

WALKING WITH BEARS

On Bridges to Earth's New Era



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12

CLEANSING THE WINDOWS

As we moved deeper into the practice of vision questing, conversations with Bear Heart amped up the importance of cleansing ourselves of toxic waste that accumulates over the course of living, in general, and working intensely with people, in particular.

Those involved in the service professions become deeply connected to others through a serving and compassionate relationship. In that connection, there is an exchange of multilayered energy, and the two of us agreed it is important to purify oneself or else become an ambulatory toxic waste station.

Such a necessity for purification is especially true in a polluted environment generated by Western Civilization. Just driving on a freeway often involves a transfer of highly charged, chaotic energy into our systems, not to mention carbon pollutants, smog, and ground-level ozone.

The stress of everyday living creates intense contractions within our musculoskeletal system so that the flow of energy in the form of electrical impulses hits the dams created by the stress-induced clenching.

Before we know it, we are uptight in a high loop. When the flow encounters the dams, there is a physiological pooling on one side and a

Walking With Bears

trickle on the downstream side. Within the flow is a current of lactic acid which then remains in the pools because we don't have adequate release and cleansing practices. Eventually, the acid irritates the nerve receptor cells; these irritations become inflammations and the seat of much of our pain and disease.

Cutting-edge science is now telling us that many diseases, including heart difficulties and various forms of cancer are intricately connected to inflammation, a process that leads to cholesterol-clogged arteries. Such a documented proposal means that inflammation sets the stage for heart attacks, strokes, peripheral artery disease, and even vascular dementia, a common cause of memory loss.¹

So, yes, there are immense benefits to purification ceremonies such as sweat lodges and fasting, the process which I have found to be the most effective in the release of contractions. But the larger hill to climb is the release of humans from the bondage of a stress-dominated culture.



About the time Bear Heart and I were discussing stress, inflammation, and purification, our clinic at The Center for Creative Resources in Houston was on the graduate rotation of various universities for training psychotherapists, psychiatrists, family physicians, teachers, and pastoral counselors.

Our office setup included a closed-circuit television system that linked a team of senior therapists and their students with a treatment room where a trainee or a seasoned therapist would see a client.

The client signed a release to be part of the training, so it was a very effective form of therapeutic education. While the client gave up the privacy of meeting in seclusion with a therapist, she gained multiple perspectives from the larger treatment team watching in an adjacent room through closed circuit television. Such an arrangement was not for every client but worked well for many.

On some occasions, I would work with a client while Judith headed a team that included graduate students in an adjacent room. Through our televised system, the trainees observed as I engaged the client with the aspiration of learning from both useful therapeutic moments and mistakes. We also videotaped the session for future study and clinical research.

One day in the treatment room, I talked with a woman who had been through a severe trauma. As part of the treatment, I had her lay down on a ceremonial blanket on the carpeted floor and breathe through her feelings.

Utilizing a light trance induction of hypnosis, I took her briefly back to the trauma and then to a place cherished by her in Nature. In her mind's eye, she let go of the suffering, anger, and pain associated with the trauma and invited a healing presence to enter where the wound had been for so many years.

Through an indigenous breathing technique I had learned from Bear Heart, I invited her to expel the toxic waste of the trauma. We also engaged an integration of therapeutic tools that drew on Thought Field Therapy (TFT) and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT).²

Both were aimed at allowing various energy fields to pass through the client and release tension and stress in favor of a more relaxed state. After an extensive active imagination or shamanic journey in which she had moved through a cave and a tunnel into another reality, she returned to her ordinary state of consciousness and sat up, holding her knees to her chest.

She reported that she felt much better. A knot in her stomach had disappeared.

While she rested, I told her that I would consult with the training team in the next room and that she could take this time to rest and collect herself, integrating the healing experience into her more usual ego state.

Walking With Bears

I left the room and walked briskly to the office where Judith and the trainees were watching by our closed-circuit television arrangement. When I opened the door, Judith and the five other professionals were white as sheets, like they had seen a ghost.

It turns out, they had.

“What is going on here?” I asked, a bit alarmed at the vulnerability in the room.

All six of the people pointed at the closed circuit television monitor. I looked up at the screen, and I could see my client sitting where I had left her, holding her knees to her chest.

That aspect of the scene was perfectly usual. However, along the floor was a complete outline of her discharged energy. Was it an energetic representation of her trauma? Or was it some other phenomenon?

