

Risk Managing a Wilderness Fast:

Why, When and How to Facilitate a Fast in the Backcountry.

Paul Stonehouse, PhD



Outdoor Leadership
simpsonu.edu/outdoorleadership



Fingers and Pats



Two responses over the last couple of days: Fingers (pointed in my face) passionately renouncing the place of fasting in the backcountry and Pats (on my back) appreciatively noting the need for a discussion on this important topic.

Fasting in the backcountry appears to be a polarizing issue.

Arguing one way or the other is not my intention. I'm simply trying to begin a conversation that is important to our field's development.

How many are here because their program facilitates a fast and they'd like to know more about it?

How many are here because they are suspect of backcountry fasting?

How many are here because they're curious about backcountry fasting?

Fingers and Pats



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Road Map

- Programs that Fast
- Professional Expectations
- Purposes of a Fast
- Risk Management Implications
- Ethical Considerations for a Backcountry Fast
- Pedagogical Strategies



Programs that Fast

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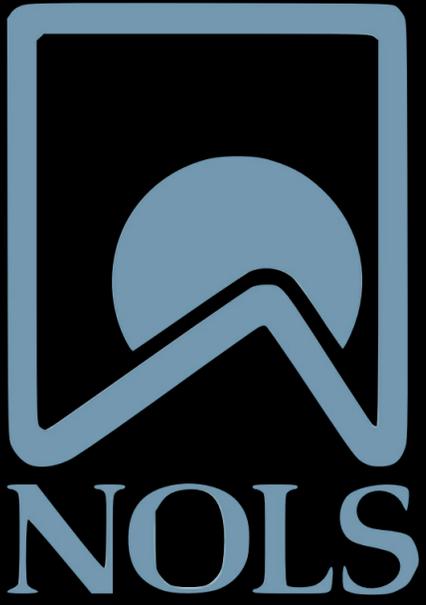
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Rites of Passage – “The Vision Quest program has four core elements that serve as both challenges and supports for the journey: Solitude, immersion in nature, fasting, and community.” – see <http://www.ritesofpassagevisionquest.org/the-vision-quest.html>

Wilderness Within – “Most therapeutic programs are designed around a solo–fast which includes gestalt expressive experiential group therapy. Trips vary from base camp settings to more remote wilderness adventures.” – see <http://www.wildernesswithin.com/category/events/nature-therapy>



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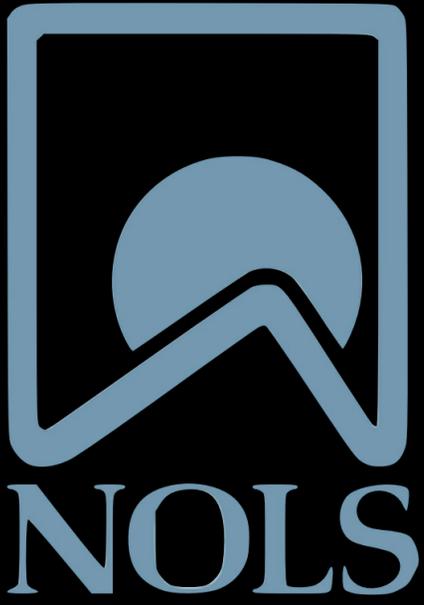
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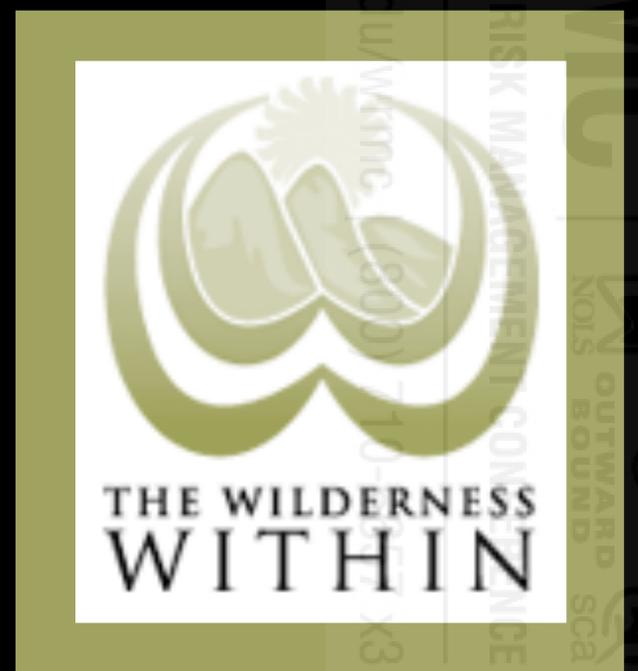
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Little Written on Backcountry Fast

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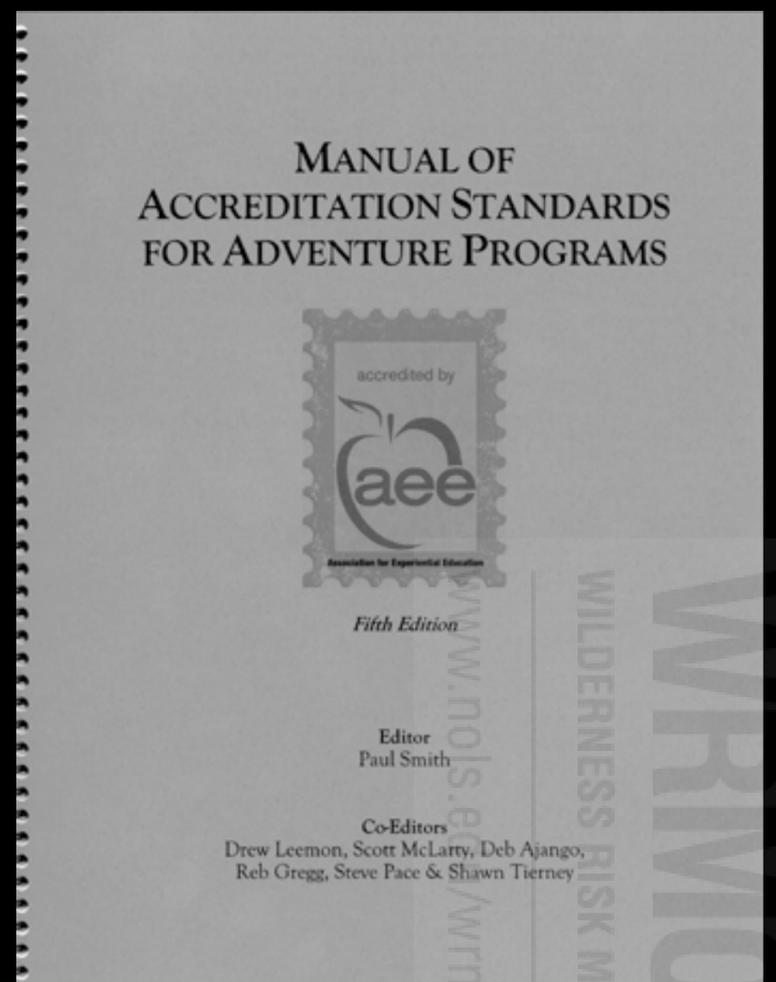
If there is this precedent for fasting throughout our practice, why is so little written on it?

