CIRCLES ON THE MOUNTAIN

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Cover photo by Praveen Mantena

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Circles on the Mountain is an annual production of the Wilderness Guides Council
www.wildernessguidescouncil.org

PAST ISSUES
Circles on the Mountain has been published since 1988. It began as a quarterly and after Fall 1991 became an almost annual journal written for and by the members of the Wilderness Guides Council. Contact the Netkeeper for the Wilderness Guides Council at netkeeper@wildernessguidescouncil.org for information about past issues.
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EDITORS’ NOTE

Nancy Jane and Sara Harris

WILD CARD! Be careful what you ask for! At the beginning, even with two announcements, we had so few submissions that it looked like Circles on the Mountain just wasn’t going to make it into form this year. As a last try, we put out a call . . . more submissions, please. You responded in spades! Never have we been so swamped with members sending in their stories, their reflections, their photos, and poems. We went from ten submissions to almost forty in less than two weeks!

What awaits you in this issue is the generous heart of the WGC community. More than being grateful for a large quantity of submissions, we editors see this outpouring as a big YES to our mutual connection, made visible through Circles on the Mountain. We take Circles home and read it in bits and pieces. We refer back to it and get re-inspired about our work. We find an unusual perspective, a poetically turned phrase, or a touching, tender description. Some authors we have known for many years, and some we are meeting for the first time. Together, we are a landscape as varied and as colorful as the landforms we quest on.

Circles on the Mountain has provided a record of who we have been, who we are now, and who we are becoming. Yes, Circles remains our heart offering to one another. Thank you, one and all, for your voices and views. In between annual Gatherings, we can sit in “council” and share stories, here in our larger circle, our Circles on the Mountain.

With wild heart,

Nancy and Sara
THE WILD IMAGINAL WORLD OF STORYTELLING AND MIRRORING

Betsy Perluss

It’s a crisp September morning in the meadow above Baker Creek. All fifteen of us are huddled tightly in a circle, beach chairs and Crazy Creeks, the river nearby lined with old cottonwoods. This is the final day of the mirroring training, and we’re ending with a punch! The stories have spun us together, mesmerized us into a unified whole. Images fly about like birds. How could such strange and remarkable words come out of the mouths of these people?

It is no wonder that at the School of Lost Borders we talk so much about mirroring. What is this practice? Really? And more so, what is it not? We know that mirroring is deep listening and reflection. And we stress that mirroring is never about fixing or resolving. No, we claim, the aim of mirroring is always to empower and validate the gifts already present in the story. But even still, mirroring mystifies me. It is such a simple practice, and yet something occurs that I just can’t fully grasp. What is it that draws us down so deep? What loosens our tongues, allowing words to fly freely? What gives rise to such tears and ineffable joy? Indeed, part of what we experience remains hidden, like a coin in a magician’s hand.

In my Jungian studies, I discovered the following quote by Marie-Louise von Franz, which offers some insight into this hidden aspect of mirroring, which she calls the “mysterious point of contact.”

The mysterious point of contact between the two systems appears to be the center of a sort of pivot where psyche and matter meet. When an individual enters into relation with the forces of the pivot, he finds himself close to the sphere of “miracles” which seemingly could not occur without a corresponding attitude on his own part.

Although von Franz is presenting an obscure idea, I simply think of the “two systems” as two people — the storyteller and mirror — and the “pivot” as the story itself. Von Franz is actually referring to the phenomenon of synchronicity, those moments where the inner realm of the psyche and the outer world of matter merge in meaningful concurrences. But to me, this sounds a lot like storytelling and mirroring, which, as we have seen, tends to attract synchronicity. How many times has that hummingbird flown into story circle at the exact right time? Or the mirrored words touch on the beating heart of an unspoken truth? How many songs have we shared, unknowingly, between base camp and those on their solos?

And what is the “corresponding attitude” that von Franz refers to? In mirroring, I believe, we would call it love.

When we “teach” mirroring, one of the first things we mention is that above all else mirroring is an act of love. If the listener can fall in love with the story, and thus, the storyteller, than the “mysterious point of contact” will be met despite the actual words being spoken. And when this happens, it feels like magic.

Henry Corbin, the Sufi philosopher and mystic, speaks of love as the force of imagination, the entryway into the Mundus Imaginalis, the Imaginal World. For Corbin, the Mundus Imaginalis is a place similar to von Franz’s mysterious point of contact, a place that exists between our knowing and not knowing, but is palpably real. It is a place, he writes, that is “both intermediary and intermediate ... a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses.
and that of the intellect. This world requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power.” When love pulls us through the threshold of the story, we enter into this realm of imagination where anything is possible. It is love that calls us out of our limited notions of reality and each other. This is not gushy, feel-good love, but love for life.

I confess I understand little of Corbin’s work. But I like his flavor. I like that he recognizes the Imaginal as something more than fantasy, that the Imaginal is a real realm that exists beyond our brains. Yes, the Imaginal depends on our ability to perceive, but the images that appear have a life of their own. It is like the animals that come to us in our dreams. They need the dreamer in whom appear have a life of their own. It is like the animals that exist beyond our brains. Yes, the Imaginal opens us up and makes it big again.

One of the most profound books I have ever read is James Hillman’s, The Thought of the Heart & the Soul of the World. It is a book attributed to Henry Corbin. Hillman begins with these words:

You who have been privileged at some time during his long life to have attended a lecture by Henry Corbin have been present at a manifestation of the thought of the heart. You have been witness to its creative imagination, its theophanic power of bringing the divine face into visibility.

“Thought of the heart,” “creative imagination,” “bringing the divine face into visibility.” These are the clues to the underlying workings of storytelling and mirroring.

The thought of the heart, unlike the rational head, is not locked in certainty but is free like a river to meander over stone, to pool up in an eddy and then let go. And it is of the heart because it is love that keeps the river flowing, refusing to dam that which it loves. Anytime we fall under the spell of fundamentalism or the need for certitude, we have forsaken love. As Hillman writes, “When we fall in love, we begin to imagine; and when we begin to imagine, we fall in love.”

Creative imagination breaks the chains of our literalism and its incessant need to make all things purposeful. When someone asks, “Does mirroring work?” “Is it beneficial?” I get stymied. I don’t know how to answer. “Yes,” “No,” “I don’t know.” Such questions are impossible to answer because they inadvertently trap us in the mechanism of cause and effect thinking, the very thing we wish to avoid in mirroring. When our stories are taken literally, mirroring turns into a technique, and all the living images become nothing more than psychological debris.

I am not saying that mirroring doesn’t have psychological merit. We all know that it does. But psychological profit is not the reason for mirroring. This is why, I believe, it is a great disservice to market vision fasting and wilderness rites of passage as a self-help endeavor. It’s not. Let’s get this clear. Vision fasting will not lead to a happier life, better sex, or whatever. For as long as humans have been fasting in the wilderness, this has never been the case. Think of St. Jerome out in the desert, hungry and alone, pleading to God to strip him bare! But vision fasting will allow us a glimpse into a world that is not confined to our wishes. A world much bigger than ourselves. A living and infinite world. And what could be better than that? And in falling in love with this world, we, of course, feel a deep desire to give back to it. To preserve it, and make it better. This is why incorporation — giving back to one’s community — is so crucial. Incorporation is the continuation of love.

But what does Hillman mean by bringing the divine face into visibility? Although it might sound esoteric, Corbin maintained that everything has its angel. Not an angel in the literal sense as an ethereal being with wings, but a presence that reflects each thing’s true essence. Tom Cheetham, a Corbin scholar, writes, “The Angel is the immediate source of the personal face of every being. For anything whatever to be present, it has to be present to someone, and it has to be regarded, looked at, in a mutual, personal relation.” Today we might call this angelic presence “soul.”

During the mirroring training, we always remark how easy it is to fall in love with the storyteller, even when we don’t particularly like that person! I believe this is because we fall in love with that person’s angel, or soul. In this life, we all wear the dirty clothes of our human fallibility and interpersonal muck. But the angel shines through the dirt, or because of it, revealing the face of our shared humanity. We fall in love with the angel that is reflected in our own. Storytelling and mirroring are therefore an endless call and response between our very human selves and the soul of each person and living being, between the Soul of the World and us.

Let us never let the story come to an end.

*References available upon request.
Hefted is a word from the uplands of Scotland, and these days it mainly refers to sheep. A hefted flock will have grown into place over many generations. The sheep live in unfenced country and are born with an internal barometer of belonging: They do not stray, they know the weather patterns, where to take shelter, the first green shoots of spring, the natural salt licks. They know they are home, and they are not separate from it.

Hefting, however, is not a static word. It is the effect of country on the self of nature, on the psyche. It is the calling to belonging.

“And did you get what you wanted from this life even so?” I did.

“And what did you want?”

To call myself beloved. To feel myself beloved on the earth. (Raymond Carver)

Let me explain my relation to country. I was born on the opposite curve of this wonderful planet. I was hefted into country, a tiny English village where my parents worked with the soils and the seasons and grew our family a living of vegetables and fruit. Of course, adventure takes a young mind, calls him out into the broad world, and for me, resistance to that call was futile. So I landed after many years and journeys on a high volcanic plateau, part of the great, dividing range that straddles the eastern coast of Australia, and I married and grew children, and we built our house here.

This is big country, and for a mind and body used to the close-knit of rural England, here is broad stitch and big sky. Here are almost endless vistas, a great sheltering sky; here is a wildness with a way of its own.

I would suggest that many who may read this have had the experience of growing into a place, but also of place growing into them. In its simplest form it takes on a growing knowledge of country — its geography and history, where the sun rises as the season changes, where the shadows fall, where the creeks drain, where the brown snake suns himself, where the platypus plays, and where the Gang Gang parrots nest. But then it gets more complicated. There is a way country begins to call you, to ask of you, to invite you in deeper, and then the moments begin to appear when you awake suddenly pre-dawn and have to (yes, have to) attend to the call of country and turn up where she asks. And slowly the ancient language of place begins to be heard. The language of what is.

I’ve always felt that once hefted to one place, that the heft, or the feeling of heft, is also true to other places, same curve, same planet. Now I’m looking back at nearly 20 years of growing into this place. Having place grow into me — and we as guides are all deepened and dignified by country — I often wonder as to my particular sense of being here, my stitch in the guiding community. I trace it down to this one word, “belonging,” both for myself (“All I want is to belong to this great blue planet”) and for the questers and fasters, who have now started to come into my country. I want them to belong here, to see themselves reflected in this great, granite, forested country, to not feel separate, to come home to themselves.

So now I’m wondering about country itself, the peaks and the curves and the hollows on top of Mount Strathbogie and the Telling Mountain; the hollowed old peppermints and mountain grey gums and the lichen-crusted rock shelters that our visionaries disappear into for those four days and four nights. And I can only dream into the longing that comes from country itself, the at-first, barely audible song that calls them home, that perhaps has been calling them all of their life, perhaps for many centuries, that calls them back from civilization, back from the empires of dislocation. And I wonder, like I think we all do, as to the hows and whys of those moments of magic, those moments within their own mythical stories, where the light shines in, and the borders disappear, and the song of the earth is so wonderfully perceived.

Today I shall walk in this ancient country, and I shall walk through the place where Andrew found the first deer antler of his adult self, where Sharon broke down and wept in the fire-hollowed tree, the rocky headland where Harry learned to trust. I shall feel the trepidation of these
tentative selves as they walk out that first morning and the sometimes-glorious relief of their return home. I shall praise these wonder-filled meetings and sing this wonder-filled country and ever so quietly be humbled by some of the new stories it contains. Just here I shall lean forward into an imagined future of stories that are waiting to happen, of country’s barely audible bass-line call, and the great fattening of this land, the wonder-filled weave and heft of people and country.

So I’m thinking about what it means to be hefted by country, to be called back, to be so well met. And I am sending out a little prayer to the world that we should all be called back, that we could all find our hefts. We could all belong.
Refuge in These Burned Hills: A Prayer

Sage Abella

In September 2015 a massive wildfire burned down half the homes in the rural community where I live. This was the fourth big fire of the summer and the third evacuation from my home in a span of a month and a half. I've lived in wildfire country for twelve years, but the animal nature of these fires was like nothing I'd ever seen, the fire superheating the air ahead of it and igniting flames miles beyond what was already burning. Tornadoes of wind drove the Valley Fire over the top of Cobb Mountain and down into town in the span of only a couple hours. Everyone was evacuated into communities over the mountain, and no one could return home for eleven days or more. I learned that my local landscape is deeply woven into my psyche. Earth’s elements are begging us to be in relationship with them. Fire’s voice will not be silenced anymore. I’m a fire carrier. Fire has been my intimate teacher for over ten years, and I am listening, loving, and feeding Fire even as I heal from the devastation inside my community.

Here’s how I live in the charcoal. I hunker down like a bug on a cold day, slow moving, long watching. This isn’t the desert where I would have learned the smart way to live with no water, staying “brush low” to the ground, decorating my body with a million tight tiny leaves, my body a contraction waiting for water.

This is char. This is charcoal and ash. Here’s how I live in the ash. I walk the steep side of Rabbit Hill, always my lower foot slipping, often down on my knees, not in prayer, but in desperate surrender. My hands black, nose itching, now my nose black, too.

This demon fire. This wild heat burning whole Gray Pine trees just so, all the way through but not deep enough to crush in the hands of an artist. Here’s how I live in the afterthought of a wild rolling fire. I gather armloads of charcoal. Sing to the trees for their great offering that nobody but me on the side of this hill in the late afternoon sun notices, at least not today. Today I am the only one gathering.

Maybe there’s a secret tribe of us, all caressing the hillside with our brave feet and broken hearts. Looking at the way the veins on the scrub oak leaves are now burnished with black lines rubbed in, the way my father used to polish black into his shoes. The fragile web between the lines crackled and gold-leafed by the gods who know a different kind of poetry.

A poetry that appreciates a fire this big because it is long poetry. Poetry of a planet whose body stretches between tectonic plates, whose imagination groans and pulls lava up beneath the ocean floor, steaming where nobody will ever hear the steam hiss. Poetry of a planet who sings forests out of the ground, calls people to live there in the tremendous, wordless beauty where words are only found after the beauty is dead gone.

Here’s how I live in a land that was as familiar as the back of my hand, but now is the stranger who found my hidden house key under the pathway brick and entered my round home to raid it of the one perfect, ripening avocado on the morning kitchen counter. Mourning the loss of a landscape who had become like kin, and I didn’t even know it, until now when the face of the hills is black and the only thing changing is the weather.

See how the rising light makes the charcoal stick trees silver. Watch how the clouds lay low like a grandmother’s blanket caught in a dream of warming a land that is now committed to the clutching hands of winter. Keep watching because there will be one tender, fleeting moment when the full moon waits out the whole night until the morning is gun metal blue. Full fat moon, shining face, stacked over muscled clouds hanging from thin wires off the fingertips of an elaborate God devoted only to questions and not to answers. Haiku of full moon, lumbering clouds, snow-covered mountain.

Keep watching because this is the way I live in a land swallowed by fire. I caress it everyday with my questioning heart and my vigilant eyes because something in me knows that where there is black, there lives the soul’s poetry.
I sit in my yard in Oregon and look at three short willow sticks planted in the ground before me. They are my connection to the “Netzwerk,” the network of German-speaking vision quest guides. At the end of last month’s annual gathering, a willow meditation hut was dismantled, and we were each invited to take home and plant a small part of it. On the first day of every month I light a candle near my prospective willow grove and feel my connection to the other guides in Germany, who are also lighting fires or candles on that day. And I wonder: Will my willows grow? Will my relationship to the Netzwerk and to my German heritage continue to deepen?

Netzwerk and Gathering

German-speaking guides have been leading quests in Europe since the 1990s. The Netzwerk has been formally in existence since the year 2000 and currently has about 190 members from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. In 2015 these guides led 56 adult quests, 7 youth quests, and 163 other initiatory, nature-based programs. There are currently several organizations in these three countries that offer training for new vision quest guides, and the Netzwerk has guidelines as to what elements need to be included in this training.

The annual Netzwerktreffen (Gathering) is held in January, and for the past four years it has been held at Schloss Buchenau, a Renaissance castle built in 1611. In 2016 there were almost 90 of us participating. The elements that make up the Gathering are not that different from our WGC gatherings. There is a mix of structured and open time, space for professional exchange and for deepening our connection to the work, and also time for play and for taking care of business. Highlights for me were the outdoor candle labyrinth that slowly turned into a snow labyrinth as snow kept falling; the “Mini-Nets,” groups of about ten people who met every morning for an hour of council that provided more intimate personal connection within this large gathering; the “Death and Birth” council where endings and beginnings, personal as well as professional, were brought into the community; and the outside fire that was ceremonially lit with a fire-drill and tended for twenty-four hours through the night.

One thing that felt different from a WGC gathering was the fact that we were surrounded by fields and pastures rather than open wilderness. And so when I took a question to the land, I encountered an old tree that straddled a pasture fence, deep furrows crossing a field of green cover crop, and a raised hunter’s outlook hidden at the edge of the forest. But then there was also the hawk circling high above, looking for prey — maybe not so different after all.

Identity, Belonging and Integration

During my first Netzwerktreffen some years ago I realized that there are parts of me that are not reachable in English, and I started spending more time in situations where I was able to do inner work in German. I came to notice that the German Anna is different from the English-speaking one. She originally didn’t developed much past age twenty-three. She feels more shy than the American one and often feels that she “doesn’t know how to talk to adults.” And at the same time, she has a very strong connection to the land and to the songs and stories of her ancestors that tell about that connection to the land. Over the years, the German and American Annas have been in dialogue, have compared notes, have become closer. And still, they continue to maintain somewhat separate identities within me.

At my first German gathering, I very much went as a guest, as the “American” checking things out. But this year this guest status did not feel right anymore. I didn’t want to be an outsider anymore: I wanted to have a voice. And then I found out that I was considered a member of the Netzwerk all along. Apparently, the guest status was in my mind rather than reality. I am reminded of the time almost twenty years ago when I decided that it was time to stop being a guest in the United States and applied for U.S. citizenship. In a way I have come full circle. I don’t want to be just a guest in either place any longer. It is time to step into my adult “world citizen” self.
One morning, while climbing the stone steps in the old castle, I wondered about the people who had worn down these steps over hundreds of years. I felt how much I am connected to these German ancestors, how much they have influenced who I am. And I also realized that I have a choice as to how these ancestors are expressed through me. Having stepped outside of the original environment, I find it easier to examine this ancestral history and not just accept it as a given.

**Refugees and Emigrants**

Before my trip I had of course heard about and seen pictures of the refugees in Europe, but it wasn’t until I was at the Gathering that I realized just how much the current refugee crisis is at the forefront of everyone’s consciousness. I participated in a council on “Beheimatet Sein,” a term that has no exact translation; it includes elements of “being at home,” “homeland,” “belonging.” In the council we spoke one at a time about our feelings and experiences with this topic, and I started to get a felt sense of this current crisis. I heard stories of individual experiences with individual refugees. There was a sense of urgency, of “too much,” of “we need to do this.” And there were memories, mine included, of the prejudice surrounding ethnic German refugees from Eastern regions at the end of WWII that lasted well into the 60s, 70s, and beyond. When I was growing up, we were still labeling those families as “Flüchtlinge” (refugees), and on some level did not consider them “real” Germans.

When I look at my own experience in a new homeland, I realize how privileged I have been. For me it was conscious emigration, the choosing of a new home. And still it has not always been easy. I wonder what it is like for this generation of people who are now coming into Germany from other cultures. They are not here by their own choice; they do not have the option to return. How can they integrate into this new society and still preserve their own heritage? How will our shared German heritage exclude those that don’t share the same background? Will German society be able to adapt to becoming multicultural?

**International Gathering 2017**

Another large theme at the recent Netzwerktreffen was the preparation for the 2017 International Gathering that will take place in Germany, September 10 – 17. The location is Königsdorf, Bavaria, 50km south of Munich, at Jugendsiedlung Hochland www.jugendsiedlung-hochland.de. Close to thirty people are working towards this event, and there is a lot of energy in this planning group, even now, twenty months before the event. I decided to join and become a member of the subgroup that is working on “goals and content” for the Gathering. It feels exciting to step into this role as my adult German self, and also a bit intimidating. There is still a part of me who feels that I am twenty-three years old and don’t really have anything to say to this group of “experienced adults.” I also know that it is time, and that I am ready to step into this role.

When I learned some details about the location of the 2017 gathering, I felt how this place can give us the opportunity to be with its varied history, to let it inform our interactions, to inspire us to build bridges between our varying cultures and ethnicities. Jugendsiedlung Hochland is a rural youth camp in a location that has recorded history back to the year 815. In its long history, the camp has hosted both Hitler Youth groups as well as holocaust survivors preparing to emigrate to Israel.

I do feel that at this time both the Netzwerk and WGC have come of age, are embodying their organizational North Shields, and that, therefore, the 2017 International Gathering is an opportunity to focus on tending the world that our children will inherit from us, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

At this time in history it is imperative that we work towards belonging to the Earth as a whole, rather than just to our own individual countries or cultures. This is not easy, but as Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” With our skills as midwives to change, transition, and transformation, let us be that group of thoughtful, committed citizens.
WHAT IS WILD: ECOTONES!