I squinted and rubbed my eyes. A perfect outline of a ghost-like body would not go away. My client continued to pull her knees up to her chest and sat in the middle of an out-stretched energetic form that had been expelled during the therapy.

At least, those were my first thoughts.

Judith said that during the treatment session they could see the energy pouring off her body like a dark mist. As it left her body, it shaped itself into a coagulated form that looked like her but flowed out on the floor.

It totally bumfuzzled the interns.

Was it an electromagnetic outpouring from her body? Was it a bridge between the wave/particle domain described by quantum physicists? Was it what ancients called “spirits or demons?” Was it a visitor from another dimension?

In any case, the form on the floor propelled us into a reality beyond our current paradigms.

Immediately, I went back into the treatment room and invited my client to return to her chair, which she did. She was completely unaware of the form-like mist that had issued out of her welcome release and purification.

When I asked her if she noticed anything different where she had been sitting, she said, "No." I told her that we had observed an expulsion of toxicity and that we were examining the tape. After I affirmed the excellent and courageous work she had done, we scheduled another appointment, and she left. She paused at the door with a quizzical smile on her face and thanked me.

Then, I returned to the observation room to examine the monitor more fully in order to make some sense of what was unfolding in our midst. On the monitor was the continued outline of an energetic body on the floor.

We discussed what it might be. Did it have something to do with the camera? Was there some technical miscue we were overlooking? We made adjustments in an attempt to eliminate hidden variables in our technology. We turned the camera on and off. We wiped the lens. We doubted what we were seeing and sought some explanation within a more rational paradigm.

About that time, Jack Jensen, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon who practiced in the office next to us, entered the discussion. With his assistance, we eliminated more variables.

We even changed cameras. Still the energetic body lay on the floor. While we could not see the toxic form of her release with the naked eye, we continued to observe it with various cameras and camera angles. It remained outlined on the floor of the treatment room for over 24 hours until it finally dissipated or departed after I burned sage and juniper for purification.

In the discussions we had with our team, we explored the reality of leftover energy within our treatment facilities. At that time, I had been involved in the practice of psychotherapy for more than twenty years and was still a relatively young man.

Walking With Bears

Just think, I intoned to my graduate students, how these energy forms have gathered in my office over time. And think of all that energy moving into and through all of us, all outside our awareness.

We should, I kidded, get hazardous duty pay. For several weeks we discussed with our students the importance of purifying ourselves when there is a discharge of energy in a therapeutic transaction.

I still have the videotape, and I look at it when I doubt the necessity of purification. I propose that any deep listening by any person to another who is in crisis leaves a residue of emotional and energetic energy both with the interior and the exterior eco-fields.

The questions our students raised with us boiled down to one: how do we cleanse ourselves of leftovers in our transactions? I suggest that addressing that question is a central one in a culture beset with fear, angst, shame, addiction, environmental degradation, an avalanche of negative news, and a variety of traumas.



Another dimension of our undigested energy globs comes into awareness through tensions and conflicts we experience in relationships. Both partners in an intense conflict lose energy in the exchange during which there is a “deposit” of unwanted energy in the other. Astonishingly, there are few models of conflict resolution taught in a typical academic setting that pay close attention to purification of toxic waste.

In Judith’s and my work, we use a variety of approaches to move through tensions in our marriage and in clinical work. Hal and Sidra Stone have provided us with a most useful map that attends to purification.

They call these moments of conflict—negative bonding patterns—because of the presence of negativity during the relational exchanges. Hal and Sidra are spot on: much of our bonding in mainstream culture is in negativity. Take an ordinary weather forecast. More often than not the forecaster seeks to evoke fear with continued reference to “getting hit” with a storm.

A trailer might suggest that we will need our umbrellas for the morning commute even though the forecast for rain is spotty. We subsequently are bound to a negative narrative about the upcoming day.³

At the core of tension in intimate relationships in negative bonding, according to this model, is a power imbalance. One partner hits (emotionally and/or physically) the other from a power side of the personality (often an internal critical parent).

The damaged partner experiences hurt and vulnerability and then shifts into a power gear and returns the hit. Soon, there is a cycle of hitting and hurting. Resolution, however, is not complete until the negative energy deposit has been scrubbed from the system.

What is crucial in purification?

Not just emotional and spiritual release but most important, physical sweat!

