Wilderness Rites Of Passage:
Initiation, Growth, and Healing

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Preface

This is a slightly-edited version of a manuscript describing wilderness rites of passage for students at a local private high school and an earlier manuscript describing a similar program for at-risk teenagers. While there are still some references specifically to high school students and the transition from adolescence to adulthood, most of it applies equally to other transitions throughout the lifespan. We often prolong the transition from adolescence to adulthood for decades; most of us of any age can relate personally to the challenges of entering adulthood. At the same time, many of the dynamics of entering adulthood fit equally well those of us entering our midlife years or our elder years. Maybe I will find the time to revise this to make it more fitting for other transitions. For now, squint your eyes a little bit; I expect you can see yourself here, too.

I received a letter containing an account of a recent suicide:

"My friend . . . jumped off the Golden Gate bridge two months ago. . . . She was trying to get from one phase of her life to another and couldn't make it. . ."

The letter had already asked, "How does a human pass through youth to maturity without breaking down?" And it had answered, "help from tradition, through ceremonies and rituals, rites of passage at the most difficult stages."

(Berry, 1977)

If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.

(Meade, 1993)

Successful life transitions are truly cause for celebration. A soul is maturing, and the community is gaining new energy, creativity, and potential. At the same time, transitions bring disorientation, disenchantment, and distress. The activities, both at work and play, that gave life direction seem empty and unsatisfying. Relationships feel incomplete or hollow. The simplest questions of how to be are confusing; one's very identity is up for grabs. Yet, this confusion is an inherent, even necessary, part of the life journey. One must let go in order to move on; death is a pre-requisite for birth.

Directed by the elders who have traveled the same path, inspired by the larger community, and supported by one's inner resources, a successful transition will be the basis for fulfillment and contribution in the next phase of one's life. For adolescents, the trials and ceremonies of transition confirm the beginnings of adulthood, for midlife adults, the beginnings of elderhood. However, without that guidance and support, the journey quickly turns sour. Going through the motions takes the place of initiation through ritual. Increasingly, we are hearing calls for effective ways to mark, confirm, and deepen life transitions.

My purpose in this paper is to explore a model for wilderness-based rites of passage with which I have been deeply involved, both personally and professionally, for over a decade. I describe some of the aims, approaches, and means of adapting traditional rites of passage to our time and place and offer some ways of talking about the rationale for this kind of process. There are infinite variations on this work and great value in it; here's to the task and the gift!

RITES OF PASSAGE

Modern society has provided adolescents with no rituals by which they become members of the tribe, of the community. All children need to be twice born, to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind.

(Bill Moyers, quoted in Cohen, 1991, p. 45)

In another place or time, you might leave your village to go onto the Mountain for as long as it takes. Animals speak to you, lightning crashes around you, the sun bakes you, and the wind separates the chaff of childhood from the living seed of your new life. Discovering your place in the greater web of things, you offer thanks for your gift and return to share it with your people. Having moved through adolescence, you take up your new place as an adult in your clan. You are worthy of a chance to gain their respect. Your quest has shown you a new purpose and a vision of what your life can be.

You might spend years learning the ways of the sea and crafting a small boat, the vehicle that will carry you to the edge of the world and beyond. At the appointed time, you set sail. Looking back at the signal fires on the shore and your youth, you realize an aloneness like none you have felt before. You continue on through the jaws of a mighty storm and through the irons of dead calm to a small island where you confront an ineffable, otherworldly trial. Upon your return, your people know you have been tested and succeeded. You are ready for the next test. Thus, they honor your new status as a full member of the community.

We might send our children alone into the desert to wander alone for a year, dead to us—except that we pray often for them. They learn the plants, the animals, the water holes, the power places, and the songs. Praying alone at the center of the world, they glimpse a new chapter in their stories. With this gift, they come back to us, bringing spiritual renewal and wisdom. Our songs and celebration welcome them for we know that their rite of passage has nourished us as well as them. In turn, our celebration confirms to them that something vital has happened. Their flames burn brighter. Leaving as children, they return as adults just as we did years before.

Cultures throughout time and in an enormous variety of places have designed rites of passage to mark life transitions. The rites of passage serve several functions: relieving tension on the social group, framing the transition as an opportunity and a blessing, assisting the person in coping with the inevitable distress, and deepening the meaning and significance of the change. Steven Foster and Meredith Little, who have been testing and refining wilderness-based rites of passage and training guides for many years argue that rites of passage are, at their root, confirmatory rites. Initiates must be tested in order to demonstrate to themselves (and hopefully, to their communities) that they are able, willing, and entitled to move forward.

Our culture, however, seems to lack meaningful ways of marking transitions. Ask a dozen people, for instance, when a youth becomes an adult and you are likely to get a dozen different answers. Is it when you get your driver's license, vote, become financially independent, live on your own, have intercourse, get drunk (legally or illegally), get arrested, get pregnant or father a child? "Licensed, laid, loaded, and locked up"—not necessarily in that order—is the program for too many young people.

