

Rites of Passage in the Wilderness: a Therapeutic Source of Cultural and Environmental Recovery

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Abstract—Rites of passage in the wilderness have always benefited the individual, enriched culture, and promoted a holistic understanding of the place humans hold within the context of their natural environment. In the modern world, the practice of wilderness rites, such as the “vision fast,” is increasing. With the help of nature, and trained, safety-conscious guides, the individual is conducted through an initiatory passage in which the web of nature plays a vital role in the process of self-discovery. The initiate brings back a story, a myth, a way of visualizing self, from the wilderness ordeal (the threshold). This story, validated by a council of elders, provides the initiate with a “raison” for mature behavior within culture, and in natural environments such as wilderness.

For untold thousands of years, our indigenous ancestors practiced a primitive form of “psychology” that was nevertheless so effective that it insured the continued survival of our species through times of great upheaval. This psychology focused on rites of passage that guided individuals through personal crises and imbalances that might otherwise have jeopardized tribal welfare and security. Culturally sanctioned, these rites confirmed the passage of the young into adulthood and the mature into ever more mature states of being.

These rites ordinarily took place in wilderness settings outside the village or camp. Everyone paid careful attention, for the rites of passage were the gardens in which the people grew a collective identity. Certain rules were followed and teachings given in connection with these rites, for the health of the community depended on their successful performance. By participating in the rites, whether as initiate, initiatory “midwife,” or elder, the people created and nurtured their own names and lands, and the names and lands of all their earthly relatives, their myths, their legendary leaders and heroes, their sacred ancestors, and the symbols of their unity, health, and destiny. Furthermore, the rites of passage confirmed the vitality of the cultural imagination, enriching the collective body, psyche, mind, and spirit. And the “therapy” practiced by elders and maieutic teachers was far more enriching and complete than what we call therapy today because it took into consideration the health of the individual, the community, and the natural environment.

In: Watson, Alan E.; Aplet, Greg H.; Hendee, John C., comps. 1998. Personal, societal, and ecological values of wilderness: Sixth World Wilderness Congress proceedings on research, management, and allocation, volume I; 1997 October; Bangalore, India. Proc. RMRS-P-4. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

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We can learn a great deal from these therapeutic practices that were so functional to the survival of primitive cultures, for we are beset on all sides by grave challenges to our survival. The same problems the rites addressed are relevant today, perhaps even more so. Perhaps it is not that we, as human beings have changed, but that the environment we have created to live in has changed. In terms of our “human nature,” we appear to be much the same as our distant grandparents.

The breakdown of the quality of modern life is profoundly connected to the rapidly disappearing wilderness. Unless we provide for our children’s healthy growth into a mature understanding of their place within their earthly home, we will never be able to assure the health of our natural environment and its priceless wild resources.

Modern Wilderness Rites

A movement has been gathering momentum throughout the world, especially in Europe and the United States, that seeks to reconstitute, within a contemporary framework, the ancient rites of passage—and to restore a portion of their therapeutic effectiveness within human personality and culture. Wilderness rites, commonly called “vision quest,” “vision fast,” “walkabout,” and other initiatory style experiences in nature, are consciously linked to the old ways and are gaining advocates and influence, but not without difficulty.

At any given moment, in hundreds of wilderness locales, the passage rites built on “old ways” are taking place. The people who choose to experience them come from all walks of life. Usually, they are in the midst of some kind of crisis or life transition and are ideally looking for a way to confirm to themselves and others that they have passed through the difficulty, that they have moved from a state of confusion to a state of resolution or new understanding. They have left an old life behind and are ready to begin a new life, and they have attained the next life station or status.

For over 20 years we have been absorbed in the training of therapists, educators, outdoor leaders, and other professionals in ways of implementing ancient pan-cultural modalities that celebrate life transition, evoke self-discovery, and resolve life crises within a wilderness setting. The dimensions of these modalities are holistic and comprehensive. They affect the whole being. A deeper taproot connects these rites to what the psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the “collective unconscious,” the ancestral memories of our species, graven in our genes. Our School is not alone in offering this kind of training. Many other programs operate with the same intent.

A quick glance at the list of organizations in the American Wilderness Guides Council turns up scores of programs with names like Earth Rites, Wilderness Transitions, Sacred Passages, Back to the Source, Rites of Passage, The Great Round, Earth Passage, Wilderness Rites, High Desert Passages, Animas Vision Quest, and so on. Although each program is distinctly different from the others, a certain methodological similarity binds them together into a common purpose. They all employ the ancient dynamic of initiation, the three phases of a rite of passage identified by classical anthropologist Arnold van Gennep: severance, threshold, and incorporation.