Professional Expectations

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7.06 Participants are provided with or have access to adequate nourishment



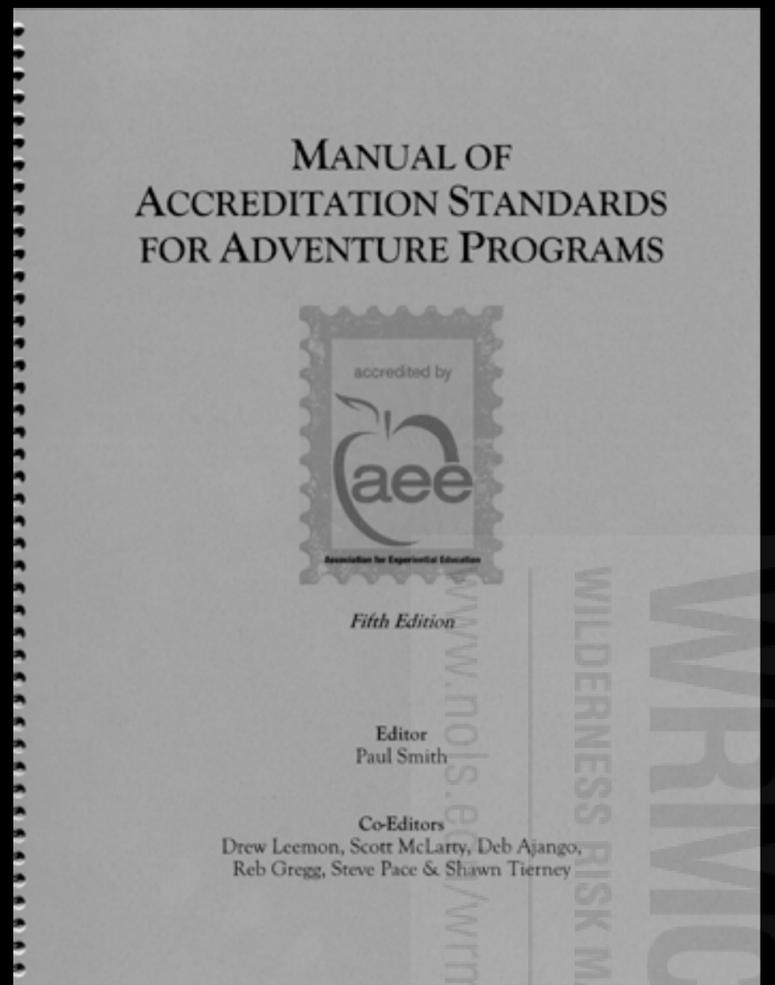
“Programs that permit fasting will explain that aspect of the program to participants before they agree to participate. If the program allows fasting, emergency food supplies will be available.”

Section 7 on nutrition and other matters...

Three things here: 1) “explain,” this implies the offering of a rationale; 2) offer a choice to fast or not; and 3) some forethought as to “emergency food supplies” – which we’ll address later.

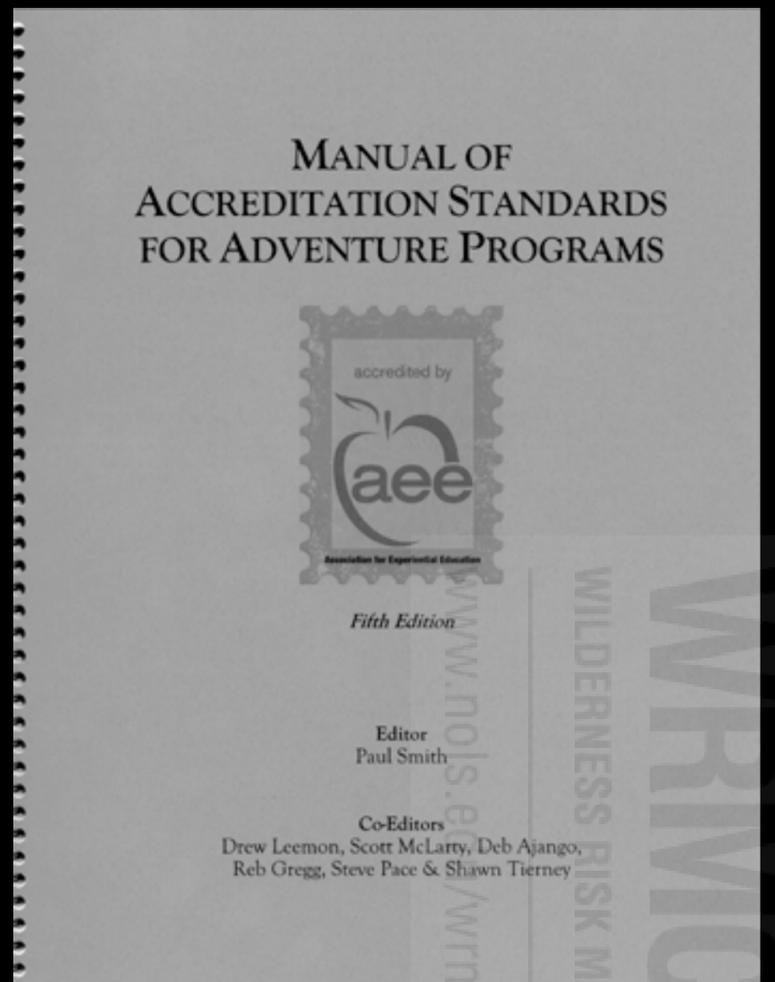
I think these are important, For, over the years I’ve had several opportunities to fast as an outdoor adventure education participant. As I reflect on these experiences I remember: 1) feeling unclear regarding the purpose of the fast; 2) not realizing that the fast was optional; and 3) being convinced that “breaking the fast” was not an option.

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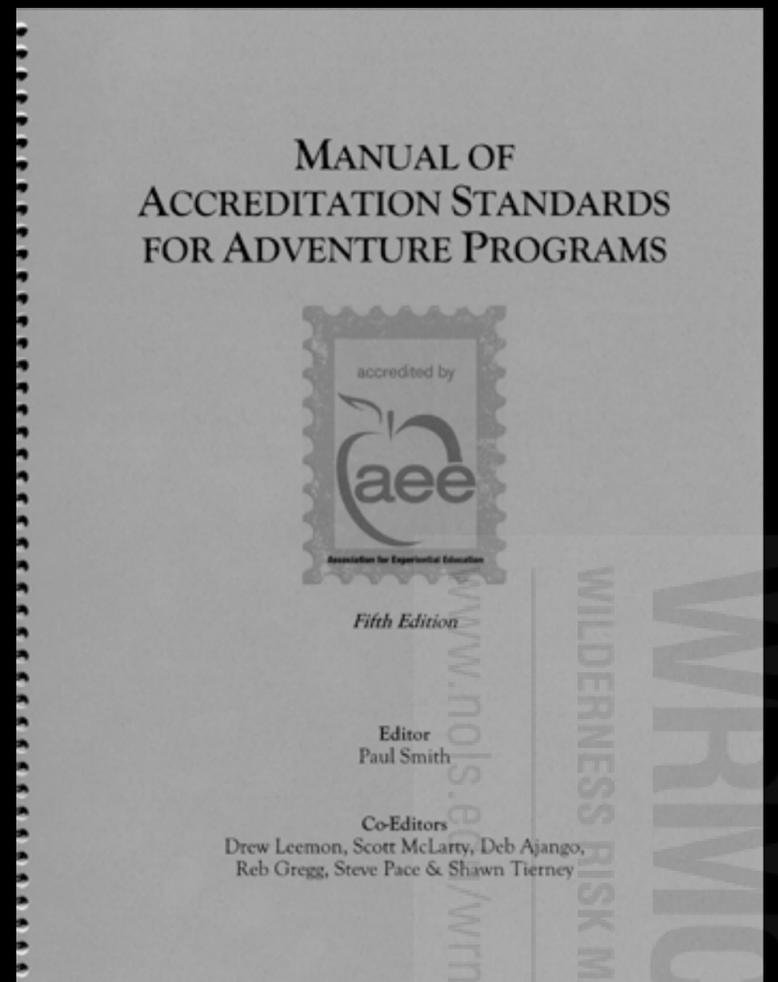
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Over the course of the presentation, we'll be sure to look at these three elements.

Purposes of a Fast



In this section, I'll highlight some historical reasons for fasting...

Why and why not fast?



Find a partner and ask why they would and/or would not utilize a fast in a backcountry program.

Why and why not fast?



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Widespread Value

- "All the major religions of the world recognize its merit. Zoroaster practiced fasting as did Confucius and the Yogis of India. Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle all fasted. Even Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, believed in fasting."
- Foster



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Abrahamic Religions



OT – Moses, King David, the Prophet Elijah, even the cattle!

Islam – Ramadan (9th month of Islamic calendar is a worldwide fast for Muslims)

Christianity – Jesus himself fasts and assumes we will too (Matt. 6:16)

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This widespread usage doesn't make it right, but it should give us pause...



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Health

- Rest
- Detoxification



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Health is an often assumed benefit of fasting that goes all the way back to Hippocrates, as mentioned above.

The argument goes something like this:

Rest: most of us eat, snack, or drink something throughout a majority of the day, and the short breaks we take between these eating sessions are rarely enough to clear the Small and Large intestine. So our digestive system is working all the time! Fasting offers a much needed break.