Sweating increases an almost magical chemical we call endorphins. Toxic elements such as alcohol, cholesterol, and salt are excreted through the medium of sweat. According to recent studies, sweating reduces the incidence of kidney stones by flushing out the kidneys.

Sweat contains antimicrobial peptides effective against viruses, bacteria, and fungi. These peptides are positively charged and attract negatively charged bacteria; they also enter the membranes of bacteria and break them down. Sweating unclogs pores that can cause various skin problems. No wonder hot yoga has become popular, along with Zumba, bicycle spinning, and myriad exercise regimes.

All good. But there was more I needed—exercise-type sweating was only a first step. Much more was needed in the hyper-complex world in which we live to rid the system of an everywhere negativity.

The *inipi ceremony*, sweat lodge, offered the deep cleansing I needed. The benefits astounded me, and I wanted to share the experience with

Walking With Bears

Judith. Such an occasion presented itself during the sweltering days of a Houston August, circa 1980.

The only place we could find to conduct the ceremony on short notice was a vacant five-acre lot north of Houston, near a subdivision; not the most auspicious place for a sublime experience.

In the hot afternoon, we built the lodge with traditional willows cut from a near-by drainage ditch. We covered the thatched roof with blankets and draped black plastic over the top, a grudging nod to the petroleum industry. Bear Heart didn't like to use the plastic, but it was all we had. Tarps and hides of the type he usually used were not available.

We entered the lodge about sunset with sweat already dripping off our bodies from Gulf Coast humidity. About an hour and a half later, we emerged from sitting on the rich dirt, from looking into rocks heated to a red glow, from smelling the pungent fragrance of a variety of herbs, from hearing deeply moving utterances of a dozen pilgrims, and from the smoking of a sacred pipe.

We crawled out of the lodge on our hands and knees feet first to symbolize a breech birth. Bear Heart told us that children and pilgrims born through breech birth had powerful medicine.

Upon emerging from the hot lodge, I couldn't believe how fresh and cool the air felt. Even sweltering Houston felt cool after this ceremony! Toweling off, my skin breathed in a way that opened the micro-tubules of my cells to reach out and mingle with the energetic pulsations of life all around.

I lay down on the cool ground, with my belly button connected with the rich soil of Mother Earth. With each deep breath, toxic waste poured into the ground. It would be returned to me recycled, said Bear Heart, after it was purified.

I loved this cycle because it underlined a sustainable use of energy whereby the negative had its place and then was returned in positive form.

After a brief ceremonial meal of fruit, Judith and I opened the doors of our 1979 VW pop-up van. Before I turned on the engine, we sat in a most profound moment of intimacy.

“What just happened?” Judith asked with a voice indicating we had been through an experience unlike anything she had ever known.

Over three and a half decades would pass as we purified ourselves in this fashion once or twice per month. Such a cleansing practice was challenging and a lot of trouble. I kept searching for a purification process that would take its place. I found many helpful ones, but none that penetrated to the depth of my cellular structure and the domain of sub-atomic particles like the sweat lodge did.

But what of people who do not have a sweat lodge ceremony available to them?

Recently, I received an email from an enrolled member of an indigenous tribe in a nearby state. She was in desperate need of a cleansing ceremony, but, to her surprise, her tribe did not have a regular sweat lodge ceremony in the entire state.

Her tribe taught that she needed this purification each month; yet, there didn't seem to be a regular practice available. If need be, she wrote, she would drive ten hours to enter the sweat ceremony with us. Her email set me to thinking about those persons who don't have a tribe that engages in this practice.

Allow me to break down some of the components of the ceremony which can be engaged for purification when the whole enchilada is not available. As I proceed, you will see how this ceremony touches aspects of ourselves not inherent in jacuzzis, commercial saunas, or other sweat inducing experiences.

We crawl on the ground and sit with our bare feet on the soil. There is considerable scientific evidence that such sitting allows the electro-magnetic field to pass through the soles of our feet in a process called “Earthing.” Earthing in and of itself can enhance our cleansing and pro-

Walking With Bears

vide vigorous steps towards wholeness.⁴ I make it a point to walk bare-footed on the exposed ground nearly everyday.

In sweat lodge ceremonies, we stand in a circle with the fire heating up the rocks. A simple ceremonial linking with friends around an outdoor fire will release much that needs to pass through us.

