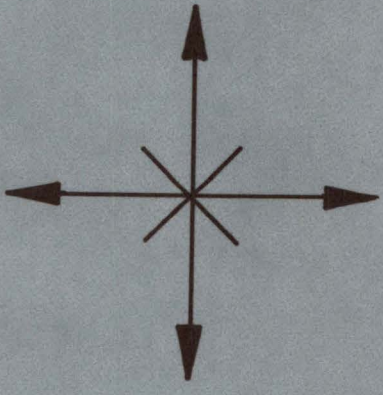
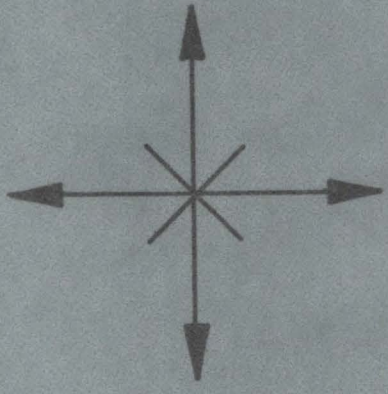
STEVEN FOSTER and MEREDITH LITTLE

WILDERNESS RESOURCE

DISTINGUISHED LECTURESHIP





Wilderness Resource
Distinguished Lectureship

16

WILDERNESS VISION QUESTING AND THE FOUR SHIELDS OF HUMAN NATURE

Steven Foster
and
Meredith Little

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO WILDERNESS RESEARCH CENTER

May 2, 1996

Published as Contribution No. 822 of the Idaho Forest, Wildlife and Range Experiment Station.

Illustration on pg. vii by Lorraine Ashland.
Diagrams on pgs. 7 and 15 by James Wright.

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Moscow, ID 83844-1130

Forward

Edwin E. Krumpe

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the sixteenth in the annual series of Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lectureships sponsored by the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center. The Center's mission is to promote research and educational activities to further our understanding of wilderness and natural ecosystems and man's relationships to them. Our goal is to gain knowledge that can be applied to better manage our designated wilderness areas so that the public can enjoy sustained use and benefits from our wilderness resources. Since its inception in 1972, the Center has supported research projects in Idaho and the Pacific Northwest, with over thirty studies completed just in the last two decades.

The Center also helps sponsor five university courses, giving students opportunity to study wilderness principles and practices and, in the case of intern students, to gain firsthand experience in wilderness management and research. At the national level the Center has sponsored a national conference on wilderness management, two national task forces, and conducted workshops and presentations at many other national research conferences, and has been deeply involved in several international conferences. This past year the Center and its director have played a pivotal role in launching an exciting new journal, the *International Journal of Wilderness*.

But of our long-standing education traditions, the one for which we take most pride is the annual Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lectureship. In what has become a fine academic tradition, the Wilderness Research Center has sponsored and published the lectureship to encourage constructive dialogue and to broaden our understanding of the management and meaning of wilderness resources. Speakers of national prominence have been

invited on the basis of their contributions to the philosophical and scientific rationale of wilderness management.

Tonight, for the very first time we have invited two people to share in the presentation of the Distinguished Lecture. To this end we are honored to present Dr. Steven Foster and Meredith Little who come to share their twenty-five years of experience in conducting vision quests and fasts, rites of passage and initiation, and other modern versions of primitive "eco-psychology" in wilderness and wildlands.

Dr. Krumpe is principal scientist for wilderness management in the Wilderness Research Center and a professor in the Department of Resource Recreation and Tourism.

Introduction

John C. Hendee

This year's Distinguished Wilderness lecturers are the most distinguished scholars and experienced practitioners of Wilderness Vision Questing today. I feel a special kinship for these colleagues because of their commitment to using wilderness to enhance the human condition.

Meredith Little and her husband and colleague, Steven Foster, have conducted vision quests and fasts, rites of passage and initiation, and other modern versions of primitive "eco-psychology," in wilderness for twenty-five years. Their teachers have been nature, wise people from many ethnic groups, indigenous and contemporary, and practical experience in leading thousands of people through their various vision questing programs and classes.

Steven Foster received a BA *cum laude* from Westmont College (Santa Barbara) in English Literature and Psychology, and earned a Ph.D. from the University of Washington in Humanities. He taught English Literature at the University of Wyoming and was on the humanities faculty at San Francisco State University. In 1971, he left academia and took training in counseling, family therapy, suicide prevention and crisis intervention and began wilderness therapy work with youth-at-risk.