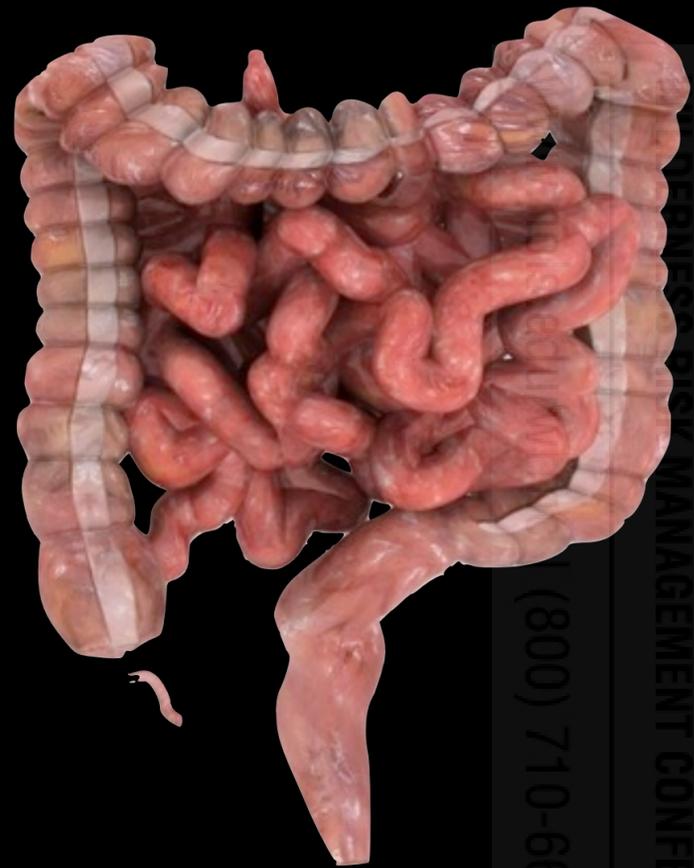
Detoxification – We gain toxins from processed foods, fertilizers and other chemicals. Even our organic farms are using air and water that are often contaminated. Thus, fasting offers a chance for the body to release some of these toxins. A fast often cleans out our bowels and seemingly excretes toxic buildup. For example, when one fasts, a thick and bad smelling residue forms on our tongue.

Right?

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I wanted to learn more about these benefits in a backcountry environment, so I contacted Mary Howley Ryan. Do you know who she is?

She actually had reservations in speaking with me about backcountry fasting, because she considers herself only a “conditional advocate.” She alerted me to a whole constellation of variables that make fasting, of any kind, a complicated endeavor.

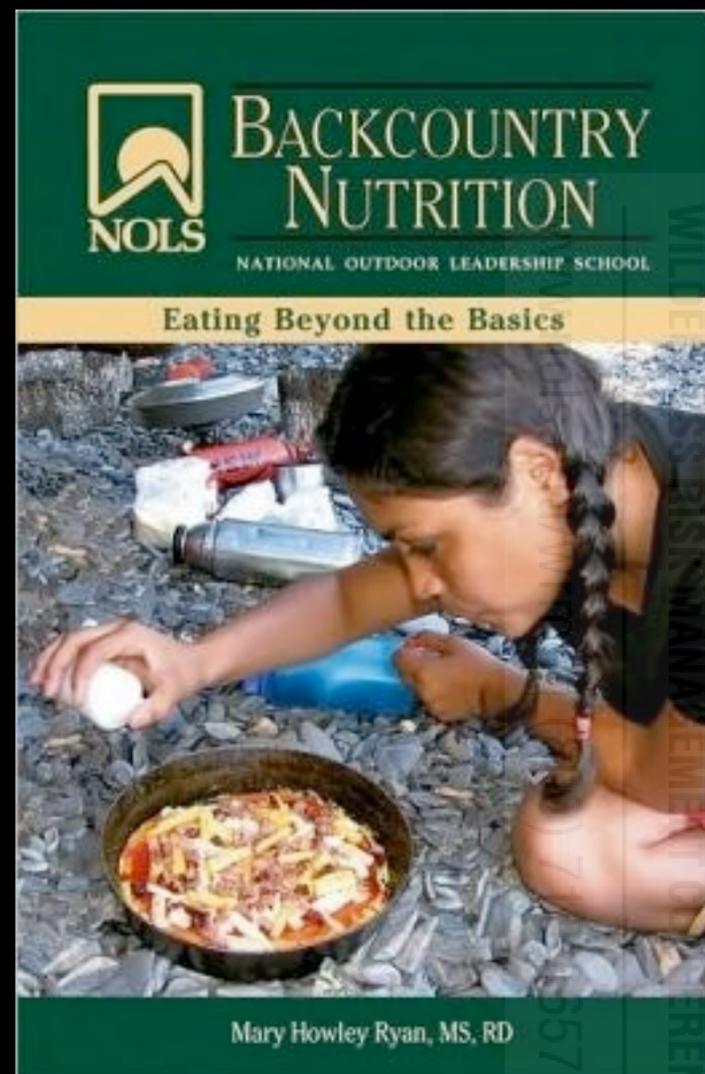
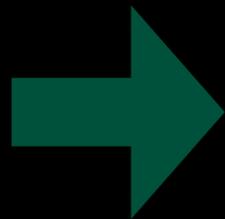
Mary suggests that these health benefits are contentious claims that do not bear out in the research literature. Further, the brevity of the fasts we facilitate in an outdoor program context are unlikely to bring about these benefits.

Although the GI tract will slow down, it will also decrease digestive enzymes needed to process our food when we begin our backcountry travel again. Additionally, it’s not just a matter of stopping eating, but of assisting your body, through good nutrition, to jettison its wastes.

Although Mary feels that if the risks are managed well, there can be benefits to backcountry fasting, in her estimation these benefits do not extend to health strictly speaking.

Health ?

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Welcome to Beyond Broccoli™

The ever-changing, often confusing world of nutrition can be tough to navigate in this age of information overload. Beyond Broccoli nutrition counseling combines nutritional science, behavioral change theory, the many lessons learned from clinical practice, as well as a strong belief in the value of whole foods as fuel, medicine, and perhaps most importantly a source of daily pleasure.

At Beyond Broccoli we love food. We also believe food has a major impact on our health and well being. Everyday what we eat and drink affects our energy levels, our moods, our ability to focus and concentrate, how we feel when we exercise, and how we sleep. Beyond Broccoli keeps the emphasis on food to get well, stay well or manage illness. While Beyond Broccoli is not anti-supplement our mission is to educate, counsel, and coach using a "food first" approach.

Beyond Broccoli individual nutrition consults also recognize that behavior change is at the core of successful nutrition counseling and coaching. We know that even simple change is not always easy and we must go beyond merely providing information to help you improve your nutrition. At Beyond Broccoli it is all about you. The plan we come up with, together, is based on your nutrition and health needs including the skills and tools you need to make changes. We also know that even small changes can be significant and are the ones you are most likely to sustain for a lifetime.

Recipe of the Month:

Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Muffins

This favorite Beyond Broccoli recipe is a delicious way to enjoy pumpkin! Pumpkin is an excellent source of the antioxidant beta-carotene (that our body converts to vitamin A as needed), as well as a good source of dietary fiber and several other nutrients including potassium, magnesium, iron, vitamins C and K. All of this for less than 80 calories per cup! Mini muffins make great snacks or a nutritious dessert.

[Click here for recipe.](#)

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Mary Ryan, MS, CEDRD, RDN

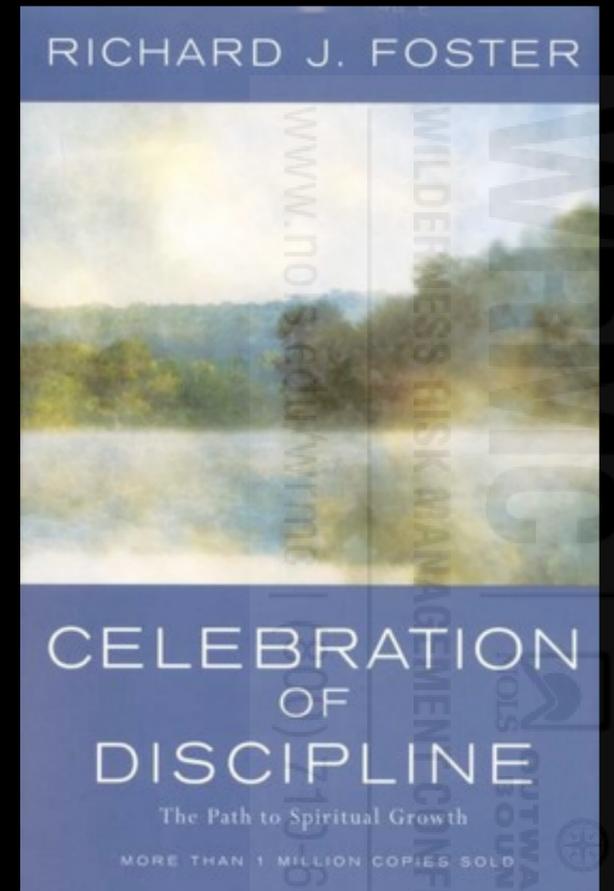
www.beyondbroccoli.com

mary@beyondbroccoli.com

I want to briefly recognize Mary for the help and expertise she offered me. She's recently moved back to Jackson Hole. She has a Masters of Science in Foods and Nutrition, is a Registered Dietitian and Nutritionist, and just became certified as an Eating Disorders Registered Dietitian – which, as you'll soon see, proved insightful for this presentation.