We, as a culture, do offer a few ceremonies for marking passages such as graduation exercises, confirmation or bar mitzvah, weddings, and retirement parties. However, these events have generally lost their deeper connection to the patterns of our lives, to the significance of the transition, and to the larger social context. Too often they are empty rituals done to please someone else and accomplished by going through the motions. Without clear markers, we are left with incomplete transitions, clinging to the old, confusing the old and the new, searching for ways to complete the change. The anthropologist, Solon Kimball (1960), wrote:

> The crucial problems of becoming male and female, of relations within the family, and of passing into old age are directly related to the devices which the society offers the individual to help him [or her] achieve the new adjustment. Somehow we seem to have forgotten this—or perhaps the ritual has become so completely individualistic that it is now found for many only in the privacy of the psychoanalyst's couch. The evidence, however, does not bear out the suggestion. It seems much more likely that one dimension of mental illness may arise because an increasing number of individuals are forced to accomplish their transitions alone and with private symbols. (p. xvii)

Teens' difficulties with drugs, alcohol, or the law often stem from misguided attempts at a rite of passage. Adolescents attempt to navigate the rocky transitions from childhood to adulthood, and the culture around them does not provide enough support, structure, and guidance. Without socially sanctioned and widely recognized rites of passage, teenagers have little choice but to create their own. And many of these self-generated initiations are dangerous and counter-productive. Some deep intuition tells the adolescent, You must be tested, you must be challenged, and some part of you must die before you can move on. The impulse to test and to prove oneself is right and healthy but without guidance and support it can too easily get beyond healthy limits. Some experts have argued that part of the increase in teenage suicide stems from misdirected attempts at leaving the old self; literal death replaces ego-death.

The majority of adolescents who do not get into serious trouble still must struggle with how to demonstrate—to themselves and to their communities—that they are able to step into adulthood. Their self-generated initiations are often aborted and unfulfilled. Internal questions about whether they are fit for adulthood will linger well into their adult years. Perhaps as a result of the prevalence of aborted initiations into adulthood, so many of our political and moral leaders are essentially children unable to step into the fullness of their power.

It should be obvious that rites of passage are critical at many other points in the life journey. Mid-life transitions, changes in relationships including marriage and divorce, births, deaths, the emancipation of one's own children, menopause, elderhood—all offer the need for initiation and a call to a rite of passage. Since most of adults have not confirmed their passage into adulthood, a rite of passage can provide the opportunity to make that step, too. The prevalence of aborted or misdirected confirmatory rites is not the sole province of adolescents. Perhaps one of the scariest aspects of parenting, teaching, or mentoring an adolescent is seeing our own struggles and incomplete initiations echoed in theirs.

THE HEROIC JOURNEY

...And so long as you haven't experienced this:
to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth.

(Goethe, 1814, p. 70).

Endings are, let's remember, experiences of dying. They are ordeals, and sometimes they challenge so basically our sense of who we are that we believe they will be the end of us. *This is where an understanding of endings and some familiarity with the old passage rituals can be helpful. For as Mircea Eliade, one of the greatest students of these rituals, has written, "in no rite or myth do we find the initiatory death as something* final, *but always as the condition* sine qua non *of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of a new life."*

(Bridges, 1980, p. 109-110)

Every rite of passage, whether undertaken consciously or stumbled into, mirrors the universal quest. This quest centers on a solitary trial after which a gift is won, and it culminates in sharing that gift through one's life. In the mythological accounts of the Heroic Journey, the gift may be a Jewel or the embodiment of the Beloved that is guarded

by a fearsome Dragon, a bottomless Abyss, or a tricky Illusion. Stepping into the Abyss, journeying to the Underworld, climbing to the Mountain, or crossing the Great Water, the Hero—and of course, Heroes can be of any gender—confronts the challenge and reclaims the Jewel. The gift represents at once the Hero's unique medicine, power, or potential, what the Hero needs in order to carry on his or her life journey, and what the Hero's people need to thrive. And no matter what, the Hero can claim the gift only after demonstrating the necessary heart and dedication to be worthy of it.

Bridges (1980) writes that traditional rites of passage "opened the person to the transformative experience" of a life transition and "made that experience intelligible and capable of assimilation" (p. 117). Transitions hold inevitable distress, but marking the transition formally makes the distress meaningful. Ultimately, the meaning of a transition is growth, and the archetypal gift—a vision—reflects that growth. Understanding and celebrating this meaning helps to complete transitions. A life transition is essentially a death and a rebirth: the death of aspects of an old self and the birth of a new self. The rites of passage facilitate the "labor" of this birth and make way for the new self.

