative interviews with both students and teachers, and the analyses of journals, it is evident that students experienced transformations in

their ideas about race, culture, and historical events, their ideas about relating to others, and their actions and responses towards education.

A History of the Experiential Outdoor Education Program

In order to begin the discussion of what our students learned and what transformational learning occurred it is important to have background knowledge about the program as a whole. Over a four-year period of time, Angel Salathe, Randy Bauer, and I planned a unique learning experience for our alternative high school students. We believed that our students could succeed in school if they had more opportunities to have hands-on learning experiences both inside and outside of our building. We agreed with Herdman (1994) who wrote of Outward Bound experiences at a school in New York State:

> Our work with Outward Bound has been called experience-based or experiential education. To some, these terms mean simply learning by doing, but at George Washington we used physical experiences not only to bring students' academic class work to life, but also as a bridge to a greater understanding of their own lives. (p. 16)

We differed from Outward Bound in some elements, but we did want to foster the following design principles of expeditionary learning Outward Bound:

- The Primacy of Self-Discovery
- The Having of Wonderful Ideas
- The Responsibility of Learning
- Intimacy and Caring
- Collaboration
- Diversity
- The Natural World
- Solitude and Reflection
- Service and Compassion (Rugen and Hartl, 1994, pp. 20–21)

Although not an Outward Bound program, we wanted to focus on using nature, camping, and history to motivate disengaged youth. For many of our students, the stigma of "failure" in mainstream pro-

grams had adversely affected their desire to learn. Many students had been referred to an alternative education site due to truancy, failure to complete work, and a general "lack of motivation." We began asking students questions, such as, "Would you ever want to actually see the places you read about in history class?" and "Have you ever been camping before? Would you like to try it?" Many students expressed interest and we began planning.

Once funding was gathered from donors, Angel, a history teacher, and Randy, a science teacher, worked with me, an English teacher, to write summer school programming that included an outdoor education travel experience. The first summer, 2003, Angel and I laid the framework for an experiential study of the Lewis and Clark Trail. Students studied topics of history, social justice regarding the Native American perspective, and environmental preservation during a six-week classroom experience. We then left for an eight-day trip that followed the Lewis and Clark Trail as far as the Rocky Mountains. Leaving from Minnesota, we traveled through South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. As instructors during this experience, we observed higher student participation, more detailed journals and more positive group dynamics than in our traditional classes. We also noticed strong bonds forming within our group. Of those eight students, six graduated from high school, three went on to college, one dropped out of school, and one, sadly, died of an overdose.

The second summer, 2004, Angel and I asked Randy to join us. We studied the Oregon Trail in a similar manner, but we added science curriculum. Nine out of eleven of our students that year had expressed ideas about dropping out, many were addicted to drugs, and two were involved in gang activity. Each year we asked students to fill out an application asking why they wanted to go on this trip, and that year we admittedly recruited our students most at-risk of dropping out—our Hmong boys and Native American girls. They all filled out an application. In their application, some students said that they wanted to participate because they had never left the city and felt that they would only live for a short while and wanted to experience something new. Others said that the credit earned on this trip would

help them graduate. On this second trip, we noticed increased sharing during Circle, full participation in activities, independent high-order questioning, and an increased interest in social justice. The complex journal entries and videotapes documenting why this experience made our students more excited to learn moved us deeply. Five of those students now attend post-secondary programs, two dropped out of school, one received a High School Equivalency Diploma or HSED, and the others graduated from high school and are now working.

The third year, 2006, we focused on Western Expansion from a human rights perspective. We included more poetry and continued to deliver science lessons on geology, the environment and camping skills. During this trip, ten students worked extremely hard on assignments, taught their own mini-lessons, and learned to cooperate effectively. In addition, our restorative justice Circles were even more powerful. Students spoke openly and honestly about why this style of school appealed to them and frankly said that their engagement levels changed as a result. They also spoke of their awe of what we had seen in nature, and their sadness at the injustice that they saw presented through our Westward Expansion history lessons. But most often, without our prompting, students spoke of their connections to each other. Out of these students, one graduated on the trip, six graduated during the next two years of school, and three pursued their High School Equivalency Diplomas.