We chant, drum, and sound the conch outside in richly nourishing eco-fields. As such we join with all aspects of the environment as relatives. The trees reach down and draw pollutants from our bodily systems and even assist our breathing.

We breathe in to the count of 13 and out through the mouth to the count of 8, starting with a concentration on the head, then to the heart, then to the solar plexus, and then to the genitals.

We dance together in five rhythms to the sound of drums and other music. We engage in body drumming, acupuncture, acupressure, myofascial release, and other body therapies.⁵



Our civilization has produced cleansing practices that are distortions of the purification process. Bulimia (compulsive vomiting) and anorexia (compulsive fasting) are examples, especially with young people, of an intuitive urge to cleanse ourselves.

By the same token, chronic constipation is common in the mainstream and speaks not only to diet but to a blocked civilization. All of these adjustments in life deserve our awareness and compassion. They are largely memetic symptoms of a culture gone awry.

The wisdom of the sweat lodge ceremony offers a profound corrective. No wonder such ceremonies are present in many cultures under different names: Mexican *temezcals*, Scandinavian dry heat saunas, Afghanistan rock heat, Irish/Celtic sweats, and so on. There are many different forms of sweat lodges available in different locations.

A word of caution. It is very important for sweat lodge facilitators to be properly trained. As we proceed, we will see how a long-lasting spiritual community called The Earthtribe grew out of Bear Heart's and my work.

Through the decades, a particular form of healing has evolved, and those forms will be addressed as we proceed. Sweat lodge guides in the Earthtribe receive eight years of training as part of a rigorous commitment to respecting the power of this process. Before engaging in a sweat lodge practice, it is a good idea to inquire as to the lineage and training of the leaders.



What is the purpose of this cleansing?

For our personal benefits solely?

Or for a much larger endeavor?

The windows of our perception are cleansed so we can see clearer. See what? See beyond ourselves to all creation. This intimacy is at the heart of who we are as natural humans, and we cannot rest until we have those connections.

It is the aim of our Earth walk. Releasing the contractions of muscles, emotions, and mind tangles lies at the heart of purification with an eye toward more intimate and aware connections with our surroundings.

The purpose of such cleansing that leads to relinquishing is the co-creation of a regenerative and sustainable civilization. As we delve into the creation of compassion and nature-based communities, we turn to a partner of purification and fasting: vision questing.

I was about to discover domains of perspective, power, and vulnerability just beyond my experience, or even my imagination.

13

SEES FAR

An envoy of cars drove some three hours north of Santa Fe on Highway 159 toward our vision encampment, following the spine of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

In the distance, about 70 miles away were two peaks that stand alone, not part of the Sangre de Cristos, and across the Colorado line. The Ute Indians call them *Huajatolla* (pronounced Wa-ha-toya), which translates as “Breasts of the Earth.” Official maps call the mountains, *The Spanish Peaks*; such a pedestrian naming is in contrast to the indigenous linkage of the living mountains with breasts.

I figured we were about two hours northwest of Raton, New Mexico.

When I feel vulnerable, I call up measurements in my mind to keep me connected with the side of my brain interested in linear matters. That’s the side of me that hits the brakes when I go too fast on the freeway and pays the bills on the first of the month. These mental gymnastics present only an illusion of control; in this case, a comforting illusion.

Snow still covered the Huajatolla since the West Peak is 13,626' and is the easternmost mountain over 13,000' in the USA. Better than the measurements as a comfort was a sustaining energy emanating from

Walking With Bears

the Great Mother's bosom in the form of the two peaks. The snow at the apex appeared as nipples of nourishment.

Our parade of cars left the tiny pavement of Highway 159 and wound on a bumpy, dirt road to an encampment. When we arrived about midday, some questers were already hard at work building a large *inipi* or sweat lodge.

Others were preparing their vision circles. One quester came from a tribe where the tradition was to dig a hole for a descent into Earth's skin for his quest, and the sound of his digging attracted my attention. I sauntered over to assist him.

The scene of his digging reminded me of holes I had dug intuitively in the Llano Estacado as a boy. As children, we called our holes, forts. Many days and nights I spent lying in such holes looking up at a spreading pear tree which dropped its bounty into the hole for me to break my boyhood fast.

Sometimes, when I ate the pears green, I paid the digestive price. Fallen and rotting pears attracted honey bees, wasps, june bugs, hummingbirds and butterflies.

