

The Wilderness Guides Council: Expanding Professionalism and Community Among Leaders of Wilderness Vision Quests and Rites of Passage Programs

Marilyn Foster Riley

Abstract—The Wilderness Guides Council is a global network of leaders offering modern wilderness vision quests or vision fasts, rites of passage in nature, and other earth-centered healing activities. By 1988, there were enough leaders conducting rites of passage that many of them wanted to share their common concerns and interests. So, from an initial meeting that year of 26 guides, periodic gatherings every few years evolved into the Wilderness Guides Council of 200 members that now meets annually.

Six unifying concepts are the principles or foundations around which the Wilderness Guides Council organized:

1. We adhere to an ethics statement.
2. We operate a site registration system for members running programs in California.
3. We work as a network rather than as a hierarchy.
4. We operate using the practice of Council to let everyone speak and be heard.
5. We focus on the spiritual and healing values of wilderness.
6. We use ceremony and ritual to enhance the meaning of, and commitment to, our work.

The Wilderness Guides Council is now ready to address a bigger picture, including: supporting the wilderness movement; helping land managers; and speaking for the spiritual and healing values of wilderness. But the greatest value of the Wilderness Guides Council is as a place to renew our hearts, our passion, and our souls for the work done by members, and to build loving relationships among all of us, so we can care more for each other and the Earth.

Evolution of Modern Wilderness Vision Questing

Vision questing is an ancient practice, and most indigenous cultures had some kind of rite of passage in nature through which their people, especially their youth, marked

their passage from one stage of life to another and searched for meaning and direction. So modern vision questing is really based on the resurrection of an ancient, time-tested practice.

The modern vision quest was energized in the 1970's by several people whose efforts contributed to the growth of questing and thus to the formation of the Wilderness Guides Council. Among these pioneers were Joseph Jastrab in the Northeast, John Milton in the Southwest, and Sun Bear in the Northwest. However, the modern vision quest evolved primarily from the efforts of a cluster of vision-questing pioneers in California.

In 1973, Tom Pinkson, then a budding young psychotherapist, was studying the effects of outdoor activities, such as mountain climbing, river rafting, cross-country skiing and the new (old) activity of vision questing, on recidivism of substance-abusing youth. His research indicated that the vision quest, with its time for deep reflection by the young addicts on what they were doing to their lives, was most effective (Pinkson 1975). Today, Dr. Pinkson, now a psychotherapist in private practice, continues to lead quests for clients seeking vision and meaning as part of his therapeutic practice.

Leading this first vision quest with Tom Pinkson was a young university professor in transition, Dr. Steven Foster, who had begun formulating the idea and need for contemporary rites of passage while teaching humanities at San Francisco State University. While studying mythology he began to envision a school to teach people in transition or crisis how to enact a meaningful, symbolic rite of passage in a natural setting to formally confirm the resolution of their crisis, and passage. (Foster and Little 1988). Following that vision quest with Pinkson, Foster pursued his dream and by the late 1970's, he and his wife, Meredith Little, were running vision quest programs in the San Francisco Bay Area in an organization called Rites of Passage, Inc. Over several years, they and their staff (the author included) took hundreds of youth and adults on wilderness vision quests. From their efforts, interest in vision questing grew, as did the bureaucracy and workload at the Rites of Passage organization. In 1983, Foster and Little moved to Big Pine, California, to establish the School of Lost Borders, where they still run vision quests, train vision quest leaders, and continue their scholarship (Foster 1995; Foster and Little 1998). I also left Rites of Passage that same year but continued the work and lead quests today with my own company, Wilderness Transitions, Inc. The Rites of Passage organization continues under the direction of Mike Bodkin in Sonoma County, California.

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Marilyn Foster Riley is Director of Wilderness Transitions, Inc.; Netkeeper of the Wilderness Guides Council, and Affiliate Assistant Professor of Recreation at the University of Idaho, P.O. Box 482, Ross, CA 94957 U.S.A., e-mail: rileymr@earthlink.net

During this same era, Professor Robert Greenway was establishing a wilderness psychology program at nearby Sonoma State University, where he imported methods he used in helping develop Peace Corps Volunteers' training programs using solo fasts. Several of Professor Greenway's former students have become vision quest guides and teachers, and his contributions to the field continue (Greenway 1996).