Self-Revelation

- Fasting reveals the things that control us



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Foster is suggesting that sometimes, instead of dealing with our problems, we cover up hurt and brokenness with things that make us feel good – chiefly shopping and food. When we take these comforts away, we sometimes see what lies beneath.



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Anger



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Anger



Pride



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Pride



Fear



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Anger



Pride



Fear

Anxiety

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Anger



Pride

Self-contempt



Fear

Anxiety

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Anger



Pride

Self-contempt



Jealousy

Fear

Anxiety

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Connection



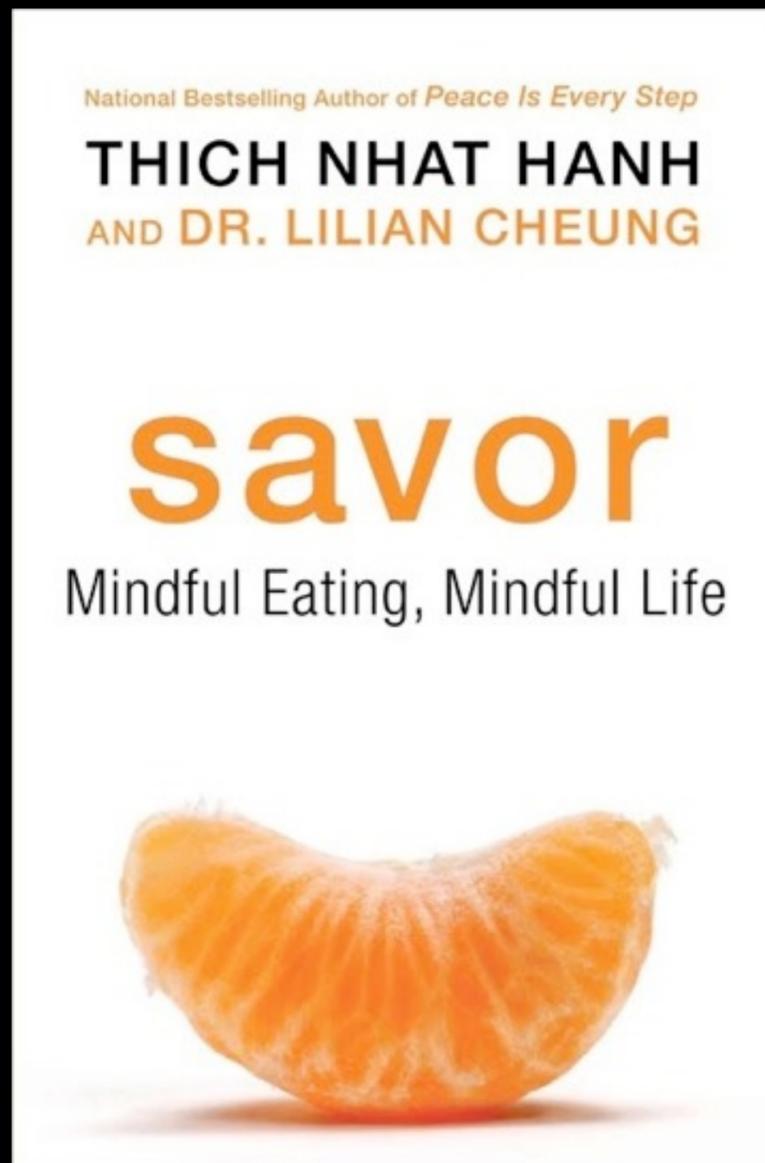
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For many, a fast is a time to connect more deeply with one's body and realize the crucial role food plays in our attaining optimal health. During a fast, one more clearly sees the role food plays in performance, capacity and energy. Thus, a fast can assist one in becoming a better listener to one's body. In many instances, these kinds of connections are already being made on an expedition (the caloric demands of backcountry travel, the emphasis on eating well, and our commitment to craftsmanship in the kitchen), therefore a fast may serve to deepen these realizations, and make more explicit.

Mindful Eating



One hope for a fast, then, is that these new perspectives on food and the body may contribute to more “mindful eating.” This has been the case for many of my students. In this book, Dr. Lilian Cheung’s nutritional science meets Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness practice to help the pilgrim move towards health.

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Identification



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Fasting leads many to identify more clearly with hunger-related issues.

Every five seconds, a child dies from hunger-related diseases. – The Hunger Project www.thp.org – 720 deaths during this presentation alone.

Fasting is a way to remind us of our excess and motivate our compassion.

Simplification



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“Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives.” Foster p. 56

Thoreau’s admonition for us to: “simplify, simplify, simplify!” Walden, in many ways, was an experimental fast.

Character/Discipline/ Self-control



Aristotle

Citations are from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Over time, as we make decisions in a variety of contexts, we begin to assemble character traits. In order to become disciplined and self-controlled, for example, we must practice being self-controlled in a variety of circumstances. Fasting is one such example, and thus makes a moral contribution to the participants' character.

Character/Discipline/ Self-control

- Character is the sum of virtue and vice over a lifetime (I 10§11),



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- “We become just by doing just actions and become temperate by doing temperate actions” (II 4§1).



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Character/Discipline/ Self-control

- Fasting has a bad rap from the medieval excesses

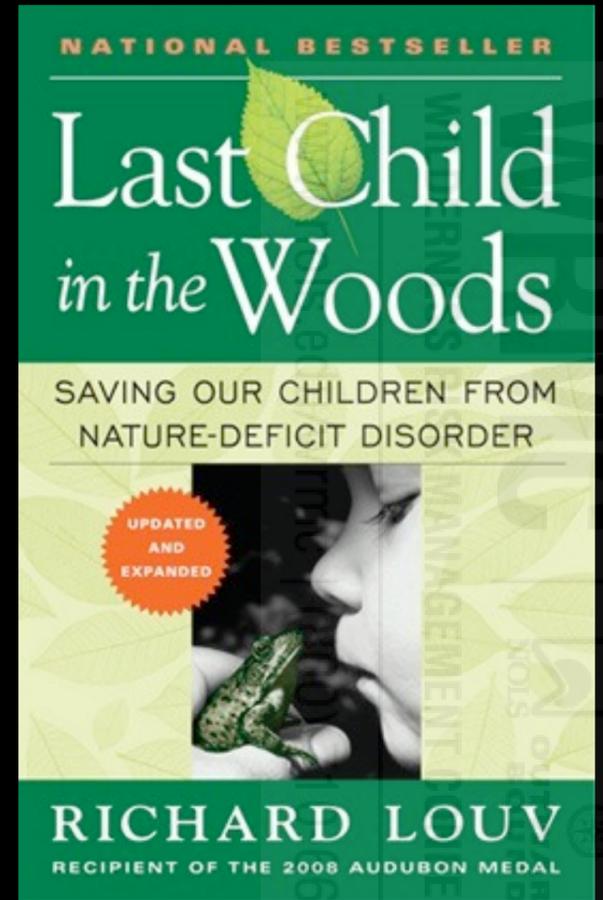


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It may look like asceticism in the extravagance of our culture, but for past generations over the millennia, fasting was an element of a disciplined life. – Foster p. 46

Character/Discipline/ Self-control

- The disciplined person can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done



Teaching self-discipline through our courses in activities such as fasting is a needed antidote to the rising obesity and Type II Diabetes rates in our young people.

Risk Management Implications

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Health: Nutrition?

- How nourished are your participants? Will vary.