Jennifer J. Wilhoit

Prologue
When I first heard the term “ecotone” at the beginning of my graduate studies, I inexplicably felt like I had come home. The concept of “extraordinary richness in a transition place” resonated deeply within me. I love word games and conceptual challenges, making sense of my experience of life through metaphor, simile, and abstract ideas. Somehow even back then when midlife had not descended upon me in irreversible cycles of physical, relational and ideological changes, I knew that using the term “ecotones” as a representative for the special diversity and significance of particular aspects of life as a human held great potential.

Finding Rich Wildness Within
What is wild within me is the need to submerge in beauty. To see the twinkling lights, numbering in the thousands, that dance on the water’s surface when sun fire meets ocean saltwater. Fondling handmade crafts from places afar. Hearing the bamboo rattle in the breeze.

What is wild within me is the calling to serve. People who are dying, and the people who have loved and lost. Stepping in to lend a hand, or better yet, two ears that live in the heart, listening for the place where sensibility breaks and sorrow floods forth.

What is wild within me is the undeniable flood of love, like a beloved companion, that I feel toward all that is nonhuman. Tree. Wind. Ocean. Sun. Rain, the tapping of the sapsucker’s bill against the moss-covered bark outside my window.

Journals, essays, memoir snippets, even scholarly articles, or presentation proposals. Business newsletters or the simple stream-of-consciousness blog.
What is wild within me is the need to create. Hands in paper mulch, fingers on knitting needles, fingertips smeared with the thick, pasty crimson of an oil pastel, arms moving in rhythm, warping the loom. An idea that grows and deepens, taking shape, details becoming clearer.

What is wild within me is the passion for story. Oliver’s poem: “tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.” Despair, sure. But also - joy, hope, abidance, peace. The way in which transformation has occurred and new shapes have formed out of the choking ashes of agony. The whisper of grace that rounds the curve of transition, blanketing with a warm glow all that was upended.

“Ecotone” refers to a particular region of the landscape: a transition zone, a place where two or more distinct biological communities come together. An ecotone is especially rich in biodiversity because it contains species from each natural area that converges there. The ecotone between the forest and meadow might contain small grasses, a few scattered saplings, wildflowers, and some blown leaf litter. They are juicy areas of confluence. An ecotone is not one natural area or the other; it is bits of both. We can also think about ecotones as: edges, boundaries, zones of confluence, borders, transition zones, areas of overlap. Sometimes it is difficult to determine where one biome ends and the next begins; these areas can be so gradual, so incredibly subtle. They are not the black line marking a boundary on a map. Ecotones exist where natural communities have merged together over space (and time, of course); the term, then, is largely a spatial referent. It is the union, the seam, between one and the other – the place that is whole, in and of itself.

Finding Rich Wildness “Out There”?

What is wild outside of me is not just that from which I can walk away and imagine I might be separate from . . . like leaving the edge of the surf, or descending the mountain after a fast, or leaving a friend’s company to return home . . . I know I am not separate from these others, these places, these things. Yet moving away so that they are no longer immediately present with me in a tangible form often places me back in the illusion of separation.

The truth is, we are interconnected with Him, Her, The Other, That, This, whether we are joined in time and space or not.

Finding Rich Wildness Within the Ecotone

But it is this ecotone between self and other, between me and all that I perceive as separate from me, that is the richest place of wildness. For it is this transition place where things becomes seamless. Where the ambiguities of self and other reside in tangled wildness.

Take for example, the recent news of my father’s death. The estrangement since childhood. The layers and layers of ever-deepening forgiveness work, including a night walk in the desert under full moon when I begged for him to respond and he was so. conspicuously. silent. The way the news of his death a few weeks ago was a shock, and how Grief arose: sharp, consuming, conflicting with relief. The final door on all possibility for direct relationship closed. Losing a parent – the archetypal wild expression of genetic interconnection.

We take people outside and we guide them. In whatever places – remote or inhabited, wild or tamed – that we actually go with them, we understand that the land will have lessons.

That a creosote bush can sing the sweetest, calming lullaby to a faster on Day Three. That poison is also medicine. That The Ancients can gather in a circle down below the faster’s spot and dance in a blaze of color just before sunset. That rocks, ants, boughs, cacti, and the very soil herself offer themselves to the faster – and to the guides – in a moment of pure reflection.

But it is not just Nature mirroring us. Or, us mirroring those who have sought and returned. It is the ecotone between these that is activated. It is grace and soul and all the earthly stuff converging in images that we choose to focus on. It is divine magic. It is holy and makes us whole.

It is when we acknowledge the relationship between self and perceived other that we step deeply into the ecotone.
of interconnection. For the natural world is always there. Always speaking. It is when we decide to listen, take time to release our daily patterns of living — shelter, food, human company, work, reading — that we open our ears to really hear, that we open our eyes to truly see, that we take into our wet bellies the succulent taste of our own wild selves, in harmony and relationship and conversation with the wild beings we experience around us.

It is the convergence place where we let in all that is and we give all we are to this Great Earth.

And when we do, we are all made more alive.

This is the thing about ecotones. They are especially rich in biodiversity. They are the transition zone that is a place especially hospitable to life that can thrive on the bounty they contain. In fact, some species live in the center of the ecotone — in that juicy soup where there is all this coming and going by the species that primarily reside in one or the other contributing biome. That is, the ecotone is HOME to some species.

And this is beautiful because it is where we — as guides, coaches, therapists, naturalists, ceremony crafters, nature-lovers, healers, and listeners — abide! We live in the transition zone of the ceremony.

The basecamp where guides eat chocolate, sing, sleep; the basecamp where flutes and prayers are lifted up in the fasters’ names; the basecamp where sacred and profane meet; the basecamp where trainings and rest, where stargazing and nightwalks, where laughter and tears — fears and hopes - live in proportion to the whole community.

It is this basecamp that is held between severance and incorporation . . . it is this basecamp that is the liminal space . . . It is this basecamp that is the ecotone in the rites of passage work.

Too, our annual fasts are ecotones — transitions — to remind, heal, and teach us.

Our work in the world outside of formal quest times is loaded with transitions. If we can relax into the dis-ease of the evershifting life that is Life, we can find peace and beauty in these very potent places of incongruence, of change.

My experience in formal quest and rites of passage settings is that we are in the wildest and wooliest transition place of all when we allow inner and outer to converge. It is in the mirroring and reflecting and shifts (i.e., ecotones) that wild becomes Wild.

Epilogue

The Wildest place I know is that rugged terrain of inner/outer landscape, where Nature (outer) meets Nature (inner) and they are so inextricably fused that one cannot be separated or teased out or coerced into its own identity. They are richer and more whole when they are allowed to reside in untamed wildness. At age twenty-three, an inexplicable dream of powerful beige and sage rolling mountains I’d never seen before meets ten years later with an actual landscape: the unbelievably precise image in tangible form brings the dream image flooding back. They are identical: a dream depicting a foreign landscape that a decade later is lived experience. This is the Wild Ecotone.
The interplay of difference and commonality has been at the core of our work as guides from the beginning – the differences between individuals, life phases, genders, and cultures and the common core of human nature we all share – and still we carry these questions, as we should. I want to point briefly on some questions of diversity and rites of passage. This is just a beginning. I don’t pretend to have a final answer, but I sure am interested in the conversation.

A Universal Model of Transitions and Rites of Passage

Our work draws on the observation that all transitions move from severance to a threshold phase and on toward incorporation. If we see these three stages as the deep structure of all transitions, it also makes sense to see them expressed in the structure of all rituals and myths related to life transitions. It seems that the shape of rites of passage is universal. However, some recent anthropological evidence does not support the universality of these three stages. In his book *Deeply Into the Bone*, Ronald Grimes has pulled together this evidence. Critiquing the view that rites of passage are universal, he comes to the conclusion that the familiar shape of rites of passage can be found in some cultures but not all.

It may be that claims of universality reflect an all-too-familiar pattern of projecting the views of a privileged group (in this case, dominant Western culture) onto marginalized groups: “We are all like us,” proclaim those in power. This pattern has been recognized in many areas of multicultural and diversity studies. The upshot is that perhaps we should speak of rites of passage as being more particular than universal. Personally, it makes me feel a bit more humble about projecting my views onto all cultures.

Two Shapes of Rites of Passage

Even more challenging is the claim that the three-stage model of rites of passage described by Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and, I would say, most modern wilderness rites of passage work, is based on one particular life transition. This model sees the initiate leaving home, the old phase of life, and all that is familiar; going alone to face
a trial and if found worthy, claiming a gift; and returning
to a new role and status. But rather than applying across
the board to all of us, some point out that this is the pattern
for initiating males into adulthood. As such, it will not fully
address the needs of women or people of any gender at
different life stages.

Bruce Lincoln in his book *Emerging from the Chrysalis*
and Abigail Brenner in her book *Women’s Rites of Passage*
summarize evidence that the SEPARATION-THRESHOLD-
REINCORPORATION model describes males’ transitions
into adulthood but not necessarily others’ transitions. They
argue that this well-known model exhibits a male-centric
bias and needs to be expanded. Cross-cultural studies of
girls’ rites of passage reveal that they are not sent away from
the village as boys are. Rather, they are taken by the elder
women into a special lodge, told stories and secrets and,
rather than being sent away, are held close. Lincoln makes
the case this way:

. . . Although women’s initiations regularly conform
to a three-part structure, the three stages cannot
accurately be described as separation, liminality [or
threshold –JD], reincorporation. Something different
seems to be at work, and in place of van Gennep’s
terms I would suggest three others: ENCLOSURE,
METAMORPHOSIS, and EMERGENCE. (Lincoln,

I like this framing a lot. I would only suggest that the middle
stage could also be called TRANSFORMATION. How might
a vision fast or wilderness rite of passage look in this model?
What new possibilities for the liminal or threshold phase
does this view open up?

Gender?

Feeling more deeply into this, I want to question the
gender-specific nature of these two models. If we do, indeed,
have two different models, do these need to be necessarily
tied to males and females? As a vision fast guide, I have
found that the first model fits really well for many people—
girls and women as well as boys and men. I have also seen
rites of passage for men, which fit the second model. In my
own experience, both models have been relevant at different
times. Furthermore, dividing us into male and female
ignores the many varied expressions of gender, which do not
fit easily in one of these two binary categories.

Conclusion

If there is value in both of these two models, our
question becomes which model fits this person at this time?
In practice, we may not do much differently on our trips, but
understanding the roots of our work brings greater potential.
While I find these two models helpful and while I appreciate
the critical thinking about their hidden assumptions, I find
it even more interesting to turn to the initiates, themselves,
and ask, “What’s happening for you, what is your truth, and
what do you need now?”

Now I suggest we come full circle in this exploration.
A deeper look into these two models suggests they are
variations of a deeper form. At their root, they share the
same three-stage structure (as Lincoln and others observed).
All initiates are separated from the village and, more
importantly, from their previous life phase and identity.
They all must enter a world apart from their ordinary world,
a threshold or liminal phase. And they must return to a
world that is both the same and different for them; they
all are reborn. Whether we are “going out” to be alone in
solitude and “going in” to be held in intimate community,
we all seem to be enacting the universal shape of all rites of
passage.
Those of us who guide youth often say that you have to be insane to do what we do, so I thought I’d offer a helpful step-by-step guide for those of you who want to join us.

**Step 1: Go on a vision fast.**

It was 2005, and I had been teaching in a small, alternative high school program for just over a year. As an outdoor program in a public school, we needed creative ways to get our students out on wilderness trips without terrifying the school lawyers, so we had a “Memorandum of Understanding” with Washington State University 4-H. As long as all of our teachers were trained as 4-H Facilitators, then 4-H would cover our liability and insurance for our students to do outdoor activities as part of their curriculum.

In May, we received a flyer from 4-H announcing the start of a new program called “Rite of Passage.” As an already established 4-H club working with “at risk” youth, we knew that an intensive solo experience could be vital to our students’ personal growth. I volunteered to be the staff person sent to the training. Despite having read all the required material, I completely missed the fact that I would have to PARTICIPATE in my own vision fast prior to leading fasts with youth. When I arrived in August and met my guides and other participants, I had to do an immediate mental shift from “passive student” to “active participant.”

**Step 2: Get trained, and start guiding with youth . . . immediately.**

Being young, I jumped into guiding before I knew how terrifying it can be. I quickly arranged a 24-hour solo for my students on our school property. It was December, and there was a dusting of snow on the ground with periodic strong gusts of wind that threatened to topple smaller trees. I had a terrible head cold, and I had even encouraged my co-teacher to go on solo as well. This left me alone to do 100% of the work. With little to no training, I was operating off of vague memories from my own fast as well as dumb luck.

In spite of my untrained efforts, every student had a powerful experience. I knew that I needed more training to lead vision fasts safely, so I attended a Mirroring Training through 4-H and supported in base camp during our first full fast done as part of the school curriculum. Then, just eleven months after my own initial fast, I was again overcome by blissful ignorance and guided my first full fast with another new guide under the watchful eye of my mentor, friend, and soon to be co-guide, Larry Hobbs.

**BONUS TIP #1: Choose “at risk” youth as your target audience.**

Although working with youth of any type brings challenges, I have a special love for youth who are traditionally underserved in wilderness settings. I enjoy taking out a group of kids who have never experienced darkness, get terrified by silence, have never seen the Milky Way, and don’t want to get their one pair of good “kicks” dirty. Add to that the fact that most of them arrive with little to no camping experience, no outdoor gear, no transportation support, and little to no funding, and you’ve just tripled the amount of work you get to do before getting them out! Asking all of your friends and family for scholarship support, gear donations, or donated time driving youth year after year is a great way to start moving yourself closer to that edge of insanity.

**BONUS TIP #2: Align your youth fasts with both a government organization and a school district.**

Since traditional rites of passage are no longer the norm in modern society, it’s often hard enough to explain to your friends that you take youth out into the wilderness to starve them for 3 days and nights. Convincing the lawyers and administration of a government organization and school district in a risk-averse culture is absolute madness! Now, we are getting somewhere!

Thanks to the efforts of Larry and a then 4-H employee, the legal jargon was all in place with 4-H by the time I arrived in 2005. Continuing that relationship with 4-H for the past 10+ years has taken dedicated commitment to following all protocols and procedures. Learning to speak in political terms and jumping through legal hoops help us question our sanity on a seasonal basis when working with them.

As if working with 4-H wasn’t enough, I decided it would
be fun to work the vision fast into the curriculum of a public school. This required an entirely new set of protocols so that we could prove to the administration that the students were being “supervised at all times.” The relationship with the school district has taught me to dance between the lines of empowering the students as adult initiates, while maintaining required boundaries and safety for them. Being both their classroom teacher and their vision fast guide is a dual role that isn’t for everyone. I must empower their story, even when their choices could threaten my continued employment with the school district.

Step 3: Make sure everything that could go wrong does go wrong.

This is my favorite step as it continually challenges my illusion that I am still sane. In nearly 10 years of guiding youth fasts, I have had the pleasure of experiencing a myriad of emotions directed at my students who are out fasting: pride, joy, anger, disappointment, fear, frustration, hopelessness, and surprise. Each fast, I say to myself, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t put my heart through this again.” There is always at least once when I question their decisions, get angry at them for “giving up” (my story, not theirs), or fear for their lives and what would happen to me if something happens to them.

A constant struggle is solos turning social. Sometimes it’s just for a few minutes, while other participants have joined sites (and hopefully not bodies) for a full night or a couple of days. Once we had a student visit several other participants’ sites to collect money and then walk three miles to the nearby town to buy burgers for everyone. Mirroring his story without wanting to kill him as his teacher was a particularly unique challenge. Some of my students are current or former drug users, so getting high is a fear for me, especially on school trips. We have had to evacuate mid-solos due to a forest fire that swept through our base camp and then relocate 2 hours away – a venture that literally took all day to gather them, transport them (while still “on solo”), and then relocate them in a completely separate ecosystem. Students have come back several hours late on the last morning of the fast, which nearly gave me a heart attack, or come back dangerously dehydrated because they wanted a greater challenge. This is not something government organizations, school districts, or parents want to hear. Over and over again, my stress levels got challenged, and I began to lose my sanity.

My favorite stressor is when a youth participant goes “missing” and hasn’t checked their buddy pile at the appropriate time. This became especially terror-producing for me after I had a youth participant die during a solo in 2009. This experience was not during a formal vision fast but a 2-day solo of a 19-day wilderness trip; however, it happened during a period of time when I had already been a vision fast guide for three years. I thought I would never be able to guide again, but one month later, I found myself guiding another youth fast. I couldn’t have done it, were I not guiding with Larry, who provided the stability and support I needed to face my tremendous fear of losing another participant. Although I have done considerable work around this tragedy, it is a constant awareness I carry with me on every youth vision fast. My insanity was nearly complete.

Step 4: Enjoy watching them try to incorporate into a world not yet ready for them.

This can be accomplished to varying degrees directly proportionate to the level of support and understanding in the home environment from which these youth participants come. I’ve heard of families that help their youth find a vision fast and participate in ceremonies pre- and post-the experience, but I have yet to see this happen with my students. Many of my students’ families have no idea what their kids are off doing and are frustrated that they are losing their help at home. Some of this has shifted as I’ve learned how to integrate families into the Incorporation phase, but we still have limited participation from families upon their return. The “support system” usually ends up being myself and the other students who have also completed a vision fast. I get to be the one to watch them struggle, and sometimes crash and burn, upon their reentry. Even so, I still believe in the power of the vision fast and take more youth out each year.

Step 5: Love them.

This is the most important step to completing your transition into insanity. By falling in love with your participants and their courage, you subsequently forget over and over again how incredibly idiotic it is to guide fasts with youth.

Congratulations! You have arrived at the edge of insanity!
A Mask, a Mouse, a Bear, a Cow, and an Eagle
Kent Pearce

(A familiarity with the Jumping Mouse story will be helpful when listening to this three-part tale.*}

Two questions immediately glared at me the first time that I prepared to teach the Medicine Wheel and tell the Jumping Mouse story. “Where is Bear?” and “How does the hero Jumping Mouse bring his gift back to his People?” I reasoned that on his medicine-wheel-hero’s-journey the Mouse (south) would naturally meet Bear (west), Buffalo (north), and Eagle (east), but that was not Hyemeyohsts Storm’s version of the story. I wondered how Wolf had snuck in? I also knew that many traditional people do not always present “outsiders” with a clear picture. Figuring that this must be the case, I extracted Wolf, inserted Bear, and confidently began telling my version of the story.

Many years later I told Steven Foster what I had done, and he broke out laughing and exclaimed, “You caught him! You caught him!” Confused, I asked, “Caught who?” “Storm,” was his reply. “Storm is the Wolf. He took Bear out and placed himself into the story.”

Oh, Sacred DNA, tell me what you have to say.
Oh, Sacred DNA, tell me what you have to say.
Listen. Listen.

These are the words of the medicine song that greeted me at the threshold of my 2003 Renewal Fast walkabout. I was consciously preparing my DNA to return to Africa from its sixty thousand-year hero’s journey. I planned to do this the next fall at a heart-shaped stone pile when I attended the 2nd International Guides Gathering in South Africa.
As I rattled the sun up on the second morning of my walkabout, I was surprised to see its first rays illumine a small head protruding from a partially zipped pocket of my backpack. Instinctively, I exclaimed, “Good morning, Jumping Mouse!” Bright eyed, he replied, “Don’t you want to know what happened to me after I got the name Eagle?”

I spent the next two days wandering and pondering. Many times I experienced being a mouse who had heard a roar, and with the help of others, made his way to the side of a lake, said yes to the offer of medicine power, and jumped. The late afternoon of my third day found me staring at a towering, blank rock face unable to get Jumping Mouse back with his gift for his People. Stymied, I called out to the Ancestors for help. “Go out onto the Land” bellowed the silent reply.

I immediately headed for a friendly juniper. As I approached the tree, I was greeted to the entire skeleton of a headless cow, emerging from the dirt and the sage. Respecting the life whose journey had ended at this spot, I quietly asked if I could have some bone-medicine power. “Only if it is for your People” came an answer that touched me to my marrow. As I pondered which part to receive, the generative one spoke to me.

When I returned from the juniper, I immediately placed the heavy pelvis high up on the rock face. The shadows cast by the low hanging sun sharply defined the deep eye sockets of the horned Mask that benevolently looked down upon me. Transfixed, I reverently began to sing the words to the song that had resonated in my heart ever since they greeted me at my walkabout threshold:

Oh, Sacred DNA, tell me what you have to say.
Oh, Sacred DNA, tell me what you have to say.
Listen. Listen.

Eagle soared higher and higher. From his lofty vantage point he scanned the course of the Sacred River, whose source was the Sacred Medicine Lake, a lake that reflected all of the World. His sharp eyes could see tiny specks scurrying about in the bushes far below. He surveyed the vast prairie and the foothills of the Sacred Mountain. Looking again at the beautiful lake nestled at the base of the sacred peak, Eagle began to wonder how he might be perceived by the World.

