

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

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Part 1: Mountains

It was our third day out and it had been a long one. We had started on the far side of Kongo Mountain, climbed more than a thousand meters to the top, then made the long descent down the other side to Kimi Pass. There had been much more snow than any of us had expected, and the few breaks we took were cut short by the cold wind. So late in the afternoon, when we found a flat spot next to a stream, we were all eager to take off our backpacks, put on extra warm layers, and get settled in for the night, except Yoshi. Yoshi stood still, unmoving, with his heavy backpack still resting on his shoulders.

“You OK Yoshi?” I asked, trying to be casual. No response. I waited a minute before asking again. Still no response. He stood silently, backpack still on his shoulders, staring off into the forest with glazed eyes. Finally, I put myself directly in his line of vision and said loudly, “Yoshi, are you OK?”

“I’m tired,” he said after a pause, “mentally, physically . . . I’m tired.”

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This much was obvious, but his stark admission of this truth caused a wave of anxiety to crash over me. Takashi and Shota, out of sensitivity, pretended not to hear, and instead continued at the work of unpacking gear, finding firewood, and filling water bottles.

I convinced Yoshi to at least set down his pack, put on his outer coat, and sit down on one of our thin foam sleeping pads. I told him to relax and that we would take care of everything else. I found some raisins from my own backpack and tried to convince him to eat some, but he just continued to stare off into the forest blankly, so I set them on the pad in front of him.

Takashi and Shota, sensing my anxiety and Yoshi's exhaustion, worked with even more efficiency than usual. We had the tent up and a fire going before long. Yoshi was still staring off into the forest. Usually full of comments, questions and jokes, he hadn't said a word to anyone in about thirty minutes.

As light was fading, Takashi was boiling water for our dinner. The pot, already completely blackened with soot, was suspended over the fire by a stick that was held in place with large rocks. Takashi took off the lid and shone his headlamp into the pot and poured pasta into the boiling water.

At some stage, I noticed that Yoshi was working intently on something. He had found a small piece of wood, and with a pocket knife, he was carefully whittling away. Still he was silent, but this activity led to a palpable change in his temperament. Eventually, Shota asked him what he was making. He held a half-carved spoon into the firelight, smiled slightly, then continued to whittle away. Our plastic spoons had all broken by the second morning and we'd been using handleless spoons to eat our meals since then.

Takashi stirred the pasta, declared it done, and served it up into our plastic bowls. Only after Yoshi had eaten with his new wooden spoon did he finally

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning
venture to make a comment, “thanks.”

By the time we were all in the tent, in our sleeping bags and playing the nightly card games, everything was back to normal. I declared that the following day, our second to last in our mountain trip, we would take it easy. No one had to wake up before they were ready.

The following morning, Yoshi slept till noon.

We set off at about one, and as usual I followed the three students from behind. Takashi was setting the pace up the countless wooden log stairs leading to the summit of Mt. Iwawaki. Yoshi was behind him, back to his usual joking and laughing self. Shota was behind him, and directly in front of me.

Shota seemed cheerful and responsive to any questions, but I noticed, each time he raised one leg to go up a step he would sway precariously until he completed the step and placed the other foot securely on the ground. I observed this several times and almost had to reach out and catch him.

“You OK Shota?” I asked.

“My legs aren’t moving the way I tell them to,” he responded, managing a wry smile but clearly frustrated by his predicament. Takashi and Yoshi stopped and looked back. “Let us take some of your weight,” I suggested.

Shota was hesitant, but Yoshi was insistent. Shota passed his water bottle to Yoshi, the camp stove to Takashi. I took the tent-poles from him, and we continued on.

But it wasn’t enough. Shota never complained, but had hit his limit. Again, with each step up the seemingly endless stairs, his body would pivot on his foot, swaying in wide circle as though blown in the wind like the tall cedar trees around us. Several times he seemed near the breaking point where he would collapse. We stopped and distributed more weight. Yoshi was full of

energy and insisted on taking more and more of Shota's gear. Shota gratefully accepted our offers and almost emptied his own pack.

