

# WILDERNESS VISION QUESTS: THEY TAP THE SPIRITUAL VALUES OF WILDERNESS

MARILYN RILEY

## Introduction

I think I have one of the most interesting and most important jobs of any woman in natural resources. For 18 years now I have led about six programs a year called Wilderness Vision Quests. I take paying clients on eight-day trips into mountain and desert roadless areas and wilderness in California and Nevada. Generally, my clients attend four pre-trip meetings and take an all day "medicine walk" in nature to prepare for the eight-day experience, which includes four days by themselves. During their solo, questers usually fast with only water and engage in reflection. Sometimes they use ritual and ceremony in search of insights about "who they are" and to focus on pressing issues in their lives.

This modern "Wilderness Vision Quest" simulates an activity at least 8000 years old that was practiced in many, if not most, indigenous cultures around the world (Cruden, 1996; Foster, 1995; Foster and Little, 1988). The vision quest was often used as a rite of passage from one life stage to another, or in preparation for a serious event. But the basic process is the same—to affirm, through solitude and fasting—who one really is, and to ascertain among life's choices what rings most true. This is a beautiful, natural, healthy, time tested, ancient yet modern way to find and create meaning in life.

## How I Started Doing Vision Quests

I learned about vision questing from my brother Steven Foster in the mid-to-late 1970's. I was living on an island in British Columbia, occasionally receiving letters from Steven and his wife Meredith Little, about a new wilderness business they were starting called Rites of Passage. They sent literature to me which looked sort of stark, primitive, and strange—about spiritual practices in the wilderness? The ritual enactment of a rite of passage? The vision quest? I could not relate. I had a family to raise, a garden to grow. I was



Marilyn Riley, Director of Wilderness Transitions Inc., has led 100 Wilderness Vision Quests in the desert and mountain wilderness of California and Nevada over the past 18 years.

busy building a house in a green island paradise, gathering stones from all over the island for a fireplace. There was never enough time even then to sit down to ponder and reflect, which is what my brother's literature suggested I do.

But it no longer surprised me that a year later I arrived at my brother's doorstep, participated in my own vision quest, trained and studied, became a guide, and eventually took over the Rites of Passage youth program. From hundreds of presentations at Bay Area high schools, and hundreds of days and nights in the wilderness with youth from all backgrounds, I came to know how desperate young people are for some rite of passage to help them make the leap from adolescence to adulthood—a ritual path to maturity. I learned too how desperate many parents are for help in letting go and finding meaning in their own lives as their fledglings prepare to leave the nest.

The years went by, I earned a Master's degree in Psychology focusing on vision questing and human healing (Riley, 1986), and I began my own vision questing business. I joined in 1988 with my dearest friend, Betty Warren, who is now 80, in creating our current company, Wilderness Transitions Inc., a non-profit educational organization. Betty and I lead an average of five or six trips a year, plus some special events, and are proud to demonstrate with our perfect safety record and hundreds of satisfied customers that women too can be competent wilderness guides for men and women.

Like many women, I was denied equality in outdoor activities, usually staying in the campground or at home with my mother and sister when my brothers and father headed down the trail to manly adventures. Today, I see many of my women clients with impacts on their self esteem from similar treatment based on gender; the joy in my work is compounded by the empowerment they gain from completing a vision quest. The hero's journey that the vision quest represents is also a heroine's journey. But it seems no accident that over half of my clients are women, many of whom also missed the chance for such journeys that were available to their brothers.

## Ritual and Ceremony

In my former life, I could not have imagined spending 18 years participating in, let alone leading others in, an ancient wilderness ceremony. Though my family enacted many rituals, especially around the holidays, they were not called that. They were traditions—clean, neat, white, orderly affairs with the paternal figure presiding.

I have a brief early memory that now reminds me of the importance of ceremony. My father's father died when I was five years old. My father was sitting at the kitchen table. He was crying, sobbing, and I was not able to comfort him. Maybe he thought I couldn't possibly understand his sadness. Maybe he thought he would lose his strength by showing his feelings to a little girl. The children were cleared from the room and not allowed to attend the funeral. Many of my questers have similar experiences, growing up without closure on so many of life's transitions. If our family had had some kind of ceremony to share thoughts and feelings, to sing a song in my grandfather's memory, to learn more about his life, to lay a flower at the grave and give thanks for his life, it would have helped a lot. It would have drawn us closer, to share the grief, to talk openly

about the meaning of this event. Instead, we somehow scattered and life went on.

Luckily for me, however, my grandfather became a mythic figure, his life and death became a story with certain qualities that eventually became my own. Besides being an attorney, my grandfather was a miner, and I have felt a sense of atonement teaching people to love and heal the same earth in which he made great holes and slag heaps. This is now part of my myth and destiny.

And though my parents would never admit it, my siblings and I see their mythic relationship. My father never tires of telling certain stories—like how he met my mother, what she was wearing, what she was doing, how he courted her, how hard he had to work to win her love. Or, in later years how he followed my mother up Mt. Whitney, how he would never have climbed the 14,000-foot-plus elevation without my mother's indomitable spirit. We integrate our relatives' myths and rituals, and then go on to create our own.

The wilderness vision quest can put people in touch with their myths. Stories emerge from the vision quest. This is real life adventure. This is the stuff that myths are made of—the hero and heroine's journey. We ask of the universe, the Great Mystery, Who am I? Where do I belong in the whole scheme of things? What is my destiny? We listen in the silence of the wilderness. The spirits may visit us. We hear our own inner voice. We tell the story of what the spirits and our inner voice say. We return to live out our own myth of who we are and why we are here.