Quickly descending, he landed on a flat rock next to the lake. Peering into the glassy water he saw the face of a mouse with the eyes of a buffalo and a bear grew closer and closer. At the moment that his beak met the whiskered nose on the surface of the lake from which he drank, the Voice asked his question, “Are you an eagle dreaming that you are a mouse, or are you a mouse dreaming that you are an eagle?” “YES!” sprang the spontaneous answer. “You have a new name,” said the Voice. “You are Wun!”

Wun flew back to his People as fast as his legs could carry him. When he reached his village, a young one asked him, “What is this roaring in my ears?” “What you hear is the sound of the Sacred River,” he replied. “What is a river?” asked the young one. “The Sacred River is much too magnificent to be described by words,” smiled Wun. “You must experience it for yourself. Take the path toward the roar. Listen carefully and the sound will lead you.”

Later that day, Wun gave a copy of The Trail to the Sacred Mountain by Steven Foster and Meredith Little to a dripping, wet one. As Wun gazed upon the wet one, gratefully hugging the handbook to her heart, a Voice whispered, “If you would you like to have some Medicine Power . . . Listen. Listen.”

*The story of Jumping Mouse can be found in the book Seven Arrows by Hyemeyohsts Storm and in the book The Roaring of the Sacred River by Steven Foster and Meredith Little.

** The mask is now the WGC Ancestor Mask.
The core of any rite of passage journey that takes place in nature is getting intimate with the inhabitants — rocks, sunlight on mountains, that particular creosote bush, coyotes — of the place where we ourselves are visitors. And that means slipping out of our habitual humanness, our driven and purposeful ways, and opening up to the likelihood that among these inhabitants are many wise and opinionated beings and that several of them have something important to tell us.

Or, in the words of Francis Ponge, the French poet and chronicler of the mythic existence of ordinary things, we must allow our world to “disarrange” us. Ponge believed that being so penetrated, so disarranged, by the world was the only right way of seeing. It engaged a person in the act of regarding the things of the world not as inferiors that she must somehow corral for her use and understanding, but as equals capable of amazing her as they revealed the many facets of their particular selfhood.

To busy, focused adults negotiating life today, Ponge’s advice probably sounds naïve, romantic. Allowing the world to disarrange us is just the opposite of what we aim to do with Facebook, Twitter, Outlook, our iPhone, our computer, our GPS, and all the other things we use to arrange the minutiæ of our existence and then report to others, many of them strangers, on how well we’re doing with our skillful management. To allow ourselves to be disarranged by things would be to submit to a kind of helplessness. Instead of agreeing to be penetrated by the world, we want to be the ones to penetrate it by controlling, organizing, and managing it.

But those of us who have slipped into intimacy with the natural world know the allure of such disarrangement. On all my programs, whether it’s a two-hour “story walk” in New York’s Central Park, an hour-long Earth Exchange at a gas fracking site, or a ten-day youth quest, I schedule time for participants to make at least one foray into the land, so they can discover for themselves how profound is the experience of communicating with the rooted, winged, mineral, and other inhabitants. As they get up to go on their first walk, I
can see the expressions of doubt on several faces: \textit{Talk to a tree? It might work for some people, but it won’t happen for me.}

And then, invariably, they return, and they have a story, and they have been profoundly changed. And from that time forth they will know that they can find in nature guidance, wisdom, and an affirmation of who they are that is both stunningly exact and achingly tender.

Here are some tips I offer to those who are heading out to seek a new relationship with the land around them:

1. Adventure forth with your imagination, not with your intellect. If a tree reminds you of a dragon, let it be a dragon. If it tells you to be as patient as a stump, seriously consider obeying.

2. Go with meditative expectation, as if something surprising could happen at any minute. It will.

3. Be patient. Your attention will wander. At some point you’re sure to decide you’ve had enough and it’s time to go. Give it another few minutes. And perhaps another few minutes after that.

4. Be there, just be there. Remind yourself that you don’t have to produce any results. You don’t have to fix anything. You’re not here to receive enlightenment or have an experience you can tell your friends about later. You don’t need some kind of psychological breakthrough.

5. Walk, sit, look with your memory. If you’re in a wounded place and you’re suddenly seized with recollections of your lonely, wounded childhood, acknowledge them. Let the land stand for your childhood, the broken tree for your broken family, or your mother who died too young. Talk to them about what you’re recalling. Talk out loud. Doing so can heal your relationship with the past.

6. Be with your place not as an expert in your field but as a novice sitting at the feet of a marvelous teacher.

7. Respect your own experience. Whatever you feel, maintain an attitude of openness to yourself as much as to the place. Allowing yourself to be disarranged by nature, a shift precipitated by the willingness to meet it with curiosity and attention, may be the first step to falling in love not just with it, but with all of life.
I’ve been wondering what we mean by “initiation.” There seem to be several possibilities. If, as guides, we say we’re offering initiation experiences, what do we mean? And what is the relationship between initiation and rites of passage?

In recent decades, the Western world has rediscovered the vital importance of initiation. We’ve recognized that over a span of many centuries we had lost something essential on the journey to becoming fully human. We’re remembering there’s something crucial that children need at puberty to guide them into a healthy adolescence. We’re remembering there’s something young men (and even middle-aged men) need in order to help them attain what is sometimes called “true manhood.” We’re remembering there’s something young women (and even middle-aged women) need to enable them to embrace the full promise of womanhood.

Most generally, I see three different meanings of “initiation,” corresponding to the beginning, middle, and end of a journey of personal change:

• **inception**: the start of a process of transformation from one state of being to another; the first step of a journey (at its root, “initiation” means to begin, to enter upon)

• **the journey itself**: the process of transformation from one state to another, a journey that might last months or years; being betwixt and between the old and new, in limbo, a liminal state; the journey includes practices and ceremonies to quicken the transformation and often instruction in mysteries and ritual knowledge

• **the final passage**: the shift into a new state of being; the completion of the journey

When we speak about initiation, we might be referring to any one of these three aspects of the journey.

But, to make things a bit more complicated (it’s unavoidable), there seem to be two very different kinds of transitions people refer to as initiations:

• **social changes** (including vocational, religious, therapeutic, and academic): acquiring a new social role (such as married, parent, debutante, divorced, retired) or religious status (confirmation and other attainments of religious majority) or religious role (novice, monk, priest, priestess) or academic standing (freshman, graduate, PhD candidate, associate professor, dean) or chronological/biological state (maiden, mother, crone) or therapeutic status (in a healing process, in recovery, healed) or acquiring new membership or a new role in a social group, fraternity or sorority, gang, trade union, or secret society

• **psychospiritual transformations**: major shifts in one’s existential place in the world and the accompanying changes in consciousness; death-rebirth passages; what Mircea Eliade referred to as “a basic change in existential condition,” such as major life-stage passages (for example, birth, attainment of self-awareness, puberty, start of true adulthood or elderhood, death), spiritual conversions or illuminations (satori, enlightenment, encounters with the sacred or divine, wrestling with angels), other experiences that change your world (first experience of sex, romance, ESP, appreciating the difference between soul and Spirit, experiencing the cosmos as conscious and intelligent, or the implacable reality of death)

These are two very different categories of transitions. Most social changes do not entail significant psychospiritual shifts. You can get married without any fundamental change in your consciousness or world. You can faithfully go through all steps of an “initiation ritual” without being deeply changed in any way whatsoever, even if at the end you’re given new robes or a new title, and people slap you on the back and treat you differently.

Conversely, most psychospiritual transformations entail no changes in social status (or vocational, religious, or academic standing). Although you might be thunderstruck by seeing the face of God for the first time or by your first encounter with the mysteries of your soul, perhaps no one notices or treats you any different — and your boss doesn’t give you a promotion, and no university confers upon you an honorary degree.

But some transitions are both social and psychospiritual; or one kind of change triggers the other. For example, after giving birth, perhaps the world is truly a
different place, your consciousness permanently shifted. Or you’re wounded in combat, receive a purple star or bronze medal (a change in military status), but also have your first indelible experience of the evil of war or the reality of mortality, a profound shift that permanently alters your life. Or, after your first time in space, you’re inducted into the guild of veteran astronauts but, like Edgar Mitchell, you’ve also had a profound experience of Earth as a living being, an experience that forever changes you and your experience of what the world is. Or, as a Buddhist monk, you experience satori, a Roshi recognizes this, and you’re asked to be a dharma teacher.

When we speak of initiation of either of the two kinds, we might mean the inception of the journey, the journey itself, or the completion of the journey. So, doing the math, that makes at least six sorts of things we might mean when we say “initiation.” For example, the inception of a social-religious journey: “There’ll be an initiation ceremony for Peter when he enters the seminary.” The process of a psychospiritual initiation journey: “By the fall of 1914, Carl Jung was several months into his multi-year confrontation with the unconscious.” A social-academic final passage: “Carlin has graduated from art school; Sunday is the initiation (commencement) ceremony.” Both a social and psychospiritual passage: “During her 13th year, Rebecca and her family joined several other families at a forest camp for a weeklong puberty rite.”

The long ceremony of the vision fast can help facilitate or mark any of the six kinds of initiations — or, in some cases, none of them — depending on such things as the intent of the guides and participants, the life stage and psychospiritual preparedness of the participant, and the design of the ceremony.
With most psychospiritual transformations, the passage is the fruit of a process or journey, often a rather long one of several months or more. No process, no passage. As guides, do we accompany people through their entire journey — or only mark its end with a ceremony? With many social transitions, in contrast, there might be little to no process (e.g., a wedding with no engagement period; or a weekend initiation ritual with little or no preparation). Major life passages usually require a lengthy initiatory process, usually the entire preceding life stage.

One last distinction regarding initiations: There are two kinds of circumstances — having to do with the agent of change — in which people undergo transformations of any of the six kinds:

• Mystery changes you, shifts your psychospiritual center of gravity, sometimes with the supplemental support of an initiation guide or an entheogenic substance (for the word Mystery, you can substitute life, soul, Spirit, psyche, world, etc.)

• another person changes you or confers the change upon you: an initiator, guru, priest, rabbi, academic dean, gang leader, superior officer, ritual guide, or elder (“I now pronounce you husband and wife;” “You are now a man;” “Welcome to the sisterhood,” etc.) — or perhaps you confer it upon yourself (e.g., by crossing a physical threshold)

Major life passages, such as attaining true adulthood, are always a matter of Mystery shifting our psychospiritual center of gravity. We cannot do this for ourselves, and no one can do it for us, including through a rite of passage.

When it comes to psychospiritual transformations, rites of passage are ceremonial ways of marking or celebrating (not causing) the psychospiritual shift brought about by Mystery. In contrast, with rites of passage for social changes, the shift in social status is not merely marked by the rite but caused by the rite and conferred by the officiant of the rite (or by a whole community).

At Animas Valley Institute, we use the word “initiation” primarily to refer to one kind of psychospiritual transformation, the one we call Soul Initiation, by which we mean either the process (“the journey of Soul Initiation,” which usually spans several months or years) or the completion of that process (the passage of Soul Initiation).

The passage of Soul Initiation is only one of several major life passages possible in a full human life, but one experienced by perhaps only 10% of contemporary Western people. This is the passage from psychological late adolescence to true adulthood, a psychospiritual transformation earned in part by success with the tasks of the archetypal Wanderer, but ultimately brought about and conferred by Mystery. Ideally this passage is also recognized, marked, celebrated, and supported by a community, perhaps partly by way of a rite of passage.

Every major life passage is a psychospiritual transformation in two ways: It is a completion of one initiatory process (the previous stage) and an inception of a new one (the next stage). Puberty is an initiation in this sense — the end of childhood and the inception of adolescence. This is also true for eco-awakening (a first visceral experience of the world as thoroughly animate and of ourselves as native members of such a world). And for Soul Initiation. Birth, too, of course. And the attainment of conscious self-awareness, which occurs around the fourth birthday and which van Gennep referred to as Naming. Following Soul Initiation, there are (by my count) four additional major life passages possible, each of which can be thought of as psychospiritual initiations, the final of these being death.
In our immersion in the vision fast ceremony, it is easy to forget that rites of passage come in many different forms. This is the story of a rite of passage that was totally unexpected.

* * * *

I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. After a few years of periodically following up leads from friends and reading some articles, I was off to the Peruvian jungle to participate in a 10-day ayahuasca ceremony, ingesting five disgusting doses of the hallucinogen in a far-off land with people and leaders that I didn’t know. (I later learned that the correct translation for this “ceremony” is actually “purge.”) It reminded me of when I first went to my two-week training with Steven and Meredith on the advice of a friend and no knowledge of what faced me.

But new research at Johns Hopkins Medical Center, New York University, and other mainstream institutions, on the effectiveness of hallucinogens in transforming the experience of terminal cancer patients, people with depression and addiction, and the rest of humanity had been calling me. Western Union wouldn’t forward money to those hosting the ceremony, saying that they, Western Union, would not participate in what they saw clearly as fraud, so I put some cash in my pocket, bought a plane ticket, and headed South.

With the help of my unseen hosts, I arrived in the Amazonian frontier town of Pucallpa, met my fellow participants, drove for four hours over muddy, potholed roads, traveled an hour up a huge, fast-flowing muddy river in a canoe, and arrived at the pristine, forest ceremonial site (make that purge site!) of Don José Campos. As evening set in, we gathered in a large, circular, open-sided structure, a maloca, and were given minimal information. I was the only participant who had not done this before. We were told that the effects of the “medicine” would last about 4-5 hours, and that after an hour one could take a second dose if the first dose was not sufficiently effective. I took a second dose and was gone for over 12 hours. I had anticipated a little nausea like my experiences with mescaline, LSD, and peyote in the 60s, a sense of loving and belonging and singing “kum ba yah” together in sweet surrender. But it was completely terrifying! People were throwing up, I had lost any sense of time, space and self, and I was sick, terribly sick the whole time. I swore that if I lived through that first night that I would not ever touch the stuff again.

I did live through it and stayed for the remaining four ceremonies, terribly sick each time. After the extreme challenges of the first ceremony, I asked Don José what I could do to get through the next dose, and he said that I had the choice to take the medicine or not, but after that I could only pay attention to my breath, relax, and surrender. Somehow that advice, curiosity, stubbornness, and some powerfully healing “visitations” gave me the strength and courage to continue.

One such powerful experience focused on my relationship with my older brother. Although we have become closer over the years, I experienced our growing up together as very difficult, centered on intense competition for the limited love available in our family. He was older, more skilled, and inevitably won those competitions, which left me angry and isolated from him. In the ayahuasca vision, I was about twelve years old and looking at a profile of his face. As I watched, he turned slightly toward me and looked at me out of the corner of his eye with absolute love. I had never seen this in him before, and I wept then, and I weep now as I write this.

It was only on the way back home in the midst of massive, holiday airport crowds that I realized that I had just taken part in a traditional three-stage rite of passage. I had severed from all that I knew in my homeland of the Pacific Northwest (including making out a will). I had been immersed in a threshold of terror and dismemberment, and I was now beginning to incorporate my experience into my “normal” world. I was amazed that in the face of holiday madness, I was, without effort, breathing and relaxed!

My intention, written before the time in Peru, was to “experience connection that will transform my isolation and...
fear. I am prepared to go through what is needed to move beyond this disconnection and use this to guide my life from here on out.”

As I sit here today, two months into incorporation, I see the challenges and miracles that have already been happening in both my inner and outer worlds. I called my brother and told him of my vision in the Amazon and wept again as I retold the story. It was a new and scary experience for us, and he responded with a sweetness and connection that was unknown in our previous relationship. I have also given a talk in my small mountain town entitled, “Climate Change, Sustainability, and a Life of Work in the Wilds: Facts, Stories and Dubious Moments,” which was personal and vulnerable and opened a new connection with my community. I am now writing this to share with you, my larger guide community. This incorporation time probably sounds familiar to many of you from your own experiences with rites of passage integration. And already, I can feel the pull toward doing more ayahuasca ceremony, of staying in altered states and ceremony, in spite of the terror and sickness. Thankfully, the wisdom of my teachers, to not linger in the world of the threshold, prevails. So I am allowing incorporation the fullness of a year to integrate all the teachings of “mother ayahuasca” (the same advice we offer our vision fast participants). I will then let what serves at that time emerge into the next step in the larger rites of passage of life.

I come away from this ceremony with so much, and more will certainly be revealed. I see that rites of passage are all around us in a huge variety of forms. I see more deeply the importance of ceremony, which “…lifts up crises and events and makes them sacred, tapping the inherent wisdom of these experiences rather than just surviving them.” Without the ceremonial container of rites of passage, life just becomes a series of mundane events, lacking the deep, personal meaning, wisdom, and guidance possible in ceremony. This is true for the ceremony of the Vision Fast, the ceremony of Ayahuasca, births, deaths, marriages, divorces, wars, and all the things that cry out for meaning during our lives. As I navigate this incorporation time, I am left feeling as though I am in a graduate course in Wisdom, Gratitude and Surrender, living into this new life that has been called forth from intention and ceremony.
A SIMPLE, PRIMAL CHALLENGE

Robert Wagner

Find out what happens when you say, “I’ll take this watch.”

Since my first vision quest eighteen years ago, I’ve made a commitment to go out into the wilderness every year alone and fast, typically for three days and nights. This sacred time gives me the opportunity to contemplate my life and to renew my commitment to my life’s purpose. But this year I did something different. Inspired by a teenage experience as an Eagle Scout and perhaps by that pivotal line in so many adventure movies, “I’ll take this watch!”, I decided to create a primal challenge: to build a fire at sunset and keep it burning until sunrise.

I also committed to three guidelines:
1. I would use only one match and dry wood shavings to light my fire.
2. I would have a legal fire, which meant waiting until the beginning of the rainy season.
3. I would burn only wood I brought in. On my way into the mountains, I stopped by a friend’s house and stacked two rows of split wood into the back of my Jeep. After contemplating it for a few moments, I stuffed in a couple more logs, muttering, “I hope this is enough!”

The place I chose for my vigil was on a ledge deep in the forest a couple of miles from any paved road. Since the forecast called for rain and temperatures in the low 30s, I
brought full rain gear and layers of warm clothing, as well as a tarp to cover the wood. I also brought two gallons of water and some emergency food. As with any solo adventure, I told a friend where I would be and promised to call as soon as I was safely out of the woods.

My vigil would start at sunset (6:04 PM) and last until sunrise (6:45 AM). As the starting time approached, I organized my gear, stacked the wood under the tarp, cleared an old stone fire ring, and proceeded to stage my ceremony fire. Then, as the daylight faded, I lit some sage and smudged myself in the smoke before reading aloud the “Blessings of the Seven Directions.” Finally, I took my match and struck it across the side of the empty matchbox. As it flamed up, I carefully placed it in the center of the fire. The flame caught, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My vigil had begun.

At first I focused easily, gauging the size of the fire to keep it strong without using too much wood—and the vigil seemed easy as well. But after what was at least a couple of hours, I checked my watch and realized it had actually been only 45 minutes. So I stashed the watch. This would be tougher than I thought.

As it got really dark, it was mesmerizing to sit and gaze into a fire, watching the flames dance. My thoughts wandered into my past and then into my future, only to be rudely interrupted by an intense inhalation of smoke as the wind shifted. So I found myself sitting, kneeling, standing, walking, and even dancing around my fire. As the temperature continued to fall, I felt it on my backside, so often I rotated away from the fire to warm it up. Not-so-profound questions like, “What the hell am I doing here?” crossed my mind.

I’m not a late-night person, and it was probably near midnight when fatigue began to win me over. Sleep was a risk, for if I slept too long, the fire would go out, but eventually I didn’t have a choice. So I added a few extra logs and reluctantly lay down next to the fire. It was probably only an hour before I awoke with a start. The fire was low, but with a few deep breaths it was back to a rich glow.

I now felt a deep sense of commitment to this fire and to my life. What really mattered came to the forefront of my thoughts—my daughter, my girlfriend, my life’s work. Clarity came in the glow of the fire. I was grateful, and yet I realized I don’t really take the time to stop and reflect on my life as often as I’d wish. I would get lost in such thoughts until the fire called out once again: Feed me!

Around 2:00 AM, I guess, I felt a few drops that became a light rain. I cursed as I pulled out my rain gear and put a few more logs on the fire. Honestly, trying to stay awake and tend a fire in the middle of a cold, rainy night is not fun. As the rain continued, I dozed off, and this time I awoke to gently falling snow. It was the first snow of the year. My fire was still burning.

As the blackness of the night gave way to a dark gray, I also noticed my wood was almost gone. This was going to be close. Snow continued to fall, and the early morning light gradually revealed my camp and the surrounding forest covered in a soft blanket of fresh snow. It was a beautiful scene to behold.

As I carefully placed my last log in the fire, I felt relieved that my watch was just about over. More important, I felt a renewed commitment to my life and a deep appreciation for those dear to me.
Before the sun shows his face above the rock covered hills
the last stars slip behind the thin veil of light
The birds sing to the not yet blue sky;
The color grey,
softly coated in bird song.

The long night lingers in my body
It is a slow waking into day

Praise be these words
Simple words
That lets be what was
to come alive again

Words, like the morning sun,
Arise from the rock hill of my body
Creating Life
Bringing Light.

