
The Ultimate Self-Help Quest

Contributed by Lauren Chambliss

Here's a first hand account of how to find life's answers through a vision quest.

It is late May in the Virginia woods, I'm 200 miles from my suburban home, sitting by a creek bed, playing hide and seek with a frog. By afternoon my self-pity ebbed and I began creating a ceremony to honor my mother. Although she had died several years before, I was still grieving. I knew from the start that my quest, in the same mountains she had wandered as a child, would be a time to make peace with her, and say goodbye.

I propped pictures of my own three kids at the base of a tree, talked to my mother and reflected on our life together. Her presence was so palpable that later I wondered if I had hallucinated. In the forest alone, I felt every emotion more intensely; longing, loneliness, joy, grief, fright and humility.

As I mourned my mother, I saw a pattern in a shadowy splay of gray and brown on a dead tree limb. It looked like a shrouded woman. In her arms she held a child. I could see compassion and love in the tilt of her head, in her outstretched arms. In that moment, a realization struck my heart and rent it open.

I had not yet accepted my own motherhood. I was a bystander mom, repeating my own mother's sad pattern of disengagement. The clarity of this incredible irony was the greatest gift of my quest. I felt so dizzy I almost fainted.

On day two, still feeling lightheaded, I swam in a pond and very nearly stepped on one of the longest black snakes I have ever seen. I wasn't scared even as he poked his tongue out at me and hissed. For music, I listened to the sawing and splashing of nearby beavers. The sun was high and hot. Ticks were everywhere, but strangely they were not biting.

"Maybe I'm protected by some spiritual shield," I thought, thinking back to my blessing ceremony. Or maybe I just smelled strange. It had been several days since I bathed. This worried me. My 8-month-old still nursed occasionally. I knew I smelled pretty sweet, verified by the fact that every bug in the forest appeared to have found its way to my quest site. But as I waved away flies and gnats, it was bigger creatures that pre-occupied me. Would a bear smell me and think I was a human honey pot?

That night, I slept fitfully, waking several times to a noisy forest. I was surprised at how loud a squirrel could be, and how at 2 a.m., it sounded just like a 300-pound bear. I got up at first light. Later that day, in a trance, I hiked back to the base camp, feeling pure exhilaration. Back together with other group members, all of us exhausted and giddy, I realized how far into non-ordinary reality I had gone. At first, I could hardly speak.

It was time for the final phase of the vision quest, the re-entry period. We ate good food and spent hours in a circle,

sharing our stories and making commitments to incorporate the magic and the lessons into our everyday lives.

Watch this video on a vision quest and the search for meaning.

Bill Plotkin, a leading authority on vision quests and the founder of Colorado's Animas Valley Institute, says some people return from a quest and make huge changes immediately, while others make gradual adjustments in work or family relationships that eventually lead to fundamental change.

That is what happened to me. In the immediate aftermath of my vision quest, I did not upend my life, but the restless anxiety I felt about pushing to a higher level in my profession dissipated. I began to make time for spiritual pursuits, eventually training to become a vision quest guide.

But most of all, I became a passionate mom. Something changed during that moment of clarity in the Virginia woods. My heart opened. I never forget the cell-level longing I felt for my children when I was stripped of everyday distraction.

In an instant, I can drift back to my sacred space, to the frog of my hide and seek game and marvel anew at the exquisiteness of the amphibian metaphor. The truth I am seeking is always right there in front of me. If only I stop long enough and summon a new level of awareness.

Nature revealed my essence.

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