

RITUAL HEALING

Stories of Ordinary and Extraordinary
Transformation



COLLECTED BY

DON EULERT, PhD

RITUAL & HEALING

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A DESERT FAST

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I AM EXPOSED ON HIGH GROUND AT THE NORTH END OF A LONG, NARROW desert valley. A light wind comes off the mountains to the north, and the full length of the valley sweeps away below me. It's October - hot days, cold nights. I have been alone, fasting from food and drinking only water for the past four days. With the end of the fourth day approaching, I have prepared for an all-night vigil in a small circle of stones and sticks. The ceremony, a wilderness rite of passage or vision fast, provides the outline and structure for my solo fast and my vigil: four days of preparation and severance from my familiar life, four days of solitude without food and with only a minimum of shelter. Time for reincorporation and integration will come later. The structure of the ceremony and the support of my guides are profound, but with the arrival of the last night of my solo, I am increasingly alone.

As the setting sun pauses for a moment on the western mountain, I put my sleeping bag, ground pad, and water bottle into the circle. Finally, I take off my clothes and place them into the circle. I say a prayer for strength through the night, hoping for a vision of my place in the world and guidance for my work as a wilderness guide. As the sun dips below the horizon, I bow to say good-bye and step into the circle. My arms stay here all night, awake. Once in the circle, I quickly put my clothes on; it is cold now.

I have fasted in a similar way several times before this and received deep, strong teachings and insights. This time is different, however. I deliberately set higher goals for myself. Not knowing exactly what I

I sense that the more I can let go, the more I will get out of it. My mantra the last four days has been "Dig Deeper."

Another difference is symbolized by going naked into the circle. I am seeking as much openness as possible. In the past, I went into my vigils with my meditation beads, journal, Tibetan cymbals, songs, chants, and other tools for awakening. This time I leave all that behind, taking only what I feel I need for safety during the night. Going naked represents my intention to simply be here, just me in the circle. In parallel, my intention for the solo has been simplifying, almost like the sun and wind blowing away my wishes and hopes until nothing but the bones of my intention remain. The question I couldn't quite voice goes something like this: "Do I have what I need to live my life?"

As the night comes on, stars appear in the east and the blue in the west deepens. Shooting stars come down, some on the edge of my awareness, some full-bore in front of me, leaving fantastic blue trails. Like sweets, they delight me. I sit in my circle for a while, and when my legs get tired, I move around the circle in a slow, shuffling dance. From time to time, I stretch and bow, usually to nothing in particular.

I have been trying not to have too many expectations about a "vision," but it is hard. How often have I told others not to expect any particular kind of vision? "A vision can come in many different forms; be open to whatever happens, including nothing." But I find it hard to let go of my expectations. Instead, I let them surface, all the hopes and fears. Maybe animals will speak to me or the sky will open to reveal a chorus of angels, maybe not. What if nothing at all happens? Maybe, this is my biggest fear - emptiness, insignificance, pointlessness.

At first, I have lots of energy, but as the night comes on I find myself more tired. The past few days, my energy went from high and even agitated in the beginning to exhaustion and on to a quiet, clean, and impeccable clarity through my mind and body. My hunger peaked in the second day, and now I barely notice it. During the last day of the solo, I felt as if my body-mind were a clear bottle which has been scrubbed clean from inside.

I move and stretch often during the first part of the night. I try med-

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itating, but my mind is uncooperative. It seems to be jerking around a lot, bouncing, even frantic. Feeling that I need to do something with the incessant thinking, I decide I will give my mind something useful to do—or at least something it's good at. I'll let it do calculations. The waxing quarter moon has been up for some time. I measure various angles and, according to some formula I can't remember now, I figure that when the moon sets, dawn will be just a couple hours away. Judging from how high the moon is in the night sky, dawn won't be long now. I settle down for the remaining few hours of night with a growing sense of completion. The night is still getting colder and I wrap myself in my sleeping bag. "This hasn't been too difficult," my mind comments with relief.

I spend more time sitting, shuffling, or jumping up and down. It is a struggle to stay awake, but I am working at it. I count more shooting stars. I hum softly to myself, and I make myself conscious of my breathing. At one point, the world stops. There is a timeless moment of total stillness and silence, deep, black, and peaceful. I am conscious of the stillness, unlike sleep, and I am aware of the lack of mental activity other than this bare recognition and knowing. The moment feels total, complete, and infinite.

Soon enough, the stillness is replaced by more mental activity, some of it downright rowdy. For example, I find myself going around to my favorite restaurants ordering meals. It doesn't matter that the food never comes, just ordering is enough. ("I'll have samosas for an appetizer, the chicken curry, onion naan bread, and rice pudding for desert. ... Swiss cheeseburger with slaw and extra tomato, fries, and a beer ... Rice and veggies, water to drink, no ice.").