Even before modern vision questing was reenergized, other organizations were also using solo fasts as part of their wilderness programs, such as Outward Bound. Their efforts helped pave the way for fasting as a modern personal growth tool in the wilderness, but as outstanding as their programs were, and are, their emphasis is not on formal rites of passage or spiritual journeys. This is a key difference, for it is the marking of life passages with a spiritual journey into the meaning of one's life that distinguishes vision questing from other outdoor programs using a solo fast (fig. 1).

Organizing in Support of Modern Vision Questing: The Wilderness Guides Council

By 1988, there were enough leaders conducting wilderness rites of passage that many of them wanted to share their common concerns and interests. Thus, the Wilderness Guides Council evolved from an initial meeting in 1988 of 26 guides in what is now Death Valley National Park in California. In a beautiful desert setting we shared ideas from our programs, our concern for the wilderness and the impacts we encountered, and our common belief in the importance of this work. Our journal, "Circles on the Mountain," was born at that meeting.

Four years later, in 1992, more than 50 vision quest and other rites of passage guides from all over the country met at a retreat center north of San Francisco. Concern was building about how our use was impacting the wilderness, and a main product of this gathering was the idea of self-regulation, in which the loose network of guides operating in California would register the wilderness sites they used with a "netkeeper." We also agreed to voluntarily limit use of our sites to once per year in desert areas and no more than twice per year in forested areas.

In 1993, we met again and took a further step toward organization by formally agreeing that all of us would follow a "Wilderness Ethics Statement" in leading our programs. It seemed an unprecedented achievement at the time, the agreement among these diverse and independently minded guides, to register and self-regulate their use and to follow strict ethical guidelines.

We organized even more after that 1993 meeting and have had annual conferences since then. At one conference we developed a purpose statement, claiming: "We are a network of wilderness guides whose purpose is to maintain and improve the health of wilderness ecosystems." We used the word "guide" in the hope that we might appeal to a wider range of wilderness program leaders. We also continued to refine our wilderness ethics statement, and developed a PLAN, setting forth such things as membership standards and organization principles.

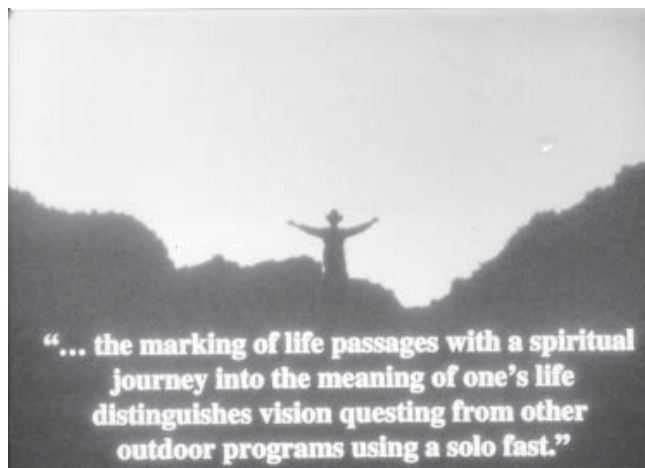


Figure 1—Two themes of the Council: by maintaining the health of wilderness ecosystems, spiritual values are also protected; and human exposure to healthy, balanced, natural ecosystems helps people come into balance.

Our 1996 meeting was important because we invited outside presentations on permits, fees and liability insurance by wilderness leaders from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and the Worldwide Outfitters and Guides Association (the largest insurer of wilderness programs). Following this meeting we formed an Insurance Committee, made available model permit applications for our members, and established a Steering Committee and a Conference Agenda Committee.

To deal with our growing membership, now 200 strong, and an annual 3-day conference (fig. 2) that draws 75 to 100 people, we've evolved to a higher degree of organization. While most members welcome this organizational maturation, we are constantly being pointed back to the unifying ideas around which we organized. Following are what I see as six unifying ideas around which the Wilderness Guides Council (WGC) organized, and which I believe make us unique.

Wilderness Guides Council Members Adhere to an Ethics Statement

We organized around a purpose statement:

We are a network of wilderness guides whose purpose is to maintain and improve the health of wilderness ecosystems.

