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Coming Home:

The Vision Quest as a Healing Modality for Cancer Survivors

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Abstract

This paper offers a unique view of the study of ecopsychology by examining the author's personal experience with nature-based ritual, life threatening illness, and the Vision Quest as a holistic healing practice. This account emphasizes integration and self-discovery through reconnection to Self, others, the land, and spirit. As a rite of passage, it is a part of the author's continued unfolding process of transformation that seeks to honor the strength and resilience of the human spirit.

Keywords: ecopsychology, vision quest, life transitions, illness, cancer, nature-based ritual, holistic healing, myth, archetypes

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The following paper is dedicated to my mother and father, to my son Dakota, and to my husband Greg. Thank you. I love you.

Coming Home: The Vision Quest as a Healing Modality for Cancer Survivors

In January 2010, I was diagnosed with an incurable cancer, multiple myeloma. After a successful stem cell transplant and full remission, I had questions about the new life stage I was entering: How could I reconcile the grief I was feeling? Who was I now? How did I want to live, given my new circumstances? And, how would I continue to contribute to my family and community? In a discussion about my journey with cancer, I was once told by David Spirit Eagle Somerville that there is no cure, only a healing journey (personal communication, n.d.). I now know that in his clever way he was talking not only about my journey but about everyone's life journey. I believe profoundly in the healing power of nature and in the need for a holistic approach to wellness. As an ecopsychologist and rites of passage guide, it was natural for me to turn to nature as part of my healing journey. This thesis proposes that the Vision Quest is an application of ecopsychology that invites cancer survivors to experience holistic healing. It is my hope that the telling of this story will serve as inspiration to cancer survivors on their healing journeys.

Introduction

I believe that change always results in a shift of consciousness. Processing it well is what results in transformation. Although you will never hear me say I am grateful for having cancer, multiple myeloma has been and continues to be an important teacher in my life. Surviving cancer has helped me to better understand myself. This gives purpose and meaning to my life which in turn helps me to better serve myself, others and the Earth. For this I am grateful.

For the past decade I have been guiding people through therapeutic experiences, the bulk of which has been spent guiding youth through their transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Recently, I expanded my work to include mentoring young children and guiding adults through their life transitions. Through my work as an ecopsychologist, my vision is to

contribute to a regenerative future by guiding people toward developing an ecological identity that fosters reconnection with Self, others, the land, and spirit. Nature is my co-guide.

My personal experience participating in and guiding wilderness rites of passage has been influenced by several important people who I am honoured to call mentors. The first is a man by the name of Ernie MacAuley, also known as Deer Heart. Ernie was the first mentor to guide me in a Vision Quest. His work is from the lineage of Sun Bear, a well known Chippewa medicine man, and the School of Lost Borders. The second teacher to guide me on a Vision Quest is Shkudamseh (Wes Gietz). Wes learned most about the Vision Quest through an Anishinabe man named Dan Whetung, who referred to his mentor as Old Bob. David Spirit Eagle Somerville of the Mohawk and Kwakwaka'wakw Nations, and Quageelagee (James Quatel) of the Laich-kwiltach Nation are elders and spiritual mentors who have also generously shared with me the spiritual healing ways that were passed on to them from their elders. Although this information is in the oral tradition, their wisdom speaks through my work and is echoed through the work presented in this paper. Indigenous knowledge carries a depth of wisdom that is ecopsychologically astute and extremely important. Although they do not refer to themselves as ecopsychologists, traditional wisdom keepers and healers are ecopsychology's elders.

Definition of Ecopsychology

John Davis (2006) defines ecopsychology as the “story of the home of the soul.” It is concerned with healing the relationship between the human soul and the soul of the world, or Anima Mundi. It acts as a bridge between the fields of ecology and psychology to address the psychological and spiritual roots of the human journey.

Ecopsychology invites humans to consider healthier ways to live as a species and as caretakers to the Earth. It reminds us that although humans are clever, complete intelligence dwells throughout the natural world and within the vast spirit of the universe (Audubon, 2007, p. xxii). It is a transhumanistic science that recognizes interdependence and interconnection. Its

premise is that to be whole, humans need to foster a healthy relationship within and surrounding the Self that takes into account the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical realms.

Applications of ecopsychology are diverse and centre on embracing connection to Self and All Our Relations. This includes not only other humans or family but also other-than-human beings including animals, plants, rocks, trees, wind, stars, the entire ecosystem; all of creation, seen and unseen. Ecopsychology's applications include elements not limited to mindfulness practice, direct contact with nature, ecotherapy, wilderness therapy, environmental action, play, ritual, ceremony, and rites of passage.

I believe that as a wilderness rite of passage, the Vision Quest is an application of ecopsychology that can help cancer survivors reconcile the trauma of life-threatening illness and guide them toward rediscovering connection and purpose in life.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the psychological impacts of surviving cancer while examining the benefits of holistic healing and the restorative qualities of nature. It also examines the structure of the Vision Quest, which is explored later in this paper through the role that the ceremony played in my healing.

The Psychological Impacts of Surviving Cancer

A diagnosis of cancer has a profound impact on the psyche of the patient. Denial, depression, anxiety, and anger are among some of the more common reactions (Zanni, 2010). In addition to the emotional and psychological impacts, Halvorsen-Boyd and Hunter (1995) note that a diagnosis of cancer is often accompanied by a period of focus on physical healing that can foster a sense of determination and optimism that treatment will be successful (p. 9). After successful cancer treatment, the focus of the patient shifts from physical healing to emotional and psychological healing; the cancer survivor must contend with how to go forth. "With cancer,

people confront death. With survival, they feel an urgency to re-examine how they live the rest of their lives” (Halvorsen-Boyd & Hunter, 1995, p. 4).

