

“VISION QUEST”

by Sedonia Cahill

With a single word, the Hopi have described much of our Western contemporary way of life. Koyaanisquatsi -- the title of a popular documentary film -- means crazy life, life in turmoil, life disintegrating, life out-of-balance.

Native Americans and other traditional peoples have a remedy for such an existence of stress, alienation and despair. It is a vision quest, a rite of passage from one time of life to another, a symbolic death and rebirth, a traditional cultural answer to a life of crisis. The vision quest is a time for looking into the soul, fording a new direction or spiritual helper, a test of survival, a trial by loneliness.

"Know thyself," challenged the classical Greeks. Contemporary explorers of innerspace are rediscovering the value of this ancient process of the vision quest for self knowledge.

Long ago, an anonymous Indian prophet warned, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Thus the vision quest benefits not only the quester, but the tribe, the nation and all beings, as in the *Mahayana* Buddhist philosophy of bringing one's enlightenment, love and wisdom to all.

The vision quest is a search for direct revelation. Solitude, fasting, prayer, meditation and ritual induce an altered state of consciousness in which one is open to the message of spirit, and in which emotional and spiritual healing can take place.

"In the wilderness we come back to ourselves," my partner, Bird Brother, says. "The mind gets bigger, more fluid, the heart softens. The mountains them-selves become the healing circle." Indeed, the vision quest experience convinces me that our most important and profound learnings come to us through nature, through solitude, through silence, and once again we connect with the delicate music that is life.

I lead ten-day vision quests in the majestic Mojave desert around Death Valley and in the high desert of the Inyo Mountains of California. Questers come from all walks of life and backgrounds. The quest is open to the young and the old alike at all stages of physical ability.

“Our hope is that we will weave together a collective vision that can create beauty and harmony in the world.”

Preparation for a vision quest includes gathering survival gear (proper clothing, tarps and rope, water containers), but more important, questers are helped to bring to their full consciousness the most meaningful issues they wish to confront during this sacred time and space. Afterward, they are helped to process what for some may have been an ordeal.

To pay attention is the fundamental law of the vision quest, certainly for safety reasons and also because spirit can come in subtle and surprising ways. If you aren't alert and present you can

miss it. Occasionally people return feeling that nothing has happened to them. Questers receive feedback from us as we take them back through their experience, helping them understand the significance of what passed before their eyes, their minds and souls. Usually after they tell their story and hear it told back to them they realize that the mountains have danced, the spirits have brought them wondrous gifts.

After camping together and preparing themselves for a few days, questers go off in pairs till out of sight of the others. When they have gone a distance from camp, each pair builds a marker at which they agree to leave messages for each other, one doing so in the morning and the other in the afternoon so they won't have physical contact with each other.

For many, this is the first time alone in the wilderness. So the trial begins. Without books, radio, or even food, there is little to distract the quester once shelter is made. In this environment, they may begin to understand the poverty of living life without a vision. Our hope is that we will weave together a collective vision that can create beauty and harmony in the world.

In this quiet time, the earth, the sky, the sun and the wind, the animals scampering about, take on a new and personal meaning. Communications may be established with rocks, stars, spirits. The questers usually receive names that refer to some part of the natural or spirit world that has brought them special gifts and strengths during their solo-time: Moon Dancer, Humble Heart, Keeper of Dreams, Loving Wind, Coyote Healer. All the spirits in the desert seem to welcome us and lend their support. To be open to nature, to self, to each other, to spirit, and to take on the medicine that each has come into this life-walk to express -- this becomes the goal.

The vision quest can be broken down into three parts: the severance, the threshold and the reincorporation. Once alone, the quester cuts ties to others and to things familiar. And at some time during the three days of fasting and being alone, the threshold is passed, often most dramatically on the last night when the quester remains awake in silent vigil through the long, lonely hours. In the flickering campfire, the individual "cries for a vision," something to inform his/her life.

During this last night, the quester sits inside a medicine circle made of rocks, each representing some part of his/her life. The entire universe is symbolized in the stones of the medicine circle. Special care is given to the rocks that are placed in the four cardinal directions, each carrying the significance and powers of that direction: the south representing the child, loving, open, innocent and playful, the west representing the looks within place, the depths of the soul, transformation, the north the long cold nights, the winds, the wisdom of the elders, life made into medicine, the east the dawn of a new day, the ability to see far and to move from intuition. All of these are of equal importance and must be incorporated and brought into balance, both within the individual and into the world itself.

The quester's medicine wheel is a tool for understanding the relationship of a person to each aspect of him-or-herself and all parts of the universe. Because each of the cardinal directions has

specific qualities or characteristics of human personality, and our life is a process of collecting the values and experiences of every one of them, we work to become masters of all possibilities. In this way we begin to dance our dream awake.

Reincorporation is the process of reentering what we call the little round of life" -- coming back, saying the first words to people, eating a meal, telling our story. On the last night a drumbeat welcomes the questers to a large circle lit with candles a good distance from the base camp. Questers and guides alike are in ceremonial garb with faces painted. The drumming provides an entrance into an altered state and, along with rattling and dancing, celebrates the ending of this part of the quest. Entering the circle, the quester is smudged with sage, sprinkled with blue cornmeal, and invited to sip the Sacred Waters of Life. After more ritual, each quester is asked to sing or dance his or her experience of the past three days and nights. Questers are reminded to let the song and dance move through them with the impulse of spirit.

The questers then return to home, work, lifestyle, and the guide remains available to process later aspects of each person's vision, everything done with an attitude of mindfulness and attention to detail. The reintegration into society can take as long as a year or more. We often think of this process as the most difficult and challenging part of the quest.

Far from instant enlightenment, the vision quest, like anything worthwhile, takes hard work, often painful, even dangerous. Much of the psychological processing has to do with giving up our old, worn-out stories, finding new and better ones. The quest concerns healing, growth, navigating through all the storms and shoals of life to that place of peace and prosperity for all humankind. It is one more path on the journey to wholeness.

Sedonia Cahill is a visionary guide living in Bodega, CA , where she has a counseling practice. With a degree in psychology, Sedonia has spent many years of research in the field of world religion, ritual and ceremony. She and her partner, Bird Brother, as The Great Round, lead 10-day vision quests to Death Valley and other areas. She is currently co-writing a book, 'The Ceremonial Circle," to be published by Unwin Hyman of London in the Fall of 1990. Readers interested in the experience of the vision quest may contact Sedonia at: The Great Round, P.O. Box 201, Bodega, CA 94922.707874-2736

For more articles from the Meditation Magazine Archives, please visit this link:
<http://livingpurposeinstitute.com/articles-2/meditation-articles/>

For information on Living Purpose Institute: life coaching, life coach training and certification, workshops, classes, meditation ceremonies, ceremonial sweat lodge ceremonies, retreats, videos, and much more, please visit: <http://livingpurposeinstitute.com/>