

Therapeutic Ingredients of the "Vision Quest"

In earlier cultures a method for gaining insight into oneself was the "vision quest" (a term associated with the Native American version of this practice). A person would go on such a quest in times of crisis (when an answer to a problem was needed), as a rite of passage into adulthood, or simply out of a desire for self-discovery. The person typically would wander into the wilderness alone, or go on a journey of some kind, searching for an insight or "sign" that would reveal some truth. Sometimes the person deprived himself of food, water, and shelter, perhaps for several days at a time, which induced an altered state of consciousness. This mixture of altered consciousness and an intense "desire to discover" caused something to happen - an experience, an event, a "sign" of some kind that resulted in an important insight.

Might there be features of such vision quest practices that resemble some of the therapeutic features of traditional psychotherapy? The following exercise incorporates some of these features. It is not a re-creation of such vision quest practices, but it incorporates some of the basic elements. Here are the guidelines for the exercise:

1. For a period of at least 4 hours, leave your room or home and go out somewhere, anywhere. Don't plan ahead as to where you will go or what you will do. Don't do anything in particular (e.g., don't go bowling, to the movies, to visit friends, etc.) Just go where your instincts tell you to go. Let your "intuition" carry you. Just wander (of course, don't do anything dangerous).

Do this alone. This is very important! If you meet people you know, you may talk to them for a few minutes, but no longer than that. Continue on your way.

2. While you wander, concentrate on some question about yourself, something you want to know about yourself, or some problem you have been experiencing in your life. You could simply focus on the question "Who am I?" or any similar question. Think, reflect, ponder this question - but also let your mind "drift."

3. The whole time keep in mind that you are on a "quest." You are looking, waiting, expecting something. Something will happen. There will be a sign that will give you an insight into the question. It could be something that happens to you, something you see or hear. The world out there will give you the sign!

4. Take along a notebook or some paper, and a pen. Every half hour sit down and write. Note the time, the place, and what has happened. Write about your reactions to what is happening to you. Write about your thoughts, feelings, and insights. Write these notes for yourself! You do not have to hand them in. But if you want to give them to me (along with your paper), I will be glad to read them and give you feedback. During the exercise, if you're anxious, frustrated, or bored, ask yourself "why" and write about it. If nothing important has happened, think and write about why that is so. How could you make the exercise more effective?

THE PAPER (to be handed into me):

Divide the paper into the follow sections and use these headings:

1. **A SUMMARY OF THE EXERCISE:** Summarize what happened to you during the exercise. What did you think about, do, feel? Where did you go? Describe as much detail as seems important. What were your reactions to this exercise? What did you learn from it?

2. **THE SIGN:** In this section focus on the SIGN. Did you receive one, more than one? How did it happen? What did it reveal to you? If you didn't receive a sign, talk about that. Do you think there was a reason why you didn't? What do you think about the whole idea of "receiving a sign?"

** These two sections, obviously, are about your personal reactions to the exercise. Feel free to say whatever you want. You are NOT graded on what you say. If you prefer not to mention certain things, that's O.K. too. However, if you're very interested in getting my feedback on your experience, the more you tell me the more valuable my feedback can be.

3. **A THEORETICAL EXPLANATION:** Propose a theory about how such practices as the vision quest might work. Use ideas that we have discussed in class and read in our texts. For example, consider these questions:

What psychological processes are involved in the exercise?

How does the quest lead to insight?

What factors would intensify or weaken its effect?

What roles do the environment and the "sign" play?

Apply concepts from psychoanalytic and humanistic theory, such as free association, insight, lifting of repression, self integration, separation-individuation, self-actualization, existential issues, etc.

Be sure to take this section of the paper seriously, since it will be an important factor in determining your grade.

Length of the paper: The paper can be as long as you want, but write at least two pages for the first section, maybe one or two for the second, and at least 2-3 pages for section 3.

TAKE THIS HANDOUT ALONG WITH YOU DURING THE EXERCISE.