

# On zebras and meaning making in adventure therapy

## Embracing individuality and the human connection

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This article disentangles what it means to be a meaning seeking person and how we can use these core understandings from psychological theory in our everyday practice of Adventure therapy. I challenge you, dear reader, to reflect on how what I write about may be relevant to you and your particular work.

I will build a case – a chain of arguments – that can be summed up like this:

- Meaningful experiences promote a range of health benefits
- Different people find meaning in different experiences
- In adventure therapy we should seek to understand the unique way in which each participant constructs meaning

I will start by telling you three small stories from my work in Norway.

### Eva

We normally don't do very long hikes, but this one had become quite substantial. Our group had split up for the day, and being alone with the one half I carried a big pack. This is ok – I am not fast but I am quite strong. None of us had been this way before, and I challenged Eva, an aloof and somewhat mysterious girl, to navigate. I remember, on being asked, she gave me a look that I found un-interpretable. Then she took my map folder and compass, and led the group cautiously, but confidently. Approaching the end-destination she walked up to me and said; Leiv, let me try your backpack. Putting it on her narrow shoulders she looked ridiculous, but she staggered along with it the final stretch. I can't believe you have carried that thing the whole day – she said. That night, when I had retired to my tent, I could hear in

the distant participants in quiet talks and sometimes laughing. The campfire cast a flickering light through the tent wall and onto the map folder Eva had handed back to me, and it was then I discovered the small flower she had placed between the plastic cover and the map. Eva's style of communication often took unexpected turns, but for those wanting to see she could be clear as water.

### Per

Per's qualities lay more in brut strength than verbal skills. But he is one of those guys that has layers of mildness covering up his physique. Still, having lived a while I knew well this boy could probably outdo me in anything physical. As we hiked along he challenged me to a rock throwing competition, the goal being to toss a stone as far as possible. Leiv, I know you want to, he teased. Not really into that stuff anymore I hesitated, but hearing Per's enthusiasm I succumbed, gave it my all and threw the rock quite far by my standards ... and lost momentarily. Continuing the hike Per came up besides me and said; I didn't think you'd take the challenge – you threw that rock really far for a bloke your age.

### Mona

We had followed an easterly course. The weather was nice but our legs were tired after a solid climb. The group decided to

rest, and we found a beautiful place beside a small, nameless stream. After food and drink, without having planned this, we all laid back into the dry grass. Most closed their eyes and the group went quiet. The ground was shaped such that the body of my neighbour slid towards me, resulting in Mona's shoulders touching mine. I let it be, kept my eyes shut and indulged the peace. The rays from the summer sun made the temperature perfect, and the stream saturated the air with pleasant sounds. After a while I came to notice how Mona's and my rhythm of breathing had come together. Our calm had become symbiotic as our bodies synchronized. I must have dozed and when I came back my aging back was stiffening. Mona and I were still inhaling and exhaling simultaneously, our upper bodies communicating it seemed. As we got back onto our feet a little later Mona looked at me with a cautious smile and said; thanks Leiv for being tired with me. I noticed you fell asleep for a while.

You may already have noticed that these three stories have one thing in common; a developing inter-human connection that goes beyond our more traditional role as client and therapist. Hold on to this, because this phenomenon is vital in this paper.



## Meaning

Until 50 years ago the discipline of psychology had been really ambiguous towards the idea of meaning making, claiming it could not be studied with any degree of precision. Actually, as far back as 1927, Mary Calkins – the first woman president of the American Psychological Association, wrote that; “There is no reason why psychology should insistently claim the concept of meaning”. So here is a very simplified version of how the concept of meaning entered, and some would say, started owning the stage of modern health and well-being understandings:

Throughout history, in most nations, meaning and happiness were understood as the same thing, and the formula for happiness was simple; the wealthier we were the happier we would be. Of course Greek philosophers, and others, had long ago claimed otherwise, but these were mostly forgotten. So in May of 1961, when US president John F. Kennedy announced America would have a man walk the moon before the end of the decade, NASA quickly developed a worry about their relations to the public. What would this tremendously expensive national goal cost the average American citizen in lost quality of life? In happiness? The quest for answers sparked what we call the Social Indicators Movement, and some years later the seminal book *Quality of American life* concluded surprisingly; "It is no longer enough for the nation to aspire to material wealth; the experience of life must be stimulating, rewarding, and secure". Their examples were; “needs for social esteem, recognition, and self-actualization"

Of course, humanistic oriented people like Maslow and Rogers had claimed this for a while. However, these good people based their understandings on qualitative research techniques only, and as a result the impact of humanistic psychology had been limited... which was a shame, because now we know that much of what they said was spot on. Today research has shown that happiness, quality of life, subjective and psychological well-being can indeed be studied in a rigorous manner. We now understand that the good life is expressed

through our choice of life goals, and the “engine” drives these life goals is our basic thrive towards meaning in life and meaning with life.