Mary's work in eating disorders has found that digestion is effected in just a few days of fasting. The body quickly makes adjustments when no food is available, and digestive processes are then given low priority. While a nutritional deficit is unlikely to form in a two-three day fast, if one comes in poorly nourished, a fast only exacerbates the effects of malnutrition. Also, depending on the program, fasting participants may have substantial wilderness travel to complete after the fast is finished. If this is the case, then this places even greater importance on the participants' pre-fast nutritional state.

Health: Special Cases



Some medical issues and lifestyle choices will require special attention when facilitating a fast.

Diabetes – A modification will be needed to provide adequate calories for a diabetic participant.

Cardiac patients – During longer fasts, since not enough amino acids are ingested, muscle, including the heart, breaks down. Check with the participant’s physician.

Vegans – Vegans may be barely maintaining nutritional health on the ration plan available, so fasting may be a greater challenge for them.

Others concerns would include intestinal disorders, epilepsy, etc.

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VEGAN

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Health: Eating Disorders



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A fast only exacerbates a participant's struggle with an eating disorder. Sure, a few might list their disorder on their med form, but a majority will not. This is one of the greatest risks of a fast.

Medical Risks and Fasting

- Dehydration
- Hyponatremia



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Dehydration – Many students don’t like drinking “just water,” so their intake may be less. Further, since we get much of our hydration from our food, participants may not know to compensate for this loss. Additionally, without exercise, many participants will not feel stimulated to drink.

Hyponatremia – Sometimes, when there is nothing else to eat, participants will pound the water to make themselves “feel full,” thereby off-setting the sodium balance.

Environmental Risks and Fasting

- Temperatures
- Precipitation
- Altitude
- % Humidity
- Wind
- Sun
- Site exposure



Temperatures – Extreme temperatures can create a risk of cold and heat related illnesses. Cold weather requires more calories to stay warm.

Precipitation – When wet it is harder to stay warm without calories.

Altitude – Higher altitude is often associated with dryer air, and thus may be a dehydration concern. Remember, too, that for every 1000 ft gained, the temperature drops by 3–4 degrees Fahrenheit.

% Humidity – Humidity, depending on the ambient air temperature, could make the weather feel hotter, cooler, or dryer.

Wind – If one gets wet, then s/he will cool much quicker in a wind. Similarly, wind creates convection, making it harder to stay warm.

Sun – Depending on ambient temperature, sun may be welcome or a threat for superficial burns and overheating.

Site exposure – Planning a location for a fast may go some way to mitigating these environmental risks.

Policies, Protocols, and Procedures



The following are some issues affecting policies and procedures!

Water Fast?

- NEVER!

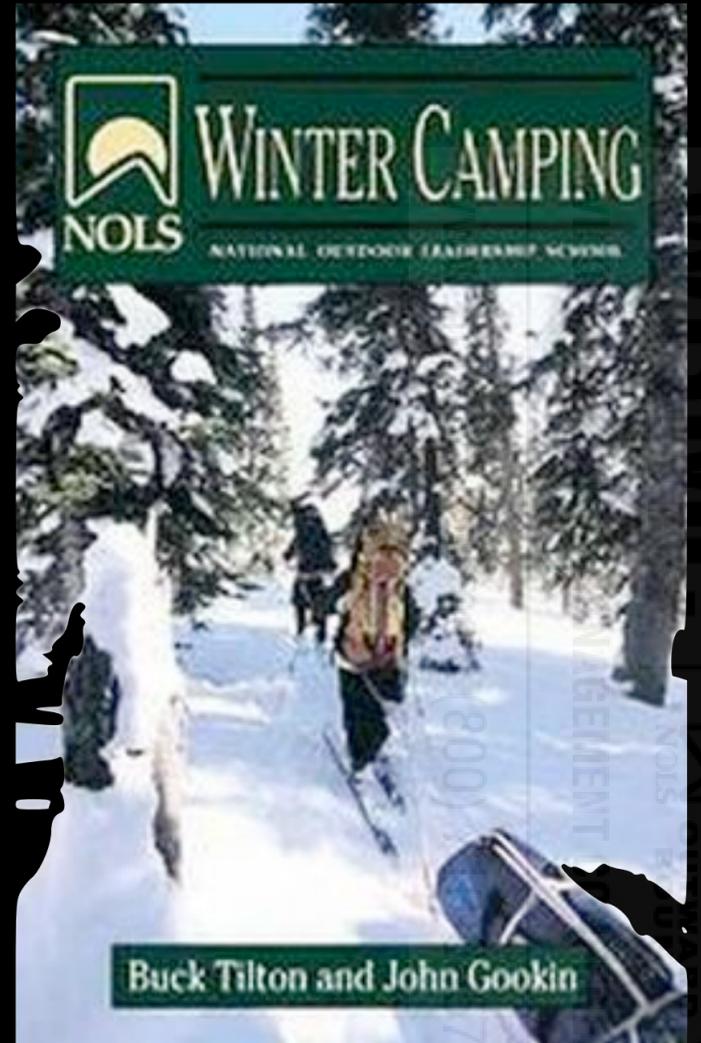


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Mary and I agree that no backcountry fast should EVER include abstaining from water.

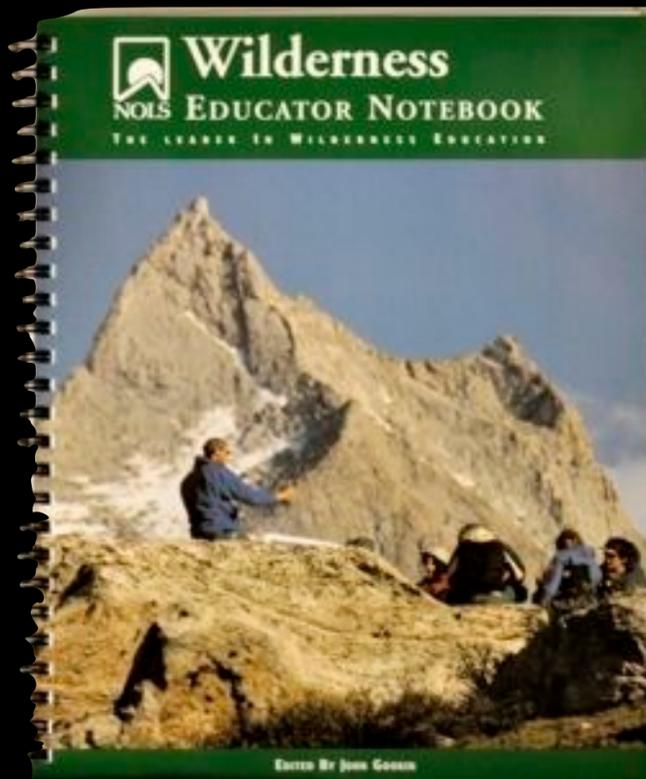
Winter Camping

- **STRONGLY** discouraged



Winter conditions make fasting a much more dangerous proposition.

Dynamic ?



NOLS has a history of dynamic (moving) fasts. See pp. 121-122 of the WEN

“Walking out of the mountains without food has been an important part of many NOLS courses since the school began in 1965. Paul Petzoldt summarized the original purpose, “the walk-out without food was a final test of all that the students had learned on the course.”

Gookin seems to presume that a fast would be dynamic, and values it for the following reasons: 1) prepares for the inevitable missed resupply or failed bear bag (or fence); 2) increased leadership and expeditionary behavior skills. Both of these reasons are commensurate with the purposes of a fast, mentioned above.