Remarkably, in spite of the challenging emotional responses of living with cancer, the diagnosis of any major illness can also be a psychologically profound experience and a catalyst for personal growth (Bolen, 2007; Halvorsen-Boyd & Hunter, 1995; Plotkin, 2003). Similarly, Bolen writes:

Every serious diagnosis, especially when life-threatening, is a major crisis for everyone concerned that shakes the foundations of previous assumptions... All aspects of life are thrown into a time of turmoil and transition. When death and disability come close, it is indeed a time of danger and opportunity, which raises questions about the meaning of life and tests the bonds of friendship. Life-threatening illness is a crisis for the soul. (Bolen, 2007, pp. 1-2)

It is common for cancer survivors to view their situation as a turning point that includes a re-prioritization of roles and lifestyle (Bolen, 2007; Halvorsen-Boyd & Hunter, 1995). However, redefining self, incorporating that self authentically, and maintaining clarity of vision and priorities can sometimes be difficult in the face of everyday life. Returning to routines that conflict with the desire to lead a more fulfilling life can cause disappointment and frustration (Bolen, p. 9). Furthermore, although physical healing may be complete, there is a need for the patient to reconcile the grief that follows such a life-altering event.

[Cancer survivors] grieve major losses. Most obviously, we mourn the lost body parts or functions. But survivors also grieve a deeper loss. Our most comforting illusions are gone. We are both mortal and vulnerable, and we know it beyond a doubt. It is simply awful. (Halvorsen-Boyd & Hunter, 1995, p. 18)

Cancer is sometimes called the wisdom disease (Bolen, 2007, p. 226). Illness can be the catalyst for personal growth but it is healthy processing of the experience that leads to wisdom

(Bolen, 2007; Halverson-Boyd & Hunter, 1995). Because of this, successful healing beyond the symptomatic relief of ailments requires a holistic approach encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness (Adam 2008, p. 33).

The Benefits of Holistic Healing

Halvorsen-Boyd and Hunter (1995) compare surviving cancer to dancing in limbo:

As trauma survivors we may be wounded, but we know that we'll live. As cancer survivors, we hope we are cured and we proceed *as* if we are, but we cannot be sure. Our outcomes are unknown for so long that we are forced to search our souls *while* we are painfully uncertain of our fate. That is why limbo is a cruel pun: it is a place and a dance, and both are difficult. (p. 8)

Although cancer survivors experience physical healing, tending to healing the soul is a necessary part of the process (Bolen, 2007; Halvorsen-Boyd & Hunter, 1997; Plotkin, 2003, 2008). Facilitating this approach, Wong (2004) and Adam (2008), both advocate for a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model for health care that offers healing and well-being beyond the physical: "This is a powerful vision of holistic medicine that enables us to transcend existing boundaries and limitations" (Wong, p. 3). In further support of this theory, Wong cites Dr. Viktor Frankl's work in logotherapy, or healing through meaning, as an important factor in holistic healing and advocates for its inclusion in all kinds of medical treatment because it addresses the fundamental issues of purposeful and meaningful living. "Man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning" (Frankl as cited by Wong, 2004, p. 6).

Dr. Herbert Benson, Founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute of Harvard University (as cited by Wong, 2004, p. 8) has demonstrated through mind-body medicine that emotional healing can have a positive effect on physiological and physical healing. In further support of the benefits of a holistic approach to healing, Adam (2008) and Adehar (2008) discuss the role of sensory input in well-being. Adam describes the power of sensory experiences to activate all

dimensions of humanness, including those beyond the physical, and to evoke a sense of imagination that in turn impacts our responses, including our intention to heal and create our own reality (pp. 48-49). Our sensory capacities are fundamental avenues of connection between Self and the world (Sewall, 1995, p. 201). In regards to sensory input, Adehar (2008) highlights the universal importance of sense stimulation as a fundamental pre-requisite for health promoting and healing processes. Adehar (2008) advocates the therapeutic potential of nature in holistic healing because of its capacity to evoke more than physical dimensions within the human psyche that affect overall wellness. In support of this, Burns (2005) and Sewall (1995) confirm the therapeutic benefits of nature because of its capacity for multi-sensory stimulation.

The Restorative Qualities of Nature

John Davis (2004), a transpersonal ecopsychologist and wilderness rites of passage guide, is also a proponent of the healing qualities of nature. He supports the theory that nature can trigger peak experiences, which are defined as "...experiences of optimal mental health, comparable to intense spiritual experiences or mystical experiences" (p. 6). Adehar's research (2008) supports Davis' and she too notes that nature experiences elicit transcendence. Clinebell (1996) writes that all humans need peak experiences; experiences that are healing, growth stimulating, and hope energizing. He asserts that many people find their most transformational peak experiences in the awesome beauty, wisdom, and wonder of nature (p. 95). Burns (2005) hypothesizes that nature has a capacity to take us beyond the Self and forges meaningful connections; a significant factor in holistic health and general well-being. Several important studies (Kaplan 1995, 2001; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Maller, Townsend, Prior, Brown, & Leger, 2002; Maslow, 1968) also demonstrate the health benefits of nature.

In further support of the restorative qualities of nature, Davis (2004) highlights the capacity of nature experiences to shift and deepen our self-perception through the process of mirroring (pp. 9-10). Stephanie Sorrell (2011) iterates the importance of mirroring as a

therapeutic tool used by psychologists and psychotherapists, and advocates the use of nature as a therapeutic modality. Sewall (1995, p. 209) writes that giving credence to subjective reality through the process of mirroring allows the conscious creation of metaphor. It is as if nature speaks, making visible and meaningful the previously unseen. A bear becomes a symbol for inner strength, a tree reminds us of our inner resources, and a sunrise is a new beginning. These images act as guides that inform us of our desires and priorities and invite us to act accordingly. Entering into relationship with nature causes a shift in perception. Consciousness is altered, and as a result so is behaviour (Sewall, 1995, p. 203). Legitimizing this relational perspective creates a more refined change in consciousness and awareness that John Davis (2011, p. 143) compares to a journey of descent into the mysteries of the soul or psyche. The descent creates an opening where awareness begins to differentiate into presence, then forms, patterns, and qualities, giving rise to ourselves as humans in the world. Through processing, understanding, and meaning making, a journey of ascent and more subtle forms of non-duality is then initiated (p. 144). The Vision Quest mirrors this process in that the initiate descends into the depths of their psyche and re-emerges as the heroic, transformed Self. The process of change that occurs within this journey is also reflected in all mythical stories of initiation (Campbell, 2008).

