

Gratitude, Guidance, Grief and Glory

.....Some things that can emerge on Vision Quests and Nature Retreats

“To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe -- to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it -- is a wonder beyond words.”

— Joanna Macy

In many cultures it is a long held practice for individuals to seek occasions of solitude in ‘the wilderness’ in order to replenish their spirit and their humors. Even today some African, Siberian and American Indian tribes spend up to six weeks on retreat: times of transition and transformation are marked through a period of self-imposed banishment from the familiar, and a return to the land. Time spent in Nature is embedded in folklore and religious texts. Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Pagans all use time retreating in Nature to support their spiritual practice, search for wisdom or connection to the Divine.

Our contemporary, post-modern and largely secular society in the West has developed its own equivalents in certain leisure pursuits such as walking, sailing, gardening or lying on a beach. By walking and sailing we find a different focus and a change of pace from our normal lives. But activity can also be distracting – offering only brief respite or hit of pleasure hormones. The tourist mentality capitalizes on the idea of ‘buying ourselves temporary relief from life’ - rather than transforming our lived experience.

We all need dreamtime in order to balance the frenetic activity of our daily lives. Given the fragmented, confusing, complex and disorderly nature of contemporary experience, a retreat enables us to visit those parts of ourselves that busyness keeps at bay, and to orientate and motivate us in refocusing our lives.

There are now a growing number of non-religious, and non-denominational retreats being offered. A growing movement in eco-psychology is developing new lines of research and development that embraces many of the traditional, teachings and rituals, whilst also embracing contemporary scientific enquiry and a growing interest in secular meditation or mindfulness practice. New forms of Vision Quest and Nature Retreats may involve staying out solo for 4 days or more, whilst others include an evening return to base camp, discussion, teaching or shared creative experience. All include a withdrawal from daily distractions.

Here we describe the key shape of one such retreat being offered by the Nature Effect in Dorset in September 2016.

The Journey begins

The retreat begins as soon as we sign up for it! What draws you to want to take time out? You might ask: how will it be to be alone with myself? This is a good time to pay attention to your dreams, to eat lightly and cut down on addictions and distractions.....TV, mobile, alcohol, caffeine or whatever your poison. As the

date draws nearer you might find all kinds of reasons why you should not go. This is normal, and life can always present us with excuses not to face ourselves.

Finding your Place

An important step at the beginning of the retreat is to find way so of introducing yourself to the landscapes – asking permission, looking for invitations. You might experience a shift in perspective - a rock or tree or space in the land suddenly comes more alive to you as if it is opening its arms or inviting you in.

By being alone all day and hardly moving from your chosen spot, you become familiar with a small part of the landscape. You may have a glimpse of the sea or you may be in a narrow valley - wherever it is, it will be appropriate to your condition. You will become known to that place. It will offer you all you need, with space to stand back from your daily round and reflect, perhaps on the long view of relationships and your life.

Coming to our Senses

After some minutes or several hours being alone in Nature your mind may feel like it has thought all its thoughts for a bit. Slowly the chatter subsides and you can begin to open your sense doorways. Sight, Smell and Hearing, Touch and Taste become more attuned. Other senses such as movement, orientation and voice become more conscious. Breathing slows. You may become preoccupied with your survival: shelter, orientation, warmth, danger, curiosity, or you may simply experience an enlivened sense of connection to the living world of grass, tree, sun, earth and sky and your own smallness and vulnerability within the greater whole.

As the mind settles it might be enough to sit and receive. Or you might need to move with the land or in response to the thoughts and feelings that arise. You may find you want to sing or speak aloud to the rocks, trees or into the Earth.

The ‘Four Gs’ and finding Grace

“In the face of impermanence and death, it takes courage to love the things of this world and to believe that praising them is our noblest calling.” — Joanna Macy

Without the distractions of phone, reading, and daily tasks such as preparing and eating meals, our minds will search for inner and outer distractions. As these pass over like clouds in the sky, deeper level memories, longings and insights may emerge, sometimes along with strong emotion or unfamiliar bodily sensations. These may delight you and other times they maybe feel deeply uncomfortable. You will experience something unique and totally appropriate for you. It may not be a sudden Eureka experience. There may be no great new vision. But insights you will find, and a coming home to yourself

The **‘Four Gs’** provide a framing of common experience when spending alone time in Nature. They can also be actively invoked in contemplation and used to ground yourself during retreat. **Gratitude, Guidance, Grief and Glory:** each offers a path of self-instruction, not just as a subject to reflect upon, but also to inhabit,

embody and learn from. They can be offered as forms of prayer, of invocation. They can be spoken to the Earth, nurtured in our hearts or released to the four winds. We have drawn them from many peoples' stories about their retreat experience. They are not a finite or exhaustive list, particularly as many experiences are beyond words. Expect the unexpected.

If **Gratitude** arises you may come to a renewed sense of what you have, of 'counting your blessings', of thankfulness for food, shelter, growth, health, love and the life you live.

If you seek **Guidance** you may hear the voice of teachers passed, or discover new questions. You may gain new perspectives to issues that have perplexed you for many years, leaving with you with great self-awareness and connection to your inner wisdom.

Embracing the shadow, tears and fears are a common part of the Vision Quest or Nature Retreat experience. Where **Grief** is present, the lap of Nature offers space and support. Worries, melancholy and loss, maybe accompanied by fear or anger that has been held in check for months or years can suddenly find oxygen in Nature. They can grow huge and sometimes feel overwhelming: before settling down, burning out, or taking flight, leaving you more peaceful, secure and decisive.

If we open ourselves to **Glory** we may simply feel a sense of celebration, of beauty, awe, and wonder at the miracles of the perceived Universe, leaving you with renewed creativity.

Each of the '**Four Gs**' are inner states that may arise spontaneously, or you can consciously evoke them as part of a practice of deepening connection to yourself and wider ecological world. As you retreat with intention and support, stay with what arises, lean in to the land, each of the 'Four Gs' may transform into periods of deep peace, a flow between inner and outer being of connection or unification of 'self' and 'other'; a state of Nature that we might call **Grace**.

Reflecting with others – the power of a group

This is more than simply taking yourself off on your own and sitting in Nature on your own for a time. The retreat is a journey undertaken with intention for some kind of transformation to take place. There is an amplified power in the group and having time to reflect or share with others – in words or in silence. There is the support of others on a similar journey, and from an experienced team who are there to serve your journey.

Integrating what we have learned

People join us from all walks of life, academics and craftsmen, mothers and students, bankers and local government employees. They come from London and the provinces, the Hebrides and from Europe. A few return every year or two for refreshment and for their continued wellbeing. They come to stop and to listen. Nothing is imposed on them, and there are no compromises to another's beliefs. At the end of a journey together there is change of expression on the face of each of those completing the retreat. There is a marked openness and freshness as if

they have been energetically 'scrubbed' and some scales have fallen from eyes and shoulders.

We encourage people to keep a journal and write letters to their 'future selves' and not to speak to family and friends too quickly about what they have experienced inwardly during their journey. It can take weeks, months or even years to really reap the benefits. You may look back and say 'Oh yes, that was when I began to.....'"

Hugh Dunford Wood
Annie Davy
Facilitators