Praise be the first touches of sunlight on the waiting rocks
Praise be the glow just beyond the hill
Praise be the first shout of light announcing his triumphant rise to morning
Praise be the first ray of light that falls upon my raised water jug
Praise be the drinking of sunlight
   the crystal coolness
   held in the mouth
   caressed by the tongue
Holy Water
There are two stories that I particularly like when it comes to understanding the power and intimacy of a "primordial dialogue." Of course, more important than understanding such revelatory communion with the natural world is experiencing it directly. Wilderness rites of passage and other nature-based awareness practices become obvious opportunities to touch the essential fabric of life, beyond cognition, beyond ego constructs, beyond habitual thinking and ways of relating to the world. Another deeper faculty comes into play, something core to our nature as human beings who are embedded in natural processes.

By primordial dialogue I mean a co-creative, emergent process with the natural world; we are both that which sees and senses and that which is seen and sensed by Nature. We are in it and part of it, as kindred spirits. We are not on the planet; we are the planet. The communication is direct, cell to cell, energy field to energy field. Time and distance do not matter. We are the ancient seas and the faraway stars, one continuous relationship in evolution.

The first story: Laurens van der Post, through his many books, exemplifies this living deeply into our unity with nature. Once, while in a restaurant in Kenya, van der Post heard the roar of a lion outside:

At once all conversation ceased and everyone listened with instinctive reverence as if to the voice of a god. The lion was close, and the immediacy of the sound came like lightning from its throat; the authority of the voice proclaimed as if on behalf of life itself, through the absence of fear and doubt in its utterance. Even when the lion’s announcement ended, we remained silent.
long enough to hear another lion answer at length from far away. Only when that answer ended the primordial dialogue did the men gasp, as if coming up for air out of an unfathomed deep themselves, and start to talk again. (Van der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*)

The “primordial dialogue” takes place not only between the two lions but also between the humans listening and these wild animals. As witnesses to “the voice of a god,” the men tap into their own “instinctive reverence” for wild nature, and so are temporarily silenced, the ordinary set aside. Such a powerful summons from the natural world invites the men – invites us – to deepen, to be touched by the intense aliveness and presence of the natural world.

The second story comes from Australia and recounts aboriginal skill in flint making. It’s a beautiful story about attunement in daily Aboriginal life. Let it land in your heart; let it be remembered in your own indigenous soul.

A very old man, the last member of his tribe to possess the skill of fracturing quartz into cutting tools, is teaching some younger Aboriginal men this art. The small flakes of quartz used for cutters and scrapers are the only supplements to an otherwise wood-based technology. He takes the younger men many miles into the bush to a place where he knows the earth “prepares” stones for this purpose. He points out the features of the land, which has been visited by his tribal ancestors for generations to collect stone for tools . . . The old man squats . . . one leg drawn underneath him. With his deep-set eyes shut he passes his weathered black hand, in a sensuously fluid motion, over boulder after boulder. To each stone he mumbles a phrase: “This one is pregnant, but she is not ready yet,” “This one will be very good in its time.” Finally, he finds a stone that he picks up and holds in both hands; with a knowing smile, he says, “The flint lives inside this stone like a dream inside your mind. Its essence has been prepared inside the stone since the Dreamtime . . . now it is ready to be born!”

Quick, sharp blows with another stone shatter the boulder, and the desired implement appears out of the rock. The young Aboriginal men watch the old man intently as he removes the newborn tool from the dark womb of its parental rock and holds it up with noticeable satisfaction. In most cases, there is no need to chisel or shape these pieces of stone; they are “born” perfect and are almost identical to the 13,000-year-old cutting tools that archaeologists have found. (Lawlor, *Voices of the First Day*)

Van der Post would add: “Never has it been so important and urgent, if human life on earth is not to fail the purpose which created it and gives it meaning, to begin again its ancient quest of seeking to remember what remembers us.”

To become receptive to the natural world in this way is to come home, home to a profound sense of ease in our oneness with Nature, which is our birthright. The opportunity and evidence of primordial dialogue are all around us. Shall we begin?
Only 30 years have passed since the oil industry began its house-of-cards collapse, taking down the oil-based economy and financial system with it. It was a crazy time. Financial markets, which had been generally reliable and growing since they were first conceived of in the 12th century in Europe, careened wildly up, then down, creating panic, chaos, and subsequent destitution for many around the world. The largest, and ostensibly most stable corporate institutions and natural monopolies, such as electricity supply and distribution, waffled dangerously, and many came toppling down, crashing with great noise and collateral damage to the average citizen as well as global economies.

Climate chaos was in full swing, with early attempts to respond to and arrest the freight-train effects predicted by scientists having been too little, too late. Rising oceans, unpredictable weather, and continued national instability in affected areas caused large waves of immigration, stressing countries, which had heretofore been immune from the pressure of poverty and dense population.

The fabric of human societies was rent, torn apart at the strongest seams. Disease and death were harder to ignore for many people. Some people withdrew into fearful modes of fundamental protectionism and sealed themselves off. Some reacted with great anger and attempted to regain their former power by any means possible. But no one could stop the great, gaping holes that appeared where the old institutions and systems of power had been.

Yet, for those who had eyes to see, there were, underneath the tumult and noise, many, many new green shoots. Local currencies, community-supported agriculture, and millions of small businesses, non-profits, and completely informal organizations that held core values of social responsibility and ecological sustainability had been self-organizing for about two decades before the collapse began. Using continually evolving advanced information technology in wildly creative ways, and operating with a new
openness and trust, they were growing, doing their thing, slowly but surely finding and connecting up with each other.

One group was a loosely affiliated tribe of far-flung individuals who had somehow sensed in their bones that a great change was coming and intuited that their fellow human beings would need psychological and spiritual tools, some way to access a profoundly deep, ineffable connection to a Bigger Reality, in order to weather this change and emerge as leaders of a new human world. These folks knew their job was to midwife humanity through the dark place of the bardo between death of an old way and birth of a new beginning. This loosely affiliated tribe had been gathering and connecting with each other for decades and silently doing their work in their own communities, under the radar, working to guide people, one by one, to places where they could die to who they had been and come to see and feel in their bones a Bigger Reality of who they really were. The “magic” these guides offered was at once ancient and visionary. It drew from the wisdom of the living planet earth and the collective intelligence of all her creatures. It integrated the cutting edges of human sciences of self-knowing with the deepest wisdom of primordial human understanding.

By the time the collapse was in full swing, these guides had grown in numbers, and the gaping holes in human culture revealed them. Their “magic” was soon revealed to be a critical component in the leap that humanity collectively needed to make. The demand for their guidance became great, as more and more folks understood their work as a core component of a renewed culture.

And now, the new green shoots have grown into good-sized trees and are growing everywhere, unstoppable, as an initiated and integrated humanity is becoming the norm. Disagreement is understood as fuel and compost for creative innovation. Difference is seen as the greatest asset. True elders abound. Cities are designed to work with the natural bio-systems of their region, and native plants and animals flourish amongst the human population, as they are given space to move freely (and eat each other as needed!). Economies are no longer measured only in terms of material growth, but in the depth and richness of local plentitude. Politics explores incorporating the widest viewpoints and fosters rigorous community engagement, aided by an ever-more connected, worldwide communication system. A social safety net has become nearly irrelevant, as more and more individuals take full responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, and our environment has become much cleaner, our parenting much more enlightened, and our neighborhoods more engaged. Energy is efficient and plentiful, as people understand and respect natural carrying capacities, as well as push into new technologies for harnessing naturally abundant energy sources. Business pushes into areas of ever-expanding creative innovation, benefiting not only humans, but also the more-than-human world, defined first and foremost by quality of mutually respectful relationships. Education is widely defined, is seen as a lifelong pursuit, and is inter-generationally delivered. Large-scale war is no longer, and disease, old age, and death are no longer feared, but seen as great teachers and suffered with love.

And the very oldest guides, the weathered and withered ones, sometimes gather around the fire and speak in wonder about the days long ago, when there was war and hatred and decimation of nature; when they wondered if the human race would make it. And they smile.
THE COURAGE TO BE HAPPY:  
THE EMPOWERING VISION OF THEATRE ACTIVIST AUGUSTO BOAL

*Galaxy Earth Dancer, PhD*

In many card games, the Joker is often the “wild card.” The Joker card has the unique ability to play several roles, or to shapeshift, if you will, for the good of the collective hand.

While in graduate school in the 90’s, I had the wonderful opportunity to study with the Brazilian political theatre artist, Augusto Boal. He was both mentor and spiritual guru, and working with him transformed me. Boal’s legacy is that he radically turned traditional theatre on its head, developing a form in which people created interactive plays that required the active participation of an audience of their own community. In this theatrical form, the go-between between the play onstage and the people in the audience is known as the *Joker*.

The *Joker* facilitates the crossing over of the people in the audience (passive spectators) into the active world of the play where they may effect real change in the outcome of the developing story. In this way, an impassive spectator transforms into an actor and experiences true empowerment. The *Joker* has several theatrical tools in his or her back pocket to facilitate this process (including

*We must all do theatre – to find out who we are, and to discover who we could become.*

~Augusto Boal
mirroring intentions!). The Joker, however, does not have any answers; rather, the answers come directly from those living the story.

We can also think of the vision fast guide as wild card, or Joker, who shakes things up, listens deeply and mirrors, calls upon the wisdom of the circle, and shifts focus from individual to community and back again. Theatre, like the ceremony, reminds us how your story is my story and your speaking gives me the courage to speak and share my story. Boal’s political slogan was always, “Have the Courage to Be Happy!”

The core tenet of Boal’s radical theatre philosophy was that theatre had nothing to do with buildings, but rather that theatre is the human capacity to observe oneself in action: to act, observe, and act again based on informed choice and intention. His body of work, known as the Theatre of the Oppressed (or its more positively sounding Theatre for Living) is based on this principle that ALL humans are both actors AND spectators. The function of the Joker is maieutic, eliciting a person’s (and the community’s) own inner wisdom.

Boal believed that people should be empowered to be the initiators of change in their own lives and communities, rather than relying on political leaders. He said,

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see a dance piece where the dancers danced in the first act and in the second showed the audience how to dance? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see a musical where in the first act the actors sang and in the second we all sang together? This is . . . how artists should be — we should be creators and also teach the public how to be creators, how to make art, so that we may all use that art together.

For Boal, working in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, art was a tool wherein the politically oppressed could subvert the dominant paradigm. He also worked in Europe and America where he helped to tackle such problems as racism and homophobia, and even individual inner psychological conflicts (in another theatrical form known as the Rainbow of Desire, techniques that I sometimes use in the vision fast setting). In theatre, as well as in the vision fast, our inner work is physically embodied, as in theatre, as in Nature.

This view of artists and change-makers can also hold true for us as vision fast guides. We facilitate the circle and the ceremony and then the “play” is on: questers tell their stories and dialogue within the container of the circle. They experience themselves being mirrored, becoming their own spectators. The guide may be a Coyote Trickster, a Master of Ceremonies, a Holder of Projections, or a Keeper of the Sacred Container, weaving in and out of the emerging scene. The analogy is not that a vision fast ceremony is like a traditional play, but that by actively participating in a rite of passage, participants can become empowered to enact their soul’s vision concretely in the world and in their community. They know themselves more deeply, and moving forward with intention becomes the only action available. This “theatre” is a far cry from performance: it IS life unfolding.

The Joker is the person who can play the wild card, deftly (or not so deftly, but always trusting the ceremony), shape-shifting to fit the situation. A rite of passage guide is like this: Versatile, we reach into our toolbox forged from life experiences, though we never presume to know the answers. And in spite of our role, we are continually humbled, and we observe ourselves and learn along with the mirrors. We are also the ones who chop wood and carry water. It’s all a part of creating the space, creating a container called ceremony where people discover for themselves their own truth and their own path.
RITES OF PASSAGE AND WHITE CULTURAL IDENTITY

Darcy Ottey

The edge of things is a liminal space. The edge is a holy place, or as the Celts called it, “a thin place” and you have to be taught how to live there. To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return. It is a prophetic position, not a rebellious or antisocial one. When you live on the edge of anything with respect and honor, you are in a very auspicious position . . . To live on the edge of the inside is different than being an insider. Yes, you have learned the rules and you understand and honor the system as far as it goes, but you do not need to protect it, defend it, or promote it. [You can] love both the inside and the outside . . . and know how to move between these two loves.

~ Richard Rohr, Radical Grace

My story begins in the flickering light of a small campfire, sitting amongst a multi-generational circle of women from cultures and with life experiences vastly different from my own, listening to their stories of coming of age ceremonies. The circle was called by a half-Hawaiian, half-Norwegian woman, Pualani Case, who initiated her daughter in what she believes to be the first traditional Hawaiian coming of age ceremony in generations. She described the process that she, with the help of a number of women, reconstructed and the power of that ceremony both for her daughter and for all the women who took part.

Her story inspired a young Diné mother to share her own story, the story of her Kinaalda ceremony. At the end of her detailed, lively description, the woman concluded by saying, “and any of you here, you’re welcome to use this ceremony yourself, if it would help you in your community.” Pualani responded, thanking the Diné woman for her generosity, but encouraging everyone present to turn to their own cultural traditions in developing rites of passage for young people. She described the impact that turning to her own ancestral traditions had on herself, her daughter, and her community, the enlivening that reclaiming her own roots had for all involved.

This experience was transformative for me. As a white, middle-class, thirty-year-old woman from Seattle and rites of passage guide myself, I had oriented my life and work around the necessity of bringing rites of passage forward into my community. Yet I had been increasingly growing troubled by the cultural appropriation, the illegitimate taking of cultural traditions not my own, that I observed and took part in, in the world of rites of passage.

Long before such concerns had entered into my awareness, part of my studies in college had been in anthropology, and the Kinaalda ceremony was something that I had read about a number of times. Here I was, hearing about it first-hand. Not only that, I was being offered the beauty of an intact coming of age ceremony, told to go ahead and use it, and at the same time being encouraged to delve into my own cultural traditions. This reframing of the issue, where it became not just an issue of what do I have permission to use but what is authentically my lineage, sent me on a journey of discovery:

What is my culture?
Who are my People?
As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, where is the place for reclaiming specific cultural traditions, and where is the place for weaving
seemingly disparate cultures in new ways?
What cultural symbols, stories, and ceremonies have meaning for me and the young people I work with?
What can be reclaimed for my people and what should not be?
How is this to be done in ways that acknowledge the genocide and cultural destruction of native communities and act in solidarity with indigenous people’s right of self-determination?

These questions have guided me for the seven years since I sat in this circle. During this time, I have been working to understand race and culture and how they operate in my life and in the lives of those around me. I have been examining power and privilege and their effects on my psyche and the psyches of others with skin that looks like mine. This has happened while simultaneously holding the context of how to help young people through hard transitional moments in their lives, through ritual and ceremony, introspection, and connection with the land. This inquiry has been an exploration of the interplay between two separate but deeply complementary bodies of theory, practice, and research: social justice and rites of passage.

Rites of passage: Intentional, meaningful markers of transition from one life stage to another.
Social justice: the view that all people are entitled to equal access to human rights, fair allocation of community resources, and that communities have the right to political self-determination.

I have found that these two bodies of knowledge offer an inspiring and engaging roadmap for cultural change starting from within, strengthening and informing one another. I have found that the more deeply I immerse myself in one, the more firmly I am rooted in the other.

Along my path, I have come to recognize that initiation is a birthright of every human being that inhabits this planet, a fundamental right as essential to community vitality as clean water and clean air. Time and time again, the huge barriers to meaningful initiation in Western culture have made themselves readily apparent. I have come to see how far too often, white skin leaves one simultaneously racially privileged and culturally impoverished – a tragic combination.

Across the globe, conversations about race, privilege, and oppression are reaching a new intensity. Generations of struggle for civil rights have given way to calls for true justice and the formation of new structures no longer embedded within systems of white supremacy. Having been isolated from people of color through centuries-long campaigns of privilege, white-skinned peoples are often severely lacking in tools to at best assist with these struggles, and to at least adapt to a changing world. They are now being called upon to willfully sacrifice advantages, yet often lack a sense of what will replace them.

As we enter this new civil rights era, white folks are painfully behind the times. Having been taught to avoid conversations about race, many white folks lack the skills for meaningful dialogue, afraid to even acknowledge skin color. For people who have been indoctrinated into cultural superiority, loss of privilege often feels like marginalization. For those who have been buffered from the impacts of racism on people of color, choosing to put oneself in situations where the emotional realities are apparent can feel like self-flagellation.

Rites of passage offer a doorway for liberation. As rites of passage guides, we help usher people through transitions. Many of us see ourselves as part of a larger cultural movement, working to change the relationship between humanity and the living world we inhabit and share with so many beings. We recognize that it is not just our individual transitions, but our collective ones as well that need ceremony.

It is time that we apply this lens of midwives through transitional moments to white culture, which surely is long past ready for a rite of passage into a new way of being. Taken in this light, rites of passage can:

• help individuals develop a strong, positive cultural identity, fiercely honest yet not plagued by shame or fear.
• foster new, unique, and creative ways for individuals and communities to use racial/cultural privilege to support equality and justice for all peoples.
• ultimately redeem all cultural lineage(s) from the forces of colonization and oppression toward liberation, justice, and sustainability.

All people have the right to be taught and tested, to prove themselves, to have a meaningful welcome into each of the stages in their lives. We all have a right to be offered skills and guidance that will allow our unique gifts to shine. We have the right to confidence in ourselves and confidence that the community around us will care for us. We have a right to a culture that is vibrant, life-affirming, imbued with meaning, and one that defines us not as prospective consumers, but as an absolutely essential piece of the greater whole.

Yet to reach this dream requires the dismantling of the culture we now inhabit. I call on those of us with white skin to take responsibility for our culture, consider what role we uniquely have to offer, and begin to learn how to inhabit this role with grace, respect, and a fierce commitment to solidarity with all peoples.
A DIFFERENT WORLD: PERCEIVING POSSIBILITIES

Corinna Stoeffl

Last November, after the events in Paris, I felt called to write and use my images. It is available as a book through Amazon: A Different World: Perceiving Possibilities. Here are a few excerpts:

There is a different world not only possible, but also necessary if we want to continue on. For me this different world consists of

. . . a world where
there is caring based on the recognition
that what hurts one,
in the end, hurts all of us

. . . a world where
consciousness is valued. Consciousness includes everything and judges nothing.
Consciousness looks at the impact each choice has and what future it will create.
Consciousness asks questions and perceives the energy that is brought up by it.
It does not look for answers, it cherishes the unlimited possibilities from which we can choose

. . . a world where
we choose lightness, fun, joy and laughter knowing that this will create more for us and the Earth.

Currently, we have learned that in order to show we care, we have to express sadness, trauma and drama; in short heaviness.
Our times have many names – the Great Unraveling, the Great Turning, the Long Emergency, the End Times, the End of Days, the Apocalypse. To cultivate my inner maverick during these high stakes times, and to remind myself that the future is still unwritten, I call it the Great Gamble. Wild cards wield a protean power in gambling: They shapeshift into what is needed to create a hand of value. I like the image of myself as a wild card up Mystery’s sleeve, ready to morph into whatever the moment needs.

Like anyone, I often go through times when such brazen fluidity of identity is not only inaccessible, but downright forgotten in spells of amnesia. The approach to the 2015 WGC gathering was such a challenge: it was going to be my first full gathering, I hardly knew anybody, and there was someone I didn’t feel resourced enough to encounter. In the grip of disillusion, conflict, and despair, it was easy to isolate with a personal problem. I sent an email changing my registration fee to a donation and received a reply suggesting I not rush my decision. When I received an email about the Heart Matters talks, this question changed everything: “How can your heart hold the whole spectrum of interpersonal relations and human relations with the earth - conflict, joy, despair, disillusionment, empathy, compassion?” Suddenly, there was space for me to attend as a conflicted woman and guide and as a whole spectrum part of the theme, even.

Personal tussle returned to its true place as part of the collective struggle. As long as it’s only my heart or your heart, a private property heart separate from others, the work becomes much harder, perhaps impossibly hard. When conflict, joy, despair, disillusionment, empathy, and compassion cease to be held as private property, then the ocean of transpersonal psyche we swim in reveals itself: Our struggles, heartaches, failures, and triumphs take on the potential for collective, evolutionary meaning.

I sent an email saying I was going to attend the gathering after all and received the reply, “We’re so glad you’re going to give a talk!” “Whoa. I’m not giving a talk, that’s a misunderstanding,” and so on. I gave a talk early in the gathering. The struggle that was going to keep me home flowered into my contribution.

Our hearts hold the whole spectrum of relationship because we do, and it’s fiction to pretend we are designed otherwise. I’m guessing you’ve had moments of what I call “globalization syndrome,” when the collective heartache seeps through the cracks of privatized consciousness, and it would be too much to bear if it didn’t feel like you’re waking up to a truth of your humanity.

Our lives depend on the fidelity and persistence of the heartbeat and the unique way individual hearts pulse within the collective heartbeat of the matrix called Earth. What subterranean council might our hearts be holding, even now, in their secret heartbeat language?

