


# Character, Calmness and Carrying-on

by Simon Beames



In the world of outdoor adventure education, the term 'character' seems ubiquitous. Members of the public and media sources appear to be fixed on the idea that a set of highly demanding outdoor challenges will yield transferrable and enduring personality changes in its participants. Just last year, I was interviewed by a journalist and carefully explained how learning outside the classroom involved enhancing the delivery of conventional curriculum by teaching some of it outdoors. The piece in the Guardian was well-written, but the title? **Outdoor education builds character.** I was furious.

Discussions of 'character building' go back to the early 20th century (think of Baden-Powell's vision, for example), however, deep critiques of outdoor education's capacity to elicit a change in a participant's character are more recent. (*In the academic literature, the most well-known is Andrew Brookes' Neo-Hahnian critique in 2002. Paul Stonehouse then did his PhD on this same topic and used Aristotelian virtue ethics to make sense of it all.*) What these experts agree on is that change in a person's character is unlikely to result from one short stand-alone programme. A person's character is highly durable and has been formed over many years; changing that character will almost certainly take a long, long time.

Let us return to popular notions of 'character'. Besides meaning people or figures in stories, there are two other common uses of the word. The first refers to people who are somewhat odd or eccentric, as in 'that person who wears the duck costume to the pub is a real character'. The second kind of character comprises a certain 'pluck', resilience, and doggedness that is consistent with the clichéd **Keep calm and carry on** rhetoric. This kind of character



has a very high social value and opportunities to display it are most commonly presented on the sports field, battleground, and, of course, on a hillside in the pouring rain: the wetter, colder and hungrier the person, the higher the level of character required (and presumably developed).

At this point, I hope we can agree that character change is rather difficult to orchestrate and that articulations of what constitutes this kind of desirable character are somewhat ambiguous. This brings me to my purpose of writing this piece and to one my favourite social theorists: Erving Goffman (1922-1981). In 1967, Goffman wrote an essay called *Where the action is*, in which he deconstructed the word 'character' in a way that I believe can be useful for outdoor educators who find themselves tasked with the unenviable job of developing someone else's character.

As we have seen, changing a person's character during a three-day residential programme is probably not going to happen. Still, there is no reason why outdoor instructors – like other kinds of educators -- cannot facilitate participants' encounters with circumstances that might offer them opportunities to demonstrate character. Following this rather wordy logic, we need to know more specifically what might be considered indicators of character. This is where Goffman comes in. He equated character with remaining 'correct and steady in the face of sudden pressures' and 'maintaining full self-control when the chips are down' (p. 217). He identified several aspects of character, which include gameness, courage, composure, gallantry, and integrity. Let us consider how these five aspects might manifest themselves through an abseiling activity.

**Gameness** is most commonly displayed by people saying, 'I'll give it a go'. Gameness is heightened when people have legitimate reasons for not participating (e.g. an injury) and lowered when reasons for not participating are not convincing to the audience. It is further shown by those who stick with their line of action when experiencing set-backs or pain – usually through high levels of determination and will-power. **Courage** can be seen when people are clearly afraid of what they are engaged in, but continue despite their fears of being harmed or of losing something of value. The girl who has demonstrated gameness by accepting the challenge of abseiling off the platform may then find herself struck by a powerful fear of heights once on clipped-in and standing over the abyss; this is when she can demonstrate courage alongside her gameness. (note that one cannot be courageous without also being afraid)

**Composure** is perhaps the most important and visible of Goffman's five aspects of character. Is the abseiler focused and thinking clearly about the challenge, or is she showing signs of irrational fear and unable to think clearly? Staying 'cool' and keeping one's head in times of stress is particularly valued by society, in Goffman's view. **Gallantry** refers to an individual's ability to maintain normal social courtesies when

facing hardships. Are the pleases and thank-yous, general politesse and grace, as evident on the abseil platform as they are in the classroom or at the dinner table? Humility and deference are others ways that gallantry can manifest itself in the outdoors.

Where composure and gallantry tend to be highly observable, integrity is perhaps the least public of Goffman's aspects of character. **Integrity** is about resisting temptations to depart from accepted moral standards – especially in private. An example of integrity would be if an abseiler showed very little composure while alone with the instructor, but felt morally obliged to raise his emotional outburst with the group during the evening review. In this case, there may have been personal 'profit' for the emotional abseiler in not sharing her lack of composure. This example demonstrates how character, according to Goffman, is multi-faceted: a person can be low in one area (composure), but high in another (integrity). Rather than discussing whether or not people show character in a given outdoor education situation, it may be more helpful to consider the degree to which participants demonstrate each of the Goffman's five aspects at different stages of the programme.

These five aspects of character were outlined in an essay written almost 50 years ago and which had nothing to do with outdoor education. Still, my hope is that terms like gameness, courage, composure, gallantry, and integrity will give outdoor instructors a more nuanced language with which they can discuss their important work. So, what do you say? Are you game? ■

#### References

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