The hummingbirds and butterflies followed me throughout my life and became my allies. Beyond the pear tree limbs were the vast stretches of blue sky dotted with cumulus puffs, as if smoke from a sacred pipe.

These were textured memories that floated to the surface as my new friend toiled with his vision site, but I decided not to dig a hole for my quest. For one thing, I didn't have time. But just seeing what this quester was up to connected me with the significance of being down in Earth's crust, seeking a vision.

Bear Heart had taught me how to build traditional sweat lodges, so I joined in the cutting and lashing of willows for a vision lodge that would follow later in the day. Since the practice of sweat lodges in North America has been preserved by Northern and Southern Plains tribes, the

lodges most often are built with white willows which grow readily on the plains especially along arroyos.

On this day, a shaman in our circle used the bark of the willows, which we shaved off, for temporary pain relief and other forms of healing. The drug we call aspirin is made from acetylsalicylic acid, a by-product of willows, and I felt a debt of gratitude since the high altitude and fasting had given me a headache.



Little did I know or even imagine at the time that the Earthtribe would sprout from this vision quest and that hundreds of sweat lodges would be built over the next three and half decades. We would learn that the eco-fields would tell us what materials to use in building the ceremonial huts when willows weren't available.

Years after this powerful New Mexico, encampment, the 600-acre wild life preserve ranch on the Gulf Coast of Texas, Deer Dancer Ranch, would share its yaupon saplings with us for building the framework of sweat lodges.

Later even still, we learned that the Comanches used these same yaupon saplings in the spring of the year when they journeyed to the edge of the Comanchera east of the Balcones Fault. They nibbled on the poisonous berries to provoke vomiting, a practice they needed in order to cleanse their systems after eating dried and sometimes stale buffalo through the winter.

We in the Earthtribe came to like yaupon lodges and also juniper frames since willows weren't available. Near our homestead in the Texas Hill Country, we built a juniper lodge out of saplings that lasted for over a decade. It was the stoutest lodge I ever experienced.

Once, when Judith and I were invited to teach one of the first courses at Wisdom University in 2005, we felt called to build a lodge in a redwood forest in Northern California. We were stumped about how

Walking With Bears

to proceed because there were no saplings, only giant redwoods. At our wits' end, we consulted the caretakers of the land. They suggested we talk with the redwoods, which we did.

Talking with redwoods was quite an experience in and of itself. John Steinbeck wrote, "The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree.

"The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time."¹

After an extensive conversation with the redwoods, we noticed that professional arborists had been trimming certain shooters at the edge of the trees' circumference to give them breathing room. The tree specialists showed us how to trim around the bottom of selected giants for their benefit, and we found that these trimmings made a spectacular lodge.

We had a sense from the trees that they appreciated our giving them a haircut, and our lodge experience over a period of days confirmed their generosity.

The extreme droughts of our climate change era have birthed other forms of creativity in building lodges. We have designed lodges that can be built with milled cedar that can be transported from place to place. In the Earthtribe, that has been our practice in recent years in order to avoid cutting willows and other saplings struggling for life during extended periods of little or no rain.

Currently, we are experimenting with sustainable bamboo. I located a local patch of bamboo, and the keepers of the land gladly allowed me to cut back what they considered to be unruly invaders.

At first, the bamboo was challenging likely because the shoots didn't like the label of trash trees given to them by locals. Also, the bamboo didn't bend easily. After soaking a few days gently in water and after

I apologized for the derogatory words directed toward them, they slowly gave their permission to grace us with a beautiful framework.



Ordinarily, Bear Heart engaged in what he called *healing lodges* for our Earthtribe. A warrior-like endurance in these healing lodges is not the focus, though they can be really hot. Earthtribe lodge experiences usually do not last more than an hour and a half since people who come to the ceremony may be quite vulnerable and are new to the process.

Even though we have been practicing these ceremonies for decades, we are sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable persons because the experience is, indeed, powerful medicine. The ceremony is not to be engaged without the presence of trained elders.

The lodge on this vision quest in New Mexico was an anomaly. Mostly full-blooded native shaman were in attendance, and they had grown up with this practice. Bear Heart mentioned to me that I needed to brace myself for a different kind of experience, but I didn't really know what I was in for.

We entered the lodge at 5:00 p.m., a fact I knew because they asked me to remove my watch and put it on the earthen altar in front of the lodge, sometimes called *unci*.