### Why Go on Vision Quests?

People from all walks of life go on wilderness vision quests with us, and they bring all kinds of issues on which they seek clarification. But most questers are involved in some kind of change or adjustment, and are seeking to reconnect

Betty Warren, 80, co-director of Wilderness Transitions Inc., and a veteran of more than 40 vision quests, draws from her rich life of teaching school and Zen meditation in her work with questers.



with a greater purpose in their lives. Some are grieving the death of a loved one; others cope with a divorce or the end of a relationship. Still others deal with an empty nest or are struggling with transition from one life stage to another. Others may be taking time to celebrate or affirm change, such as marriage, graduation from high school or college, menopause, mid-life crisis, retirement. We've watched people seek insights to help themselves transition to more meaningful work, something more aligned with a greater purpose in their lives. Many trips have clients facing imminent death. Everyone needs to get away from the hustle and bustle of life, the stress, and the need to keep up and keep doing that goes hand and hand with modern living. Technology also is invasive, and some clients come to us looking for natural connections with earth and spirit.

In ancient vision questing in indigenous societies, the wilderness was familiar, hunger was no stranger, and the biggest challenge was probably leaving the close-knit community with whom they lived. For modern vision questers, the solitude may be a welcome reprieve from the intense social pressures of urban living, a close knit community may be fiction, and the most difficult challenges are often

fasting and dealing with the wilderness conditions. Yet, upon completion of the quest, the fast and its clarifying and purifying effects, the wilderness conditions of naturalness and solitude are regarded as a key to the benefits of the experience. Thus, vision questers invariably become strong supporters of wilderness and environmental protection, for they have experienced first-hand the healing and spiritual benefits of nature.

Wilderness Transitions Inc. clients first hear about our vision quest programs in San Francisco Bay Area news and service tabloids (34 percent), in booths at two or more annual activity fairs like the San Francisco Whole Life Exposition (20 percent), and 27 percent from personal and professional references. Increasingly, we are attracting clients from out of town, out of state, and repeat questers.

Potential clients are invited to a free slide show about the vision quest, and then those who want to go on the next trip about four weeks hence, commit their \$595 and stay for the first pre-trip meeting. Others may wait and think about it for a few months, or even a year or more, but a majority of those who come to a slide show will return and go on a quest.

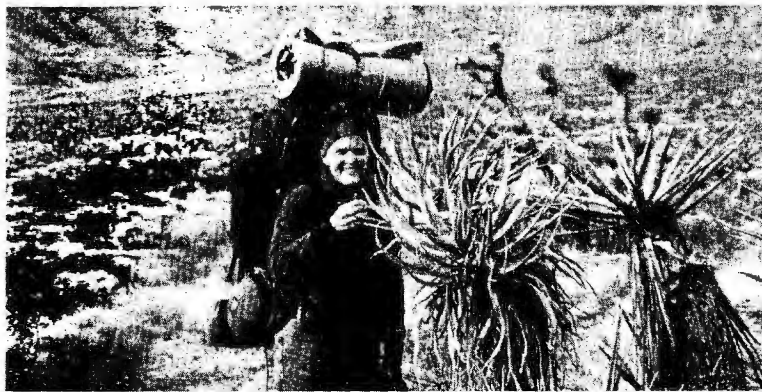
It comes as a surprise to many that our evaluation questionnaires indicate only seven percent of our clients come primarily to experience nature or wilderness, but they are all wilderness lovers upon completion of their quest, citing the wilderness qualities of naturalness and solitude as being a key to their experience and insights. Thus, the vision quest introduces many urban people to the value and beauty of the wilderness for the first time, and the healing and inspiring effects of naturalness and solitude.

### A Typical Trip

Like any business, satisfied customers are our life blood. So we prepare them carefully in four pre-trip meetings, covering such things as how to prepare for the four days of fasting, and what kind of backpacking equipment is needed. Leave no trace camping and safety procedures are taught, and we describe the natural history of the area to be visited. Travel arrangements are made. But a constant focus of the pre-trip meetings is helping questers develop their intent—that is, what they hope to get from their quest. In addition to time honored rituals such as journaling, art, and creative writing, ceremonies or meditation techniques are suggested as a way to help certain questers achieve their intent. A key part of the preparation is the medicine walk, a day in nature alone early in the preparation, and during which natural influences may



Gathering in a traditional circle or "council," vision questers share their intentions for gaining insights into who they are and life issues that brought them on their quest.



stimulate deeper thoughts about the intent of one's quest.

Finally, the day of departure arrives. We usually leave on a Saturday, car pooling with six to twelve questers the 300-500 miles to a base camp near the end of road access in a desert or mountain area in California or Nevada, the location depending on the season. After setting up base camp and providing orientation and safety information, questers explore the area to find a solo site with their desired degree of isolation, but usually only one-half to two miles from base camp. In the evening, after a healthy vegetarian meal, we hold a campfire if conditions permit (always using a fire-pan and wood brought from home in desert areas). The next day questers continue their search for a solo site and, on finding it, may take out some of the four gallons of water they will use during their fast—one for each day.

