

# THE TEACHINGS OF THE WILD PLACE

Some people ask us,  
“how did the work start?”

Well, the work started thousands of years ago with indigenous people, and we just happen to be modern people who have picked it back up again.

Native people have always done this work, but amongst modern white people it is not generally understood. When we first started guiding rites of passages, we were considered to be crazy, that we'd lost our marbles, were a cult.

For thousands of years, not only on the American continent, but in most cultures around the world, you find native people who have provided meaningful ways of marking the passage from one life stage to another. In the Germanic, or British Celtic background you find similar kinds of rites of passage as those of the Native Americans.

All we have done is to help bring these ways back into Western culture, trying to appropriately support the challenges and life transitions of people who live in the modern world today.

Steven Foster and  
Meredith Little



A wilderness rite of passage often involves the real or perceived risk of living alone for three or four days and nights, without food or shelter, as a meaningful way of marking, celebrating, and confirming the major changes in life we all go through.

In the popular mind at least, it's concerned mostly with the passage from childhood to adulthood; and certainly in most traditional cultures this passage is marked by certain kinds of experiences, growth events and ceremonies which the whole community involved themselves in, and which have the sanction of the culture. After children go through this experience, they come out the other side and are considered to be adults - given all the rights and privileges of adulthood. This is something we really don't seem to understand in our modern world.

These new roles cannot be merely given, they need to be earned by passing through the rite, by proving oneself worthy. You can listen to the old people talk about what's important until you're blue in the face, but until you have experienced what's important, it's all meaningless talk. That's one of the problems our young people are experiencing today - there are plenty of people who are giving them advice. But young people know, deep down, that they need to do more than just listen, and so because there are few culturally sanctioned rites, we often see them pursuing some sort of rite of passage in their own fashion.

In America, and also in Britain, there are many, many urban gangs. The beauty of the gang is that the members are finding for themselves ways to be initiated. Gangs include a sense of community, and they involve the individual seriously brushing up as close as they can to death to find out who they are; and then being accepted within a new role as a member of the gang.

Unfortunately, when we have youth initiating youth it becomes an inadequate and often self-destructive rite of passage. They have the elements, there is something in us all that knows what we need, and when it's not provided - well, we see what's happening in our culture today.

Until we can provide genuine rites of passage experiences for our youth, we can't possibly expect our youth to grow into healthy maturity. Instead what we will have are older people, such as those who are in positions of authority, who have never been initiated, and who are, in Robert Bly's words, 'nothing but uninitiated boys and girls'.

### THE THREE PHASES

One of the people who wrote about this process was Arnold van Gennep, a French anthropologist who recognised that every rite of passage contained three phases. He saw this consistently and clearly throughout the many cultures that he studied.

The first phase is the *severance phase*, which can take a full year or

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**Above:** tattooed arm of a member of an American street gang

**Left:** Steven and Meredith

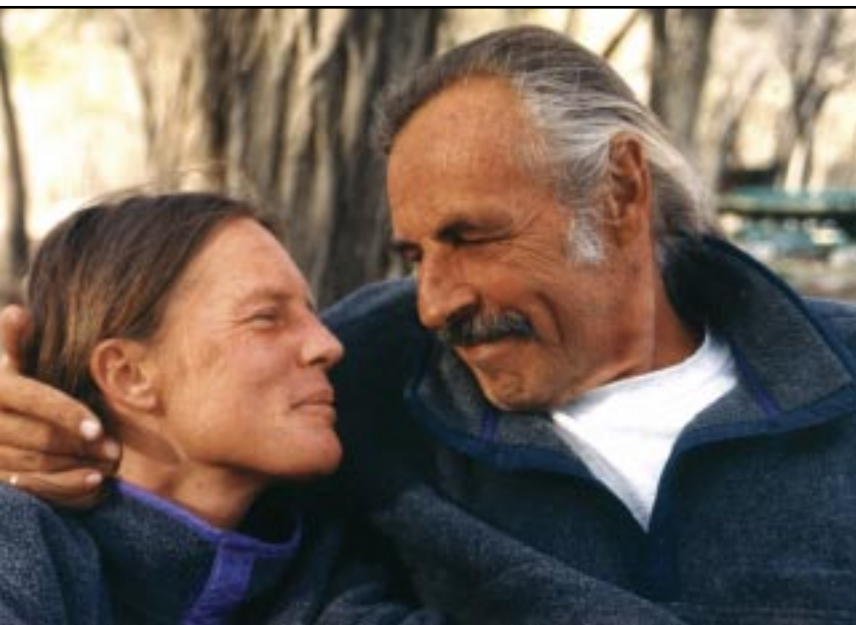
longer. This is the time to let go of our life up until this point, and to cultivate understanding about what it means to enter the new life stage. This phase generally contains a lot of teachings, and during this time the elders of a community would guide, and pass on the wisdom, knowledge and stories of the culture, which supported the new role.