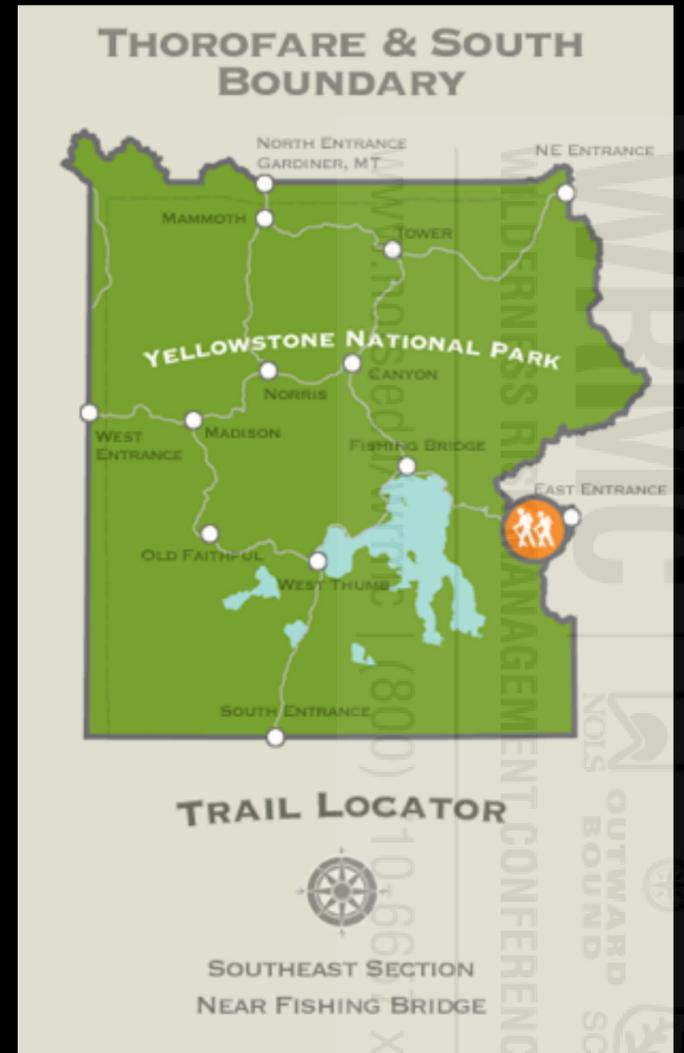
Gookin says that fasts are not appropriate for courses requiring technical travel.

He concludes, “by accomplishing this physical and mental feat without food, students reaffirm that crisis is a state of mind that can be overcome by personal fortitude and self discipline.”

Dynamic: Fasting & Judgement

ISGT & Fast?

- Backcountry travel judgement needs?
- Mixed with symptoms of Hypoglycemia?

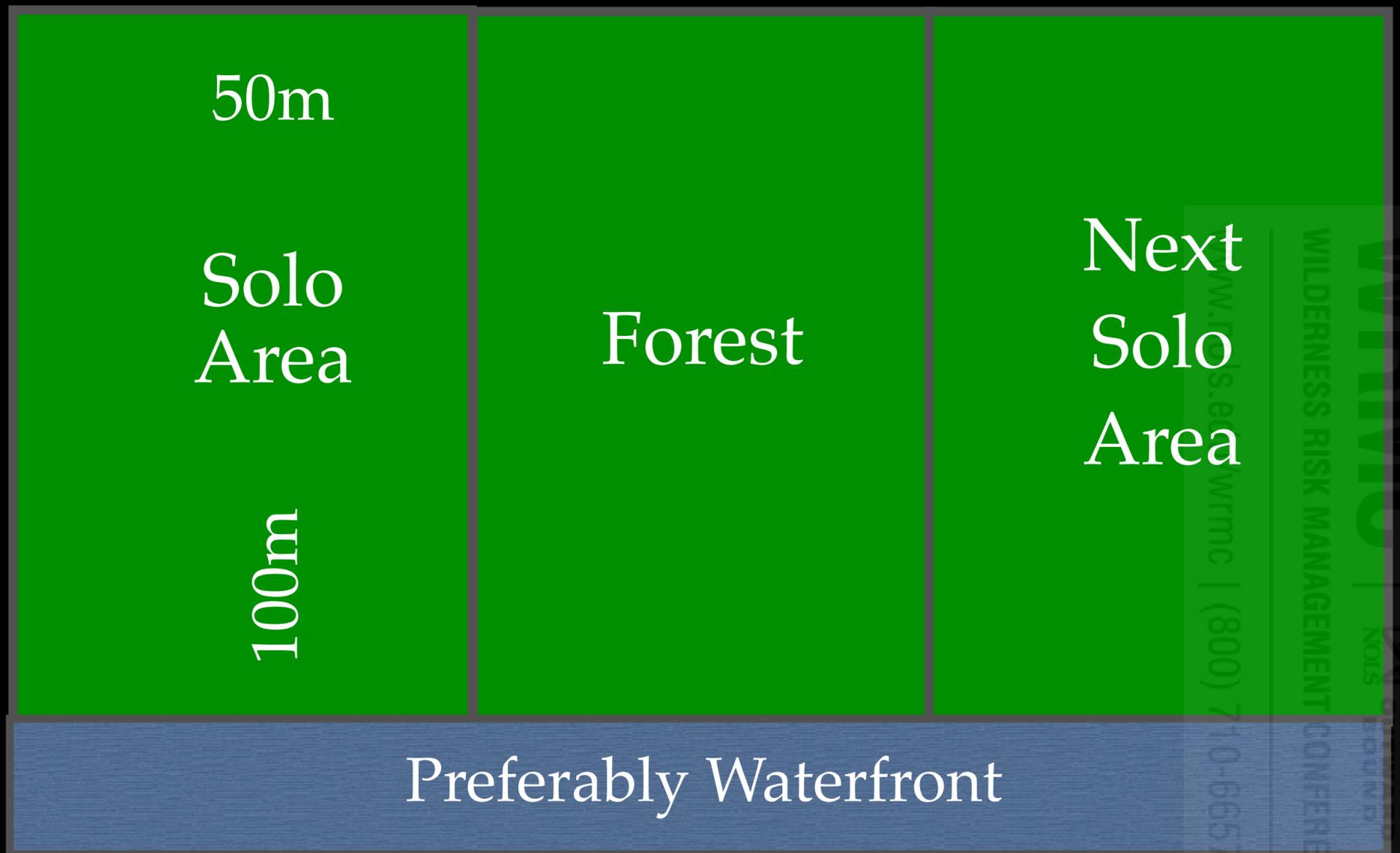


Programs must decide if dynamic fasts will require the presence of instructors, or if they are permissible with Independent Student Group Travel (ISGT)?

Decisions typical of backcountry travel include: river crossings, steep terrain, navigation, and medical concerns.

The signs and symptoms associated with hypoglycemia are Lower Level of Responsiveness, weak, disoriented, irritable, "not quite themselves."

Stationary?



Programs may also want to consider a stationary fast, often associated with a solo.

Stationary fasts are:

- 1) Still a challenge
- 2) Easier to manage risk and care for emergencies

The preponderance of programs that utilize a backcountry fast, do so in a stationary manner.

Stationary: EAP



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The emergency action plan in a stationary solo is similar to the “beacon system” used in the Lord the the Rings film, but in the solo/fast, we use whistles to pass on the signal.

Stationary: Instructor Visits & PO System



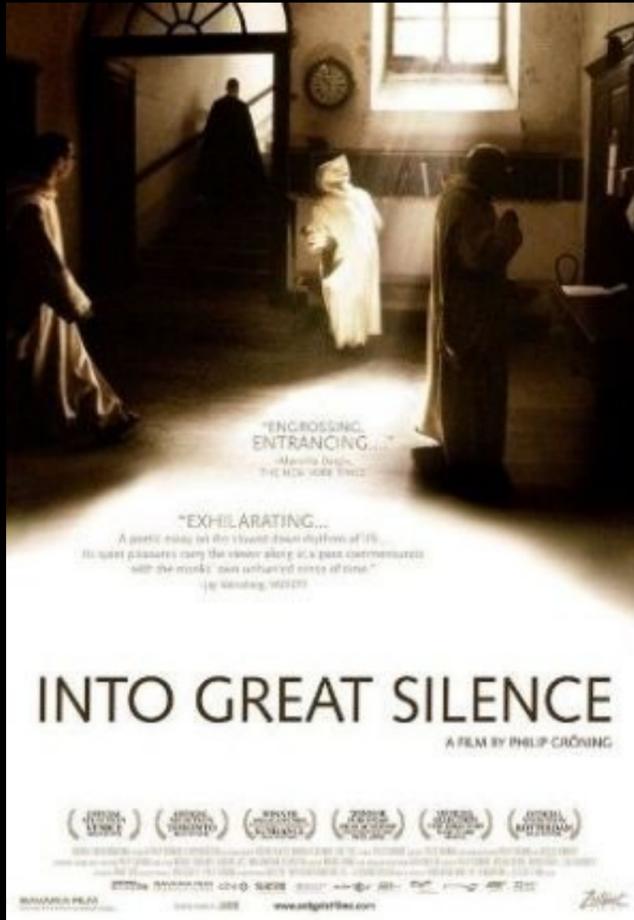
Programs conducting a stationary fast/solo will need to create a post office system for instructor-participant communication. The PO system our program uses is similar to the system used by Carthusians (see [Into Great Silence](#) film) for over a millennium.

