Circles on the Mountain

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Expanding Borders...
We who carry lights into the storm-shadows of the heart; who bear water through a dry and thirsty land; who wait at the foot of the sacred mountain and pray for our people; who conduct seekers to bright graves where they birth themselves—we greet you with respect and love in the name of our collective ancestors. The time has come again to talk, to dance, to learn, and to grow.

We are honored by your coming. Join us. Sit around our circle.

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Circles on the Mountain functions as a forum wherein diverse ways, values, and opinions may be expressed. Its contents do not always reflect the convictions of the editors.

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EXPANDING OUR BORDERS: AN INTRODUCTION

Trebbe Johnson

Steven Foster was accustomed to receiving wisdom from nature. Ravens, rocks, wind, desert skies often gave him counsel. One of his most important conversations, however, took place in a laundromat.

The meeting occurred right after this rebel and seeker, this man longing for meaning had been wandering alone for months in the desert. Now, burned, toughened, and softened, he stood shakily once more on the rim of civilization, about to face the demands of family and fiscal responsibility. Even though he was outraged at society and already aching for the serene, pure beauty of the desert he had left behind, he knew, somehow, that it was no longer enough.

He was watching his clothes spin around in the dryer when his heart said to him, “Go back to your life and your loved ones. Work it out there. Go and learn to live with the people.”

And since, as he notes in The Book of the Vision Quest, he had come to trust his heart, that is what he did. He sorted things out with the family and said goodbye. He volunteered at a suicide prevention hotline center and there met a young woman named Meredith Little, who became his life and soul partner. Together and with other teachers from their own community and from distant places and times, they began exploring the possibilities for personal transformation in and with nature. The vision quest was born.

Steven and Meredith called their own vision The School of Lost Borders. Even the name of this organization, through which they offered wilderness rites of passage programs and trainings, confirmed the founders’ belief that the truths, dreams, actions, transformations, and expressions of self that people might discover were immense and limitless. And in fact, in the past thirty years, the meaning of the wilderness rite of passage itself has undergone a great transformation. The teachings of the teachers, combined with the visions and insights that thousands of people have received while fasting alone in the wilderness have branched into scores of creative variations. In the accounts that follow, we present just a few of the voices of women and men who have lost their own borders and are now ushering others into the boundless frontiers where nature and human encounter each other.

Boundless, yes, but not without some important landmarks along the way. In the articles, essay, and poem that follow, certain themes and lessons recur:

- A person, alone in wilderness, is actually in the presence of the wisest, most compassionate and insightful of guides
- The wilderness need not be wild; nature does not save up her best epiphanies for remote inaccessible places (sometimes she even finds her way into a laundromat)
- The soul, or unconscious, which yearns so deeply for connection with the great mystery, for wholeness and authenticity, reaches eagerly for the tools that will further its aim: for example art-making, ceremony, working with dreams, meditation, wandering in nature
- The phases of the vision quest, Severance, Threshold, and Reincorporation, offer models of transformation that are valuable in a surprising number of contexts
- The four directions (or four shields, or medicine wheel) provide ancient patterns for understanding life that can be endlessly re-explored and relived
- And, perhaps most important of all: you just never know when someone will be ripe for a wild dialogue with the sacred that will utterly change his or her life

The stories in this issue of CIRCLES ON THE MOUNTAIN present just a few of the ways that people have ingested the core teachings that Steven and Meredith (and, as they would be the first to insist, generations of teachers from every culture on earth before them) and brought them into the world mixed with their own unique vision. Here we see elements of the vision quest coming alive in a college classroom, a Dominican convent, a suburban park, and a clearcut forest. We read of life taking on new meaning and purpose for young people and elders, business people, students, people seeking psychological healing and those with terminal illnesses, and people who are dying. Meredith herself has embodied her own teachings and widened her horizons in the past two years, emerging from the long hard years of Steven’s dying to create, along with Steven’s doctor, Scott Eberle, new programs in which participants face their own physical death.

And these are just the offerings of the people who responded to our call for submissions to the magazine. In South Africa, Coleridge Daniels, Mthunzi Fuma and others are reaching out to militarized youth, recruited for gangs when they were barely out of childhood, and taking them on vision fasts. As a result, confused, angry, violent young people are now finding ways to bring other young people back to love, compassion, and service. Dave Talamo, Jeannie Gunter, and Animas Valley Institute, among others, are offering wilderness rites of passage for teenagers and young adults, that they may step into an adulthood of authenticity, instead of one prescribed by fads and consumerism. In Florida, Michael de Maria holds a weekly Council circle and seasonal trance dances on the beach that incorporate concepts of sacred movement and space. For Annie Bloom, the wilderness is Salt Lake City, and her community is an ever widening group of adults and young people with whom she creates personal and seasonal cere-
mony on a regular basis. Lynnaea Lumbard and Rick Pierce have explored the medicine wheel in depth and offered intensive programs during different seasons and in different directional locales of the U.S. The explorations and experiments are as vast as the passions and sensibilities of the people who are called by them.

The vision quest, or wilderness rite of passage, when we are ready for it, changes our lives and infuses us with an big dose of the ineffable and magical—and possible. We feel we have learned the secret of life, and so, in a sense, we have. We have learned the secret of our life. We cannot go back to what we were, but must make this path of connectedness, beauty, and transformation accessible to others. As Sparrow Hart notes in his essay, an evocative letter to River, “We have been seeded by the gods, prepared for a greater life…. We are pregnant with mystery.” Widening our own borders, we help redefine all of inner and outer space for others.

Soul-Centered Dreamwork

Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.
Animas Valley Institute, Durango, CO

The human soul—“the truth at the center of the image we were born with,” as poet David Whyte puts it—can be uncovered and explored by a variety of methods: arduous pilgrimages, physical ordeals, extended wanderings in wildlands, and the consumption of entheogenic plants. However, one of the most universal and effective ways to uncover the secrets and mysteries of one’s soul is through wilderness-based fasting rites—popularly called “vision quests.” As one aspect of my work, which I call “soulcraft,” my colleagues and I have developed a contemporary, Western approach to wilderness vision quests. We’ve also created programs in which we backpack for a week into wild lands (soulcraft journeys) or gather at campsites or retreat centers (intensives) and which deepen and extend the soulcraft practices introduced on the vision quest. The primary goal of our quests is to enter the underworld of soul so that the individual might discover the psyche’s mysterious images. These soul images, unique to each person, provide the direction, wisdom, and inspiration for providing one’s deepest gift to the world and, thereby, realizing the greatest fulfillment that life can offer.

Soulcentric dreamwork is one of the soulcraft practices we regularly employ. Dreamwork can reap transformation, healing, direction, and initiation from the rich landscapes of our nocturnal visions. Soulcentric dreamwork, however, diverges from other methods in its premise that every dream is an opportunity to develop our relationship to soul, to who we are beneath our surface personalities and routine agendas. Each dream provides a snapshot of the unfolding story and desires of the soul, and a chance for the ego to be further initiated into that underworld story and those underworld desires.

During the preparation and incorporation phases of the vision quest, we work with dreams soulcentrically. Every part of the dream is understood as a part of the dreamer, representing the dreamer’s sub-personalities, attitudes, feelings, wounds, rejected qualities, and hidden potentials. The I in a dream represents the ego, the way the dreamer thinks about himself. The dream reveals the relationships between the ego and other elements of the psyche. We understand the psyche to include the collective (universal) unconscious as well as the personal unconscious. Therefore, some parts of the dream are seen as archetypes, the gods and goddesses that act through our psyches, as well as representing our more personal qualities.

A key principle in the soulcentric approach is this: the archetypal presences in our dreams—and the dream more generally—may not be the least bit interested to help with the ego’s dayworld agenda of personal happiness or adjustment. This agenda itself may be the primary obstacle to soulful growth. Rather, the dream affords the ego an initiation opportunity in the underworld, that would bring about, not a healing or patching up of the ego but something quite contrary: a death to the ego’s current way of being in the world.

From the soulcentric view, the dream, like the vision quest more generally, wants to separate the ego from its surface life, at least temporarily, so it can be introduced to a deeper, richer, larger possibility, a life more in keeping with the desires of the soul. Ultimately, this will render the conscious personality more whole, but not without an intervening death.

The specific strategies of archetypal dreamwork (some reviewed below) impel the dayworld ego to dwell as long as possible in the world of the dream, among those nightworld images, giving them plenty of opportunity to alchemize the ego. This contrasts with strategies that keep the ego in the driver’s seat, extracting the dream’s images into the dayworld, where the ego, unscathed, can have its way with those images.

Dreams can have the same transformative effect on the ego as a thorough immersion in nature. The inner wilds of dreams and the outer wilds of nature are two of our most powerful allies, teachers, and guides in our maturation and initiation. To intensify the transformative effect, we can work with our dreams while immersed in the natural world, bringing dreamwork to an exceptionally deep level and opening new doors to the sacred garden of nature.

To respect the power of dreams, the first rule in a soulcentric approach asks you to refrain from interpreting your own dreams too soon and never interpret someone else’s dream. Rather, permit yourself the sometimes disquieting luxury of hanging out among the rich symbols and events of your dream, wan-
dering slowly though its images and emotions, twisting slowly in the breeze of its seductions and abductions. Let the dream do its tidal work on the ego rather than allowing the ego to do its analyzing work on the dream.

You would do best to avoid all those so-called dream dictionaries and other books that purport to tell you what a dream symbol means, as if each dream element could be extracted from its dreamworld and have a fixed meaning independent of its relationship with the dreamer and all other elements of the dream.

There are many techniques for working with dreams without interpreting them right off the bat, or ever. First and foremost, you can gain an enormous amount by simply telling your dream, out loud, to one or more people without any comment. Like a poem (it is a poem, a soul poem), try recounting your dream in the present tense (as if the action is happening as you speak) and talk very slowly, very slowly, even slower, like reading a world-class poem, savoring every word. Allow the emotions of the dream to flow through you as you speak. Pause often. Let the emotions and images do their work on you. Go slowly. Describe the sensory qualities of the dream in great detail—the sights, scents, sounds, tastes, and textures. Describe the subtleties of the personalities and the emotional nuances of the encounters. Linger.