On each trip, these core pieces were part of our process:

- Experiential Learning
- Restorative Justice Circles
- Social Justice Curriculum
- Human Rights Education
- Camping Skills
- Environmental Education

The first foundation of this program is experiential education and hands-on learning. In experiential learning theory, ideas grow and change through experience (Kolb, 1984). Kraft and Sakofs (1988) de-

scribe experiential education as a process that actively engages students and allows students to experience new knowledge first hand. In experiential education, the reflection or debriefing process holds the key to transforming the skills, attitudes and theories held by students (Joplin, 1995). Our students' responses to hands-on learning, travel, and observing the historical sites directly will be presented in detail in Chapter Two.

Part of hands-on learning involves taking healthy risks and communicating with team members; thus, establishing a safe, trusting climate is essential, especially when working with students who have disengaged from traditional schooling. Because of this, the second foundation of our program is restorative justice Talking Circles. (Please note that the term "Circle" will be capitalized throughout the book as it is in most restorative justice literature.)

In an education system that often silences youth who are marginalized (Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001), each year we form a caring community in which student voices are heard. Because our trips last twenty-four hours a day for over two weeks at a time, we have broken through the barriers built by structured bells and overwhelmingly large classes. Our "classroom time" starts at the crack of dawn with a morning meditation and lasts until midnight with final Circle. Although our itinerary is well planned, our moments of connection occur when we prepare food and share in meals together, when we all see an amazing view of nature and reflect on how it impacted us personally, when we play games during long stretches of driving and during many other times. This abundance of opportunity for connection is not present throughout a traditional school day. And yet, it needs to be. According to McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum (2002):

> When adolescents feel cared for by people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they are less likely to use substances, engage in violence, or initiate sexual activity at an early age. Students who feel connected to school in this way also report higher levels of emotional well-being. (p. 138)

This is highly important when engaging learners who have become disillusioned by the educational system, as our students had been.

Angel Salathe, Randy Bauer, and I believe that connecting to one another and providing time to answer the big questions in life is as important as the science, social studies and English curriculum. We agree with Noddings (1995) who states:

> Some educators today—and I include myself among them—would like to see a complete reorganization of the school curriculum. We would like to give a central place to the questions and issues that lie at the core of human existence. (p. 675)

Our Circle process is that central place. It is during Circle that I feel true caring for others begins to develop. Noddings (1992) states that positive developments in adolescents are linked to the caring relationships within their lives, including schools. Yet in 2004, during the start of our program, Minnesota high school students reported in the 2004 Minnesota Survey that they didn't feel strongly cared about by teachers and other adults at school. Feelings of care were higher in sixth grade, with 28% of males and 30% of females reporting that they felt teachers and other adults cared about them "very much". However, the number drops significantly to 10% of ninth grade males and 9% of ninth grade females reporting feeling that teachers and adults cared about them "very much". That trend continues in twelth grade with 10% of males and 11% of females feeling cared about "very much". (MN Department of Education, 2004, p. 13). Noddings (1992) says, "The current structures of schooling work against care, and at the same time, the need for care may be greater than ever" (p. 20). In a system focused on standardized tests, results and common assessments, when do we have time to care for our students, especially at the secondary level? When do students have time to reflect and honestly be listened to? Our program is the way that we broke down the current school structure in order to connect with our students. And it worked better than we could ever imagine. Further investigation of connectedness theory, restorative justice Talking Circles, and the results that Circle had on our youth will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Circle also connected students to concepts such as responsibility, care for each other, and social justice. For example, each year, we

would spend one full day engaged in community service projects, such as working on fire prevention at a South Dakota camp for people with disabilities, rebuilding campsites and clearing litter at a horse camp in the Wyoming hills, and clearing litter and debris at campsites close to streams. We found that restorative justice Circles planted seeds about social justice, but could not stand alone in restoring justice, so we built a curriculum that cycled through human rights knowledge, provided time for reflection through Circle, presented students with planned opportunities to serve the environment and communities, and then returned to Circle each evening to reflect on their own social justice actions and responses. Thus, Circle was not held in isolation. As teachers, we believe strongly that providing opportunities for students to actively restore justice to people and land is paramount.

