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## **WILDERNESS VISION QUEST** **A journey of transformation**

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### ABSTRACT

The Wilderness Vision Quest is a retreat program which provides participants with an experience of personal growth and spiritual renewal within the context of an outdoor camping trip. Through the careful use of techniques such as deep relaxation, reflective writing, visualization, symbolic art, expressive movement, music and communication rituals, participants touch, explore, and develop important human resources such as imagination, intuition, creativity, inspiration and insight. The Quest helps participants learn how to love themselves more deeply and bond in important ways to other people and to the natural world, and they return to their normal lives with a clear sense of the meaning and purpose of their lives.

*Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes.*

Fortunate is one who knows the country gods.

Anonymous

## BACKGROUND

As a Human Resources Consultant, specializing in the field of Transpersonal Psychology and trained in a discipline called Psychosynthesis, since 1972 I have been conducting a wide variety of personal growth and professional training programs for individuals, groups and organizations throughout the United States and Canada. I help people tap into and explore their rich inner worlds, develop their unique personal resources, and more fully actualize their human potential.

In 1976, in an effort to provide high quality and intense programs for individuals and groups honestly in search of transformational experiences, I began to conduct retreats in nature. I began to lead people on programs which, at various times, has involved hiking, camping, backpacking, canoeing or trail rides.

When an outdoor retreat is oriented toward personal growth, I call it the Wilderness Vision Quest. When it is oriented toward professional development, I call it the Career Development Quest. Whatever the activity or period of time--an afternoon walk along a nature trail, a weekend retreat at a conference center, or two weeks in a classified wilderness area--I seek to help people explore, develop and renew themselves; improve their relationships with one another; and bond very deeply to the natural world. Since 1976, I have committed 20% of my professional career to conducting intense and innovative outdoor training and retreat programs.

## INTRODUCTION

There are so many demands on us in everyday life that our energies are almost always focused outside ourselves. We must care about our families, develop and sustain careers, deal with the demands of busy life styles. We are accustomed to feeling closed, resisting noise, erecting walls between ourselves and

others. And all too often, fear is the motivating force behind our actions in the world.

In the hurry and pressure of modern living, many of us experience conflict, insecurity, and discontentment within. We have the intuition of wholeness, but find ourselves divided into many parts. We need to connect to a source of wisdom to direct our lives with purpose and meaning, but where can we turn for such guidance? Our greatest task in life is to develop and actualize the deep springs of inner wisdom that flow within us. We must explore the depths of our own human nature, and the most profound place for doing so is in the natural world.

There are levels of reality within us that are much greater than our analytical minds can know. Nonetheless, we can make them accessible to our awareness so that they become channels by which we reconnect ourselves to the great source of life. Evoking the depths of ourselves is a way to the renewal of our humanity. It is a way, and a method, by which we can become more truly and fully persons and by which we can carry ourselves beyond the subjectivity of being merely individuals in a self-seeking world.<sup>1</sup>

## WILDERNESS

In the United States we have come to value wilderness. Through the Wilderness Act of 1964, and the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1975, Congress has officially set aside 80 million acres of land as classified wilderness. Building slowly over the course of this century however, this national appreciation of wilderness is a relatively new phenomenon. In the early days of this country, the wilderness was too much with us! Settlers and pioneers had to deal with life and death situations constantly, and endure harsh realities on the plains, in the mountains and the forests, in a basic struggle to survive.

But times have changed. The continent is settled. In less than 500 years, from the time the early European explorers began to move across a land that was essentially 1.9 billion acres of wilderness, less than 2% truly remains untrammled today. The scarcity of wilderness increased its value to the point where Congress had to step in and ensure that some remained for future generations to experience and enjoy.

It is our task, in our time and in our generation, to hand down undiminished to those who come after us as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours. John Kennedy.

Today, there are a large number of organizations in the United States that guide people on experiences of wild country--each with its own purpose and objective. Outward Bound, the National Outdoor Leadership School, and Wilderness Odyssey, for example, stress physical challenge and high adventure as a way to conquer fear, let go of negative self-concepts, break through psychological barriers, and enhance self-esteem. The American Rivers Conservation Council offers canoe and raft trips down splendid and pristine waterways, as part of its educational and conservation effort. The American Forestry Association offers horseback trips and trail rides in the wilderness of our western states. The Smithsonian Institution offers group excursions to coastal and wilderness areas of Alaska, among other places. The National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation offer programs on bird watching, plant identification and the study, observation and protection of endangered species.