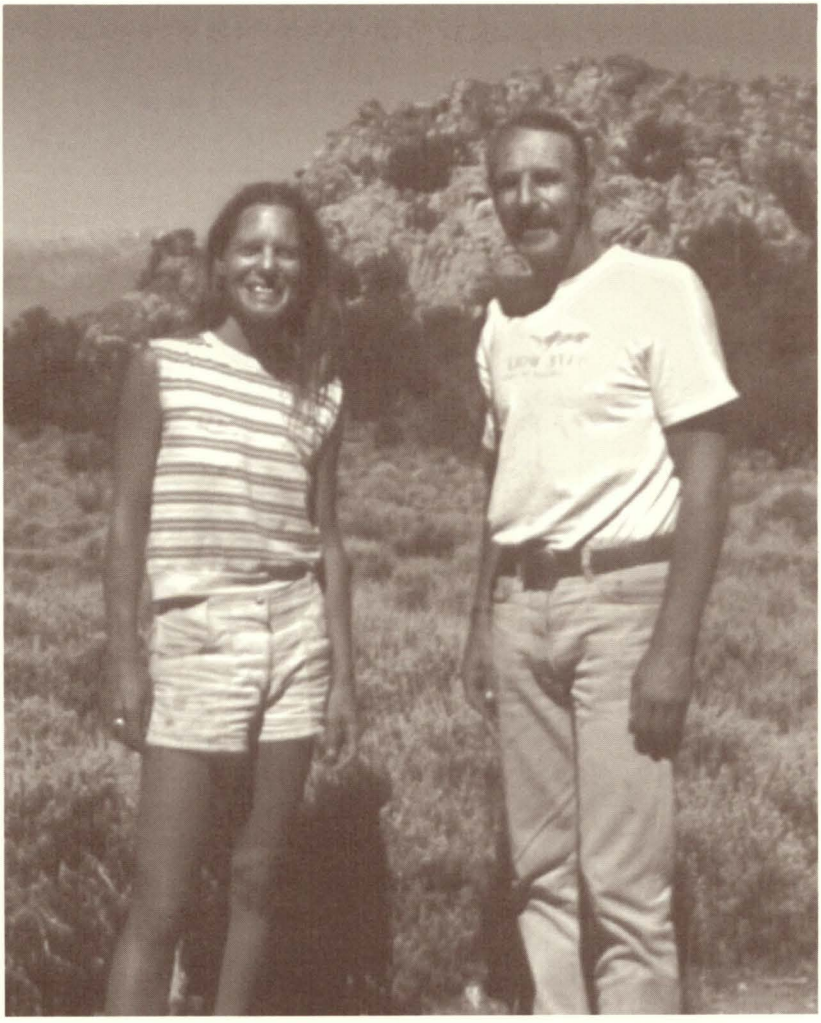
Meredith Little attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and graduated from Antioch College West with a BA in Human Responsibility. Subsequently, she attended the Humanistic Psychology Institute and was trained in suicide prevention, crisis intervention, family therapy, and ran a group home for at-risk youth. She and Steven were married in 1977 and together founded "Rites of Passage Inc." offering wilderness

therapy for at-risk youth in the San Francisco Bay area. In 1982 they moved to Big Pine, California, studied under a Paiute Indian doctor for five years, and founded a school to train wilderness leaders.

At their "School of Lost Borders" located in the Owens Valley of California, east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and west of Death Valley, they train leaders from all over the world in vision fasting and questing forms of primitive eco-psychology. Their courses emphasize experiential study with solo experiences in nature on four planes of development: physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual. I have had the pleasure of taking two of their courses at the School of Lost Borders. These courses were different, effective, and significantly expanded my wilderness knowledge.

Steven and Meredith are authors of many articles on wilderness therapy and several books including *The Book of the Vision Quest* (Prentice Hall), *The Roaring of the Sacred River* (Lost Borders Press), and are editors (with Louise Mahdi) of *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* (Open Court Press). Steven and Meredith have just completed a definitive book manuscript on wilderness therapy, *The Four Shields: A Psychology of Human Nature.* I am looking forward to hearing some of the ideas in that book this evening.

John C. Hendee is director of the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center, managing editor of the International Journal of Wilderness, and former dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Range Sciences.



WILDERNESS VISION QUESTING AND THE FOUR SHIELDS OF HUMAN NATURE

Steven Foster
and Meredith Little

First of all, we want to thank Dr. John Hendee and the Wilderness Research Center for inviting us to speak here. It reflects an openness to new ideas and new challenges in wilderness therapeutic work. We also want to thank those students who worked with him to bring us to this hour. We also want to introduce Marilyn Riley, who is here tonight, the first person we trained in this work many years ago—a dear heart and a skilled professional.

Rites of Passage and Initiation

Steven: Many years ago, I left college teaching because I had something more to do than speak in a lecture hall. I left the "ivory tower" and went into the classroom of the world, drawn by the certainty that our culture had lost traditional wilderness rites of passage—rites that used to guarantee that the young grew up into a stable society that provided for their orderly, nonviolent passage into adulthood.

The community at large always played an essential role in this process. For the most part, these traditional rites are lost to us, although we can still see the ghost of them in high school graduations, driver's license training, induction into the armed

services, and attainment of the magical, yet meaningless, drinking age of 21.

We can certainly see the need for such rites in the behavior of our young, who seek to be grown up in a thousand different dangerous, illegal, or self-destructive ways. The same can be seen in the behavior of many "adults," who, because they never participated in traditional rites of passage, grew up into helpless adolescents.