One definition of meaningfulness is "when a situation is experienced as congruent with the person's goals and values". In normal language congruent is the same as “in accordance with”. Now hold onto the last piece of this definition ... as congruent with the person's goals and values. This is where the zebra enters the picture. Not now, but a little later.

The scientific field has accepted, and even embraced, that experiencing meaning in life, and with life, is essential to our mental health, our psychological robustness, and as an anti-dote against illness, ill-health and what my friend and colleague Nevin Harper calls dis-ease. This article is, in other words, built on the inference that experiencing meaning promotes health. By health I mean increased immunological defence, increased subjective and psychological well-being, increased sense of coherence, increased and more robust health-behaviour and increased sense of self-worth. In other words; meaning sparks life-satisfaction, which directly counteracts depression and anxiety, suicidal behaviour and a range of other symptoms of reduced health.

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## The human connection

Sometimes coincidence strikes. As I was preparing this article I communicated with another friend and colleague, Will Dobud. During our talks, and without him knowing the topic of I was writing about, he summed up the lowest common denominator of this paper's three opening stories. Will said: Adolescents prefer not to be in a helper/helped relationship in adventure therapy. Especially after multiple failed therapy experiences. Over half the kids in my study said something like this about what was the turning point in their therapy; "it was when I found out the therapist was human".

Here is a fourth story: Hans was a tall, slender 17-year old young man. His father had died in an accident some years

earlier and he had been bullied since. Hans' self-esteem had become very low. However, Hans was an asset to any group as he was caring, observant and with a mild humour to spare when needed by others. I recall us early in the group process telling him; Hans, you are a really nice person to be around, but he swiftly dismissed this as he replied; You have to say that. Of course you do. That is what they pay you to do. Our program progressed and our joint stories became more numerous and intertwined. We had been tired together, canoed together, looked at the stars together. We had even gone to the toilet behind the same bush. On one of the final talk sessions of the program we repeated to Hans; Hans, you are a really nice person to be around. He stirred the fire a bit and replied quietly; I hear what you say and I still find it hard to believe. But coming from you I'm now willing to consider if there might be some truth to it.

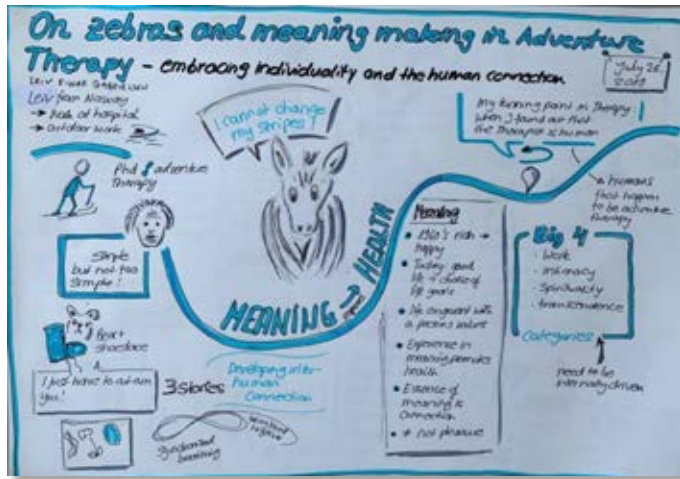
There was no particular greatness in our words, but there was lots of magic in what we had been through together ... and that had changed the meaning, the value, and the depth of our conversation. Hans had experienced that we were his tour mates, for good and bad, a fellow human companionship who also happened to be outdoor therapists.

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## Meaning making

Most people find their meaning in one or several of four meaning categories that are lovingly labelled the BIG 4 of meaning. These categories are work (and achievements), intimacy (and relations), spirituality, and transcendence (and generativity). This means that whenever, in adventure therapy, our conversations or situations move towards subjects related to participants work, intimacy, spirituality or transcendence, we can confidently know that we are likely approaching something of fundamental importance to our client.

Now, if only it was this simple. You see, not only should we seek the meaningful categories, we must also make sure these cat-



Graphic Recording des Vortrags: Ina Lockau-Vogel

egories resonate with the clients internal motivation. That is that these categories are grounded in needs like purpose, values, efficacy or self-worth. In other words, even though facilitated tasks and experiences in our adventure therapy work may lie squarely within the BIG 4 categories, they may still not be perceived as meaningful by clients, particularly if they are driven by factors outside their motivational system.