During this time, I also hold a personal conference with each quester to help them further prepare, relieve anxieties, and insure safety. Group meetings in a traditional circle (council) these two days in base camp are rich in excitement and anticipation, as well as instruction in safety and tips on journaling. We teach them how to record the abundant dreams that will come on the solo fast, and discuss ritual and ceremony that have proven their value in helping questers get in touch with their feelings and which address the issues that brought them on their quest.

Early on the third day in base camp, after hot drinks, a final group meeting and good byes, the questers—now backpackers—go out to spend four days and nights alone. They leave a daily sign of their well-being at a predetermined place in a mutual check-in with a buddy.

On the morning of day five they return, clear eyed and empowered, to joyously greet the community of other questers. After a breakfast of fruit salad, a council is held where each questers' story is heard, acknowledged, and appreciated. High emotions continue in the now close knit

group as we start the journey home, stopping at a hot springs and a salad bar; we often camp overnight. Two weeks later a reunion is held, and questers share their experience in the hardest part of the quest, the return to daily life.

By now its hard for me to say goodbye to the group, for I have shared so much with all of them. But the next slide show is just ahead, and a new group is forming. It is a consolation knowing that another group of urban people have been connected to wilderness, and that I may be invited to additional reunions in the future. Many questers stay in touch with each other and will meet again to help keep the magic alive.

### The Wilderness Guides Council

As you might expect, vision quest guides are also strong advocates for wilderness and roadless wildlands, especially efforts to protect their ecological integrity—and thus their spiritual values. The Wilderness Guides Council is a global network of leaders offering wilderness vision/fasting quests and other earth centered healing and personal growth programs. We organized in 1988 around a Wilderness Ethics Statement and all members agree to abide by these guide-



Guy McPherson and Laurie Oman monitored each other's safety with daily messages. Site: Inyo Mountains of California.

lines in their programs. One of my duties as the current Netkeeper (Chair) is to keep a registry of sites where different questing groups plan to go in California or Nevada, and through this self registration system we voluntarily coordinate and restrict use of base camp areas to no more than once per year in fragile desert sites, and no more than twice per year in forested areas. Besides the site registration system, we hold an annual conference where we discuss such issues as training, permits, fees, insurance, safety, and how to improve the quality of vision questing by the growing number of programs.

Increasingly, the Wilderness Guides Council is becoming more active as advocates for the spiritual values of wilderness. Many of us are concerned that wilderness policies may be made without adequate appreciation for such values by wilderness managers. I dream of taking my wilderness colleagues—my brothers and sisters in the wilderness managing agencies—on a vision quest, where their knowledge might be expanded to matters beyond planning, environmental and needs assessment, Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC), Leave No Trace (LNT), and the technical matters of wilderness on which they focus. I think they would love seeing how vision questing taps the spiritual values of wilderness. I know I would then become more knowledgeable about their concerns.

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# Answering the call of the wild

By Deanne Stone

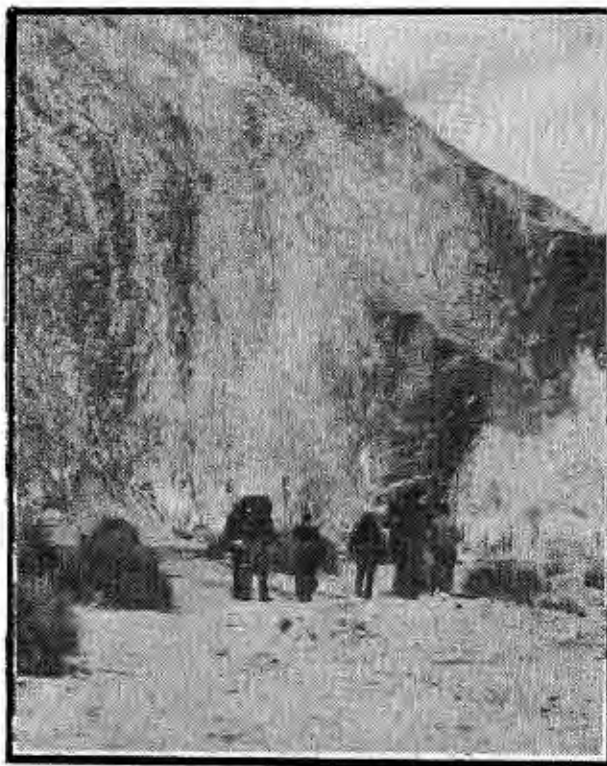
This past April, Betty Warren spent three days and three nights alone in a remote California desert. An ardent environmentalist and veteran backpacker, the 70-year-old Warren, who lives in Sausalito, probably feels more at home in nature than most city dwellers. Yet she says she would never have dared a solo journey in the wild if it were not for Marilyn Riley, founder of On Your Own, a program that offers "vision quest" -type wilderness trips to the general public.

"I've backpacked with friends for 22 years," says Warren, "but this trip was a completely different experience. There's a magic at work when under Marilyn's skillful guidance, strangers of different ages and backgrounds come together and in a short time develop close bonds.

"The barriers just seemed to melt away as we shared our hopes and fears and turned to each other for encouragement and support. There's the paradox of going on a solo journey and yet feeling more together than alone."

**THE CONCEPT OF USING** organized wilderness experiences to build self-confidence and strengthen group ties has its roots in ancient tribal rituals. Virtually every tribal culture throughout the world has formal rituals to mark the major transitions in the life cycle and to recognize an individual's new position in the society. But rites-of-passage ceremonies have effectively disappeared from modern life. And those that remain for adolescents — confirmations, Bar Mitzvahs and graduations — are more symbolic changes in status than real turning points.