The rock carriers invited me to doff my bathing suit and explained that this particular, shamanic lodge required us to return to our "birthday suits." It was about 60 degrees F and quite pleasant for a spring day, so I gladly stripped and put my cloths in a pile outside.

Sweating nude was a bit odd to me but interesting. Occasionally, we sweat in the nude in the Earthtribe, but our usual practice is to wear bathing suits or other loose clothing. Since we are hybrids and not pure bloods and since it is a new experience for many of the participants, we go slowly.

Walking With Bears

All of the rocks in this particular vision lodge I describe were volcanic extrusive and simply called “sweat lodge rocks” by the elders. When the rock carriers brought in the rocks, they were glowing red. Bear Heart announced to us that, since we thought we were advanced in our shamanic training, we would need to burn through our pride.

The heat was intense; our arrogance was large. His intent was to stretch the strongest beyond their endurance in order to call forth our warrior abilities. This approach was very different from the healing lodges, which focused on working with vulnerability.

Many layers of skin peeled off as the fiery rocks burned through my resistance. When the first door opened, I saw it was already dark outside. By the time we completed the other three doors, I had reached a complete openness but was hanging on by a thread.

I barely noticed that seasoned medicine people crawled out of the lodge until there were only a few of us left. For at least half of the lodge, I lay on the ground breathing in the searing heat so that my lungs felt on fire. On several occasions, I made a move to leave.

This ceremony completely humbled me. I cried. Death hovered. I thought of Thomas Aquinas’ line: “humility is truth.” That virtue never appealed to me, but here I was lying prostrate before the powers.

Years later, cancer visited my loved ones. Aging grabbed me by the shirt. Massive storms—energized by climate change—washed over me, sent swirling waters into our houses, and left me agog. This intense ceremony prepared me to engage the mighty forces of Nature by lying on the ground and acknowledging the mystery; how little I know; how fragile we humans are.

Still, Earth’s arms seemed to hold me steady. The cool soil nurtured my fears until they quieted.

At last, the final door opened, and I dragged myself out of the lodge, coming out feet first as Bear Heart instructed. I lay on the ground, shivering. Later, I learned that the temperature had fallen precipitously

below freezing. I picked up my watch from the altar and was shocked to see it was after 11:00 p.m.

We had been in the lodge for over six hours.

Something nudged me on my left ribs as I lay near my clothes with little interest in putting them on, and I heard Bear Heart's gruff voice, "You still alive?"

Then, he laughed, poked me again with his big toe, and continued, "Best to get up and go find your vision site."

Stumbling, I found my clothes and put them on as best I could. Looking around, I hoped for some help in locating my vision circle. Some eight hours before, I had selected a specific landscape for my prayer ties that looked toward the breasts of the Mother in the distant peaks.

Chest high juniper bushes, spring sage, and Thompson's yucca outlined the place I had chosen for the vision site. It had been easy to locate my site in the late afternoon before I had crawled into the sweat lodge. But now, as midnight approached and the temperatures plummeted below freezing, finding my way seemed a monumental task.

The walk from my site to the lodge in an afternoon of sunshine was only about 30 minutes, a pleasant meander in the bright warmth. But after the intense sweat lodge, I now realized the inky traverse over strange mountainous terrain—lighted only by a half moon and my jiggling flashlight—presented a major challenge to my trans-ordinary state of consciousness.

Somehow, I brought in my usual state of surviving to shake hands with this shamanic state to form a partnership in finding my circle.

Or so I hoped.

Looking around for help again, I saw I was all alone.



On another vision quest, where Bear Heart and I worked together in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a woman selected a site on a ledge overlooking a small canyon. Disoriented, she took a tumble that resulted in minor injuries.

Coupled with the experience I described above and her fall, I knew beginning vision questers needed more assistance. This help was especially crucial for those who were not accustomed to this form of rugged meditation.

As the Earthtribe would unfold over the next three decades, we linked each quester with one or more supporters whose task it was to know where the vision site is located, to accompany the quester to the site, but not to interfere with the privacy and value of solitude.

In our emerging version of this practice, the quester is settled into their circle, and then the supporters respectfully leave. The vision supporters learn much in expressing love and guidance without drifting into a co-dependence so rampant in our culture.