At this point let me quickly remind not to confuse meaningfulness with pleasurable. Hedonism, or pure fun if you will, may be really good, but it has little to do with meaning. Enjoyment may enhance health too, but not to the lasting effect meaning does.

So, this is what it is all about; creating experiences within the meaning categories that are fuelled by the participants' internal motivation – congruence! Any time you enable such a situation that sparks the feeling of congruence in your client, that is, remember, the notion that this experience is aligned with his or her goals and values, meaningfulness occurs, and you are doing something very right and important. And with it comes the entire buffet of psychological benefits that I argue are among the most powerful processes in health care.

But how do we do this? The answer to this question is in theory straightforward; we simply should include as many experiences of meaning into our adventure therapy program as possible.

**The zebra**

There is however one major issue left to navigate, and which, I am sorry to say, is often forgotten or downplayed by adventure therapists as well as other professionals for that matter. What is meaningful to me is not necessarily meaningful to you. We are different to one another, all of us. And we will remain different.

This individual difference is called by many names; individuality, selfhood, disposition, psyche, self, constitution, identity, makeup, temperament, character, and distinctiveness ... the list goes on. I am talking about whatever rises from within and makes us who we are. It is what defines the very core of ourselves and that is recognized by people we have not seen for years. It is what makes us predictable and why we are drawn towards some people and shy away from others. It is why we become really good versions of ourselves in some situations, whilst we find other situations demanding.

I am talking about personality. And like it or not, our personality usually doesn't change all that much, at least not after we have reached 30 years of age. It has even been said that it is no easier for a human to change his or her personality ... than it is for a zebra to change its stripes.

I am of course aware that this assertion can be challenged ontologically, philosophically, from the concept of free will, nature versus nurture, and epigenetics. Nothing is absolute for sure, but this is

not a paper about the theories of personality, so we will not go there now. It is however a paper about the individuality of meaning making and the amazing possibilities lying herein. It is about wanting to see the unique and beautiful stripes of each of the people we work with. It is about understanding that we should not only tolerate our differences, but that we should embrace them. We cannot fit well in moulds defined by others! You can only reach someone's heart if you, to use the cliché, accept him or her for who they are. It is all but impossible to connect with someone if we at the same time are working hard to rearrange their "stripes".

Let me use myself as an example: I am, to a certain extent a social introvert. If no other expectations pull my strings I tend to avoid large crowds of people, particularly if I do not know them well. I am not very good at small talk and random noise makes me uncomfortable. I have chosen to learn techniques to manage "extroverted" situations that are sometimes required of me, but left unchecked you will see me pulling back into the shades, perhaps with a good friend, a book, or just to be alone. This is me, it is part of my zebra pattern. The point being that, as most people do, I like my pattern. It is who I am – and if I adhere to it, play to its tune, it provides me with many congruent moments. Depending on how the light falls on me the pattern of my stripes might be strong sometimes and a little weaker on other days. But it will always be there I think.

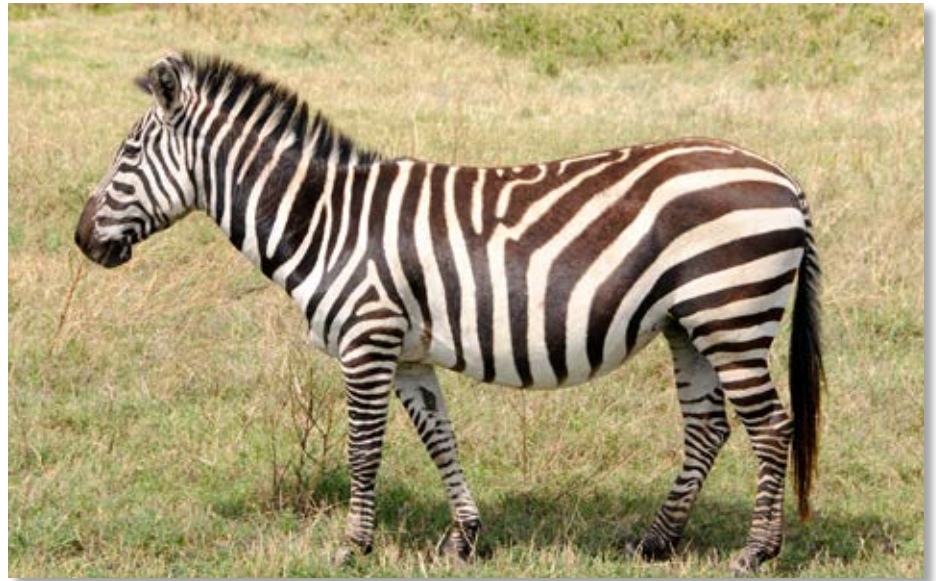
### From theory to practice

Returning quickly to our initial meet with Eva, Per and Mona, these stories all had the genuine connection between two people in common. Eva who secretly presented a flower, Per's respect for the older man who allowed himself to lose the rock throwing competition in front of him, and Mona who's body rhythm of breathing synchronized with her therapist as we attended to our common human need of rest.