Then comes the middle phase known as *the threshold*, which is the actual testing time. In our case, it is the three or four days and nights alone, fasting.

For a young person marking their passage into adulthood, they are severed from their parents, from their familiar culture, and given back to the Great Mother, the Great Father; to be born again as adults in the sacred wholeness of life.

This phase engenders a sense of what one's own personal and unique gifts are, what values and dreams make up this newly initiated adult. What their place is in the community at large. When the phase is complete, the initiate returns to the community once again.

The third phase is the *incorporation phase* - which again can take a year or more to complete. This is a time of gaining the courage, and honing the skills, to fully take on the understanding that was given to them when they were alone. A time to learn how to





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apply their gifts in ways that feed the greater community - and so enable the community to survive.

What we lack today, and what was in so many traditional cultures, is a community to formally receive the initiate back. There is a need for both a welcoming and supportive community, as well as a group of elders who, not only guide the *severance phase*, but are also there to listen to the stories brought back from the threshold. These elders must be there on the other side to say 'Good, this is your gift, we see

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you, we recognise you, and we welcome you back so that we can all together make our community a good place.'

Because our elders are rarely there to welcome the young people back, we are no longer hearing the stories that the young people have to tell us. Early cultures knew that any story that was brought back from this rite was not just for the individual who brought it back, but was also spiritual food for the whole community.

Until we begin to listen to the stories of our youth we are going to remain stagnant - a stagnant culture that's not hearing what is truly needed for the health of the community, because the young people's stories contain important pieces of this knowledge.

#### **PREPARING FOR THE RITE**

Many modern people have no idea how to be in the wilderness, particularly if they are alone. So a good deal of our preparation has to do with screening them to see if they are going to be safe.

This involves asking them questions about their life and about their intent - particularly about their intent. If their intent is strong and honest, then generally the person will move in a balanced way and be more likely to act safely. If there is a weak intent, if the person is not sure why they are doing the rite, then their chances of being in danger are a little bit more real.

There is also quite extensive physical preparation. People have to learn how to camp, what equipment to have, how much water they need every day, what to do in case of lightning storms or flash floods, what habits the animals in the wild have, and what to do if they meet up with them.

People also have to learn how to take care of themselves while they are fasting. A lot of people think that if they don't have food in their belly, they might just fall over dead. Of course they don't, but they do get weaker, so they have to have instruction on how to make sure that they act appropriately if they are in a weakened condition.

We always make sure that they know that they can come in at any time and will be welcomed by those who are holding the space at the base camp, to either talk for a time and go back out, or to remain in base camp if they feel finished.

#### **FEAR, FOOD AND DEATH**

It's important for people to feel, at least a little bit deep down, that they might die. This was an important ingredient in traditional rites, and is still important for modern ones.

For modern Western people simply to go without food is often very frightening. Initially going without food is many people's greatest fear; but they discover that loneliness and boredom become much bigger monsters. Fasting actually becomes a kind of delight for most people.

When we don't have the distraction of a fridge, or a telephone, or a television, or an iPod, or a book to read, we find our emotions rising to the surface and their information more clearly accessible. There is also a great clarity of mind that comes with fasting. One feels empty, and what feels unimportant falls away remarkably easily. There is a clarity within the silence and the inner and outer space we sit within, that floods into us when we are not eating. It is as if the environment becomes our food, and with it a deep sense of what is truly needed and important.

This sense of clarity can be very profound. Some people upon their return, talk about having felt



'high' while they fasted, and we always emphasise this with young people - 'the old way is that if you want to get high, don't put anything in - not even food.' Obviously the ancients had a fairly good idea of how to get 'high' without using drugs. That's certainly an old secret we would like to re-introduce to the modern world. There also comes a deeper empathy for the many people in our world who experience hunger and deprivation on a daily basis.

### THE MAZE AND THE AMAZING

We have recognised over the years that the more we, as the facilitators, get out of the way when people actually go out on the land, the more the ceremony, the land, and this interrelationship with the individual, does the teaching. If there is a teacher it is not us. If there is a teacher it is the land and the ceremony itself.