I’m guessing we’ve all been hurt by the cult of the self-sufficient individual, who pursues happiness at the expense and ignorance of the interdependence that is the collective. If your heart and my heart and their hearts are all heart cells in the collective heart of the collective body of Earth, what of yourself would you offer to that?

We learn to consciously hold the whole spectrum of interpersonal relations and human relations with the earth because we must, because the world is in a sense one version of “I,” and “I” is one cell of the larger body of Earth. Perhaps a willingness to disarm ourselves and be vulnerable to the whole spectrum of the world heartbeat, as both an individual self and part of the collective initiatory ordeal sometimes called the apocalypse, is one of the most essential and radical offerings we, who are designed for these times, can make.

Meanwhile, back at the Gathering: The bony ancestor mask sits on the ground in the middle of the circle on the last morning dance of the gathering, and I’m seized by an urgency to put it over my face and dance. For a moment, my body is flooded with the ancestors’ fierce hunger for the vast blue sky. Through my eyes, they behold the tall pale grasses and look into the eyes of the humans around me.

In return, they telegraph me a message of how migration, exile, diasporas, dispossession, occupation, the loss of one’s people and all that, is very much part of the ancestral story. I never grokked that before. I was born to refugee parents and grew up lovingly steeped in the brutal
mythos of exile. Though I identified with global citizenship, I considered myself apart from people who could personally relate to their ancestors. Perhaps we, the often orphan-identified, mystical nomads of our times, are part of a great migration in consciousness from a world that has ended to one that is beginning – the cyclical road from apocalypse to genesis – as we gingerly step through the psychic post-apocalyptic debris of a shattered culture. It’s not so hard to see the broken infrastructure and feel its impact. More difficult is to stay aware of the debris inside our minds and the way our humanity tries to make contact with others while stumbling, tripping, attempting to navigate – unconsciously at times - the way human consciousness has been injured through ongoing cultural trauma cycles.

Migrations are set in motion by personal, cultural and environmental calamities. The road is long and filled with discomfort and uncertainties. Where is the next water, the next shelter, the next food, the next fuel for a warming fire, the next dance with beloved others? We don’t know. May we carry nourishment in our hearts, for ourselves, and each other, with wild dignity and nobility, as we walk this unknown road.
Over the past several years I have offered workshops on leadership, forgiveness, the Four Shields, and mirroring. They have challenged me to delve deeper into the meanings and application of the Four Shields and other eco-psychological models for understanding the human experience at this time in Western culture.

Recently, the guides for the Women’s Community Quest asked me to offer a workshop on how to create questions, tasks, and ceremony to help others journey towards wholeness. We invited the Sisters of the women who are questing this year, other women in the Circle, and men who are creating a community-based quest for other men.

I prepared by rereading articles and reviewing books by Steven Foster and Meredith Little; Bill Plotkin; John Davis; Gigi Coyle and Roger Milliken; Angeles Arien. I went through all the past issues of Circles. In one of the writings, Steven bemoaned the layers of interpretation that are often put on a story brought back from a walk or a fast. The essence of his message was keep it simple. I have looked and looked again for that reference, even contacted Meredith, to see if she recalled what book or article that was in.

It haunted me.

I have spent over twenty years listening to and mirroring stories. I went from a profound lack of confidence in my ability to listen to and respond to stories to a sense, when I quieted my own thoughts and ideas, that I could hear and mirror the essential message of a story. The times that I have felt strongest are when I spoke both as a clear mirror and was informed by something beyond my own cognition. I have spoken, sung, dramatized, drawn, and danced in mirroring a story. I have spoken for a long time, and I have said three sentences, letting silence say the rest. Meredith’s
reminder that if it is in the story, it can be mirrored, is a mantra that helps me stay out of someone’s story — most of the time. Yes, I have overreached at times, and I know it instantly. I believe I can say I have done no harm.

But Steven’s statement churned up something in me, and I carried that into the workshop with the men and women from my community. It was not doubt per se, but it was a question about what we mirror and how.

I had asked them to bring stories from the land that we could use to identify the four shields and related questions, tasks, and ceremonies. A person would tell his or her story, and then, rather than mirroring, I asked a series of questions: What shield(s) do you hear in the story? Give examples of where you see each of the shields. What is developed, exaggerated, underdeveloped? Is there balance? Is there movement or is something stuck?

Then we explored the kinds of questions or tasks that we might offer to help the person better understand themselves within the shields. And we talked about the kind of ceremony that might support the person’s journey.

I offered some guidelines about asking questions. When to use questions? With agreement (Do you want to explore this more deeply?) and permission (May I ask a question?) Is it necessary? (Allow person to journey towards the understanding.) Is it kind? (Mirroring and questions always are “positive,” not critical.) Is it true? (Check your own assumptions and intentions. Why are you asking the question?) What makes a good question? (Avoid yes and no questions; avoid embedding the answer — the answer that you “know” — in the question.)

We talked about how many of those apply to offering tasks or suggesting ceremony with the added caveat to not ask someone to do something you have not done yourself.

I asked the group questions that I often ask when teaching mirroring: What assumptions are you making about this person before they even speak? About their story as it unfolds? About where you think it is going? About what YOU think it means? How do your assumptions blind you? How do they inform you? What mental models do you carry that keep you from hearing the true story?

The workshop felt scattered to me in some ways. I had envisioned a more methodical discussion (first look at questions, then tasks, then ceremony), but it all just came like the wind. All I could do was facilitate (tack and jibe to keep the wind metaphor). In spite of my misgivings, the group said they learned a lot and felt more confident in their ability to ask questions, offer tasks, and create ceremony.

Fast forward a couple weeks and I am sitting in council with a group of men who are questing in April. The men have stepped forward to create a community-based quest for other men. They are likely guides, brothers, and base camp holders. They are on their own personal journey, and they also hold an intention about being a guide for others so they are also learning by observing.

Because of this dual purpose, Nils Whittlesey, my co-guide, and I invited the men to mirror each other’s story in content only, using the man’s own words as much as possible, without interpretation or personal reflection. I have done this in the Women’s Circle, inviting short phrases or even single words, which collectively mirror back the story. In this Circle, after a couple of rounds of a more “popcorn” mirroring, we mirrored the story back to each man chronologically. The first reflection would be the beginning of the story, the second, the next part, and so on. The Circle became alive with clear mirrors!

Steven’s words, from whatever source they came (perhaps I dreamed them?), came back to me. Do not complicate the process. Just listen to what the natural world is saying.

Many times I hear people — guides and participants — getting lost in their associations with the four cardinal directions. What animals, rooted ones, elements, colors, emotions, stages of life, and seasons of the year we associate with each direction is rooted in place, culture, spiritual beliefs. We learn about the Four Shields (Foster and Little), Soul Centric Human Development (Plotkin), and Four Rivers of Life (Ariens). It is easy to lose track of the story. When I suggest guides go back to the actual story, what happened, what the person experienced, it is very clear. No interpretation is needed. In many stories, the person already knows what has been given.

I am mentoring guides more than guiding now. It is a humbling experience. After so many years acquiring information, knowledge, and skills, they have blended together so that either I both move from one to another “mental model” so swiftly that they all become one, or there really is just one, and it is the clear mirror of the natural world.

But there is more. I am recognizing that the Other Beings around us can be in relationship with us if we only would acknowledge their sentience, perhaps their sapience, their language — and then communicate. Not only listen, but respond, ask questions, offer what is needed, be fully present, like being in a caring relationship with a Human Being. Friends. Companions in Life.
I exchanged a few more emails with Meredith as I gathered my thoughts and began to write. Her words will guide me moving forward as guide, mentor, the one who quests: go back to the core, remember what’s important, get simple and real, trust.

With deep gratitude for All My Teachers, named in this article, the men and women with whom I have sat in Circle, All Beings Seen and Unseen, Heard and Unheard.

(This comes from my response to people who ask me about what a quest is really about . . . what happens in preparation, what do we do. For me it has all come down to learning to Listen.)

Listen
Listen to the natural world — to Other Beings and Elements as sources of wisdom.
Listen to the natural world as Beloved . . . what does She need from you?
Listen to all the “voices speaking within you:” dreams, musings, whispers on the edges of your consciousness, roars from parts of you that are angry, screams from parts that are in pain, sobs from the parts of you that are forgotten or lost
Listen to your stories — the ones that no longer serve and the emerging stories.
Listen to your body — your bones, joints, senses, organs, muscles, tendons and ligaments, gut, nerve endings.
Listen to other people’s stories.
Listen to ancient myths being told through your life story.
Listen to what lies between our words.
Listen to what is beyond your understanding.

Listen.
Here I am in the prime years of my elderhood — healthy, active, fully engaged in large ideas for service in the world. My 21-year-old son is alive as well with big intentions and exploration. We have a dynamic relationship in support of each other’s hopes and journeys, often inspiring and cheering each other on.

At the same time, my mom is in her early 90’s, and my twin sister has multiple mental and physical challenges. When it comes to caregiving for them, making key decisions about their needs and plans, and supporting them in tough situations, I’m it.

When all is well for them, it’s easy.

When a crisis arises with sister or mom, there’s not enough of me to go around, and I feel exquisitely torn between all that calls me. It’s really not exquisite, of course. Often there is no easy solution to the need of the moment. Expectations clamor, both inner and outer, of what it means to be a loving relative. Old patterns trigger: of rescuing, of minimizing my own needs, of being angry with myself that I am so tied up in knots inside, of paralysis or discouragement. WHAT IS IT that I am to be doing with this one precious life of mine?

I try to think clearly, to put energy into the most critical projects for them, and gracefully ignore the others. My own personal life and larger-world priorities pile up, and inside, I am screaming. There are two nasty extremes to my reaction: wanting to run away and put many miles between me and them, or flinging myself bruisingly against that wall of expectations. And the prospect is that I have years of this ahead.
How to live in some sweet place of balance and grace?

I have a handful of good friends who will listen and with whom I can remember that I am not alone, either with the particular struggle or with the larger humanness of my story. Or to consider out loud in conversation with another: “What am I grateful for?” A council circle of two.

And to have a stonepile, not just during a wilderness fast, but in this wilderness of life challenge: the assurance of leaving a message and knowing it will land with love.

Sometimes a new day simply dawns with hope and energy.

And on some days, in some moments, I can release myself a little from the tangled grief of standing in close witness to the hardship of one that I love with those complicated strands of family connection.

I can stand in witness more spaciously as another journeyer, as I do in guiding. Aching, Loving. And blessing. Holding out my palm with my heart in it, and blessing with my breath.

This is your life, your story, and I honor it. It is mine to witness, to stand behind, but not to take on the changing of it. Go sweetly.
Of late, I’ve been thinking about Green Tara who, in some ways, reminded me of Taoism. Yes, I agree; it’s a strange combination. However, aside from being Green, she is the radiant female Buddha of compassion. As such, Tara reminds me of Mother Earth who sustains us. In some depictions, Green Tara is not sitting cross-legged in the full lotus position, just meditating. Her right leg is extended outward. She’s steppin’ out. She’s ready for action!

As I see it, as vision quest guides, we have taken up Green Tara’s call. We’ve come to recognize that we can no longer afford to just sit on our vision quest cushions. Like practicing Buddhists and fellow Taoists, who are attuned and aligned and living in balance and harmony with Mother Nature and the cosmos, we’ve jettisoned and helped other folks to let go of self-preoccupation.

Rather than just focusing on ourselves, we’ve come to realize that we’re interdependent, that we’re a part of the whole, that we are planet earth, and that planet earth is us, and that it and us, our species and that of other sentient beings, are in danger of extinction.

Yes, it’s one thing to talk the talk; it’s another to walk the walk.

So, what actions am I taking?

So, after much deliberation, I recently purchased an acre of rolling hills adjacent to my home, in which no one, given its extreme slant and other inherent limitations and restrictions, was interested, except for some local folks who were looking at it as a motorcycle racing track! However, as it turns out, this particular acre is laden with a host of benign, ethnobotanical, medicinal plants, such as wildcrafted Black Sage (Salvia mellifera), which honeybees love; they thrive on it, especially during springtime. It’s a natural refuge.

As many of you know, I’m also a small time organic
farmer, currently cultivating succulents and cacti, meaning that my land is pretty clean. As such, it serves as a haven for creatures of every description. That includes lizards, migratory song birds of all sorts, including hawks, hummingbirds galore; along with snakes (yes, rattlesnakes, too); flights of yellow and white butterflies; and on rare occasions, a few migrating monarchs headed for the mountains in central Mexico, where they wait out the winter before returning in the spring.

I think you’re getting the picture. As you know, both honeybees and monarchs, both pollinators, are endangered. What they have in common is that they’re both subject to loss of habitat due to the “development of subdivisions, factories, shopping centers, etc., at the rate of 6,000 acres a day or about 2.2 million acres per year.” Moreover, as you know, they’re both being Monsanto-ized, thanks to the widespread use of the “non-selective systemic herbicide glyphosate, aka Roundup, which allows growers to spray fields with the herbicide instead of tilling to control weeds.”

So what to do, what to do? It occurred to me to buy the land (it was costly), which will help preserve a measure of privacy and natural beauty for my family, while creating a refuge, a sanctuary which includes honeybees and migrating monarch butterflies by planting nectar-saturated milkweed, which is native to the region I’m living in (San Diego county). I’ll also be planting white sage (salvia apiana), which is used ceremonially by Native Americans, along with a host of other ethnobotanical traditional plants, such as California Sagebrush. What I have in mind is a way station for monarchs, so they can produce successive generations, as well as for honeybees and other creatures who inhabit this area.

Some of you are old enough to remember Dr. Richard Alpert, Ph.D, aka Baba Ram Dass and his 1971 book Be Here Now, which ironically was printed in the Year of the Monkey. 2016 is also the Chinese Year of the Monkey! A year of surprises and innovation! My initial impulse was to call the refuge Bee Here Now!

(Phil may be contacted at Los Arboles Ranch, P.o. Box 2664, San Marcos, CA 92069, to learn more about the honey bee-monarch project and to purchase native plants, such as wildcrafted black and white sage.)
Joseph Campbell described the quest for the Holy Grail as the founding myth of Western civilization. My interpretation of this statement is that it is the deeper, universal story that encompasses each of our own personal individual stories within it.

My first encounter with the many tales and characters of the grail mythos came as a young boy attending Catholic school, when I was given a picture book illustrating the adventures of the wizard Merlin and his companion, an owl named Archimedes. An undercurrent of magic had surreptitiously entered my young life at a difficult time when I was enduring physical and emotional abuse by the Catholic nuns. Along with the physical punishment, we were threatened with stories of torture at the hands of the godless, evil communists, who would boil us alive in oil and shove bamboo shoots under our fingernails until we denied our belief in God, which would condemn us to eternal suffering in the fires of Hell.

We were born into original sin, we were told, due to the first people’s disobedience towards God’s commands, after they were seduced by the devil, in the form of a talking serpent, into eating the fruit of a forbidden tree.

I believe that my encounters with the tales of Merlin and the grail have been guided by some mysterious, unseen intelligence that has led me, step by step, into progressively deeper and deeper engagement with the initiatory mysteries of living and dying, each of these events and insights laying the foundation for further revelations and discoveries.

In my early twenties, responding to the Call to Adventure, I left my home, family, and friends and hitchhiked to California. Along the way I encountered the Rainbow Family, a loosely organized group of individuals that emerged from the alternative culture of the Woodstock era. The Rainbow Family organizes gatherings based on the ideals of peace, love, and living close to the earth. Everyone is welcome, and everyone’s needs are met through voluntary donations. I embraced the colorful, creative, tribal lifestyle and the experience of wilderness living. I spent the next ten years living on the road, never staying in one place more than a few months. I lived and worked in the mountains and forests planting trees, which allowed me great freedom. It was also the birth of my awareness of the consequences of humanity’s alienation from the wild and the resulting exploitation of the natural world. In 1979, I traveled in the Sunshine Bus, a colorfully painted schoolbus full of wandering hippies, to pick apples in Washington State. While there, I came down with hepatitis and was nursed back to health in a tipi by a couple of compassionate hippie women.

In October, I was in San Francisco, where I attended the first public presentation of “The Spiral Dance,” a participatory, public ritual, blending music, dance, and art, based on a re-creation of pre-Christian Celtic traditions celebrating Samhain, the Celtic celebration of death and rebirth that we have come to call Halloween. This marked the publication of Starhawk’s book The Spiral Dance. I realized then that I am a born-again pagan. The word pagan comes from the Latin *paganus*, meaning a country dweller or one who lived outside of the empire’s control. The Spiral Dance has become a yearly ritual in San Francisco and other places, as the Reclaiming Community, which grew out of that event, has spread across the United States and Europe.

That winter, drawn by the stories and rainbow-colored clothing of my wandering friends and by my interest in indigenous peoples, my girlfriend and I hitchhiked through
Mexico and Guatemala. It was a life-transforming experience in many ways. Despite the horrifying political violence and oppression, that I was unaware of at the time, I intuitively felt that the people there were in touch with something that was missing in my life in our industrial, consumer-oriented society.

In 1984, at the cusp of my thirties, I discovered Marion Zimmer Bradley’s novel *The Mists of Avalon*, a magical interpretation of the King Arthur tale as told from the women’s point of view. Set in the transitional time when the meeting of Pagan and Christian cultures was transforming the British Isles and Europe, Merlin reappeared as an ally of Morgaine, a priestess struggling to preserve her goddess-based tradition in a land where patriarchal Christianity was threatening to destroy the ancient pagan ways.

Undertaking my first wilderness rite of passage in 1986, under the supervision of Steven Foster and Meredith Little, was perhaps the biggest turning point of my life. Upon returning from my solo time in the mountains, I vowed to “give my gifts to my people so that they might live.” At the time, I interpreted that as meaning I needed to find some way to re-enter the mainstream culture that I had done my best to avoid, a challenge I still struggle with to this day. I later returned to complete their month-long training to become a guide.

I spent the following winter on a piece of land known as Annwn, named after the underworld of Welsh mythology. In Arthurian literature, Annwn is ruled by Gwyn ap Nudd, Lord of the “fair folk or faery.” The land is cared for by The Church of All Worlds, one of the first legally recognized pagan churches, whose mission is “to evolve a network of information, mythology, and experience that provides a context and stimulus for reawakening Gaia and reuniting her children through tribal community dedicated to responsible stewardship and evolving consciousness.” A few years later, after a four-day fast in the Ojai Mountains with the Condor Clan, I was given the name Greenman by Kent Pearce, in honor of my passionate love for and service to the wild.

In my forties, while attending Pantheacon, a conference for “Pagans, Heathens, Indigenous Non-European and many of diverse beliefs,” I first encountered R. J. Stewart, a Scottish-born musician, author, and teacher, who has written over 40 books on Celtic mythology, magic, underworld, faery, and Western esoteric traditions, leading me deeper into the magic and mysteries of my ancestral heritage and the faery realm.

In 2009 I visited the British Isles on a pilgrimage to the homelands of my blood ancestors. Starting in Dublin, I circled the Emerald Isles. To my surprise it was not Ireland but Scotland, with its forests and mountains where I began to feel the ancestral magic and connection. I visited Edinburgh, Rosslyn Chapel, Braveheart William Wallace’s Memorial, the windswept standing stones of the Orkney Isles, and Doon Hill, associated with the Reverend Robert Kirk, who wrote the “Secret Commonwealth,” an essay on the nature and social structure of fairies. It is said that Kirk, who was gifted with second sight, reputedly did not die but entered into the fairy realm through the local hill.

When I reached Glastonbury, believed by many to be the location of the mystical Isle of Avalon, the hiding place of the Holy Grail and Home of Gwyn ap Nudd, I felt I had come home. I knew this place. When I visited the Chalice Well Garden, where I attended a Lammas or mid-summer Reclaiming ritual, and the White Spring, and when I walked the trail up the Tor to Michaels tower, I felt a deep, familiar resonance with the land and its long history. Rich in mythology of both Christianity and Paganism, it has been a destination for pilgrims for thousands of years. I believe it may be one of the rare places where our Western culture has not severed the ancient links between the land, humanity, and the unseen realms.

My quest continues. In 2012, while visiting Ukraine for the Global Rites of Passage gathering, I discovered that the Carpathian Mountains are believed to be the originating place for Celtic tribes.

My experience is that each new, dawning awareness opens up new vistas and new mysteries to be explored. In pursuing my own unique initiatory path, I have joined, on a mythic level, with the company of those legendary knights who set off into the unknown seeking the Grail, that mysterious, all but unobtainable prize they believed would heal the wounded Fisher King and regenerate the wasteland that humanity has created of this once pristine world. Perhaps Merlin and my Celtic ancestors have been guiding me towards my destiny. I choose to believe it is so. I don’t know that I will ever succeed in obtaining the Grail. Few of the Knights who set out on the quest succeeded, but perhaps, like life itself, the experience of the quest is enough.

I don’t believe the Grail is a physical object as it is so often described. R. J. Stewart has this to say: The Grail was originally a vessel of regeneration arising out of pagan faery and Underworld ancestral traditions, its descriptions and associations becoming steadily modified through the centuries until it became a chalice said to be that of the Last Supper.