Wilderness provides us with the opportunity to witness ecosystems as they evolve outside man's influence, to enjoy animals in their natural habitat, to witness a primal state of cooperation, balance, harmony and wholeness. Each part of nature contributes indispensably to the whole, from the smallest micro-organism to the giant redwood trees, in the oneness that really is LIFE. The struggles of life and death and regeneration, and countless lessons

about transformation, can be found in every square foot of natural terrain: caterpillars changing into winged butterflies; verdant life bursting forth from the floor of charred and burned out forests; the ruffled grouse charging us with outspread wings to draw us away from, and protect, her young; trees struck by lightning, upturned by wind and wave and water, smashed by other fallen trees, still reaching upward toward the light, still growing, still alive!

## SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

All the rivers run into the sea: yet the sea is not full: unto the place from whence the rivers come thither they return again. Ecclesiastes 1:7

Why is wilderness so important to us? Why does it so capture our imagination? The term 'wilderness' evokes different images for different people, but I believe the urge to officially designate areas as WILDERNESS, and to protect these areas from mining, grazing, timbering and other uses, is an outer expression of a universal inner need: the need to hold and honor, within us and in the world, some small part of life as sacred. Thoreau once said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." Sigurd Olson, one of the founders of The Wilderness Society, once said that "wilderness to the people of America is a spiritual necessity, an antidote to the high pressure of modern life, a means of regaining serenity and equilibrium."

It is time to speak openly and with a clear voice about the spiritual dimensions of our contact with the natural world. It is time to deliberately focus on, and consciously work toward, the constructive discovery, exploration, healing, enrichment and growth of the human spirit. Arthur Carhart (Timber in Your life, 1955) said, "Perhaps the rebuilding of the body and spirit is the greatest service derivable from our forests, for of what worth are material things if we lose the character and the quality of the people who are the soul of America?"

There is an almost exponential growth in the number of people who are turning explicitly to environment for a deeper sense of naturalness,

simplicity and solitude, and a tangible spirituality grounded in the mysteries of nature. Records show that, in 1983, there were more than 250 million visitor days to the National Parks alone. Why are so many of us going outdoors these days? For what do we search?

One yearns...

The rivers of existence, the very founts of life to reach. Goethe

This need for meaningful outdoor experience is a healthy and holy movement: a response to an inner urge for excellence and well-being that can become so eclipsed in urban living. In fact, we *must* experience and deeply explore the natural world in our quest for wholeness. We live in bodies that are exquisitely wired by three billion years of evolution to perceive and respond to subtle shifts in color, temperature, sound and movement. We are natural creatures living, to a large degree, in unnatural surroundings, disconnected from the weaving, pulsing, throbbing web of life. We have to do something fairly radical to kick-start ourselves back into full operation once again, but we must do it in a way that honors the integrity of our body, feelings, mind and spirit.

Few of us know how to gently approach the mysteries and wonder of nature, to find real simplicity in the wilds, to set the stage for an experience of the eternal, the infinite, the ineffable. With few exceptions, organizations that lead people into wild country simply hope that special and memorable experiences will occur, for these are the moments we remember and cherish most.

We know we are moved by the beauty and wonder of nature, but few of us can really articulate how or why. We need to develop a new language and understanding of our outdoor experiences if we are to secure and preserve the last truly wild regions on the planet. With the careful use of methods for expanding our awareness, we can consciously and deliberately move toward experiences in nature that can truly change our lives in positive ways.

Through a combination of appropriate physical activity, light diet, exposure to the cycles and rhythms of nature, and selected psychological techniques, we can intensify our experiences of wilderness *and* our inner lives. We can learn to create a state of readiness which allows us to hear the voice of nature, be touched by wonder, develop our intuition, and let the energies of inspiration move powerfully through us. We can move closer to a primal sense of the unity of all creation and, for our efforts, be regenerated and renewed at the deepest levels.

When you ask why I dwell here docile among the far green hills, I laugh in my heart. My heart is happy. The peach-blossom watches the river running but remains content. There is a better heaven and earth than the busy world of men. Li Po

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. Henry David Thoreau

## NATIVE PEOPLE

We must all see ourselves as part of this earth, not as an enemy from the outside who tries to impose his will on it. We who know the meaning of the pipe, also know that, being a living part of the earth, we cannot harm any part of her without hurting ourselves.