So we don't tell people how to think or how to feel or how to make meaning, we encourage them to bring their own faith and their own belief systems, and to trust their own selves in the experience. Our role as facilitators is mainly to make sure they are going to be safe - physically, psychologically and spiritually - and then give them over to the Great

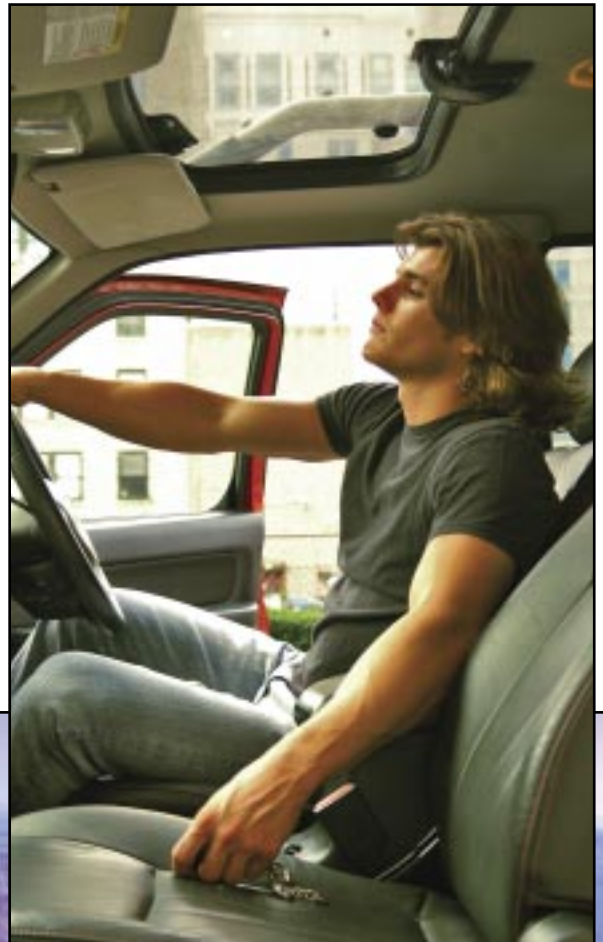
Teacher without interfering.

Nature is a great teacher. She is a mirror. She reflects back to us our internal condition. If we are angry and we look out on nature, we see symbols and images of anger. If we are unhappy, we see symbols and images of our unhappiness. If we are afraid, the very bushes seem to become monsters with arms. This is perhaps one of the most important ways in which nature teaches us - she reflects back to us what we happen to be feeling or thinking at any given moment. That's an old, old teaching, and an old understanding.

In the mirror of nature people can find images and symbols of their own power, their own gifts, their own abilities, or, what the native people called, their own *medicine*. And the beauty of it is there is no judgement, there's only being seen. It's rare in our culture that we can be seen without judgement, but nature does that, sees us, witnesses us, and reflects back to us.

People come back owning and really recognising their own wounds and their own hurts - as well as their own gifts. And they come back with the ability to accept these because they feel they have been so accepted by the land. And this is the highest place

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we can get in our lives... to become fully human, accepting our shadow, our mistakes, as well as our gifts and our joys.

Indigenous peoples saw every landform, every expression of nature, as containing a piece of eternal wisdom. The clues about co-operation, generosity, healing, communication, transformation, and so much more, are all there. And far healthier than the clues we often pick up in our cities and family systems.

One could say that modern psychology is a young science that has been developed in order to study the caged animal, and tends to be 'problem oriented.' There was a time when we weren't so caged, but now we have all kinds of

restraints. Our everyday schedules cage us, the fast pace, the very homes we live in which keep us separate from nature, and separate us from our own nature as well - we are human animals after all.

Culture and media seem to bombard us from all sides with images of what we should want, what we need, what we might want to dream for. So many of our stories are being made up for us now, instead of composing our own. People in the modern world seem to have lost their stories, lost their ability to say 'I'm going to do this, this is who I am' and then do it in some deep and meaningful way.

We see others and ourselves behaving like animals in a maze. We have learnt how to go through the maze in order to get that little bit of cheese at the end, and we are really good at pressing the button to get that little bit of cheese, without realising that around us really is infinite space, freedom, and possibility.

One thing that is evoked in the human psyche by being on the land is that people remember who they truly are. They begin to remember parts of themselves that are never evoked by being in a civilised world. There is a sense of quieting, a sense of settling down into ourselves which we gain from being alone on the land.

Rather than mostly seeing ourselves through the eyes of someone else, we begin to see ourselves through the eyes of



nature, and through the eyes of our own heart. We begin to realise that where we have been putting so much energy in our lives is actually unimportant, and that many of the things that are really important to us, we don't give time or energy to at all.

So a wilderness rite of passage not only supports us to take responsibility for claiming our own, real life back, it gives us the courage to go back and live our own, true story in the everyday.

