

Weaving Voices Article (Aug-Nov 2003)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

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Inner Work in Wilderness

Memories, stories and reflections
of a wilderness vision quest guide

(Some details have been altered to respect participants' privacy)

BY MAGGIE MACKENZIE

It is the crack of dawn at the edge of the Wollemi National Park wilderness. Bellbirds ring the damp air. Ten women wait silently for the leaving ceremony. Each is loaded up with backpack, sleeping bag, tent and a little low chair. No books or walkman...only a journal, and their intentions for doing this. Their faces look apprehensive, expectant, some a little afraid. The time of departure for their three days and three nights of solitude and fasting has come.

For the next three days and three nights their 'solo' place, will be their entire world....living alongside the birds, trees, cliffs, river, rocks, animals, insects and lichens. What will the weather do? They face the challenge of being with solely with themselves, alone with the cycles of day and night, with the moon, the darkest night skies, animal rustlings and stars...waiting and watching for the feelings, thoughts, and day dreams that have been pushed down, perhaps for years...to arise. Will they survive hunger, layers of memory, the possible boredom? Will their own intuition be able to break through the noisy chatter and obsessions of the mind? Will nature 'speak' to them? Supporting them is the knowledge of tradition they are now part of...in other years and other places others have done this before.

They know they will return to base camp along the same ceremonial path three mornings later. If really in trouble they can return earlier. They know silence will be observed until each woman has told the 'place story' of her 'solo'. Then the valley will ring with the pride, relief and hilarity of woman together.

These women were undertaking a Women's Wilderness Vision Quest, a seven day 'rite of passage' – to clearly mark 'endings' or 'new beginnings', or to experience the healing of solitude in nature. The women's ages have ranged from 22 to 62. They have been held over the past ten years. Jung has been quoted as saying "men heal by action, and women heal with stillness"

While participants have been preparing for some months, it is when they sit down on the floor with their equipment list, responsible for gathering their own gear, that full reality hits them. Some have never put up a tent. Many have to work through guilt at leaving others behind. Concerned family and friends may challenge their resolve.

It is the second day. The women are now on their own, equipped with water, whistles and bandages for possible snakebite. They splash up through the river remembering signposts such as

tree logs, rocks, different sorts of trees...try to notice how the afternoon shafts of light reveal some feature but shade others. They are each looking for the right solo place for them. Anxieties come up. A habitual belief about always having 'second best' may return, even here. They are very aware this is a once in a lifetime experience. No changing their spot later. Will they feel 'called' to a certain place, will someone else want the same spot? Sydney real estate jokes are made. Some need to negotiate with each other. Will they remember to look up for any dead branches, to not camp over animal tracks? One woman thought she had finally found the right place, lay down on the earth, relaxed, when a swarm of wasps flew in. Disturbed she continued looking, to find just around the next bend, a much prettier and more suitable place.

Over the course of the 'solo' all of nature is regarded as 'teacher' – being and active 'mirror' to the quester's own seeking. Nature is not just a pretty backdrop. The quest contains a traditional indigenous value – the individual will 'bring something back for the benefit of their people' as well as for themselves.

Women have marked passages such as-changing career direction, the ending of a long marriage, turning 40, death of parents, redundancy, beginning of retirement, menopause, closure of therapy.

The wilderness quest pass through the three phases, 'severance' 'threshold' and 'return'. The 'Severance' phase is the cutting off from all city life distractions, mobiles, television, internet, family obligations and work responsibilities. It relates to the willingness to review of one's life, like tying up one's affairs before death. A nightmare 'burning' ceremony marks the stark reality of what is being finished with. Real artifacts such as wedding photos, childhood diary, swimming medals and nurses' registration papers have been carefully placed into the flames. The final stage of severance comes with leaving base-camp, the support of the guides, and the group sharing with other women.

The 'threshold' phase is the entry to what is described as the 'liminal' space between the worlds of nature and human. It is here, in the special 'solo' place that the women are invited to give up all pre-conceived ideas of what will happen. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, artist and teacher from Daly River says "In our language we have the word "dadirri". It is inner, deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us."