After redistributing we each took a last candy from the four remaining in the plastic bag. Before the trip, we had worked together to take all of the wrappers off each candy, to reduce the amount of trash we would carry. Unwrapped in the plastic bag, translucent and shining in blue, yellow, orange and red, they appeared like four gems in the midst of much subtler brown, dark green, gray and white of the winter forest around us.

That evening, from the summit of Iwawaki, after a dinner of porridge made with the last of our rice, with the stars above us and the countless lights of Osaka beneath us, we shouted into the silent darkness around us and danced in the snow.

That night, our last on this mountain trip, it was my turn to be one of the two people to sleep in the middle of the tent. With four of us cramped in together, the two on the outer edge would be in direct contact with the tent, and in turn the cold air outside. There was frost on the inside of the tent each morning from the moisture from our breath which condensed and froze during the night.

I had more experience in cold mountains than the others and wasn't really bothered by the prospect of one last night on the outer edge. I began to offer up my spot, but was immediately and vehemently denied.

"No way," everyone said definitively, "it's your turn in the middle."

As I climbed into my sleeping bag, comfortably removed from the cold sides of the tents I was reminded that one aspect of generosity is graciously accepting the generosity of others.

Rationing resources, carrying garbage

A trip through the mountains, particularly in the winter, cannot be successful without complete cooperation of all the members of a team. When someone is having a hard day, the others need to work harder, willingly, without hesitation and without expectation of some form of payback.

Since we were backpacking, we only took what we absolutely needed. We had enough food for five days and four nights and we had to carefully ration it to make sure that everyone got enough. Any trash that we produced we carried with us on our backs for the rest of our trip.

I hope that the students learned basic skills for traveling through mountains and forests, minimal impact camping skills, how to safely build a fire and harness its heat to prepare a meal. I also wanted them to learn how to care for the environment, the equipment, and for each other while backpacking in a natural setting.

But the far more important lesson is that everyday life is not really any different than a mountain trip. While walking the aisles of a supermarket, or riding the escalator in a sparkling new shopping mall, it may appear that we have limitless resources, but we do not. The resources available to us must be carefully distributed and consumed. If someone is eating more than they need, someone else, somewhere else, is not getting their fair share. We can throw our trash in the garbage can, but it does not magically disappear. It may be carried away to a landfill, or burned in an incinerator, but it is never really gone. We will carry the trash we produce with us with every step we take, and the more trash we produce, the heavier the burden will be.

Finally, we won't make it to the top of the mountain if anyone is left behind. Would we have left Yoshi to stare into the woods blankly while we ate his

pasta? Would we have let Shota collapse in the forest and leave him behind while we pushed blindly ahead? Obviously we would not, and yet when we don't interact with people directly, it is much easier to leave them behind and forget that our fates are intertwined with theirs. Individual success cannot come at the expense of others but only with the collective success of the whole.

PHOTO 1

Backpacking in the Kongo-Izumi Mountains (Photo by Aloys Ratinet)



Part 2: Nonviolence through experiential learning

While working at Momoyama Gakuin University in southern Osaka, I have led several hiking and camping trips in our local mountains. By far the most ambitious was the trip described above, a five-day, four-night trip with three students through the Kongo-Izumi Mountain range in early March of 2011. I

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

have also created several other experiential learning projects, including bread baking, volunteer snow shoveling, and vegetable growing. All of these activities are different in terms of the practical skills taught, but I they are all similar in philosophical terms about how to live one's life in a way that is meaningful, fulfilling, and nonviolent. The following five broader objectives are consistent throughout the experiential learning projects:

- help others
- be creative and productive
- care for our environment
- actively engage in the natural cycle of life
- unite body and mind through meaningful physical work

Just as students can learn how to make bread by getting their hands covered in flour, students can learn how to attain these more abstract goals through direct experience.

For more details about the actual logistics and practicalities of creating and implementing these programs, please refer to my previous article, *Four Experiential Learning Programs at Momoyama Gakuin University* (Decker 2012). In this present article, I will focus more on the abstract philosophical principles behind nonviolent experiential learning while grounding them in narrative descriptions of actual events. It is my hope that in reading this, you will be inspired to create nonviolent experiential learning opportunities for your students, your families and friends, and for yourself.

