

Wilderness Rites For Elders

By Jody Woodruff

For several generations we have lived in a culture that celebrates youth and devalues old age. This mind set is contrary to many former societies where elders held places of respect, were givers of wisdom and mentors to the young. A long time coming, there now appears to be a reversal of attitudes and a beginning consciousness of the unique talents and wisdom that elderly can contribute to our communities.

Rituals and ceremonies indicating transitions from one life stage to another held great significance in societies where all ages, all stages of life were respected and honored. Today, as we attempt to regain balance, some mentors to the elderly are showing us how reconnection with nature goes hand and hand with restoring all of us to our place in the natural order of things. Anne Stine, through her organization *Wilderness Rites*, has worked with groups of all ages, offering a variety of earth-based healing practices relating to the ancient ways of being with nature in our transitions through life. In the past six years, however, her focus has shifted to an emphasis on providing elder passage quests. We talk with her about her journey and what she believes is the importance of her work.

Anne's earth based programs began with a personal experience in 1989 when she went into the desert, with guides, in a ceremonial way to do a mid-life rite of passage. Coincidentally, the devastating Loma Pieta earthquake, centered in Oakland, California, occurred during the solo time in her quest. Normally, a person is never interrupted during this crucial time alone, but those who had relatives in the quake area were given the option of leaving. When Anne called home and found that her loved ones were safe, she chose to continue.

The changes that resulted in her experience alone on the land were literally an earthquake on another level. Aside from the physical changes caused by the earthquake, the way she viewed herself and the world changed to the extent that she could not continue her life as she had been living it. She immediately returned to the desert to the School of Lost Borders to undergo training for an extended period of time, experiencing the interface between psyche and earth. As Anne realized that she could not exclude nature from any part of her life, her work as a therapist changed. Within a year, she altered her profession, ended a personal relationship and moved out of her home. As if that weren't enough, she contracted cancer, the latter sending her into what she describes as a long underworld journey.

As a result of her training and personal experiences, Anne is empathic in her belief that without a healthy and sustainable relationship between humans and the earth, we're not going to survive. "I believe that many problems we are encountering on our planet stem from our disconnection from our basic kinship with the natural world. Doing harm to the earth is doing harm to us. One of my teachers said that the big lie is that we are separate from the land upon which we live and totally depend upon for our well being. Losing that conscious connection has put us in jeopardy. We are not separate from the lack of health in our environment. We see this in many ways, but one of our big issues now is global warming. The impact of this climate change on people's lives is so huge that we can't escape it. We must change our relationship to our earth."

Anne began her new work by taking both men and women of all ages out on the earth for periods of time, training, teaching and mentoring. When a colleague, Ann Linnea, asked her to collaborate in working with older women to mark their movement into elderhood, this led to seven years of focusing on women in their 50s, 60s and 70s—taking them into the high desert for ten days for a ceremony that marks the rite of passage in their lives regarding what it means to be an elder today.

Some older women have a sense that they are entering a new stage of life, some feel something is calling them but they are unclear about what it is. Others are well on their way, but want a sense of community. Thus the intention of the ceremony is for them to call back into our culture the wisdom and gifts that older women have to offer and to help them define what this means to them. Women come from all over the country who emerge seeing themselves as elders with meaning and responsibility.

Anne comments, "One of the voids in our culture is that older men and women have been put aside and not recognized that we, as older people, have the opportunity to give back to our communities what we have learned. As parents and teachers, we are also the ones that help the younger generations grow through their life changes. In our ancestral cultures, the elders were the ones who formally initiated the younger ones in their passages. We want to help our elders regain their true place in our culture."

Anne refers to their ceremony as an elder passage wilderness quest, modeled on the cross cultural rites of passage that carry the elements from many different cultures. Going onto the earth, being alone and leaving behind your familiar life is a very ancient practice, performed for many centuries. Today, those who do this work take the ancient ceremonies and dress them in a contemporary form that fits the people they serve. Guides prepare

the participants to spend time alone on the earth, living with the intention to bring meaning to this stage of life. Preparation ceremonies are offered as well as practical information. For example, most haven't had the experience of going out in the wilderness and spending three days and nights alone. There are safety considerations about how to live, to deal with weather and wild life.

Anne continues, "Another word for vision quest is initiation. This means there is a change—a death of the old and a calling in of the new life. In ancient cultures, being sent out on the earth meant real and present danger. Today there is no real danger if people are prepared, but there is a sense that *I'm in uncharted territory* and I have to bring forth something about myself to get me through this. The real threats are internal."

Usually several days are spent together as a group in a remote area. Food and water are taken in and after several days the women go out on the earth to fast and be alone. At the end of three days, the group comes together to listen to the varied experiences and share what they've learned. It is the group's role to acknowledge and empower each other as elder women in this world.

It is commonly reported that participants experience a shift in consciousness about their own lives, the way they have been living or want to change. Some find a newer purpose. To be more specific, a grandmother in her 70s, on her first quest, discovered that she had not been the kind of grandmother that she wanted to be, but rather had been acting like a second parent—telling her grandchildren what they should or shouldn't do, giving advice. What she came to realize in the ceremonies was that she was not there to be a parent or tell them how to live their lives, but to hold a space of listening and cherishing—a caring person to whom the grandchildren could come and just be. She went home and started doing just that. Periodically she communicates her grandmother journey back to the group; consequently, those who were with her have benefited from her story of transformation to the wise grandmother.

