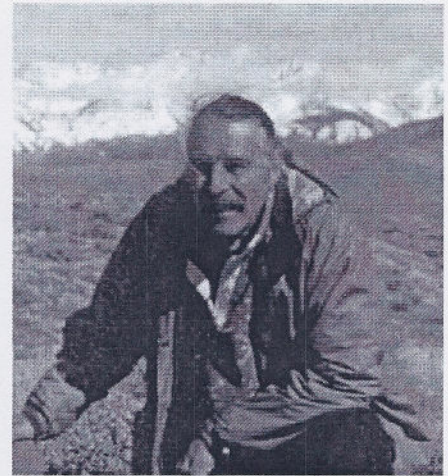
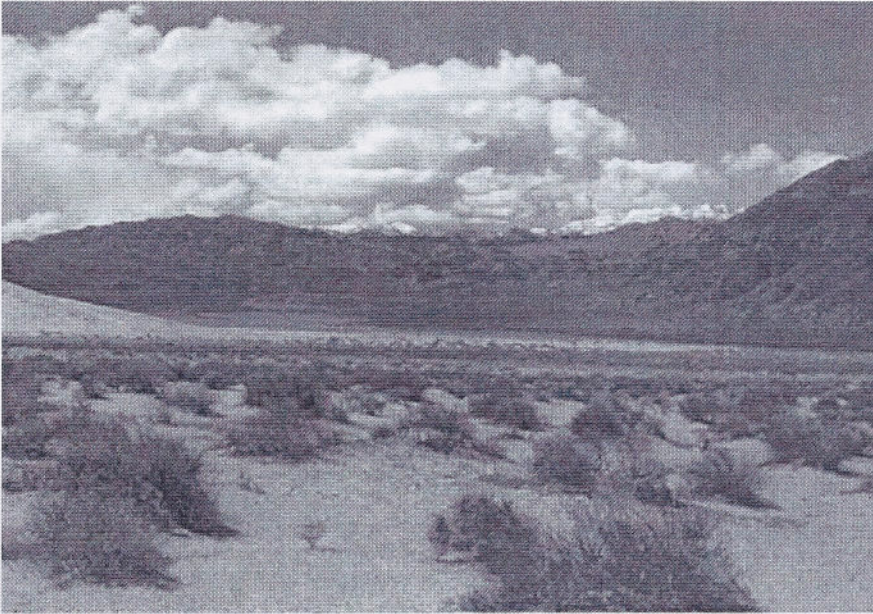


The Vision Fast—

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 is ideal for Vision Fast programs (left).

FOR 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.”¹

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.² 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 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 thresh-



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.

old 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 participants 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 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,

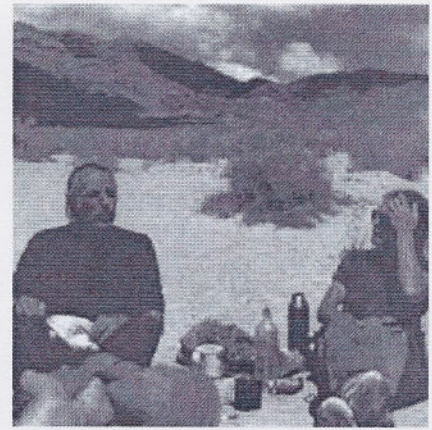
declaring that their experience had taught them something about dying.

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



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.

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) potently 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. **LJW**

STEVEN FOSTER, PH.D., is codirector of the School of Lost Borders, P.O. Box 55, Big Pine, CA 93513, USA.

FOOTNOTES

1. See A. van Gennep, *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 Hyemeyohsts 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."