Inspired by the tales of those who have gone before me, my hope is that I may inspire a few of those who presently walk this earth with me, and those who will come after me, to respond to the mythic call and embark on their own hero’s journey.
TO BE SATISFIED
Keith Howchi Kilburn

Can I give this gift
that we are all Buddhas?
foregoing all unfair advantage
relieving all suffering
relinquishing all resentment
shining and encouraging
all others to shine

and yet I crave. . .
am I a junkie for peak experience?

Give me this day my daily ecstasy
lest I drift into agitation
despondency
loss of worth
Not satisfied by a flight of falling leaves
swirled by the draft of passing cars
The natural flow of water
or love that is steadfast and dependable
Strange desire for turbulence
forces in opposition requiring
heroic effort
Requiring intensity just to feel
Alive

To be satisfied by a soft and gentle touch
rose petal on tender skin
the slightest breeze on a sunny day
An old woman’s smile
a baby’s breath
Our arms encircling one another
in one long exhalation

you whom I carry in my heart
Buddha Tara conjoined
in joyous matrimony
help me to carry this gift of completion
secure connection
knowing my place in the universe
to love and be loved
without striving for more
than can be realized
TURNING FEAR INTO POWER: 
A LIFE JOURNEY INSPIRED BY VISION QUEST GUIDING

Linda Sartor

It is late afternoon when eleven internationals are walking together into Balata Camp from Nablus. As we get close to the village, a Palestinian ambulance passes us. Ambulances are the only Palestinian vehicles allowed out on the street during curfew. Suddenly, an Israeli tank further ahead fires a line of machine gun fire at the ground in front of the ambulance and us—a scary warning not to proceed further. At first, we are jolted and swerve to the side in unison. Someone reminds us what Starhawk told us at the beginning of our brief training—to “ground.” We turn to walk the other direction.

The driver of the ambulance stops and lets all eleven of us climb aboard. The two Palestinians in the vehicle are grim as they take us around to another entrance into Balata Camp. It is growing dark, and we know it is dangerous to be out after dark because soldiers can’t see who we are. To get into the neighborhood, we have to walk past another tank. We clump closely together and put our hands up as we pass the tank. I reassure myself with the idea that it would be bad public relations for an Israeli soldier to hurt a U.S. citizen, since their operations would not be possible without U.S. funding.

This self-reassurance supported me in my two-week visit to Israel/Palestine in 2002 where I participated in peace activism with an organization called the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). I described my experiences in Israel/Palestine in Chapter 2 of my recent book Turning Fear Into Power: One Woman’s Journey Confronting the War on Terror. The book brings to life my peacekeeping and citizen diplomacy work during a decade, when I traveled with several different peace and justice organizations to six war-torn countries.

Let me begin by revealing a little about myself. I don’t particularly like traveling internationally. The few times I traveled in Mexico, both as a child and again as a young
adult, I felt uncomfortable on the streets among the poor local people—like I was flaunting my class privilege just by being there. I have found discomfort even traveling into more prosperous countries. In my thirties I took a trip with a friend to Scotland and Holland; I found that I was on edge, easily irritated, and not a pleasant traveling companion. Most importantly, I don’t like traveling alone. Therefore, traveling alone into a war zone is essentially an outrageous idea for me.

Through telling my story, I hope to inspire readers to get more in touch with their own inner wisdom and to follow their heart’s longings, even when it is scary. My belief is that our fears keep us small and prevent us from actualizing our full contributions, and that the powers of domination in our world create and perpetuate cultures of fear in order to stay in control. I hope that the more we all learn to accept fear and follow our hearts anyway (no matter how big or small are the tasks we are called to do), the more likely we as a global society will find our way out of the bad times in which we find ourselves now—times of war, torture, intolerance, economic crises, poverty, injustice, degradation of natural systems, global warming, and other environmental and cultural catastrophes.

In the face of these crises, it is easy to get caught in a sense of hopelessness that there is nothing one individual can do to make any significant difference and so do nothing. We need to find the courage to take the actions that our hearts are longing to take even when the odds seem hopeless and overwhelming, and we know we may not see the results within our lifetimes.

My belief that fear is a powerful limiting force and distracts people from following their heart’s longings comes out of my work guiding “vision quests.” While preparing to go out to be alone in the desert, participants often confront fears. During the time out when all distractions are removed from their lives for three full days and nights, they usually learn to listen better to their heart’s longings. Then upon their return from this solo time, they are confronted with the challenges and fears of bringing the guidance of their hearts back into their everyday lives.

Fears that emerge in preparation for the solo experience are of mountain lions, rattlesnakes, or being alone in the dark, for some examples. When initially facing such fears, it seems from a participant’s perspective that his/her life is truly in danger. Yet I am familiar enough with mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and being alone in the dark to know that visitors to the desert can learn enough to be reasonably safe. Through this experience of guiding participants through confronting fears, I have witnessed how important it is to acknowledge and then to actually embrace the fears in order to learn from them. Yes, mountain lions and rattlesnakes are potential threats, but we can learn to be safer around them, and we can learn something about our relationship with fear itself in the process. I work with participants to better understand mountain lions and rattlesnakes so that they know how to respond if they should encounter one. We also work with the less concrete fears like fear of the dark. I encourage them to acknowledge and accept the fear (whatever the source) and then to get in relationship with it—to even have a dialogue with it—in order to learn the lesson(s) that the fear has to teach.

The experience of guiding these trips is critical in inspiring me to face my own fears and to not let them stop me from following my heart’s longings. My heart led me to make the decision to go to Israel/Palestine and beyond. The life threatening fears experienced by participants on vision quests are parallel to my fear that traveling into a war zone is life threatening. I used the same strategies in taking care of my fears as I suggest when guiding vision questers to work with theirs; I acknowledged and accepted the fears and then learned as much as I could about the dangers I might face. Furthermore, I recognized that the thought of the risks can easily grow out of proportion when considered from a distance, and that experiencing the situation first hand was really not so scary when I was actually there.

When fear is denied and not faced, it has more power over us and prevents us from following our heart’s desires. I have seen that when vision quest participants learn to be with their fears in a new way, the limiting power of those fears decreases significantly. Witnessing the vision quest process many times has led me to hear my own heart’s longings more clearly and thus face my own fears. My heart’s longing is to change my country’s commitment to military dominance in the world and stop the atrocities that accompany that military dominance. I feel called to respond in a way that is bigger than I have ever before imagined.

My intention in the book is to share some of my inner and outer journey during the ten years beginning on September 11, 2001, the day of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. My response to the way many U.S. citizens and our government reacted to that attack was that I could not sit still as if life was “business as usual.” Protesting and educating weren’t enough anymore; I needed to take a stand with my body that as a U.S. citizen my life is not any more precious than anyone else’s life.

(Turning Fear Into Power: One Woman’s Journey Confronting the War on Terror is available at locally owned bookstores. Be sure to give the subtitle or Linda’s name to avoid confusion with another book with the same title by a different author.)
THE LIVING SYMBOL ON QUEST: FINDING OR MAKING

Mark Sipowicz

Salvation is a long road that leads through many gates. These gates are symbols. Each new gate is at first invisible; indeed, it seems at first that it must be created, for it exists only if one has dug up the spring’s root symbol.


The border between making and finding the living symbol that guides us on our questing path and that can illuminate the way home is sometimes a thin one. The question of which — making or finding — was a central theme on a quest of mine recently, over and over, wondering and asking, but also feeling the border between the two as particularly mysterious. One can walk on quest into any number of images that feed our curiosity, trigger some direct line between the inner and outer world, or scratch their way from the dark unconscious below to the light of dawn or dusk above. But which image is my gate? Which symbol will offer the salvation, truth, or freedom I seek or need? And is my conscious mind guiding me to the image and thus creating a connection out of desperation and desire . . . or have I truly found . . . the mountain, the wind stream, the animal call, of my soul’s desire? Or has it — him, or her — found me?
No easy or literal answer to any of these questions, but after working with others and myself in the field I offer the following reflections regarding the search for these gateways in the landscape of quest: the living symbols that sometimes offer us the salvation we seek, that Jung speaks of.

1. Put all your encounters in your pocket, metaphorically, of course! You never know what image will serve you on a rainy day—what image will serve you on a dark night’s journey. But also, while on quest, pause often, observe, engage, and inquire. Don’t be afraid to ask. Are you the one that I have been looking for? Are you the one that has been seeking me? Are you the way through this passage of my life? Honor all your encounters with sun and sky, earth and rock, fish and fowl. Pause often, and engage what or who is there for you.

2. Be alert for the numinous, which may arise on the path of your sacred journey, or in a circle of reflection after your quest, or many miles further down the road. Watch and feel your body’s awareness of subtle movements: a shutter of recognition, a gasp of alarm from your ego’s longing for security, a ghastly foreign-ness, or the deep welcomed warmth of mutual understanding and connection. The numinous movements in your subtle body, your feelings, and intuition are an indication of the world or the psyche grabbing your attention. There is less making here and more finding—or actually being found!

3. Like a dream in sleep, the waking dream of quest is slippery and surprising. See what shows up when you recount your journey to yourself or others. You may have tried hard to hold all the events of quest tightly in your pocket, and now only one or two small and hard to discern images still remain in your grasp when you go to open your bundle. Trust that the quest itself offered medicine to you, but also that the manner in which the story afterward unfolds has its own truth and its own way of revealing what is needed for the journey forward, for your return, for your life.

I had a dream the night after a particularly beautiful and rich quest that my dear sister took recently. It helped me with an aspect of working with the symbols of quest. There was a huge tree with leaves on it being hit by the light of the sun. In the dream I could see that there were two kinds of leaves, ones that absorbed the sun’s rays and ones that reflected the light and heat of the sun. After working with the dream, it became clear that there are at least two dominant ways that we work with the illumination of the quest after our return. Be mindful of leaves of reflective light and leaves of infused light. When we return from quest, there are both. This dream helped me to listen to my sister the day after quest with more discernment. It helped me to not be so eager to help my sister find or dig for the gold and instead trust that some of the gold was already gifted to the subtle body. Sometimes the tree of return holds a predominance of one or the other type of leaf. In one tree everything needs and wants to be reflected upon; a discourse needs to unfold for the sake of a good return. On other trees, there are predominantly leaves that naturally infuse the light. A quest with these leaves may need very little reflection at all, with self or others. This is a quest that offers its gifts on a deep and subtle somatic level: the body of quest and body of self are infused spontaneously and naturally with the spirit of quest. The work of return for these questers can often be seen as creating time and space for assimilation and digestion — less dialogue and less of an active integration.

So finally, it is, of course, rarely an either/or question of which luminous event, image, or symbol is the one that will carry us home. Again, we give thanks for this time and this place. That we followed through on our intention to walk and sit on this good, blue-green earth, with our desire, our hopes, and our fears. And that she received us, that we were seen, and that we saw her and all the others that she loves and holds. Later in Jung’s *Red Book* he stands in the tension of the initial question regarding which way leads to the salvation we seek, and we are surprised and yet perhaps heartened to hear: “The symbol can be neither thought up nor found: it becomes.”
DAWN WALK

Michelle Katz

From the emotional twists of a dead golden pine,
I rose and made love to the earth.
As my body was caressed,
I do not know if I orgasmed once or twice.
So soon after,
I felt my womb ache in discomfort.
But it was the Earth that gave birth
To the red glowing sun.

I looked at the bright beauty child,
My gaze caught,
So enchanted, I was
That I become half blind.

Relying on my ears alone,
The birds, wispy and countless,
Circling me with quick flutterings.
And in the distance crows yelling out,
Only for a short time.
Then it was soft in sound,
Though not without life.

My sight returned.
With new eyes,
I gazed again
At the child.
Who had grown a radiant yellow
That coved the earth.

With stick, I moved rock and earth,
Roaring and drumming,
I played sage bush trumpet.

The birds, cars, plans, and Om-ing people
Joined the band briefly.
Each one having solos and moving on.
The fly even had a go of it.

All things hum.

I stayed the duration.
Knowing eventually, I, too, would move on.
The road in half shadow and light

The original and core shape of the child
Can no long be deciphered.

Thus it was best to close the eyes,
Lay down,
Know her through warmth.

How does growing up and growing old happen?
Growing brighter and bigger?
Growing warmer and wiser?

How do all move from shouting to silent again and again?

The sun shines on both birds that fall from their nests
and those that play chase in the sky;
On both deer of full body and left bone,
On both scurrying and stuck lizards,
On both downed trees and trees reaching toward sky alike,
On both mountain tops and valleys in time.

All is in the celebration of this Day
This Be Earthed Day.
In October 2014, *The Grandmothers’ Circle: The Four Shields of Elderhood for Women* was offered through the School of Lost Borders. The dreaming and manifestation of this project took some time, yet despite many no’s and a few doubts, I persisted. I was determined to do this if it was the last thing I did in my guiding career.

“Old age is no place for sissies,” Bette Davis once said. Nearly twenty years into my own eldering, I realized she was right. “Hold on to your seats,” Bette also said, “It’s going to be a bumpy ride.” If I had not faced this elderhood business head-on with my eyes wide open, it would not have been a bumpy ride as much as an unconscious glide through old age.

Over the years of exploring the edges of this uncharted territory, I became intimately familiar with the bumps and curves of this extraordinary landscape and came to view this journey as an opportunity of a lifetime and a clearing for new possibilities. I have met inspiring elders and teachers who gave me the courage and support to move forward into elderhood with grace and dignity. But I was also hit with the unpleasant reality that many aging men and women often struggle to hold on to old beliefs that may no longer be working, leaving some miserable and afraid. More frightening and disheartening to me is that many are simply disappearing into old age like a faded memory, forgotten by the world.

I began to wonder and to dream of ways I could serve this population. My own time of surrendering my role as a vision fast guide to the young upstarts is closing in and soon to give way to whatever is next in my life. The
thought of creating an offering for elders awakened in me a new passion, and I came alive with a renewed hope and creativity. Perhaps the “next” in my life was now giving me a nudge. After nearly four years, from inception through gestation to its cracking open, it came time to embody the dream.

With my friend and co-guide, Sara Harris, *The Grandmothers’ Circle* was called.

Ten remarkable women showed up at Baker Creek Campground in Big Pine, CA, in the middle of a storm. They were wet and tired from traveling but glowing and smiling. We happily greeted each one of the women and assisted them in quickly putting up their tents. That afternoon we had our first welcome/handshake circle followed by a simple, hot meal that was prepared for us by our two young assistants, Jessica and Michelle. All of us thankfully retired early. This is one of the many perks of being an elder — we can retire early.

“Did we actually do this?” Sara and I asked ourselves at the day’s end. “Is this really happening?” Yes, it was really happening, and, yes, we actually did do this. The next day we began what was to be the most incredible and inspiring week, filled with rich stories and profound experiences.

The truth is that these ten trusting, courageous women are the ones who made this all happen. The guides and assistants happily held the seat of privilege and honor of witnesses and holding this circle of elders. All the wisdom that emerged throughout the week was pure, simple, and authentic: taking the path less travelled - making pain your strength - reaching for the stars - coming face to face with the healer within - loving the beauty of an aging face - finding a new kind of fertility - stepping up to take your place in the world - steeping in deer medicine - finding inspiration in the written word - holding both the profound and ordinary - being enough - carrying humor as medicine - asking for what you need - being the greatest grandmother ever - finding the source within yourself - being completely honest - finding joy and play in the presence of horses - being in the ecstatic bliss of timelessness.

For me, it also meant wearing our grief, losses, and disappointments like exquisite pearls around our necks. It meant crying tears of pain and joy so that things feel real. It meant growing down and rooted so we are able to withstand the storms of adversity with courage and strength, so that we may continue to move forward in our lives with grace and dignity. It meant we listen to the cravings of the young people for guidance and recognition. It meant we make compassion our religion and maintain the strong back of equanimity.

As a guide and an elder in the experience of sitting among others like myself, I was reminded that this journey of growing older also means growing. There is still so much to discover as I explore my deepest self and continue to trust the source I find within. This journey is a continuous and unfolding mystery to which I find myself surrendering.

I will continue to support women moving through elderhood and continue to remind them and myself how important we are to society and this world now more than ever. We carry the ancestral stories in our bones; we are like human libraries filled with volumes of history. We have the opportunity to leave our legacy of gifts, knowledge, and the wisdom of a lived life for seven generations. It also begs the questions: “How can I show my gratitude for the gift of years, and what ways can I give back?”

My hope is that this offering, now being renamed, *The Elder’s Journey: Four Shields of Eldering for Women* will continue to serve women who are moving through elderhood, who are willing to walk the path less travelled and claim the journey into elderhood with a new awareness, intention, and readiness to step into becoming the elders this world needs.

My deepest gratitude goes to Sara and to our wonderful assistants, Jessica and Michelle, who worked with such heart and generosity, taking care of all the elders, while seeing and honoring the elder wisdom that was then revealed.

Not knowing when the dawn will come, I open every door.

— Emily Dickinson
Being a mentor is a call to rise to a role that some of us play unconsciously, yet to do so entirely consciously. It is a choice to live with utmost responsibility. It is a reminder that my life, then, is a model and a potential guide to others. It is the willingness to be a constant teacher. Here is how I listen to the truth within me. Here is how I honor myself while honoring another.

To me, mentoring is akin to parenting, though the time and relationship are more temporary. Through each of my actions, I am giving a message, saying to those in my care, “This is how the world works.” In that, mentoring is thrilling because by the careful choices of one person, a mentor can inspire others to believe the world is a worthwhile place, where all of us play a deeply valuable role. Like parenting, mentoring is also humbling, for we must face our imperfections and grow in a fuller sense of love through these as well.

Mentoring holds an especially dear place to me because I have had to witness the darker sides of life. While bearing witness, I was also the one looked to for guidance, for the solace to reconcile the painful and unjust. Given the challenge of seeing people act from lesser places of greed, deceit, jealousy and vengeance, how can I make sense of such a world? What options are available to me?

As the oldest sister of five children, I was often cast in the light of leader, guide, confidant, nurturer, and protector. My role emerged slowly to me, along with the weight of early responsibility. What soon followed, though, was the gift of potential to truly lift up another. Many enlightened hours of conversation, both to inspire and to console, shifted what was once dark into something full of light. That possibility could be brought forth between us, and then an opening . . .

A mentor holds the cherished position of mirror, seer, truth-teller, and springboard to one’s higher place. We call the dynamics of a situation with skill and clear-sightedness. It is a practice of seeing as much as action. We can affirm others’ experiences, while forever steering toward the greater perspective, the higher possibility.

At some point, we are all given an upper threshold. We find a limiting view or a challenging experience that may threaten to keep us in lesser expressions of ourselves. Yet, through so many subtle ways, we do influence one another. Knowingly or not, we are so often teaching and informing and confirming, “This is how the world works.” We have an opportunity to choose, to rise and shed light where there may be darkness.

Once we consciously choose this role of mentor, we cross a point of no turning back. We are accountable for our actions, and our very lives may become a teaching tool. Maybe some have acted with destructive drives, but here I offer another example. If I can rise in courage to defend the honor of one I love, I have cracked an upper threshold for one who believed all was cowardice and cruelty. If I can speak an uncomfortable truth, I put a fissure through a limited belief that all would be silence and avoidance. If I can call beauty where others have cast shame, then I have helped open a door in a once cold and lonely room. Because we are all full of infinite potential, this world also must hold the same.

Mentoring is a call to rise. And rise. And rise again. And onward we go.
THE WISDOM OF THE BRANCH

Polly Triplat

The wisdom of the branch
Strong twisted one
The juniper loves the sweet,
rich compost of the present Earth
Her roots rising out of compassion
Knowing the relationship is whole,
complete and ever changing.
Beautiful! The Quest had already begun and continues in the “field” of the West; it is in place, for all of us. My response is this . . . This is the truth for every one of us in differing layers, whether we are aware of it or not. All is included, can’t run, can’t hide.

Can’t change without getting dirty and wet, if I don’t know the fabric of my own life. All roads will be the same, no matter how much I may try to change them. If my path isn’t based in the story, dirt and juice of my own, it will stay on the surface with not much meaning. Can’t change, can’t grow, can’t hide, can’t move without resistance, discomfort, ambivalence, edges, doubts, fears and projections, all part of our human condition, benevolent forces, challenging to guide us forward, to wake us up, a chance to grow, to deepen. If you’re called, that is? The juice and energy, holding the tension of it all, to cry, scream, laugh, let go, get in there, be a fool, mess up, give up, jump; jump in a pond, jump into the waters of your life, jump into passion, that’s the spiritual path. All included. Whatever happens, whoever we are, wherever we go, we can’t escape or hide . . .

That’s the work.
WILDERNESS AND GRACE

Ruthanne Svendsen

Mountains and deserts have always been a draw for me. There’s something about the unpredictable, yet harmonious quality of committing oneself to the freedoms and restrictions of the trail that feels intensely intimate. While I have explored their external wildness, I have come face to face with my interior wilderness. John Muir aptly observed, “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay till sundown, for going out, I found was really going in.”

My husband Rich and I just returned from just that kind of a long walk, one which both terrified and titillated us all at once. What got a hold on us, I can’t really say, except that it did, and we walked, and we’re changed.