The Core Dynamic of Wilderness Rites of Passage

The central idea of a wilderness rite of passage is invariably a story of initiation. The child, the neophyte, the pilgrim, the initiate, severs from the old life, from the way things have been, from a childish perspective, and enters the passageway that conveys the individual to a new status earned by virtue of the trials encountered along the way. This metaphor is very old, at least as old as our human ancestry. It appears in all our mythology, and is the essence of personal transformation, individuation, and growth. Mythically speaking, successful negotiation by the hero or heroine of the threshold passage brings health not only to the individual but to the social order—and by extension, to all creation.

To best understand the meaning of the threshold ordeal, we must always go back to the passageway between childhood and maturity, between innocence and experience. There came a time for all of us when we had to leave the security and innocence of childhood behind and confront a great gulf of unknowing—and we had to encounter that unknowing because there was no other way to attain the knowledge of experience that made for our maturity.

Adolescence is such a passage. It is a particularly perilous passage because our culture does not recognize it specifically as an initiatory passage, and does not celebrate it with sanctioned rites that are meaningful or relevant at the deepest levels to the child's maturing being. Nevertheless, we all attempted to negotiate this passage. Some of us, after many years of groping in the dark, made it to the next stage. Others are still in the dark. Some may stay there until death finally claims them.

That child within us must face an unknown passage many times in life. Adolescence is only one of several significant human transitions. Marriage, divorce, childbirth, parenting, relocation, change of vocation, middle age, and dying all require that the child enter the "adolescent passage" once more. If large numbers of us turn away from this passage that leads to maturity, we will never understand what it means to be fully mature; the human spirit will lack nourishment. Wilderness passage rites address the lack of spiritual nourishment in modern culture.

The Vision Fast

At the heart of an initiatory solo fast upon the earth, the initiate is at one with the wilderness. Everywhere lie signs, symbols, teachings, and stories that mirror this person's

feelings, memories, and dreams. The initiate may not be entirely aware of what is happening, and may feel bored, empty, weak, impatient, unobservant. Nevertheless, an interaction is occurring. The memory field is caught like a fly in the web-like memory fields of the wilderness. Information between fields is being exchanged. They "remember" the rocks and trees. And they remember them. They literally "eat" nature. The cacti fill them with sharpness, the flies with irritation, the hard ground with pain, the night with apprehension, the sunrise with joy, the stillness with the pounding of their beating hearts.

Dreams, fantasies, daydreams, and visions arise unbidden, stirring the deep waters of personal myth and answers to the questions: "Who am I?" "Why am I?" "Where am I going?" "Who are my people?" In the lonely solitude, the initiate begins to weave together strands of memories, thoughts, ideas, inspirations, into self-affirmation, an inner feeling about self that is absolutely essential to the life that must be lived, the winters that must be endured, the work of the future that must be done. And all this time the initiate interacts with the sharp edges, the uneven ground, the unshielded heat and cold, the fury of the wind, and the stomach-churning approach of a thunderstorm.

The Initiatory Passage

The root of the modern English term "threshold" is the Old English verb, *therscan*, "to thrash," in the primitive sense of "tread" or "trample." The hero or heroine has come to the place where the wheat is threshed from the chaff, the seed trampled from the stalk. The initiate will be held here and lose some of self. What is no longer important will fall away. One of the "boundary conditions" of a safe passage through this zone of magnified power will be the toll paid by the ego. If there is a "problem," the cost will be having to live alone with this problem in the sacred threshing-hold.

Also central to all the anthropological connotations of "threshold"—limit or limitation, border or borderland, margin or shore, cross or crossing, door or doorsill, opening or entrance—is the idea of passage. The hero or heroine passes through this threshold aperture. In a mythical sense, a fetal spirit is negotiating the bardos of the underworld. This intensely physical threshing world has a symbolic dimension, mirrored by everything encountered. By the light of consciousness, images and reflections stand out in the natural mirror. They wait. Gradually they come forth from themselves.

From a purely therapeutic perspective, the threshold phase is full of potentially healing psychological states. Consider the power of boredom to open doors of awareness, the power of weakness to awaken sources of strength, the power of loneliness to evoke those who are truly loved, the power of the uneven ground to teach balance, caution, and a sense of harmony with all things, the power of a storm to ignite existential states, the power of emptiness to induce feelings of fullness, the power of darkness to unlock illumination, the power of light to cast inward shadow.