At the School of Lost Borders, we seek to provide ways in which young people—and adults—can celebrate or confirm their attainment of new life stages in a traditional fashion—in the wilderness. The way we use the wilderness, forest, or park has been described as "soft." True, we do not lead expeditions to the tops of mountains or rocks, or conquer rocks, rivers, or long distances. But what we offer is "hard," difficult, and challenging to body, psyche, mind, and spirit. Soft? Yes, we touch the land lightly, hardly leaving a trace. We learn how to yield, to surrender, to cooperate with and accommodate the forces of nature. We learn how to live in balance with the environment. We utilize therapeutic techniques that are not problem- or goal-oriented, but ancient means of empowerment. Soft? If loneliness, solitude, hunger, and exposure are soft, then the vision quest is soft.

We learn how to live in balance with the environment. We utilize therapeutic techniques that are not problem- or goal-oriented, but ancient means of empowerment.

Meredith: What our young people are seeking is a meaningful context in which they can be witnessed and confirmed as having attained maturity. The wilderness provides that context, that interface with nature that evokes truths in us that can be known in no other way. In ancient times, people lived *in* the wilderness. It

was always there. It provided a perfect passageway for children to leave the community and their identities as children behind. On the other side of the passageway, they reentered their community again, as adults.

That same wilderness is still with us. It is not entirely gone. But what our ancestors had that we don't have is a community to witness that passage in their life, and to listen to the story that they brought back of how they interfaced with the earth or the "Great Mother." And as they listened, the elders of the community would see what this or that young person's role would be within the community, so that there would be a place for that person, so that the community would grow and survive. And the elders would welcome that person back as an adult, no longer as a child.

In modern life, we are aware of the hunger of our young people to grow up. Because the old initiations are gone, they seek to initiate themselves. Again and again, we see how they test themselves against the edge of death. The fact is, we all need to feel that edge, especially in our adolescent years. The early cultures taught us how to bring the young to that edge within a meaningful, safe context. In that context the young discovered their own unique gifts, their own way of getting through hard times, their own way of converting darkness into light, or pain into understanding. Members of the community played the part of "lay-midwives" to this birthing into maturity.

I was talking with someone before the meeting, how when we lose our story, our sense of purpose in life, we are in danger of losing our life. Rites of passage in the wilderness enable people to find their story again and to bring its meaning back into their lives.

The Three Stages of Vision Questing

Steven: Our teachers have been cultural anthropologists, American Indians, and the traditions of our European ancestors. We do not owe our allegiance to any particular tradition. Wilderness passage rites, as taught at our school, are pan-cultural, eclectic, and geared to the modern experience. They always involve the same three-stage dynamic typical of "primitive" rites, as first identified by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his classic *Les rites de passage* (1909). These stages, invariably accompanied by certain sanctions or taboos, are vital to the effectiveness of any passage rite. In the modern world, we must re-learn them.

You begin with an ending—*severance.* The child must cut the ties that bind him or her to childhood, parents, and community. He or she must be prepared to enter the second phase, called the *threshold, marge,* or *liminal* state. The threshold stage is profoundly existential and involves a passing through, a journey of some kind, through a wilderness landscape that evokes psychological states and feelings. This passage is considered to be sacred. All that happens to the candidate has meaning and points the way to the nature and quality of adult life. The third stage, *incorporation,* represents the attainment of a new life stage, a new status within the community. This status is automatically confirmed by virtue of the passing through.

The *threshold* or wilderness phase involves risk. In many cases, the candidate brushes up against death. The reality of death, however, is mainly "perceived," as opposed to "real," and is magnified by the presence of taboos. At our school, we observe three threshold taboos: no food (fasting), no company (aloneness), and no shelter except a small tarp (exposure). The death is psychological and occurs inwardly. In the threshold passage, the child dies to childhood and comes forth as an adult. From the passing through comes the story, which is told to a council of "elders" during the incorporation phase.

The Role of the Vision Quest Guide

Meredith: What is the role of the wilderness guide in this process wherein youth and adults celebrate their passing through the transitions and crises of their lives? Our role depends on what we perceive to be the needs of modern culture. And these needs are relative to the culture.

We've come to feel very strongly that the need today is to get in touch with our own personal calling, values, sense of meaning, and the understanding that within ourselves we have the answers—that we have the ability to touch on the wisdom that's within us and to take full responsibility for that calling. In the wilderness solitude of the threshold time, all dead wood falls away. Only the core is left. The person returns with that core. Some call it "vision."

But not necessarily vision in some deep, mystical sense. The vision brought back from the threshold might be that I need to go back and tell my family how much I love them. This in itself can be life-changing. As guides, we're not here to infuse people with our own values or anyone else's, but to offer a basic, meaningful context that they then can fill with their own life and value. We witness the discovery of this value and empower them to take this "vision" back to their day-to-day life.

The incorporation phase is far more difficult than the experience in the wilderness. Vision is not vision until we are able to take it back into our lives and live it. Our role is to make sure that they will be safe during the time they are alone and fasting, and to prepare them well for the risks that are present in any wilderness experience. We must make certain these children, who are severing from childhood, have the physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual tools they need to complete the "passage." Thus, we often refer to ourselves as "midwives." We're there to facilitate the birthing—but, in fact, they give birth to themselves. We don't judge them if they return early. We hold them with love, are there to support them, to listen and love their

story, and to empower the understandings they were given about their own way. That is, we help them understand what their story means to the life they go back to. Their experience means little unless it is woven into the fabric of their lives.

