

Out of the Office and On to the Land

Contributed by Sybil Meyer, MFT

After leaving my clients to lead three Vision Quests last year, and with three more trips to the desert planned for this year, I realized it was time to integrate these two worlds of my work that I had been keeping separate. I am not by nature a person who advertises easily, and did not have any evidence in my psychotherapy office about either of my other jobs: as Director of an East Bay mental health day program for the last eight years, and more recently, as a wilderness Vision Quest Guide.

In my role as a therapist, the topic of my existence outside of sessions recently fit into a session with a client who usually censors her curiosity about me. Since my upcoming absences would affect my schedule with her, I made use of the opportunity to tell her why I would be away more this year than I have in the past. Since our conversation was focused on our process with each other, I gave her a brochure about vision quests, and suggested that we could talk about it next time.

Next time, she said she did have questions after she read the brochure. Then, haltingly, "I guess, you must have had to go on one" (of the vision quests). Her tone made it clear that this was an extremely unappealing prospect to her. I laughed loudly, responding that her use of the phrase "had to" showed how differently we felt about the idea.

Obviously, not everyone wants to go on a fast in the desert, or longs to spend three or four days exposed to the natural world as a way to experience the sacred. More than twenty years ago, when I first heard of a vision quest, I felt an immediate stirring or yearning, accompanied by a sense of recognition: someday I would love to do that. Ten years later, when I finally did go on my first vision quest, my intuition was confirmed. I was completely at home on the land during my solo time. Following the safety guidelines taught by trustworthy, inspiring guides, my time alone on the earth gave me what the mystic in me wanted: affirmation of a spiritual belonging that is grounded in the cycles of the natural world.

Many of the people now leading vision quests or vision fasts were trained using a method developed during the 1970s by Steven Foster and Meredith Little, who adapted teachings from H. Storm and developed group structures that prepare questers and help them process their experiences. In this tradition, questing is not primarily about facing hardship or rigorous survival challenges. It does involve some backpacking and camping in a desert or other remote place for a week without showers or bathing. Leave No Trace, or low impact wilderness camping, is taught and practiced.

In the preparation phase, the guides teach a crash course on safety issues: from First Aid, to a system of daily buddy messages, to drinking enough water while fasting, to instructions on putting up a tarp. In a series of meetings, questers refine their purpose and confront their fears or obstacles as they clarify their intentions. A version of the Medicine Wheel is taught. It is a developmental psychology and cosmology in which the four directions symbolize the stages of life, the seasons of the year, and the cycle of the day, as well as the stages of a person's psycho-spiritual development. The inner child, adolescent, adult, and elder must all collaborate in the quest.

If you do not hear the call to face your true self in solitude in the wilderness in that way... well, you wouldn't have any interest in doing it. For me, experiences of extraordinary peace and inspiration have happened during my fast, each time finding a greater sense of my self reflected in the mirror of nature. As much as I loved being alone out there, equally important were the support of the group and the expertise of the guides who prepared me thoroughly and sent me out safely.

The solo time is the middle one of three stages of the quest, which are "severance", "threshold", and "incorporation". The container of the group made a circle of mutual support that held me before and after, making the solo time possible. There is an incredible bonding that happens out on the land together. With so few of us out together in a wild landscape, the group quickly comes to represent all of the positive qualities of human affiliation in the face of the vastness and unknowns of the wild.

So the vision quest is not only about going it alone. It specifically requires people to prepare and send you out, then welcome your return, feed you, bear witness to your story, and prepare for the return home. The meaning of the story of the quest is often not recognized by a quester until it is told to receptive listeners. Telling the story claims it for the individual, and the guides' reflection affirms and validates it. There is an element of interpretation that happens at this point that overlaps with psychotherapy—it is not so much the raw experience that counts, as the meaning we make of it. Telling the quest story is a necessary way to own the new reality, to integrate a newborn part of the self and affirm it in community.

The group processing after the return from the solo affirms the gifts that are brought back from the quest, like the return home of the mythical hero who brings back the gifts of the voyage. By the end of each quest, I am awed by the courage, strength, love and support that a group of previous strangers can create in a nine-day journey together. We have accompanied each other through a profound passage, and we are each changed by it. As with any sort of peak experience, though, carrying the insights and decisions from the quest back into our daily life can be challenging. Here is where psychotherapy may be most helpful in continuing the work of manifesting the "vision" of the quest. Likewise, a vision quest can deepen and recharge an ongoing therapy, if the therapist is supportive.

As for "visions"—it is not about hallucinations. I have never met, seen, or heard anything that was not there to my senses. One of the suggested tasks during the solo is to let the environment—and the life forms living in it—become spiritual teachers. Our senses heightened by living outdoors and fasting, we allow the tree, rock, lizard, flower, or cloud to take on a personal symbolic significance. Seen in this light, the messages received from the natural world are always meaningful, and this is the magic of the quest.

Like opening a book to just the poem you needed to read, nature does not fail to answer us when we "cry for a vision". Nature is the therapist out there. Inevitably, questers meet the experiences they need for the next stage of their inner development. The symbolic power of the quest stories is as rich as dreams or good poetry: they are stories as varied and beautiful as the landscapes of our souls.

I hope that my future work as a guide will not only take me away from my clients in the city (while I am gone), but also ultimately enrich what I bring to my work with them. The client I mentioned at the beginning was right in a way, that I had to go on my own quests to become a guide; but it was not an imposed or external requirement. Instead, I feel I just have to go out on the land periodically, to answer the inner call of the Vision Quest.

Sybil Meyer, MFT combines existential, relational, and expressive arts therapy with her interest in ecopsychology. Her private practice is in Albany, next to Berkeley. She quested and trained as a guide with Wilderness Rites; and has been a vision quest guide for Rites of Passage (www.ritesofpassagevisionquest.org), which offers CEUs for therapists. For further information on vision quests, see the international Wilderness Guides Council website at wildernessguidescouncil.org or contact Sybil at sybil@sybilmeyer.com

Her website is: www.sybilmeyer.com