

Interview with Karsten Heuer, Sterling College, March 2012

In March, the wildlife biologist, author, and film-maker Karsten Heuer visited Craftsbury Common and gave a presentation to a standing room only crowd in Simpson Hall about his epic journeys in the Canadian wilderness. Before his talk, Karsten joined a Vertebrate Natural History class, toured the Sterling Farm, and caught up with Common Voice to discuss the value of experiential education, the challenges college students face, and the importance of staying true to one's heart. Karsten's trip to Sterling was funded by the Arctic Research Consortium of the U.S. (ARCUS) through their Arctic Visiting Speakers program.

CV: How did your own university education prepare you for your career?

KH: I grew up in Calgary, Alberta, and attended the University of Calgary by default. Initially, I wanted to be a veterinarian, until I realized that I was allergic to anything with four feet. I switched to ecology, which seemed to fit my passion for the outdoors, but the program was strictly theoretical, without much practical, field-based application. When I became a park ranger after graduating, it was embarrassing how little I knew about practical things, like taking stream measurements, electro-fishing, or even identifying native plants and birds. My education did teach the importance of self-discipline and personal initiative, but it was mostly about a credential, a slip of paper that I needed before I could get a job, and before I could really start to learn.

CV: What are your impressions of Sterling College?

KH: I'm inspired by Sterling. The educational philosophy here seems to address what I view as shortcomings in my own university experience. Sterling is a small school, but there's tremendous diversity in the curriculum. This morning, for example, I was with David Gilligan's class, identifying animal tracks in the snow - that's something I never did in university. I would hope a college education could impart a diverse set of skills that are rooted in actual practice. Working with draft horses, for example, involves both practical skills and universal lessons, not just specialized theories. If you want to go deep into more abstract and theoretical concepts, that's great, but such inquiry should be rooted in knowledge that is more basic and fundamental.

CV: What challenges do you foresee for this generation of college students?

KH: The disassociation of our society from the natural world is a huge problem. Students must be savvy with technology, but not let it run their lives. Technology has tremendous potential in terms of communication, and facilitating activism, but we must be conscious about how demanding it is on our time, and how it can pull us away from our natural, social, ecological, and familial surroundings. On a fundamental level, we are all human beings interacting in a natural landscape. Technology can facilitate these interactions, but otherwise it is a dead-end.

I also think we need to re-think our economic model, and move towards a system of real-

cost accounting. How you do that is a big challenge - it's like the economy is a massive lead ball rolling downhill, and we need to figure out how to nudge that ball onto a different course. The challenge is how to do make the necessary corrections before a crisis badly injures our society, and before we lose more of the diversity of life on this planet.

Addressing these challenges is going to take a lot of creativity, good communication, and compelling arguments, along with fundamental knowledge in fields like economics, agriculture, and ecology. When I come to Sterling I'm heartened, because it seems that this college is arming the next generation with the tools to address the big correction.

I don't want to sound ominous, though. Change is out there, and things like the Occupy Movement are encouraging. Our challenge is to turn these movements into discernible change. My wife and I devote our lives to being agents of change, but we've stopped trying to figure out exactly how it will come about. If everyone follows their hearts, and does what's right, eventually critical mass will arrive.

CV: What advice do you have for Sterling students?

KH: This may sound cliché, but my most important advice for students is to live your life by following your heart and intuition. I think most Sterling students are already doing so, by virtue of choosing this school, but it can be hard to stay true to oneself in this day and age. I'm sure every Sterling graduate leaves school knowing in their heart what's right. The challenge is to stay true to that knowledge, and not get swayed by the illusion of material wealth, not get sucked in by the dreams we're fed through advertising.

Take full advantage of your time at Sterling. Be a sponge, soak everything up. Push yourself.

In the future, you should make time to self-assess. Anytime you feel that something is missing, or you've gotten off-track, know that you can adjust. Be disciplined, and stay true to your heart.