Another point that cannot be over-emphasized is that the Heroic Journey always ends in bringing something of value back to one's People—intimates, family, community, or world. The completion of the cycle is the Return and the implementation of one's vision. This is, in a sense, a two-way street. The initiate brings back something of value, whether it is a new sense of purpose, a deeper sense of maturity and authenticity, or a specific insight. At the same time, the community has a responsibility to the initiate: to provide a place to which to return. In traditional rites of passage, a well-integrated community sent the quester forth and celebrated the quester's return. After the celebration, the quester took her/his new place reflecting a new status. What a loss to return from a Heroic Journey with a great and precious gift only to find the village in ashes! This need to provide a strong community and to recognize a valued new status may be the most difficult challenge in creating modern rites of passage.

Malidoma Somé, a native West African, was taken forcefully from his village at the age of 4 to be educated by Jesuit missionaries. At 20, he returned to his village and was eventually initiated in the traditional manner. He is a medicine man in his people's way and has also earned two Ph.D.s, one in political science from the Sorbonne and one in literature from Brandeis. Bridging two worlds, his views on rites of passage and initiation reflect what others have written.

> Because of the unhappy loss of this kind of (authentic) initiatory experience, the modern world suffers a kind of spiritual poverty and a lack of community. Young people are feared for their wild and dangerous energy, which is really an unending longing for initiation. I think it is urgent that the West quickly learn from indigenous people how to help young people ritualistically focus and transcend their wild energy. demonstrate their worth, and be accepted into a community. . . .
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> I don't know yet what the content of American initiation will be, but I do know what it's going to look like. It has to have a moment of separation from the family and the community. It has to happen in nature and be a genuinely challenging ordeal. Whatever the initiates feel before entering this cycle must be deepened to the point of transcendence, giving them the opportunity to feel whole. Finally, and most importantly, there has to be a strong community ready to welcome the survivors of the ordeal. This welcoming must be massive, not like a simple ceremony of giving a diploma, but a recognizable, wholehearted embrace and valuing of the initiates' power to contribute to the community. In other words, this last stage must make the returning

> men and women want to maintain the pride of their community. This will fuel a continued sense of belonging, which is so much lacking in the heart of the modern youth. (Somé, 1994, p. 68).

A STRUCTURE FOR A WILDERNESS RITE OF PASSAGE

Comparison of rites from all over the world suggests that these initiation rites themselves possess an archetypal structure, for the same underlying patterns and procedures are universally apparent.

(Stevens, quoted in Cohen, 1991, p. 69)

In that circle , I was alone, really alone.
In that circle, I was empty, really empty.
In that circle, I found a garden of wind and thunder and my own song.

Aloneness became my Lover and emptiness my Release and Fulfillment.
For a time, I became whole and I began to realize the Source of that garden.
Then the real work began.

Joseph Campbell (1949), van Gennep (1960), Eliade (1965), Turner (1969), and others describe the underlying structure of all rites of passage. An embodiment of this deep structure has been developing over the last 25 years, largely through the efforts of Steven Foster and Meredith Little (1983; 1988; 1989) and others, including Tom Pinkson (1976) and Robert Greenway (1990/91). Since 1983, I have been guiding wilderness rites of passage using this form in a variety of settings including the high desert canyons of Utah, the mountains of Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico, and wilderness islands in Lake Michigan. The description given here is probably most appropriate for adults and graduating seniors, but with only a few modifications, it would also be appropriate for younger students.

The format we use honors the demands, possibilities, and constraints of our modern context. The trips typically involve an eight-day wilderness camping trip with important meetings before and after the trip. Others use different formats successfully, but we have found this one most effective and accessible. All rites of passage, traditional or modern, have five stages.

1. Preparation This is a time for identifying one's transition, taking stock of one's resources for the journey, and examining one's commitment to the journey. Traditionally, much of a person's life education provided her or him with practical and spiritual tools for a vision quest or walkabout. In a modern context, this stage can occur through directed study of transitions, rites of passage, myths, and history. Clarification of one's purpose in going on a wilderness rite of passage is an important part of preparation. While this phase may be very difficult for most adolescents, the deep preparation provided by a Waldorf education will have accomplished many of the tasks of preparing the mind and the soul.

Other tasks of preparation include assessing and developing one's resources for the trip, including mindfulness skills and physical fitness as well as equipment. The aim is to assist participants in finding and using their own language or belief systems for articulating their journey. We help participants remember that even the most mundane tasks such as packing their equipment and leaving their bedrooms in order are symbolic of deeper aspects

of the trip. Journaling is one tool for this phase. A ropes course can be a highly salient medium for testing one's limits, identifying one's style in high-risk situations, and group-building. It also serves the function of defusing some degree of risk-taking so that the focus of the wilderness trip can be more contemplative. To a degree, a ropes course or the like helps shift the adventure from physical limit-testing to the higher realms.