Our high-achieving woman was determined to set her solo camp up high on the cliffs. In the end, confused, she gave that up to settle in a soft lush glade beside the river and slept for fifteen hours. When she awoke she'd had one important dream that illuminated a childhood wound. Five butterflies hovered for hours around her site that day. Another woman was feeling like nothing was happening at all, a bit numbed. On the third day tears started to fall. She then cried a long time for her older teenage sister who she's found dead. She made a little boat of bark and leaved, put seeds in it representing prayers for them both, and sent it down the river.

In the 'return' phase the quester slowly re-enters community at base camp. This phase seems almost as critical as when a space shuttle re-enters the earth's atmosphere. It is so important that women continue to 'contain' what has gone on for them. As a guide the most heartfelt and delicate phase of all is the waiting for each woman to ceremonially re-emerge from the bush, their faces tear-stained, eyes joyous and clear. Traditionally as quest guide I've been more as mid-wife who oversees but does not intrude on the 'birth' journey. Later that day, the sharing of the solo 'place story' is full of fragile new 'gleanings'. As guide I listen for metaphors and themes. I recall one very wet Easter quest. Keeping themselves and their gear dry was a heroic challenge, without even a cup of tea. Yet still no one chucked it in early. Once back over the swollen river safely, they huddled together under the big tarpaulin, telling some of the most powerful and poignant stories of any quest. The confinement and constant rain had brought up experiences of buried grief. Once the last woman had finished her sharing, the sun came out and stayed out.

Re-entry to the 'normal' world is when the real quest is said to begin. It is usual for the ripples of doing a quest to continue over the next nine months. Sometimes a 'symbol' such as the flash of a blue kingfisher, or a dream might suddenly make sense even years later.

Over the years not one woman has returned to base-camp early. There have been no snake-bites or other injuries. It is as if we have all been held by 'grace'. Four long lasting benefits have emerged...finding sense of fulfillment in 'being alone'...a far greater sense of connection with nature...becoming more physically 'present' and 'grounded', and stronger intuition and instincts.

Completing the 'rite of passage' – is as if an old skin has shed. There seems a quickening of new psychological growth. The 'solo' seems to be as a 'crucible', where base-camp provides a safe 'holding environment'. Sharing group ritual before the 'solo' prepares the mind to be in a more 'imaginal' or right-brain state. There seems to be some 'alchemical' mix of the different elements of –timelessness, place, solitude, nature, ritual, and receptiveness. Also the possible presence of 'spirits of place', and the quester's own 'daimon', a type of guiding inner figure. And there is the very real power of undertaking a 'rite of passage' in itself.

One Kimberley elder Mowaljarli used to say "If you live in this land and are prepared to look after the part you live on, then you belong here"

Some woman now settle here from overseas felt the wilderness quest connected them finally with Australian soil. How connected can non-indigenous Australians feel to the earth of this ancient land? Where is our sense of place?

For questers afterwards, the second sight, and smell memories of their particular 'solo place' usually provides a nurturing ongoing positive internal nourishing image. Their 'rite of passage' a lasting reminder of their courage.

It is a Sunday afternoon one month later. Women arrive for the post-trip meeting in a Sydney seaside apartment. Life has picked up its usual fast pace for most of them. Pleased to see each other again, they find it natural to join hands. A shockwave of tingling warmth shoots around the circle. No one can say exactly what that is. But they have been there to witness each other go through this by what seems now an almost 'otherworld' journey.

Over on the ocean cliffs the sea crashes below, the afternoon breeze is picking up.

One by one they wrap strips of brilliant cloth around the curling long Rainbow Serpent talisman, already bedecked with sparkling, plain, striped, feathery and tartan ribbons. This rope sculpture is regarded as symbolic of the lineage of all the questers gone before. This is the last ceremony of the wilderness quest – a tribute to their courage, and their gift for the women who will next follow,...apprehensive, open-hearted into the wilderness.