In the past 20 years, however, there has been a renewed interest in restoring lost rituals. Educators, "new age" trainers, and men's and women's groups among others have experimented with adapting old ceremonies and creating new ones. But it is the organized wilderness experiences that seem to come closest to capturing the essence of traditional rites of



passage and that attract the most varied participants.

Riley has been leading wilderness trips since 1979 when she joined Rites of Passage, a Marin non-profit organization founded by her brother and sister-in-law, Stephen and Meredith Foster. In 1983 the Fosters moved to Big Pine, California where they started a new program, The School of Lost Borders. Riley then founded her own wilderness program, On Your Own (though she and others continue to call it "vision quest."

Originally, Rites of Passage, an outgrowth of a Marin drug program for teenage substance abusers, worked only with adolescents. But in 1980, the program was expanded to include the community at large.

"Parents were impressed by the changes they saw in their children," says Riley, "and requested trips for themselves. Of course, a rite of passage is not only for adolescents but for anyone facing a major transition — graduation, marriage, divorce, career change or midlife crisis.

"It takes courage to face the unknown, even for a short time," she continues. "But for people willing

to take the risk, the experience of being alone in nature often leads to their knowing themselves better and making wiser choices about what they want to do next."

Currently Riley leads about seven trips a year, usually in the mountains or high deserts of California. She chooses remote locations that are beautiful but far enough off the beaten path to guarantee that her groups do not bump into other campers.

The wilderness trip, which includes a three-day solo camping experience for each participant, lasts a total of seven days, but Riley begins preparing the groups for their adventure a month before the departure date. In the four pre-trip meetings she covers essential information about equipment, safety precautions, emergency procedures, and the terrain and ecology of the region they will visit.

**IN CONTRAST TO PROGRAMS** like Outward Bound and the Roping Course, which incorporates tests of physical skill and stamina into nature adventures, Riley's trips focus more on "inward" journeys, she says. The basic ingredients of vision quest-type wilderness experiences, adapted from cross-cultural traditions, include solitude, fasting, ritual ceremonies, and symbolic interpretations of natural signs or dreams.

One session of the pre-trip meetings is devoted to a discussion of what Riley calls psychological tools — dreams, journals, meditation — that may be used to record or understand more fully the emotions and insights that occur during the trip. Although the use of these tools is optional, Riley encourages people to experiment with them as a way of adding another dimension to their experience.

"Practicing ancient forms that have worked for tribal cultures for hundreds of years can be very powerful. Even though the rituals have been altered for modern people, they still have an intensity and a magical quality that can get us in touch with our deepest roots."

The pre-trip meetings are also the time for people to express their anxieties about the trip. Predictably, the most common fears are being alone, fasting, and encountering such unwelcome company as snakes, scorpions or tarantulas.

"I remember my first solo journey," says Riley, "I was so frightened by the unfamiliar sounds of the

desert night that I pulled my sleeping bag over my head and didn't peek out again until the next morning. The first night alone is the hardest, but afterwards, most people — experienced and inexperienced campers alike — say that it wasn't nearly as bad as they had imagined it would be. And the truth is I've seen more scorpions in Marin than I have on the trips."

But for urban people unfamiliar with the wilderness and solitude, the thought of spending three nights alone in the outdoors strikes terror into their hearts. Riley tries to lessen their fears by planning carefully for their safety and by focusing on the positive aspects of being alone.

"We live in such a high-pressured, fast-moving culture that it's hard to know our own thoughts. But when we are alone in the wilderness, we are truly free to do what we please, forget about how we look, and be whoever we are. When everything superficial is stripped away, we begin to see what is really important to us and to discover resources we never imagined we had."

**FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL**, fasting has been used by traditional societies and most religions as a means of purification or of opening doors to the unconscious. Riley recommends fasting as an option for those who want to heighten their awareness while on their solo journey.

"At first, people — especially those who have never fasted — think they could never go without eating for three days," says Riley. "But they find that it is a lot easier to fast in the wilderness than at home where they are surrounded by food."

Richard Cressler, a carpenter who lives in Woodacre, was particularly resistant to the idea of fasting. He says he went on the April trip to escape from the stress of his daily routine.

"I wasn't looking for a spiritual experience," says Cressler. "I just wanted time alone. Besides, I thought it was dangerous to fast in the wilderness. I lugged 15 pounds of food and a propane stove on my back. But once I was on my own, I was so busy exploring and thinking about other things that I forgot about eating. I used to be so worried about missing a meal, but this trip changed my attitude about food."

From the outset, Riley sets the stage for participants to think of the trip as a formal rite of passage. For the final pre-trip meeting, she asks each group to plan what she calls a "self-generated ceremony."



Riley leads about seven wilderness trips each year.

People can write letters, burn sticks, sing songs — whatever will help them symbolize that they are leaving the past behind and are embarking on a new course.

The April group, which was smaller than most, set off in one car. Recalls Warren, "The car was loaded with backpacks and 30 gallons of water. Huddled together, we talked and dozed, taking turns driving, and marveling at the moonlight on the snow-capped mountains. Despite no sleep we felt fine the next day when we arrived at base camp."

Group members spend two days together in base camp getting accustomed to their new surroundings. In that time they relax, explore the area and choose the site for their solo. Each person is assigned a buddy with whom he must communicate daily during the following three days. The buddies choose a spot midway between their sites where they make a small stonepile to serve as their designated checkpoint. Each day they go separately to the stonepile and leave some sign or message indicating that they are safe and well.

