The Tradition of the Philosophers’ Camp

In 1858, 10 scholars left New England society for a sojourn in the Adirondacks. Seeking to immerse themselves in the natural environment, they hunted, rowed, fished and camped. One of the participants was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a poem to commemorate the excursion, dubbing participants “freemen of the forest laws;” they were free of societal and professional boundaries. Thus liberated, they fell naturally into a cross-disciplinary cadence that reflects the style of unity between self, other and world that has come to characterize the Philosophers’ Camp and mark its intellectual significance. These early camp philosophers represent a synthesis of the arts and sciences in thought and practice. Our revitalization of the Philosophers’ Camp draws on the traditions established during the original expedition; the setting is the same landscape that inspired Emerson and his friends. Our readings and conversations will be an opportunity to enter into the spirit of the original Philosophers’ Camp by engaging in shared inquiry and discovery.

Seminar discussion will be led by David Carl, a faculty member at St. John’s College and dean of the Graduate Institute. St. John’s, the third oldest college in the nation, offers a distinctive approach to liberal arts education that focuses on the study of great books in the fields of math, science, philosophy, history and literature. All classes are held in Socratic-like discussion, the same method we will use to stimulate our minds in these sessions.

The Philosophers’ Camp will also include:

- an introduction to the history and culture of the region from Paul Hai, program coordinator for ESF’s Northern Forest Institute
- evening poetry readings and discussion led by Marianne Patinelli-Dubay, Environmental Philosophy program coordinator
- a guided hike through the surrounding Forest Preserve
- a guided meditation at sunrise each day

Friday, Oct. 2
Evening: cocktail hour, dinner and welcome followed by opening lecture.

Saturday, Oct. 3
Morning: guided meditation and breakfast followed by seminar and discussion about William James Stillman’s 1858 painting, “The Philosophers’ Camp in the Adirondacks.” This seminar includes readings from Samuel H. Scudder’s, “The Student, the Fish and Agassiz.”
Afternoon: lunch and then a guided hike in the woods—inspired by Emerson’s writings, it will be a practical exploration of way-making as an expression of “the deliberate life”; then a seminar on Emerson’s essay, “Nature”

Sunday, Oct. 4
Morning: “Only That Day Dawns to Which We Are Awake,” a guided meditation named in honor of Henry David Thoreau’s writing in “Walden”; breakfast and a seminar discussion of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.”

Above: A reprint of the 1858 painting The Philosophers’ Camp in the Adirondacks by William James Stillman (courtesy of the Concord Free Public Library).
The Philosophers’ Camp: Grandly Simple  
Friday, October 2, through Sunday, October 4  
ESF’s Masten House  
Newcomb, N.Y.

The Masten House is a retreat facility at the headwaters of the Hudson River in the center of the 6-million acre Adirondack Park. Its nine bedrooms can accommodate up to 25 overnight guests. Participants in the Philosophers’ Camp will be among the first to enjoy the beautifully renovated Masten House, which opened to the public in 2015.

The registration rate of $750 per participant includes accommodations, catered meals and receptions, advance reading materials, guided seminars and hikes, as well as time to enjoy unparalleled access to the largest protected wild landscape in the lower 48 states.

For additional information visit www.esf.edu/nfi/. To register, please contact Daphne Taylor at aechwf@esf.edu or call 518.582.4551, ext. 106.

ESF’s Northern Forest Institute (NFI) is an interdisciplinary educational outreach program at the ESF Newcomb Campus. NFI is dedicated to providing enrichment opportunities for government and non-government personnel at agencies and institutions with an environmental impact, college students, primary and secondary students, and the general public.

NFI’s program in Environmental Philosophy, led by Dr. Marianne Patinelli-Dubay, supports and facilitates rich conversations across a range of disciplines. The program’s educational initiatives bridge humanities content with field experience to help participants understand the impacts of the relationship between scientific research and the policy it advances.

St. John’s College is a community dedicated to a liberal education that seeks to develop the arts of understanding, an intelligent and critical appreciation of our intellectual heritage, an awareness of our social and moral obligations, and a lifelong commitment to thoughtful inquiry into fundamental human questions. The program of study at St. John’s College is based on the study of great books that express the ideas that have shaped our civilization.

The Graduate Institute is the graduate division of St. John’s College, offering master’s degrees in Liberal Arts and Eastern Classics.

St. John’s College
GRADUATE INSTITUTE

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ESF State University of New York 
College of Environmental Science and Forestry