



“Scouting and personal development”

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In an effort to approach the role of Scouting in personal development, I will address three different questions:

1. Is it possible to highlight an explicit framework of the essential features of personal development in Scouting?
2. How is the continuous gap between values and experience explored in Scouting? In other words is it possible to identify any specific ethical issues in Scouting as essential components of personal development?
3. Finally, is Scouting nowadays still a great opportunity for helping young people to develop their own personality?

I will draw on my personal Scouting experience (I have been involved in Scouting since the age of 11 years and I am now 53!) and on B-P's writings. It is important in the first century of Scouting to go back to our roots!

In response to the first question, the answer is yes and it is easy to identify the following critical components:

1.1 Personal View

Several images are recurrent in B-P's writings where the self is described. There are two best known ways to describe the essential components of personal development: the value of the 5% in each of us and the famous “paddling your canoe”.

The first expression tell us at least two things:

- In every human being there is an intangible reserve of kindness, truth, and beauty that no experience, albeit negative, can violate;
- In every human being an enormous component of our identity is deeply dependent on our own responsibility and sense of guardianship.

The second expression suggests at least three things:

- Each of us has the opportunity to give direction to our lives;
- This challenge depends on our skill to develop progressive self-development deeply rooted on powerful moral strength;
- Canoeing is always a difficult challenge. We should be aware of the inner hurdles (what B-P defines as laziness) and outer obstacles (the rocks can crash against that change over time). Otherwise our canoeing will be short and either the boat will sink or we will land!

1.2 How to Approach Experience

In the vision of how Scouting describes the way to approach our daily experiences, it is easy to recognize the positive attitude of the Scout Law which says that “the Scout and Guide smile and whistle under all circumstances”. This shows the importance of having a positive attitude even in unpleasant situations.

If we remember our own pasts, it is easy to recall how our lives, our personal experience, the world around us and the people we know are affected by an invaluable positive vision, by a deep trust (which is faith!), by openness towards everything and everybody.

A positive attitude to approaching our experiences, does not involve hiding problems, difficulties in life, the experience of failure, our faults, uncertainties, pain, death, or sin....but it offers us the opportunity to face these problems with a trustful mind and an open heart.

1.3 Language

In Scouting, symbolic language is considered a synthesis of communication in which all languages (and the experiences they express) blend together. When we reflect on symbolic language a decisive element in personal development emerges. Life which we may experience as a series of distinct experiences, one unrelated to the next in reality, has a single meaning.

Of course, the way towards this self-exploration will not be immediately clear. It is defined step by step but it will not always remain undefined. Eventually it must be named.

1.4 Our Relationship with God

On a group Scouting activity, in a Scout camp, or on a hike, you will notice how Scouts take a few moments for prayer, religious instruction and discussion of faith. You will probably notice the spontaneous and unconventional atmosphere that surrounds moments like these.

For B-P, it would be impossible for a Scout who feels the “brotherhood of service and the open-air life” to come to a different conclusion than faith.

Many things have certainly changed since the start of the century, but it remains true that the relationship with God is fundamental to Scouting.

As stated in the WOSM document “Scouting and Spiritual development”, using the words of his time, B-P stated clearly that the spiritual dimension is part of a whole, linked with the other aspects of the fundamental principles and underpins the purpose of the Movement: the integral development of young people”.

1.5 Social Relationships

If you observe the fresh-air excursions and other activities of Scouting, you will notice that each participant must adapt to the rhythm of the community and assume some of the responsibility for the welfare of all. Each person is asked to show initiative and creativity to make the group dynamic even better. By the end of the day, everyone is a bit tired but collectively they are all happier.

Aside from this, in a successful day of camping one gets a view of human relationships, an idea of what society is and how we can find our place within it.

This idea is organised along three lines:

- 1) Good citizenship;
- 2) Leaving the world in better condition than how we found it;
- 3) A high level of institutionalisation of relationships (only in the sense of the life of the Scout Unit).

Along the second line, we focus on improvement. Citizenship means working for change, making an effort to improve the community.

The third line (institutionalising relationships) highlights how our own identities are based not only on our abstract and mysterious essence but on the web of relationships we have.

As for the second question: Is it possible to identify any specific ethical issues in Scouting as essential components of personal development?

2.1 The subject of happiness

The subject of happiness in the writings of B-P is extraordinarily meaningful.