Nonviolence

Nonviolence has been developed and refined by practitioners such as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and countless others. For this paper, I will draw on the definition that I set forth in a previous article, *Teaching Nonviolence*.

Nonviolence is the opposite of violence. I define violence as thoughts, words, and actions which are harmful. Thus I define nonviolence as thoughts, words, and actions which are helpful. Nonviolence is not neutral, nor does it simply mean the absence of physical violence. The closest synonym in the English language is love. Nonviolence is selfless and universal love. The concept of nonviolence is based on a belief that everything is united. I am writing this sentence and you are reading this sentence. We are connected at this moment, transcending time and space. No human exists in isolation. Rather we each exist as a small part of an unfathomably vast and interconnected universe. If I intentionally inflict harm upon any part of our universe, I will be harming myself. If I intentionally help any part of our universe, I will be helping myself (Decker 2011).

The Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn describes this concept of interconnection effectively in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*.

When we look at the ocean, we see that each wave has a beginning and an end. A wave can be compared with other waves, and we can call it more or less beautiful, higher or lower, longer lasting or less long lasting. But if we look more deeply, we see that a wave is made of water. While living the life of a wave, it also lives the life of water. It would be sad if the wave did not know that it is water (Hanh 1998).

The wave can be read as a metaphor for an individual human life. We must care for ourselves as waves and we must care for the water that we are composed of. We should not deny either ourselves or the broader system that

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

we are connected to, but instead, do our best to care for both.

In *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Tolstoy describes nonviolence from his perspective as a Christian.

Christianity recognizes love of self, of family, of nation, and of humanity, and not only of humanity, but of everything living, everything existing; it recognizes the necessity of an infinite extension of the sphere of love. But the object of this love is not found outside self in societies of individuals, nor in the external world, but within self, in the divine self whose essence is that very love, which the animal self is brought to feel the need of through its consciousness of its own perishable nature (Tolstoy 1893).

By loving “everything existing” we are also loving ourselves. By caring for the water we also care for the wave.

There is much that initially seems counterintuitive about nonviolence, particularly in a culture where we are bombarded with commercial messages telling us to gratify our temporal senses for our own benefit, regardless of the cost to others. Why should you make bread when you can easily buy it, baked and wrapped conveniently in plastic? Why should you walk through the mountains when you can drive down the four-lane highway? Why should you grow vegetables by hand when someone else can use a machine and do it for you?

In his essays challenging modern economic thought, John Ruskin questions the idea that people will naturally want to do the least amount of work for the highest amount of selfish benefit: “That which can be done with perfect convenience and without loss is not always the thing that most needs to be done ... (Ruskin 1906).” Sometimes it is better to choose the more difficult path. By acting nonviolently, that is, by acting in a way that brings benefit to others without harm, the act itself is its own reward.

Experiential Learning

I define experiential learning simply as learning through direct experience. John Dewey, an early advocate for experiential learning, in *Democracy and Education* states, “When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences . . . It is not experience when a child merely sticks his finger into a flame; it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence (Dewey 1916)” If a child burns his finger in a candle, and realizes that he has been burned because of the flame, then he has learned an important experiential lesson. However, with a burnt finger and throbbing pain, this would constitute an example of violent experiential learning.

Life is full of violent experiential learning. Someone drinks too much vodka and suffers the consequences of a terrible hangover, eats too much and has indigestion. A person insults another in irrational anger and loses a friendship. Nonviolent experiential learning helps people to make positive choices and then reap the benefits from them, not benefits that are accrued in the distant future, but immediately rewarded at the moment of making the positive, non-violent choice. Furthermore, experiential learning takes nonviolence out of the realm of abstract conception and allows people to directly experience the power of nonviolence for themselves.

The good and evil in us all

The day before his tragic assassination, Martin Luther King Jr., one of the greatest practitioners of nonviolence, referred to the good and evil within us all.

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

And in every one of us, there's a war going on. It's a civil war. I don't care who you are, I don't care where you live, there is a civil war going on in your life. And every time you set out to be good, there's something pulling on you, telling you to be evil ... Every time you set out to love, something keeps pulling on you trying to get you to hate ... There's a tension at the heart of human nature. And whenever we set out to dream our dreams and to build our temples, we must be honest enough to recognize it (King 1968).