We had to go. 45 miles, 4500 vertical feet, 5 days. As Robert MacFarlane puts it, in Mountains of the Mind, it’s as though we were impelled to flee to “environments that do not respond to the flick of a switch or twist of a dial. But have their own rhythms and orders of existence.” We longed to let go of our own sense of order and accomplishment and give over to a larger universe. We all suffer from what he calls “amnesia.” And he, like we, went to the mountains for “correction.”

“They pose questions about our durability and the importance of our schemes,” MacFarlane explains, and like Muir, saw that the mountains not only make us aware of our immeasurable gifts and limitations, but more importantly, reshape our understandings of our interior landscapes, such as we experience on a vision fast, for example.

Yet, ultimately and more importantly, the mountains quicken our sense of wonder as we become astonished at the simplest transactions of nature. Rich and I wept at each vista, smiled as we rested in the tundra, and sighed with delight as we immersed our feet beside the fingerlings resting in the mud and still waters, and absorbed the glory, at the end of a long dusty trail, of bathing in the golden Sierra light and clear waters.

Seldom do I feel as graceful as when I have spent several days in the wilderness thinking through my feet.
In my life the sustained intensity of living and thinking in the unplanned actions and details over time is nearly unparalleled. As I pause to take a look back at my life, I notice that the moments I find most meaningful are those gifts of some “otherness” working in my life where no prior planning had taken place — where I was “thinking through my spine.” Whenever the gifts of the moment happen, I feel I have experienced a state of grace.

Herein lies the metaphor of how our challenging forays can mirror our life journeys. Sometimes I wonder if the grace we experience cannot be truly known, except in the moments of actual movement; grace is experienced in the midst of climbing, living, doing, working. My love for camaraderie, terrain, and nature is shaped in the midst of moving over it and participating along with it. I see the power inherent in our experience of the Sierra really cannot be known ahead of the event. One finds one’s body and soul immersed in its grace and comes to recognize it; in other words, we seem to live the grace provided in the moment. It doesn’t show up except in the doing and living. There’s a sort of naiveté living in the wonder of life’s explorations, connections, and graces. These are the qualities that make my life so livable and so wondrous.

Funny though, having said all this, I’m thinking a good walk in any wilderness does the same thing, and even the wilderness of our own dwellings, if given the right intentions and environment. Grace, wonder, connections. These components of our vision fasts connect all the parts of us we tend to compartmentalize.

We’ve understood that mountains, over time, become folded in on themselves, and eroded by the pressures of continental movement, they create a time gap. Old strata and new formations reveal themselves; the whole process John Powell called a Great Unconformity. What happens for me in the desert or mountains is my own version of an unconformity that truly began to upend some years ago in a desert region on the West side of the Inyo Mountains, called the Eureka Valley.

I walked up a wash and erected a large blue tarp using the creosote bush as a tie-off with strips of parachute chord I had in my pack. Besides my tarp, sleeping bag, toothbrush, journal, and the clothes I was wearing, I brought four gallons of water for four days and five nights of prayer and fasting. I was afraid, not for my physical safety, but for my mental. I was sure I would meet the spirits of darkness. Instead, something quite the opposite happened. Following is an excerpt from a letter I sent to Steven Foster immediately following my return.

If the desert was able to show me anything, it was that time is an elusive spirit who slips gently into a void and bids me follow, and even though the sun and stars marked the moments so that by them I observed movement of light and dark and glimpsed changes within my body that signaled both my transient and eternal capacities, I still haven’t found my way back from the other side. However boundary-less time-spirit may be, she also by the divisions of the light signals an urgency, the kind of which feels imperative to organization and cognition; a growing need on my part to figure what the heck happened or at least peel myself off the sand and rematerialize with a modicum of former recognition of myself.

Remember what Heraclitus said about Logos and Chaos; if I can simplify, he said that personal chaos always results in a larger personal Logos: well, so I trust his words and count on a bigger personal picture, but its this in-between time that disturbs. As I re-read my journal, I see that I’ve said in wonderment “water is enough for now,” and perhaps water will be my sustenance for a while longer, although I’m feeling like that’s all I’d like it to be, and struggling with the fact that I’m ingesting more than I want to, metaphorically speaking; the small things of the desert seemed to be ministering to me, the hummingbird flew his jet-like love dance several times, mourning dove woke me from a branch near my head, finches and sparrows eavesdropped. Water and small things made for such intimacy. The desert makes all beings intimate. I wanted to follow the call of each bird onto its flight, and lizard into the creosote, and I imagined a generous reception by the flora. Time in that desert ocean felt luxurious: slow and focused. Time for small attentions and quiet movements. Time to let the day unfold.

Later I added, “while in the desert I had moved into a deeply intimate space with all things around me. My whole body and mind were brought into being, and my whole being was ‘pressed into life.’” I felt as though the thin veneer that separates from the grandmothers and witnesses surrounding me had become translucent; the light and magic of the desert became the artful metaphor through which Love’s presence seemed in all and through all.

During our journeys into the desert or the mountains, our interior spaces light up and re-engage with the deeper spirit within us, dispel our amnesia, synchronize our lives, and provide enough wonder and grace to reshape our wilderness within. Enough for the moment, and enough for the day, all things made intimate.
Much of our thinking has been shaped by the brilliance, intuitive wisdom, and practical implications of depth psychology, particularly the work of Carl Jung and others standing upon his shoulders. Against the background of the discovery of the Unconscious, the imperative to understand the relationship between instinct and reason, and the swirling debates concerning Darwinian evolutionary theory, Jung was led, sometimes seemingly in spite of himself, to argue for a reconnection with the natural world.

Whenever we touch nature we get clean . . . Walking in the woods, lying on the grass, taking a bath in the sea, are from the outside; entering the unconscious, entering yourself through dreams, is touching nature from the inside and this is the same thing, things are put right again. All these things have been used in initiations in past ages. (Jung, 1984, p. 142)

Small wonder that Stephen Foster and Meredith Little referred to important Jungian texts in developing their Four Shields model, as they noted parallels between Jung’s work and the four shields dynamics they were tracking. “In some ways, Jung’s twentieth century theories point to the more ancient four shield dynamics of the natural self” (Foster and Little, 1998, p. 113).

The relevance of Jung’s work for our various projects in eco-therapy generally and in the practice of wilderness rites of passage continues to be explored by numerous writers. James Hillman’s notion of “a psyche the size of the earth,” Craig Chalquist’s Terrapsychology, and Sasmita Hauk’s practice of “earth-dreaming,” among others, are all rooted to one degree or another in Jung’s work.

Elements of Jung’s work thus have great appeal to many of us working “in the field” or on the mountain. His emphasis on the Gnostic aphorism, “as above, so below,” as well as his plea for a new (or renewed) relationship with the cosmos and the centrality of the quest of soul-making are magnetizing.

However, in the Jungian emphasis on individuation, sometimes it seems that the importance of relationship is neglected or marginalized. What I would argue for here is akin to the quantum dilemma of whether elementary entities are particles or waves. It depends, right? Fellow wilderness guide, Tara Souch, and I have been exploring possibilities that arise when we privilege the idea that we are fundamentally relational “beings” and wonder about the consequences and effects of approaching our work from that perspective (as well). What follows is far from a complete explication of this idea and really amounts to an invitation to further exploration.

This notion of relational being (see, for example, Sampson, 2008) has a number of sources, but rather than spend much time on the concept, I would like to get right to a couple of points of where these ideas come alive. One of the practices that a lot of us probably refer to and work with when we are on the land, betwixt and between, in the threshold, and when we are guiding and holding others within that twilight world of Spirit, is holding conversations with the other-than-human. Talking with trees, cacti, streams, Sparrow, Raven, Coyote, and others all becomes not only possible, but sometimes even begins to seem, well, natural. These conversations, in my experience, often follow an interesting trajectory, one that some might describe as developmental.

When talking with these Others, at first, I have a tendency to come from a rather allegorical or conceptual mode. In other words, ego remains in control as I “imagine” what these Others might say, as in “I am a tree, I am rooted in one place, but I can dance in the wind.” Here, the tree remains rather generic, one of a class, even if I move toward the particularities of a species, Pine, say, or Willow. It is possible, under certain conditions, that there is a shift, and I can open to hearing more clearly what this particular Other, this only one in the Universe, singular individual being has to say to me. One of the conditions for this shift, in my experience, is laboring through the agony of a catharsis, which often seems to happen for me on the third day of a fast. Subsequent to a full-bodied, full-voiced descent into agonizing grief, attended by raging sorrow and raging anger, the threshold within thresholds in which the grief of

THE PARADE OF OUR MUTUAL LIFE:
INVITATION TO A CONVERSATION
Scott Lawrance
previous and present generations bursts like flood from my core, a space seems to open in which each being in my field, not only animals, plants, but even rocks, come truly alive, re-animated. And these conversations take on a life and individuality of their own, with the same tone, quality and valence of talks with dear friends about matters of the heart!

These are the conversations, then, that compose the self, in the sense that the self is not a single, isolated “thing” among other similarly isolated “things.” This is the “celebration of the other” that is not only powerfully meaningful when it occurs, but also becomes an enduring element of our storied ongoing-ness. Karl Tomm, from the University of Calgary, has provided a fruitful approach to understanding the dynamics here with the idea of the “internalized other.” We could say that this approach deconstructs the sense that “we” are an integral and unified, even imperial, self, but are actually composed of multiple internalized others with whom we are always potentially “in conversation.” The main difference from Karl’s work is that here the others are other-than-human.

Thus, the ancient fire-scarred Ponderosa and its tender-needled offspring, with whom I wept and talked on the ridge last summer, remain conversational partners for me now, sitting in the rain in Victoria, BC, assailed by the ongoing cries of the world. And, to shift metaphors and find ourselves in a different map, is this not one face of the “West,” enabling us to see that which is hidden in the depths inviting re-imagination of our world? And is this re-imagination not occasioned, impelled, moved by the fully aroused feelings, the erotic body of the “South,” mad to be in contact with the very flesh of the Other?

The second point of engagement with these ideas is drawn directly from the practice of Narrative Therapy, which offers many useful and provocative ideas that may be relevant to our work. The parallels and relevance of Narrative shows up most clearly in how we conceptualize “mirroring.” In both ways of working, Story is pre-eminent. In the Narrative Therapy framework, persons are limited, oppressed, or constrained as a result of inhabiting, embodying, or performing problematic stories, stories that often deny them legitimacy, agency, or value. These stories arise in relationships, at the level of family or friendship, and at the level of culture and discourse. These stories invite persons to see themselves with limited, even pathological identities, ranging from being “angry people,” “addicts,” “schizophrenics,” “alcoholics,” etc.

But Narrative Therapy, using a text analogy, suggests that people are always multi-storied. As well, using the slogan, “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem,” practitioners enable their conversational partners to identify, thicken, and perform stories of alternative identity. You may readily identify the parallel here with the work of mirroring for intent and the subsequent mirroring for empowerment. Undertaking the ceremony, undergoing the challenges of the threshold, one returns to take up and perform a new story, one that fits with the values and intentions that have been clarified.

We do not have the space here to explore these ideas in the depth and expanse they deserve, but allow me to highlight the previous theme of a social construction of self. Again, as opposed to the discovery of an inherent core, or authentic identity, this metaphor suggests that it is the stories that we tell, and the stories in which we are told and defined by others, that determine the quality and nature of our worlds. An example that might be readily available to us is that of a youth, defined as a troublemaker in school or community, who takes on and performs this ascribed identity. We know these kids, do we not, and our knowing includes understandings that transcend the pathologizing of them as persons. Narrative practices are designed at all points to deconstruct or undo the problem story and facilitate an embodiment of our preferred identity, an identity in this context that is rooted in the rite of passage.

Finally, I would like to note the importance of locating these individual stories within networks and communities. The Narrative Practices of reflecting teams, outsider witnesses, definitional ceremonies, and letter-writing campaigns are each relevant here. These practices are each suggestive of further developments that “thicken the plot” of the new identity that has been marked by ceremony. Creative adaptations of each will circulate the knowledge of transformation and contribute significantly to the ongoing challenge of creating and locating communities for both youth and adults in which their incorporation can be recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated. Tara and I hope that you might be inspired to contribute to this conversation!

References
These mountains are not for the faint of heart
They will intimidate the meek
Beat down the weary
And break apart those who underestimate their power

But for those who are willing to take the risk
of being changed by the journey
and open their heart to what they might discover —
the mountains are beckoning

For those who are willing to brave the rocky, windy peaks,
to be scratched
and burned
and beaten
For those who are willing to follow the path
just one step at a time
even when they feel they can go no longer —
the mountains are beckoning

For those who dare to walk exposed along a ridge top
and scream on a peak
and swim naked in the cold blue lakes
and feel the depths of what it is to be
fully vulnerable
fully human
fully alive —
the mountains are beckoning

And when the night falls and the stars explode
into the darkness
And the silence asks the meaning of our existence
Those who have come will sit in the chaos
of the unknown and expanding universe
And hear their hearts beat in rhythm with
the low hum of the earth
And meet themselves there.
Pulling out a bunch of multi-colored carrots from the small corner patch planted late last spring in our garden in the Owen's Valley, something hits me. It's a golden mid-October morning, the kind of day that opens your soul to the beauty of all that is exquisitely alive and heart-wrenchingly impermanent.

Delighting in the multi-colored carrots in my hand, I am struck by the paradoxical nature of this moment: that I can only harvest these carrots by taking their life. That I can only steep in the simple miracle of their beauty and sweetness after having pulled them out of the ground. Maybe death is always like that, for all of us. Maybe death is just the moment when we get harvested. Each of us in our own time. Some of us well after our prime and others prematurely. Who knows why? What if death is simply harvest time? And while we cling to the soil of our living like the next plant, it is our destiny to come out into the light of a fine day that we will not know until we get there.

Something in me is softening. Thinking of death as a harvest, I feel my breath deepen and my body relax. All is well. In life and in death. I needed to remember that. No matter how many ways I have already known it, no matter how many more times it will reveal itself to me. I need to remember it over and over again. Because I always forget.

Truth is, the privilege of a life “on the edge of my seat” (as I call my new life post-cancer treatment) is not always as glorious as I’d like it to be. I often say cancer saved my life, and in many ways this is very true. It allowed me to take an in-depth inventory of my life before it was my time to leave this world. An early death lodge if you will. It granted me the opportunity to make radical changes in areas of my life that begged for alignment. It gave me the courage to quit a job that was killing me (quite literally, as it turned out!) and expand and transform my limited notion of what it means to be a fiercely loving, responsible, and committed parent. Ultimately, it gifted me with the freedom and the need to heal this one precious life forward, whatever that meant for me.

At the time, I was flabbergasted. I had made it through the maze. No more medical interventions, no more surgeries, poisoning or radiating. No more doctors visits for a while. My new life was extending before me in brand-new colors. I wouldn’t have wanted to return to my old life if I could have! I felt blessed living on the edge, even with all the unknown that recovery from cancer holds. I knew that it would be this very edge that would help me turn into my new life wholeheartedly. I knew it would help me let go of old knee jerks and worn out patterns which were not supporting a healing life. It would set me free to take risk and stay true and current in my relationship to myself, my family, and my work in the world, keenly aware that all I had was the present moment. In a way, I felt quite blessed for no longer being able to take my life for granted. Instead, I got to steward it forward for what it really was (and is): one wild and precious opportunity to come alive.

Yet, some days living at the edge of my seat feels overrated. It is many things, but the one thing it is not is comfortable. I’m two and a half years into it now, and the truth is, it isn’t getting any easier. The same special rawness of this life that calls me out and into my truth, day after day, is simultaneously wearing me down. The healing movement that was born in response to cancer continues to spiral out into more and more areas of my life, asking me to become more and more aware and present on so many levels. This is a good thing. But in reality it’s not so easy. Like in any true healing, a surprising amount of suffering comes forward in the process, wanting to be held, seen, and witnessed in order to be released. Core childhood fears, rudimentary survival responses, and post-traumatic anxieties surface unannounced and at random times, and they are not easy dance partners. That’s the part I don’t share as readily with others, the shadow of my journey. But it is also the part that makes it real.

In many ways the realization of our impermanence is what countless spiritual practices work so hard to attain. As people touched by cancer, we get a lifelong free pass. The only hitch is that we can’t get off the ride when we’re dizzy or nauseous or simply feel we’ve had enough. Unlike other people who commit to a regular meditation practice, we can’t get up from our pillow or decide to skip a day of
practice. Having lost the ability to negate our own death, we are in this for life — in the advanced course of living and dying.

While the gift of having lost my “insulation” for good is an amazing opportunity for me to live an awakened life, it is also one of the biggest blows for my ego. And there isn’t a day that it isn’t fighting this truth, one way or another, to the bone and back. To the bone and back.

The illusion of control and the sense of ownership of our life is no longer available after having encountered cancer. It’s just not on the menu. We know better. And in case we forget, invariably we have close friends from old support groups, who have been doing well for many years, only to then die suddenly and unexpectedly of recurrences. We buddy and coach newly diagnosed comrades through the highs and lows of their treatments, with varying outcome. We have prayer lists for those with terminal diagnosis. We are ALWAYS the first ones to call and consult if anyone in our family or community gets cancer. Or one of our 466 Facebook friends. Sometimes it feels like the whole world has cancer.

Cancer is a rite of passage. And as any rite of passage guide would tell you, what turns out to be the hardest part of the ceremony is not the actual time out on the mountain, when you’re in the middle of the ordeal, hungry, tired, and weary from the wind, but when you’re coming back to the world and to your community, irrevocably changed. The monomyth of the “hero’s journey” is widely used in the cancer community today, but just like in the old Hollywood movies, we fancy the illusion of an ongoing “happy ending” after all is said and done. Truth is, there is no ending. Yes, there is happiness, and many of us are blessed with a particular sense of acute aliveness that affords us to live a little looser in our skins, grateful for the small and big gifts in our everyday living and prone to focus on what really matters to our heart. But there is also darkness, right alongside the gift. There is the continual relentless call to confront, reconcile, and make good with our worst fears and deepest grief. Life with or after cancer is more intense both ways, lighter and more amazing and darker and more challenging.

I could tell you what I do when the going gets tough. I have my bag of tricks. Practices, mantras, medications, meditations, and more. And maybe I will, another time. But today I just want to say that I don’t have the answer. That there is no quick fix and no fail safe cure. The simple truth is that sometimes it’s just damn hard. Sometimes the best we can do is hunker down, hold on, and let the storm blow over. No matter how bad, eventually the weather will change. Yes, this too shall pass. To muster the courage to be here now. Simply being present where we are. Right in the heart of the pain. Letting go into it. Surrendering to what is. Turning into the skid. One breath at a time. Again and again. Trusting the heart of the darkness to peel off another layer of our suffering before returning us to the light. It always does, because suffering has no other purpose than to lead to healing.

I heard that when the Japanese mend broken objects they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold. They believe that when something has suffered damage and has a history, it becomes more beautiful. If this is so, then may we, too, shine golden through our cracked-open selves, less perfect but more beautiful; courageous, edgy, and wildly alive. Until that one fine day of our harvest. And on that day, may we bring a big old smile to creation’s face when she is inspecting us with loving curiosity, size, shape, scars and all, before tasting the sweetness of what we have done with our lives.
It seems like I always knew that I was going to die young. The premonition came to me in my 20s without details (like when or how). With the exception of annual quests, I did not prepare, until March 2001, while I was driving home from a successful reconnaissance trip. There I had discovered a suitable base camp from which I could guide a rite of passage for a severely disabled woman.

Madeline had been dreaming for years of enacting a vision quest despite the fact that she was wheelchair bound and only partially able to move, speak or see. I took on the challenge of planning a trip for her after other guides had turned her down. I admired Madeline for her persistence. As a relatively new guide (in my third year), I was perhaps just naive enough to imagine that I could succeed.

The evening I met Madeline, her pluck and her staff impressed me. She required 24x7 attendant care. Her entourage even included a personal manager. Barely able to lift her arms, she still had managed to become adept at maneuvering the joystick controlling her chair. She could whip that machine around in the blink of an eye.

Madeline was smart and legally blind. Laughter flowed easily from her, a result I learned of an accepting nature and a sophisticated sense of irony. She had acquired cerebral palsy as an infant during heart surgery. Unlike most of us, who take our able bodies for granted, she had never experienced sitting up or walking without assistance.

I began looking at non-traditional venues. The search led me to a state park three hours south. I traveled light for my recon trip, having chosen to fast and to sleep outside. Everywhere around me I was greeted by green remnants of a recent rain. Taking my time, I headed for the most likely spot, a group campground closed for the season.

When I crested the hill to the last two sites, my heart skipped a beat and tears blurred my eyes. I had found it! The camps were separated by a stand of mature pines, edged by meadows. In the middle stood one of the largest outhouses I have ever seen. That night I slept next to a picnic table.


Returning home, I postponed breaking my fast — I was so enjoying the clarity it brought to me. Choosing the silent hum of the road over the distraction of the radio, I found my thoughts turning over options. “Where do I go from here? What’s my next step?”
Instead of logistical plans, however, my thoughts honed in on a different question, “What would I do if I knew I was going to die in 6 months?” For the next two hours I drove and mused as wooded hillsides faded into suburbs and cities. Everything else was forgotten, insignificant. I was left with an imagined future . . .