The first pages of “Rovering to Success” identify happiness as the meaning of life and in the last message, after B-P declares having led a happy life, he tells the Scouts that happiness is the goal of our lives. B-P speaks very distinctly and, in a way, enigmatically of “living happily and dying happily”. Thus, B-P defines happiness as precisely “a life achieved”. Attaining happiness is “being successful” and “being successful” is achievement.

We can re-write the expression “rovering to success” as “the road toward achievement” or even as “rovering to happiness”. B-P then defines the happy, successful “life achieved” in negative terms as well as in positive ones. In negative terms, this is not pleasure nor riches, laziness nor knowledge. These terms abound in all of B-P’s writings.

In the first few pages of “Rovering to Success” pleasure and riches are explicitly mentioned as being contrary to happiness. In positive terms, happiness is defined not as something one “is” or one “has” but as something one “does”. Acting toward the happiness of others, that is to say, the value of the action depends on how favorable it is to others.

2.2 The Happy Life and the Good Citizen

A happy life in one’s relationships with others is lived through behavior which is considered “good” in the eyes of the law and in the customs of civil society. In this sense, the image of the good citizen suggests the need for young people to “adapt” and assume customary behavior (laws and traditions) as their own.

The complexity of this position that defines a “socially” happy life and observance of customs (laws and traditions) must have occurred to B-P who tried to make them understood in a different way from the mere, albeit sincere concept of “adapting”. The good citizen must have the virtues and character of the man of the woods, with a lack of formalism, generosity that goes above and beyond the call, the courage of the pioneer who crosses borders.....the frontiersman.

Last but not least, the good citizen must avoid and oppose behavior that degrades the human race: flattery, using other people for one’s own pleasure, wasting one’s own good qualities.

2.3. Learn By Doing

From an ethical point of view, the motto “learn by doing” expresses how we can learn to live happily by paying attention to what we feel while doing. We can identify two concepts that embody what we feel when in action: “time lag” and “deception”.

The “time lag” is the distance between the intended result of what we are doing and the actual result at the end of the action. Action, which calls on learning by doing, inherently implies the existence of this “time lag”. Experiencing failure is the painful aspect of the “time lag” whereas success, when what we expect is what we get at the end, shows us the exceptional and perhaps random aspect of achievement. Daily life teaches us that the time lag, whatever the result, is tolerable.

One of the truths that is learned by doing is the gap (in time and in quality) between expectations and results, Scouting expresses this truth through the “method of adventure”. Beyond its different applications, it poses the question, “what qualities should an action have to make expectations feasible?” and affirms a certainty: that there is an incompressible “time lag” between expectations and results.

The writings of B-P strongly warn us to avoid deception. He specifically mentions “stumbling blocks”, but in general terms this covers all metaphors for finding one’s way, not getting lost and knowing how to identify landmarks.

On the other hand, Scouting is not disposed towards the instruction of deception, but prefers “positive” readings on one’s own actions and the world. The result is often a slightly cynical attitude born from disappointment, when one has passed the enthusiastic phase of youth and, without good judgement, sees “living for others” as impracticable.

Secondly, deception is described as action taken without the person having accepted the truth behind that action. Specifically, it is when we act in order to please others, to pretend, to give insincere respect, or to justify one’s self before others. When we do this we deceive ourselves.

What lies underneath this profile, under the abundant reminders of authenticity in B-P’s writings, is the practice of a challenging outdoor life as well as the way that bad consciousness and deception are exposed.

2.4 "Paddle Your Canoe"

The image of "paddling your own canoe" speaks to the general idea of "making it alone" and is an ever-present paradigm of Scouting. Becoming independent is certainly essential to young people's personal growth and Scouting places great importance on this. But this must be considered only as a part of another typical Scouting motto: "be strong so as to be useful". This refers to autonomy, not in the sense of self-rule, but in the sense of service.

Is Scouting still relevant as an educational method that aids in the development of one's personality?

1. The ideal context for an appropriate education of the "youth of today" is a continuous reference to the self in one's progress, in one's constant need to progressively experiment with autonomy.

2. Sharing values in society. This sharing of values is a condition because it can be absorbed into everyday life. One's own actions must take place according to values that are not only individual but are societal, shared by all.

3. The presence of "rules of the game" (laws) and a place to practice discipline, that is to say that learning one's way in action, is a praxis.

For these reasons, and perhaps many more, I strongly believe that Scouting will continue to be a fantastic opportunity for young generations in the future!

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