Lame Deer

Throughout time, and trans-culturally, people have been aware of this need to go within, connect to deep potentialities, and better understand the forces of nature--within us *and* in the world around us. Procedures were developed to break what might be called the cultural trance, so that one

could see life fully and in great detail, from many points of view. These procedures were always carried out in a sacred way, through rituals, initiations, and rite of passage conducted or supervised by the wise men or elders of a community. The techniques employed covered...

...a wide range of methods, from the use of psychoactive substances of plant and animal origin, trance dancing, fasting, sleep deprivation, shock, and physical torture, to elaborate spiritual practices such as those developed within the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, on the continent of North America, native people developed elaborate rituals for vision questing. The Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne, Pawnee and many other tribes and nations deeply believed in the necessity of seeking visions to guide one's life. They saw Man as the bridge between earth and sky or, expressed in a sacred way, as the bridge between spirit and matter. When life lost its meaning, when misfortune came, or change was imminent, it was time to leave the community and seek contact with the realm of spirit.

Plains elders cultivated an atmosphere which prompted their children to seek a revelation at an early age, either directly or indirectly. A boy grew up hearing constantly that all success in life had its beginnings in visions; hence he would go away to fast, praying for a powerful benefit. A mature man or woman would also seek a vision whenever a special need arose.<sup>3</sup>

Without a vision, a man was next to nothing, since he had no source of power, no special wisdom, and no protection... Any Indian who failed to achieve a clear and successful vision would constantly express his wretchedness over his situation. He remained like one in a desert without

water, and unable to find peace or rest.<sup>4</sup>

The essential thing to bear in mind is that in their quest to reach an accord with all things, the Indians assumed that invisible presences existed to answer every need, and that all they required was a means of making them visible so as to deal with them on a man-to-man basis. The ultimate process which evolved brought them into close contact with the supernatural and the natural worlds and enabled them to live in harmony with these in all their extremes.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, we have no such understanding or traditions in western society. The exploration of consciousness is not widely validated in our culture as it is, and has been, elsewhere. Neither do we make, as a primary goal in life, the development of our deep human resources, to our great detriment!

We have few rituals of transition, from one stage in life to another, that inspire, empower or help us continually unfold our potential. We scoff at native and primitive practices while, at the same time, we live boring, superficial and tragic lives that lack depth or meaning. We remain too long in jobs that no longer challenge us, or too quickly leave relationships, not understanding that it is an inner shift in consciousness that is required to remain vital and alive. One result is the fact that nearly 80% of the disease in North America is stress related: a result that surely comes from a lack of vision in lives that lack an authentic sense of meaning or purpose.

## TOOLS OF SELF-DISCOVERY

The Wilderness Vision Quest is intended to help us experience the fullness of our humanity. It is a whole experience, touching body, mind, senses, feelings and spirit. There are very few occasions in ordinary life that touch us so completely. The program is designed to carefully touch and energize

many levels within us in order to guide us back to a natural state of balance and well-being.

There are many parts of us coming to the land: parts that are afraid of the unknown; parts that need to let go and relax; parts that need to be discovered; parts that have not been heard from in years. There are parts of us that need to be enlivened, refreshed, renewed; parts that can become more capable and independent, adaptive and creative, open and responsive. We need to slow down to tune into these many parts of us, listen to their needs, and begin to bring them all together in a holistic way.

If nature is a harmony and man a part of nature, then man himself must be innately harmonic. The laws governing his mind and body reflect and partake of the functioning of greater nature.<sup>6</sup>

On a Wilderness Vision Quest we hope, not to conquer nature, but to know her. We hope to leave behind our neurotic competitiveness, attachment to material comforts, and unsatisfying patterns of interacting with others. We hope to listen more closely to our authentic needs and learn how to meet them. The first and most important step, then, is to slow down. We have to take the time to move beneath our fear and tension to discover what is essential in us *and* in the world around us.

**BODY.** The mornings often begin with slow and conscious movements, called Hatha Yoga, that gently stretch all parts of our bodies. Many of us live with chronic stress and tension. Yoga teaches us to breathe into our tension, acknowledge our limitations while gradually becoming more loose and flexible. Yoga, first thing in the morning, can free us from the nagging worries and concerns which plague us, and can help us greet the day with peacefulness and response-ability.

