



TWO COYOTES

Wilderness School

by Nancy Cohen

*Whenever the pressure of our complex city life
thins my blood and numbs my brain, I seek relief in the trail;
and when I hear the coyote wailing to the yellow dawn,
my cares fall from me... I am happy. ~ Hamlin Garland*

Native American culture is rich with lore featuring Coyote as a central figure. Often seen as a paradoxical mixture of wise sage and foolish prankster, Coyote energy is said to be connected with simplicity and trust, and crucial for growth and change. It renews innocence and reawakens a childlike wisdom in the world. Coyote howls remind us of our primal connections. The aptly named Two Coyotes Wilderness School is a local “non-profit organization dedicated to nurturing healthy, whole human beings through building self-awareness, community, and connecting people to nature.” It utilizes wilderness survival, wildlife tracking, and naturalist skills as tools to help participants explore their senses and enhance understanding of their self and the world. Director Justin Pignataro describes their approach as “weaving nature connection, cultural practices, artistic expression and mythological adventures into a transformative experience.”

When setting curricula, Justin seeks opportunities for long-term mentoring. Workshops are offered for all ages and include: Coyote Pathfinder Teen Overnights; Adult Wilderness Survival; Earth Skills for Homeschoolers; Nature Skills for learning how to survive in the woods and become at home in nature; and, Wildwood Rangers, a fantasy-based wilderness program teaching fire-making, plant identification, camouflage, archery, and more. Staff is available for one-on-one mentoring, birthday parties, and in-school programs.

Nature programs offer invaluable lessons. Says Justin, “Our children learn that all nature, including themselves, is sacred. That each of them has a gift they are meant to share with the world. They learn how to work together

using peacemaking, how to express their emotions, and that it is okay to feel angry or sad sometimes. They learn how they respond and overcome challenges in their life, to accept themselves and others, what it is like to have elders and mentors who care about them, how to express their gratitude for life, and sing without reservation.”

What helps children integrate their wilderness program experiences is the involvement of parents and caregivers, which Justin sees as key. He asserts that “programming can only go so far without family support” To that end, they also offer programs such as a family campout on August 21.

Two Coyotes was founded in 2000 by Scott Eldridge, in order to share wilderness skills with children. He named the school after observing two coyotes at his “sit spot” (see sidebar). Justin, who holds B.S degrees in anthropology and biology and has been teaching about nature for ten years, signed on as director in 2007. Programming began in 2008. Along with mentors and elders who helped guide him on his journey, Justin says taking class at Tom Brown Jr.’s Tracker School, and the Art of Mentoring workshop by Jon Young changed his life and gave him the creative courage to live this vision.

Two Coyotes programs are for everyone. No skills are needed, just an openness to new experiences. Staff and elders have a diverse array of wilderness skills and all serve as mentors. Their shared talents include improvisational dance and music, nature art, poetry, storytelling, and more.

Responses to workshops come from children and parents alike, with comments such as: “The program is extremely inspiring to me and I feel as a direct result of your program I have changed in ways I hadn’t expected. The few days I have



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spent with the group have given me wonderful feelings and strength” from a Coyote Pathfinder attendee; or, from parents of participants, “You touched my child’s spirit, you touched my soul. I am so very grateful to you,” and “It is an amazing magical program. The guides are true nurturers of the world and our kids.” Justin’s response to such tributes is “This is what inspires me...to see how our programs change lives. It’s stories like these that keep me following my vision.”

As to the importance of learning wilderness tracking/survival skills in a world of technology and modern comforts, Justin suggests “It is about connection, to the land, to each other, and to our self. Eating a wild plant or making fire by rubbing sticks together are ways we can remember our roots, and rekindle a sense of place and meaning in the world. For me it is not about going back as much as it is about reconnecting with core parts of being human. When kids lack core connections to nature, themselves, and each other, they become, isolated, unempathetic and disenchanting. Problems like media addiction, depression, and violence in children come from this state of disconnection. Two Coyotes is about bringing back the connection that has always existed and sustained people for centuries. What do the kids get out of it? A sense of worth and wholeness, meaning and purpose, and a desire to make a positive difference. It is life-affirming and life-changing.”

For more information, contact Justin Pignataro at: 203.843.3112, visit:www.twocoyotes.org or facebook. See calendar for some Two Coyotes events.



JUSTIN PIGNATARO
GETTING BACK TO NATURE

“We have all the essential aspects right here: earth, water, plants and animals, the sky and stars.”

“SIT SPOT” A “sit spot” is a place to sit and observe nature. To find one: Pick a spot close to home, work or school. Don’t worry about finding the “perfect” spot. At your spot you can meditate, observe, ask questions, journal, use your senses, go tracking, practice a skill, sleep, read, sing...anything. Make it a routine to visit your spot at least 3 times a week for 15-30 minutes a visit.

EXERCISE FOR ADULTS Find a mud puddle and take your shoes off. Slowly dip your bare foot in the puddle. Savor the feeling of the mud slipping between the toes as memories of childhood come flooding back. Advanced versions of this exercise involve walking, running, and jumping into the puddle.

WILD EDIBLES “For me, the peak wild edible season is early June. There is so much bounty that time of year. In late summer and early fall there are a lot of berries and nuts ready for harvest. I recommend if a person is interested in eating wild plants they learn the few poisonous plants first. Also, if you get a chance try some Autumn Olive berries in September, they are great!”

RECOMMENDED READINGS *Coyote’s Guide* by Jon Young, Ellen Haas and Evan McGown, and *The Tracker* by Tom Brown, Jr.

ANOTHER RECOMMENDED PROGRAM *The Art of Mentoring* at Vermont Wilderness School Date: September 22-26. Visit: www.vermontwildernessschool.org.