In ancient cultures, the community was there waiting for them with a feast, with support, and an honoring of the new role they took on. The visions changed the community and the roles of other people in it.

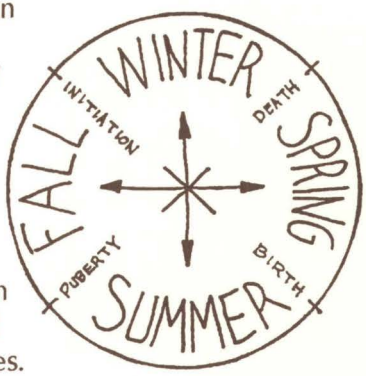
Steven: We train people to do this work. Our special intent is to train elders—those who have been through this process and understand what it is all about, those who are willing to be there for people who have just come through, and to help the new ones understand the meaning of their story.

It's not like traditional therapy, which tends to be preoccupied with people's problems. We work instead with the ways they can deal with and dance with their problems.

An important training process is called "mirroring," that is, the ability to hold up a mirror to the story that shows the positive, the gift, the good, the beauty, the grace, the power, and the promise of life. It's not like traditional therapy, which tends to be preoccupied with people's problems. We work instead with the ways they can deal with and dance with their problems. The mirror of the elders witnesses and mirrors back the beauty of the gifts that their life has bestowed on them, gifts that enable them to surmount their mountains.

The Four Shields

The mirroring process is based on a kind of "primitive" psychological paradigm we call the Four Shields. Two lines intersecting at right angles. A four directions cross. With a longer foot, we see it everywhere in our churches. Now, draw a circle around it.



What we have here is the American Indian, Australian Aboriginal, Anglo-Celtic, East Indian Buddhist symbol of the four directions, the four winds, the four gates, the four heavens, the four hells, the four ends of the earth—and the four seasons. In the northern latitudes, summer is in the south; fall is in the west, where the sun goes down; winter is in the north; and spring is in the east, where the sun rises.

If we are of this land called the North American continent, we live, breathe, and have our very being within the compass of the four seasons. The four seasons of nature are also the four seasons of *human* nature. This cannot be otherwise.

The Summer Shield

In the summer of life, we are children in the physical body of nature. We live in thrall to our senses, our reactive emotions, our erotic instincts. Unthinking, unfeeling, and innocent of any premeditated wrongdoing, we are like the body of nature itself, subject to our survival instincts of fight, flight, or freeze. Like all the other species, our basic function is to survive and grow, to be born, to fluoresce, and to die in a world ruled by the basic evolutionary laws of the survival of the fittest.

In the summer of human life, our needs are material: food, shelter, and the goods and services that satisfy our bodily cravings.

Like children uninitiated into adulthood, we defend what we possess. Our actions are guided by the need of the ego and the physical body to survive attack. We are subject to the elemental emotions of fear, rage, jealousy, possessiveness, and are incapable of seeking the well-being of others. We do not take responsibility for our actions and act without thinking. Instinctively, we play the competitive games of survival, some of which are violent, seeking the advantage over others.

Summer represents the first phase of a rite of passage. It is the period during which the child is prepared to cut the ties that bind it to childhood. Via *severance*, human nature is prepared to be initiated, by the passage of fall, into the rigors of winter. In ancient times, childhood was merely a prelude to the main theme—the initiatory passage. The sensual, emotional, egotistical persona was always expected to become more than a child.

At the School of Lost Borders, we teach our students how to prepare the child of summer to enter the initiatory passage of fall. The child (of any age) is afraid. Emotions are visceral, close to the surface. We look into the face of a 50-year-old man and see the boy; we look into the face of a 19-year-old and see the little girl. We do not attempt to diminish the child, but to honor the fear of the child. The wilderness is not the comfortable womb of home. The wilderness cares nothing for our selfish little desires to be comfortable, secure, or entertained.

We are always this child. We never leave this child behind, not even when we are dying. We can no more do without this child, and the consequences of its actions, than the great wheel of the seasons can do without summer. The child of summer is a fact of our nature. But it is only one part of the whole.

The Fall Shield

Meredith: Summer must become fall. Even so, the child must become adolescent. The fall represents a time of constriction, a time of inwardness, when the child of summer must symbolically die to childhood and be reborn as an adult. It is a time of

initiation. The initiation must be complete if the child is to be ready for winter, when the snows blow freezing cold, and ice grips at the will to survive. If it were not for fall, the people would never survive the winter. The children would never grow up into adulthood. There would be no one to take care of the children.

To get to winter, summer must pass through the dark lands of the fall. These lands of the fall shield are like the "psychosphere," the "morphogenetic fields" described by Rupert Sheldrake in *The Presence of the Past.* They are the memory fields of the human psyche. The inward face of self-consciousness, feeling, and dreams. The dreams of our ancient ancestors, the dreams of our genes. Here we feel the eyes of our opposite sex parent turned upon us, often with disapproval. We try to be good, to do what those eyes tell us. But sometimes we rebel. We want to go our own way. We want to find out who we are.

