

Tracker Academy, Circles and Rites of Passage

Samara Game Reserve, Great Karoo, South Africa

with Scott Davidson and Lolla Odendaal, 20-24 October 2014

Introduction:

Scott Davidson from California, USA, was invited by Alex van den Heever of South Africa to be a guest guide at the Tracker Academy for one week in October 2014, specifically to bring skills in council and rites of passage in an effort to support the personal development of students as they transition into becoming highly skilled and responsible professionals. Scott co-guided with Lolla Odendaal, a native of South Africa and rites of passage guide, to ensure the best service. They intended to introduce tools and practices in a way that was culturally appropriate, respectful, immediately relevant and simple to integrate in their absence after this special visit. The feedback from students and Janetta was very positive. They would be honored to consider supporting future developments with consultations remotely, collaborations with the network of South African rites of passage guides, and/or another visit as guest instructors, ideally during TA program transitions (beginning orientation/ending graduation of program year, or transition from semester 1 to 2).

Following is a briefing of our week of work.

Day 1, evening session upon arrival:

We were greeted warmly upon arrival with handshakes and smiles. After visiting briefly with lead instructors Pokie and Janetta, everyone circled up on the porch, students and teachers alike. We shared a bit of the backstory, of tracking with Alex and Renias in California, swapping stories together, then being invited to visit the Tracker Academy to bring this work.

The purpose of our work this week: Life transitions and rites of passages need to be witnessed and supported in community in order to be complete. Changes in life, big and small, happen with all of us. Some are predictable, like a child growing up through puberty to become an adolescent. Some surprise us, like a serious car accident or illness. Being a student of the Tracker Academy is a huge opportunity and transition as well, a kind of passage into adulthood. This "council" work is a natural way to support transitions. We introduced council as a practice that deepens trust and understanding of each other.

Another important understanding is that much of our lives are casual with agreements that are loose or unclear. Sometimes it helps to formalize things a bit with some structure to help us consciously meet moments in life more fully. The first hour of this visit, after much planning and travel, was one of those moments that would benefit from some intentional structure.

To establish a safe and productive space for us all:

- First we sat in a perfect circle so that everyone could see everyone else easily and equally. Instructors and students are equals in this circle practice.
- Then we left the past behind and cleared the air some, this time by burning an aromatic plant. Ringing a bell, singing a song, a moment of silence, a group breath, can all work too. Anything to clearly mark the beginning of our intentional time together that also helps each of us to become more present to this particular moment.
- We lit a candle at the center with the spoken intention to listen to each other, which helped us focus.
- We made a simple agreement this time to practice listening from the heart. Not just being quiet until it's your turn, but actually agreeing to listen carefully to each other for a deeper understanding.
- We also agreed to use a talking piece. I brought a North American Turkey feather from home which we used as a talking piece. One person holds it when taking a turn to speak. Everyone else listens.

To bring focus, we asked for response to the following questions:

1. Your name
2. Story of your name
3. Where are you from
4. Describe a transition in your life that changed you, anything that happen where you were a different person afterward

Day 2, afternoon council:

Why council? When is council practice helpful? Why a talking piece?

We continued our training on council practice, including 5 agreements (listen from the heart, speak from the heart, be spontaneous, be lean/cut the fat, consider confidentiality), followed by a simple Check-in Council: How's it going today? How are you?

We introduced the "4 Shields of Human Nature" teachings by Meredith Little and Steven Foster of the School of Lost Borders, aka the "natural life cycle" to keep the language simple and more universal. This is basically a map of the seasons through the year (summer, autumn, winter, spring) over top the seasons of human life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, elderhood) over top the energetic strengths and weaknesses of each (being curious, introspection, responsible in community, inspiration, ancestry and future generations), all mapped onto the four cardinal directions.

Small group reflections on the life cycle teaching: Where do you see yourself on this map?

Based on our read of the above experiences, we decided to guide a simple exercise or ceremony: Set a physical threshold for yourself (a line on the ground) to mark the beginning of a solo walk for 1-2 hours with a specific question, then cross it when you're ready: What's your gift? or What are you afraid of, what slows you down? or What question do you need to ask in your life now that will help you? Remember to cross your threshold when you come back to mark the end.

Day 3, morning stories, afternoon and evening DVDs:

Simple check-in council followed by personal stories from their walks shared with full attention in council. "What happened during your walk? What's your story?", about 5 minutes each, then mirrored by Scott and Lolla. It was simple, potent and meaningful for all, shedding light on areas unseen before. For example, some realized:

"I may be slow, but I'll get there with focus and persistence."

"I have a gift for bringing people together in my family, and I can see that I have some more work to do."

"I've been to every inch of this landscape. I know it well. And yet I've never seen this one particular tree before. It was amazing, with a very sturdy trunk that had seen it all, it had weathered the storms. This tree was like me."

After lunch, DVD on Bird Language with Jon Young of 8Shields.org

Afternoon tracking session

Over dinner, DVD on Coming of Age in the Wilderness, Youth Quest with the SchoolofLostBorders.org

Day 4, "I am a tracker who..." to closing council:

Before morning tracking, "notice when your energy and clarity rises when tracking, and when it falls."

Afternoon council:

- Reflect on your energy and attention during morning tracking.
- In small groups of 3 people, take 3 minutes each with the talking piece to complete the sentence "I am a man who..." as many times of you can.
- In the big group, we held council to complete "I am a tracker who..." with one sentence per person with the talking piece in 2 or 3 rounds to fresh out the groups understanding of being a tracker.

Afternoon break and Samara Lodge visit with refreshing juice, cheetah roomers and baboon break-ins.

Evening closing council before braai, with questions intended to glean insights from the week:

- What happened this week? Describe your observations of what happened (for example, We sat in a circle and listened, I added a porcupine quill to the center piece, I taught a song to close, etc).
- How did you feel about what happened? (I felt a little nervous.)
- What did you learn?
- How did it serve the bigger picture of life here? How was it helpful?
- To close, we had a short spontaneous song and dance council that then morphed into playfulness across the threshold to close our time together. It was surprisingly brilliant with full participation, very fun.

We suggest that the Tracker Academy consider the following for future developments:

- Beginning each day with a 1-10 minute circle for people to share gratitude.
- Developing an apprenticeship program for graduates, perhaps one Apprentice for each field site, to assist instructors and regenerate leadership gradually over time.
- Cultivating community support from home by requiring applicants to share their TA application and letter of intent, ideally with two male allies (respected uncle, elder, neighbor, teacher, boss, etc) and two female allies, people to check-in with occasionally, to ground their experiences in community before, during and after their time with the Tracker Academy.
- Practicing skills in indigenous friction fire making, hunting and animal processing. These skills could profoundly connect students with the art of science of food and where it's from, fire and how to tend it, as well as working with raw materials by hand. Imagine harvesting all of the meat for the semester directly from the land.