Shielded from mortal sight and persuasion, the questers can only be who they are, with a matchless opportunity to accept who they are. With the aid of nature, questers resolve into an identity and a place on the earth, naked of pretense

or illusion. In the mirror of nature evolves a name, a dream, a boon, a way to go ahead, an idea, a guidepost, a beacon, a knowing, a vision, another chapter of life's myth. This happens best, of course, with simple guidance from leaders, guides to one's experience in a holistic or mythical way, a way that encourages the initiate to find certain helpful meanings in their experience.

Thus, a wilderness threshold passage takes life, concentrates it into a brief eternal span of literal-allegorical time, composes a story with a real-symbolic meaning whose mortal-immortal protagonist undergoes an ordeal-epiphany in a bounded-limitless environment where ordinary-nonordinary realities exist simultaneously. The story is both the stuff of action (rite) and contemplation (myth). As the protagonists move through the plot of the story, they find themselves in a "double-meaning" universe. An animal is both animal and spirit. A mountain is a mountain and a quest. A star is a star and an angel. A direction walked is a trail and a Way. A dream is a dream and a divine visitation. A mosquito is a pest and a messenger.

The Mirror of the Elders

The council of elders, to which the quester returns from solitary vigil, is an ancient form of group psychology. It is composed of those who have themselves participated in wilderness rites of passage and are familiar with the monomythic dimensions of the threshold story. The work of the elders is to listen to the quester's story, to reflect their idea of its meaning and wisdom to the candidate, to confirm that the intent has been realized, and to empower the quester to accept and live the truth exemplified by the story.

Questers see themselves in the collective mirror of the elders. The mirror does not judge their behavior or actions any more than nature does. The mirror reflects the quality of the story: the abilities, gifts, character, values, doubts, and life-goals of the "one-who-passed-through-adversity." The mirror reflects that the next life stage has been reached. The adolescent has passed into maturity, and has discovered the self as an unique being, independent of mother, father, or past history.

Modern elders' councils lack the power and relevance of their historical predecessors. In the old days, the elders were mature individuals within the community or neighborhood who themselves had been initiated into maturer and maturer stages of being. They were respected members of the community, for they held the highest responsibility—that of "midwifing" the birth of adults. Theirs was the sanction of an entire community where rites of passage were the means by which the social order maintained itself.

Nowadays, there are few councils of elders among us. No social body exists that formally sanctions and confirms the coming of age of our children, or the attainment of maturer and maturer stages of life by our adults. Therefore, the modern wilderness rite of passage lacks the power of its traditional counterpart. The modern vision fast candidate must return to an uncomprehending world and begin to walk the path of insight with practical feet. They carry with them the fading memory of a vividly experienced event, a renewed sense of their own life story, the validation and empowerment of the council of elders and—invariably—a deep and abiding love and respect for the wilderness. All of

which will hopefully carry them through the difficult tests ahead.

They have lived alone, empty and unshielded, with the wild heart of nature. They have kneeled inside themselves, as Jonah kneeled in the stomach of the whale. They have groped around in their own shadowlands and have met monsters with names like doubt, loneliness, fear, boredom, and rage. They have come forth into the rising sun of a new beginning—and they carry a story—a story of having passed through, a story about a life and a destination. They will forever be grateful to the howling wind, the mosquito, the rattlesnake, the wren, and the dung beetle.

The Future

This old way must be made available to everyone. It could, in fact, be a key to the initiation of our young into adulthood. Wilderness passage rites must come into existence within our communities as a means of bringing up our children and celebrating our passage through the predictable crises of life. If the movement should fail, we will be deprived of an authentic means of maintaining our place in the interconnected web of nature, and perhaps history!

As we face the 21st century, we must face the fact of the possible demise of our species. The answers to the questions of our collective future may indeed depend on men and women who have returned from the sacred threshold world with the daring to implement their visions. No doubt, the answers for our species are born here, in the family, in the neighborhood, in the schools, in the roots of the culture, and then what is born extends to the wilderness, to the ecosystem, to the biosphere, where the solutions to our cultural predicament wait like golden elixirs to be found and distilled into visions of health for the people. In the words of my former colleague, anthropologist Virginia Hine, "Without rites, the people perish."

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