

# Ivo Jirásek, Miroslava Jirásková

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## Winter Wandering on Snow Shoes as a Non-Religious Pilgrimage

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## PHILOSOPHY OF TOURISM

IVO JIRÁSEK <sup>1(ADEF)</sup>, MIROSLAVA JIRÁSKOVÁ <sup>1(BD)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Recreation, Faculty of Physical Culture, Palacký University, Olomouc (Czech Republic)

Correspondence: Prof. Dr. Ivo Jirásek, ivo.jirasek@upol.cz

### Winter Wandering on Snow Shoes as a Non-Religious Pilgrimage

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#### Abstract:

Background and study aim. The program of a two-week course consisted mainly in wandering on snow shoes in the Poloniny National Park at the border of Slovakia and Poland. This type of project enables its participants to encounter the raw reality of the outdoor environment in difficult natural conditions forcing the participants to involve their self-protective mechanisms needed for survival. Material and methods. The contribution utilizes the reflections of participants acquired in interviews (n = 12) and visualizations by means of Systemic Constellations (n = 19).

Results. The findings imply that the most frequent themes among the respondents relate to thinking and searching (for oneself, for the purpose of life), stopping and calming, experiencing difficult situations (focusing on basic needs), natural behavior (e.g. related to dropping masks) as well as apprehension and fear and their overcoming. The symbolism of transcendence and spirituality is also quite evident in several of their statements.

Conclusions. The way of experiencing in this type of course manifests the acquisition of a pilgrimage experience. Due to the non-religious spirituality as witnessed by the participants' experience, such journeys can be legitimately classified as spiritual, non-religious pilgrimages.

#### Introduction

In our contribution, we would like to present our research conducted within a course organized by Vacation School of Lipnice – Outward Bound Czech Republic, which consisted in wandering on snow shoes for two weeks (in 2011). The main part of this course (entitled “Life Is a Gothic Dog”) was a winter field trip on snow shoes in the Bukovské Hills in the Poloniny National Park at the border of Slovakia, Poland, and Ukraine. The participants carried all their gear (tents, sleeping bags, cookers, food, tools, etc.) in rucksacks on their backs and they moved on their snow shoes along the ridge following a route long more 100 kilometers (more than 60 miles). This type of project enables its participants to encounter the raw reality of the outdoor environment in difficult natural conditions forcing the participants to involve their self-protective mechanisms needed for survival. They had to walk 10 kilometers (more than 6 miles) every day, bivouac in the open air before sunset, collect firewood, make preparations for sleep, and

prepare food. The evenings were spent around the fire, which was their only source of warmth aside from their cookers. Apart from camping (setting up their tents, cooking, starting the fire), the program also consisted in evening conversations at the campfire (philosophically oriented, with themes such as the archetypal pilgrims Gilgamesh and Ulysses; the difference between tourists and pilgrims; the horizon, journey, and goal; love: Eros and Agape; the horizon of death; the purpose of life: service). The program included a one-day stay in the Osadná village, a discussion with the local Orthodox Pope, and a visit of the local crypt to honor the remains of soldiers from the World War I.

Being in the winter landscape, which included physically demanding activities, overcoming pain, gusts of wind, and freezing coldness, as well as paying attention to the legacy of the earlier deaths of then young people, intellectual opening to themes carrying deeper questions about the purpose of life, or meeting and helping one another within the newly established community — all of this formed

the course "Life Is a Gothic Dog", conducted in the mode of experiential education, which also raised the question whether such a course (or its selected moments) can be regarded as spiritual. As our research has proved that certain experiences during such a journey may be perceived as spiritual (the participants' way of experiencing in this type of a course suggests their acquisition of a pilgrimage experience), we presume that such a program can be conceived as a discourse on pilgrimage. Nevertheless, it is not a pilgrimage undertaken within a religious framework, but a specific form of non-religious pilgrimage.