I am sitting by a small round table in an enclosed garden bordered with lobelia and shaded by redwoods. This is my sanctuary where I receive friends and family who come to visit and to say goodbye. Here in this protected place I feel safe enough to share my deepest thoughts with whoever sits across from me, sipping tea. The conversations vary, but the tea does not. I relish the soothing, hot refreshment, tasting every pepperminty drop with nearly as much passion as the love I feel for these people steeped in their anticipatory grief. We laugh and cry, share memories and then hug as I walk them to the gate. They pass through solemnly, both of us knowing that we will never see each other again. I feel blessed that I have this time to receive each one, to honor and be honored by them. It is my “real” death lodge.

Madeline and I set a date to meet with her manager Pamela and the two gals I had recruited to assist. My intention for the meeting was twofold. I wanted to tie up loose ends and offer a guided journey. I questioned my intention. “How does one guide a visualization for a person who is blind?” As psychodramas played in my head, it came to me: “Focus on every sense except sight.” And so it was that I sent them deep into a completely dark cave with musty stonewalls, plinking drips, snoring bats, and a breeze that shifted from cold to warm.

It was a sunny June day when we arrived at the park. We’d done most of our prep back home, so we went to bed early. The next morning I drummed our small group awake. As the sun rose, we stood at the threshold circle. First, I prayed over the attendants, blessing each for her commitment. I summoned Madeline then, and with white sage smoke thick in the air, I smudged her and her chair thoroughly. I sent her off as I have always done, with instructions to not look back. I, however, watched as she faded into the underworld.

An assistant took Madeline for a “walk” later that day. Going down the hill, the chair started to slip. In a panicked squeal, Madeline called out for help. Helen dashed back up the hill and immediately stabilized the wheelchair, not nearly as off-road worthy as we had hoped. Helen got behind the behemoth machine, and they proceeded carefully, skidding a little, but never totally losing control.

They stopped at a camp with plenty of shade. Every so often, as instructed, Helen encouraged Madeline to drink. [Having no sense of thirst is one of the ways cerebral palsy affects her. It makes her dependent upon an attendant who will ensure that she drinks enough liquids, every hour or so, every day, forever.]

Later I learned that Madeline spent that afternoon in conversation with a dappled, white-tail fawn. Helen didn’t see it. Later, Madeline herself speculated it was a spirit deer — it knew too much for its age.

On the afternoon of the last day of her “solo,” Claire put Madeline down for a nap on top of her red sleeping bag and sat nearby. A movement caught her eye. She was stunned to see a brown rabbit poised next to Madeline, sniffing. Claire froze. Slowly, the wild bunny moved ever closer to Madeline’s prone body. It reached out its neck and touched her before hopping away slowly.

Claire ran down the hill to get me, breathlessly telling the story as we walked up to where we could see the lump that was Madeline’s slight form, outlined in red. The rabbit did not return as we stood watching, recounting the story. “This is special.” I thought. “I won’t tell her right away, in good time.”

Although fasting drained her energy more than anticipated, Madeline was delighted with her quest. A few weeks later, we gathered at her place to share stories. During this reunion, I asked her about the fawn she had spoken of weeks later, we gathered at her place to share stories. During this reunion, I asked her about the fawn she had spoken of weeks later, we gathered at her place to share stories. During this reunion, I asked her about the fawn she had spoken of. “Do you know anything about rabbit?” “Let me tell you about what happened while you were asleep.” I proceeded to regale her in detail with the story about the time Rabbit kissed her.

It was only obvious to me after the fact, that the year of planning, the study of disability, and the practice of conscious dying was the best preparation I could have had for what was to come in my own life. As it turned out, my premonitions were providential: by the end of that year I had died from a stroke.

Thanks to modern medicine, I returned to the land of the living. When I regained awareness a few days after the craniotomy, I discovered that I had lost the ability to consciously control most of my body. For the next few years I focused primarily on relearning everything, especially how to walk. Initially, however, I was confined to a wheelchair. I never upgraded to a motorized model, but I imagine that if I had, I would have become a joystick jockey, too, just like Madeline.
Coyote Keeps His Name

Steven Foster

One time Great Spirit called all the Animal People together. They came from all over the earth to one camp and set up their lodges. Spirit Chief said there was going to be a change. There was going to be a new kind of people coming along. He told all the Animal People they would now have to have names.

“Some of you have names now, some have no names. Tomorrow everyone will have a name. This name will be your name forever, for all your descendants. In the morning you must come to my lodge and choose your name. The first one to come may choose any name he wants. The next person will take any other name. That is the way it will go. And to each person I will give some work to do.”

All the Animal People wanted to have powerful names and be well known. They wanted to be the first to Old Man’s lodge in the morning. Coyote walked around saying he would be the first. He did not like his name. He was called Trickster and Imitator. Everybody said those names fitted him, but he wanted a new name.

“I will take one of the three powerful names,” said Coyote. “Mountain Person, Grizzly Bear, who rules all the four-leggeds, or Eagle, who rules the birds, or Good Swimmer, the Salmon, the chief of the Fish People. These are the best names. I will take one of these names.”

Fox, who was Coyote’s brother, said, “Maybe you will have to keep the name you have. People don’t like that name. No one wants it.”

“I am tired of that name,” said Coyote. “Let some old person who cannot do anything take it. I am a warrior! Tomorrow when I am called Grizzly Bear or Eagle or Salmon you will not talk like this. You will beg to have my new name, brother.”

“You had better go home and get some sleep, Coyote,” said Fox. “You will not wake up in time to get any name.” But Coyote didn’t go home. He went around asking the Animal People questions. When he heard the answers, he would say, “Oh, I knew that before. I did not have to ask.”
This is the way he was. He lost his shirt in a game of hoop and stick; then he went home and talked with his wife. She would be called Mole, the Mound Digger, after the naming day. “Bring in plenty of wood now. I must stay awake all night. Tomorrow I must get my new name. I will be Grizzly Bear. I will be a great warrior and a chief.”

Coyote sat watching the fire. Mole went to bed with the children. Half the night passed. Coyote got sleepy. His eyes grew heavy and started to close, so he took two small sticks and wedged them between his eyelids to hold his eyes open. “Now I can stay awake,” he thought, but before long he was asleep with his eyes wide open.

The sun was high in the sky when Coyote woke up. Mole made a noise that woke Coyote. She did not wake him up before this because she was afraid if he got a great name he would go away and leave her. So she didn’t say anything. Coyote went right over to the lodge of Old Man. He saw no one around and thought he was the first. He went right in and said, “I am going to be Grizzly Bear. That shall be my name.” He was talking very loudly.

“The name Grizzly Bear was taken at dawn,” said the Great Spirit.

“Well, I shall be called Salmon then,” said Coyote in a quiet voice.

“The name Salmon has also been taken,” said the Great Spirit. “All the names have been taken except yours. No one wanted to steal your name.”

Coyote looked very sad. He sat down by the fire and was very quiet. The Great Spirit was touched.

“Imitator,” he said, “you must keep your name. It is a good name for you. I wanted you to have that name and so I made you sleep late. I wanted you to be the last one here. I have important work for you to do. The New People are coming, and you will be their chief.

“There are many bad creatures on the earth. You will have to kill them. Otherwise, they will eat the New People. When you do this, the New People will honor you. They will say you are a great chief. Even the ones who come after them will remember what you have done, and they will honor you for killing the People-devouring monsters and for teaching the New People all the ways of living.

“The New People will not know anything when they come, not how to dress, how to sing, how to shoot an arrow. You will show them how to do all these things. And cut the buffalo out for them and show them how to catch a salmon. But you will do foolish things, too, and for this the New People will laugh at you. You cannot help it. This will be your way.

“To make your work easier, I will give you a special power. You will be able to change yourself into anything. You will be able to talk to anything and hear anything talk except the water. If you die, you will come back to life. This will be your way. Changing Person, do your work well!”

Coyote was glad. He went right out and began his work. This is the way it was with him. He went out to make things right.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Betsy Perluss has been a guide and trainer at the School of Lost Borders for over fifteen years. Her keen observations of psyche in nature have been recorded in a number of eco and depth psychological journals. Her most recent article, “This Glorious Darkness,” is about her 28-day solo trek along the John Muir Trail, published in Psychological Perspectives, summer 2015. To read more about Betsy’s work, please visit her website at psycheandnature.com.

Bill Plotkin Ph.D. is a depth psychologist, wilderness guide, and agent of cultural evolution. As founder of southwest Colorado’s Animas Valley Institute, he has, since 1980, guided thousands of women and men through nature-based initiatory passages. Bill is the author of Soulcraft (an experiential guidebook), Nature and the Human Soul (a nature-based stage model of human development), and Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche (an ecocentric map of the psyche — for healing, growing whole, and cultural transformation). www.animas.org

Carol Wilburn is a committed elder and teacher, bringing her full heart to rites of passage, council circles, and community building. She’s also a writer, a photographer, a skilled carpenter, a watercolor artist, and a professional engineer, designing and building tiny homes in support of regenerative living.

Corinna Stoeffl is a photographer, an author, a workshop leader and facilitator whose desire is to create more awareness. Her workshops create more for people and the Earth.

Darcy Ottey has been familiar with rites of passage since her Coming of Age with Rite of Passage Journeys at age thirteen. In addition to guiding vision fasts and providing trainings and consulting on rites of passage for a variety of programs, she currently serves as Co-Coordinator of Youth Passageways. She is busily trying to finish her first book, tentatively titled Rites and Responsibilities: Growing up White.

Dominica Bridget Ursula Kroziaka is a protean wild card woman, dancer, writer, performance artist, mother, traveler, firebrand, apocalyptic alchemist ally, dreamer, visionary thinker, and underworld guide. She is a Bohemian/Romany-American woman born to a surrealism family in exile, who currently resides in the belly of the beast, San Francisco, with beloved others, but is most at home on the road in her van Bardo. www.apocalyptictango.com

Fran Weinbaum has been guiding wilderness rites of passage and retreats since 1996. Her growing commitment is to the weaving of soulful community in North Central Vermont through community-created and held ceremony, including rites of passage.

Galaxy Earth Dancer has lived life as a theatre director, biology teacher, and wilderness therapy guide. She is the founder of Owl & Passages and is a guide with Rites of Awareness. While most days she prefers to be out in the wild hiking or being in sacred circle, she also finds moments to hunker down in bed with a good sci-fi novel.

Jennifer Wilhoit Ph.D. is a published author who writes about inner/outer landscapes. She founded TEALarbor stories through which she offers writing mentorship and support for people in life transitions. Jennifer leads writing workshops and facilitates Story & Nature Guiding©. Jennifer is also very involved with hospice work. www.tealarborstories.com

John Davis is on the staff of the School of Lost Borders. He stumbled into wilderness rites of passage quite by accident, got hooked from the beginning, began guiding in 1984, and continues to feel humbled and grateful for it.

Joseph Rubano is a biographical counselor, Spacial Dynamics Movement Educator, and poet living and working in Oceanside, CA. He brings 44 years of meditation and inner work, exploring Eastern and Western esoteric traditions, including a strong foundation in Anthroposophy, and years of working with Native American ceremony to his work with individuals, couples and groups. He has been offering the True Heart True Mind Enlightenment Intensive and the Desert Solo (Vision Quest) Experience in San Diego and Maine since 2009.
Keith Howchi Kilburn has apprehended himself slowly merging into elderhood like a snake losing his skin a piece at a time. He is working on the third or fourth volume of a trilogy or tetralogy loosely entitled *Drinking the Nectar of Earth and Sky*. Preferring the imaginal realm to what's commonly referred to as reality, he is also kinda drifting off, as near as he can remember.

Kent Pearce is a light-hearted man who re-wilds one step at a time. He is the originator of Condor Vision Quest, father of the Condor Clan, and co-originator of the Order of the Red Bandana. He has been a hyper-active member of the WGC since 1993.

Kinde Nebeker is a designer, artist, and teacher whose love of the Big Questions eventually led her to wilderness rites of passage. In 2011, she created New New Moon Rites of Passage (www.newmoonritesofpassage.com), offering rites of passage wilderness trips, and related work. Kinde is committed to cultural renewal through the work of deepening and transforming our relationships to the natural world, to ourselves and each other, and to spirit — creating the conditions for the shift in consciousness that we must make in order to become a sustainable species on the planet.

Larry Hobbs is a vision fast guide and trainer with the School of Lost Borders and the founder and lead guide for the 4-H Youth Rites of Passage Program. He has been leading ecotour groups around the world for over 30 years and researching and writing about human sustainability on the planet for about the same length of time. He has also taught natural history and conducted original research on whales, dolphins, manatees and polar bears. Larry is a grandfather and lives in a small mountain town in the Washington Cascades.

Lauren Marziliano is currently serving as a teacher in the Highline School District south of Seattle in a high school program focused on environmental leadership and community service. With extensive experience taking rites of passage into the public school setting, she is especially committed to supporting underserved populations in getting connected to wilderness experiences.

Linda Sartor lives in an intentional community, teaches at St. Mary’s College, guides vision quests with Rites of Passage, and is the volunteer coordinator for the Peace and Justice Center of Sonoma County. After she saw how the U.S. responded to 9/11, she joined the International Solidarity Movement in Israel/Palestine in 2002; Iraq Peace Teams in 2003; the Nonviolent Peaceforce, Sri Lanka, 2003-2008; Global Exchange diplomacy, Iran in 2008; Voices for Creative Nonviolence in Afghanistan, 2011; and was deported from Bahrain in 2012.

Mark Sipowicz is a Jungian wilderness guide born in Chicago. He commercial fished in Alaska, survived an avalanche, opened and ran a bookstore, studied literature in Missoula and depth psychology at Pacifica. He is a founder of the Heart Arrow Quest, a men’s wilderness retreat, and his private practice is Soul and Stream. He currently lives in Boulder with his wife and two teenage boys.

Michelle Katz has personally experienced and facilitated various rites of passage ceremonies and nature-based counseling practices. She is trained in the tradition of the School of Lost Borders. Michelle is also a certified yoga instructor and adjunct faculty at Sierra College; she has taught in various settings over the years. All this in culmination has contributed to the creation of Oaks Counsel.

Nancy Jane began her study of wilderness rites of passage in 1981 and has been following this calling ever since. She is on staff at the School of Lost Borders. She leads youth and adult vision fasts and has pioneered wilderness rites of passage in school settings. Her intention is to listen deeply in support of others’ connection to nature and spirit and to empower them in the full expression of who they are. Nancy currently teaches in the Ecopsychology graduate program at Naropa University.

Paul Andrade (Greenman) is a dreamer and wanderer of Celtic and Latin descent, who has a great curiosity about this awesomely beautiful and crazy world that he currently finds himself in. He seems to have to learn things the hard way, more often than he likes. He is a lover of the Goddess and the wild untamed magic of creation. He chooses to believe that humanity is undergoing a personal and planetary initiation and will make the choice to live a new dream and renew the earth.
Petra Lentz-Snow has guided vision fasts and wilderness rites of passage programs for over twenty years. WGC Netkeeper 2012-2016, she is currently serving as co-director at the School of Lost Borders. Her personal journey with breast cancer has led her to write articles for her blog (www.journeysintohealing.org) and other venues to raise awareness about cancer as a rite of passage. A native of Germany, she is a certified naturopath and the mother of three young adult children.

Phil Baum, aside from being a full-time grandpa, a long-term active teacher of Qigong and an organic farmer, a former college professor and environmental activist, is a member of the Palomar Cactus and Succulent Society, whose slogan now is “Save Water, Grow Cactus and Succulents.” He may be contacted at Los Arboles Ranch, P.O. Box 2664, San Marcos, CA 92069, if anyone is interested in more information about the honey bee-monarch project and buying native plants, such as wildcrafted black and white sage.

Pippa Bondy is a wilderness rites of passage guide and a carrier/trainer of council. Her vision and passion led her to found Ancient Healing Ways — a foundation that brings ancient healing arts and modern healing methods together. She is based in North Wales UK where the land is rich in myth and legend. www.ancienthealingways.co.uk

Polly Triplat holds a vision to facilitate consciousness and well-being within individuals, leading to a more conscious community and world. She is a true earth-spirit who is dedicated to increasing wellness, community connection, and nurturing the nature of the human spirit.

Robert Wagner is a skilled vision quest guide, offering wilderness rites of passage that create a profound opportunity for personal transformation. A compassionate and gifted communicator, Robert approaches people with deep respect and intuitive wisdom, honoring each person’s unique path and pace of growth. For more about Robert and his work, visit www.wildsacredness.com.

Ruthanne Svendsen is a Wilderness Guide, Spiritual Director, and Musician.

Sage Abella listens to the outer landscape mirroring a dialogue going on in the inner landscape of her body. She’s an artist, writer, lover of the natural world. Her biggest question: “What forest has burned down in me and what unfolding succession of wild lands will grow there now?”

Scott Lawrance is a therapist and wilderness guide who has worked extensively in schools, private practice, wilderness therapy, counselor education, and employee assistance programs. He has been a practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism for over 40 years. In addition to honing his skills as a father and grandfather, Scott is also a poet and writer who has published five volumes of poetry.

Scout Tomyris went on her first quest when she was 45. She began an apprenticeship with her mentor, Anne Stine, in 1997. Scout attended a WGC Gathering just 3 months after her near-death experience where she learned that wheelchairs sink to a stop in desert sand. Many quests, gatherings and years later, she is an active member of the Elders Council. Scout has served as President for the housing cooperative where she lives since 2013. Her story is an edited version of one destined to appear in her first book.

Silvia Talavera has been a guide with the School of Lost Borders since 1993. She is a woman of versatility, passion, and humor, inspiring people towards self-empowerment. She brings to her work a nurturing insight and deep compassion and guides and teaches from lived experience enhanced by her love of nature. Silvia is a mother and grandmother and has taken her place in her community as elder and mentor. She also continues to work as a hospice nurse, Reiki Master and community educator on hospice and end of life care. Silvia has made it her life-long commitment to guide and support those moving through life transitions.

Simeon Ayres discovered Beyond the Threshold and the vision fast in 2012 and was floored by its potency as a transformational tool. Intent on the discovery of his own indigenous soul, he completed the guide’s training in 2013 and commenced working with BTT to bring the vision fast and day walk back home to Victoria. These are now firmly established in the great, forested granite hills of the Strathbogie Ranges, where he lives with his family. These days, you will find Sim wandering the hills and valleys, a pathfinder, a mapmaker, a storyteller, and a lover of wild places.

Stephanie Block is currently working in and exploring the meeting of sea and mountain, urban and wild. Her home is both the rolling hills of interior British Columbia and the jagged coastal rainforest near Vancouver BC. She is studying education from the perspective of eco-relations and continues to search for ways in which to cultivate rites of passage programming in public education.
Steven Foster was a teacher, visionary, author and poet, husband and father. He obtained a Ph.D. in 1965 from the University of Washington, and later, as a professor at San Francisco State University, he was terminated for his association with various student and teacher groups protesting the Vietnam War. In 1974 Steven and Meredith initiated their lifelong work together, founded Rites of Passage, Inc., and in 1982 moved to the Eastern Sierra where they founded The School of Lost Borders, a training ground for thousands of people from many professions, faiths and nationalities in the archetypal ways of initiation. Steven gave his last talk at the Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, entitled “Lost Borders: Coming of Age in the Wilderness.” He died surrounded by loved ones in May 2003.

Trebbe Johnson is the founder and director of Radical Joy for Hard Times, a global community of people dedicated to finding and making beauty at the Earth’s wounded places. She is the author of The World Is a Waiting Lover and the forthcoming Aphrodite at the Landfill: Making Meaning, Beauty and Even Joy on a Challenged Planet. She lives in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Vanessa Osage is a mentor, guide and educator based in Bellingham, Washington. She is the Founder/Director of Rooted Emerging, a nonprofit organization celebrating youth rites of passage since 2010, with nourishing support for the puberty transition. She teaches soulful sexuality education to elementary, middle and high school students and their parents. She offers workshops and consulting to adults of all ages on integrating sexuality into a vibrant life path. Vanessa draws inspiration from wild rivers, travel, dancing, giant puppet theatre, singing/songwriting and her seven-year-old daughter.
2017 Circles Theme

SEVERANCE * THRESHOLD * INCORPORATION

We’re back to fundamentals. These three stages frame most of our wilderness rites of passage, whether we call them vision quests or vision fasts or rites of renewal or rites of reconnection.

How important are they for modern times?

Please share your perspectives, your stories, your ponderings on severance, threshold, or incorporation – or all three.

We’d love to hear your answers to these questions:

• How do you prepare participants for each stage?

• What rituals or practices do you bring to each stage?

• How do these stages work in your own personal life?

• Do you have a story that quintessentially exemplifies one or all three stages?

Please send us your submissions, photos, poetry!

Deadline – January 15, 2017

All current, dues-paying members of the WGC are eligible to submit original work. Please limit the length of your piece to a maximum of 1500 words.

Send your contribution electronically as a Word document to: netkeeper@wildernessguidescouncil.org
(File formats for written work should be .doc and artwork should be .tiff or .jpg at 300 dpi)
Circles on the Mountain 2016