In this speech Dr. King shines light on one of the most difficult aspects of the practice of nonviolence. We are not perfect creatures. There are negative impulses in us all. On one level, our biological instincts may compel us to act selfishly. If there is only one piece of bread left, a voice of self-preservation will tell us to eat it all for ourselves. But there is an even deeper more frightening level: a self-destructive tendency within us. In order to love the world around us, we must also love ourselves. Conversely, if we feel anger towards ourselves, we will also feel anger towards the world around us. If we feel anger towards the world around us, we will also feel anger towards ourselves. The water and the wave are inextricable.

Nonviolence is a choice that must be made constantly. It is not a static line that can be crossed, nor is it a summit of a mountain to be reached. Is it a path in itself, and at times it is exceedingly difficult. Like most people I know, at times I am besieged with negative thoughts and emotions, and at these times I deeply doubt my ability to practice nonviolence myself, and feel even deeper doubt about talking and writing about nonviolence to share these ideas with others. But at these times, I remember that the practice of nonviolence is like water. I can drink water in the morning, but if I don't drink anymore for the rest of the day, I will go to bed dehydrated with a headache. Nonviolence is like exercise. I know that it is the right thing to do. I know that it will make

me feel better, but sometimes it is so hard to get off the couch, put on my sneakers and go for a jog. Furthermore, even if I run a marathon today, if I stop running thereafter, I will lose any benefits to my health that I may have gained.

The same applies for nonviolent experiential learning. A student who participates in one bread-baking activity should not be expected to become a steadfast practitioner of nonviolence for the rest of his life. The important point is that the bread-baking activity is a small step in the right direction along the path.

PHOTO 2

International Bread Making (Photo by Language Center Staff)



Part 3: Bread

The flour, yeast and salt were all arranged on a central table. Each interna-

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

tional group of students had two bowls and a copy of simple hand-written directions: flour-500 g, yeast- 2teaspoons, salt- 2 teaspoons, water- as needed. Everyone wanted to know where the teaspoons and measuring cups were, but instead, I encouraged them to rely on their eyes, their hands, and their collective judgment to estimate the right ratios of yeast, flour, water and salt.

While each team ended up with a slightly different consistency, all of the dough was successfully kneaded, and millions of yeast spores activated. When we returned three hours later for the second session, all of the dough had doubled in size from the respiration of the living yeast. We carried the dough down to a local community center kitchen for baking. Students were free to shape the loaves into any size and shapes they chose, and then they baked them until they deemed them done. At the end of the session everyone had eaten their fill of bread and there was enough to take home for the following day's breakfast. We had all eaten our fill, but only after working together to create our food.

Making bread is simple.

For someone who has never made bread before, these words are nothing more than words. An experienced baker will recognize the truth of this statement. Similarly, consider the following:

By helping others you also help yourself.

Those who haven't experienced this phenomenon directly may see this at best as a noble ideal, or at worse, as an empty platitude. However, people who have genuinely experienced the fulfillment and joy that comes from helping others will intuitively understand this concept.

Giving someone a powerful idea without giving them something to do with it is like handing a child some flour, yeast, salt and water and asking her to make bread, then standing back and doing nothing to help. The result will be the child with his hands covered in a glutinous mass shedding tears of exasperation. However, if an experienced teacher offers some guidance, but allows the child to do the work by herself, then the child will have the direct experience of the beauty and simplicity of making bread and the confidence that she too can do it. Similarly, if a teacher offers a parable about helping yourself by helping others, the teacher should also create a situation in which students can actually put this idea into practice and directly experience its validity.

Part 4: Vegetables

It was a Wednesday, sometime in early June and a steady drizzle was falling outside the window, but really it could have been any day of the week and any time of the year with weather from a typhoon to a blizzard to brilliant luminous sunshine. I was in a post-lunch torpor, hardly aware of my surroundings. On my desk was an orange peel, a banana peel, a coffee filter full of spent grounds, and a bowl coated with a layer of greasy tomato sauce. Lunch had been delicious and I had enjoyed every bite, but now it was gone, and the torpor had taken hold. On my computer monitor was a rough draft of my paper on nonviolence, but I knew there was no chance that I could effectively work on that now in my current state of mind. I had an hour before my next class. Sixty minutes to clean up and try to find the enthusiasm for teaching that my students would be expecting.