Other dreamwork methods we use include merging with the dream elements through enactment, being interviewed by another while you are in the role of the dream element, asking the people in a dream group to play the characters and/or things or places in your dream, journeying back into the dream through your deep imagination, and entering into dialogues between two or more dream characters. These methods permit you to get inside the dream, to crawl into the skin of different dream characters and discover the conflicts, potentials, and desires—yours—embodied in those beings. You can do this not only with the people in the dream but also with the dream’s animals, trees, rivers, mountains, clouds, houses, cars, situations, emotions, sounds, speech, and even qualities such as colors or size.

While on a soulcraft journey in the redrock canyons of southern Utah, a woman named Maya—a forty-year-old, single health-care professional—chose to work with a disturbing dream:

I am on an extended visit at a friend’s house. My friend has two babies, and she has a refugee woman staying with her who also has a baby. I am to sleep in the refugee woman’s room. I rearrange things there to make it less cluttered. Later, I overhear my friend saying how inappropriate it was for me to do that, since I am only a guest and the refugee woman gave up her room for me. I feel ashamed. The babies’ diapers are being changed, and, even though I don’t want to deal with it, I feel obliged to help. In the process, I get runny baby shit on my hands and on the floor. I also notice animal scat in the living room and under the bed where I have been sleeping. I see people stepping on the shit, distributing it all over the floor, and kids decorating the scat piles. I feel disgusted, and I try to wash off my hands, so I can leave. The refugee woman says, “If you rub it, it just goes in deeper.”

The themes of not being at home and not fitting in were common to both Maya’s nightworld and dayworld. She harbored shame and anger over her sense of dislocation.

To get inside this dream and wander there awhile, Maya was encouraged to go off alone and find a place in the canyon where she might make an “extended visit.” She was to find a place that seemed cluttered and then she was to rearrange the things there, being careful to pick a spot where her rearranging would not harm the environment. Then she was to express in sound and gesture her anger about being mistreated by others and her shame about not fitting in. Finally, she was to find animal scat, get it all over herself, and try to remove it by rubbing it.

Maya accepted this task with some reluctance. She found a place in a side canyon and rearranged some rocks and sticks at the edge of the creek. She asked the canyon for permission to express her rage about not fitting in. Soon she found herself on all fours, screaming and growling with a fierce animal wildness. Then she removed her clothes and, unable to find animal scat, rubbed slimy red mud from the creek all over her body. Her legs looked to her like furry animal limbs.

During her dream task, a transformative process began for Maya. In contrast to the dream ego’s disgust over baby shit and animal scat, Maya discovered a wild power derived from the earthiness and carnality of muck. And, in contrast to her dayworld ego’s shame about not fitting in, she found a social courage and resilience that grew out of her full-bodied enactment of feral anger.

Her side-canyon experience became a pivotal part of the ceremony Maya designed and performed the next evening in base camp. With the group drumming in a circle around her, she gradually emerged from beneath piled bark and sticks—as the mud-covered, wild animal of herself. Moving around the circle on all fours, she growled and hissed, approached each member of the group, and looked fiercely into their eyes.

Maya thus began to reclaim her wildness, her otherness. She had previously experienced these qualities as shit, as socially unacceptable features of the wild animal of herself and the unsocialized babies of herself. She had rejected the “cluttered” ways of her inner refugee, the aspect of self displaced from both mainstream society and from her ego, the psyche’s mainstream. She came to see that her rejection of the refugee of herself had kept her alienated from the wildness of her soul. This rejection left her feeling socially unfit, without a “room” of her own. Now she knows that to have that room she must embrace her refugee soul powers.

The refugee was correct when she said, “If you rub it, it just goes in deeper.” Fortunately, Maya found the courage to rub, and the wildness and earthiness of that mud-dung went in deep enough to be inerascible.

The denied qualities that once caused Maya so much shame and suffering have a positive and essential function in her life—and in society, too. Since her canyon time, she has been retrieving and integrating her wild nature and other “undesirable” qualities. Maya has come to understand her soul powers to be those of a woman who bestows an essential dose of wildness to the village and whose place in the human community is at the edge, on the boundary between the village and the wild.

Excerpted from Soulcraft: Crossing Into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche by Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.
One of the aspects of the initiatory ceremony we commonly call the vision quest or vision fast which is most inspiring to me is that it is cross-cultural and non-demoninational, traversing all human boundaries and historical perspectives. In 2002 and 2003 I had the good fortune to be part of a one-hundred-day sabbatical, “a holistic program providing women and men, lay and religious, with an opportunity to experience the healing of the earth-human relationship.”

The program was sponsored by the Siena Spirituality Center, a ministry of the Amityville Dominican Sisters, located on fifteen waterfront acres in Southampton, NY, two hours from the big city. The Dominican movement, which began in thirteenth century Spain, is based on the creation of a community completely oriented to preaching. At the core of its religious context is “the capacity to hear the voice of creation, to be spoken to by the storm, to be breathed on by thunder, to be driven by human suffering, moved by flowers,” in the words of the Nigerian writer Ben Okri. I had been invited to participate in this program by a dear friend, Margaret Galiardi, OP, a Dominican sister who had served her Order for about thirty-six years at the time I met her. Margaret was a social activist in her Order, having traveled extensively to other parts of the world in the service of peace. Her work was what I call “on the front line.” She had contacted me during her own year-long sabbatical, when she was looking for the next steps in her ministry. She was strongly drawn to my training program in Applied Wilderness Ecopsychology, Rites of Passage and Earth-based Healing Practices. Shortly after our conversation she submerged herself for two weeks in the wilds of the Inyo Mountains to mark her stepping into the next phase of her ministry, which she knew would be a reclaimation of her own connection to the earth and her conviction that the Church must be a strong voice for human stewardship of the land.

When she returned to her home on Long Island, she began to convert the traditional one-hundred-day retreat so that it would emphasize the human-nature connection. She subtitled the sabbatical “Born of Our Oneness with the Universe the retreat will birth transformed images of Earth, Self, God and Others.”

Margaret’s new ministry was greatly inspired by the author and theologian (or “geologian” as he calls himself) Thomas Berry and by his Universe Story, which includes his vision of establishing a new reciprocity between humans with the earth and one other, as well as a comprehensive ethics of reverence for all life. Berry claims that there can be no peace among humans without peace with the planet. Margaret asked me to come to Long Island to teach what she and I, like Berry himself, called the “Book of Nature,” a text equal in importance to the Book of Scripture. She encouraged me to do whatever I thought would strengthen the retreatants’ connection with the earth and enlarge their communion with the sacred so they could hear the voice of God in the human-nature relationship.

I was initially a bit daunted by this idea. In attending this retreat, twelve Dominican women in their sixties, seventies, and eighties with more than five hundred years of service in their ministry between them (some had been in their Orders for over fifty years!) would be spending their first time away from their lifelong jobs in the Church. To me, these women represented the true “religious” of the earth, for they had years of experience with service, silence, prayer, solitude, fasting, and reverence for life. However, I had deep confidence in the basic ceremony which connects us all to nature—that of the vision fast and the earth rite, with its tried-and-true practices of earth-based rituals, council, storytelling and reflective listening, and more. This opportunity was not about me doing anything, it was about these wise women making their own connections to what awaited them within their own natures.

When I first arrived in New York City on September 11, 2002, a small group of Dominicans had taken up a thirty-day fasting vigil for world peace, returning, as their simple announcement of the vigil phrased it, “to the Ground Zero of their own hearts to wait on God, confident that a path of peace can emerge through the practice of silence, prayer and fasting.” We were all aware of this prayerful stance, which provided a background to our time together on the land. The questing ceremony with its stages of preparation, threshing time, incorporation and illumination provided a perfect container for our time together. Siena Spirituality Center was also an ideal environment, with its acres of lawn sweeping down to the waterfront, beautiful trees, flower and vegetable gardens, and many places for quiet reflection.
of their symbolic lives and how these concerns are mirrored in the natural world. Finally they went out on the land for a day, with intention and prayer, eager to be alone and quiet, to reflect on their lives and ministries. We made the threshing circle together, and some wept quietly as they and others stepped into their time alone. To look into the eyes of someone more than eighty years of age, whose decades of spiritual/religious practice and prayer had led her to stand alone in a circle under a tree, was a profound experience for us all. At the end of the day each Sister stepped back into her new life with clear eyes and an eagerness to share her experience.

In the evenings we made the first fire on the Siena land since it was purchased in the early 1930s! Some of the elder women engaged in fire-making for the first time, and in the light of the flames everyone told her story and engaged openly in deep reflection. What I noticed was how simply and to the point each story was told. One by one they shared an intuitive grasp of the Book of Nature, and the clarity and heartfulness of their experience was revealed under a cold clear night with the warmth of the ancient fire.

For me the crowning moment of the retreat was an unexpected ceremony in which I was made an honorary Dominican Sister. The eldest of the retreatants led me before the others and a long piece of cloth was placed around my neck. We had all been initiated. The experience was summed up by one of the retreatants in an evaluation at the end: “I enjoyed praying in nature, listening to God in the gentle breeze, the support of a tree, the rippling flowing water, and the warm sunshine. I was stretched to deepen my relationship with God in nature.”

This experience is just one of many that has taught me how the possibilities for the use of this ceremony is limited only by our imagination and our willingness to step into the unknown. The questing experience has its roots in the lives of our ancestors. They knew that as wild nature cycles through changes, so does human nature. The necessity to mark these transitions in some meaningful way is open to everyone, everywhere, throughout all time.
Joni is a fit-looking woman in her thirties. A former competitive athlete, she was diagnosed a few years ago with osteoporosis so severe that she risks bone fractures even from normal activities, much less the strenuous sports she so enjoyed. She’s come to Facing the Mystery, a journey into nature and self for people with life-altering or life-threatening illnesses, because she’s sick of feeling sick, she’s grieving the loss of her “healthy” life, and she’s struggling to find meaning in her illness. Looking at the life-sized tracing of her body on the table before her on the first day, she says, “I hate this,” picks up a black marker and proceeds to darken the entire interior of her form. A few days later, after her day-long solo, she stays up the whole night with her drawing, which now hangs, along with those of the other eight participants, on a wall in the meeting room. The next morning, the group finds her sleeping at the foot of her blackened form, which is now surrounded by a halo of gold and filled with beautiful, colorful leaves and flowers, lovingly glued in place.