2. Severance This stage focuses on letting go of the old self, the ending of adolescence, disidentification from old roles, and a symbolic dying. On our trips it begins with leaving home, driving to a wilderness trailhead, hiking a short way, and setting up a base camp. During the two-and-one-half days in base camp, various ceremonies and structured activities, walks, journal work, and contemplation are used to deepen the letting go. Much of this time is open, giving participants the chance to settle in to being closer to nature. They begin to come into the natural rhythms of the place, they begin to recognize plants, rocks, landmarks, and paths, and they begin to adjust to sitting and sleeping on the ground. For many participants, these adjustments are difficult while for others, they are like a coming home. It is important that participants have time to "take off their city shoes," and the support of the group helps. This phase is usually completed with a sacrifice ceremony, burning an object that symbolizes the old role or self which is ending. This ceremony honors what was good and valuable in the old self and signifies one's willingness to let it go. It is an opening to the unknown.

3. Threshold This term refers to the threshold between the old which is no longer and the new which is not yet. It also symbolizes crossing the threshold from one's familiar world with it roles and identities into a world of expanded meaning and possibility. It is the doorway into "sacred time and sacred space." Foster and Little (1989) have pointed out that this term derives from the "threshing-hold," the place in which the wheat is separated from the chaff. This is an apt metaphor for the threshold phase of a wilderness rite, offering the shell of one's life—the husk which was necessary and protective but is now dead—to the wind in order to recover its living core.

This phase usually involves a three- or four-day period of solitude and fasting. Participants choose a place to set up camp. We use a buddy system for safety but the soloists usually have no direct contact with their buddies, communicating by leaving signs or gifts once a day at a meeting spot. Aside from attending to the buddy spot, there are no assigned activities and little movement from the spot one has chosen, leaving most of the time unstructured. Participants are given guidelines for creating ceremonies for this period and many undertake some simple self-generated ceremonies. We encourage participants to make the last night an all-night vigil, staying awake in a self-constructed circle of stones that is at once a tomb and a womb, engaging the ordeal more deeply and opening to the vision.

There is often a delicate balance of support and challenge. Questers recognize that they have come to be tested; without the test, there is no confirmation. On the other hand, the test must be appropriate to the quester's capacities. While this is always a challenge for guides (and an important reason for there to be experienced guides), our experience has been that trusting nature and the quester's intrinsic wisdom is the best way to find the proper blend of demand and comfort.

4. Return This stage provides for reincorporation, rejoining the body of the community, a rebirth, a new beginning. It begins when participants return to base camp and continues when we return to the city. The Return provides a chance to start integrating one's insight

and vision into one's life, to explore its meanings deeper, or just to let it blossom without analyzing it. The day's activities include eating, sleeping, sharing stories and gifts, and discussing the challenges of returning to town. We point out that while it takes enormous courage to go on a vision quest, it takes even more courage to return! A time for gentle re-entry, this day includes a few simple ceremonies such as the Giveaway. For the gift of one's quest to be real, it must be given away to one's people; it must be made useful for the community in a concrete way. To signify the willingness to make one's vision useful, each person gives a gift to someone else in the group. This physical gift becomes a touching reminder of the precious inner spiritual gifts received during the trip.

The following day, we clean up the base camp site, striving to leave no traces of our stay, and we participate in some simple ceremonies of saying good-bye to the site. We eat a meal in town together, marveling at the abundance available to us and remembering that while we chose to fast, many others are still hungry and starving. This helps to deepen our attempts to bring our gifts back. We also try to find a way to clean up together, sometimes stopping at our favorite hot springs vapor caves to wash the dirt off and change into our city clothes. It is necessary to let go of that time in the wilderness in order to move on. In any case, the drive back to town becomes an extended kind of reintegration, symbolically taking on the clothes of one's home, encountering other people, stores, advertising, and the myriad other temptations to forget. There is usually a difficult time after such a trip. This "fall" may be necessary so that participants do not over-idealize the wilderness setting and so they can return more fully to their lives. It is not easy, and understanding and group support after the trip helps.

5. Implementation After the trip, we take time to help participants further integrate their experiences and implement their visions in their lives. We help them remember that their visions must be demonstrated in their lives in the form of some behavior change or specific action. The goal is deepening one's own understanding of the transition to adulthood and confirming and extending the changes begun during the trip. In many traditional settings, the remainder of a person's life expressed their vision. For us, this is a task made more difficult by our culture's failure to acknowledge the rite of passage in the first place. However, taking on a personal or community project and enlisting the support of peers, parents, and others helps. Conducting such a trip in the context of the high school program would help immensely with this difficult stage

The purpose of going into the wilderness is to come back with a task, with something to offer. We do not go only for ourselves but for our place and our People, whether that means one's immediate family, one's community, humanity, or the larger community including nature and the Earth. We attempt to open ourselves to a sense of our "medicine," that which we need to survive and that which is our gift to give. We encourage participants to accept their tasks because, as we remind ourselves, "a vision without a task is just a dream."

THE PLACE OF WILDERNESS

For years, copying other people, I tried to know myself.
From within, I couldn't decide what to do.
Unable to see, I heard my name being called.
Then I walked outside.

(Rumi, 1984, Quatrain 77)

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them No expectations, alert and sufficient, grateful and careful, generous and direct. A calm and clarity attend us in the moment we are wiping the grease off our hands between tasks and glancing up at the passing clouds. Another joy is finally sitting down to have coffee with a friend. The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home. . . . Please do not repeat this to the uninitiated.