I also would learn how to support questers energetically without being physically present. Through the years, Bear Heart and I would smoke the sacred pipe in meditation at 10:00 p.m., midnight, 2:00 a.m., and 4:00 a.m. He was a resolute holder of vision space during those times.

For decades thereafter, I held the space in the way he taught me, but, as I pushed into my elder years, I saw the need to train other pipe carriers to offer a distributed mode of support.

Nowadays, I join the circle in the tipi at 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., and, often Grandfather Bear joins us from his place in the Milky Way to co-create an *eternal now*. This point in nonlocality offers support to the questers.



Back in time and in New Mexico, I trundled toward the vision site with a view of moonlight on the mountain breasts. Earlier, I had used them as a visual to guide me to my circle, but, in the dark, I could see only faint outlines.

I knew I was in trouble.

A moderate state of hypothermia hovered. I was shivering and confused. I put on my jacket with an awareness that I needed to increase my body temperature. My training and preparation told me that my body temperature was plunging toward 95 degrees F, close to a danger zone.

Strangely, I observed and diagnosed myself while at the same time being submerged in vulnerability. My walking labored as I stumbled along. I shined the flashlight on my fingers, and they were an odd, blueish color.

I blinked, and talked aloud, placing one foot in front of the other, the way I might have when stopped by a policeman to check if I was driving under the influence.

At the bottom of my resources, I let go and grasped for Spirit's hand.

Bear Heart had told me the quest was a little bit of death, a training experience for the real thing. In the 1970s television series, *Sanford and Son*, Redd Fox often thought he was dying of a heart attack and uttered a humorous phrase, "Oh, Elizabeth, this is the big one; I'm coming to join you." As I walked, it felt like I was on the bridge to the big one.

At long last, I saw the sleeping bag I had put down in the afternoon, a green one that had a stale smell. I lifted the string of prayer ties at a door into the circle; a door is what we call the place where the two ends of the string of prayers meet.

Walking With Bears

Without further adieu, I collapsed into the bag and zipped it up. I knew seasoned vision questers sat cross-legged, stayed awake, and meditated to raise their body temperature. Not so with me as a novice.

In the face of the larger forces of Nature, I was completely humbled. That trait never appealed to me, yet here I was lying on the ground next to death.

I ducked my head into the bag and breathed, feeling the warmth slowly regenerate me. My clothes were soaked with sweat, so I wiggled them off until I was naked against the stiff green material of the moldy sleeping bag.

After a few moments, my nose surfaced like a river otter swimming in a stream to gain fresh air. Then, with my lungs full of the fresh mountain air to sustain me, I ducked down again to allow my breathing to be a mini-heater. This procedure went on until I returned to a more stable state, near equilibrium.

Most of the night I lay awake. As my body temperature slowly returned to normal, I pulled down the edge of the sleeping bag to gawk unabashedly at the stars. In the last moments before first light, I drifted into a light sleep.

Suddenly, I was awakened by a growling sound. As I adjusted to the first light, I looked directly into the eyes of a ruby-throated hummingbird. It had a bright, startlingly red throat, a black mask that stretched around its head, and a bright green cap.

Although it belonged to the smallest bird tribe on the planet, it hovered in a sublime, cloud of power. I caught fleeting glimpses as it flew away and then back as if to speak with me in a tongue I had lost long ago.

To my amazement, the winged messenger flew backwards, and then forwards. Up and down. Tears welled up from an inner point forgotten, an essence that had been asleep since my days on Rattlesnake Island on Lake Conchas.

My eyes opened wide.

I knew that this was an turnaround moment when the wheel of life rotated like the old tractors from my family land. I basked in an instant of transparent clarity. The humming bird's long beak seemed to reach into and perform mysterious, open-heart surgery.

Unspeakable joy poured forth with exhales of deep breaths. The rotating wings beating over 50 beats per second whirled around my head in speeds that lifted me up where eagles dare to fly. Sacred doors opened, and I slipped through into a nonlocal eternity.

Everything spread before me as a movie of what was to come, for myself as a small part of Earth herself.

I knew I was seeing myself return to a natural identity. Years later, an Earthtriber, Mary Sue, would have a vision and acquire the name *Sees Far*. That name describes my experience. I knew I was part of a Great Returning, an impulse of the Evolutionary Spirit herself. I had glimpses as if through a smoky mirror. Through the smoke I could see Earth Herself was headed toward a mighty balancing, a movement toward a new equilibrium.

And what role would humans have, if any?