### OUT IN THE WILDS

Practically speaking, of course, most of the time out in the wilderness people twiddle their thumbs a lot, they sit on their bums a lot, they sleep under the stars and they get rained on. If they get wet and cold, or hot and dry out in a warm climate, they have to learn how to take care of themselves without anybody else telling them how and what to do, and without too many modern conveniences, just what they happen to have brought in their pack.

We let them move about on the land, but they can't go too far because they feel a little weak from fasting. Some traditions have people stay put in a very small area. They sometimes pray, and sing, and dance, and sometimes they shake a rattle - maybe for hours at a time. They write in their journals about their feelings and experiences.

They encounter animals of various kinds, from fairly large mammals, to the tiniest insects. They live with the flies, they watch the flowers open and close, and they watch things live and die. They experience nature in the raw, and they do it without any partition, any barrier between themselves and the weather and land. This is perhaps one of the most frightening and also one of the most rewarding kinds of growth events anyone in this modern world might have.

One of the important things it invokes in us is the recognition that really we are always connected, always in a relationship with the world and land that is around us. In our civilised world we are so bombarded by people and input, that we often have to put up a protection; it's all too much, and it's often dangerous to extend our consciousness out to the other people and the world around us.

In the modern world we often feel out of place, unimportant, and disconnected in ways that we find painful. Not many people feel they really belong to the land anymore, and so to have the experience of feeling that we have a place where we belong, makes us start to sense just how alive the land really is. When we feel that, we know that we are not detached.

We feel our innate intimate relationship with the land, rather than being above it or separate from it. We come from the earth and we go back to the earth. As we grow older we begin to understand that better and better.

This kind of wisdom about the intimate relationship between life and death was certainly a part of the understanding of the 'ancients', even if nowadays it seems to be getting pretty lost in Western culture. As we grow older and go through the various growth events that produce us, we should gain wisdom, and ultimately the ability to die well.

We go back to the earth when we die. Where do we go from there? Well, there are many different theories about that, but the fact of the matter is when we die, we go back to the earth. My father, who just recently died, was put in the earth. We watched them do that, and that realisation to me is very important as I grow older.

It's important that as people grow up, take on the roles of adulthood, parenting, marriage, relationships, professions etc., and reach mid-life, they become aware that they are ageing - that their bodies are natural and that they are going to die.

Today so many, many people now die in hospital rooms, stoned out of their gourds on morphine or some other pain killer - to the point that they can't even speak to their loved ones anymore. It's like they are dying in tiny, little, sterile cubicles, with a great sense of dis-attachment from the earth. That is heart breaking.

### RETURNING ONCE AGAIN

Generally, people return from a time in the wilderness with a greater sense of self-reliance and with greater confidence in their own abilities. Young people often return with a greater love and appreciation for their parents and their upbringing. This appreciation helps them to 'die well' to their

childhood, and turn more fully toward what's next. People also return with an enhanced desire to realise their own dreams, and a confidence that their dreams are attainable in the world.

One of our teachers, Hyemeyohsts Storm, summed it up very well. He said that 'Loneliness is the teacher of giving.' When people come back they often feel a hunger within themselves to find a way to give back to their community. This is often very strong and it stays with them for a long time. They have a realisation that there is something deep within them that is worthy to be given back to others.

And yet, there is a restlessness that often occurs in people after they have returned, a feeling that they have come back to a world where they can't experience what they experienced when they were alone in nature.

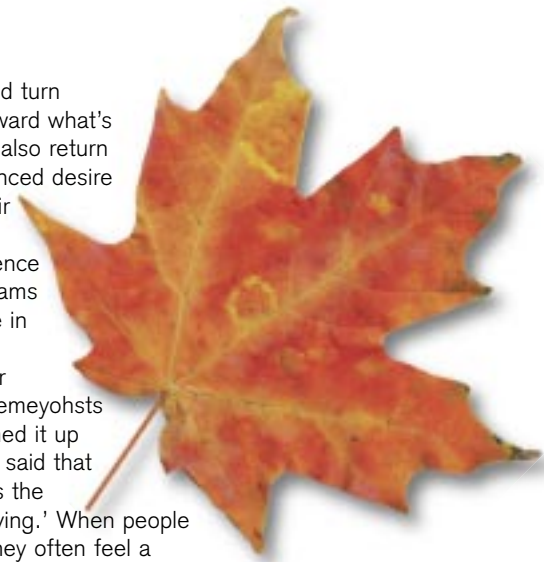
This can produce another very important spin off from the experience - a greater love and sense of gratitude for nature, and an interest in the preservation of wilderness and the ecological bio-systems within it.