(Snyder, 1990, p. 24)

The wilderness has traditionally been a setting in which transitions could be engaged, explored, and deepened. A transition can only be fully completed by returning to one's community. But, while the severance and return phases of a rite of passage entail contact with one's familiar setting, the threshold phase is best accomplished in an environment that is removed from everyday life. Exploring new ways of being is facilitated by this removal and the gentle dissolution of the personality structure and roles that usually ensues. Furthermore, the trial that is required in the threshold phase is accomplished more naturally in the wilderness. Nature provides the best of both support and challenge to test the participant and to confirm his or her transition.

Research findings One way to understand, or at least speak about, the role of wild nature in mental health is through psychological research. Such research provides surprisingly robust and broad support for the power of touching our connection with the Earth. It is a bridge for those who desire a certain kind of demonstration. It is also an interesting and worthwhile exercise in translating the ineffable experience of the healing power of deep contact with nature into the language of modern science.

The following list suggests some of the psychological and spiritual factors that are strengthened through this kind of wilderness trip. Most of these have strong research bases linking them to positive mental health and resiliency in the face of stress (see, for instance, Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, et al, 1991). For those without an established research base, we can confidently hypothesize, based on other research, that they link wilderness experiences and optimal mental health.

1. Relaxation. Physical and cognitive self-regulation; "psychic decompression."
2. Physical fitness in an atmosphere of adventure and play.
3. Self-esteem, confidence in one's native abilities and capacity to learn and grow.
4. Internal locus of control, a sense that one's behavior influences outcomes, that what one does matters, and the opposite of helplessness (but see # 8, below). An internal locus of control is associated with increases in self-esteem, health behavior, and self-responsibility, and decreases in depression.
5. Hardiness, an attitude of internal control, appreciation of challenge as an opportunity, and commitment to a cause larger than oneself. Research connects it to thriving in the face of stressful life changes.
5. Fascination with an environment that is new, rich, engaging, and compelling.

6. Coherence, a sense that one's world is meaningful and connected. Coherence is identified in research with a reduction in the negative effects of distress.
7. Flow, mindfulness, involvement, engagement, present-centeredness, according to some formulations, flow is the basis of optimal mental health, happiness, and the essence of meditative states.
8. Trust in the world and one's place in it, a reduction in the need to control, the antidote to an overdeveloped or compulsive internal locus of control.
9. A sense of community and intimacy with the group which transfers to other group settings.
10. New social roles facilitated by the unfamiliar demands and new possibilities of wilderness living.
11. Social support as groups bond more deeply in new and sometimes difficult environments.
12. Peak experiences, moments of transcendent joy, knowledge, beauty, peace, and harmony.
13. A renewed sense that the world is alive, whole, enchanted, and meaningful and therefore, that one's life is whole, enchanted, and meaningful.
14. A sense of coming Home.

Examples of research In research on peak experiences, Keutzer (1978) reports experiences of nature as the most common trigger for peak or "transcendent" experiences. Wuthnow (1978), in a survey of a large representative sample of the general population, asked respondents whether they had had any of three kinds of peak experiences. Eighty-two percent reported having "experienced the beauty of nature in a deeply moving way" and 49 percent said this had a lasting effect. This was the most common of the three types of peak experiences he measured. Swan (1992) has confirmed this view of wilderness in a review of the research on the educational and spiritual aspects of nature. He also points out that significant "psychoemotional bonding" with nature leads to greater commitment to environmental service.

Researching the effects of wilderness experiences, two environmental psychologists at the University of Michigan evaluated the Outdoor Challenge Program with a variety of participants including inner city youths, suburban youths, and teachers (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983). Although this program did not have a ritual or spiritual orientation, its outcomes are consistent with the purposes of wilderness rites of passage. Based on content analysis of participants' journal entries, Kaplan and Talbot report that:

> [During the backpacking trips] for many participants there is eventually a surprising sense of revelation, as both the environment and the self are newly perceived and seem newly wondrous. The wilderness inspires feelings of awe and wonder, and one's intimate contact with this environment leads to thoughts about spiritual meanings and eternal processes. Individuals feel better acquainted with their own thoughts and feelings, and they feel 'different' in some way — calmer, at peace with themselves, 'more beautiful on the inside and unstifled.' (p. 178)
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> [Immediately after the trip] the strongest connection between the wilderness experience and individuals' feelings about themselves [is that] they feel comfortable in their natural surroundings and are surprised at how easily this sense of belonging has developed. There is a growing sense of wonder and a complex awareness of spiritual meanings as individuals feel at one with nature, yet they are aware of the

> transience of individual concerns when seen against the background of enduring natural rhythms. (p. 179-180)
>
> [After a follow-up] the wilderness is remembered as awesome, and is felt to have offered a compelling glimpse of a real world, and of a way of relating to one's surroundings and responding to one's daily opportunities and challenges, that was immensely satisfying. (p. 182)

This research is especially striking because the goals and approach of the Outdoor Challenge Program did not include these deeper aspects of spiritual growth, yet they unfolded naturally and unmistakably.