The Power of Myth

A long time ago, before the birth of Western civilization, stories were used to evoke the creative minds of humans. Myths were crafted by weaving together spirit and fact through the use of symbols and imagination. In doing so they opened a window into the unconscious that allowed people to derive an understanding of their place within the world:

Stories, like dreams, are the way that people understand the world and their own place in it. In the midst of the worst trouble imaginable, stories can restore the sense of continuity in life that is necessary for discovering creative solutions (Meade, 2006, p. viii).

Symbols or archetypes within stories are powerful mirrors that reflect the inner process of our psyche's response to change. The integration of archetypes into conscious contemplation helps to make our destiny clearer (Campbell 2008; Meade, 2006; Plotkin, 2008).

Bolen (2007), who examines archetypes through the use of mythological storytelling, states that: "Myth and symbols are in the language of the soul. A myth helps us to take a situation to heart and know what we must do" (p. 34). Infusing our personal stories with mythical qualities is a form of ritualizing loss that allows healing through its emotional power and invites humans to act in deeper more meaningful ways (p. 35). Contact with nature plays a role in activating awareness of symbols and archetypes (Bolen, 2007; Davis, 2004; Sorrel, 2011). The Vision Quest is a nature-based ceremony that promotes this transformation; it is the manifestation of an individual's mythical journey (Campbell, 2008; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, 2008).

The Vision Quest

The Vision Quest, a term first coined by European anthropologists, initially referred to traditional rituals practiced by North American indigenous people but is now used to refer to initiation ceremonies that are found pan-culturally (Plotkin, 2003, p. 214). In earlier times, the Vision Quest was a normal part of the journey to adulthood, a natural step that was usually undertaken during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Today, there is a growing desire amongst Western populations to experience meaningful ritual and personal growth (Grimes, 2000, p. 112; Somé, 1998, pp. 26-27). As a result, the motivation for Vision Questing has evolved beyond the transition between adolescence and adulthood, and is used as a rite of confirmation, integration, and initiation that seeks to derive meaning through life's diverse and challenging transitions (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003).

The structure. In published literature, Grimes (2000, p. 104) states that the structure of the Vision Quest is commonly described using Arnold Van Gennep's model consisting of three

phases: 1) separation - a period of isolation or a metaphorical death symbolizing the end of something old and the beginning of something new; 2) transition - a period of facing and processing challenge, both external and internal, and of receiving Sacred knowledge or Vision; and 3) incorporation – a return home where the initiate is metaphorically reborn and clarity of purpose is manifested in the new roles and responsibilities assumed by the initiate.

In my 10 years of apprenticing and guiding wilderness rites of passage I have observed that, despite the lineage of place and culture that form the basis of their uniqueness, all wilderness rites of passage share a similar structure. John Davis refers to this as the mirroring of the universal quest or initiatory journey (2006).

Wrapping the Bundle: Literature Review Conclusion

The preceding literature review includes previous research on the psychological impacts of surviving cancer, the benefits of a holistic approach to healing, the restorative qualities of nature, the power of myth, and the structure of the Vision Quest as a means of providing the reader with a theoretical framework that will help to deepen understanding of the healing journey described later in this paper.

Discussion

The following discussion incorporates insights gained during my experience participating in the Vision Quest. It shares how, through the Vision Quest, life-giving lessons emerged that invited me to move fully and authentically into my relationship with Self and All My Relations. It is the story of my healing journey with multiple myeloma. From an ecopsychological perspective, it is the story of how I came home to my soul through entering into relationship with the soul of the Earth.

The Human Journey

Life transitions are a natural part of the human journey. Some examples include birth, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, marriage, divorce, illness, and death. When significant

changes occur in the life of a human, making sense of existence can be challenging. Wilderness rites of passage, like the Vision Quest are a transformative application of ecopsychology that can help to successfully navigate transition for cancer survivors.

Stein and Stein (1987) explain Victor Turner's definition of liminality as the existence "betwixt and between" firm identities; a time of undoing accompanied by a process of transformation and rebirth or initiation (p. 292). The changes that were thrust upon me as a result of living with cancer are profound. Life as I knew it before my diagnosis no longer exists. My treatment brought me to the verge of death itself, indeed many physical parts of me did die, and then I was reborn, bald head and all. My healing, though, was far from complete. My body, my spirit, and my broken heart needed mending. As a way of emerging from this transition whole, I chose to participate in a Vision Quest. The following section is an intimate, first-hand account of my experience with this ceremony. In sharing it, my hope is that other cancer survivors, healers, and people who find themselves in the midst of transition will recognize elements of their own healing journey, and that together we can step more fully into our lives.

The Vision Quest structure presented is based on the School of Lost Border's model as outlined in Davis' and Jane's structure for wilderness rites of passage (n.d.), the Four Shields Model of the Vision Fast (Foster & Little, 1989, 1992), and my personal experience participating in and guiding Vision Quests. In addition to Genep's three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Grimes, 2000, p.104), the structure I present contains two additional phases: the preparation phase and the integration phase. The preparation and integration phases are vitally important parts of the process (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Greenway, 1995; Plotkin, 2003). As such, I have devoted significant space to explaining them. The intent in sharing my story is to present a first-hand account of the holistic healing benefits of the Vision Quest for cancer survivors as an application of the concepts covered in the literature review.