This kind of slow gentle attunement to our own bodies can set a mood and a way of being which follows us throughout the day, and can greatly determine how we confront ourselves, each other, and our experiences in nature. Other relaxation methods

are introduced as well: techniques of meditation, control of breath, guided imagery---methods for being fully in the present, in the 'here-and-now' so that we can listen to, sense, and absorb the energies that surround us.

On a Wilderness Vision Quest, there is no specific distance we must hike, ride or canoe each day. The speed or amount of land we traverse depends completely on the situation at hand. We exercise and/or move for 2 or 3 hours a day but we stop often to rest and enjoy the space in which we find ourselves.

Each group is composed of many different people: old and young, men and women, some experienced and strong in outdoor adventure. But the vast majority of participants, perhaps 85% or so, have never done anything like this before, are new to outdoor activities, and are usually in ordinary physical condition. Because of this, each person is encouraged to listen to his or her own body, and find his or her own pace and style of being on the land.

We move, not to push ourselves further than we have ever gone before, or to find new levels of endurance, but purely for the pleasure of movement: to feel the mountains with our muscles, to watch the beauty of the land go by, to celebrate the joy of physical activity. It is rigorous but not exhausting, and great fun.

**FEELINGS.** Many of us are accustomed to holding our feelings deep inside. We are afraid to let them out, afraid to show what we judge to be our imperfections, afraid to be vulnerable with others, afraid to seem incompetent. We play certain specific roles in life that hold us within narrow limits of risk taking.

The normal adjustment of the average, common sense, well-educated man implies a continued successful rejection of much of the depths of human nature... To adjust well to the world of reality... means that the person turns his back on much in himself because it is

dangerous. But is now clear that by so doing, he loses a great deal too, for these depths are also the source of all his joys, his ability to play, to love, to laugh and... to be creative. By protecting himself against the hell within himself, he also cuts himself off from the heaven within.<sup>7</sup>

It is not easy to change these tendencies. To a large degree, these patterns are vital to our very survival in the busy technological world today (or so it seems). Creating a safe or sacred context for the revelation of what is deep within us--feelings and emotions, pain, insights, inspiration--is a delicate undertaking for, above all, each person needs and deserves respect.

On many programs, we take the time to share who we are, what we are discovering, and the depth of our experience, through the use of a ritual tool called a Power Object. This can be a stick or stone or hand-crafted object that the group has chosen, by consensus, to be a focusing agent. Each person has a turn to hold the Power Object as it rotates clockwise around a sharing circle.

The ritual use of a Power Object is one Native American process that deserves wider recognition. With it, each person has the undivided attention of the whole group for a period of time. We can share our thoughts, sing a song (known, or created on the spot), dance, confront someone, remain silent and/or simply pass it on, or do anything else we need to do for as long as we care to share our unique energies with the group. No one is allowed to interrupt the holder of the Power Object without first getting the permission of the holder to speak. When the holder is finished, he or she passes it on to the next participant.

This process creates a tremendous focus of group attention. A strong, dynamic field of caring and support becomes available to everyone, in the light of which many important lessons are learned. Through the use of a Power Object, we learn how to listen with respect to other group members, and learn how to share with authenticity what is really in our own minds and hearts.

**DIET.** In many native vision quest rituals, the initiate took no food, water or other equipment which might distance him or her from a primal contact with nature, and he or she remained in an exposed state, often in a dangerous location, for three or four days. Such a ritual was intended to provoke what we might call a psychological crisis, and help externalize and/or release powerful (often repressed) inner forces. To native and primitive people, this was necessary to get at deep spiritual states of awareness--to find a protecting totem, spirit guide, or vision of transformation.

Few of us are very anxious to go to these extremes in order to grow personally, professionally, or spiritually, but with the methods from Transpersonal Psychology that are incorporated into the Wilderness Vision Quest, the severity of such ancient processes is not essential. A light diet is, however, important.

On a Wilderness Vision Quest, we take less than a pound of food to eat per day. This consists of foods that do not require cooking, such as nuts, dried fruit, hard cheese, bread, milk or juice powder, and a little meat such as pepperoni, salami, etc. On most outdoor programs, a vast amount of time is spent in food preparation and cleanup, but on a Wilderness Vision Quest, we eat out of our 'forage bag' whenever we feel hungry, and utilize the time saved for other processes.