A theoretical model The psychological concept of mirroring is one of the means by which wilderness affects experience. All environments mirror us back to ourselves, reinforcing certain qualities, attitudes, and self-concepts. Familiar environments reflect familiar roles and identities. The more unfamiliar the environment, the greater the potential for deep change. A wilderness setting tends to reflect to the adolescents new and different aspects of themselves. At first, this will be deeply unsettling. Participants who had constructed tough exteriors against fear find themselves afraid, genuinely afraid. Those who defended themselves by withdrawing find they must look around and encounter their surroundings. Those who got by through coercion and manipulation find they cannot coerce the wind into stopping or manipulate a steep hill into being level. Any sense of control based on resistance breaks down as the wilderness coaxes participants into opening. Just as severance from the old way of life is a necessary step in a rite of passage, dissolution of outmoded personality structures is necessary for growth. The shell of the defensive ego begins to evaporate.

But there is more. This dissolution allows one's essential nature to emerge or for the soul to descend more deeply into one's life and world. The wilderness mirrors and supports those qualities in participants that are genuine, authentic, intrinsic, and natural. Exposed to the power of the wilderness, participants feel more of their own power. Seeing the beauty of nature, participants see more of their own beauty. Touching the wildness of their surroundings, participants come to appreciate more of their own wildness—their unconditioned sense of being alive, unrestricted, passionate, rich, multi-dimensional, and free. Environments that are relatively wild and, thus free, reflect and support intrinsic freedom.

We can say that the wilderness is a relentless and gentle teacher, an important means of letting go of the self-images which are dying and of facilitating the birth of new self-images. As the personality structures which developed in order to cope with difficult circumstances soften and recede, healthier, more resilient structures—the qualities of a mature, authentic, responsible, and caring adult—emerge. And perhaps most importantly, this emergence is an organic and natural response to supportive wilderness experiences. Ecopsychologists have begun to point out the necessity of deep contact with the Earth for emotional and mental health (Roszak, 1993). Indigenous, earth-centered cultures knew this but the disenchantment and disillusionment of the modern culture has gone hand in hand with disconnection from nature. While the wilderness setting may not be necessary for reestablishing this connection, it is a powerful opportunity for deepening the potential for profound change.

THE ROLE OF CEREMONY

Together, myth and ceremony constitute the original forms of interaction between the ego and the Self, between the human and divine, between earth and heaven. It is through myth that the unconscious speaks to us most directly and universally. And it is in ceremony that we "complete the dialogue." We might say that, spiritually speaking, this commerce between heaven and earth is the central opportunity of life.

(Plotkin, 1991, p. 13)

We have found that ceremonies have added depth and power to wilderness rites of passage trips. Indeed, the process itself is a ceremony, and without the ceremonial dimension, it becomes merely a physical, emotional, and mental adventure. Over the years, I have included fewer specific ceremonies and made those we do use more spare and pure. The entire trip is the ritual. The essence of ceremony is very strong; it shines through even the simplest ceremonies: a bow to the rising and setting sun, sharing thanks before a meal, passing a stick of smoldering sage in silence. Such a "light-handed" approach encourages every action to take on a ceremonial significance: washing the dishes, carrying a backpack, greeting the others in the morning, taking a shit, shooing a fly.

There are a few specific ceremonies that seem very important, however. We take a few minutes before leaving town to say good-bye in a ceremonial structure. We use a council process with a "talking staff" frequently. As it goes around the circle, the person holding it understands in a visceral way that s/he has both the permission and responsibility to speak directly and openly, to tell the truth from the heart as best s/he can. And those of us present during a talking staff council accept the responsibility of listening with open ears and hearts as best we can. After the solo, we incorporate several ceremonies including a "first" meal together in basecamp, a Giveaway ceremony, councils, good-byes to the place, and a special meal in town. It seems that the Return phase is an especially important time for ceremony because participants are so tender, open, and sensitive. Ceremony provides a crucial holding environment for beginning to encounter the familiar world with all its demands.

A particularly rich ceremony happens the night before the solo begins. While the details vary depending on the group and the place, it centers on a fire and sacrifice. We may begin with music-making—drums, rattles, spoons on pots—and dancing. Then we settle down around a small fire. One at a time, each person steps away from the fire into the darkness for a few minutes and then back up to the fire. Telling a bit about their sacrifice, they offer to the fire a flammable object that represents the part of themselves that is dying, the old skin that is being shed, or the stage of life they are leaving. Thus, they enact and confirm their willingness to let go and move forward into their lives. They stand before their community and make public their commitment. After the fire has consumed the object, we may say, in unison, "Good-bye and blessings on your journey." After each person has made their sacrifice, we let the fire die down to embers and, in silence, go to bed. At dawn the next morning, they will leave to begin their solos. It is a profound evening.