Coming Home: The story of my Vision Quest

On June 2, 2011, I died. I left my family, my people, and the safety and comfort of my home. I stepped into a circle of stones and my body sank into the mossy earth. There I remained for four days and four nights. In the wind I heard the song of my ancestors. Under a canopy of salmon berry butterflies the earth reclaimed my tear. In the company of Sister Sitka I lost my mind, came to my senses, and found my true Self. At sunrise on the morning of the fifth day I returned to the world of the living where I was welcomed with open arms ready to step into authentic relationship with myself and All My Relations. (Author's personal journal, 2011)

Preparation. The first step in preparing for a Vision Quest is deciding to engage in one. I started preparing for this Vision Quest the moment after the shock of my diagnosis passed. I understood the enormity of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual transition that was taking place; and both consciously and unconsciously I placed an intense amount of energy on holistically getting ready.

My cancer had progressed far enough that I had significant bone damage and the transplant had been a devastating physical ordeal. Before participating in the ceremony, I needed to make sure I was strong enough to withstand the physical challenges involved. This required consultation with my specialists who made sure I was not putting myself at risk. It was not until just over a year later that I was physically ready.

During the time it took me to become strong enough to participate, I found myself analyzing my situation. I informed myself thoroughly about multiple myeloma and treatment options and read about the psychological impact of surviving cancer. I was amazed by the many inspiring stories of others on similar journeys and how closely our stories echoed each others'. In doing so, I prepared myself mentally.

Emotionally, I allowed myself to grieve. My diagnosis and the uncertainty of the future broke my heart. Both Bolen (2007) and Foster and Little (1998) write about the healing potential of illness, death, and grief in its ability to enhance how keenly a person feels the sacredness of life. Through my broken heart, something amazing happened. My grief and vulnerability shaped me and gave me new life and purpose by increasing how powerfully I felt and still feel love. This shift opened my heart and allowed me to see beauty and interconnection that I did not before. Emotionally, I was ready.

Spiritually, I spent time thinking about the big picture and finding meaning in my illness. I received guidance from my spiritual advisors and engaged regularly in meditation and practices that reconnected me to the Earth. Upon the advice of a good friend, I worked with Allione's book titled, *Feeding Your Demons* (2008). From this process was born a story that I wrote called *Fire and Water* (Author's personal journal, 2011, see Appendix A – Fire and Water). Bolen (2007) compares living with illnesses like cancer to a rite of passage or a hero's journey. *Fire and Water*, which I discuss in more detail during the integration phase of the Vision Quest experience, is a tale of initiation that has been and continues to be a very important teaching story.

As the date for my ceremony approached, my focus turned to clarifying my intent for participating in the Vision Quest; a pivotal part of the process (Davis & Jane, n.d., pp. 4-5). This involved time alone in contemplation and time seeking advice from elders. I was given the task of preparing a meal for three different elders who were to ask me questions about my life. These people are referred to as my anchors. The time I spent in conversation with my anchors and alone in contemplation helped to clarify my intent for the experience: To move fully and authentically into my relationship with Self and All My Relations.

With this clarity of purpose and all of my other tasks successfully accomplished, I was ready for the ceremony. When the time came, I met with my guide and found the place that

would be my home for the duration of the experience. The spot that I chose was under a Sitka Spruce tree, by a stand of salmon berry. I was instructed by my guide to build a circle of stones that would mark the boundaries of the site and in which I would spend my entire solo time, leaving only when I needed to eliminate bodily waste. Medicine wheel teachings, as taught by Foster and Little (1998) and my spiritual guides, were shared with me so that as I built my circle I was aware of the deeper holistic symbolism attached to each of my stones: 1) East for my spirit, 2) South for my body, 3) West for my soul, and 4) North for my mind. Preparing my space in this way provided a threshold where I was to symbolically and spiritually enter a different realm. Carefully and ceremonially I built the circle of stones and returned to my guide, ready to begin the process of leaving behind the world of the living.

Each person's experience with the Vision Quest is unique and preparation times can vary. I have heard some people say that they have been preparing their whole life for the ceremony. Adequate preparation time is extremely important. In my case, the preparation phase involved a holistic approach that encompassed my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This approach helped me to reconcile the grief that I was feeling as a result of my diagnosis and experience a more complete healing than a fragmented approach would have allowed. One year and two months after my transplant, I was ready to leave behind the comfort and security of my home and family to spend four days and nights alone with nature contemplating how to live fully with cancer.

Separation. This phase marks the leaving behind of everything known for the experience that lies ahead. Bill Plotkin (2008) refers to this as the cocoon, the place of metaphorical transformation. In the School of Lost Borders model, it is a time of ceremony and ritual, symbolizing a letting go of the old to make room for the new (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, pp. 214-215). The separation phase of my rite was marked by a sweat lodge ceremony. When I emerged from the sweat lodge, I was smudged with an eagle

feather and told that I was now dead and that it was time for me to go. I turned my back and left. The power of this simple ritual was profound. I truly felt like I had left my people behind and entered the spirit world. When I arrived at my circle, I removed the eastern rock, stepped into the circle, replaced the stone, and sat.

Transition. The transition period is when physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual boundaries are pushed and stretched to their limits. (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, pp. 214-215). During this phase, guides hold vigil for those who have gone. Symbolically, holding vigil is representative of holding a sacred space until the return of the new initiates. Practically, if someone should return in distress, there will be a guide waiting for them who will be able to provide support and company.

The transition phase involves deep contemplation and reflection. Bolen (2007) writes, “For the soul to be heard, the mind must be still” (p. 9). Solitude in nature allows for this to happen. During this time, everything that occurs has meaning. It is the place to face inner demons, fears, and to symbolically die. It is also a place of self love, healing, and initiation (Foster and Little, 1998). This phase usually involves a three to four day period of solitude, fasting, and seeking a Vision. (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, pp. 214-215). In my case, my intent was to confirm what I needed to move fully and authentically into my relationship with Self and All My Relations as a cancer survivor.

The depth and subtlety of the transition experience are beyond the scope of this paper but I will share a few of what I feel to be the most significant events that help to explain the process of holistic healing that occurs during the Vision Quest.