My calculations have been off, however. When I figure dawn is just over the horizon, the night is still deepening. It is now much longer than I had planned. It is very difficult to stay awake and focused. My mind is running around like crazy. My body aches. I am almost too tired to move, but I know if I stop for more than a minute I will drop off to sleep. I reach my sleeping bag for warmth, but it threatens to seduce me into sleep. I feel so tempted to step outside my circle back to the soft sand of the last three nights and sleep.

It is no longer a vigil for a vision but just a struggle to stay in my circle and stay awake. The night stretches on like this. It should be dawn by now! I seriously consider the possibility that some crazy cosmic catastrophe has brought the world into continuous night and the dawn will never come. Yes, seriously. I give up all hope except my intention of staying awake in my circle. Finally, finally, however, the dark in the east softens almost imperceptibly. I breathe a sigh of relief, and I find I am crying. I know the night still has a long way to go, but at least it is moving.

The sun breaks the horizon. I whoop with joy, I say a prayer to the sun, and I take a moment before stepping outside my circle. I feel great relief but oddly also a hint of disappointment and even defeat. Now, though, it is time to pack my stuff up, disappear my circle, and meet my buddy. Activity fills me, and the feeling of disappointment recedes. It is good to see my buddy. The guides who stayed at basecamp greet me with smiles, simple prayers, sage incense, and hugs. It truly feels good to be in their arms and to see the others. I am quiet and open, and the warm sun is delicious. The food tastes exquisite. ("I'll have fresh fruit and a cup of herb tea.") I also offer prayers for those who are hungry without choice.

The next two days, I spend much of my time listening to others' stories as my teachers work with them. I am not talking much about my experiences. Since I will be around for another week, they focus on those who need to return to their daily lives. However, in quiet moments, my sense of failure is growing. I am feeling that I wasted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Instead of going into a profound state or opening myself to some great insight, I just hung out thinking about food and trying to get comfortable. The skies never opened to reveal Truth, no animals whispered my name, and I struggled. Something grates on me about not having been graceful and centered throughout the night. I let go of anything subtle or esoteric, and I just scratched around in the dirt, waiting for the night to end. I groveled in my little circle. I groveled! I catch the odor of old shame, the shame of being insignificant and needy, the shame that my time in the ceremony had been pointless.

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It is now the third day following my fast, I am sleeping in the sage flats outside of the desert town where my teachers live. My campsite is very plain, and to me, very beautiful. It's just a patch of bare ground surrounded by low bushes. Songbirds flit through, and I have a stunning view of the mountains across the valley. Waking in the cool air before dawn, a very strong sense fills me – crystal clear and sharp as a rising sun. Now I get it! The simple, undeniable fact is that I did everything I set out to do on my ceremony. I went into my circle on the fourth night of a solo fast in the desert, I stayed in that circle through the night, I stayed awake, and I stepped back out of that circle. No long, involved story and no dramatic emotional catharsis, just a simple, certain truth.

However simple it is, though, its impact on me is profound. Still in my sleeping bag, I feel I buoyed up, held in some greater arms. How can I continue to deny my own capacity? I was truly exposed in that circle. It was hard, and I really struggled! And I did what I set out to do. The fullness and completeness I feel is not a sense of personal accomplishment against something nor a sense of winning, but rather a sense that those events have taken place through me. I feel humble and grateful, and my heart is more relaxed than I have known.

All my images and idealizations evaporated in the unbounded, eternal darkness of that desert night. Avoiding neediness and struggle had kept me from a deeper sense of my own capacity. Needing to look good, even though I was the only one around, had been at my ideal. Yet, on my vigil, that had all cracked open. What emerged was my actual experience. I had groveled and yet, I had completed my intention for that ceremony. I had done what I set out to do. Gracefulness be damned. Indeed, my life is big enough to include groveling, too.

The lesson of that vision fast in the desert is that I hold within me and I can open myself to-- all that I need. This is enough. Lying there on the sage flats, taking in the cool air, and watching the dawn, I remember the passage from Castaneda's **Tales of Power** in which Don Juan tells Carlos

You say you need help. Help for what? You have everything needed.

the extravagant journey that is your life. I have tried to teach you that the real experience is to be a man and that what counts is being alive; life is the little detour that we are taking now. Life in itself is sufficient, self-explanatory, and complete.

I now have an answer to the question I brought to my fast. "Do I have what I need to live my life?" Yes, I do. I confirmed that in the ceremony of the solo. I am held, even when I struggle, and I am capable even when I fall apart. This sense of capacity is not dependent on my meeting any standards or being any particular way. It's in the nature of being alive and awake in the singular and unique circle of my life. Meanwhile, the sun's warmth releases smells of the sage, and sparrows flit noisily from bush to bush. Time now for breakfast. "Granola with almonds and raisins and a cup of black tea, please."