There are at least four functions of ceremony on the wilderness rites of passage.

1. <u>Ceremony as sign</u>. The entire rite of passage is a sign that an important transition is taking place. Specific ceremonies also function as signs or markers along the way. They say, "this particular junction is important; take notice." As such, they help orient participants along the Journey.
2. <u>Ceremony as significance</u>. Signs may point to the surface and they may point below the surface to deeper meaning. Ceremonies encourage people to look for the deeper significance of their behavior. For example, when lighting the fire in a ceremonial way, we

are not just lighting a fire, we are, on a deeper level, also bringing warmth and light into the world or preparing to enter Sacred Space. The significance of lighting the fire is preparation to enter Sacred Space. After a few days of this, everything takes on a deeper tone; participants begin to be more aware of a broader context for their actions. We find ourselves seeking the deeper significance of fixing a meal, washing hair, and helping a friend with a pack. We begin to do these things more mindfully and respectfully. The question of the significance of an action eventually leads to a sense of ultimate significance and opens a dimension which is spiritual and meaningful by its nature. In another sense, ceremonies help "complete the dialogue with the unconscious" (Plotkin, 1991). They encourage the unconscious to ask, as it were, why am I doing this, what is its deeper meaning. Dreams, artwork, guided imagery, I Ching and Runes, and other tools (all of which we may incorporate at times) give us ways to listen to the unconscious. Ceremony provides a means of "seeding the deeper layers of mind" (Plotkin, 1991, p. 10) On the passage rites, the unconscious is put on notice that an important transition is being entered consciously and celebrated.

3. Ceremony as community building. Gathering together in a sacred way builds deep bonds and the process of forming these bonds can carry over to other situations. Through ceremony, such bonds form at non-verbal levels. Bonds also form through the reinforcement of shared values and beliefs. For instance, a ceremony can remind us we value openness, mutual respect, and diversity on a shared journey. This sense of community, already developed so strongly throughout the school years, reduces the sense of alienation that seems epidemic these days and engages the power of consensus that there is meaning and magic in the world. This is the necessary antidote to the disenchanted and overly rational modern worldview. We are reminded that community extends beyond humans. Ceremony helps to build this larger community as well.

4. Ceremony as sanctuary. We have repeatedly observed that in the safe space of ceremony, news ways of being and new emotions or insights can emerge. Those who are reluctant to share their feelings and insights begin to speak up. Those who chatter in order to keep up a "positive" front begin to honor the silence of their wisdom. Tears that could never be shed in the twilight of ordinary living, come out in the light of ceremony. Risks are less risky in these sanctuaries.

One other comment about ritual: We bring ritual into our work in a way that is confident but not forceful, direct but not heavy-handed, and invitational, not coercive. We feel it is important that ceremony not be forced on an individual or a group. We attempt to allow participants to discover for themselves—again—the power and magic of ceremony, and we offer guidelines and suggestions for self-generated ceremonies before the solo time. Questers are encouraged to reach into their own heritages for sources of ceremony and to look around them, asking the land what sorts of ceremonial forms are called for in this place. It is a delight to listen to the stories of the beautiful, authentic ceremonies that have grown in such fertile soil.

WILDERNESS RITES OF PASSAGE IN CONTEXT

. . . That was just the first night [of a vision quest solo]. I was to experience so much more. I understood fear when a raging storm came over the desert and forced me to crouch under my tarp for the last two nights worrying that my shelter would leak or be blown away. In the end, I felt relieved that I managed to keep relatively dry. I felt content by myself, laughing out alone and singing in my loudest voice various funk and 60's tunes to

my spot. I knew myself better and found I could trust myself to respond effectively to certain intense situations. I was comfortable in knowing that I could probably handle just about any situation after my experience in the desert. . . . My vision quest last year has, somehow, made everything more manageable. I never forget the desert. Most of all, I remember the silence.

Peter Nachtrieb, student at Marin Academy, in Circles on the Mountain

Environmental Education Wilderness rites of passage can be clarified by showing their relation to other forms of environmental education and wilderness work. I find three levels or types of environmental education. The first focuses on environmental science, natural history, and wilderness skills. Nature is a laboratory and library. A deeper appreciation, fascination, and knowledge of the world results. Many of the environmental education programs aimed at teaching ecology and environmental sensitivity are good examples.

The second focuses on the development of increasing self-confidence and esteem, developing leadership skills, and team-building. Outward Bound's programs are some of the best examples of this approach. Nature is a setting or vehicle for challenging students and a personal growth lab. At its best, this approach fosters psychological growth. The challenges are more profound because they are real, not artificial, and because they are so concrete. A dark shadow side of these programs has emerged in recent years, using an aggressive boot-camp style of wilderness therapy. Some of these programs have turned out to be quite brutal and allegedly have resulted in deaths. These programs should not detract from the value of the careful and professional programs.