First, very shortly after I arrived at my circle I lost my tear. When I was diagnosed, my husband worked a piece of labradorite stone into the shape of a tear and gifted it to me. It represented the transition that we were going through as a result of my diagnosis and the grief and beauty that were woven into our experience. As part of my transition toward healing, I

carried the stone with me constantly. While I was out on solo, I discovered that the stone had disappeared from my pocket. Because the stone was of great significance to me, my first reaction was to search frantically for it. But then something shifted in me and I accepted the deeper meaning: I had transitioned successfully, my grieving was over, and I was ready for the next phase of my life. The significance of this event was profound in that it confirmed my readiness to move forward.

While I was out, I also spent time thinking about and speaking to my ancestors. I am a Métis woman. I was told by my mother that the butterfly is the creature that carries the prayers of the Métis people to the Great Spirit. As I was lying under a canopy of salmonberries, I was struck by the strong resemblance of the salmonberry leaves to butterflies. Sleeping under this canopy of butterflies, I knew beyond a doubt that my prayers were being heard. This was a powerful experience. I also became aware that I could hear voices singing in the wind. I kept asking myself if I was imagining it but I am convinced that I was not. I believe that it was the voices of my ancestors singing to me. Under a canopy of butterflies, I could hear my ancestors singing to me and I knew that I was being cared for. I felt a timeless connection that was a powerful remembering.

The final significant event that occurred was that the trees gave me an important teaching regarding how I want to be in moving forward. While out, I noticed that trees are firmly rooted in the ground and at the same time their branches extend to the heavens. In this way, they are a bridge between the physical and the spiritual. I too have one foot firmly planted in two worlds. I am a bridge between cultures and I have a strong capacity to embrace the spiritual while remaining grounded. Trees are a resource as I am to my people. Trees are strong and flexible, bending in the wind and that is how I choose to walk my life: standing strong like a tree and remaining flexible enough to absorb whatever comes my way.

Incorporation. Incorporation is when initiates return from their time in the wild and begin reintegration into the world of the living. The return is a time of community, celebration, sharing, and processing of the initiate's stories. It is a time of guidance from other initiates as to the meaning of the experience and the challenges that will be faced re-entering life and moving forward with purpose and meaning (Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, pp. 214-215).

On the morning of the fifth day, I awoke to the sound of the birds singing and knew that it was time to return to my people and share the gifts that had come to me while on the land. I was welcomed back by my community with open arms and warm hugs. I re-entered the sweat lodge, shared my story, and had it mirrored back to me in ways that helped enrich the meaning of my experience.

Time in solitude with nature looking for deeper meaning in the things I saw provided me with an opportunity to creatively imagine and see profound and vital messages that helped make sense of my situation. Stephanie Sorrel (2011) refers to nature as a mirror:

The more I looked at nature, the more I saw the journey of my own soul reflected, I saw that nature was inscribed with a life philosophy which was ancient, spoke all languages, was inherently spiritual and close to the heart of all life. (p. 21)

My experience with the Vision Quest helped me to understand what Sorrel means. Through nature, I saw reflected back important symbols serving as guides and answers to some of the deep questions that I had about myself and my future. Nature took me beyond myself, into the depths of my soul, and invited me to find meaning and connection. In doing so, the parts of my psyche that were shattered as a result of my diagnosis were able emerge whole again.

Ecopsychology's premise is that the deepest level of the psyche remains bonded to the Earth (Roszak, 1995, p. 5). The Vision Quest is a healing conduit to re-establishing deep connection with Self, others, and All Our Relations. The research covered in the literature review

of this paper demonstrates the importance of holistic healing and the benefits of contact with nature as part of the process. The Vision Quest, with its focus on cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and emotional processes, provided me with elements of holistic healing that I needed to take in my next steps as a cancer survivor. With the closing of the incorporation phase, I returned home inspired to integrate into my life the insights and lessons that I learned.

Integration. The Vision Quest is a holistic healing experience that helped me contemplate and process my experience with cancer. Plotkin (2008), however, makes an important point in saying that simply engaging in a rite of passage is not what transforms. It can be a catalyst, or an important and meaningful ceremony acknowledging a transformation, but it is most certainly not a cure. Maturation and personal growth are lifelong processes (pp. 64-67). Although the experience of being on the land is critical, it is but a small part of the totality of the experience. The complete significance of the event is only revealed over time. Because of this, the integration phase can be the most difficult and is the longest lasting. It involves incorporating the inspiration, gifts, and vision that were received during the Vision Quest into a congruent and embodied way of life (Bolen, 2007; Davis & Jane, n.d.; Foster & Little, 1989, 1992; Plotkin, 2003, pp. 214-215). Robert Greenway (1995) has observed this and states that the key issue is in the integration of the experience of a wilderness rite of passage into today's culture. Greenway has recognized that mindfulness practices, a gradual reincorporation back into the 'real world,' and maintaining connection to nature and other initiated adults are all important factors in successfully manifesting ideas inspired by a wilderness rite of passage like the Vision Quest.

Bolen (2007, pp. 1-2) writes that cancer is a crisis for the soul, an opportunity for profound growth. Life is a journey in which there is no beginning and no end, only a lifetime of engagement and discovery (Harper, 1995, p. 185). An ecopsychological commitment to holistic health and to the harvesting of the wisdom that comes from living with life threatening illness involves committing to practices that invite continued connection to Self, others, the land, and

spirit. As part of my continued self care I have committed to practices including touching base with my anchors, guides, and other initiates on a regular basis, mindfulness practices, maintaining a strong connection and regular access to wild places, and creating a vision for next steps in my personal and professional life. Most significantly, as part of my continued healing journey and as a way to remain connected to All My Relations, the Vision Quest inspired me to continue exploring the power of practicing self-generated nature ritual.

