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# Into the Woods, Into Adulthood

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Bring up the name Kurt Hahn in a dinner party conversation about education and you may get blank stares. Mention United World College, or Outward Bound, and a few people may engage. Refer to the Gordonstoun headmaster in the Netflix series *The Crown* who meted out tough discipline to Prince Philip, and most everybody at the table will have an opinion. Tough English headmasters have a way of crystallizing our views on what makes for good and bad educational practice.

Whether we see him as educational muse or unyielding disciplinarian, Kurt Hahn has something important to say to us about the power of education to shape our youth and therefore the world.

## **Kurt Hahn: Visionary**

Kurt Hahn (1886-1974), a German educational visionary, was himself an unhappy student, put off by a rigid education narrowly focused on preparation for Germany's final secondary-school exams, the Abitur. As the headmaster of a school he co-founded, he openly defied the Nazi regime and was briefly imprisoned before being forced to leave Germany. He settled in Scotland, where he founded Gordonstoun School, featured in the Netflix series. He went on to found several schools, including the first of 18 United World Colleges that now span the globe. He also co-founded Outward Bound, the global outdoor education network.

The schools he established (secondary schools in the UK are typically called colleges while higher education is called university) and Outward Bound had something in common: They were meant to allow young people to find their interests and their passions, to learn by doing rather than by being lectured to, and especially to encounter themselves and one another in nature.

Hahn's vision for education focuses on the innate resilience of young people, especially when tested in nature. While he was

known to push and challenge students in ways that many today might find *zu strenge*, Hahn's principles were grounded in a belief that investing in youth, and challenging them to grow, would yield a more peaceful world. Hahn saw decency and kindness as natural to young people. He sought to bring together students on the threshold of adulthood, where this decency could be encouraged and nurtured in the face of challenges best met cooperatively. Such an education, Hahn believed, could provide a check on society's tendency to corrupt the natural inclination in young people to form connections with one other—regardless of their differences.

## **Our Wilderness Excursions**

At UWC-USA, the only United World College campus in the United States, new students from more than 90 countries participate in wilderness excursions within a couple of days of arriving on campus. With the Pecos Wilderness and southern end of the Rocky Mountains at their back door, students with little hiking and backpacking experience learn how to plan routes, pack gear, set up tents, and cook meals—together and across the barriers of language and culture.

Our alumni tell us it is an experience that shapes their two years together. The place in which they find themselves demands a new awareness of the effects of climate change and the need for human efforts toward sustainability. They share the arts and cultures of the world and discover their differences as well as what they hold in common. Two years of this constructive engagement shapes their fundamental approach to themselves and the Other.

It is that first wilderness challenge that binds them and makes them friends for life. It is something they never forget. It doesn't matter where they come from, or where their families fall on the broadest economic spectrum imaginable, or what cultural commitments they thought were settled for themselves. Because they have had to depend on one another, they can never see success again as wholly individual, wholly about themselves.

## **Enter COVID-19**

With due respect to *The Crown* and to those whose only introduction to Hahn was that bit of English headmaster drama,

his legacy tells us one thing he got absolutely right about education: A deep encounter with nature nurtures the resilience it takes to face its scope and power, and to understand our place in it. The importance of this lesson stands out especially now, following an unprecedented mass migration of education online in response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first appearance of the coronavirus effected a shift in education, to be sure. Many believe that remote learning has now irreversibly launched as the next educational revolution. But what kind of education? So much of education is about relationship building—relationships to knowledge and facts, to be sure (something that cannot be taken for granted if civic discourse is to be possible), but also relationships with ourselves and one another and the larger world, political and natural. In a very short time, our young people got a lesson in the gains and losses that come with online education. All of us got a lesson in the digital divide and how it perpetuates social and economic disparities that challenge peace and the sustainable future we desire for our youth.

But regardless of where we stand in the generational, social or economic divides, we were all witnessing something else. We were witnessing the inextricable interconnectedness of the human world and the natural world. We rarely pay attention to that natural world; we typically know it only through the models and explanations of experts. This, of course, is not the natural world Hahn had in mind when he shared his vision of students discovering themselves in nature. He had in mind something more familiar, whether the wilderness adventures our students engage in, or the sustainable farming they practice to supply our dining hall and surrounding community.

Microscopic or macroscopic, encounters with nature teach young people that they are part of something larger, and smaller, than they are. They are connected to a force they must understand—not necessarily to control it, but to control themselves in the face of its immense power and mystery. This is as true today as it was when Hahn embraced these experiences as a meaningful part of a young person's education. Grappling

with nature, and knowing they have the character to face the risk, provides a fundamental insight when they are faced with the exigencies of the natural world.

Digital connectivity is surely important for leveling the educational playing fields that seem to bar entry to many underprivileged young people, and it will likely have a bigger role to play going forward. But the opportunity to connect with nature, and the educational moments that invite them into the very real risks that come with it, are perhaps more important. Living indigenous cultures across the globe, including in New Mexico where Hahn's vision for United World College has a home, have recognized for millennia the danger that comes with understanding ourselves as apart from nature. Whether it's the challenge of COVID-19 or the challenge of climate change, the natural world will always remind us of our place in it, and its importance to our very survival.

### **The "More" That is in Us**

Our work in education is to stand on the shoulders of our predecessors to meet the future with a fuller vision. Kurt Hahn continues to have something important to say to us. A deep encounter with nature makes possible an even deeper encounter with ourselves—with risks worth taking because they challenge us to grow and to grapple with how small we are in the enormity that is nature.

As Hahn put it: "There is more to us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for less." An authentic encounter with the scope and power of nature causes all of us to recognize the "more" that is in us. Educational programming that introduces this fundamental lesson will always be timely, especially if it means a dark and rainy night in whatever wilderness we find ourselves.

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