The fall shield is the *threshold* of initiation, where the wheat is threshed and the chaff falls away. The bare seed is left. In wilderness rites of passage, the tools that thresh are hunger, isolation/seclusion, loneliness, boredom, and exposure to the indifferent forces of nature. These are true tests of adult potential. Although the "adolescent" is seemingly at risk, the risk is more "perceived" than real. The experience is more psychological than physical.

Much richness can be found in the darkness of the fall shield. Feelings can be like quicksand, and we have to stay away from black holes of depression, guilt, shame, regret, and grief. But we must not try so hard to avoid this place. Here we can drink from the springs of self-acceptance. Here we can walk in the valley of the soul. Here we can find the will to be who we say we are. Sometimes we wallow in old wounds, playing the helpless victim. We refuse to grow beyond our past.

In wilderness rites, the dark shield of each adolescent is tested. It is tested by living in it. The adolescent must live in her or his own sphere of self-awareness. This can be intolerable at times. At

other times, it can be ecstatic. The student is told that the *threshold* time is sacred. During this sacred time, whatever she does is sacred. There is nothing that she can do that is not sacred. But the concept that we ourselves are sacred, as well as profane, is a little strange to many. People wrestle with their past, with the child within them. Usually they find a way through the labyrinth. And all during this time, the wilderness surrounds them. They look into nature and see themselves reflected.

We are always that adolescent. Every time we come around to fall, we are that adolescent we were when we were 16. And fall always comes after summer. The child of us again has to enter the time of experience when the leaves fall from the trees and the nights grow colder: the time of changing, of turning, of maturing, of reaping the fruits of summer. Every time we come around to this dark passage again, we have to find the courage to turn and face it.

Winter Shield

Steven: Winter is here. Who do we ask to guide us through these perilous times? The children? They are too busy playing with their toys. The adolescents? They are too busy being initiated. Only the adults in the community can insure the survival of the whole. For that reason alone the children must be severed from their parents and put through the threshold passage. Their readiness for adulthood must be certified and approved by the people.

The attributes of adulthood are many. They bear such names as self-control, self-reliance, commitment, vulnerability, hard work, order, selflessness, patience, sacrifice, endurance, empathy, etc. The true adult recognizes the interdependence of human and nature, and lives in accordance with the ways of the wild. The threshold experience in the wilderness confirms that these attributes are present in the young.

The north shield represents the mind, or what the biologist Gregory Bateson calls "mental process" (*Mind and Nature).* This mind activity is recognized throughout the universe in the

organization and interaction of multiple parts. The activity of the human mind can be discerned in thought, language, communication, science, and all the "ologies." Laws, institutions, orders, and disciplines have their roots in mind.

Incorporation into adulthood is a function of the winter shield. When the children return from the threshold trial, elders from the community stand ready to receive them and to confer the rights, responsibilities, and privileges of adulthood. They belong to a greater body than their own now. They belong to the social body on which the health of all the children depend. And although they still retain the child of summer and the adolescent of fall, these shields are under the governorship of the adult of winter.

Wilderness passage rites, as taught at our school, always include the careful *incorporation* of those who return from the *threshold.* This process involves the celebration of certain moments: re-entry into the social body, the ingestion of food, turning away from the mountains, and the conscious acceptance of community. Within 24 hours, a council is convened, during which time the returnees tell their stories and the elders respond with their "mirroring" of meaning. The attainment of adulthood is confirmed. The candidate is empowered to live a life befitting the new life station.

Spring Shield

Meredith: Spring brings a sense of being a part of something greater than ourselves—a new life, a new hope, a shift in perspective toward the light. In the spring of human nature, the old forms of winter are broken. New life comes forth. The rite of passage has come full circle: body (south), psyche (west), mind (north) and spirit (east). The spirit of regeneration; the spirit of birth, when something springs from nothing. The creative impulse. Child becomes adolescent, becomes adult, becomes newly born. Where is death? If death is on the great "wheel of the seasons," it occurs here, in the northeast, where the old forms disintegrate and the spirit begins to breathe on the seemingly dead seed.

The constriction of the fall shield is countered now by the expansion of the rising sun. The darkness of the initiatory passage was necessary so that the child could become an adult, so that the adult could be illumined. This illumination is the by-product of the discipline. It has been earned by hard work, by virtues encountered in the dark passage. The quester is rewarded with a vision of the Holy Grail. She or he sees with the long view. He sees how he can change his life. She sees how she can dance with the divorce. He realizes he must tell his children he loves them. Examples of sudden insight and illumination are typical.

What is Vision?

Vision is nothing if it is not attached to appropriate action. Plenty of people return with "visions." The spirit shield of spring is oozing with the stuff to make visions. Wild nature inspires visions, although usually they are not the kind where angels descend on ladders of light. People tell us all kinds of stories. We listen without judgment, but we tell them their vision means nothing unless they can get their feet on the ground and assume the hard work necessary to activate these visions for the benefit of the community.

Common also are stories of connection with spirit, God, or indwelling Mind. American Indians consider spirit not to be some invisible thing living inside life forms. To them, spirit is the thing itself, the creature, the species itself. In the wilderness, such "spirits" are everywhere. Some sting, some scratch, but their purpose is sacred. They remind us of the web of life, which is also a spirit. At the school, we encourage our students to pray. It does not matter to us whom they pray to. But the act of prayer, like any act of faith, is a powerful ally in times of distress. When you are praying alone in the wilderness, you notice that all things seem to be praying with you. Could it be that one of the functions of the great web of life is to pray?