### The method

Our investigation utilizes the combination of two sources of information: unstructured interviews and Systemic Constellations, which were realized with 12, respectively 19 respondents (15 men and 4 women) — approximately one third of the overall number of course participants—in September 2012, so the research investigation was undertaken not later than six months after the course was completed. In order to achieve the objective of our study, we chose the qualitative heuristic strategy [Loučková 2010], combining several techniques of data construction. While the interview (n = 12) reflects the verbalized/discursive and conscious aspects of experiencing, Systemic Constellations (n = 19) capture even the non-verbalized/non-discursive and partly unconscious aspects of the participant's experiences. As it turned out, the Constellation representatives can feel the feelings experienced and communicated by the participants in the interviews, so both methods seem to suitably complement each other.

The unstructured interviews with each participant took approximately 45 minutes and were recorded for later processing and for the sake of authenticity. They were realized by four instructed investigators. All interviews began with the same initial question: "We would like to know whether anything really touched you during the course," (as we tried to find out which experiences had the deepest impact on the participants) and after that, additional questions ensued from the respondent's narration. The transcribed interviews were given open codes, in which semantic units and subcategories were identified, and the data were classified qualitatively. On the basis of the analysis, thematic categories were created, some of which may be interpreted as spiritual: the relationships during the course (community, natural behavior associated with dropping masks), thinking and

searching (for themselves and their life's purpose) connected to the change in the perception of time (calming, stopping), transcendence (the symbolism of exceeding one's own limits in difficult situations and focusing on basic needs) and the nature (including the emerging theme of natural elements).

Systemic Constellations (see the introduction of the method below) were built on the request of a concrete respondent (altogether, 9 Constellations were realized), and the individuals, who asked for a Constellation, selected their representatives who were not familiar with other respondent's answers in the interviews. The procedure of every Constellation (building the elements of the system, their dynamic change, and accompanying verbal statements) was recorded on a video camera. In our interpretation, we used only these spoken statements, not the Systemic Constellations themselves—the placement of the representatives, the metamorphoses of relationships, etc. Nonetheless, Systemic Constellations are not a widely known method, so we should first present their basic features.

### Systemic Constellations

Systemic Constellation (or Family Constellation, with respect to the usual focus on family themes) is a tool used in psychotherapy, personal development, counseling and coaching as well as in management, pedagogical context, etc. The founder of this original approach combining phenomenological perspective (Husserl, Heidegger) and applying certain elements of psychodrama (Moreno), psychoanalysis, and transactional analysis (Berne), or even the ancestor reverence as practiced among the Zulus, is a Germany native, Bert Hellinger (b. 1925). Formerly a Catholic priest, he was sent on the mission to South Africa, where he spent 16 years. The peculiar utilization of the rituals, wisdom, and approach to the world in the Zulu community, together with his in-depth study of phenomenology, his anchoring in a Catholic religious order (which he abandoned in the 1960s), and also his training in psychoanalysis, inspired him in the creation of a unique psychotherapeutic and developmental method, which has spread from Germany across the world since the 1990s [Hellinger 2002; Hellinger 2003; Kampenhout 2001; Ulsamer 2003]. Systemic Constellations point out to the fact that logical language and rational approach may not be sufficient in terms of grasping of all aspects of the human way of being. They postulate a trans-rational reality of our experiencing, thus annoying the representatives of science who believe that only rational exploration of the existence is realistic and acceptable. The

systemic approach highlights the perception of the system in its entirety and refers to the necessity to see every human life in the holistic framework of miscellaneous structural relations. Such a system incorporating human beings can be represented by a working place (with its complex, usually hierarchical structure of superiority and inferiority of the involved individuals), our contemporary familial arrangements, and of course, the original family, encompassing parents, children (including those not born), most significant relationships of the parents in the past as well as the parents' families and distant relatives. Even the course itself in its structural entirety — the participants and instructors, the program, environment, weather, etc. — can become such a system. Constellations work with an image of reality by means of an arrangement of the elements of a selected system in the Constellation space, using a symbolic expression of the network of relationships of the given system in a meaningful structure.

