

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 surprises 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.

Literature Cited

- Cruden, Loren 1996. Thoughts on Contemporary Vision Questing Practices. *Shaman's Drum*, Winter 1996, pp. 19-22.
- Foster, Steven 1995. The Wilderness Vision Fast: Therapeutic Use of Wilderness For Personal Growth. *Int'l Jour. Wilderness* 1(1) 7-10.
- Foster, Steven and Meredith Little 1988. *The Book of the Vision Quest*. Prentice Hall 173 pp.
- Riley, Marilyn 1996. The Psychology of a Modern Vision Quest. M.A. Thesis, Sonoma State University 130 pp.
- Riley, Marilyn 1995. The Wilderness Vision Quest: A Ritual Path to Spirit. *Sacred Reflections* 7(4) 7, Winter Solstice.

Marilyn Riley is Director of Wilderness Transitions Inc., a non-profit educational organization in Marin County, California, and Netkeeper (Chair) for The Wilderness Guides Council, a national organization of Wilderness Vision Quest leaders. Her Bachelor's is in English literature and education from Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California, and her M. A. in Psychology is from Sonoma State University. She has taught elementary school in Berkeley and owns/operates a private business in addition to her vision quest work.