One of the ways we stay unconscious in our lives is, in fact, by eating far too much. We eat when we are nervous. We eat to celebrate our success. We eat to avoid experiencing our sadness, anger, sexuality, loneliness, grief, fear. But this eating weighs us down, deadens our senses, and makes us sluggish. We need to have and experience the full spectrum of human emotions to be maximally and creatively alive. We miss much of the potential for dynamic living, and many opportunities to grow, through an abuse of food.

This light diet is an essential part of a Wilderness Vision Quest and, although many people express concern about this aspect of the program initially, everyone is grateful for this component of

the trip when the program is complete. In fact, many participants have food left over at the end of a trip! We take this journey to learn how to be nourished in different ways: through contact with our own inner depths; through close rapport with others; through a greater rapport with the natural world.

**MIND AND SENSES.** It is clear that anxiety and tension result from the ways we think. We brood about past events and review old battles; worry about future possibilities or rehearse upcoming situations; become overwhelmed by the many choices in our lives, and seldom surrender to the incredible richness and magic of the present moment. Many of us, educated in contemporary schools, are far more use to thinking and intellectualizing than to flowing with experiential learning, and we are stuck far too often in our heads.

Still, we need to understand our experiences so that we can learn from them. For this reason, a workbook or journal of blank paper is an essential item in our packs, along with colored felt-tip pens and other drawing materials, and we take time each day to write about our special experiences, draw the scenes which move us, and record what we are learning.

The workbook is the hinge of the process because in it the individual records and re-experiences the inner continuity of his life. As he involves himself in the workbook, the process of inward growth establishes itself in his consciousness. It validates itself and becomes tangible for him. Increasingly, as he continues in the process, he feels the presence of the principle of wholeness working within him.<sup>8</sup>

Camping, living on the land, responding to the changing weather patterns pulls us out of our heads and into our senses. We feel the cold and must respond by putting on a coat or sweater. We become aware of the dance of light and shadows as the sun breaks through the clouds, penetrates through the foliage and illuminates the world below. We smell fragrant perfumes that waft up from the decomposing

earth. We stop to listen to the geese approach, and marvel at the order in their flight. We all need to struggle against the inertia of our unhappy self-neglect, and need to strive for a state of primal, clear perception like mushrooms push against the soil reaching for the light.

**SPIRIT.** Recent neuro-physiological research informs us that the left and right sides of the brain have different functions. The left hemisphere is the part of the brain that is in charge of our logical, rational, analytical talents and ability. It is outer oriented, helping us read, understand and respond to the external world. The right hemisphere is the part of the brain that is in charge of imagination, intuition, inspiration and insight. It is inner oriented, helping us perceive, and be aware of, our inner worlds--values, meaning, purpose. The left hemisphere is overdeveloped at this time in history; the right, sadly undeveloped. To be healthy and whole, we need to balance the activities of the two sides of the brain, and develop the capacity for what has been called whole brain thinking. Our spirit for living, the enthusiasm we experience day to day, is directly related to a balance or coherence between left and right brain functioning, and harmony between inner values and outer action.

As we begin to experience the right side of our brains, we become aware of the symbolic dimension of the psyche, and move from linear to holistic thinking. Imagination is a right brain activity, and helps us see reality from many perspectives and from different points of view. Visualization is the capacity to see with the mind's eye what the rational mind can only view one discreet piece at a time. Imagination takes into account many aspects of our inner and outer experience all at once, and presents us with a mental picture or unitive symbol, which can portray the truth of our situation in its complexity and its wholeness.

There is also the special quality of the symbolic process that causes the self-balancing wisdom of life. The inherent capacity of the universe to heal and reintegrate itself in its



individual parts is made accessible to man through the symbolic dimension.<sup>9</sup>

When the unconscious is seen to be a meaningful part of us, and as we begin to explore and utilize the depth dimension of the psyche, then...

...the center of gravity of the total personality shifts its position. It ceases to be in the ego which is merely the center of consciousness, and instead is located in a hypothetical point between the conscious and the unconscious which might be called the self.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the ages men have been intuitively aware of the existence of such an inner center. The Greeks called it man's inner daimon; in Egypt it was expressed by the concept of the Ba-soul; and the Romans worshiped it as the "genius" native to each individual. In more primitive societies it was often thought of as a protective spirit embodied within an animal or a fetish.<sup>11</sup>

## FASCINATIONS

As we learn to tune into deeper levels of awareness with openness and receptivity, we are far more able to feel and appreciate nature. It is as if there is more space within us in which to receive her. One way of expanding our rapport with nature comes through an exercise I have developed called Fascinations.

