

CIRCLES ON THE MOUNTAIN
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Susan Hagen for Circles on the Mountain

Fostering a True and Harmonious Relationship with the Earth **An Interview with Anne Stine**

By Susan Hagen

At the 2014 gathering of the Wilderness Guides Council last spring, veteran guide Anne Stine was among those who stepped into a new Mentoring Council to support future generations of rites-of-passage guides. Anne has been a Marriage and Family Therapist for 32 years. She taught Applied Wilderness Ecopsychology for the Master's Program in Psychology at Sonoma State University and spent eight years training rites-of-passage guides. Today, she has an Ecopsychology practice in Ashland, Oregon, is a consultant and mentor for rites-of-passage guides, and continues to lead wilderness quests. Over her career, she has led 80 wilderness quests. Last fall, while a dozen questers were out on their solo time in the Inyo National Forest, I sat down with her in basecamp to talk about the future of this ancient ceremony.

Where does the wilderness rites of passage have its roots?

Our modern-day rite of passage is inspired by the School of Lost Borders, but there is really no beginning. It doesn't belong to any particular culture or view. What we do today is enact a contemporary form of an ancient, pan-cultural rite or ceremony that lives in all humans. Some version of it sustained our ancestors in their community lives across time, across cultures, across all boundaries.

Somehow, Steven Foster and Meredith Little connected with this. They were working with youth in Marin County and were inspired and guided to bring this work into contemporary form. They didn't bring it in from the outside; they connected with it internally. Their brilliance was in developing a school that made this ancient rite of passage accessible and relevant for modern times.

How did you become a guide?

I was a Marriage and Family Therapist in Marin County, California, when I heard about the work Steven and Meredith were doing. In 1989, I started studying with them at the School of Lost Borders. I knew right away that this wasn't just another workshop; I was connecting with something essential and meaningful for my life and my community.

In October of that year, I was on my first wilderness fast in the Eureka Valley, when a 6.5 earthquake rocked Northern California. At that time, I was headed in a different direction – really, not a very good direction – and the Loma Prieta earthquake completely redirected my life. I knew I wanted to do this work. I founded Wilderness Rites in 1990 and have been guiding, training, teaching, and mentoring ever since.

What is the connection between human beings and the natural world?

Human beings, as with everything in the natural world, go through life changes. As we sit here today, we can see the aspen trees enacting their own rite, preparing to go through winter. Human beings have that same blueprint. It lives in all of us. It's an urge: to have a child, to connect deeply with another, to love and be loved. These are common human experiences. The need to mark change in a meaningful way is stamped in everyone.

To enact this rite of passage in a natural setting mirrors our true nature. In that mirror, there can be an increased awareness of who we are. When we look into these trees, we can see how they interact with everything else out here. We can see that the interdependence is also in us. Nature is our home. We are nature. So there are no barriers.

This ancient ceremony acknowledges change in humans and nature together. We come here traditionally for the purpose of marking a life transition. Things are always changing, but most of the time we don't notice until it hits us over the head: you get a terminal illness, lose a job or relationship, or something else happens to wake you up.

What do people undertaking a wilderness quest have in common?

In the natural order of things, human beings have a deep purpose in being here, and we each have gifts to offer. The health of the community – both human and non-human – depends on each individual fulfilling that gift and giving it back. If everybody is living that way, we have a healthy, sustainable, beautiful, harmonious life for all living things.

I've never met a human being that isn't searching for their true, deep, life purpose. Sometimes it's buried under terrible life conditions; but if you dig deep enough, it's there. We all want to make a contribution. It's a deep longing, urge, wish, prayer. There's profound joy in connecting with that gift and finding ways to offer it.

How does the ceremony help people connect with their gifts?

This ceremony involves a conscious act of dying to what is no longer needed. We are actively engaging and participating, with choice, in a life change. We are choosing to enact our own death, renewal, and regeneration experience in order to step into and live the true life we've been given. We are maturing into people whose lives benefit others in addition to and beyond our own needs.

The idea of undertaking this ceremony can become grandiose and lofty; but really, it's a very mundane thing. We are living a very physical life with intention to bring meaning to our experiences. When we go back to our daily lives, we are empowered by a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the community. We go home and do the best we can with what we've been given in order to be of greater value to all living beings.

What advice can you offer young guides just starting out?

First, make sure you feel the call to do this, because you'll be challenged to keep it going over time. It really is a life's work. You need to be able to support yourself with it, to make it a viable, working career, so you can really give yourself to it.

If the call is truly there, then ask yourself, what's the next step I can take to bring this work to the people? What am I ready to do? What's available in my life today? Think about the need in your immediate community. How can you fit yourself into that? For example, if you have a connection with a local high school, gather up your materials and go give a talk.

I encourage guides to undertake a personal fast at least every two years to keep current with changes in their own lives. If we're going to ask people to go into that deep process of change, we have to go through it ourselves, over and over again, and have some wisdom about it. You can't offer what you haven't experienced yourself. If you're going to take people through this, you have to be able to go with them. This is a lived experience.

It's also very important to make connections with other guides, people of all ages, and share experiences. The Wilderness Guides Council is a wonderful avenue for this. Think about getting a mentor or two. There are plenty of us out there.

Can the ceremony be adapted to shorter lengths of time without losing its meaning?

Yes, of course. That's the beauty of this work. You can do it anywhere, anytime. There is no belief system to take on or leave behind. It's very adaptable. In fact, it must adapt. As the world speeds up and our cultures change, we need to become skillful at adapting the ceremony to the needs of the population.

However, it's advisable to include the three ingredients: solitude, fasting from daily life, and exposure to the natural world, as well as the three phases: preparation, solo time, and incorporation. You can adapt the three ingredients and the three phases to any situation, any need, any population. It doesn't have to be a ten-day quest with a four-day solo; it can be a couple of hours, an introductory half-day, a medicine walk. We are only limited by our own imaginations.

How can our work help heal the earth?

At the most fundamental level, this ceremony fosters a true and harmonious relationship with the earth. It's especially urgent that our youth come to feel a deep care for the earth as a most cherished loved one.

It's so painful to watch this culture destroy our life source. As a community of guides, it's imperative that we encourage people to renounce some part of consumptive living for the benefit of the earth. In my own life, I base my consumption as much as possible on what I can buy in bulk in refillable containers. I try to stay out of my car at least one day week. And I do my best to use water twice. Imagine the thousands of people we can influence through our work – and the difference we can make – by encouraging these small actions in everyone we meet.

How can we best carry this ancient wisdom forward?

The survival of the ceremony depends on us carrying it forth in a genuine way. Stay true to the original form and fill in where you need to. Stay true to the old ways, and be careful not to dilute them as you adapt to the modern world.

Change happens. It is the fabric of this life. As guides, we are here to help people participate in these cycles of change. Steven Foster talked about guides as “wilderness midwives.” I really like that concept, because we’re instinctively assisting people in giving birth to themselves.

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