Riley calls the night before the solo journey the "time of reckoning." Seated in a circle around the fire, group members talk again about their self-doubts and what they hope to achieve on the trip. Then Riley asks the essential question — what, if anything, would bring them back to base camp before the three days are up? Riley says 98 percent of

adults and 90 percent of teenagers complete the three-day solo, but they are free to return to base camp whenever they feel ready.

**EACH PERSON IS ASKED** to keep a journal of thoughts, discoveries and dreams. They may also bring a special book, art supplies or lightweight musical instrument, but distractions such as drugs, radios and tape recorders are not permitted.

When the solo journey ends, participants team up with their buddies and hike back to base camp. There, seated around a campfire, they share their experiences and exchange gifts — poems, songs, rocks, or flowers — they selected for their group members during the solo journey.

Most people are profoundly affected by their solo journeys but Riley cautions participants not to expect that one journey will transform their lives. Often the return to the city can be jarring and the welcome home disappointing.

"Unlike tribal communities that formally reincorporate an individual who has completed a rite of passage, our society works against our maintaining that sense of joy, harmony and resolve we gained in the wilderness.

"Shortly after the trip I hold a reunion for the participants and their guests to celebrate their new beginnings. But because of the lack of support in our culture, some groups continue to meet on their own to reinforce their new insights and the visions they want to live."

Riley has dreams of organizing larger reunions a few times a year for all the participants who have taken the solo journeys. Her goal is to build a community of people who share her concerns for preserving the wilderness and creating bonds with nature.

"The main reason I lead wilderness trips is to keep myself and others in balance. I am the guide, but nature is the teacher. By observing the cycles of life and the continuity of nature, we can understand and accept the need for transitions and changes in our own lives.

"It is our connection to the earth that gives us the feeling of being rooted, of being grounded. I believe that awareness can help us make wiser decisions about our own problems, the environment, and the kind of society we want to live in."

-- WILDERNESS TRANSITIONS --

Marilyn Riley, Betty Warren (415) 456-4370, (415) 332-9558



Photo of Betty Warren, courtesy Wilderness Transitions

# A Wild Woman

*Discusses Her Ageless Journey*

BY PAT KING

*Betty Warren's roots began in that Hollywood town of Los Angeles in 1916, but seventy-eight years later you'll find her backpacking in a remote California desert or high on a mountainside leading Vision Quests and helping participants learn to live in harmony with themselves, others, and the natural world.*

Warren is an avid outdoorswoman who has followed her bliss into a career leading inward journeys with Marilyn Riley of Wilderness Transitions in Sausalito, California doing Vision Quests. During a Vision Quest, a group of people hikes 2-3 miles into the mountains and sets up a base camp. For the next few days the group

lives together and explores the area. Then, for three days and nights, each person lives alone, with the one responsibility to walk each day to a prearranged place and leave a sign of his or her well-being for a buddy, a fellow vision quester.

"When I was in my 40's and developing an interest in Zen, I also took up backpacking," recalls Warren. "It's been 27 years that I've been going backpacking every summer."

Warren's reason for such annual agility? Regular exercises and a daily Zen meditation. "Since I retired I've been doing regular exercise every morning and I'm careful about nutrition." She eats some organic foods, some of which come from her own garden. She used to smoke and drink coffee, but gave them up.

"I like to wake up and just sit every morning for about 30 minutes to an hour. This is a form of meditation, which is supposed to be in everything you do, whether it's washing the dishes or reading a book. It's trying to be present in what you do; do everything consciously. Eventually, it could drive you out of your mind."

When Warren experienced her first Vision Quest, the trip was easy as far as the hiking was concerned because she was in good shape. But Vision Quest brought a new angle to her meditations. "With these wilderness trips, you're trying to become one with all of Life. You're not just yourself but the rocks you walk on. The rocks are alive, as are the plants and animals. All of these are yourself." In the backpacking, Warren really appreciates the wonder of the High Sierras and seeing how alive and simple everything is and how things get along with each other in harmony. She has noticed human beings don't seem to be able to do this very well. This is where Warren changed on her first Vision Quest.

Warren had been an outdoorswoman and kind of a loner, so she wasn't blown away by being out alone for three days. "But I woke up one morning on the trip and was weeping—weeping with gratitude—because of the love I'd experienced in the group; That's what blew my mind. In the group you share a lot of your feelings and thoughts. You see a lot of yourself in other people and there's a give and take at a much different level than you reach with most people. You are all out there for a purpose: to understand who you are and what you're doing on this planet." Warren

has found that she becomes *unconditional* in her relationships with fellow questers, and yet it's possible she will not have anything to do with these people after she returns home.

"Several more older women have joined the Vision Quest trips," Warren beams. "One woman was 68-years-old when she began the trips and has been on two other trips." Warren believes older people's wellness during these journeys depends on whether they've kept active or not and if they are interested in life.

Warren leads the group in a guided meditation on fear. One lady of Native American background who attended the Quest had been taught by her grandfather to "walk with her fears," a very expressive way, Warren believes, to think about fears as your friends.

During the trips, people also find out how well they can get along with very little comfort and food. This reflected in a letter Warren received from one quester that described how wonderful it was to fix her tea! Warren has decided that it's most profound to appreciate simple things.