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Stationary: Instructor Pack

- Food
- (Hot) Water
- Clothes
- Bivy
- Shelter repairs
- Pens/PO cards
- FA supplies



The following items are carried in the instructor pack while visiting POs/participants during a solo/fast: spare food and water; spare clothes; shelter repairs; extra pens; dry sleeping bags; PO cards; and First Aid supplies – there is no rest for the staff! p. 134 of S3

Dynamic or Stationary: Backcountry Skills



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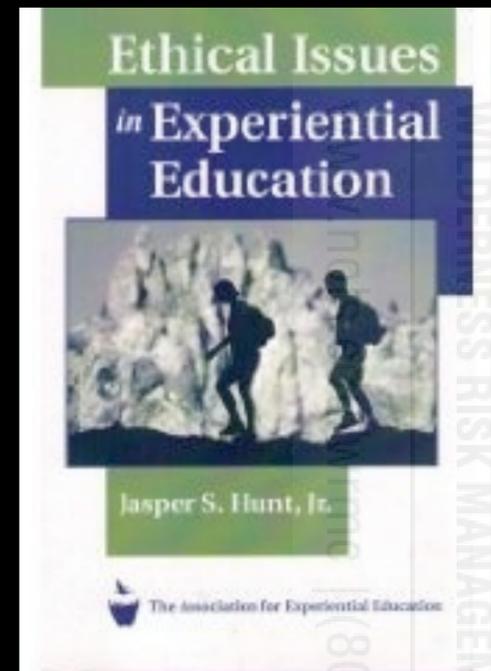
Before students participate in a dynamic or stationary fast, ensure they are capable of any backcountry skills they are likely to use: water treatment; handling a knife; shelter set up; bear hangs, etc.

Ethical Considerations of a Backcountry Fast



Ethical Issues

- Informed Consent



Waivers, Course Materials, & Marketing

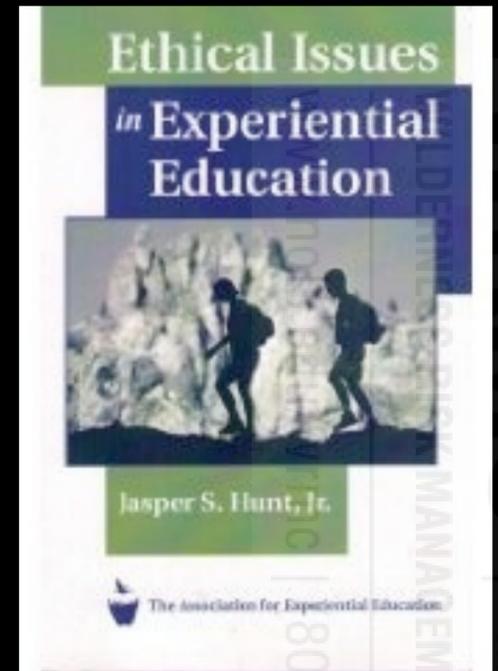
Several ethical issues arise when facilitating a fast for participants. I recommend that the following three chapters (Informed Consent, Secrecy, and Captive Populations) be read in full.

In the medical field, "An informed consent is that consent which is obtained after the patient has been adequately instructed about the ratio of risk and benefit involved in the procedure as compared to alternative procedures or no treatment at all." p. 44

While we may not have the same precision as the medical field, we can inform our participants about the potential risks and benefits. Informed consent is a moral issues because it is predicated on our commitment to personal liberty and autonomy.

Ethical Issues

- Secrecy

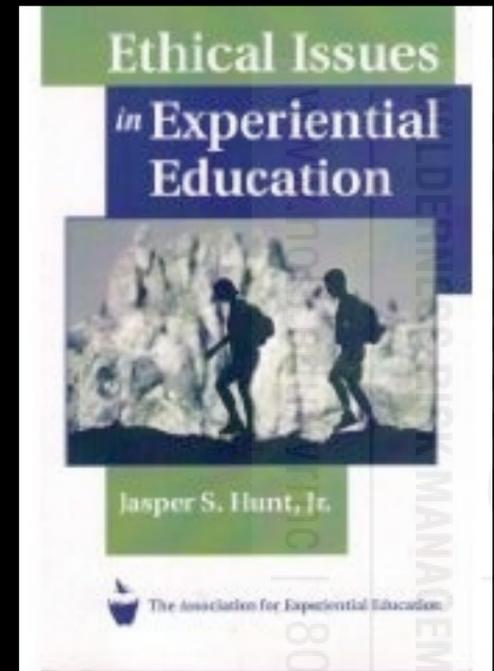


“A secretive act is simply the withholding of information.” p. 61

Secrecy can easily lead to uninformed participants, who have not given their consent to the reality of a situation they know little about.

Ethical Issues

- Captive Populations



A captive population is “any student or group of students who are in a given program because of being ordered or coerced into being there rather than through their own free initiative.” p. 71

“Whether or not a consent to participate in a given program is freely given must be evaluated in terms of the alternative consequences if that consent had not been given.” p. 74

Hunt differentiates between institutional captivity and activity captivity. Whereas, the participant may indeed be institutionally captive, presumably for some behavioral reason, the possibility exists that they could still be given the freedom to choose which activities they participate in. p. 73

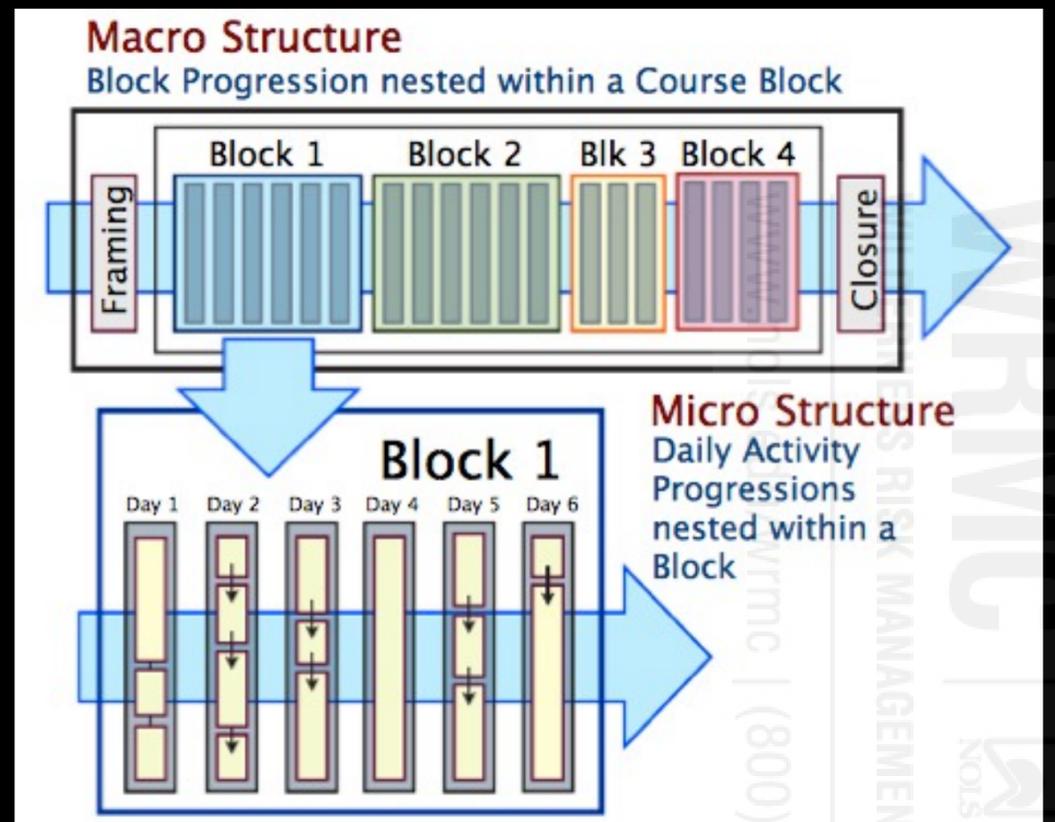
Thus, captive participants could (should) still be free to choose a fast.

Pedagogical Strategies



Timing: Pre-fast

- Delay the fast:
- Health/nutrition
- Wilderness Skills



Paul Nicolazzo

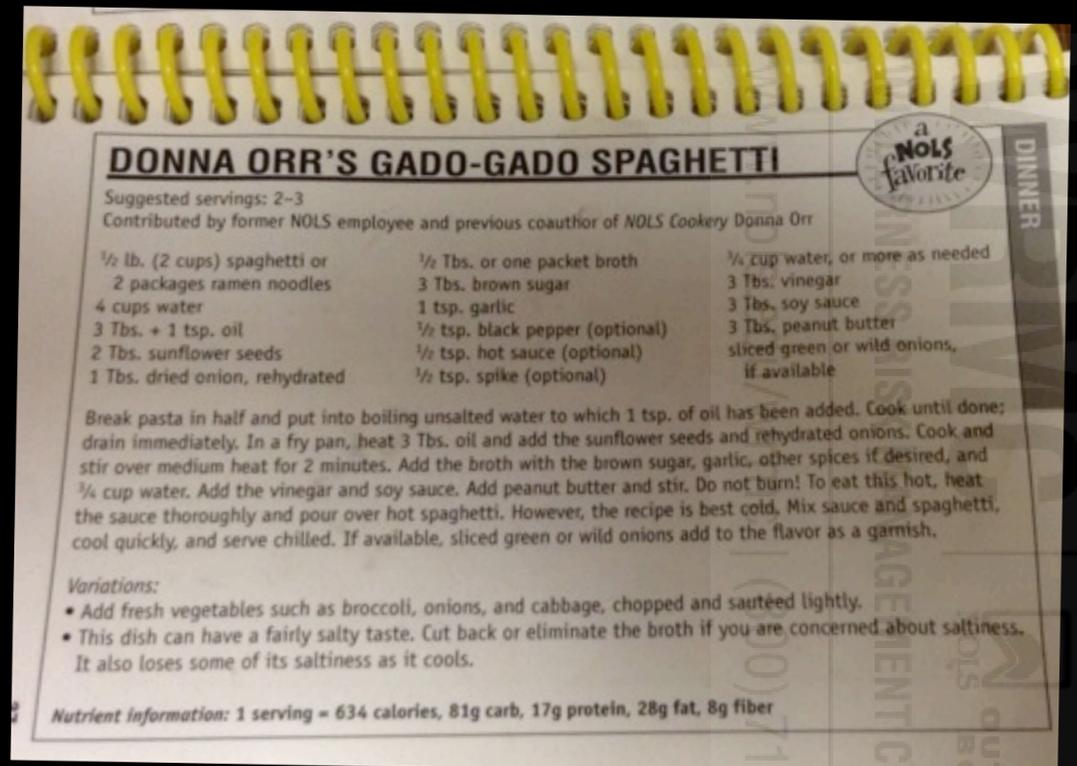
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Health/nutrition – placing a fast LATER in an expedition gives instructors a change to observe the eating habits of participants; also, assuming that participants are eating well on an expedition, delaying a fast allows greater nutritional balance for those who began the program with deficits.

Wilderness Skills – delaying a fast gives participants more time to develop their wilderness skills before entering into a solo/fast alone.

Timing: Pre-fast

- The day before:
 - ↑ Glycogen
 - Hydrate + Lytes
 - Adequate fiber



The day before the fast, try to eat especially balanced meals. Strive to top off glycogen stores (with quality carbohydrates), maintain hydration, and get adequate fiber to help pass a bowel movement when not eating. Don't "over-fiber," though, as this may lead to constipation – individual needs will vary here.

Timing: Pre-fast

“A Fasting Talk”

- Purpose and value
- S&S for Dehydration
- S&S for Hyponatremia
- S&S for Hypoglycemia
- Give out electrolyte tabs
- Emergency Action Plan



Many programs offer a “solo-talk” pre-brief before students enter into solitude. Much like a “solo-talk,” consider offering a “fasting talk” where a fast’s purpose, value, and risk management concerns are discussed.

Timing: During Fast

- Interrupting a fast
 - ↑ Glycogen
 - Bland
 - Warmth = comfort



53

On occasion it may be necessary to interrupt a fast. Instructors may insist on an interruption if medical concerns (e.g. signs and symptoms of hypoglycemia) development. Or, for a variety of reasons, a participant may deem it necessary to interrupt a fast.

In either case, have some simple food that will increase glycogen, but be bland so as not to upset the participant's stomach. For example: Oats, fat-free powdered milk, raw sugar, and cinnamon.

- 1/3 c. old fashioned oats
- 1-2 teaspoons brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1-2 teaspoons powdered milk

Timing: Post-fast

Breaking a Fast

- Soup!
 - Fluid & Lytes
 - Minerals & Vitamins
 - Little fat
 - Carbs
 - Complete Protein



Time with
resupply

It is best to break a fast with bland food. Soup is ideal because it offers: a salty broth (electrolytes); minimal fat (oil) ; rice (carbohydrate and protein), legumes (carbohydrates and protein – which together with the rice makes a complete protein), vegetables (as fresh as possible). Consider trying to time the breaking of a fast with a resupply, so that fresh vegetables could be packed in and used in the soup.

Timing: Post-fast

Breaking a Fast

- More important than “what” is “how much” (little)



Hara Hachi Bu

Perhaps the most important element in breaking a fast is not eating too much too fast. Shoot for “Hara Hachi Bu” – eating until only 80% full.

Private Contracts

- Social pressure to fast
- Challenge by choice?

Pre-Solo Reflection Sheet

Name: _____

What are your goals for the solo?



Sometimes it is very difficult to create a genuine “challenge by choice” environment. Too often students feel compelled to participate by subtle forms of peer-pressure. You can partially avoid these social pressures by offering confidential contracts. Here, the student privately commits to the fasting parameters they’re comfortable with.

Modifications: Choose your own adventure

False Dichotomy

- Complete food fast
- Smaller food intake
- MORE whole foods
- Abstain from sweets
- Perhaps fasting from conversation is enough



Don't create a false dichotomy. Fasting is a continuum, not an either/or of food or not food. There is benefit in halfway. Any of the above examples could be considered a fast.

Conclusion

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Action Steps:

If you choose to fast...

- Make adjustments to waiver, course description, and marketing materials to reflect the possibility of a fast.
- Use this presentation information to make an addition on fasting to a risk management plan and/or instructor manual.
- If necessary, adjust a ration plan to accommodate pre-fast, during-fast, and post-fast needs.

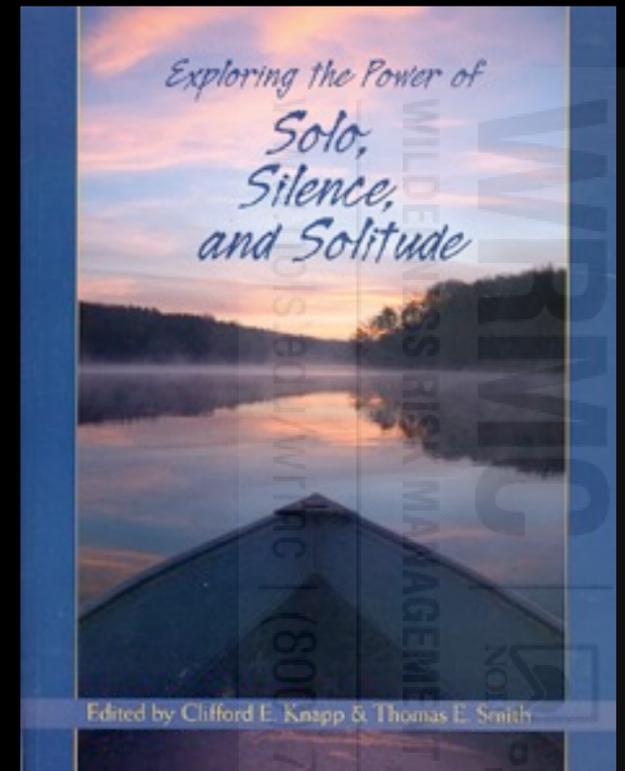
Action Steps

- Alter instructor equipment list to ensure adequate risk management of a stationary backcountry fast.
- Alter a course plan/progression to increase the likelihood of a meaningful (and less risk-prone) fasting experience.
- Start developing a “Fasting Talk.”



Priorities

- "I'm less concerned about what they can't take, or can't do, because I now believe that maybe if they are a bit more comfortable while they are out there, they will get more out of it."
p. 6 of S3



This quote, by Tom Smith, reminds us that any commitment to a fast must fit clearly within an organization's larger educational goals. It may well be that a complete fasting of food is contrary to the educational priorities of a program. Be deliberate when using a fast.

Celebration!



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Any ascetic practice, such as fasting, needs to be balanced by deliberate acts of celebration.



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