Another important factor of this program is that restorative justice Circles are combined with careful social justice curriculum. The curriculum uses critical reading and discussion to facilitate positions on human rights issues. Students learn of the human rights violations against Native Americans by visiting the Wounded Knee Museum and the Crazy Horse Memorial. They learn about the right to clean air and land, and begin actively caring for the wildlife areas that we visit. They study the diverse opinions of ranchers and scientists regarding the wolf population in Wyoming, and come to their own decisions on which side is "just." In addition, students study the history and meanings of Bears' Lodge, its renaming into Devil's Tower, and the opposing views held by climbers versus the people who believe that the site is a sacred monument. Again, students use their knowledge of human rights to create opinions of what is "just."

In addition to developing critical thinking around social justice issues, our program provides evidence that human rights curriculum, in partnership with environmental education, can facilitate changes within students—they can move from being disengaged from society (in some cases being juvenile delinquents in our court system) to being young social justice advocates. As our program developed, we focused more and more on human rights, agreeing with the theory

that human rights education can promote peacemaking (Reardon, 1997). Because many of our students experience violence and oppression firsthand, glossing over ideas of "peace" and "justice" would have proven ineffective. Instead, we dig deeply into our own experiences and facilitate discussions on social activism. We model our practice around the belief that multicultural education is best served when it moves into the realm of social justice (Sleeter, 1996). And our students actively respond to this. Nieto (1992) writes that multicultural education was developed as a response to inequality in education based on racism, language discrimination, and ethnocentrism. Because our alternative students experienced these inequalities in both educational and judicial systems, they responded passionately to both human rights and social justice education. We will explore the curriculum and student responses to it in Chapter Four.

Along with research regarding the foundations that make up the program, this study details the changes that students documented—changes about beliefs, ideas, and practices. Thus, this study focuses on transformative learning theory in response to the use of outdoor education, hands-on learning, restorative justice Talking Circles, multicultural education, and human rights education.

In 1978, Jack Mezirow developed transformative learning theory during a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education that was investigating the large number of women returning to education in the United States (Mezirow, 1978). Results of the initial study showed that ten phases of learning were involved in the transformative process:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan

8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

(Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168–169/2009, p. 19)

According to Mezirow (1991) the transformational learning process is a shift in perspectives (p. 14). He describes the perspective transformation as:

> …the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Taylor writes that, "Fostering transformative learning is seen as teaching for change" (Taylor, 2009, p. 3). The program that we envisioned and created was admittedly built around the hope for change. Our goals as teachers were to re-engage our students, to create a safe climate, and to change student perspectives on learning (move them from disengagement to excitement about the learning process). Each student who applied to participate in the trip began the trip with goals such as earning credit and traveling. The changes that occurred were much deeper than we ever expected—both our goals, as well as our students' goals, paled in comparison to actual results. Unlearned in transformative learning theory, our practice was formed based on our knowledge at the time. Using intuition, past successes, personal experiences and big hearts, we crafted a program that promoted change. Unbeknownst to us at the time, our program fostered transformative learning. Taylor writes that the following core elements foster transformative educational experiences:

1. Individual experience
2. Critical reflection

3. Dialogue
4. Holistic orientation
5. Awareness of context
6. Authentic practice (Taylor, 2009, p. 4)

Individual experience consists of what each learner brings to the classroom (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). Our students brought immense experiences to our classroom and shared some of those experiences with us during the program. For example, one of our young students was pregnant and shared her fears about finding a place to stay and how she would raise her child. Another student had recently been arrested and spoke to us about serving time at a juvenile detention facility. One young woman shared her experiences with an addiction to methamphetamine. Others shared rich traditions about their beliefs, culture, and home lives. It is important here to note that transformative learning theory is an adult learning theory. Taylor (2000) writes:

> Only in adulthood are meaning structures clearly formed and developed and the revision of established meaning perspectives takes place. However, there has been little research to support this claim, such that transformative learning has not been explored in relationship to learning and the age of participants. (p. 288)

The age range in current documented studies is seventeen to seventy (Taylor, 2000). Most of our students were seventeen to nineteen years old, but we did have sixteen-year-old participants. However, our students were not "traditional" students. Their life experiences had forced some of them into early adulthood. Getting kicked out of the house, drug-addicted parents/guardians, personal addiction, pregnancy/parenting, and the foster care system had forced some of our participants into adult roles early on. Even the students who were still under the care of loving adults had experienced betrayals in their lives—betrayals by the education system (many were "pushed out" of mainstream classrooms) or betrayals by peers that made them "grow up fast." I would argue that our alternative students, though young, were prepared for transformative learning and that they should be part of communities that allow them to discuss and explore a wide

range of topics. Belenky and Stanton (2000) agree and write that discourse communities, such as those fostering transformative learning, can include the immature and the marginalized (p. 74). Our students have been described as both. Though living under labels such as "at-risk," "marginalized," and "academically deficient" our students were prepared for change and volunteered for this program. Researchers don't rule out transformative learning in adolescents, it just isn't well studied or documented. Indeed according to Taylor (2000) transformative learning might "inform meaning-making during childhood or adolescence, particularly understanding the impact and the processing of significant trauma" (p. 289). As Hannah's opening quote stated, many students began processing traumas during the course of our program. For example, one student had been badly beaten and hospitalized prior to the trip and was able to process some of that experience through dialogue and rituals such as Circle. Age is a factor that needs to be studied in more detail regarding transformative learning, however, it is important to note that our students brought rich histories and life experiences into the classroom, that many had been pushed into adult roles at a young age, and that though "labeled" negatively by peers and school systems, our students were willing to take a risk and try something new.

Critical reflection and dialogue occurred during our program both informally while traveling and formally through restorative justice Talking Circles. Critical reflection refers to "questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experiences" (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). Critical reflection was fostered through journal writing and exposure to new information about historical events such as Wounded Knee. Dialogue fosters transformation because it provides a safe place for learners to hear other opinions, gather details, share their assumptions, and voice new ideas (Mezirow, 2000). Our restorative justice Talking Circles built the trust that enabled the sharing of feelings to occur. These aspects will be discussed in chapters two and three.

The fourth core element that fosters transformative learning experiences, holistic orientation, concerns the practice of teaching. Are

instructors engaging with multiple ways of knowing? Holistic orientation encourages both the affective and relational ways of knowing (Taylor, 2009). Affective knowing is described as the development of feelings and emotions in the reflective process (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). Emotions were definitely a part of our learning process. Both students and teachers shared a variety of emotions. Dirkx argues, "Helping learners understand and make sense of these emotion-laden experiences within the context of the curriculum represents one of the most important and most challenging tasks for adult educators" (1998, p. 9). Students' emotional reactions during the program were often deep and painful. I recall one student whose tears slid down her face for hours during a drive. When asked how she was doing, she responded, "I'm just working through so much right now. Out here with you all I can do that." Another student covered his head and cried and said, "How can you do this?" "What?" I asked. "Care about people like this? Love so much." I went on to explain that I just had to. That I felt more joy out of life when I loved than when I hid from love. In the case of this student, he was questioning his ideas about trust. Taylor states that emotions "often act as a trigger for the reflective process, prompting the learner to question deeply held assumptions" (Taylor 2009, p. 11). For these students, the emotions that they were feeling were raw. As a result, we felt it too. In most traditional classrooms, these conversations would never occur. Students would be told to leave their emotions at the classroom door. By nurturing the emotions, change could occur. Another aspect of holistic orientation involves including opportunities to experience presentational ways of knowing (Taylor, 2009, p. 11). We included music, physical activities such as paddling a river, quiet meditation time, poetry, myth, legend, and storytelling as forms of presentational ways of knowing. These expressive and physical arts, many that were new to students, also created seeds of new awareness. Documentation into these expressive arts and their impacts on transformative learning is now occurring. For example, Nelson (2009) documents that storytelling promotes transformational learning and resiliency in youth.