This purpose statement, which quickly grew into a more lengthy ethics statement seeking to reduce our impact on the wilderness, expressed the compelling reasons that brought us together. Agreement to abide by the ethics statement was, and is, a requirement of membership. The ethics statement emphasizes an attitude of respect, reverence, and appreciation for the lands we visit, and is embodied in 17 specific rules of behavior to which members commit to minimize impacts. For example, Item 15 states "We dismantle any old stone piles, circles, firepits, or other human markers we may find" (except mining claims). Leaving evidence from spiritual practices give earth-centered



Figure 2—The Wilderness Guides Council evolved from an initial meeting of 26 vision quest and rite of passage guides in 1988 to a membership of 150 in 1998 with an annual 3-day conference (photo by Marilyn Riley).

healing a bad name, and is one of the reasons we organized around an ethics statement that focuses on minimizing all impacts of our use. Now some members are talking about expanding our ethics statement to address leader-client relationships, and also to protect the spiritual values of wilderness that is so important to our members' programs (Riley 1997).

Self-Registration of California Use Sites with the Council

Another requirement of membership is registration of sites used by members' programs in California. Compliance with this requirement is not perfect, but most members running trips in California participate so they can coordinate their use with other members. Since an increasing number of leaders are being trained and are attempting to launch their own programs, it is important that someone knows who is using what areas and when. The site registration system has helped avoid some conflicts, coordinate use, and point new guides to unoccupied territory. But it's getting crowded in the wilderness. Suitable areas not already being used are hard to find—especially since the ethics statement limits use of desert areas to no more than once per year, and forested areas to twice per year.

Site registration is a sensitive issue because some guides are reluctant to reveal special places they have found, and some resent any kind of regulation. We do not disclose member sites to land management agencies, despite some casual requests. The Council does not require members to obtain agency use permits and liability insurance, but the fact that most of our well-established programs and experienced elders obtain such permits and liability insurance provides leadership by example. I believe there is growing consensus (if not a formal position) that favors all of our

members who run their programs on public lands to fully comply with all the required permits, fees, and insurances.

Wilderness Guides Council is a Networking, Non-Hierarchical Organization

The Council is organized as a network, like a "knotted fish net with a multitude of nodes or cells of varying sizes, each linked to all the others"—flexibly, freely, and democratically interlinked—"a segmented, polycephalous [many headed] network," as anthropologist Virginia Hine, one of our founders, called it. The nodes of the net are members and their programs, and all have an equal voice. A netkeeper provides coordination and business management, and a few committees help do the work.

Our network, as opposed to a strictly hierarchical organization, intends to promote a spirit of equality and community among our members. The larger membership works using a council process. It requires that important decisions be made after we have listened to one another and have had the opportunity to speak our own hearts and minds. Our committees, the Steering Committee and Conference Agenda Committee, operate by consensus, taking into account the input of members, much of which is received in council discussions at the annual conference. Relying on the council process for critical input to decisions is time consuming, but we believe it leads to many rewards.

We Operate Through the Practice of Council

As a network seeking equality among members, we use the ancient practice of council in our meetings, giving every

member present the chance to speak in turn, and to be heard. In this process we are also able to pay particular attention to the views of our elders—those members with demonstrated wisdom and experience. The positive rewards of sitting in council, where everyone has an equal voice and the right to be heard, are in the personal understanding, empathy, and sense of community that evolves.

We are fortunate to have among our members a number of people experienced in the practice of council, including Virginia Coyle, coauthor of a book titled “The Way of Council” (Zimmerman and Coyle 1997), and Sedonia Cahill, also an author on the topic (Cahill 1992; Garfield and others 1998).

Key guidelines of the practice include: listening and speaking from the heart, spontaneity and brevity in expression, and self-restraint in taking the floor to speak—are my words really needed to make a difference? We practice patience to hear whatever “personal” or diversionary issues come up, because if such issues are not addressed during the council, they will surely return to complicate any resulting actions. Skillful and balanced leadership is needed to see that the tasks at hand are kept in front of the group.

The practice of council is continuing to evolve as a key tool of the Wilderness Guides Council. It’s what most of our members want to spend more time doing at our 3-day annual conferences. The sharing feeds our hearts and souls and heals us for guiding—the heartwork that is the focus of our wilderness business.

Focus on Spiritual Values and Healing

Another unifying point in the Council is our recognition and support for the spiritual values and healing qualities of wilderness. Two central ideas here are: (1) that by maintaining the health of wilderness ecosystems their spiritual values are also protected; and (2) that human exposure to healthy and balanced natural ecosystems helps people come into balance. People, after all, are natural creatures. We evolved in the wilderness and the wilderness is in us. No wonder it feels like home. Anthropology and archeology tell us that, from the most ancient times, people have believed in the spiritual and healing values of wilderness. Modern, urban people need access to those values too, and a recent study shows they are a major appeal of vision questing to the public (Riley and Hendee, this proceedings).

Ceremony and Ritual Uplift and Deepen our Meetings and Work

As guides committed to leading people in making changes, or rites of passage in their lives, ceremony is one of our most important tools, that is—symbolic actions that have purpose and positive meaning to all those involved. Simple ceremonies and rituals are used by most members during their wilderness work. Some example are use of the four directions as a symbolic system of life stages linked to the seasons of the year (Foster and Little 1996; Foster 1998), the idea of crossing thresholds, and symbolic actions surrounding letting one’s old self die so a new self can be born.

Ceremonies and rituals also provide the binding agent or “glue” for our annual conferences. For example, we begin and end our conferences with a sharing circle, or council. We maintain an altar, not to worship, but to provide a place for symbolic objects, like stones, representing each member. We also use a staff, or talking stick, in council to designate the current speaker and empower them to speak their truth from their hearts, and for all others present to listen carefully. Such simple ceremonies and rituals help make our conferences memorable, meaningful, and reinforce commitment to our work, our own growth and support of one another, and our desire to be good stewards of the Earth.

We Must Do More

We’ve spent the last 10 years organizing around these principles, but we now seem ready and able to address a bigger picture, and contribute more to the wilderness protection movement. Here is my vision as Netkeeper.

We Must Support the Wilderness Protection Movement

The Wilderness Guides Council needs to reach out and link up with other wilderness organizations in promoting protection of the ecological, and thus the spiritual and healing, values of wilderness. We hold in common a concern for the well-being of wilderness and a desire to heal the land. We can help other organizations, and they can help us. Some of the approaches we use in vision quest and rites of passage work, and in the Council, can be helpful to other organizations in the wilderness protection movement.

We Need to Help Land Managers

As I’ve become more acquainted and involved with land managers the past few years, I’ve come to realize several things. First, most land managers don’t know about the Wilderness Guides Council, and have little factual information about wilderness vision questing and rite of passage work. Some managers have misguided notions about our practices based on rumor, and some unfortunate incidents attributed to “us,” such as finding ceremonial rock circles, prayer ties, and a few base camps left impacted and messy. But once they learn what our work is really about, our deep concern and respect for the health of wilderness ecosystems and their spiritual values, and the truly low impact of our use, they are very supportive. In fact, many managers have a great affinity with us and deeply respect our “pure and benign” use of wilderness and concern for its spiritual values. We need to expand our acquaintance and make friends with the land managers

Second, wilderness managers really need our involvement and that of other environmental organizations to balance the loud voices of competing interests such as grazing, mining, military, hunting and shooting, off-road vehicles, and others whose use impacts the wilderness.

Third, we need to be involved in wilderness planning processes, speaking out at meetings and writing letters, keeping up with the steady stream of threats to wilderness

quality. We need to oppose the dilution of wilderness quality by all uses and actions that impact it.

We Must Speak for the Spiritual and Healing Values of Wilderness

Spiritual and healing values are embodied in the sense of sacred space that is nurtured by the silence, the naturalness, and the solitude of wilderness. With those attributes present, the spirits of a place can reveal themselves, and the wilderness can become more valuable for spiritual insight and healing. The miracle of life and the force of creation are all around us. We can see our own lives in the cycles of nature. The death, rebirth, and growth of plants are a metaphor to life passages for people. The interconnectedness of all that is around us reminds us of our own interdependence on nature—and each other. Everything around us mirrors who we are and our connection to everything. The timely appearance of an animal, a bird, or a rock formation in the sun and shadows can be a messenger, reflecting to us what we need to learn. We feel a presence that reminds us we are not the first to walk or sit here, and this reminds us that we must protect these sacred places for those who will follow us.

Speaking out on behalf of the spiritual and healing values of wilderness is an important role for the Wilderness Guides Council in the wilderness protection movement.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I hope that the brief history and unifying principles on which the Wilderness Guides Council operates, and the vision for doing more, will help clarify the work of our members who guide wilderness vision questing and rites of passage programs. Increasing numbers of persons seek to go on such journeys into the wilderness, and more people are training to become program guides. Our evolving organization reflects this growth. But, the greatest value of

the Wilderness Guides Council is as a place to renew our hearts, our passion, and our souls for the work we do, and to build loving relationships among all of us so we can care more for each other and the earth. I believe that this is also the greatest value of the World Wilderness Congresses.

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