Susanne Petermann, Medford, OR, has participated in several guided quests and assisted in others. She explains that the benefits continue revealing themselves long after the initial experience. For her, the ceremony helped to rearrange her priorities, to let go of unnecessary worries and gain a bigger perspective of her place in the world. "It helped me to live my life differently, more able to walk my talk because I'm clear about what's important for me." Personally, she believes that it's beneficial to go out periodically on the land in the quest ceremony because it renews her and reminds her of things she may have forgotten because of cultural program-

ming or her own weaknesses that gain too much importance in her daily life.

Energized by her experiences and wanting what she refers to as spiritual playmates, Susanne invited 14 women to her home to learn about the ceremony and begin preparation work for a future elder quest. At first, she and Anne Stine suggested to the group that they could develop a ceremony closer to home in the Rogue Valley, but after much consideration, it was voted to make the journey to the Southern California desert. Traditionally, an aspect of a quest is to travel far away, fasting not only from food, but leaving friends, routine and home. Traveling is symbolic of that separation. Also, a high desert environment, spacious with dry, clear air, is considered conducive to this kind of work. "Another veil removed between you and spirit," she comments.

Anne reminds us that story telling is a significant aspect of the quest experience. It's estimated that 97% of the information and wisdom we have as a species has been handed down orally, still not on the computer and in books. From the point of view of story telling in the quest context, what is learned comes out of our relationship with the earth. She stresses that we learn from all our relationships, not only from those of our own kind, but from the larger earth community. A person might come back from their quest and relate an experience with a bird, animal or plant, then speak about an insight that occurred. This small incident becomes integral to her story and the community helps her understand what this means for her life. "It's a connection, a relationship between the individual, the earth, the story, the community. When you tell your story, it becomes real, back in this world. Whether you articulate it, dance it, draw it or whatever, if you don't share it, it's not considered real in this realm. Stories are often healing. Your story heals me and my story heals you. Stories are never judged. We just go more deeply into it to help determine what it means for you."

One participant explains her response to story telling. "When I returned from my solo time, I assumed that my story only had meaning for me. I had survived my experience, so maybe it wasn't such a big deal. But when I looked into the faces of the ones listening to the tale of my vision quest and heard their responses, I realized this was nothing ordinary at all. I returned from my quest comfortable with fear, enchanted with nature, grounded in life and certain of the presence of the Divine."

Clearly, all older people have a story to tell. Some suggest that it may be an old archetypal urge. In our present day culture, memoir writing has become a popular form of expression, a piece of the family or clan's history, important for family and others to hear. Anne adds, "When you get

right down to it, our story is all we have. Joseph Campbell talked about this a lot. You live your myth and in story telling you find who you are. The growth of the field of psychology, the act of going to someone and talking about your life, is a form of story telling. I come to you and tell you my story. You reflect back to me and we do something with that. But I think it's gone more mainstream. You don't have to go into counseling to share your stories."

She continues, emphasizing that the other side of story telling is listening. "In our society, we know much less about listening than story telling. Really deep listening is a skill that has to be developed in order to hear what is being said rather than putting your own interpretation on it. When we gather to intentionally quest and examine our stories, a by-product is that we also learn to listen."

Anne explains that telling your story to a group is part of understanding that community is a big part of a traditional rite of passage. Whether the ceremony of a quest is for elders or youth, it is ultimately for the individual to return with gifts or knowledge that will nurture or heal the group. She also has helped to fashion individual quests for people who have done a traditional rite of passage and want to go out alone the following year, but significant people from their lives are always included in the process. That might simply mean a send off or return ceremony to listen to the story.

Today, there are a variety of retreats and workshops for elderly that are meaningful and beneficial. Some "quests" are done in a retreat center, living comfortably indoors, going out from there. Those can be important experiences, but are not a true wilderness quest. The major difference is that a wilderness rite of passage, based on the ancient rites, requires an ordeal factor, a confrontation that happens where the person meets something internal that is a challenge or a fear. By living alone on the earth, as they do in a wilderness rite, they live through this challenge using their own particular skills and gifts. How they accomplish this is the gift they bring back to the community. If there's not a challenge where participants feel they're meeting an edge of what they're capable of doing, it is not considered a true vision quest in the historical sense.

Many elders are not going to do a wilderness rite of passage or even a retreat or workshop. For those elders who want to begin a more meaningful connection with nature, Anne suggests, "Just walk out the door, sit in a chair and look at the sky. Look at the nearest tree and listen to the sounds of nature. If you don't have access to that, go walk in a park, sign up for a nature walk, go somewhere where water is running. Make yourself available because nature is always around us. You don't have to do the big journey or

quest. It's really a shift of attention and focus, being aware that nature is always here and always reflecting our nature back to us. Take a few moments to be open and receptive. We are nature. Everyone can connect."

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