Awareness of context is the fifth core element that fosters transformative learning. Taylor writes that awareness of context is, "developing a deeper appreciation and understanding of the personal and socio-cultural factors that play an influencing role in the process of transformative learning" (Taylor, 2009, p. 11). This awareness of context was evident in two ways. The first is that students reported that they felt safer and more comfortable learning away from their own neighborhoods. They began speaking about friends, habits, and risk factors at home that stood in the way of their goals. We began processing ways to address that, yet this awareness of context provided a dilemma for us as teachers: how do we help our students to transition home? What can we do to encourage further transformation in their daily lives away from this experience? The second awareness of context involved cultural identity and race. Skin color and cultural practice impacted student understanding when it came to learning about the injustices done to Native Americans. Chapter Four records the depth of student experiences and our awareness of context when presenting our curriculum.

The final element is fostering authentic practice, including authentic relationships with students (Taylor, 2009). Building authentic relationships was very important to us as teachers. The three program leaders all shared the philosophy that relationship building was the primary objective in our educational practice. More on the importance of relationship building and our students' thoughts about relationships are presented in Chapter Three.

As an educator, my experiences with these twenty-nine students have been the best of my career. I have seen students transformed and believe that a combined program using hands-on learning, human rights education, multicultural education, social justice curriculum, and the use of Circles is the primary reason that students were able to share openly and honestly about their experiences, re-engage with an educational system that had failed them, and become interested in community again. Using a variety of research methods including examining student and teacher journals, conducting systematic observations of student behavior and interactions, and analyzing in-depth

interviews with students and teaching staff, this book shows that these deeply disengaged students became active participants in their learning, developed closer bonds with each other and their teachers, and experienced transformations. It is their words that provide insight into why youth initially disengage with school, what types of learning that they prefer, and what they need in order to learn to trust again. If we want to re-engage our marginalized youth, we must listen carefully to their words.

I begin by taking a deeper look at one closing Circle held during June of 2006.

Westward Bound Expedition Closing Circle, June 2006

Campfire and Circle was a time that all of us looked forward to. The fire would blaze from Minneapolis through South Dakota and Wyoming. Sometimes small, sometimes large, the light would cast a glow that instilled an aura of trust. On this night, in June of 2006, tornado wall clouds, severe thunderstorm warnings, and four nights of straight rain drove three teachers and ten students to a motel in Wall, South Dakota. It was our last night together and a mixture of emotions was present. Would we still be able to come together in trust without the physical fire?

We all crowded into a hotel suite excited by the warmth of dry clothes and down quilts. I hopped from one of the beds and grabbed my orange sweatshirt from my pack. I gently placed it over the lamp and a subtle orange glow filtered through the room. "Well, this is our campfire tonight!" I said and then prepared to lead our final Circle.

We opened each nightly Circle with a ritual or devotion. Sometimes it was storytelling, sometimes quotes or readings. Tonight's ritual would serve as closure. We called it, "Leaving it in the Mountains." Stemming from my old summer camp counseling experiences, where one writes down issues or problems and burns it in the fire, we modified the activity and used the metaphor of leaving burdens in the Bighorn Mountains. Without a fire, we relied on students' trust of us…that his/her writing would remain confidential and would be burned in the fire by Mr. Bauer, our science teacher, upon

our return home. Our students, labeled "at-risk" by the educational system, had faced many troubles in their short lives. And so they wrote and wrote. Some cried. Each folded their burdens into a tight fold of paper and set it beneath our lamp.

After this process, I began the second part of the evening's Circle by preparing to read a poem. We videotaped part of this campfire, with student permission, so my words, and theirs, are exactly as they were spoken.