Another woman has undergone twenty-five surgeries on her intestinal tract in just five years. Sitting in a park in Colorado, her attention is drawn to two huge spruces. One of the trees is tall and healthy, with vibrant green boughs. The other is dead, its limbs fallen off and reduced to stumps, knobs of fungus on its trunk. “That dead tree is me,” the woman thinks. Then she notices a magpie flying around the two trees. Around and around it flies, as if looking for a place to land. She is sure it will land in the healthy tree; who, after all, would not choose what is apparently more beautiful and whole? Instead, the bird perches in the dead tree. The woman is moved to tears. This incident, which would have been so easy to miss or overlook, instead becomes an affirmation of her own value and beauty.

Facing the Mystery, a special program offered by Animas Valley Institute, was conceived by a small group of people, including a hospice doctor, a pastoral care worker, a hospice volunteer, a nurse practitioner, and a vision quest guide. Their shared intention was to explore ways of applying the wilderness rite of passage model to those who are facing health conditions that significantly alter and may, in fact, end their lives. People in these circumstances often are physically unable to undertake the rigors of a wilderness setting and fasting, but may be hungry to accept the other challenges of the vision quest. Our task was to try to adapt the metaphors of the quest—of death and rebirth, of severance, threshold, and reincorporation—to meet the needs of people facing severe physical challenges, people for whom death is no longer a distant metaphor, but a foreseeable reality.

Participants have included people with multiple sclerosis, cancer of several sorts, HIV/AIDS, degenerative joint disorder, a rare genetic condition, and others. Some participants have been successfully treated for their cancer or condition and expect full recovery, though their lives, and usually their bodies, have been changed forever; others have known that they are likely to die from their disease. In fact, two former participants have died since they participated in the program.

What do we offer in Facing the Mystery that’s different from many other programs that focus on healing? Our focus is on the illness as a rite of passage in and of itself, an opportunity for participants to gain insight by using the mirror of nature and to realign their everyday lives with its rhythms and cycles and with their own deeply rooted dreams and passions. As in the “traditional” vision quest, letting go of those aspects of our lives that no longer serve us and opening our hearts and minds to new possibilities are among the most difficult aspects of this realignment. The idea of marking and even celebrating the difficult transition imposed by illness and death—the transition from one whose own death is unimaginable to one who now lives with death as a companion—is.

When we receive a diagnosis of a life-altering or life-threatening illness, our assumptions, expectations, hopes, dreams, and views about our lives change dramatically and quickly. We are challenged to create a new vision of life that incorporates heart, body, spirit, and soul in a new and fundamentally different sense of our place in the world. Facing the Mystery is an opportunity to open to those changes “forced” on us by life; to explore the possibilities now presented to us (at the same time understanding and accepting those now closed off to us); to learn new tools and practices to manage and embrace the life that is ours to live; and to emerge with a deeper understanding of the gifts that only we can bring to the world, even as we prepare to leave it.

We hold the week-long program at a retreat center that is
Dear River,

My hands are numb; mist rises from the surface of the river. People will soon return from four days’ fasting. Food, conversation, and companionship awaits them. What will we talk about? What is worth saying or speaking to each other? In the deep recesses of the soul, when the encounter with what’s nameless draws near, can this meeting be reported, described, spun into myth and story to touch another?

People who have dealt with a serious illness often have already experienced a profound severance from the life they knew, so they come ready to dive in to both group and individual activities. The cornerstone of the program is the relationship that participants forge with the natural world, a relationship that is at once comforting and honest, loving and dispassionate. Through solitary time in nature, time exploring what we have to say to nature and listening to what nature has to say to us, a deep healing can take place, and a profound acceptance of what is, as opposed to what we might want to be, is gained. By looking deeply into the mirror that nature holds and connecting with the body of the Earth, participants often discover a new and more loving relationship with their own bodies, a sense of wholeness and acceptance that many lost through their illness.

Talking Staff Council, in which each person has the opportunity to speak their heart and be heard by others, is an important extension of this conversation with nature. We work and play with dreams, dialogues with nature, deep imagery, movement, journaling, art work, and group ceremonies as other ways of opening and deepening the conversation with nature and self. Participants spend significant time every day alone in a secluded spot that has called to them, and most choose to enact a one-day solo at that spot (with a box lunch if they need to eat). During the last day, we listen to and mirror their stories and share ways of continuing the conversation they have started with nature, their own soul, and even their death.

As guides in this process, we continue to learn as we go—from participants, from nature, and from our own deepening conversations with our bodies and deaths. The poet Rumi informs us, “There is a way of leaving the world that nourishes the world.” We often remember and speak of Stephen Foster and how he walked his last miles with stunning authenticity and aching, joyous honesty, witnessed by Meredith and his living circle of coyotes. Each of us has an opportunity to practice our death and our dying every day—as we must, since few of us will have the luxury of choosing the moment when death comes.

Will it be better for us when we dissolve into the ground, or worse? Let’s learn now what will happen. This is lovers’ work, to break through and become this earth, to die before we die.

—Rumi

HARD LABOR: GIVING BIRTH TO MYSTERY

Sparrow Hart
Circles of Air and Stone, Putney, VT

Dear River,

My hands are numb; mist rises from the surface of the river. People will soon return from four days’ fasting. Food, conversation, and companionship awaits them. What will we talk about? What is worth saying or speaking to each other? In the deep recesses of the soul, when the encounter with what’s nameless draws near, can this meeting be reported, described, spun into myth and story to touch another?

We climb the mountain, walk to the desert; we enter the sacred river. Like Christ, Moses, or Buddha, we leave everything behind, seeking God, the transcendent experience. The windows are flung open, the curtains part like the Red Sea, and something great and abiding floods in. How shall we carry this back to our people? The thoughts, language, and forms of convention seem flimsy. Our temperament and time, body and being are so small, a mere vase that would contain the oceans. How can we return?

The problems are many. The old life seems banal; society is petty and foolish. Culture appears aberrant—decades of buying stuff just a squandering of potential, the whole assumption of our association a mistake. Do we come back as teacher, savior, or mechanic; or stay aloof to avoid the toxic waste? In some middle ground between hermit and humanity we search for fertile soil. Can it be found?

What is our calling, our gift? What is our song, our story? What is our truth, our task that will bring the great into the small? A seed must be planted, protected, pruned, watered, and weeded if it is to flower or bear fruit. It takes time and effort; it is hardly easy. Poisons and pesticides abound that would kill it. The bulldozers, chainsaws, and steam-shovels are blind to the Sacred.

We will be alone, out of step, different, a lone voice facing excommunication. We will waver in doubts and dark nights, wondering what is wrong with us. The armies of the pope will come in many guises to mock us as we stand like Galileo to proclaim the world does not revolve around us. A harvest of cutting voices, judgments, and frowns is amassed from the furrowed brows of those who’ve not cultivated the fields of the soul.
The great powers must face the petty. The saviors get crucified, the Gods must suffer to save their people. Drink deep of this cup. It is the blood of Christ, the hemlock of Socrates.

Christ said love thine enemies, but they are still the enemy. It is not the beings we must battle, it is the nightmares they live. A new dream must be born of the blood of the old.

The ancestors still live within us. Gills and fins develop and dissolve in the fetus. The reptiles and the beasts designed our bones and our brain. Our eyes and sensings were refined over millennia in response to the challenges and calls of the earth. Gaia and gods, eons of evolution, and the planet itself are on our side.

But will they help us to pay the bills?

Remember, we are already abundantly rich. Our mother and father are with us. We must do our part. The saints have all lived simply, and to take more than we need violates our compact with life. Count your blessings and don’t give Caesar more than his due.

The body is small; life is short. The mind is word-bound, language, and limited. But the great mystery swirls around our tiny circle of the known. The spirit is infinite. It calls out to the soul, and it wishes to live within us. The sharp line between self and world must disappear. Embrace the unknown and become a great mystery unto thyself. You are the garden. Till and tend the soil, cherish the humus of your humanity. Be fertile and fertilized by forces greater than yourself.

Give Caesar his due, but do not pledge your allegiance. Be in this world but not of it. Give your heart to the sacred, your soul to great Gaia. Give your attention and energy to what is eternal. Reach toward the sun. Let the light fill your vessel and don’t hold it in for the well is inexhaustible, though the body must tire.

Live the life you were meant to live. Allies and guides innumerable call out to awaken: The changing winds, the rising moon, the infinite stars.... sunrise and season and the soaring circles of hawk.... the clear running rivers, the sweet sacred trees, the teachings of Buddha....

The tug of tides, the creations of stars, and the life-giving air is embedded within us. We have been seeded by the gods, prepared for a greater life. They are calling us back to the Garden, leading us out of the wasteland. We are pregnant with mystery.

### Our Lady Lavender

*(day 2 of Vision Quest, July, 2003)*

Keith Howchi Kilburn

soul-o-union, Petaluma, CA

And we are not alone.

Eagle Dancer swirls and twirls draped in royal feathers

hiding even her feet

she is for now Eagle Goddess flying from Atlantis to lay her brand of awe on human craving for a taste of Diva Divine

unknown she was when our histories were wrt

Lady Lavender soared the skies to beautify we’d call her angel now or archangel terms incapable of divining her lovely power her wings prismatic rainbows crystal reflections awakened human knowing stirring deep sensations of wise pleasure jointly enjoyed by all devotees

who chose to bask in her radiance

the original “ask and you receive” her great love raised fields of crimson poppies from a once cold earth to shower her people with their dewy softness four times a year she came to bless and guide at festivals of celebration where celestial songs to honor her ever emerging goodness and plays to teach the young ones and remind the old ones of her ancient stories that such blessings be when no one has reason to fear abundance for all life is a sinuous and seamless dance of overflowing continuity our ancient ancestors the bird tribes flew fleeting figures in the air traveling from flower to flower to sip the sweetness of her generous dispensation
Each day for four days a woman leaves base camp in an old-growth forest in a remote corner of Vancouver Island, British Columbia and walks to an area devastated by clearcutting. Among stumps so broad she can lie down on them and feel herself supported from head to heel, and ground so littered with sheered-off limbs and bark that no new trees can grow, she plunges into dialogue with the Earth. She makes an altar to the part of herself that was wounded by an early childhood trauma and that suffers anew with a marriage in trouble. She weeps for herself and for the forest. She reflects on consumption and greed, discovering these aspects of herself and gaining new compassion for the loggers who had previously earned only her contempt. She sings to the forest. At the end of the four days, she feels more intimately a part of the world around her than she has ever felt before.