So now you may ask; what happened to all the talk about finding meaningful situations?

It is a good question – and the answer is of significance; you see – it requires a certain level of emotional relationship to work meaningfully (pun intended) with helping others discover meaning. It is much easier to enable a client discover and experience congruent situations (i.e., meaningfulness) if we already have connected with him or her on an inter human-level. If this connection has been established what we communicate will be perceived differently, closer, and more honest. It means that your interest in your participant is more likely to be understood as genuine, because when people meet people as people, we cannot remain emotionally indifferent to one another any longer.

We have to genuinely understand who people are to better facilitate meaningfulness. The best way of doing this is through dialogue. And nowhere are such dialogues easier to facilitate than when spending time together in nature – one of the true magic's of adventure therapy! One of the most powerful questions I know is this; please tell me about your ideal life situation five years from now? Most people will become emotionally involved when talking about their own possible life goals – which basically is the expression of meaning, and for most a fun exercise in itself. The question concerns them and this issue will tap deeply into their emotional systems. By learning about clients' dreams and goals you learn about their individual relation to areas of personal significance. For instance – “everyone” has a need for being in relations with other people. But how this need manifests itself will vary.



Some may dream of having a big family and hold a continuous string of parties with many kids, while others may dream of living quietly on a small farm with only that one special person. Both goals are relational, both are valid, and yet they are very different to one another. If these two people were to change lives, chances are that both would become unhappy.

You may already have sensed that this paper also has a critical undertone? If so you are right, but it is a friendly critique and I present it with the acknowledgement that it spares none of us. Many clients we meet have already had lots of hardships in their lives; rigidity, instability, unpredictability, un-sensitivity, betrayal, and outright cruelty. Some adventure programs appear to introduce what by the participant can be experienced as a continuation of some of this. Especially perhaps in the interventions initial phases. Please believe in me when I say that I do not question the sincerity of program staff wanting to do well, wanting to help, but I still ask myself; why? Many of our clients that come to us for help are already “broken”, and what they need now is respect, love, dignity, curiosity, humour, and autonomy. At this point please do not confuse these values with the therapists giving up control, abandoning rules, and not placing demands. There is no contradiction here. We must, in my opinion, in our adventure therapy work, try as hard as we can, from day one, to cultivate participant individuality. Not only because it is ethical in its own right,

not only because it promotes what we in the Nordic Outdoor Therapy Network value document call relational dignity, but because it is the most efficient and decent way to help people towards improving the quality of their lives.

Let me use myself as an example again. I am what some call a sensation seeker. It was quite pronounced in my younger days, but even today I half jokingly, half seriously, say that I have to be scared once a week to function well. Many years ago I suffered a serious parachute accident. My family hated my skydiving, but even after surgery and rehabilitation they never tried to change me. I mended, slowly, and continued doing another thousand parachute jumps. They continued to dislike it, and still do when I take risks they find hard to understand. But they left my stripes alone. As for myself I understood well, even at that young age, that if I didn't get to throw myself out of airplanes I would probably start doing drugs or riding motorcycles instead. And that, back then, I would not have survived.

The essence of this story is one that I hope you will remember in your future meetings with clients because I believe it is crucial. If we need to help a client change behavior, which we sometimes do, we have to understand what, if any “stripes” are fueling this behavior. Obviously, if someone thrives on strong impulses, and they address these needs by unacceptable activities, this should come to an end.

Other outlets should be found so that this person still feels he or she is living a congruent life. Again – the solution to how accomplish this is best discovered through an accepting and joint investigative dialogue between therapist and client. It is a dialogue that requires honesty, curiosity and creativity, and which, when successful, enables the client to define for him or herself what may be the right congruent path to walk from here.

### Conclusion

In the conclusion of this paper let me point out that most “stripes” that we have – clients and therapists alike – empower us and can be immense resources in our lives. Becoming aware of our own, and others, patterns of beauty and power is among the most enhancing work we can do, not only in adventure therapy, but also as colleagues, friends and simply as co-humans. This is our common ground as human beings.

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### Autor

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