Wilderness rites of passage and related kinds of work falls into a third type. Their goal is not just the development of a more informed relationship with the natural world or a better, stronger sense of self, but a sense of coming home. On wilderness rites of passage, one finds oneself and one's journey to be part of a larger whole. The need for control over one's environment deepens into trust and a sense of harmony with one's environment. Nature is not a background against which to be challenged and grow. Rather, nature comes front and center as the foundation and container for the story of one's life. The Earth itself comes alive and, at the deepest, wilderness rites of passage become a gift to the Earth as well as one's people. Nature sees itself through the quester's eyes and feels itself in the quester's joy. Rather than including Nature in our story, we find ourselves woven into Nature's story.

These levels blend together, especially on wilderness rites of passage. Learning the ecology and natural history of an area supports one's inner journey. Besides, it is nice to know the names of one's neighbors, the grasses, rocks, clouds, and animals. Similarly, ropes courses and other challenge activities can be valuable before a wilderness rite of passage. They help to build self-confidence and deepen the sense of community in the group. In any case, there is enough challenge inherent in wilderness backpacking and camping to provide ample opportunities for success and self-esteem. Hiking, scrambling up hillsides, making it to the top of a steep rise, even just coping with dirt and mosquitoes are significant challenges, not to mention the trial of being with oneself alone for three or four days. By holding the highest possible context, they provide a deeper sense of initiation into one's life along with the many other benefits of environmental education.

Native American Traditions Wilderness rites of passage can also be viewed in relation to Native American vision quests. This raises the very important question of the misappropriation of spiritual and cultural traditions. This has been a concern for some

Native Americans as well as for wilderness rites of passage guides. Some have argued that Euro-Americans and other non-Indians should not be using the vision quest form because such use is a way of ripping-off Native Americans. A related argument is that since non-Indians cannot possibly understand all of the intricacies and necessary safeguards of doing vision quests, wilderness rites of passage can be psychically and spiritually shallow, at best, or dangerous, at worst.

This is a complicated issue and should not be dismissed without a thorough understanding and dialogue. However, for the purposes of this paper, several ideas might help. The wilderness rites of passage discussed here are not attempts to conduct traditional Native American vision quests. Vision quests, in their original and generic meaning, are universal. Even the language of questing derives as much from the myth of the Grail Quest as from Plains Indians' hanbleche and related vision quest forms. Virtually every traditional culture has conducted them, including the old European cultures, with various spiritual pilgrimages as testimony. Modern American culture has lost contact with most elements of traditional rites of passage and with deep contact with the Earth. However, the roots of wilderness rites of passage are still there, ready to be reawakened. As Joseph Campbell and others show, the myths expressing the Heroic Journey are timeless; the Hero has a thousand faces and hails from a thousand places.

It also seems to me that the Earth itself has an influence in the forms that specific rites of passage take. This has been called "genius loci," the spirit of a place which exerts its own influences on the feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and social practices there, and "anima mundi," the soul of the earth. The most powerful rituals are to a degree place-specific. It makes sense that different forms for rituals would develop in different places. It also makes sense that similar ritual forms would arise is the same place. Just as the deep forests of northern Europe, the wind-blown coasts of the British Isles, or the jungles of central Africa call forth certain specific stories and ritual forms, the plains, mountains, and canyon country of our place call forth other forms.

A simple example is the use of sage and juniper in ceremonies. Some have argued that this is an attempt to copy American Indians. However, we burn such ceremonial incense as a way of bringing the local aromatic plants into our ceremonies and inducing a sense of the sacred in the ceremonies. Sage and juniper are place-specific incenses, and they fit better with local ceremonies than imported incense. Furthermore, juniper smoke is a part of Tibetan, as well as Native American, ceremonies. The same goes for other aspects of the structure and format of these rites. It is natural—in the deepest sense of the word—that the wilderness rites of passage which call us have much in common with the wilderness rites of passage that have been calling to the people native to this place for thousands of years.

It is important to set this kind of education in the larger context of the political, social, and spiritual struggles of Native Americans, in the context of environmental activism, and in the context of pan-cultural and universal rites of passage. Out of mutual respect for native people and our own cultural histories, it is important that we do not "pretend" to be doing Native American vision quests.

CONCLUSION

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.

(Barry Lopez, 1990, p. 41)

Wilderness rites of passage reveal each person's life as a story being written each moment, and they remind us deeply that each story is magnificent. Living one's life as a mythic journey and periodically reflecting on it reinforces its dignity. Witnessing one's story deepens the sense of being the author of one's future and the sense of following one's destiny. Wilderness rites of passage guides—along with the best teachers and educators—see themselves as witnesses to the unfolding of these stories; not as therapists but as midwives attending the birth of a new chapter. We recognize this as both an awesome task and an unspeakable gift.

Alone, we seek support.
Hungry, we seek nourishment.
Vulnerable, we seek openness.
Cold, we seek the warmth of an inner flame.
Empty, we seek vision.

Human, we seek not to be different but to be ourselves,
not to find another world, but to live fully in ours.
Most of all, we pray for a gift to bring back to our People and our Place.

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