During a medicine walk in a Virginia forest burned black by a recent fire, a man is immediately drawn to two burnt pine seedlings. During the previous year, he has suffered the death of his father, a break-up with his lover, and, just days earlier, the news that his sister has breast cancer. Sitting beside the seedlings, he tells the group later, “I thought about how, when you’re sick, it feels so good just to be held.” So that is what he does: he puts his arms around the seedlings to comfort them and finds himself comforted as well.

A small group gathers on a white crystalline beach in Pensacola, Florida for a ceremony. They discover, however, that they are unable to concentrate on the ceremony they had originally planned, for they cannot ignore the trash that litters the sand. Suddenly, they know that the ceremony must change. They begin to make a mandala from both the refuse (plastic, styrofoam, rubber) and the beauties (shells, driftwood, stones) of the beach. One quadrant contains only their own hand- and footprints.

Don Juan, in Carlos Castaneda’s Tales of Power, says, “Only if one loves this Earth with unending passion can one release one’s sadness. A warrior is always joyful because his love is unalterable and his beloved, the Earth, bestows upon him inconceivable gifts.” As wilderness guides, we know well that the Earth is a mirror for any and all circumstances of our life. When we spend time alone in Nature, our attention is called to those very manifestations of the Earth’s miracles that are best qualified to show us precisely where our psyche is right now and, often, how it needs to make an adjustment. With Attending the Earth programs, we venture even more deeply into this fluent, magical dialogue with Nature, paying attention not just to how the land mirrors our own inner state, but also listening to what the Earth has to tell us about herself. With penetrating gaze and open heart we stand in places at the extremes: raw clearcuts, municipal dumps, mining pits, polluted rivers, sprawling cities. To these places, every one sacred, we bring our whole selves: emotional, mystical, activist, and creative.

Attending the Earth

To attend is to listen to or consider. It is to turn one’s energies toward something, as a gardener attends to a garden, regularly and mindfully nurturing the plants, while expectantly noting their response. Attending also means applying oneself to the care of another, as a nurse or doctor attends a patient. A conscientious health practitioner not only monitors the condition of the patient and does what is necessary to promote healing, but also brings into the situation non-judgmental presence, calm acceptance, and compassion. A third meaning of attending is to be in service to a higher authority, as a duke attends a queen, humbly and loyally carrying out her wishes.

To attend a place on Earth, then, is to be gardener, nurse, and duke to it. Attending the Earth is offering our loving presence without conditions or demands. It is cultivating an attitude of patience, while opening ourselves to learn extraordinary things from the one we serve. Attending the Earth with curiosity, compassion, and ardor,
we come to accept that the entire cycle of life and death is sacred and full of meaning. In the process, both attender and attended are transformed.

**Staying Away**

Those who feel called to attend the Earth in wounded places are intrepid souls, for, after all, there seem to be a lot of good reasons for avoiding areas that suffer from human overuse. Some people say, "It's too depressing," or, "There's nothing I can do anyway." "The soil (or air or water) is toxic there. I don't want to get sick." "I just can't stand to see the place I once loved so altered." And so, we keep ourselves apart, or try to. We may devote generous amounts of time and energy to environmental causes, we may feel a heavy heart as we speed past these troublesome places in our car, but we think we cannot bear to spend time with them.

In subtle ways, however, these places nag at our psyche. After all, as ecopsychologists point out, humans and Earth are intimately connected, and to try to limit our understanding of what influences our mental and spiritual health to our parents, job, and spouse is to ignore the most pervasive influence of all: the planet that gave rise to all beings and that sustains us in infinite ways. In Attending the Earth, we welcome the full expression of the human and the full expression of the Earth in all their rawness, their whole life cycle—their birth, their dying, their death, their beauty and persistence, their adaptability and determination to thrive. When we consider the Earth as our life companion and teacher, we realize that we can no more ignore her wounded places than we could desert a friend who was diagnosed with a serious illness. As theologian Dietrich Bonhoffer advised, we "embrace the earth in its distress."

When I first started to experiment with the pilgrimages that became Attending the Earth, going to visit environmentally endangered places alone and with friends, I assumed that the experience would be primarily about feeling and expressing grief. I had long been an admirer of the work of Joanna Macy, who has written and taught extensively that, until we allow ourselves to feel grief, fear, and outrage for the state of our world, we remain to some extent powerless, for "Both our capacity to grieve for others and our power to cope with this grief spring from the great matrix of relationships in which we take our being." Once we can feel and express these deeply felt emotions, we open dammed-up reservoirs of emotion and discover more compassion and empathy with all life. So feeling sorrow for a beautiful, wild place damaged, perhaps irrevocably, had to be part of the journey. But what next?

**The Medicine Wheel of Attending the Earth**

As so often happens, the answer came from the Earth itself. Driving north out of Albuquerque one hot summer day, I stopped at a gas station to buy water and, as I was getting back into the car, was struck by the pall of brown pollution that draped the horizon. Slowly I turned in a complete circle, noting how the color of the smog faded to the east then browned again toward Santa Fe, then opened into a clear blue sky to the west. And suddenly it occurred to me: a journey to the wounded places of the Earth could be a journey around the medicine wheel. Since that moment I have credited the Albuquerque sky for giving me this idea.

The pattern of the sun throughout the day as a tool for understanding life and organizing ceremony is wisdom that belongs to just cultures worldwide. For me, Steven Foster and Meredith Little's book, The Four Shields has been a major influence, as has been the medicine wheel work of Bill Plotkin, with whom I guided quests for several years. All symbolism of the medicine wheel branches from the way the sun moves around the Earth each day (as, indeed, it still seems to do, despite centuries of scientific advances since Copernicus!). The sun rises in the east, giving rise to new life and visions; at its height in the south at midday, it warms the world and casts no shadows; in the west at evening, it sinks into the mystery of the world we cannot see, but only imagine; in the north, the sun remains absent and so endows the fourth quadrant with images of darkness, frost, and endurance. These patterns lend themselves to symbolic colors, animals, and elements, to corresponding phases of human growth and behavior, and to rich opportunities for ceremony.

In Attending the Earth programs, the first step toward embracing the earth in its distress is to enter the eastern quadrant symbolically and simply to introduce ourselves, as the first rays of sun announce themselves to the earth. In other words, we begin simply by greeting the place we have chosen to attend and, as a group, stand together in silence, taking it in: the polluted stream, the municipal dump, the hillside seared by toxic winds from a zinc plant on the other side of the valley. Nothing more is required. We simply get to know the place and let it know us.
Next, perhaps after a short counsel or on another day, we venture alone into a “medicine spot” of our choosing, deeper into the place and deeper into our feelings. Usually, as soon as we settle down alone, rage or sorrow surges up. People sob. They shout and rail at those who have destroyed a once beautiful, now toxic or ugly place. Usually, they are amazed that these strong emotions pass more quickly than they had imagined. Sitting in silence after the storm, they sink into a kind of common cause with it. The site of one Attending the Earth journey, for instance, was a clay mine in the Florida Gulf that had been gouged for hundreds of years, from Native people scooping out handfuls of earth for pots to bulldozers scraping the clay for material to build roads. The place was so depleted that absolutely nothing could grow there, and the indignity was aggravated by the fact that the place had been used for years by the Air Force to test high-explosive artillery. One woman who ventured there cried long and hard for the place that had served so many and been left so ignominiously. She then sat down and wrote a letter to the Earth on behalf of all the people who had overused it.

After each phase of our immersion in the place, we see that it looks different, for with each phase human and Nature come to know each other more intimately. The emotional work of the south, for example, transforms a threatening site to be avoided to a presence we begin to fall in love with. Now, entering the west of the medicine wheel, the realm where the borders between humans and other species, between known and unknown dissolves, we tune in to the Earth itself, asking what she wants us to know. Surprising things occur during this part of the vigil. For example, a woman who spent the night in a clearcut in western Oregon sat for hours on a stump and was given to experience life as the tree itself had known it before it was cut down. The tree showed her what it was to feel the breeze and sense the distance from all sides, under its limbs and even among its tiny needles, to feel the presence of many different life forms in its bark and boughs. Then the tree showed her a vision of the first visits of surveyors, who marked certain trees in the forest for cutting. She felt the jolt of the tree’s alarm as the chainsaws began to whine and sensed the great long trunk severed from its roots. To her surprise, she saw that life drains slowly from a tree, a process that depends on its age. She realized that the tree she was sitting on lived still and from its remaining life could tell her its story.

Emotion and intuition are vital ways of knowing to bring to the Earth, but so is the intellect, a human gift often dismissed as superfluous or irrelevant in holistic educational work. But we find, as we get to know the place, that our brains start firing with ideas, and in the north quadrant, we encourage this energy. Turning our attention to the direction of activism and responsibility, the place of the snow-haired elders, we consider what we can do for the wounded places in our own life. Asking for input from the place we sit in, we come to an understanding of and make a commitment to act upon ways in which we can assist this or another needy place: write letters, organize, bring school children there and let them make drawings and poems about the place, take photographs, make art, offer meditation sessions, get active to prevent further devastation. In any mythic story, the quest of the hero or heroine ends with a gift that must be taken back to the people. Action is the gift we bring back. Action is the way we burst out of powerlessness and into possibility.

And, ultimately, we arrive back at the east again, the final phase, where light rises up to the heights, to Spirit. We know that the results of any human action are ultimately beyond our control. No matter how many actions we take, how much love we bring to a place, we must turn over the results. The end of the program is a giving of self to the powers of lightness, spirit, and creativity. We let go. We create beauty out of what is before us. A member of the Vancouver Island clearcut group collected the orange, pink and white plastic warning ribbons that marked the boundaries of the clearcut area and wrote prayers on them for the land, the people, the political leaders of her own government in the United States, for ailing friends, and for the world. These she tied to the top of a very tall dead crown of a Sitka spruce. She dragged the piece of tree over to a hole in the center of one giant stump and hoisted it in. The result was a colorful mast of prayer flags that could be seen from the road high up the slope.