Somehow I managed to get up, consolidate the fruit peels and coffee grounds and take them towards the compost bucket. The compost bucket is

actually just a large plastic white bowl with another plastic bowl that sits on it upside down to keep the scent of decomposition contained. This bucket was my idea, but I sighed audibly when I saw that it was nearly overflowing with coffee grounds, teabags, fruit peels, and apple cores. White filaments of an ambitious fungus were already visible in the lower levels.

I forced myself to take the full compost bucket in one hand and my tomato-sauce covered bowl in the other, and I headed for the office door. Another teacher saw my hands full and held the door open for me.

In the kitchen was one of the staff from a different office. He smiled as he finished washing out his bento box. He was about to throw a wilted piece of lettuce in the trash, but I asked him to put it in the compost bucket. As I washed my own bowl, I told him about the compost project, and in turn the vegetable garden. I explained that the compost was a good way to convert organic waste into fertilizer and to save energy.

“All this stuff is mostly water,” I said gesturing vaguely towards my compost collection with my soapy hand, “if you put it in the trash, it is just extra weight. Someone has to bag it up then use fuel to drive it off in a truck to somewhere where they’ll probably just use more fuel to burn it.” I felt a familiar despair about the human race rising in me as I said this, (similar to what I feel every time I hear the hornet whine of a leaf-blower), but then I remembered to add, “but if you put it in the ground, it just turns into healthy soil.” He smiled at this last point, and I think I even managed a smile too.

I put my bowl in the dish rack to dry and carried the compost with me to our building’s front door. As I stepped outside I suddenly recalled that it was indeed June, in the rainy season, here on the intensely green island of Honshu in Japan. I saw that the rain had let up, more like a hovering mist than a falling

rain, and above me, I could even make out the lighter disc of the sun behind layers of gray clouds. Humans, myself included, often complained about the rainy season, but at a glance, I could see that the plants were ecstatic. Every stalk, stem, and leaf of new growth was saturated with water on the inside and dripping with droplets of moisture on the outside. The air was full of the fresh air circulating through these living systems as I drew it through my nose and into my lungs.

Even from a distance, as I approached the vegetable patch I could smell the soil, also saturated with water. As I took the lid off the compost container, it released an odor that, being associated with decomposition, is intuitively offensive to the human nose, but I could detect the subtle fragrance of fertile soil in the making. The familiar white fungal hairs were growing in a spiked punk-rock style over the mix of coffee grounds, fruit peels, and leaves. A cluster of orange colored mushrooms were opening their caps around a green bread crust. George, the resident spider, scampered into the safety of his cone shaped web nest, anticipating the fresh round of organic mass which I dumped on top of the old.

Slavek was walking by while I admired the compost and came over to check on the tomatoes we had planted. The fruits were gradually getting bigger, but the plants were mostly concentrating on putting out their roots during the rainy season. The peppers were also doing well, the *goya* vines were working their way up the trellis we had made of string and bamboo, and one of the cucumbers had even produced the first tiny fruit of the season.

Slavek introduced me to his friends Ryosuke and Chisato, and we showed them around the vegetable patch. The peas were flowering, fruiting and overgrowing the bamboo structure we had built for them in the slow cold months

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

of November last year. I grabbed several pods and passed them over to Ryosuke and Chisato. They looked quizzically, first at the peas, then at each other, then at Slavek, then at me. Slavek and I were opening peas, devouring them and throwing the pods into the space between the garden rows.

“We just eat?” Chisato asked skeptically.

We nodded, our mouths full.

Chisato and Ryosuke nervously opened a pod and each took out an individual pea. They were the same shape and structure as the peas that Slavek and I and several other students had planted five months before, but these were bursting with moisture and life. Nervously, Ryosuke ate half a pea.

“*Oishii!* (It’s delicious)” he exclaimed, “*yappari oishii!* (It really is delicious!)”