Some people come to us who want nothing but spirit—we call them "airy fairies." They want to wallow in the light of illumination, but they can no more do that than spring can avoid becoming summer. They are like children afraid of the darkness. They don't want to talk about what's going on in their lives. They don't want to talk about their shadows and the skeletons in their closets. They seek the power of illumination. But the power of illumination is nothing if it is not linked to the fearful child who is afraid to go into the dark passage. True visions are earned in the opposite shield, in the western passage, where loneliness and hunger dwell.

The word "vision" can be deceptive. The vision of the spring shield must become a part of the body, the psyche, and the rational mind. The "vision quest" or "vision fast" is not really about vision. It is about balance, about all four shields blending, harmonizing, as one—the four seasons of human nature, blending as one, even as the four seasons of nature blend into what we call the "year."

Steven: Twenty years ago, a Native American teacher taught us the basic paradigm of the four shields. What he taught us then, he might scarcely recognize here. This simple metaphor has become the ecopsychological foundation of our work. By passing through wilderness rites, thousands of young people and adults have

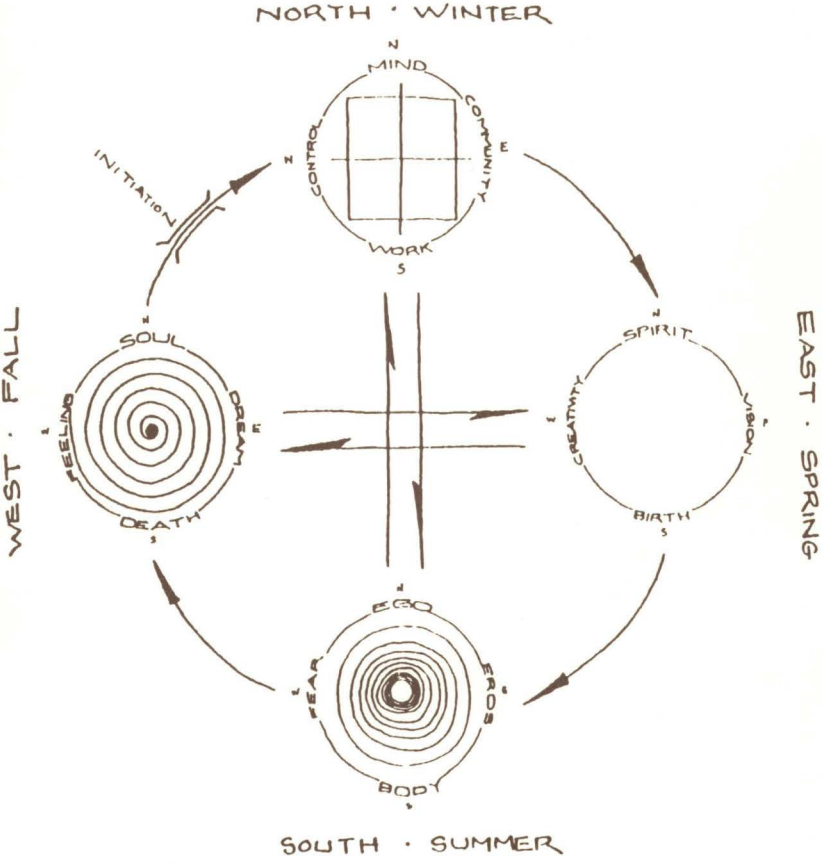
helped us to enlarge the scope of it, and to make it relevant to the modern human experience. It bears some resemblance to a similar paradigm devised by the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung in *A Psychological Theory of Types* many years ago. It also bears a likeness to the dynamics of van Gennep's *rites de passage.* But above all, it is a theory that has been tested in the experiences of those who have gone alone into the wilderness and returned with stories to tell.

Of course, the vision fast is only a part of the training process. There are many other pan-cultural, traditional experiences in wilderness settings, with therapeutic value. These initiatory-type experiences are means of strengthening the shield structure of any given individual. Wild nature easily lends itself to symbols and complexes related to each of the four shields. In the stuff of nature, the individual sees him/herself reflected. For example, our training of wilderness therapists often includes such exercises as bodily orientations to the earth (summer shield), night walks (fall shield), tracking and survival arts (winter shield), and all-night vigils culminating in sunrise (spring shield).

Meredith: Perhaps what we're really describing here is a model of the immune system. It is human, but it is also natural. The four shields are actual shields, protecting us from dis-ease. Notice that the body, the basic object of healing in western medicine, is only one of the shields. The psyche, the mind, and the spirit are also coequal in importance. Damage to one of the shields can threaten the whole. In other words, disease can come to the spirit, the mind, or the psyche, and have an impact on all four, including, of course, the body.