Carl Pope, the president of the Sierra Club, said once, “The literature on the environment is devoid of the word love.” By spending time in wounded places, we bring love to them and to ourselves, and from these places we feel loved in return. By facing what we were afraid to face, we become both stronger as an individual and more vulnerable and compassionate a part of all live around us. We cease to make snap judgments about who and what is “good” and what “bad”; what is acceptable to learn and know, and what is not; and we take on a more patient, calm, and loving attitude toward that which is new, different, even frightening. With Attending the Earth, we practice looking at the difficult realities of life with acceptance, compassion, and an expectation of being surprised by wondrous beauty. We bring our whole selves, fully, to life and in the process learn that we are more fearless, creative, bold, and compassionate than we ever thought we could be.
After spending eleven years together, a woman’s life partner suddenly leaves her for another, leaping over what would have been many useful and compassionate stages of dissolution and leaving only shock and devastation behind. For a year, the woman painfully and faithfully gathers back the myriad pieces of herself. All the while she dreads the “anniversary” of the loss and wonders how she will get through it. When the time nears, she and I go early one morning to some private wooded land and enter into Ceremony. She is fasting, and once a simple altar has been created and her intentions deeply heard, she goes out alone for two hours. She has never done anything remotely like this. Returning, we build a small fire in silence together, and with clarity and release, she burns her wedding dress and a letter to her former partner. Her eyes are clear and resolute, her heart visibly more open to herself.

You, as guides, have probably witnessed stories like this countless times. However, I am a psychotherapist and this woman is my client. This ceremony came to be within the context of therapy, not a vision quest as many of us usually embody it. Slowly but surely I am exploring ways to bring the elements of rites of passage into my consulting room. Many of us are opening creatively to this wild and passionate conversation, this truth of enactment and co-creation with Earth, and the perennial wisdom of conscious ceremony. We are also endeavoring to do this while maintaining the health and integrity of the therapist-client relationship. We must continue to deeply challenge the limiting, pathologizing and unrelated aspects of psychology that have not served either the Earth or our Souls.

The stages of Severance, Threshold and Incorporation are universal. When we remember them in our bodies, when we tell our stories within the context of ritual, we sink more deeply into our divine humanity. I have been inspired directly by my own experiences of questing, by Andy Fischer’s book Radical Ecopsychology, by countless readings of Steven Foster’s The Four Shields, among many other readings and conversations.

At this point, twelve of my clients have gone out on DayQuests with Susan Kistin and myself under the auspices of EarthWays, our new Earth-based program. Although there are many clinical decisions and issues to be considered, I can say without reservation that our work together has taken on a far deeper dimensionality since we began offering the DayQuest, for all is embedded in the relationship of a person to the earth and in the stories they tell. The depth of experiences that come from even one day out on the land, when it is marked and held by the power of intention and ceremony, and held by the circle of witnesses has astounded us.

A twenty-six-year-old woman fighting her way back from years of a life-threatening depression decides to take a weeklong bicycle trip to Idaho with a friend to mark the end of an abusive relationship. I framed it as a rite of passage and worked with her from this reference point. All of her fears in preparing, her actual readiness to go, the journey itself, and all she experienced upon returning were held within the stages of rites of passage. Before she walked out of my office to leave on the trip, we used the actual doorway itself as a conscious threshold. Mindfulness of these stages brought needed information, groundedness and context to a travel pattern that had previously thrown this woman into chaos and disconnection, usually with disastrous consequences. It also grounded me, knowing I had helped prepare her better, and reminding me to trust the ceremony, relax, and wait to hear and affirm her story.

Sometimes, clients can use their time in session to set their intentions to go out on their own solo medicine walk day. Then, when we meet next, I listen to and mirror the story. Sometimes we simply walk during a session so as to incorporate the relational and healing power of being out in the natural world together.

In my office I have a round table, very simply set as an altar containing simple representations of each of the four directions. Some clients never notice it, but it always holds me, always reminds me of the true human path, which is circular and connected, rather than linear as I had formerly believed. Other clients bring items of their own to the altar, and move them around as they feel moved, as a way of exploring their feelings about the wheel and their relationship to it. I particularly enjoy teaching
about the wheel to those who would never in a million years find access to these ways—yet who instinctively cry with recognition and surprise upon feeling the deeply known truth of the earth within them still. Although I am beginning to lead longer, overnight Quests this year, I remain passionate about also bringing these forms into daily life, connected to the Ecosystems we live within. It is crucial that we make the rites of passage and vision quest ways accessible to young and old alike, to young moms who find it hard to leave their families for ten days, to those who are terrified of the out-of-doors, and to those who are not yet ready, for many reasons, for a full quest. It is an exploration that keeps me curious and on the edge of my own beliefs about the world and about the assumptions and limitations of my profession.

Terry Tempest Williams says it so well: “What I know in my bones is that I forgot to take time to remember what I know. The world is holy. We are holy. All life is holy. Daily prayers are delivered on the lips of breaking waves, the whisperings of grasses, the shimmering of leaves.”

May the deep holiness of the earth and these ways continue to inspire and grow us as we truly open to widen our horizons!

May we Remember, and hold the space for others to Remember. —Sara Harris, MFT, Sebastopol, California

## Coyote Questing in the College Classroom

Amy Katz  
School of Living Dreams, Big Pine, CA

I imagine teaching in a typical college classroom and asking your students to go outside and make a speech to a tree. Or instructing them to wander as a clan into the Alaska wilderness and not return until they cross the glacier river, track a grizzly, and bring back proof of finding a legendary eagle’s nest. Imagine directing them to drum, create art, and share intimate experiences and feelings in council, dream work sessions, journals, class discussions and formal presentations. There was a time even in my own imagination when using these teaching techniques seemed like an impossibility.

Yet finding ways to integrate the two previously distinct and separate worlds of academia and wilderness rites of passage was part of my own mythic journey into and out of the woods. It wasn’t that I wanted to bring the practices and philosophy of guiding into my communication classes at the University of Denver and the University of Alaska. I had to. That, or give up teaching. My own integrity was at stake. So was my livelihood!

I began introducing the methods and epistemologies of the questing world into the classroom very carefully, cautiously, clandestinely. Drawing on a concept called “Coyote Mentoring” taught to me by wilderness teachers Tom Brown, Jr. and Jon Young, I utilized indigenous and ancient ways of seeing and teaching students about their own nature. This multidimensional approach lovingly “tricks” students into learning according to their unique needs, passions, and personalities. Each exercise may have an explicit intent, yet hidden within are endless possibilities for growth. For example, during a vision quest we may teach our fasters how to put up a tarp or build a sacred fire. Providing shelter or warmth for survival are the obvious intentions. Yet tarp or fire construction may lead to profound insights about patience, endurance, impeccability, stamina, courage, time management, decision making, self-love, caretaking, the wind, ceremony, or one’s relationship to the Earth or to the elements, to the ecosystem. It may activate the archetypes of “provider,” “Prometheus,” and various other elemental gods and energies.

Bringing questing into the classroom felt like stealing fire from the gods. Igniting the students’ passion for deeper communication between self, other, and nature drove me to create outdoor homework assignments. For example, to teach about perception, I sent them on a “South Shield” walk to “explore using all six of your senses, without naming things, as a child does.” To teach about group dynamics and conflicts, I sent groups of students out into the Alaska wilderness with a list of “almost impossible” tasks. They went out groaning and complaining about being on the show “Survivor” and came back dirty, wet, and exclaiming this was the most profound and exciting experience of their college careers. I still assign the required term projects and speeches, but the content is radically different. “Start with a burning question, conflict or deep-seated problem that has been effecting your life and relationships” or “follow that which you are most passionate about, a mystery it would almost kill you not to unveil.” They still have to refer to concepts from lectures and readings, but underneath that the projects are designed for maximum self-explo- ration, transformation and epiphany.

Another concept I have integrated from my quest work is the practice of “council.” Creating a safe and encouraging climate in courses that require students to self-disclose is essential. By introducing the four intentions of council: “Speak from the heart,” “Listen from the heart,” “Be spontaneous,” and “Be brief,” the same kind of loving container that we create on a quest is established in the classroom. An integral piece of this is modeling open and courageous communication. My mentors and colleagues at the School of Lost Borders demonstrated this to me impeccably, and my own college students often remark on the power of this
practice. I have to take risks in sharing about myself, even when
to do so breaks long-established norms of hierarchical
professor–student interaction. Trust in myself and my students
creates a circle of trust between us all. An added benefit is that
they find my lectures interesting, fun, and attention-keeping
because of the personal stories I tell to illustrate concepts.
Meeting initial resistance to emotionally challenging
assignments has been the biggest test of faith for me. Feeling the
students’ anxiety, uncertainty, and intensity of emotions is hard!
Yet my own inner work and interactions with mentors and
questers helped me understand the difference between being a
“caretaker” and a “soul guide”. It is essential to make students,
like questers, feel safe, supported, and loved, while at the same
time bringing them to their “edge.” All traditional rites of passage
held elements of danger and uncertainty; creating opportunities
that challenge deeply is essential to personal growth. I’m learning
the importance of trusting the process, my own intuitions, and
not backing down when things get sticky, dark, uncomfortable.
This requires me to be entirely present inside the classroom, to
meet each student in his or her uniqueness with the fullness of
my own humanness, and to be available when needed even out-
side the class, or after the course is over.

There are many other borrowed methods I use to help stu-
dents sink into a deeper place of soulful awareness and to spark
the fire of transformation. When teaching interpersonal commu-
nication, I share lessons learned from Bill Plotkin and other eco-
psychologists about “Loyal soldier,” “shadow,” and “projective
identification.” To help them overcome fear of public speaking, I
read soul poetry from Rilke, Rumi, Goethe, and Whyte about the
value of speaking one’s truth and honoring the deeper Self. I point
out the students’ gifts and strengths long before addressing prob-
lem areas or giving grades. I tell myths like “The Holy Grail,” “Iron
John,” or a native story like “Jumping Mouse,” and have them
journal about how this relates to communication. I advise them to
find ideas as they would find a solo spot during a quest: to start
from a place of “not knowing” and to let something deeper guide
them. “Don’t let your brain do the writing, let your hand or your
pen do it!” After making a particularly emotional speech in front
of the classroom, I’ll instruct them to “go make a similar speech,
this time to a tree. And if you are especially daring, sit there until
the tree makes a speech back to you!” They will usually laugh at
this, roll their eyes, and report in their journals or class the next
day that “in spite of feeling weird, it worked!” Something miracu-
rous and transformative almost always occurs when they practice
communication skills in the natural world.