Encouraged, Chisato ate hers. “*Oishii!*”

They finished the peas and looked at the pods. I demonstrated the disposal method, returning it to the soil and explaining the logic behind it. It wasn’t trash, just water and soil and nutrients temporarily in the form of a peapod. Just give it back to the earth. They threw their pods on the ground and went for more.

Having only eaten canned peas they were amazed at how sweet and delicious they were. Their cries of “*oishii*” attracted others and more students assembled. Some were new to the garden and initially timid. Others had turned the soil and planted the seeds and they ate with great satisfaction and encouraged the newcomers to relax and enjoy the peas too.

I can’t be in the garden for long without pulling weeds, so I started weeding between the newly planted peppers. The saturated soil released the weeds easily, each individual root coming easily out to reveal the complex under-

PHOTO 3

Students in the Momoyama Vegetable Patch (by Warren Decker)



ground structure of the plant. Others soon joined me and with so many hands, it was a matter of minutes before the weeding was completed.

We returned to the peas. A light drizzle was falling again, but no one seemed to care. Someone looked in the compost bucket and said hello to George the spider. Finally someone noticed the time: 5 minutes till next class. We all thanked each other and started getting ready to head off.

“Remember” I said, “This garden belongs to all of us, so please come anytime!”, then I too jogged back to my office, just in time to put the empty compost bucket back, wash the dirt of my hands, and race up to class, forgetting a pile of photocopied handouts, but full of life and ready for anything.

The parable of the compost bucket

In our vegetable garden we work cooperatively with teachers and students of different ages, departments, nationalities, religions, ethnicities. In the mix of languages we communicate to produce food. The food we produce is healthy, free beyond the cost of our labor and a packet of seeds, and delicious. We can share it together by taking the peas right off the vines.

My compost bucket seems to bring me back to the path of nonviolence just at the times when I have veered off course and am about to stumble over the edge of a cliff. I do not delude myself by thinking that a single compost bucket will solve our earth's ecological problems. All that matters is that it is a step in the right direction, philosophically, in that I am intentionally doing something constructive, and literally in that it forces me to walk outside and look at the earth below and the sky above. Furthermore, the nature of a compost bucket is that it tends to fill up, thus I am forced to take this step repeatedly. So even when I might think that I don't want to, I am guided back to the path of nonviolence.

Part 5: Snow

Mr. Chikara had to park the van about 100 meters away from Yuko Bachan's house. Before we could even begin working around her house, we would have to dig a path to get there. The snow field in front of us was a twinkling, beautiful, unbroken white surface in stark contrast to the deep blue winter sky. The frozen soil was hidden at least a meter below.

After we dug our way to the house, the first priority was to clear off the roof. Yuko Bachan pointed out a step ladder resting along a wall under the snow covered eaves. We unfolded and extended it to its full length. Takashi and I

would go up first and start on the back, and Nicole and Ryoko would follow to clear the snow off the front.

Takashi climbed up first and as Mr. Chikara had shown us the previous day, he first chipped away at the meter bank of snow where the ladder met the roof, sending it crashing down to the ladder's base. Then carefully, so as not to hurt the roof, he excavated the *yuki-dome*. Most houses in this mountainous region of Gifu Prefecture have a *yuki-dome* which is a railing that sticks up from the surface of the roof and runs lengthwise across it about a half meter above the roof's edge. On newer houses, those built in the last fifty years or so, this is usually made of metal and attached directly to the roof. On older houses, sometimes the *yuki-dome* is a cedar log, stabilized by wires looped to other parts of the house and stones carefully placed to hold it in place.

Yuki-dome translated literally means “snow-stop”, but the name is misleading, because its main function is a “people-stop”. While shoveling snow from the roof, if someone happens to lose their footing and slip, or if on a warm day, the snow melts enough to slip and slide off the roof in a mass, the *yuki-dome* is a last chance to catch a foot, hand, or shovel before careening off the edge and into the snow below.

When Takashi found the *yuki-dome*, he used this as a foot hold to climb on to the roof, then testing the deeper snow, and finding it to be stable, he walked up to the peak of the roof, making the first steps in the smooth white rounded surface. Then he descended down to the back on the opposing side and was soon lost from our vision. I followed close behind.