Nature-based Ritual as Part of the Integration Phase

The Vision Quest is what Malidoma Somé (1998, p. 150) refers to as a radical ritual: a major ritual involving community where the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions are pushed to an extreme thereby enhancing a deeper transformative or transpersonal experience. Somé also makes reference to the importance of maintenance rituals which are daily practices that can be incorporated on a regular basis into our lives. Nature-based ritual, as a practice, can provide cancer survivors with an important link to the radical experience of the Vision Quest, thereby facilitating the integration process. As an application of ecopsychology, nature-based ritual can help to discover, befriend, and intentionally develop one's profound rootedness in the life-giving biosphere (Clinebell, p. 26). Such groundedness enlivens feelings of security and strength and fosters a strong sense of identity (p. 33). These are important elements of the integration phase and of the healing process for cancer survivors.

Plotkin (2003) refers to visionary encounters as a conversation between the human soul and the soul of nature (p. 216). I believe this is what occurs when performing nature-based self-generated ritual; nature reflects back what the soul most wants and needs to see. Through ritual, a door to inner transformation is opened (Hall, 1987) and connection to Self and All Our Relations is deepened, the benefits of which for cancer survivors and holistic healing is profound.

As part of my integration, I once again began working with *Fire and Water* (Author's personal journal, 2011, see Appendix A – Fire and Water), a story I wrote about my journey as I

took the first steps in preparing for the Vision Quest. Upon reading the story again, I immediately recognized my final task: I would re-enact the last scene in my story as a ritual.

In *Fire and Water* (Author's personal journal, 2011, see Appendix A – Fire and Water) myeloma is symbolized by a fire demon. The Mother (me) is gifted with stones by those who are her allies. She undergoes an intense initiation from which she emerges, transformed. The last image in *Fire and Water* is of the Mother returning to the river with all of the stones that she received. She builds a fire ring and within it lights a fire that she lovingly tends as the snow silently falls.

In preparation for the re-enactment of this part of the story, I gathered some items I intended to use for the ritual and crossed a threshold into the forest. As I walked toward the river, I collected stones. When I got there I built a beautiful fire pit, each stone placed representing the sources of love and support I have received during my journey with cancer. In the center of the fire pit I placed a stone bead made from the same type of stone as the labradorite tear that I lost. Around the stones I placed special items: a necklace given to me by my friends at Naropa University, a heart-shaped stone from my son, a ring carrying wolf medicine, a beautiful turquoise stone, a stone from my Vision Quest circle, and a stone from the sweat lodge, among other items.

When all the items were ready I spoke to the three giant cedar trees that stand where I built the fire pit. I asked for permission to use some of their bark to help me light a fire, left them some tobacco as a symbol of my gratitude, and harvested what I needed. I drummed and sang songs inviting the Great Spirit and Eagle to witness the ceremony. Then, in the centre of the stones, I built a fire representing myeloma. It was beautiful - myeloma surrounded by all of that love.

I built the fire from cedar but noticed that it burned very slowly, peacefully, which is odd for cedar. Then, I laughed out loud because I noticed the connection: I am in remission. I have

been blessed with so much love and support during all of this and I am in remission, I am still in relationship with myeloma, the fire, the destroyer of bone, but right now it is contained and peaceful – just like the fire I had built. As I looked up, I saw ash dancing in the wind and I couldn't help but think it looked like snow. There I was, standing in the forest, by a river, a little gray in my hair, while the snow silently fell. I laughed out loud and shouted out the following statement:

I am a strong, wise medicine teacher who loves and honours her ancestors and all her Relations. I am a daughter of the Métis Nation. I am Mother, Wife, Friend, Mentor, Sister, Grand Daughter. I am the wind, the wolf, and the dragonfly. I am unconditional love, cleansing, creation, and change. I am here now, I am ancient, and I am a child. I am infinity. I stand like a tree. I am a bridge, I am a resource to my people. I am body, mind, spirit, and emotion. I am joy and I am sorrow. I am healthy and flourishing. I am me and I am more than me. I am loved and held and cared for. I am whole, I am home.

I stayed with the fire, this giver of life, until there were only a few embers left and emerged from the forest at dusk. I returned home to my husband and son who welcomed me with open arms, gifts, and a simple but magnificent and delicious feast. The ritual of *Fire and Water* was the last step in my integration phase and the closing of my Vision Quest.

Fire and Water (Author's personal journal, 2011, see Appendix A – Fire and Water) is the story of my Vision Quest; my mythical hero's journey. It is what I call a Big Story – a teaching story that has important lessons for me and perhaps even for the world. Woven into this tale are lessons about love, forgiveness, compassion, and interconnectedness. *Fire and Water* has taught me that I am a small part of a much bigger whole, and that there are also many parts within the whole of me; Mother, Child, Fire, Water, and Wolf to name a few. Outside of me, I have an intimate relationship with family, community, land, and spirit – All My Relations. As a

smaller part of a bigger whole, I must be holistically healthy in order to contribute harmoniously to the greater system.

Incorporating mythical elements into personal stories and ritualizing the experience helps to clarify one's destiny (Campbell, 2008; Meade, 2006; Plotkin, 2008; Sabini, 2008). Because cancer survivor's lives are turned upside down (Bolen, 2008; Halverson-Boyd & Hunter, 1995) this process is important.

Whether conscious of it or not, humans are highly ritualistic. For example, a regular early morning cup of tea, a routine evening bath, or celebrating New Year's Eve are rituals. Most people, though, are uncomfortable with deep or sacred ritual. Sacred ritual is a non-ordinary, emotional, and often spiritual experience that can evoke feelings of vulnerability, unfamiliarity, and discomfort (Davis, 2006). The aforementioned *Fire and Water* ritual is what I call a deep ritual. For those attracted to this type of reconnection, I recommend informing yourself about ritual, seeking out experienced ritualists, and wading into the water by trusting your inspired creative instinct (Davis, 2006).

Nature-based ritual though, does not have to be complicated and can be integrated into a daily practice for cancer survivors. Ritual practices can be as simple as expressing gratitude for a new day or taking an extra moment to notice and watch a beautiful sunset. The answer to weaving nature-based ritual into daily life is to actively look for deeper significance in our actions and to acknowledge that part of us which is connecting to the natural world, or perhaps more significantly, that part of us that is the natural world (Davis, 2006, p. 11.4).