Introducing Rites of Passage methods and ways of knowing
into the college classroom requires creativity and courage.
Anything innovative and unconventional is risky, and if one is
going to avoid the wrath of nervous administrators, the “new”
must be woven seamlessly into the “conventional.” Whenever pos-
sible, I prefer to bring students out of the indoor classroom and
into the university of the wilderness. When this is not possible or
practical, I must find ways to bring the wilderness inside to them.

Choosing Conscious Elderhood:
A Wilderness Quest for People
Seeking to Become Elder
and Not Just Older

Ron Pevny
Animas Valley Institute, Durango, CO

Six mature adults and their three guides, each engaged in silent
prayer, stand on a point at the edge of a richly forested mesa in
Utah. The chill of a late-springtime dawn at 8500 feet is being
dispelled as the sun rises over the high peaks a mile or two to the
east and sunlight gradually envelops the point, making luminous the
new green of the oak brush emerging from a long, cold winter. The
raven soaring overhead pierces the silence as it calls the world
to come to life and reveal in a new day. The walls of the high-desert
canyons that intersect a thousand feet below where the people stand
are emerging from darkness to reveal a stunning palette of color
ranging from light gray to beige to vermillion. To the west, in the
direction of the Canyonlands, it seems one can see forever. A new day
has begun in the season of new beginnings for a group of people
seeking new ways of being in their Elder years.

Places like this tend to broaden our perspective, to help us see
beyond the narrow self-definitions and limited sense of possibility
that life in society imposes. It has long been this way, that people
have retreated to such wild places to free their minds of condi-
tioned small-world thinking, to seek a raven’s-eye view of their
place and potential in a larger picture. It has also long been this
way, that at critical turning points in life people have enacted
rites of passage in wilderness places to focus and intensify their
seeking, and then returned to their communities renewed and
with new insight about how best to live and contribute as the
next stages of their lives unfolded.

These individuals chose to come together in this place of
natural beauty to support each other in enacting a rite of passage
into Conscious Elderhood. They are seeking vision for how to have
their Elder years be a time of purpose, passion and contribution. Meanwhile, many other aging individuals, often having no clear sense of what the aching inside is about, are seeking the same thing in isolation, in the canyons of the city, without focus and support.

It was not always this way. Until the industrial revolution Elders held positions of honor in their societies. In the circular view of life held by traditional peoples, the accumulated wisdom of Elders sustained the community by teaching the young how to mature, discover their unique gifts and make it their life purpose to use those gifts to serve their people. The role of the Elder was defined and supported. Even those who had lost their mental clarity were highly respected for the contributions they had made over their lifetimes and for deep wisdom of the heart that did not need words for its expression.

With the industrial revolution, a linear, mechanistic perspective replaced the circular view of life in much of the world. The machine became the metaphor for how human life is viewed. The machine is assembled and programmed during the years of youth. It efficiently produces material goods and new ideas and information during the years of adulthood, and its value is directly tied to what it contributes to the economy. In the senior years it slows or breaks down, no longer able to compete and produce, and is taken out of service. In a world of ever-accelerating change, most of what older people have learned about work and technology—about contributing to the economy—is considered out-of-date and no longer useful. In dismissing the elderly for these reasons, modern society also dismisses its prime source of deep wisdom and values, people informed by long experience about how to live in balance and harmony with fellow human beings and with the earth. So, we shuffle off, at an increasingly earlier age, into retirement, often leading lonely, isolated existences or segregating ourselves into communities of others like us. We have made our contribution. It is time for us to get out of the way so younger, more energetic people can have the jobs. And society races on, worshipping youth, discounting the lessons of the past, and continually looking to what is new for its “vision” of what the good life looks like.

There are big problems with this worldview, however. We human beings seem to be genetically and spiritually wired with a need for living passionate lives of purpose, meaning, and service to the greater good, a good which is larger than the economy. When at any age we don’t feel we have purpose for our lives, outlets for our passion, and opportunities for our need to serve, we suffer, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, as individuals and as a society. We don’t have to look far to see evidence of this suffering—the epidemics of loneliness, depression and addiction that are the scourge of modern life.

Thankfully, there are many, albeit a minority, who have resisted the linear, mechanistic view of life. In various ways these individuals have striven to live with commitment to a non-materialistic view of what constitutes a fulfilled life. The baby-boom generation are now approaching their senior years. As they begin to envision what these years will be like, a great many realize they will find little happiness in the options society currently prescribes. They know they will want to somehow contribute their wisdom and skills to the generations that are following. They want to continue to grow emotionally and spiritually even as their bodies wear down. They seek a vision for Elderhood as a time of new beginnings, new possibilities and new forms of contribution rather than a time of retiring from the life of the larger community. And, by and large, modern society offers little in the way of such vision. For those yearning for a more expansive view of what might be possible, the search is often painfully lonely and the view from the canyons of the city very constricted.

Meanwhile, the raven soaring high above this Utah mesa looks down on a diverse assemblage of questers. They range in age from their early fifties to late seventies. Four are women and two are men. They have traveled from Boston, Phoenix, Maine, North Carolina and Colorado, bringing to this wilderness rite of passage a wide range of professional backgrounds, physical abilities and spiritual persuasions.

This group includes a seventy-nine-year-old college profes-
sor with a commitment to finding ways to revive the Elder role in today’s world; a sixty-year-old organizational development consultant, who senses that a profound inner shift is underway that requires her to balance her feminine strength with her unacknowledged masculine qualities; a late-sixties retired computer programmer in the banking world seeking confirmation of her gifts as a teacher and courage to share as an Elder her love of the earth with young people; a seventy-three-year-old former home-maker feeling called to take her spiritual questing of many years to new depths; a mid-fifties woman who works with youth and feels a calling to share her deepening spirituality by becoming a Spiritual Director; a retired social worker in his mid-fifties who seeks for his Elder years a direction and purpose that can call forth his passion. Some are already well into their senior years while others are just beginning to see the gray hairs and feel the inner shifts that announce that their journey into Elderhood will soon begin. What they have in common is a commitment to Conscious Elderhood—an Elderhood shaped by the promptings of their hearts and souls rather than the limiting definitions presented by mainstream society.

There are no “experts” here with the definitive answers, because there are no definitive answers. Rather, it is out of the struggles and searches of people like these that an overarching vision for Conscious Elderhood in modern materialistic society must gradually emerge. So the group is guided by a male and female Elder and a younger man beginning the journey to Conscious Elderhood. These guides are passionate about recovering and discovering the knowledge of what it is to be a true Elder in today’s world, and are committed to midwifing the emergence of others into this stage of life. Having many years of experience working with rites of passage, they are well equipped to offer tools and share experiences which can help others on their quests of discovery.

This eleven-day wilderness rite of passage is divided into three stages, reflecting the three-stage process that characterizes all major life transitions. The context throughout is one of non-sec-tarian reverence—for the natural world, for the wonder and mystery of human life and human potential, for the Spirit that is the Source and Essence of all creation. The first phase of this quest is focused on examining the lives the questers have been living.
Employing sharing circles, ceremony, music-making, ritual dance and artistic expression, they become aware of attitudes, fears, beliefs and behaviors that tend to deaden aliveness and disconnect them from the wisdom and passion of their hearts. Then they symbolically let these go, as a snake sheds its old skin so that it can grow, knowing that this is a long-term process that is clarified and reinforced by this quest. They also explore their beliefs, attitudes and fears about what it means to become old and what it means to become an Elder—not necessarily the same thing by any means. And about the differences between having lots of information and possessing wisdom—again, not the same thing. Additionally, these first days are the time for clarifying and focusing their intentions and prayers as they prepare to spend three days and nights in solitude with partial or complete fasting, depending on their desire and health status.

This is truly a hero’s and heroine's journey, and on such a quest fearsome dragons often guard precious treasures. Most must face and conquer very old and deep fears before they are allowed to glimpse the shining jewel of their true beauty and potential. There are times of emotional pain and physical discomfort, as many old scales must be scraped off before the new self that is seeking to be born can emerge. Yet, the experience of purpose, passion and spiritual connection that ensues is one that is not soon forgotten. For many, it becomes the foundation for an entirely new life chapter.

The college professor recounts his facing of his dragons as follows: “The night times on my solo were the most frightening time for me. I felt terrified of sleeping in the forest alone. It aroused some of my deepest fears. I thought I was going to die. It was like pushing my envelope to the ultimate point. But surviving the fright brought me into a new inner space where I found out about my own strength. If I could look death in the eye, then this would change my experience of life. Moving against the current of American culture, I am now able to face dying and the challenges of old age.” This man emerges from his quest with a new mission: sharing with others his vision of spiritual Elderhood. He is now offering workshops to do so.

The retired social worker experiences intense grieving during his solo as he thinks of his deceased father and realizes that his tears for the loss of his dad are tears for himself as well, expressions of the passion that have long lived in him but have often been discounted as he has lived his life paying attention to the clock rather than to his heart. His losing of his watch during his solo is only one of several strong signs to him that, rather than despairing over lack of direction, what he needs to do is slow down and walk more gently on the earth, and give his heart to everything he does, as his father did. He returns from his solo with a strong and comforting trust that, by reclaiming his passion as the essence of who he is and by slowing down, the specifics of the best expressions of his Elder wisdom will emerge in their own time.

The youth worker spends much of her solo reflecting upon a difficult life journey of five years, during which she has felt herself gradually but hesitantly assenting to a calling which she has not fully understood. This sense of calling has caused her much pain, as it has alienated her from loved ones who can relate to who she has been in her life but not to who she is becoming. During her solo she engages in inner dialogues with many of the people from her past, seeking closure for herself. And she reads scripture from various spiritual traditions. It is while reading the Bible that she has an experience of epiphany, knowing beyond any doubt that she needs to take a leap of faith, trust the many signs that have been pointing her in this direction, and unequivocally say “Yes” to her desire to become a Spiritual Director within a multi-faith context as the clearest expression of her Elder wisdom.

The days after the return to the group are filled with the telling of these and the other stories of the quest to a community of supportive friends and guides who witness and affirm the vision and insight each has received. These are days of joy, celebration, and defining of the commitments they feel called to make. The culmination of this rite of passage is a deeply moving ceremony of self-initiation—for some, the most powerful experience of this quest. Grounded in the experiences of the time of solitude and guided by the promptings of the heart, with this small yet deeply supportive community offering witness and playing a role, each of the questers enacts a self-designed ceremony to ritually initiate him- or herself onto the journey to Conscious Elderhood.

The organizational development consultant asks each of the males to play the role of one of her male ancestors as she ceremonially embraces the males in her patriarchal line and thereby integrates her own male qualities, allowing her to more fully and effectively share her wisdom. The former computer programmer recites a poem that is both light-hearted and full of commitment, in which she declares to witnesses, both human and divine, that she is an Elder possessing wisdom, courage, humor and a confident voice to teach the young.

As this questing group packs up to return to the city, they know the task won’t be easy. There are few societal structures in place to support such visions for growing older. The machines that seem to rule modern life will whirr faster and faster, and the computers will generate more and more information. Yet the sun will continue to rise over those peaks to the east and shed its warmth on the mesa. The raven will continue to soar overhead, seeing the big picture and calling all below to awaken. And six more people will add their visions and voices to the emerging new understanding of the gifts that Conscious Elders can bring to a world desperately in need of wisdom and passion rooted in soul. Looking one final time to the horizon, this group offers their fervent prayers that the mesa and places like it will long be there to nourish the human spirit when the canyons of the city become too stifling, the noise too loud, and the view too narrow.
Cynthia, an artist in her early fifties, was diagnosed with terminal cervical cancer. The diagnosis resulted in the loss of her career as a counselor, which also meant the loss of her independence. Severe pain had confined her to her small home, where she lived alone. On top of all this, she was also working through emotional pain from childhood abuse, as well as the losses of two children earlier in her life. Cynthia, understandably, was feeling isolated, lonely, depressed, and angry.

I met Cynthia during my internship as an art therapist at a non-profit hospice organization in Colorado. At hospice I hoped I would be able to integrate my transpersonal psychology education, and I knew that art therapy could be an effective tool for bringing forth healing for dying people on many levels. I also imagined that with this particular population, both therapist and client would have a great possibility of being influenced by each other, that ultimately, each of our lives would be changed for the better because of knowing the other. This was the motivation that carried me through this powerful and challenging work.

During our initial session, Cynthia conveyed dissatisfaction with herself and the way she had been living her life. In large part, she believed that her illness was a physical manifestation of what she called “rape of the sacred feminine.” In her view, women have been “stripped of their power” and made to feel that the feminine is associated with what is bad, shameful, and powerless. She felt that she had been perpetuating this cultural and personal rape on herself by living a fear-based life, never taking risks, feeling worthless, covering up her wounds, and not taking care of herself.

In her heart, however, Cynthia believed that the feminine is powerful and good. She imagined she had this more powerful feminine force inside of her, but that she did not know how to access it. She believed that finding it would be her key to healing, and her hope was to live her life in a way that respected and nurtured the feminine. Hopefully, this transformation would heal her and also impart healing on the rest of the world.

Having done significant research on passage rites, particularly Steven Foster and Meredith Little’s vision quest model, I felt that a formal passage rite would be valuable for Cynthia, but I knew that a wilderness solo was not an option for her. Because Cynthia is an artist, and because art can offer experiences similar to those practiced in a wilderness experience, I created an art-based passage rite tailored to Cynthia’s needs and interests. I believed this intervention would be able to address several issues: issues of identity, transition, purpose and meaning, a need for guidance and support, and a need for empowerment, all of which are common concerns for hospice patients.

It is interesting to note how the vision quest stages (severance, threshold, and incorporation) relate to a dying person, especially since the passage rite is a symbolic death. As someone is dying, he or she withdraws from ordinary life and begins to make final preparations for death. Active dying becomes the threshold experience, and incorporation can be seen as the last moments of resolution before death. On another level, when someone dies, he or she is severed from life, death is the threshold experience, and depending on a person’s spiritual beliefs, he or she is incorporated back into God or the next karmic level. So even though a vision quest is not traditionally used with dying people, it could be a particularly valuable experience.

In many wilderness-based passage rite models the ordeal during threshold time is fasting and spending several days and nights alone in the wild. In considering an appropriate rite for a hospice patient, I chose to view Cynthia’s illness itself as the ordeal. Jean Shinoda Bolen, in Close to the Bone, explains that illness “takes us out of our ordinary lives and concerns, and confronts us with big questions and the opportunity of tapping into soul knowledge that can transform us and the situation.”

Wilderness rites of passage operate on the principle that nature can be a powerful resource, since it offers abundant opportunities to connect with transcendent wisdom, particularly when one is experiencing an altered state of consciousness, usually achieved through fasting. Illness itself is an altered state. And art making, particularly in a ritualized format, enables the artist to enter yet another kind of altered state, during which she can connect with transcendent knowledge. Shamanic images and patterns emerge whenever we engage in the therapeutic rituals of art-making—in painting, dance, drama, song, and other media. Imagination has always been the terrain of shamans, who undergo encounters with animals, openings into different worlds, dreamlike flights, and other experiences during rhythmic drumming, movement, chant, and painting.
Cynthia's Passage

Considering Cynthia's physical limitations and limited energy, I designed her passage rite to occur over three sessions, using Foster and Little's vision quest model. This work occurred over a period of two weeks, each session being approximately one-hour long. Cynthia requested my presence during her passage rite, so during all sessions I was a witness, but did not speak with her until after her work was done.

Phase One—Preparation for Threshold

Cynthia is sitting in her small living room as I explain Phase One. I ask who it is she needs to forgive or ask forgiveness from, or what she needs to let go of in order to be fully present in the next stage of her life. She explains that she has to forgive herself. She speaks of a repeated rape dream, something she deems as symbolic of the "rape of the sacred feminine." She believes self-forgiveness is the first step toward her powerful, feminine self and says it involves recreating parts of her dream and letting them go.

Cynthia begins to work with white clay, creating a four-inch tall pillar, wavy, and tapered to a flat point at the top. Although phallic, it is made up of soft curves that impart a feminine quality. Cynthia sculpts three spindly hands and attaches them to the pillar, fingers stretched out as if grabbing. She jabs a hole through the middle of the pillar, fashions a "spike" out of the clay, and aggressively thrusts the spike through the pillar. Small pieces of "waste" litter the pillar below the exit point of the "wound." Cynthia makes small adjustments, and sits back. She tells me the sculpture is not as scary as she was afraid it was going to be, yet she proceeds to set the sculpture in a container, snaps on the lid, and asks me to take it with me.

Phase Two—Threshold

Phase Two is the threshold space, the time when a wilderness participant leaves the circle and enters the wild, so in a situation where the threshold stage will be taking place in a person's own home, it is important to find ways to delineate threshold space from everyday activity. Cynthia chooses to use music to help create a sacred space to work in, specifically the mysterious, sensual music of Enigma.

The directive I offer Cynthia for this step is to ask a question aloud about the transition she is in, and then begin to create spontaneous art, trusting that the art will show the way or give answers. This is the art therapy version of crying for a vision. Cynthia asks aloud, "What do I have to let go of to experience forgiveness of self, in order to step into my feminine power?" She describes this powerful, feminine place as "fecund, loamy, nurturing, sensual, and sexual."

As Cynthia begins painting her sculpture from the last session, her hands shake, and she is very focused. After adding splashes of color that she describes as "wounds" and "excrement," symbols begin to show up that look like petroglyphs. Cynthia reports feeling rage as she paints her sculpture. The central feminine pillar looks strong and solid to me, despite the wounding.

Cynthia softens and begins talking of forgiveness toward herself and others. I am amazed at the physical changes I see in her at this moment, compared to our initial session. Her body seems softer, there seems to be openness rather than guardedness, and her reflections impart a sense that she has worked on this idea of forgiveness thoroughly since our last session. I take all of this to mean that her forgiveness is genuine, and even if she cannot completely forgive all those who abused her, she has at least begun to open her heart for this work to begin.

During the last half of this phase, Cynthia takes a small wooden platform from a cigar box and paints it with symbols. This is the "altar" that her feminine pillar will "step up onto when she's ready to step into her power." Cynthia explains that the symbols represent the power of nature and the elements—all things she finds strength in—and she feels that the symbols showed up as a reminder for her to look to them for strength. By this time Cynthia is exhausted and explains that a lot has happened during Phase Two. Again she asks that I take the art with me.

Phase Three—Incorporation

At the beginning of the next session, when I hand over her artwork, the first thing Cynthia does is place her female figure up on the altar. This action excites me, because it symbolizes Cynthia's own step up into her power during the past week.

I ask her, "What do you need to do to manifest the wisdom you have gained in your passage, out into the world?"

She tells me she needs to create tools for her clay figure, tools that will symbolize ways she can begin living life with nurture and love and, ultimately, joy. She glues various "tools" to her altar and figure—small branches, shells, amber, sequins—all representative of the elemental symbols that showed up on her altar in Phase Two. She speaks of these tools as "sparkly," explaining that "we are all sparkly," and that she always knew she had the capacity to shine but had always been shamed when she did as a child," which caused her to stop. Now she is letting herself shine. She reports that, since the end of Phase Two, she has started to incorporate acts into her life that are healthy and part of her powerful feminine self, such as taking walks in nature, preparing healthy meals, eating mindfully, sticking up for herself, and saying no to intrusions on her valuable time.

For the first time, instead of anger, Cynthia expresses gratitude for the cancer because it has "cleared the blocks that used to be there." She says that "every moment becomes precious, something to be treasured." Cynthia is visibly happier, practically glowing. She explains that she is now beginning to live the life she has always wanted to live. She is ready to hold onto her art piece.

Conclusion

Dramatic changes occurred for Cynthia during the two weeks that the intervention took place. New medication increased her mobility and alleviated that pain that had formerly been the primary focus in her life. She was also receiving emotional and mental support from her social worker, chaplain, and myself. The art-based passage rite helped Cynthia "clear the blocks" of anger and
Background

In early 2003 Steven Foster, Meredith Little, and Scott Eberle met during the last months of Steven's life. Here for the second time the worlds of hospice and wilderness rites of passage came together, the first time having been in Death Valley a month earlier for the first ever Hospice Vision Fast. Now, however, the presence and poignancy of the life-death transition was embedded in the very fabric of each of the three of us. For Steven, Scott provided the first truly helpful “holistic” support in the final stages of his living and dying—something Steven had long yearned for. For Meredith, unbeknownst to her, the final months of Steven's life began to weave the first threads of a future life without him. As for Scott, he began to shed the last vestiges of his former ways of practicing and to step into a fuller embodiment of his personal and professional calling.