Warren plans to continue Vision Quests as long as she can walk because, for her, it is part of her own life quest to bring body, mind and spirit together, so that she can understand them as one. "We are like the earth," Warren expounds. "We are the cells of the body the Earth, Gaia. Gaia contains the cells of the Universe. I don't know how many Gaias are out floating around this Universe, but somehow we're all one vast incomprehensible spirit." (For more information on Vision Quests, contact Wilderness Transitions at 415/332-9558.)

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# The Vision Fast— *Wilderness as a Therapeutic Source of Self-Discovery*

BY STEVEN FOSTER



Article author, Dr. Steven Foster, is cofounder and director of the School of Lost Borders in Big Pine, California (above). Desert wilderness, shown here on the edge of Death Valley in California, provides the space and solitude that is ideal for Vision Fast programs (left).

**F**OR UNTOLD THOUSANDS OF YEARS, our indigenous ancestors practiced a primitive form of “psychology” that was nevertheless so effective it ensured the continued survival of our species. This “psychology” flourished among indigenous tribes throughout most of the human occupied world and focused on rites of passage guiding tribal members through some of the potentially disruptive personal life transitions that might otherwise have jeopardized tribal welfare and safety. Sanctioned by tribal society, these rites confirmed the passage of the young to adulthood and the mature to ever more mature states of being. Our primitive ancestors, however, would never have called these practices a “psychology.” They knew the practices as rites of passage, or “initiation.”<sup>1</sup>

A deeper taproot connects the Vision Fast to what Jung called the “collective unconscious,” the ancestral memories of our species, graven in our genes. In a practical sense, our wilderness Vision Fast program was developed in response to the blinking red lights on our phones in the Marin County Suicide Prevention Hotline Room.

Such rites of passage ordinarily took place in wilderness settings, outside of the village or camp. Everyone paid careful attention to these activities, for the health of the community depended on their successful outcome. Participants in the rites also gained great benefit, for the therapy they experienced was far more complete than what we call “therapy” today. The rites went beyond mere personal or community health. They were the fertilizer in which the people grew an identity through their stories about themselves and all their earthly relatives, myths, legendary leaders, sacred ancestors, and symbols of unity, health, and regeneration. The rites guaranteed the vitality of their imagination, enriching psyche, mind, and spirit.

Today, we can learn much from understanding these early wilderness psychology practices that were so functional to the survival of primitive cultures. The same problems they addressed are relevant in today’s culture. Thus, it is no wonder the same psychological processes are being rediscovered and applied through a growing number of wilderness experience programs and that a new field of “ecopsychology” is emerging.

## ANCIENT WILDERNESS PSYCHOLOGY

The mythical, religious heroes and leaders associated with the wilderness passage rite tradition are legion and form the foundations of the belief systems of the world, even today. Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, and the Buddha are among those who sought inspiration and wisdom in the wilderness.

The wilderness passage rite tradition is illustrated in the famous indigenous peoples’ story of “Jumping Mouse,” who, because he heard a roaring in his ears, left his innocent childhood behind and went into the great wilderness to quest for a vision.<sup>2</sup> There he met Raccoon, who introduced him to the Sacred River (Nature). Beside the river he was initiated by Raccoon and Frog, and given directions to unlock the meaning of his life story. The saga of Jumping Mouse then continued as the little mouse searched for “the sacred mountains, shining in the distance” (the meaning of life).

The first part of the story, “Mouse, Raccoon, and the Sacred River,” symbolizes the initiation process, the dynamic of a rite of passage. In anthropological terms, the first phase is called “severance.” Little Mouse left his past and his familiar life behind. He severed connection from his childhood. The second phase is called “threshold.” Little Mouse went alone into the great initiation place and came to the Sacred River, where, by dint of his own efforts, he caught a vision of the “Sacred Mountains shining in the distance.” The third phase is called “incorporation,” or “reincorporation.” Little Mouse became Jumping Mouse. His new name signified an earned maturity and a personal story that made mythical meaning of his life. Then, changed by his vision, he left his past behind and went in search of the Sacred Mountains. Eventually

he arrived, blind and alone, at his destination, where the ultimate transformation awaited him.

## MODERN WILDERNESS RITES

The modern wilderness rite, called the "Vision Fast," is a process that my wife, Meredith Little, and I have been involved with for over twenty years. Our work in this area began by leading Vision Fasts and, for several years now, training other leaders. The Vision Fast is an attempt to bring back, at least partially, the therapeutic effectiveness of indigenous rites of passage in the wilderness. However, full effectiveness of such rites cannot be attained until they are again sanctioned by the culture. Such acceptance, while still limited, is emerging. At the present time, the numbers of people who recognize the intrinsic value of these experiences are growing, reflected by the increasing numbers of wilderness experience programs, even as "ecopsychology" courses multiply within institutions of higher learning.

The modern Vision Fast, as we practice it, is rooted in several disciplines: the humanities (folklore, mythology, philosophy, and symbolism); the social sciences (anthropology and psychology); the natural sciences (ecology); and outdoor, experience-based education (e.g., Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership School). A deeper taproot connects the Vision Fast to what Jung called the "collective unconscious," the ancestral memories of our species, graven in our genes.

In a practical sense, our wilderness Vision Fast program was developed in response to the blinking red lights on our phones in the Marin County Suicide Prevention Hotline Room. Our tutors were several Native American "medicine men," a couple of excellent field biologists, psychotherapists, a prominent social anthropologist, thousands of people who came to our school, and, of course, all those years we spent in the field, exposed to the therapeutic influence of nature.