As a cancer patient, I found that the spiritual and emotional components of my healing were glaringly missing from the treatment plan prescribed to me by my medical team. Ecopsychology honours the integration of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of healing and wellness. Its diverse applications include time in solitude with nature, place bonding, mindfulness, and nature-based ritual. As a cancer survivor, integrating these ecopsychological

practices into my life is helping me on my healing journey. It is a choice that has the potential to help other cancer survivors too.

Conclusion

Summary

The Vision Quest has allowed me to reconcile the grief that I experienced as a result of my cancer diagnosis. It is a ceremony that helps people to connect with the Earth and demonstrates that nature is a powerful and ancient teacher. “The psychic depths are nature, and nature is creative life” (Jung as cited by Sabini, 2008, p. 208). Humans are nature. The more we look at nature the more we see our own life reflected back. In nature there are no straight lines, only curves and spirals; birth, life, death, and renewal. By actively paying attention, nature reveals itself as a mirror to life experiences. For example, external disturbances, such as forest fires, can evoke images of incredible destruction and waste. At the same time, fires provide opportunity for new growth to emerge. It is the same with disturbances that humans experience. It is the same with myeloma. In order to grow into something new, I needed to leave something behind. A part of me needed to die:

The sense that each life-stage grows out of the death of what existed before was common to ancient peoples living closer to the natural cycles of life and death. At certain crucial levels, the human psyche remains ancient and continues to attend to the indelible pattern of life-death-renewal. (Meade, 2006, p. 16)

In my case, cancer took the form of fire, and just as it would in nature, it devastated parts of me and reshaped my landscape, preparing me for new life.

The last image in *Fire and Water* (Author’s personal journal, 2011, see Appendix A – Fire and Water) is of the mother transformed, wearing the cloak of a wolf, streaks of white in her hair, tending a fire encircled by stones that were given as gifts of healing, while the snow silently falls. As a symbol, snowflakes are deeply significant. Each flake that falls eventually disappears

only to reappear again in another form. In nature nothing is static. It is the same for me. I am a shape shifter who has undergone many transformations; from Child, to Maiden, then to Mother, and now Crone. I will continue to shape shift long after I leave behind my skin and bones. My spirit is infinite. It is the same for all humans. As a cancer survivor this understanding provides me with great comfort and peace.

Cancer has inspired me to ask deep questions like, “Who am I?”, “What are the diverse parts of me?”, and “Where do I go from here?” All challenging questions that, asked with the intent to grow, have helped in my transformation. From a psychological perspective, entering into a reciprocal relationship with archetypes, the diverse parts of my psyche, with nature, and allowing my illness to educate me, has helped to derive meaning in regards to the radical disturbances that have occurred as a result of my illness. Cancer survivors compare living with cancer to being in limbo (Bolen, 2007). Connecting with the life-death-rebirth cycles of nature can help cancer survivors to understand that there is no waste and that change is inevitable. This realization can help cancer survivors to view death from a different perspective and emerge from limbo; still profoundly saddened but no longer devastated or immobilized (Clinebell, 1996, p. 112).

Barry Lopez (1990) writes that, “Sometimes, a person needs a story more than food to stay alive” (p. 60). I think that stories are food. The Big Story that is my Vision Quest experience has helped to keep me alive. I understand more deeply unconditional love and compassion. The tears I shed have taught me the true meaning of cleansing. I see that there are many ways that I can honour the gift of creation. I am better able to see connections and inter-relatedness, and I understand that after I leave this physical world, I will continue on. This wisdom has allowed me to be birthed into a new role within my community, stronger in my gifts as a leader and teacher.

These last two years have been a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual journey. The Vision Quest has helped me to step into the next chapter of my story. With my diagnosis of

terminal cancer I experienced a loss of Self. Within that loss, I felt called to put back together the pieces of myself that were shattered; to find myself again. Through opening myself to the flow, beauty, presence, emptiness, and spirit of nature I saw into the depths of my soul (Davis, 2011). I fully acknowledged my transition and emerged from limbo whole.

As an application of ecopsychology, the Vision Quest has given me the story of the home of my soul. John Davis (2011) asserts that the relationship between humans and nature is deeply bonded and reciprocal. “Who we are as human beings, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal – are intimately connected to our relationship with the natural world” (Davis, 2011, p. 138). Initiation ceremonies are part of a cycle that helps us to find answers to life’s big questions and that encourage meaning and purpose by fostering a deepening of relationships within a larger context. The Vision Quest is a powerful container that encompasses mind, body, spirit, and emotion. People have always used rituals to help them to mourn and recover (Windle, 1995). The Vision Quest is a therapeutic nature ritual that reinforces the awareness of loss, sanctions remembering, facilitates the expression of feelings, provides support, guides the needed reorganization of life, and affirms life’s meaning (Windle, 1995, p. 142). It is a ceremony that can help cancer survivors to holistically heal.

Shifting the Healing Paradigm

From the standpoint of therapeutic work, my experience is that the current healing paradigm, with its strong focus on the physical and on quantitatively proven scientific method is incomplete. Western theories of therapy focus primarily on the intrapsychic and interpersonal while virtually ignoring the relationship between persons and the natural environment (Clinebell, 1996, p. 27). This type of fragmented approach has had devastating effects on our psyches and our planet. The application of ecopsychology is an earth-grounded approach that takes into consideration a person’s total being within the context of relationship to the Earth. This requires a focus on healing through a process of “wholeing” (becoming whole), rather than healing or

fixing a problem by eliminating it; wholeness-centered (holistic) instead of pathology-centered (Plotkin, 2008). This is an approach that is worthy of integration into mainstream medicine and healing modalities.