The Mission of This Work

We are committed to promoting more understanding about rites of passage for health care practitioners and increasing awareness of the possibility self-violence through self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others, so that her powerful self could step up onto its own altar. This experience had such a profound effect on Cynthia that she decided to become a life coach to others, utilizing art and nature, specifically gardening, as her tools. She planned to have clients work in her garden while receiving coaching, and create art which they would leave in the garden to be shared with others. She moved from being pain-centered, passive, isolated, lonely, and sad to becoming a stronger and more assertive, happier, proactive woman with a strong sense of purpose. She was “doing her work,” and in the process, she believed she might heal herself and possibly others.

Update

Three months after I finished working with Cynthia, she was coaching two clients with her garden-art approach. I also noticed that she had moved the sculpture she had made from her art studio to her living room, where she spent all of her time. Currently, she is wheelchair bound and is in extreme pain most of the time. She openly admits that she is dying. She says she is okay, however, even if physical healing never occurs and she dies soon. As Bolen writes, “Recovery of the soul and recovery of the health of the body may occur together or not; healing may occur, and the body may not survive.”

I have noticed changes within myself as a result of working with Cynthia. She has become a model for living life with intention and purpose, and she taught me to look at my feminine side as powerful and not something to try to make up for. I also noticed positive changes when I had to shift my perception of self as Art Therapy Intern to Passage Rite Facilitator, a role I had never taken on before, nor had modeled for me. I sought counsel from wilderness passage rite facilitators, and I went through my own art-based vision quest to seek the guidance and wisdom I would need to step into this role, and in doing so, gained the confidence I needed to not only serve Cynthia, but also to step confidently into my future role as therapist.

The Practice of Living and Dying

Meredith Little and Dr. Scott Eberle
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about dying practice within rites of passage work. Our trainings explore the personal, evolving mythos of each participant, while seeking to create a bridge between the growing wisdom of the modern hospice movement and the ancient, pan-cultural wisdom of indigenous people. We explore the “four shields of our living and dying” with meetings in the mornings, solitary pilgrimages in nature for “field therapy” in the afternoon, and storytelling councils each evening. Many of the programs culminate in a one-day fast, followed by one to two days to hear the stories of the fast, and a day to explore how the lessons we have learned can be brought back into our daily and professional lives.

Each training has a different focal population, with current offerings including “Where Hospice and Rites of Passage Meet” (for caregivers), “Four Seasons of Living & Dying” (for anyone whose life has been touched by Death), and “Rites of Passage as Dying Practice” (for rites of passage guides). We also offer a four-day vision fast inspired by the Mayan myth of the Great Ballcourt. The dream is to learn just what the dynamic juxtaposition of these two related worlds evokes in all of us, that we might be inspired to live and die more consciously.

Rites of Passage as Dying Practice

As an example of this work, consider the form it has taken in trainings with experienced wilderness guides. At the heart of every rite of passage throughout diverse cultures and religions the same core teaching prevails:

One must leave everything behind and die to all that has been, stepping into the creative chaos of unknowing to wrestle with the monsters of transformation and from there to be born anew, more emotionally alive and spiritually aware;

Only the initiate who perseveres gains a painfully-won secret: there can be no new life without first a dying, and only birth can trick Death—if only for the next eternal moment.

For much of the past century, modern culture has done its best to split human from nature, and matter from spirit. In an effort to impose the illusion of control on chaos and uncertainty, we dress Death in a monstrous guise and try to push it away from Life, while keeping the dying away from the living. But as rites of passage guides know well, the secret of initiation is to return death to its natural place in the cycle of life to honor the “dying practice” of Fall among the other seasons of a human life.

Who in today’s world is better able to teach us to more deeply serve this dying rite than those who are physically dying, and their guides, members of the modern hospice movement who have returned the term “natural death” to the medical vocabulary? These caregivers sit daily with the dying and their families, providing a compassionate and helpful environment for life’s final transformative passage—an environment much like that offered by a rite of passage guide.

What is the relationship between the “little deaths” of living and the Big Death that awaits us all? What can we learn by delving more deeply into the teachings of indigenous peoples and their wisdom about living and dying? And what can we learn by sitting with the paradox of our own Death drawing closer, while at the same time we rage to live on?

Pre-course Assignment: Wilderness guides already have an active relationship with the cycles of living and dying on the land. So instead of preparing for the program with a Day Walk, we ask participants to explore a different landscape. This might be someone they already know, a friend of a friend, or perhaps someone in a nursing home or hospital. We ask them to find someone in their family or community who either has a life-threatening illness, is dying, or is actively grieving the loss of a loved one. They are to sit with this person—repeatedly, we suggest—as their prepare for their own journey to Death Valley. As they do so they are to listen. Learn. Mirror. By the time the training begins, they have already developed a more intimate relationship with the dying process.

The following is part of the story of one participant, an experienced wilderness guide from California, at the culmination of a week-long program she took in Death Valley. During a sunrise-to-sunrise solo fast, she was invited “to die” that she might be reborn with the birth of morning:

I felt called to the Four Shields of Living and Dying Training because I wanted to learn how to be present for my eighty-five-year-old mother who was nearing that passage. I also yearned to consciously explore more deeply the opportunity to practice dying for my own awareness and growth, and to be able to better facilitate such practice for the faster I take out. I had expected to go to my spot and sit and watch the transformation unfold within.

Instead, I found myself drawn to walk. First, I encountered Volcanic Rock Beings: Guardians, Keepers of Memory. Being drawn further up, I next found caves. I chose one and climbed high to find that instead of a consuming darkness, it had an incredibly glorious panoramic view of glowing snow-peaked mountain ranges. Later, I entered another larger cave, and while sitting there it started to rain. As the scent of creosote came wafting up to fill my nostrils, it confirmed my choice of the object representing my final gift. My addition to the group threshold circle had been a branch of creosote as a symbol of the fragrance of Love.

This evening was Siva Ratri—the night of Siva—the one night of the year when the new moon is farthest from the earth and thus has the least pull on the human mind. Therefore it is considered the most auspicious time to use all-night song and meditation to slip through to transcendence. Celebrating this night each year for the past thirty-three years had prepared me to be able to wait expectantly for the night’s unfolding.

My Thermarest just fit on the cave floor. I dressed in all my warm clothes and got into my sleeping bag. I started to sing and meditate as I had done for so many years. After another light rain, and all traces of the sun and sunset had gone, there appeared on the western horizon two huge Buddha-shaped eyes looking at me. Eyes made by the cracks in the clouds and the after-light of the setting sun. A star glowed as His third eye. I felt seen and held and received. Later, the rain came in torrents and then ceased, revealing the glory of the star-filled night sky. With the coming of the morning light, I scrambled higher and higher to see the rising sun. Upon realizing I would have to wait hours to see the actual orb itself, I knew that I was already reborn. I had been gifted greater trust in myself and the Universe, in Death and its opening to deeper Love.
International Work

More recently we offered “The Practice of Living and Dying” course twice in South Africa. We met each time for a week in the Groot Winterhoek Mountains outside of Cape Town, each time with groups composed of twenty-four caregivers who were working either with people suffering from the AIDS epidemic or with ill, disabled and/or orphaned children. Their stories—riddled as they were with poverty, violence, suffering, and death, yet still beaming with goodness and hope—were truly extraordinary.

One participant, “Elizabeth,” first spoke tensely, as if under pressure, about how she was forever on call for the ill and the dying in her community, how she was so reluctant to spend a week in the mountains where her cell phone wouldn’t work. What lay below the surface of this story of perpetual service was a stunning tale of personal suffering, beginning with physical abuse by her father, continuing with more of the same from her husband. Often beaten by him, she was nearly killed several times, the most dramatic being the night he took her to a graveyard, shot her, and left her for dead until the next morning, when she was found and taken to a hospital. Through many years of abuse, Elizabeth managed to raise her two children, as well as two other children whom her husband had fathered with other women and who had been left on her doorstep by their mothers. Even after she separated from her husband, she cared for him during his final days, when, as he lay dying of AIDS, he asked for her forgiveness. Although unable to grant that, either then or during her week with us, Elizabeth nevertheless described a profound sense of “lightness” for having shared her story, once in a smaller group and later, one-on-one, with one of our co-facilitators, for it is the South African way to hold your deep, intimate story very private. By the end of the week, when everyone was asked what they were leaving behind and taking with them, Elizabeth answered: “I leave behind the burden of the silence and I take with me my freedom.”

It becomes increasingly clear to us that exploring the archetype of Death—in the context of both the Four Shields and hospice lore, and with significant time on the land—brings out an important renewal of our personal and cultural stories. There is something so earnest and fervent that arises in us when we look squarely at Death and at our own death. Compassion, yearning, personal place and calling, forgiveness and healing emerge in new and more meaningful forms. Suffering is lifted up and witnessed as sacred. What once seemed random and insignificant becomes deeply meaningful. Here, staring across Death’s door, there is no distinction between self and other, human and holy. We find ourselves in the present moment where “lifewarding” and “deathwarding” cease to be separate. A place where forgiveness and courage are so much more easily accessible. A place where we begin to discover our own daily practice of Decision Road, Death Lodge, and Purpose Circle, learning to die and be reborn in each moment of every day. How much more easily we are then able to hold, witness and guide the last days of someone else who is dying—and, one day, to show up more fully for our own final dying.

We close with a few random quotes from the stories brought back by our intrepid “Ballcourt players” who followed us into a flooding Death Valley over New Year 2005 for the Great Ballcourt Vision Fast. There they went out for a four day solo-fast: “to die, to dance between the worlds for a moment, and to be reborn.”

I thought I was prepared but I was surprised at the outcome.
Nothing unfolded as I envisioned.
I have unfinished business.
Am I worthy?
I have a lot to give. My path is about service.
What is my own gentle way?
The way of the cougar is to be present with myself and present with Death at the same time.
Death is the creative well out of which life springs.
Forgiveness and acceptance – a dance for the rest of life.
Prayers of rebirth.
Death never has answers, only questions.
Do I want to be here or not? You are your own authority.
The way to knowing is by giving over to the mystery.
Listen to what’s unfolding before me.
What I want when I die is to be loving and loved.
The ceremony is a way you continue to rebirth yourself.
You see where you need to be and you grow your story on the land.
Raven twin—the sacred wound that cannot be healed.
Look Death in the eyes.
I surrender.