As the years passed and we gained experience in what we were doing, various aspects of our program changed to reflect our new insights about the three phases of the ancient initiatory process and how to best present them today. But the core process remained the same, involving the three phases: severance, threshold, and incorporation.

### THE CORE PROCESS OF THE VISION FAST

**Severance:** Like little Jumping Mouse, our "clients" sever from the past. Some of this severance involves preparation to enter and survive the wilderness experience or threshold phase. We prefer that clients spend six months anticipating and preparing for their Vision Fast experience. Emphasis is not placed on the life issues or problems that brought them to the program *per se*, but on the intent—that is, what



Sitting in council, Vision Fast participants integrate the wilderness experience (incorporation) to return to ordinary life with a new level of self-understanding and acceptance.

he/she would confirm by this act of leaving the past behind and taking on the "taboos" of the threshold, such as fasting alone. When the person returns from the threshold phase to begin the incorporation phase, this intent is then fully "owned" according to the ancient therapeutic formula.

**Threshold:** When our "client" enters the threshold phase, she/he goes into the wilderness for a period of time up to four days. During this time of "threshing," three of the old liminal taboos are observed: no food (hunger), no company (loneliness), no shelter (exposure)—except for a small tarp and some rope. Though the safety of the participants is carefully monitored, they have no contact with each other or the guides unless they chose to initiate it. Alone in the great body of the wilderness, without social distractions, they experience a heightened awareness of their bodies, their emotions, feelings, and thoughts. They are compelled to be more inward and reflective and develop a more careful, clear-eyed attention to the details of the natural world. With nothing but water to fill their bellies, their senses become more acute. Emotional states such as fear, boredom, anxiety, euphoria, and feelings kindled by memories of the past become the basis for insight and internal changes leading to personal health and vitality. Transcendent or psychedelic visions are not encouraged, although participants sometimes bring back such stories.

The threshold state is not particularly dangerous and our several thousand "clients" have endured it without a single serious accident. It is nevertheless a "perceived risk." Fasting, for example, is beneficial to the health of most people. But fasting in the wilderness engenders sensations of existential exhaustion, faintness, and vertigo. For many, death is perceived as looming close, even when it is, in reality, far away. The perceived sense of death, or mortality, becomes an invaluable catalyst for self-discovery and change. The entire being is affected: body, psyche, mind, and spirit.

**Incorporation:** The third phase, incorporation, involves a process of integrating the par-

ticipants with their ordinary life at a new level of self-understanding and acceptance. They are welcomed back from their threshold experience (received) with a challenge to live what they discovered. In an informal council setting (known as the School of Lost Borders), they tell their threshold stories to the others. The guides respond with comments about various elements (from practical to mythical) in each story. Intent—the reason clients chose to participate in the Vision Fast rite—is formally declared to have been attained. Participation never ends in failure, and those who return early from the fast are also helped to understand what they have learned.

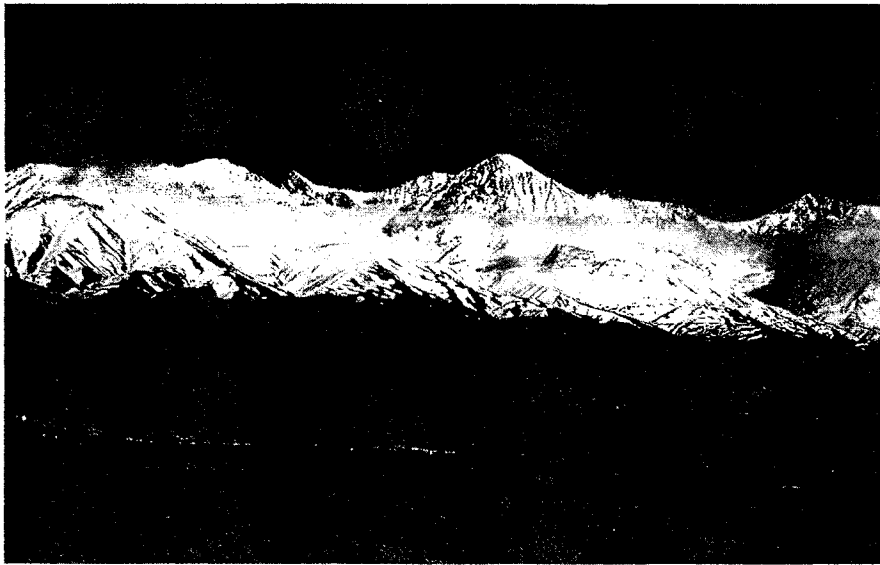
The role of the guides is not to psychologize, nor to point out weaknesses or shortcomings in the person or their story. "Person-centered listening," such as that developed by Carl Rogers, is the rule. The guides' basic therapeutic task is "maieutic." That is, they assist the individual in giving birth to a new form of self-understanding. As in traditional elder councils, held when initiates in primitive times returned from their threshold passage, the councils at the School of Lost Borders seek to identify the gifts, abilities, propensities, symbols, values—the "medicine"—inherent in the clients' stories. This identification of "the gifts within the story" empowers the person to use those gifts. "Visions" (transcendent or psychedelic) are considered to be of minimal value unless tied to practical action in the world at large. For example, the vision of a new "way of being" with a spouse, friends, parents, or coworkers could be the basis for practical action, as could visions of a new career or lifestyle. Insights surrounding such issues are not uncommon in the stories brought back from the threshold experience.