In our journals, we list all the aspects of the natural environment which have caught our attention, stimulated or moved us in special ways. Then we explore these fascinations one by one, using the imaginative tools we have learned, in a process called Creative Explorations of Inner Space (CEIS). The specific steps to the CEIS process can be found in greater detail at the end of this article.

We write about a fascination in detail, focusing our left brain thinking on its color, shape,

size, and inter-relatedness to the rest of the environment. Then we close our eyes and, with right brain awareness, visualize this fascination as best we can, in our mind's eye. Then we draw a picture of it with colored felt-tip pens or oil pastels, taking the time to present it in our own uniquely symbolic way. Finally, we ask the inner image a most important question: "What do you have to teach me at this moment in my life?"

Asking an inner image or symbol for a teaching, in the silence of our deep inner world, activates the function of intuition and, surprisingly, in our conscious minds we hear an answer to the question. We write the answer in our journals. Finally, we identify with our fascination in a physical and role-playing way; become the fascination with gesture and spontaneous movement. This is a creative, fun, mysterious and wonderful way to interact with nature. It is a way to leave our tight and guarded personality space behind and embody some aspect of the fascination we are studying.

We are drawn to, or fascinated by, certain aspects of nature because something in us resonates with them. There are deeper qualities, potentials, truths and talents within each one of us waiting to be acknowledged, explored and actualized. These undiscovered parts of our inner selves contain a certain psychological voltage which is magnetic, and we are drawn to facets of nature which, when fully explored and embodied (in a process like CEIS) can reveal to the conscious mind that which lies beneath it. When we enter the symbolic dimension this deeply, many new levels of insight, energy, and wisdom become available to us. We are profoundly able to feel and to experience an essential contact with nature, and discover how nature can directly touch and guide our lives.

Our fascinations on the land continue to be important teachers for us long after the Vision Quest is over. Gradually we learn how to pay special and close attention to what fascinates us on the land, realizing that any part of nature can teach us wonderful things about living, and can become the gateway to profound states of awareness, insight, inspiration, and energy.

**RHODODENDRON FLOWERS.** The fascinations process is a powerful process---the fruit of many years of training and experience with the tools of Transpersonal Psychology and Psychosynthesis. Because it may be difficult to understand by simply reading a description of the process, it may be illuminating to read about a fascinations as recorded in an actual experience.

The following is a fascination taken from my own journal on a week-long Wilderness Vision Quest at Crabtree Falls, along the Appalachian Trail in southern Virginia, May 24-30, 1982:

I was struck by the beauty of large purple blossoms on the Rhododendron trees which covered the mountainside along Crabtree Falls. I found a cluster of them lying beside the trail, picked them up and held them against my walking stick as I climbed the trail. I was hiking mindlessly, empty of everything except the will to get to the top, and the command to my body to hike. But the flowers I held were compelling, and I found myself studying them, wondering, touched.

I kept getting something from the flowers about being alive--that *I* am alive--open up and feel it! Accept it. As I looked into the middle of the flowers, I was in great awe of the wisdom that made these flowers grow on the tip of the tree branch. I was impressed by their delicate stamen and pistil: how did they know to stick out so far? Pollen: inter-tree communication carried by the insects and the wind. What precious and important information traveled down these fragile parts to the branch, limb, trunk, to the roots, to the spirit of the tree which guides its growth.

I got deeply into the flowers while I hiked and when I rested. Then I

realized that I wasn't allowing myself to be with, or experience, this group of people with the same caring attention. I would look at someone and glance away; observe their personality traits and react, respond or be indifferent. I realized that I didn't really know these people, and began to watch them more closely; feel them more deeply. I began to allow myself to know them. I had moved from a state of separateness and detachment, through the light trance of hiking, to contemplating the flowers of this tree, to a state of active awareness and receptivity to the people in my group.

After I had drawn a picture of these flowers in my journal, I visualized them with my mind's eye. I asked the inner image of the flowers what it had to teach me, and this is what occurred to me in my conscious mind:

"You are fragile and vulnerable now. You have been through a deepening process which leaves you open and receptive, sensitive to life. You, too, are a mystery of nature. You, *yourself!* Go into the heart of your own mystery and touch the Life in you. You are a unique creation which, like we flowers, will bloom but for a time and then perish. But celebrate your existence now. You are alive!