Beyond the roof, we could look over an open field, with an old shed that looked like a mushroom with a white cap of snow and old worn vertical planks of its sides extending upward like the fibers of the stem. A few wooden stakes

Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

stuck out of the snow in rows, evidence of the garden and the soil beneath that would once again produce vegetables after the thaw in a few months. Beyond this was a silent cedar forest that in the still, sunny winter day seemed to radiate serenity and wisdom, and a bemusement regarding our bustling human activities. Above the forest, huge, snow-capped mountains rose into the dark blue sky.

In the mountains of Gifu, left alone, the snow on a roof would accumulate and slide over the edges, to eventually form snow banks up to the level of the roof. After the next blizzard, these snow banks would merge with the snow on the roof until the house was completely buried in snow and inaccessible without digging a tunnel through to the front door. The snow precariously situated above such a tunnel could easily come crashing down. Thus, the art of clearing snow from roofs and from around the house has been developed and refined over generations.

In previous times, there were enough younger people in the village to keep up with the snow shoveling work. These days, the average age of the residents of Takane Village is probably above seventy years of age and people are at a time in their lives when shoveling snow from their homes could be extraordinarily dangerous. That's why four of us, three students and I, had come by bus from Osaka to help.

Takashi worked his way diagonally to the left, and I headed right. On the backside of the roof, facing to the north, the snow was even deeper than the front. Our first job was to find the edge of the roof. The unbroken surface visually merged with the snow field behind it as it curved gracefully down in a gentle arc giving no indication as to where the actual abrupt end of the roof might be. Keeping a good distance from this rounded edge, we leaned forward

with our snow shovels in one hand and poked at the snow, sinking the blade of the shovel deep below the surface, then pulling back on the handle, pushing the snow down off the roof. After a few tries over on Takashi's corner, a large chunk detached and collapsed with a satisfying and exhilarating *whoop* as it pushed the air away from beneath it and sank into the deep snow below. The edge of the roof was much closer to his feet than either of us expected.

After we found the edge and cleared it away, we began the extremely satisfying work of steadily working up the roof in rows. The snow had settled and was solid enough to cut into cubes. Cut down on the top, cut down on the side, scoop from below, throw off the roof: cut 1, cut 2, cut 3, throw! 1, 2, 3, throw! The first two beats had the same sound, beat three, a cut under the snow was slightly deeper. The last sound was the snow singing metallically as it whisked off the shovel and flew through the winter air to the ground below.

Slowly, steadily, we worked. Occasionally one of us would take a brief break to stand up and stretch the muscles in our back, but soon we would be back at the task at hand. We worked from the outside edge of the roof to the inside, until we met in the middle, then we worked our way back. Repeating this process we slowly worked our way up the roof, which meant we had to throw the snow further to get it to the ground below. The sun shone down from above and reflected off the snow beneath us. I took off my coat and tied it around my waist. After another row I took off my gloves and hat and jammed them into my pockets. Takashi continued to work ceaselessly, even when I stopped and leaned on my shovel to catch my breath. I pushed my hands to arch my back and stretch the muscles, then got back into the rhythm: cut 1, cut 2, cut 3, throw!

Eventually we made it to the summit of the roof where we met Nicole and

Ryouko as they were also finishing their final row. We looked at roof which was now clear of snow then looked at each other with a profound feeling of completion and accomplishment. The cedar trees looked on quietly, occasionally dropping snow from their thick green boughs.

The work itself was its own reward, but nonetheless, we were happy when Yuko Bachan invited us in to her house to eat our lunch. So, after clearing a new path to the front door, we took off our wet boots in the dirt floor of the entryway and stepped into the central room. A woodstove was built into an opening in the *tatami* floor, with a table constructed around its metal lid. We sat around the table and put our feet below, holding cold toes towards the metal woodstove. Yuko Bachan put in a few more logs and smiled.

