

# THE MEDICINE WALK

An Exploration of Ecopsychology and Rites of Passage

John Davis, Ph.D.  
Naropa University  
School of Lost Borders

*It's quite possible to leave your home for a walk in the early morning air and return a different person--beguiled, enchanted.*  
--Mary Chase

Australian aborigines go on Walkabouts, Thai monks conduct Prayer Walks through the jungle, Native Americans fast on vision quests, and the ancient Celts walked the hills of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. All found guidance, healing, inspiration, and connection with spirit on their walks.

The Medicine Walk and Ecopsychology You are invited to explore your relationships to nature and to your life's journey through the medium of time and travel in a natural place. The roots of this activity lie in an aquifer of ancient and nearly-universal practices; its particular forms reflect the modern fields of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. From a variety of sources, including psychology, environmental education and philosophy, natural history, the worldviews of land-centered peoples – both ancient and modern, and earth-centered spirituality, ecopsychology offers insights about human-nature relationships. Among its central themes are that humans and nature are part of a larger whole, that nature (both inner and outer) is intrinsically healthy, that the illusion of a separation of humans from nature causes great suffering both for humans and for the natural environment, and that a deep and profound reconnection is both necessary and possible. Ecopsychology holds that an intimate relationship with the natural world is essential to optimal mental health.

These are insights which need to be rediscovered anew by each one of us. Unless they are experienced deeply within the context of your own life, they will remain empty concepts or, worse, dogmatic belief. This practice grounds the theory of ecopsychology in direct contact with nature; a medicine walk provides an opportunity for this reconnection. The exercise presented here has its roots in one of the oldest of human spiritual practices: leaving one's familiar world to wander, opening to new insights and gifts through direct and immediate contact with the wildness of the world, and returning to share this gift for the benefit of one's People and one's Place.

The Medicine Walk and Life Transitions The practice of the medicine walk also invites us to explore your own relationships to our life transitions. Based on the nearly-universal myths of the First Nations and Native American vision quests, Australian Aboriginal walkabouts, and other wilderness-based rites of passage, the

medicine walk has many of the elements of longer and more thorough rites of passage.

From the point of view of ecopsychology, change and transformation are natural and necessary. The predictable distress of transitions is a sign of growth and can be an opportunity for discovering profound support for yourself and your life's journey.

Integrating these perspectives, the medicine walk is not only a means of connecting to nature, but also a means of connecting to your own sources of guidance and support during life transitions. It helps provide answers to the basic questions of a life-transition: where am I going?, what must I leave behind?, what do I need to learn now?, and what will I have to offer from the next phase of my life? It may also be used as part of a healing or renewal, offering answers to questions such as what do I need to see about my life now? what parts of my inner self do I need to reclaim?, what will help me move toward greater wholeness?, and what can I offer to my People and my Place? Medicine, here, refers to your unique expression of presence, power, and human potential, what you need in order to be whole, and what you have to offer others. I use the term in its original Greek sense of guidance. Medicine is guidance toward wholeness. Sometimes it is bitter to taste; sometimes it is sweet. Either way, it is growthful if we are able to take it in. Your medicine is both a gift from outside and a quality of your inner nature.

This version of the medicine walk is not intended to substitute for a rite of passage. A full-fledged rite of passage would involve more commitment (such as three or four days of solitude and fasting in the forms we typically use), and it would be recognized by one's community as conferring a new status on the quester. Nevertheless, many people have used a medicine walk as preparation for a longer and more intensive vision fast. For more information on rites of passage and a larger context for the medicine walk, I recommend the books by Steven Foster and Meredith Little (1988, 1989).

The Walk The Medicine Walk is designed around one day in a natural area, starting at sun-up and ending at sun-down. The basic prototype of the Medicine Walk can easily be expanded into a 24-hour, two-day, or longer exercise, and others have found value in shorter trips as well. However, we encourage you to try to make it at least a full day. The natural cycle of dawn to sunset provides a fitting container for your experiences.

You will take a specific question with you or carry a specific task on your Medicine Walk. Beyond that, your Walk is essentially aimless, with no particular goal in mind. The question or task you take will vary with your own needs, but we have found that the more clearly you can articulate the purpose of your Walk, the more profound its results can be. Spend time before the Walk clarifying its purpose for you. This is not just a day hike, it is a ceremony of sorts. Why are you leaving home and going to this trouble? The answer goes well beyond rest and recreation. Questions other have taken with them include these: What do I need to remember at this point in my life? Who are my People; whom or what do I serve? What do I

need to let go of in order to go forward with my life? What is blocking my current transition? What do I need now in my journey toward greater wholeness, health, and meaning? Am I ready to take the next step in my life? One of the most profound questions you can take with you is, What is my medicine; what do I need in my life in order to be whole, and what do I have to offer to the world for its healing? Let yourself come to more and more profound questions in preparation for your Medicine Walk.

On your Walk, alternate walking and resting as you choose, and let yourself wander. Pay special attention to "calls" you may get during your walk: a particular tree or rock that captures your attention, a stream that interests you, a bird, rabbit, or deer that asks you to follow for a way. You may let the lay of the land dictate your journey, or you may just "follow your nose." Bring a journal and use it to record thoughts, images, and insights. At some point during your Walk you will find an object that represents the important insight or teaching from your Walk. Bring this object or a clear memory of it home with you as a concrete reminder of that teaching.

You are encouraged to fast from food during this Walk. Fasting will help to focus you on the world around you and your inner process. You will find that fasting will clear your mind and open your body, deepening your experience. If you do decide to bring food, keep it simple such as a piece of fruit. In any case, be sure to drink plenty of water (one-half-gallon for a day's walk is a minimum).

Keep in mind that your walk is more an inner journey than an outer, physical journey. This is not a time to strike off for the mountain peak or to practice your rock-climbing skills. Nor is it a time to pit yourself against nature in an attempt to prove your grandiosity. The spirit of the Medicine Walk is to balance spontaneity, sincerity, and openness with humility and respect for the presence of death. You might say it is more a time for being than doing, a time to contemplate rather than achieve.

When sunset comes, return home. You may be feeling tender and fragile. Be gentle with yourself and choose the kind of environment you would like to come back to. You may wish to continue your learning by writing in your journal or you may decide to visit with a friend who will listen to your story. Whatever you do, stay close to yourself and your feelings.

Adjust these instructions as you need. In our perspective, there is no single "right" way for this but rather many ways, each with its advantages and disadvantages. Your goals and constraints can guide you in these choices.

Beginning and End The medicine walk is a process with a definite beginning and ending. These two points should be marked with ceremonies. The ceremonies will express your willingness to make the most of this experience and your respect for the power of this form. They will focus your attention on the present. You may choose a simple marker such as bowing with gratitude and respect to the earth or kneeling and offering some words to those powers which will guide you on your Walk. Perhaps you will leave an object at the start of your Walk and reclaim it at

its end. Let the object represent something of your "ordinary" life and preoccupations that you will let go of for the duration of the Walk. You may design more elaborate ceremonies if you wish, incorporating the forms of your heritage or designing new forms to fit the moment.

Where Choose an area where you can wander safely without concern for getting lost or assaulted. Heavily wooded areas, steep mountain slopes, or areas with many cliffs are to be used only with caution due to the risks of getting lost or falling. If you are relatively new to walking alone in natural areas, stay close to your car or prominent landmarks. It is best if you will not encounter other people on your walk but this may be difficult near large cities. If you do encounter others, a simple nod will suffice to let you continue on your way. Otherwise take the precautions you would walking alone anywhere.

Preparation and equipment The night before you are to leave, let a friend know where you are going and when you expect to return. Make arrangements for the friend to initiate a search if you do not return in a reasonable time. (And make sure you contact your friend when you do return!)

Bring a day pack with these items:

- Water (at least two quarts, more if you are in a particularly hot and dry area. Leave water in your car to drink before and after your walk)
- Rain gear, fleece or wool cap, and jacket (Hypothermia can be a risk any time of year, and it is potentially life-threatening. Even if the weather looks fine, taking these items may save your life. A wool or fleece cap is important because it is warm even if it gets wet.)
- Matches and a small candle for firestarting (used for signaling and warmth)
- Bandanna or two (useful for many purposes including a signal flag, a cover-up from sun or wind, a sponge, a bandage, a gift-wrap, etc.)
- Sun hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen (if necessary)
- Journal and pencil or pen (optional, for recording insights, events, daydreams, and messages)

Let your preparations be part of the larger context for your walk. Remember that you are preparing yourself on a symbolic and archetypal level as well as a practical and physical level. Be as mindful as you can while you gather your equipment, choose a place, and contact a friend. Watch your dreams the night before your walk — you may have an important dream — and get a good night's sleep so you will be well-rested and alert.

After you return Much will happen to you during this walk. It is important that you take time to understand and integrate these learnings. Write in your journal and ask a close friend or guide to listen to your story. Try to identify the general "plot" of your medicine walk and to integrate the various images, plants, animals, weather, and physical features that came to you. There is no need to jump to simple or simplistic explanations of your experiences. Rather, take the time to come back to your experience again and again, understanding it in deeper ways.

Treat your experience as if it were a dream and begin the process of interpreting it and making it yours. If it were a dream, you would consider each element to have

some deeper meaning and value to you. So it is with your walk. Recognize each element as representing an aspect of your psyche, an aspect of yourself which is more or less unconscious. If, for example, an unusual tree catches your attention, see that tree as an archetypal dream image, as a part of your inner life speaking to you through nature.

Examine your medicine walk as an expression of your relationship to nature: both outer nature (the physical world) and your inner nature (the psychic world). What about you was revealed in the mirror of nature? What thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears, intentions came to you? How were they confirmed by the natural world? What gifts do you have to bring back to your People—your loved ones, the ones who support you and whom you wish to support, family, community, the whole including the Earth?

Two experts in this rite of passage and wilderness work, Steven Foster and Meredith Little (1988), have described the purpose of the medicine walk this way: A microcosmic form of the threshold trial [of the Hero's Journey], the walk is a mirror that reflects the signs and symbols of your inward quest. ... As you wander, become aware of Nature's awareness of you. Signs and symbols indicating your life purpose, inherent gifts, personal values or fears, will present themselves. As you discern the beauty of life and the reality of death in the world around you, ask yourself: "Who are my people?" Pay attention to who you think about, worry about, wish was with you, and so forth. (p. 35)

Examine your medicine walk as an expression of your current transition or life issues. Your walk may be a metaphor for transitions. Your preparations at home, the drive to the trailhead, and leaving your car correspond to the Severance phase of the transition, the ending of the previous stage of your life. The time you spend on the walk, away from your home and friends corresponds to the Threshold phase, the time between stages when your sense of identity and life direction is unclear. Going back to your car, driving back home, meeting your friends and family again correspond to the Return phase, coming into a new life stage and a new sense of your identity, rights, and responsibilities. How did you approach each of these three phases of your walk? How does that compare to how you are handling your current transition? How did you feel? What parts of your experience did you hold on to and what parts did you resist?

You may also see your walk as a reflection of your life's journey. Look at it as if it were a myth representing your life. Examine how you approached your walk, what meaning it had for you, how you made decisions, how you were accompanied by fear, deficiency, joy, or trust. What thoughts or images recurred? What people visited you through your fantasies? How did guidance come to you? What obstacles and powers were you granted? What blessings were offered? What was the central lesson?

Most of all, reflect on the answers to the question you took out with you. The answer may develop over some time; it may not even be clear when you return. However, by holding the question and your experiences on the medicine walk, you will get an answer.

The Gift: Your Medicine: Those who carry out traditional rites of passage understand that you do not go to the “Sacred Mountain” or the “Underworld” just for yourself. You also go for your “People.” Who are your People? With whom do you identify; who do you care about? Going on a medicine walk incurs a responsibility to give back to your People.

What is your Medicine? A sense of your medicine may come in the form of an object like a stone, a flower, or an antler shed to make way for a new and more impressive one. It may come in a bird’s call, the shadow of a deer in the trees, or the whispers of a stream making its way back to its source.

How are you to find or know your medicine? It will almost certainly not be by searching for it or using your rational, logical mind to figure it out. Be open for a sign, use your intuition, be aware of sights, sounds, and feelings, and let it come to you. You may not understand it fully until some time after your walk but you will find a symbol of your medicine. If this symbol is immediately clear to you on your walk, accept it with wonder and gratitude. If not, accept it as a kind of seed crystal from which the fuller understanding of your medicine can grow. The symbol may creep up on the edges of your consciousness or it may stun you with breathtaking clarity. In any case, before your walk is completed, find a concrete symbol to bring home with you. Get to know it. Do not close off your understanding prematurely. Allow it to continue to grow.

Doing it “right” It is natural to wonder if you are doing your walk in the proper way, especially if your circumstances lead you to modify your Walk from the model presented here. In a way, this concern is a sign that you have taken its potential to heart and that you recognize the power of this kind of activity. On the other hand, this worry can detract from your experience. If your concerns lead you closer to your personal experience and to a safe experience, welcome them. If your questions nag at you or begin to give you a hard time, tell *them* to take a walk! The principles here are not some external standard of rightness but potential and openness. Some ways of walking carry more potential and some ways carry less potential; some ways open your experience to new possibilities and some close it. Each choice you make can be in the direction of disclosing and opening your path and your particular gifts.

Cultural roots of medicine walks A comment about the relation of this exercise to specific cultures’ spiritual practices is in order, too. Some people associate the practice of the medicine walk with Native Americans, and it can seem as if we are inappropriately using Native American Indian spiritual practices. It is important that we not misuse other cultures’ spiritual practices. We pay grateful respect to those Native Americans who have engaged in practices similar to the one described here. In many ways, it is due to their keeping such practices alive that we are drawn to this one.

At the same time, each of us comes from a long line of people who have practices very much like this one. Many cultures, perhaps even most cultures – Africans, Europeans, Asians, and others – around the world have developed similar

practices in which people leave their homes to seek guidance and healing in the natural world away from contact with other people. We see all these practices, including our version of the medicine walk, arising from the same deep archetypal human roots. Rather than trying to borrow Native American spirituality, this version of a Medicine Walk offers a means to reclaim our own relationship with ourselves and our place.

Deepening your learning Fully digested your medicine walk can go on for a long time. Many people who have undertaken this form of a medicine walk have found it useful to discuss their experiences with a guide, counselor, or close friend. We recommend that. We also recommend that you work with your journal to help you see more aspects of your medicine walk. Here are some questions you can answer with another person or in your journal. Use them as guides.

1. Why did you go on this medicine walk? What was the general "plot" of your medicine walk? What happened?
2. What natural objects, plants, animals, weather, and physical features caught your attention? What might they have been "saying" to you?
3. What were the darkest parts? What were the brightest? What parts of your experience did you try to hold on to, and what parts did you try to push away?
4. Treat your experience as if it were a dream. Reexamine the answers to questions 1-3 as if you were describing a dream. What new meanings emerge?
5. How were you guided? What challenges or trials were presented to you? What blessings were you offered? What lessons did you receive? What tasks were you given?
6. How does your walk reflect your relationship to nature and to your own nature? What parts of yourself were reflected to you? How did you respond to them? How did your feelings and reactions to nature change after your walk?
7. How does your medicine walk mirror how you are handling your current transition? What encouragement did you gain? What do you need to remember in this transition?

The medicine walk as a practice I have been describing the medicine walk as a specific technique for exploring your relationships with nature and your life transitions. It can be useful and powerful as a one-time event. However, the medicine walk also has the potential to expand into an ongoing practice. It offers a structure for ongoing exploration and inquiry into these important questions. At first, it is a technique. However, by practicing the medicine walk over time, you may find it becomes more of a way of life, a means of staying in touch with your deeper connections, and a friend on the journey.

You may adapt this practice in many ways. Try it in other settings. Find or make a

threshold, cross it, walk through your neighborhood, your town, or your city with a question, following your nose. Then re-cross that threshold, and see what medicine you have returned with. You can do this in a familiar place, as well as a new place. Do it when you go to work one day or when you have a day to yourself at home. Play around with the time. What is a one-hour medicine walk in a local open space like for you; how about three or four days alone in a wilder area? When you need to enter a difficult or challenging situation, hold as if it were a medicine walk. When you are stuck in an airport for a few hours waiting for a plane, treat it as if it were a medicine walk. You get the idea; be creative. The medicine walk structure is completely open to variation.

Perhaps the attitude of the medicine walk will become part of the fabric of your life. The question, "what is my medicine now?," can become second nature, and the entirety of your life can become a medicine walk, rich with meaning, possibility, and service to your People and your Place.

For more information

Foster, S., and Little, M. (1988). *The Book of the Vision Quest*. NY: Prentice Hall.  
Foster, S., and Little, M. (1989). *The Roaring of the Sacred River*. NY: Prentice Hall.

<http://www.johnvdavis.com/>

<http://www.schooloflostborders.com/>