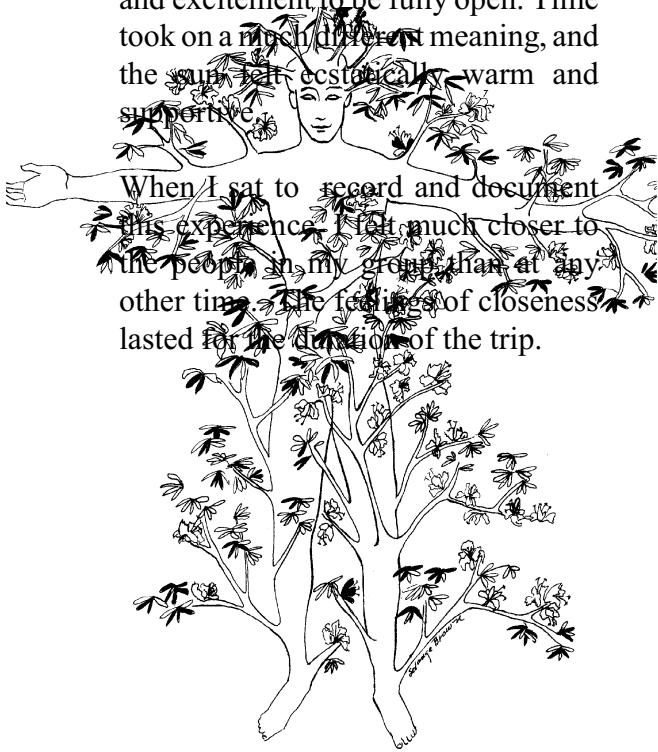
"You have much work ahead of you. It is the flowering of your past growth and professional efforts. Acknowledge this and let this awareness into you. Rejoice. Be open. Reveal your own true colors, and your own special fragrance to the world. Let others take your gifts, your own special pollen, and carry it

away. You, too, are fragile. You were meant to be. It is part of your nature. Celebrate this, too. You are an expression of the earth. It surrounds your spirit and gives it form. You are an expression of her flowering!"

"I *am* a flowering of the Tree of Live. I am a peak experience in my very existence: for the planet, for the mother earth, for the race of man. I will be fully what I am, until I am no longer!"

When I stood up and became the flowers in imagination, with spontaneous movement, there was almost an explosion of awareness--almost an orgasmic sensation. As the flowers, I could feel my interdependence with the insects, with the wind, with other trees. I felt joy and excitement to be fully open. Time took on a much different meaning, and the sun felt ecstatically warm and supportive.

When I sat to record and document this experience, I got much closer to the people in my group than at any other time. The feelings of closeness lasted for the duration of the trip.



As we learn how to observe, interact and participate this fully with nature, we leave behind those patterns and beliefs that keep us feeling so separate and alone. We discover the unity of life and the importance of our special part in it. Empowered by this perspective and these kind of experiences, we can return to our daily lives changed in a positive way: open, responsive and alive, and more able to align our actions in the world with our deepest values.

### ALONE DAY

A Wilderness Vision Quest of five days or longer culminates with an alone day: 24 hours of solitude on the land, away from the other group members. The purpose of this days is to confront, on a one-to-one basis, the depth and mystery of creation. It is always an intimate and intense encounter.

We have learned how to slow down, to open up, and listen. We have gradually made ourselves available on many different levels, and have many new channels of awareness with which to perceive the world. Because we have learned to become empty of our personal concerns, we can be filled by nature. Because we have seen, and participated in, the images of transformation all around us, we begin to accept the possibility that we, too, can change and evolve in meaningful ways. And because there is inner silence, we can begin to hear what nature, moving through her many cycles, has to teach us.

In fact, as we travel in wilderness and backcountry areas, eating lightly, moving slowly, our innate healing energies begin to work in us. We cry more easily when we've gotten to the ridges and panoramic views. We let go and release our tensions. We can see the broader view of our lives back in the regular world and can forgive much, in ourselves *and* in others. We find compassion in the realization that we are all separate and unique, struggling to do the best we can, and that, on all levels of existence, LIFE seeks union, harmony and wholeness.

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