### LONG-TERM THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS

Invariably, illumination occurs on a Vision Fast. People get "high." Many profess to be "reborn," "regenerated," or "revitalized." Separated from the everyday confusion of their lives by the wilderness, they are enabled to see more clearly their path ahead. But the "high" is short-lived. They have to return to the context of their lives, the routines, the work, the day by day demands of environment and peers. Sooner or later they fall into a predictable depression. The depression is essential, for without it the experience cannot be truly integrated into the ongoing saga of their lives.

Despite the fact that people generally return to a culture that does not value or understand wilderness passage rites, they rarely completely forget their experience, but hold on to it, sometimes like a shipwrecked sailor clutching a piece of the mast. Even twenty years later many are likely to say such things as, "This was the most important experience of my life." Only recently we learned that when





Big Pine California, in the Owens Valley, east of the Sierra Nevada Range and west of desert wilderness in Death Valley. This is where Steven Foster and his wife, Meredith Little, train wilderness Vision Fast leaders at the School of Lost Borders.

one of our early students had succumbed to cancer, an arrow point he had found during his Vision Fast was clutched tightly in his hand.

An inescapable long-term benefit of the wilderness Vision Fast is a lifelong love for wildlands. A young man, who at age 17 confirmed his passage to manhood in Death Valley, later became director of the National Outdoor Leadership School in Kenya. A young woman confirming her passage to womanhood in the Inyo Mountains later became a professor in bioecology. Another young man marking the attainment of manhood in the White Mountains became an environmental botanist absorbed in the reclamation of military bombing ranges. Many others come to mind: the real estate salesman who joined the Nature Conservancy; the college student who became a forest ranger; the television director who decided to produce nature films; the housewife who became a bird watcher; the carpenter who became an ecologist; the teenage boy on probation who became an expert in Stone Age technology; the Disney executive who became a Vision Fast guide; the woman who spent her inheritance on a project releasing captive dolphins to the wild. The list goes on and on among the clients we have guided and expands among the clients of guides we have trained.

There are also other long-term benefits: positive shifts in self-esteem, self-control, self-reliance, and personal values. Participants tend to harbor more constructive attitudes about past crises than they had before. "Victims" crawled out of the swamps of helplessness and began the arduous trek to the sacred mountains of resolution. Decisions are made and courses of action are taken that forever alter lives. There are changes in priorities, spouses, and jobs, changes in housing, relocations of

residence, new vocations and avocations, creative retirements. Some end the vicious cycle of addiction. Some sustain a renewal of their faith in matters spiritual, declaring that their experience had taught them something about dying.

### THE FUTURE OF WILDERNESS PASSAGE RITES

The future of the Vision Fast and other wilderness passage rites appears secure. After all, this dynamic has been around for at least a hundred thousand years. Today there are a thousand Raccoons who conduct Mouse down to the Sacred River. Each year we train 50-75 of them at the School of Lost Borders, and there are scores of other training programs and apprenticeships throughout the world. The number of Raccoons are growing and adapting well to the back alleys of modern civilization. But their work is not yet fully accepted by Establishment intellectuals and turf-conscious professionals. This might be expected. In ancient times such passage rites were for the benefit of all the people, even little Jumping Mouse, but the intelligentsia were the ones who told the person that if they heard a roaring in their ears, they must be crazy.

Thus, the effectiveness of the rites are diminished by the absence of universal cultural sanction. Graduates of experiences like the wilderness Vision Fast will continue to return to social contexts that do not make allowances for their self-perceived, new life status. Peers, colleagues, even loved ones may not understand or even appreciate any personal discoveries or changes that have occurred.

Ecologically, wilderness passage rites are a "soft" use of the wilderness, even though the

personal experience can be hard. The solo experience leaves virtually no trace after a year's rain. They can be conducted in various kinds of terrain, from pure wilderness to multiple-use public or private lands. Of all the forms of wilderness therapy and outdoor adventure, Vision Fast rites most directly stimulate the full range of complexes within the human psyche. The three-phase dynamic (severance, threshold, and incorporation) and the three taboos (food, companionship, and shelter) potentially convey the participant to what Thomas Moore calls "the soul of nature."

**They rarely forget their experience. ... Only recently we learned that when one of our early students had succumbed to cancer, an arrow point he had found during his Vision Fast was clutched tightly in his hand.**

In the regions of the human psyche are found the inward tools of change, adaptability, survival, and growth. These regions have names like self-consciousness, feeling (as opposed to reactive emotion), reflection, conscience, anima, animus, dreams, personal and ancestral memory, and shadow. They compose the mortal darkness from which the light of insight and self-discovery spring. They compose what we frail humans can know of the soul of nature and are the foundations of maturity and species survival. One psychotherapist we know estimated that a wilderness Vision Fast was worth a year of psychotherapy. How can we resist such a challenge? Humans will always be drawn to the source of the roaring in their ears. **IJW**

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### FOOTNOTES

1. See A. van Genneep, *The Rites of Passage*. See also J. Henderson, *Thresholds of Initiation*. L. Mahdi, S. Foster, and M. Little, *Between and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*.

2. See Hymeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrows* for an excellent version of the Jumping Mouse story. See also S. Foster and M. Little, "The Roaring of the Sacred River."