Incorporation means 'taking on the body', to *in-corporate*, and it can be the most difficult of all the three phases for anyone to navigate.

Ancient people knew that the 'setting of intent' for a rite was very important; the 'Why am I doing this?', 'What am I marking?' had to be clear. If it was clearly stated, prepared for, and understood, then when the individual returned this intent had been confirmed, and could never be taken away.

For instance, if a young person goes out to mark their passage from childhood to adulthood, and they have prepared to be an adult upon their return, then when they return they are adults.

Or if someone goes out to mark that they have done the work of healing some abuse or a wound in their lives, then when they come back there is no question, that wound or abuse is behind them - the pain of it may never go away, a wound can't be cut away or erased - but they have marked that they



Steven Foster and Meredith Little founded Rites of Passage in 1976 to support their work in re-introducing wilderness passage rites for youth celebrating their journey from childhood to adulthood. Their work expanded into providing adults in natural life transitions with similar opportunities, and the founding in 1981 of The School of Lost Borders - a training centre pioneering the methods and dynamics of modern pan-cultural passage rites in the wilderness, and 'field eco-therapy' techniques.

The essence of their work is captured in articles, chapters, an award-winning documentary film, and books that include: 'The Book of the Vision Quest', 'The Roaring of the Sacred River', 'The Four Shields: The Initiatory Seasons of Human Nature', and 'Lost Borders: Coming of Age in the Wilderness'.

Since Steven's death in 2003, Meredith continues both nationally and internationally to guide and train others in this work. Along with Dr. Scott Eberle, she has also co-founded a new arm of Lost Borders entitled 'The Practice of Living and Dying'.

www.schooloflostborders.org  
www.lostborderspress.com

have moved beyond it, that the wound no longer rules them.

Or if someone undertakes a rite to mark that they have now stepped into their elderhood, and inevitably during their time alone they find greater clarity about what it means for them personally to be an elder, then when they return there is no question they are an elder. We begin to call them 'grandmother' or 'grandfather', or use some other way to acknowledge the respect we have for them.

When we guide people through a rite of passage, upon their return we have what we call the 'elders council' or 'elders circle,' where the threshold stories are told. Stories are told and the elders listen and respond, mirroring back the meaning and the beauty of the story, giving it back to the storyteller in such a way as to empower them to live that story. In the eyes of the elders who have heard their story, they are now in a different phase of life, and the elders circle will remind them of that, and encourage and empower them to take the responsibility that comes with this new life phase. That's the old way, the way it used to be done.

People often return from the pristine wilderness as high as a kite, and filled with resolve and vision about what their futures could be; and then they go right back into a culture that does not value - and even makes fun of - what they have just done.

Because we no longer have communities where such rites are the norm, we have a situation where people can easily lose the confidence and the understanding that they have attained. So it can be a very difficult process, and there is no easy answer until we provide for these returning people a community of elders who have also experienced the rite, elders who can be there for the returning person when they come back.

One of the ways that we prepare modern people to go back into their life is to remind them that they go back to a community, and often family and friends, who may not understand what they've been through, and may actually put down their experience. We encourage them to hold the story of their experience as a secret knowing within their own hearts, not giving it away to people who don't understand.

We also remind them that the *incorporation phase* of the ceremony lasts for a full year. There will come times when they feel the enormous discomfort and tension of 'the old story' and the 'vision' of who they are now. Here is the moment of choice... to either 'refuse the call', or to manifest themselves in the body of their new story, for the people to see and be blessed by. In early cultures you hear this all the time - until vision can be manifested, and given to the community, it is not complete.

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it more difficult, more of a challenge. But what a rite does, is to bring more meaning into our lives in ways that feed our soul, and the health of our people.

Often there are people who come back to experience this ceremony again. For some people it can become a spiritual practice, a little like yoga or meditation, and through this practice of going into the wilderness again and again, over a period of years, a person encourages natural change towards the direction they wish to take their lives.

The reintroduction of meaningful rites of passage is growing; it's not a tiny movement that's dying out. In the USA for example, there are hundreds of individuals and agencies who are using this process to work not only with youth, but with people in various stages of life transition. This is true not only in America, but also in Britain and across Europe. We have friends doing it in South Africa and even in the jungles of Thailand. It has just begun, the snowball has just begun to roll down the hill, and we'll see where it goes and how big it becomes before it finally crashes into the mansions of culture!

This article was based on a video interview recorded by Phil Stebbing and David Wendl-Berry in the spring of 2001.

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Phil and David for their kind permission to extract from it, and also to Meredith Little for editing the transcript.

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