If the self becomes stuck in any one of the shields, then the whole system grinds to a halt. We not only have summer in summer, but summer in fall, summer in winter, and summer in spring. In a healthy person, the shields go up and down fluidly, from summer to spring and back to summer and so forth. In an unhealthy person, the shields may continue to go up and down, but some of the shields are shriveled and almost useless, others

lopsided, grotesque, or heavily weighted. Much of this imbalance can be righted in the wilderness, through various passage experiences. Nature does the teaching. Our job is not to be gurus, medicine teachers, or therapists, but lay midwives who hold a safe space for individuals to birth themselves.



Steven: Thank you for listening so attentively. Now we would like to show you a short clip from a video film of a youth vision quest filmed last year in the Inyo Mountains. It's a visual counterpart to what we have been talking about.

Selected Questions and Answers

Where does the name "Lost Borders" come from?

Steven: The Paiute Indians called our country, now known as Owens Valley, the "country of lost borders." Mary Austin, author of *Land of Little Rain,* also wrote a book called *Lost Borders.* We borrowed the name from her and from our Indian neighbors.

Do you ever challenge the parents of the kids in your youth program to go on a vision quest too?

Meredith: As a matter of fact, three of the parents of kids who went through the program last summer are coming later this year to participate in their own vision quest. They saw what it did to their kids and they want to find out for themselves. We're seeing more and more of this. Many of those who sign up for the vision quest are children of adults who have already experienced it. Interest in this rite of passage seems to run in families. Fathers want their sons to do it, mothers their daughters.

In a traditional culture with rites of passage into adulthood, the kids would not be the ones to spark their parents' interest. The parents, having already been through these rites when they were young, would raise their children within the tradition. The kids would participate in the rites because their parents did.

Do you ever keep track of what happens to these young people after their experience of the vision quest?

Steven: Only those who have kept track of us—a surprisingly large number. Some of them are kids who went out with us twenty years ago. They're no longer kids. They work, they have families. A large number of them have gone into the natural sciences, ecology, and the helping professions. For the most part, they seem to be succeeding with their lives within a broad socio-economic spectrum. Few that I can think of are actual "losers." I can think of a whole lot more who are actually actively pursuing their "vision."

I don't mean to be sentimental when I say that all these people share the memory of an uncommon experience—at least in this culture—a skin-to-skin encounter with a wilderness ecosystem while alone and hungry. A journey through the interior landscape of their own wilderness. What value does it have? I don't care much for statistical measurements of experiences as priceless as these. I prefer to think that the true value of it will be understood, someday, when all alone we cross the threshold of the wilderness passage of death.

Meredith: We know that when people return to their daily lives, sooner or later they go through what we call a "predictable depression." It happens like Campbell's "monomyth." The hero or heroine returns with the gift, the boon, the vision, only to encounter doubt and old habits. At that point, the "call" can be refused. The hero can turn away from the work of planting the seed. Or the hero can see this monster of depression as a challenge, a commitment, a dangerous opportunity.

All the elders can do is to prepare them for this "predictable depression," to challenge and empower them to acknowledge that what they learned in the wilderness is still strong within them. We tell them it is one thing to have a vision and it is quite another to make that understanding work. We tell them the "predictable

depression" is the "starter button." The time has come to act, to make the vision work.

Steven: The elders' council is an invaluable opportunity to make a difference in how at-risk youth see their future. How many kids are accustomed to a kind of continual failure? Everybody's down on them and often for good reason. They have begun to entertain a negative attitude about themselves. What else can a bunch of elders do than react positively to a scared kid living alone in the dark without any food in his belly? It would seem to be proof that the kid's got something in him/her. Why, every parent should be proud.

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Is there a predictable time when people might want to do this?

Meredith: Yes. When they want to confirm their passage into a new life stage. From childhood to adulthood, for example. Or at mid-life, when a person confirms the passage from young adulthood to older adulthood. Or from single to married, or from married to divorced, or from childlessness to parenthood, or to confirm the end of grieving, or to mark the beginning or end of a significant life change.

The intent of the individual is all-important. The intent—"Why I am doing this"—is confirmed, or validated by participation in the rite. "By doing this, I confirm that this is so."

How hard is it to fast in the wilderness?

Steven: It is probably much more difficult to fast at home than in the wilderness. At home, refrigerators, grocery stores, and restaurants are close by. The temptation is strong. You're sitting at a bus stop. The person next to you is chomping on a hamburger. You walk through the house—apples and grapes fill a bowl on the table. Civilized America cries "Eat! Eat!" on every street corner. In the wilderness, much of the food is so natural it doesn't even look like what we know as food. And the nearest civilized food is far away. Therefore, the temptation is less.

Medically speaking, no noticeable harm is done to a healthy adult or teenager. A loss of glycogen and electrolytes, maybe a little fat. Water intake is far more important. Our people go out with water. In the summer, a gallon per day. The psychosomatic effects of a three- or four-day fast in the wilderness can be strange, but not particularly difficult to endure. Transient dizziness, vertigo, tendencies to "black out," sensations of weakness, and occasional nausea are typical. Boredom sets in more quickly without the distraction of meals.

Most people report that the fasting was not the difficult part. Rather, it was the boredom, or the loneliness, or the helpless terror of a thunderstorm. Without food in its belly, the human psyche "eats" memories, sensations, emotions, feelings, thoughts, illuminations, and prayers; it "eats" the landscape, the trees and rocks, and the insects and birds. Fasting erases the boundary between the self and nature. The person who returns from a wilderness fast may have a hungry body, but the soul, the mind, and the spirit have been fed.

