

Wilderness Work: Nature as Healer

Imagine if you will, that a group of very young children wander away from their mothers and are raised as orphans. Throughout their lives they may sense a deep yearning for which they have no name. They may even have sought to ease that persistent ache in many ways, including a variety of addictive, obsessive, or destructive (to self, to others, or to something) behaviors. This is how John Davis described what is happening in our culture today and where we, as humans, are with our planet, Mother Earth.

Ecotherapy, Wilderness Therapy, and Rites of Passage/Ritual Work are emerging as forms of wilderness work in which that yearning is answered. All of these approaches fall under the transpersonal psychology/ecopsychology umbrella. Traditionally, these approaches have been associated with individuals who are struggling with a major life transition, however, nature work is very effective in helping someone heal an emotional or even a physical condition. It can also provide a means for renewing one's relationship with self and with the Earth or in exploring the sacred and spiritual aspects of one's life. Because humans are a part of Nature, wilderness work can provide a very powerful force for an individual's healing in any area. To a large degree, the loss of connection with the Earth is attributed to the emergence of our urban society.

In the physical world John Davis describes two basic types of structure. The first is artificial. Examples of artificial structures are buildings, roads, and even political boundaries: structures which are created and maintained by humans. The second type is natural. Examples of natural structures include bioregions, landforms, weather patterns, and rhythms of day and night: structures over which humans have no control.

The same analogy can be applied to our psyches as well. Job positions, social roles, and religious affiliations are examples of artificial structures related to the psyche. Just as buildings and roads need to be maintained, the ego believes it needs to maintain the artificial psychological structures in order to survive. Fundamental natural structures include an individual's basic nature, genetic archetypes, the ability to think and feel, and his or her spirit/soul. These natural aspects are innate, do not need to be constructed out of personal histories, and require no effort to be maintained.

An important function of wilderness work is to facilitate movement beyond the artificial structures in the psyche to a more fundamental level of experiencing self. It is in this transformation that an individual's sense of self is enhanced. Working with a therapist and/or

guide in the context of a wilderness environment makes possible the healthy disintegration of the artificial structures. As the structures and boundaries of the ego soften or even dissolve, one's fundamental nature begins to emerge. This is the process of self-transcendence which, in turn, leads to the myriad of healing potentials.

Theodore Roethke, Gary Snyder, Albert Einstein, and others have pointed out that making intimate contact with the "wild world" is also making contact with "wild self," that is, those parts of ourselves that cannot be controlled or subjugated by the subtly coercive conditioning of society. When we go into "wild places," we are seeking realms of experience where the artificial structures and the ego cannot subjugate our experience, our will, our inner aliveness, our innate guidance, our intrinsic compassion, and our innocent fascination with the world. These are the sacred, spiritual realms, the realms of the human nature.

The question then is "What are the elements which make an effective paradigm for doing wilderness work?" In many cultures, the process paradigm for initiation or renewal was based on the elements of a three-phase transition model: severance, threshold, and incorporation. The phases usually included a letting go of the culturally influenced ego (severance), a solitary time of exposure and openness to spirit (threshold), and a time of reintegration of the wilderness experience into the everyday life (incorporation). Because our present culture seems to have forgotten, or minimized, our need for connection to Earth and Spirit, it often takes the "shock" of a wilderness setting, a time of solitude and fasting, and ceremonial or ritual work to facilitate the reconnection.

Wilderness work includes rituals from a myriad of cultures, including Native American, Celtic, and African. The ancient aspects of severance, fasting-trial-transformation, and reincorporation have been used by peoples from the beginning of civilization to mark an individual's coming-of-age or significant rites-of-passage. Wilderness work draws on the same ancient wisdoms of reverence for all life, the connectedness of all life, and the sacredness of the Earth Mother.

Components of wilderness work may include various experiences lasting from one hour to several weeks in duration. They can include solo walks; night vigils/walks; purification rites including water, sand, or smoke; and specific fasts. An ultimate goal of these exercises encompasses both the healing of the individual and the honoring and healing of the Earth.

Wilderness work incorporates the use of a variety of rituals. There is often a concern with "doing it right" when utilizing the form of a traditional ceremony. This concern is, however, a normal outgrowth of a culture that worships the form rather than honoring the intent behind the

form. The former sabotages growth, while the latter facilitates the healthy, natural unfolding of the self. The use of sacred ceremony is always dedicated to something beyond, greater than, or at least in addition to the individual participants.

As a guide doing wilderness work, I am always aware that another realm exists beyond the structures and beyond the forms. Whether it is called God, the Void, Creator, Great Spirit, or any of a thousand other names, it is the source of the fundamental structures which, in turn, are the source of the artificial structures. It is the Source beyond the source. Remembering this helps me, I hope, avoid an unrealistic idealization of the wilderness. I believe our ultimate nature is to be found in neither the city nor the wilderness but in our hearts, in the great inner silence which cannot ever be coerced or violated. For me, wilderness work is best symbolized by the words with which I was introduced to The School of Lost Borders:

Most people live within well-defined borders. They will change these borders only if change is thrust upon them by fate.

Do not attend the School of Lost Borders if you plan to remain the same person.

You will come here to lose your borders, your boundaries, your limitations.

The first border you lose is the civilized one.

The second border you lose is your psyche.

The third border you lose is your mind.

The fourth border you lose is the one between you and spirit.

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