I began:

> Final campfire on these trips is always something that is filled with mixed emotions because there's a complete feeling of happiness that you'll soon be home, in your bed, and yet you're feeling this mix of the unspoken, "Wow, next week, I'm not going to be with these people. I'm not going to see what I saw. And the chance of me seeing these things again in the next year are not very much." And so, you'll be feeling some mixed emotions with it. So, the poem today...this one is all about the connections that you've made to each other and that we've made with you. I was sitting and thinking when I was crying at McDonald's because I was so tired…that I also get really sad when the trips end because we really learn to love each of you. All of your idiosyncrasies, your helpfulness, your leadership, your intelligence, your questioning skills, even at times when we can't answer those questions because we are concentrating on other things. We love you for those things and…this is all about us, right now. It's no longer about Devil's Tower or the Medicine Wheel. It's about us. And so, this final campfire is about that. This poem, called "Making Contact" is about that.

I read the poem, written by Virginia Satir (2003), aloud and asked for a student voice to read it aloud a second time. Following the pattern of the rest of the week, we then opened the silence up to anyone who wanted to share a line that stood out, or a thought that resonated with them.

Jackie responded without hesitation:

> I really relate to this poem, because, um. Terry, I've known him since he was younger and we didn't really like each other because we were totally different. And this trip, I thought, 'Is he going to be mean to me?' but we actually found out that we get along really pretty well. And I don't know, just with everybody. I made a connection with Hannah too. Just everyone.

About thirty seconds followed and Mr. Bauer began speaking:

> I think an important line is the one talks about being understood. I think every human being, remember that we are social creatures, are not alone in this world and we need to be understood. When we aren't understood, there's a tremendous feeling of alienation and loneliness. However, the only way to be understood is to expose yourself. And it is a risk. And it takes courage. But there can be great reward for doing it. Remember to take that risk. Everyone is afraid of not being understood, and that's pretty painful, and that's a possibility. But you also have that other possibility which is that tremendous reward that you are understood by someone else. And that's a wonderful feeling.

Next, Suzy explored her thoughts:

> The part that stuck out to me was the part about being seen. I felt that before the trip I wasn't a part of any group. And I feel that I now have a bigger connection with everybody. And, um, it was really nice to like, even when the teacher's asked me about my Dad, I was grateful that somebody actually understood the predicament that I'm in, and that my family is in. I've never really had the opportunity to talk about that and have people understand what I'm going through. I actually felt one with the group and that is really nice." (Suzy's father is wheelchair dependent. Suzy had a great experience when we did our community service project at a camp called "Meeting the Need" a camp in South Dakota geared towards making the Black Hills experience available to people with disabilities.)

"At some point in our life," began Jordan, "in everybody's life. They feel like they're a total outcast. And this is their goal—to be noticed by somebody."

Shelia, a student working through tremendous challenges, continued the dialogue:

> For me, this is kind of like, I want to get back to that place where I can have that gift from people. Like, I'm sure you guys have all heard gossip, um, I've been dealing with some issues…oh, sad. I'm crying. Hold on. I need a second (Shelia allows the tears to run down her cheek, raising her hood for security)….For me, it's really, um, difficult to get to that place where I can be with people and be comfortable. Where I can give of myself. I feel like I haven't done that for you guys. I don't know if it matters to you, but…yeah, I would just like to get to that place again.

After another half hour of sharing, we closed our discussion of the poem and experienced the final phase of our Circle. Using a talking piece, each student shared his or her final thoughts about the two weeks we spent together. To honor the Circle, these moments were not recorded. They were special moments filled with laughter and more tears. Having no real campfire didn't matter. Trust had been formed early on and had stayed with this group. Our students had learned curriculum, camping skills and nature appreciation, but even greater than that knowledge, our disengaged students had transformed and learned to make contact with one another. Even if it wasn't the full contact that some desired, they had begun the process of reconnecting. This is just one of many transformations that will be discussed in this book.