Does your work make people dependent on the wilderness? Doesn't it make them more vulnerable to the dangers of the city— because they can't find their strength in the city—they have to go to the wilderness to get it?

Meredith: Ultimately, the goal of this kind of work is to help people learn how to move back and forth between the worlds, easily and effortlessly. In such a way, wilderness blends with human life lived in the city. Or human life lived in the city blends with wilderness.

Exposure to the wilderness is absolutely essential to the future of the human race. As our wilderness areas shrink and our atmosphere changes, we must make the right choices about which way to go. Exposure to the wilderness for four days and nights without food or shelter "puts dust back into your blood," as they say. You never forget. The experience becomes a kind of conviction. You want to have a say in what happens to the wilderness, the environment, and the earth.

Is vision questing becoming more popular?

Steven: Do you mean the word "vision quest," or the sort of work we do, the three-stage process involving a three- or four-day-and-night fast alone in the wilderness? The word itself is quite popular and will become even more so. Films, books, footwear, outdoor gear, airplane trips to Hawaii, perfume, beer. . . . I shudder to think what the capitalistic culture will do with this word. Though the term "vision quest" may become common and mundane as a penny, the actual experience of a "vision quest" will always be rare, sacred, and deeply inviolate—at least to those who value and learn from their experience. Incidently, the word "vision quest" is from the Latin "sight, or thing seen" and "to seek, to inquire."

Is the experience of a vision quest, as we have defined it, becoming more popular? There is no doubt this kind of experiential "inquiry" within a wilderness setting is growing more popular, even as the eco-psychology movement, of which it is a

part, reaches into classrooms everywhere. Many people are coming to be trained. They are eager to explore ways in which they can provide safe wilderness contexts in which individuals and communities can experience the old way of the passage rite. As the years pass and we enter the next century, the desire to be alone and hungry on the earth will flourish. It may become an extremely appropriate way for people to orient themselves, prioritize their values, and remember why they are here. And maybe, just maybe, there will be some who return from the mountain of vision with answers, real answers to the challenging questions of our times.

Suggested Reading

Bateson, Gregory. *Mind and Nature* (Dutton, 1979).

Foster, Steven and Little, Meredith. *The Trail to the Sacred Mountain* (Lost Borders Press, Big Pine, California, 1981).

Gennep, Arnold van. *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Jacobi, Jolande. *The Psychology of C.G. Jung* (Yale University Press, 1973).

Lawlor, Robert. *Voices of the First Day* (Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, 1991).

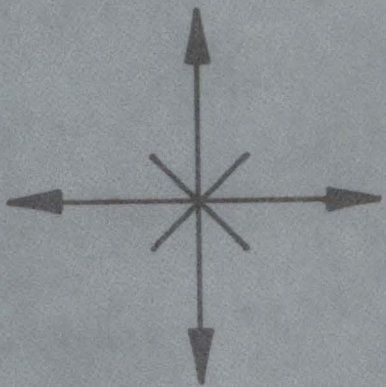
Lovelock, J.E. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

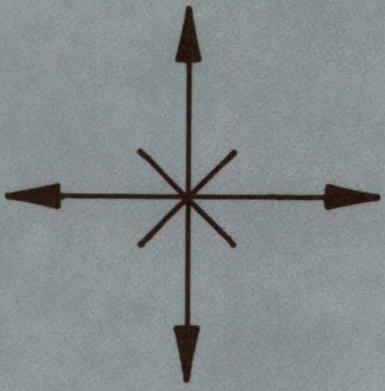
Sheldrake, Rupert. *The Presence of the Past* (Collins, 1988).

Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lectureships

1977	Sen. Frank Church	Wilderness in a Balanced Land-Use Framework
1978	Roderick Nash	Wilderness Management: A Contradiction in Terms?
1979	Cecil D. Andrus	Reorganization and the Department of Natural Resources: Implications for Wilderness
1980	Patrick F. Noonan	Preserving America's Natural Heritage in the Decade of the Eighties
1981	Russell E. Dickenson	Wilderness Values in the National Parks
1982	Michael Frome	Battle for the Wilderness: Our Forever Conflict?
1983	Wilderness Confer.	Issues on Wilderness Management (not a publication)
1984	Brock Evans	In Celebration of Wilderness: The Progress and the Promise
1987	Jay D. Hair	Wilderness: Promises, Poems, and Pragmatism
1988	Ian Player	Using Wilderness Experience to Enhance Human Potential
1989	(Chief) Oren Lyons	Wilderness in Native American Culture

1992	William A. Worf	A Vision for Wilderness in the National Forests
1992	Roger Contor	A Vision for Wilderness in the National Parks
1994	Bill Reffalt	A Vision for Wilderness in the National Wildlife Refuge System
1995	Mike Dombeck	Wilderness Management of Public Lands Administered by the BLM: Past, Present, and Future
1995	Jon Roush	A Vision for Wilderness in the Nation
1996	Steven Foster and Meredith Little	Wilderness Vision Questing and The Four Shields of Human Nature





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