Systemic Constellation is a ritual with a set order: a brief introduction of the issue by the person or client whose system will be explored; the client's selection of the representatives (elements of the system), who will enter their roles; the client's placement of the representatives into the Constellation space; the representative's perception of the role. Stepping out of the role is also a part of the ritual, a way of ending the constellation. The persons willing to enter the roles representing the elements of the system (individual family members, or even abstract concepts such as the good, money...) should be able to consciously disengage from their own thoughts and focus rather on their bodies and feelings, observing the signals of their physical feelings and intuitive insights. It is a matter of being not "in the head", but "in the heart". The attempts to grasp rationally the Constellation principles refer mainly to two sources of intellectual inspiration, namely Jung's archetypes and Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance and morphogenetic fields.

## Research findings

### *Relationships during the course*

The mere fact that the journey involved limited resources (being together in a tent, eating the prepared food from one shared pot, etc.) implied a strong tendency for open-minded, amiable, and sociable atmosphere, so the participants felt that "we are tremendously close to each other". This resulted in feelings of safety and trust, and the relationship toward other people was felt

"closer, more animalistic". The course participants perceived their mutual relationships as unaffected and unbounded (symbolized by "clear open heart"). They experienced feelings of resonance and harmony being in tune, stronger empathy and willingness to cooperate, and a sense of harmonious unity charging them with energy. Such an empathy, such "response of the person to the other then becomes an embodiment of spirituality, life meaning in action" [Robinson 2007: 29].

### *Thinking and searching, calming*

This theme appears to be significant and is continually repeated in 8 out of 12 interviews. It particularly contains categories which concern thinking about oneself and one's own life, being content with one's own life, observing how thoughts develop, strong tendency for self-reflection, or even contemplation over one's future direction in life. The process of searching for purpose and meaning in one's life is a highly relevant part of the phenomenon of spirituality [Stifoss-Hanssen 1999; Jirásek 2013]. The necessity of acting (to set up the tent, make the fire, or cook the meal) and realizing the difference between what is relevant and irrelevant lead to a profound understanding: "Everything we do there, we do it because it makes sense." New insights into things, once considered banal, are being achieved; the value of things, people, and functional relationships radically changes. The interview respondents claim that the journey supports and stimulates the process of deep reflection of oneself, impossible in common life due to lack of time. The context of life priorities, direction and satisfaction in life, and effort to become a better man give such contemplations a spiritual dimension. The support of this process might not necessarily result in finding answers, but the stimulation of such an exploration is worthy in itself. This is enabled by calming down, stopping in one's life, so-called inner anchoring, as a result of necessary concentration on basic needs. The spiritual dimension is suggested by respondents' phrases such as "perceiving the process of cleansing," "opening to one's own shadow," etc.

### *Transcendence in difficult situations*

The necessity to overcome one's own limits is closely related to the exigency of the whole endeavor, with factors such as exhaustion, tiredness, lack of sleep, etc. Every person is forced to focus on their basic needs, and thus learns to accept everything that comes to them and manage critical situations, as well as the possibility of encountering one's own shadow: "I have to come to grips with it." The sense of exceeding one's own usual zone of certainty and safety is accompanied with feelings of joy, happiness,



euphoria. The experiences are perceived as intense, deep, and intimate; the role of emotional (often even existential) mode of experiencing prevails over intellectual reflection: "I feel great in my soul." The participants repeatedly expressed their apprehension as to whether they would be able to cross the mountains. Overcoming fear (of the cold, of being not physically able to manage the demanding situation, of the expected physical performance, or even social inclusion, ignorance, uncertainty) is an element of transgressing, going beyond the dimension of common everydayness and a sign of transcendence.

### Nature

Wandering in winter landscape entails the necessity of accepting the dependence on the weather, environment, group, natural conditions. Intense perception of the beauty of nature in aesthetic form (awe, pathos) is often associated with experiencing the sacred (e.g. in the dimension of holy quietness), perceiving nature as a part of oneself and of the whole, the integrity and complexity of life, a sense of belonging or a feeling of home. One of the respondents recalled his feelings from a night march at full moon: "The moon was shining, it was incredibly beautiful, just me, the forest, the nature and nothing else, no disturbance... nothing to think about, just cherishing the moment, taking delight in the landscape and totally forgetting about the job, the duties, cleansing my head of everything, just enjoying it." Another statement manifests the spiritual dimension in the perception of the nature: "All of sudden, you perceive the nature as living and you belong to it more than ever... then you wish to find the holy quietness... the sunset, the wind, such a real, living thing, you can touch it, you feel you are a part of it... The holy quietness is the whole." Exceptionally, the feelings were expressed in explicitly religious terms: "The forest was like a temple to me;" "the monolithic vertical space of the trees;" "the trees, with the symbol of light — the vertical line, and at the same time, the cross as the tree of life." Fire played a specific role during the course; fire was "surrounded with emptiness" and perceived not only as a necessity of survival, but also as a great elemental and life-giving force, a source of magical moments. After a day-long wandering, the fire became the center of evening conversations and other social activities. The fire thus helped to structure the space and centralize its arrangement—"the circle around the fire is the center, the meaning, the order of things"—and for extraordinarily sensitive individuals, such an experience can evoke a cosmogonic myth ("the chaos of a ghostly forest obtained a firm form").

### Conclusions

Such a winter wandering in the middle of wild nature can, without doubt, may show the signs of a spiritual journey, as we have briefly demonstrated in a few participants' reflections. It is very difficult, however, to capture such an experience in words, to describe it verbally. Nevertheless, it is a distinctive experience and it can be interpreted within the discourse on spirituality. It is fully evident at the same time that this was not a case of a religious journey: the program was not communicated in terms of any religious confession, the goal of the journey was not a sacred object, and the journey was not undertaken in order to enforce any religious attitudes in the participants. Simultaneously, it does not imply a conventional tourist mode of traveling, with the goal to visit a touristically attractive location, while using tourist industry services. We therefore assume that the described course empirically confirmed the validity of theoretical analyzes criticizing the concept of pilgrimage as an exclusively religiously motivated act, and thus supports the description of a non-religious pilgrimage, characterized with a specific mode of experiencing of the wayfarer [Jirásek 2011]. The non-religious spirituality as witnessed by the participants' experience implies that such journeys can be legitimately classified as spiritual, non-religious pilgrimages. As a matter of fact, this category of pilgrimage is distinctively different from religious pilgrimage, as well as both religious and secular tourism.

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## Zimowa wędrówka na raketach śnieżnych jako niereligijna pielgrzymka

**Słowa kluczowe:** duchowość, wędrówka, pielgrzymki, turystyka, konstelacje systemowe

### Abstrakt

Praca przedstawia rezultaty badań dokonanych w czasie dwutygodniowego kursu zorganizowanego przez Vacation School of Lipnice, Czechy w 2011 roku, polegającego głównie na wędrówkach na raketach śnieżnych w Parku Narodowym na granicy Słowacji i Polski. Ten typ projektu umożliwił uczestnikom poznać surową rzeczywistość środowiska

zewnętrznego, a trudne warunki naturalne zmusiły uczestników do włączenia mechanizmów samo-ochronnych niezbędnych do przetrwania.

W badaniu zostały wykorzystane refleksje uczestników uzyskane w czasie przeprowadzonych 45-minutowych wywiadów (n=12), nagrane do celów późniejszej analizy i wizualizacje wykonane przy pomocy Konstalacji Sytemowych (n=19) notujących niewerbalne zachowania respondentów. Obie te metody wzajemnie się uzupełniały. Wyniki sugerują, iż najczęstsze motywy wśród respondentów odnoszą się do myślenia i poszukiwania (dla siebie, dla życiowych celów), zatrzymania się i uspokojenia, przeżywania trudnych sytuacji (skupianie się na podstawowych potrzebach), naturalnego zachowania (np. związanego ze zrzucaniem masek), jak również wiążą się z obawą i strachem oraz ich przezwyciężeniem. Symbolika transcendencji i duchowości jest dość oczywista w kilku wypowiedziach.

Autorzy dochodzą do wniosku, że ten typ wędrówki przypomina pielgrzymkę. Ze względu na nie-religijną duchowość stanowiącą część doświadczenia uczestników, takie wyjazdy mogą być w pełni klasyfikowane jako duchowe pielgrzymki niereligijne.