Furthermore, as a result of my experience as a patient, I am interested in investigating cancer treatment as a rite of passage. My experience of the stem cell transplant was that it perfectly mirrored the stages of the Vision Quest. I was prepared for an ordeal, separated from my family and community, spent time in isolation, was brought to the brink of death, transformed, and once again integrated into society. As an ecopsychologist, I am inspired to explore how Western medicine can incorporate the wisdom of ecopsychology alongside ancient and contemporary rites of passages into a holistic model of treatment for cancer patients.

For the Future Generations

Joanna Macy refers to *The Great Turning: The shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining culture that is occurring in Western civilization* (Macy & Brown, 1998). In the midst of the environmental, social, political, and economic crises that Western society is facing, humanity needs to look toward creating a regenerative future for generations to come. I believe the key to this future lies in guiding our youth toward an ecological identity that allows them to reconnect with Self, others, the land, and spirit. This in turn will allow them to become holistically healthy parents, teachers, mentors and leaders; the adults and Elders that will shift Western civilization's values from an unsustainable greed-based, competitive system to one that is steeped in regenerative growth and deep rooted meaning, connection, and inspiration.

Ecopsychology invites humans to consider healthier ways to live as a species and as caretakers to the Earth. The Vision Quest, with its focus on the development of holistically healthy human beings who are socially engaged, ecologically aware, and whose actions are congruent with a deep understanding of their role in contributing to society is a valuable application of ecopsychology.

My personal journey with cancer and the Vision Quest has heightened my awareness of the positive holistic impact that contemplative time in nature has on people. I find myself wondering deeply about the processes and the qualities that emerge in people, allowing them to live fully. Brené Brown (2010) has extensively researched what she calls “whole heartedness.” She has observed that qualities like courage, vulnerability, and worthiness are determinants to living well. I have noticed that the qualities of which she speaks are present in those who are bonded to wild places. I am fascinated with the subtlety of the process of change that occurs through transpersonal nature experiences and exploring more fully the attributes that surface as a result of deep connection to wild places is an area of great potential and interest to me. Phenomenological and discourse analysis research methods could be useful frameworks within which to further research this topic.

Connection to nature fosters an awareness of the uniqueness of the human species and the responsibility that we have as caregivers to the web. Rites of passage, like the Vision Quest, help to deepen connection to the Earth and to the larger community of all beings. This positively influences the quality of all aspects of our personal identities and life (Clinebell, 1996, p. 33). People who grow into contributing, healthy, authentic adults and who have purpose ultimately choose life. I am curious to explore the impacts that an ecopsychological paradigm would have not only within the personal framework but also within political, educational, social, and economic contexts. I am deeply committed to serving others as a guide to this reconnection.

I believe that shifting awareness in a way that will allow humans to recognize that they are a uniquely important part of a much bigger whole will allow humanity and the Earth to heal. My Vision is to contribute to a regenerative future by nurturing the innocence and wonder of children, mentoring adolescents and adults, guiding people through their diverse life transitions, and role modeling ways to live in greater harmony with the Earth. There is more at work here than what is measurable by the mind. The human dimensions of emotions and spirit have been

sorely neglected. I believe that weaving together traditional wisdom with scientific knowledge holds amazing potential for the future generations.

It is my hope that this paper will inspire curiosity in others and motivate people to take steps toward reconnecting to All Our Relations and in doing so heal themselves and the Earth.

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Appendix A - Fire and Water: a story of initiation

A child within the womb of a mother was visited by a water spirit. The spirit told this child that it was not her time to enter the human world. Her human mother was destined for a great transformation that would require all of her strength and attention; she must leave. The spirit told the child that her name was Talissa, 'beautiful water,' and that her mother would know her.

When the mother realized that her daughter had left she wandered into the forest and grieved. Suddenly, the sky was filled with darkness and the forest burst into flame. The mother tried to flee but was overcome by the blaze. Her whole body ached and her bones began to disintegrate. The mother realized that this was no ordinary fire and called out to the fire spirit. A dark-skinned man with angry eyes and wolf-like teeth appeared by a river. The mother asked the fire spirit what he wanted. The fire spirit replied that he was angry and that he wanted to destroy and kill. The mother was scared but saw this being's suffering. She felt compassion and asked it what it needed. The fire spirit responded that it needed peace. The mother reached out, embraced the fire spirit, dissolved herself into peace, and fed the demon of herself. The fire spirit disappeared and in its stead was a tiny winter wren standing on a stone. The wren sang its beautiful song into the soul of the mother, gifting her with its medicine.

The mother emerged from the forest deeply wounded from the fire. She did not know if she could go on. Before her appeared an old ugly hag. The woman asked the hag what she wanted. The old hag became huge and indicated that she wanted power and that the mother was nothing, useless, not strong enough to survive the ordeal that lay before her. The mother was scared but saw this being's suffering. She felt compassion and asked it what it needed. The old hag responded that it needed love. The mother embraced the old hag, dissolved herself into love, and fed the demon of herself. The demon disappeared and in its stead stood a beautiful woman in a flowing turquoise gown. The mother knew that this woman was the river that appeared to her

in the presence of the fire spirit - the mother knew this woman was her daughter. Talissa told the mother that they were of the same place, that she would protect her from the fire with love and that she would always be there as a reminder to see the beauty in everything, including herself. Talissa approached her mother and handed her a stone.

The mother collapsed by the river and fell into a deep sleep. The forest creatures wove a cocoon around her to keep her safe. Members of the mother's family and community appeared and held her gently in their arms. They came with stones and left them for her. They covered her with a turquoise blanket and gave her spirit medicine. She was surrounded by love. During the mother's slumber a wolf appeared with a stone and left her medicine, as did the wind, the sun, and the moon. The mother was cared for and held by all her relations.

Sometime later, the mother began to stir. She emerged from the cocoon as vulnerable as a newborn. The mother's relations continued to hold her and she gained strength. The mother grew fast and months later she stood strong, streaks of white in her hair, wearing a wolf's cloak. When the mother was strong enough, she returned to the river with all of the stones that she had received. She built a fire ring and within it lit a fire that she lovingly tended as the snow silently fell.

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