She was dressed in the standard fashion of the area, countless layers of clothes of a dark fabric but made lively with small colorful floral patterns. One floral pattern for the pants, another for the sweater, another for the apron, another for the vest over the apron, and another for the knit wool hat on her head. She thanked us in her soft voice, but being more inclined to action than words, put a kettle of water on the woodstove for tea, and next to it, a large cast iron fry-pan. She went into another room and came back with a plastic bag with a large frozen chunk of *tsukemono*: pickled cabbage and red radish from her garden and she dumped this in the fry-pan to let it thaw. It hadn't been in the freezer, it was just off in the side room.

As these thawed we ate our *onigiri*, drank green tea and enjoyed the nourishment of the food for our tired muscles and the warmth of the fire and the company. Soon the *tsukemono* were thawed and she insisted that we eat them all. She rustled around in buckets and boxes and found some cookies and crackers for us, more green tea, she offered us sake, but we still had another

PHOTO 4

Shoveling snow in Takane Village (Photo by Olga Górczyńska)



house to clear in the afternoon so we politely declined.

When it was finally time to go, she went off into the other room and came back with a bag of peanuts in their shells. Taking handfuls out she gestured with her eyes and chin to our hands, which we held out until they were full, and then as we tried to make our way to the door assuring her that we had enough and were very grateful, she followed us, literally stuffing peanuts in the various pockets of our clothes until the bag was empty.

With boots back on and coats zipped up we were ready to venture into the cold. “*Arigato.*” we all said.

“*Arigato* for the chance to shovel snow in this beautiful place!” we said.

“*Arigato* for shoveling the snow!” she replied.

“*Arigato* for inviting us into your house!” we said.

“*Arigato* for coming!” she replied.

With pockets full of peanuts I smiled. It is wonderful when one person thanks another, but even more wonderful when everyone thanks each other. We didn’t shovel the snow because we wanted *tsukemono* and peanuts, we shoveled snow because we wanted to shovel snow. Yuko Bachan didn’t give us *tsukemono* and peanuts because she felt that she had to, she gave us *tsukemono* and peanuts because she wanted to.

CONCLUSION

In writing this paper, I have renewed inspiration to create nonviolent learning experiences for my students, but I am also forced to acknowledge and reflect upon areas for improvement. Most importantly, I realize that the nonviolent philosophical principles could be far more powerful if they were made more explicit to students participating in these programs. To me, the connection between bread and nonviolence is obvious, but what about my students? They might be so caught up in the immediate concrete task that they don’t think about the more abstract implications of their actions.

Primarily, I am employed to teach English at my current university, so all of these experiential learning endeavors are essentially extra-curricular, and yet more and more, I feel that if anything, they should be the most central to the curriculum: the classroom for discussion of nonviolence, the world for the experiential practice of nonviolence.

I have discussed mountain travel, bread baking, vegetable growing and snow shoveling at a university in Japan, but learning nonviolence through experiential learning could take countless different forms and could be implemented in virtually any setting, not only in educational institutions. Any time

a person has a chance to make a positive choice, to reaffirm their connection to the people and environment around them, then they have a chance to practice nonviolence. It might be something as simple as stopping to pick a piece of trash out of a flower bed instead of just pretending to ignore it. It might be as simple as a smile.

The personal practice of nonviolence itself very fulfilling, but even more fulfilling is giving others a chance to practice nonviolence and directly experience its power. Whether they call it nonviolence or not, all people know on some level that they want to make a meaningful contribution to their world. But this seed of intention will only come into fruition if there is soil in which to plant it; a chance in which to convert the intention into constructive, meaningful action. Creating nonviolent experiential learning opportunities gives people this chance, and helps them to develop and exercise their most positive attributes. If you have taken the time to read this article to the end, whoever you are and wherever you may be, please join me in the ongoing development of nonviolent experiential learning.

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Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow: Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

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Mountains, Bread, Vegetables, Snow : Nonviolence through Experiential Learning

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Like baking bread or growing vegetables, the practice of nonviolence is best learned through direct experience. This article describes four experiential learning programs at Momoyama Gakuin University: mountain travel, bread baking, organic vegetable growing and volunteer snow shoveling. Although the specific, concrete objectives are varied, all of these programs share the same objectives of teaching students about nonviolence and helping them to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives.