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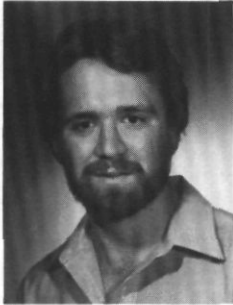
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## Psychodynamics of the Vision Quest

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In primitive cultures a method for gaining psychological or religious insight was the vision quest, or vision search. A person would undertake the quest to find a solution to a crisis that confronted the clan or as a rite of passage into an adult identity. The person would wander into the wilderness, alone, searching for a sign or vision that would reveal some truth. Because the person deprived himself of food, water, and shelter, often for several days, a heightened need state and altered consciousness was induced. Hallucinatory drugs sometimes were used. The mixture of altered consciousness with the intense expectation and desire for discovery triggered an experience, or a series of experiences, that led to insight. Afterwards, a shaman or medicine man often helped the person interpret the vision. This technique played a particularly important role in the American Indian culture, as illustrated in Neihardt's (1959) account of the Sioux warrior Black Elk, whose visions foretold the downfall of the Indian nation, and Brown's (1974) descriptions of his own vision quests to understand the fate of the Indian people.

Elements of the vision quest exist in our contemporary culture—including the common walk or drive by oneself "to have time to think," as well as the more rare odyssey across distant lands in search of knowledge. In some cases the endeavor is aimed at insights bearing social or religious ramifications, but often it is a more personal concern for self-understanding. Although the person may not consciously be searching for a sign or vision, events that occur along the way and the physical surrounding itself become incorporated into the psychological process.

While teaching an undergraduate course on psychotherapy, I (J.S.) asked students to undertake a modified version of the vision quest. The exercise was intended as an educational activity to enhance their under-

standing of intrapsychic processes, as well as an opportunity to study the psychodynamic processes of the vision quest and its potential as a type of self-directed psychotherapy.

The students were given instructions that highlighted the essential features of this practice: (1) solitariness—they had to do it alone, and although they might meet people along the way, extended conversations should be avoided; (2) a wandering away from their usual environment, allowing intuition to carry them somewhere; (3) a wandering of thoughts and emotions; (4) self-reflecting and self-questioning—posing to oneself, as a reference point for the wandering, either a specific question about some issue in one's life or a more open-ended question about one's identity, such as "Who am I?"; (5) a determined attitude of searching, looking, expecting a solution or insight into the question proposed, perhaps in the form of an external sign from the environment, or an internal realization.

The quest lasted 4 hours, just a fraction of the time primitive man devoted to the endeavor, but a more realistic goal for the students. They kept a log of their experiences, at half-hour intervals, jotting down their thoughts and feelings about what was happening, and at the end of the exercise wrote a summary interpretation.

#### *Free Association and De-structuring*

Most of the students embarked on the vision quest with a specific question or issue in mind. However, the log entries revealed no systematic, organized confrontation of these issues, but rather a loosely structured process of free association. The students described the quest as "daydreaming," "a relaxing of the mind," "letting go of your thoughts and feelings." Similar to the psychological atmosphere in psychodynamic therapy and contemplative states of consciousness (Deikman, 1982), the drifting associations of the vision quest induced a de-automatization of routine ego functions. Defenses, censoring operations, and restrictions against primary process were temporarily suspended. The students reported dreams, fantasies, long-forgotten memories, periods of heightened emotion, and an increased awareness of inner conflicts.

During the vision quest, unmoored from its usual physical and psychological surroundings, freed from the habitual tasks of everyday living, the self has the opportunity to perceive new aspects of its own structure, to retrieve the jostled pieces of previously unconscious representations that bob up through one's meandering thoughts—to experience the affect embedded in those representations. The students described the feeling of trying to retrieve lost parts within themselves, trying to reach "something that has been buried all these years."

While some students stated that "you have to stop thinking and begin feeling" for the vision quest to work, others also noted that "at some

point you become detached and step back to observe yourself." The vision quest is most effective, similar to psychotherapy, when there is an oscillation between the experiencing and observing ego that enables the surfacing and assimilation of previously unconscious aspects of self. Writing a log of what happened probably enhanced the observing and integrating process. Often it was not until after the exercise was over, after a period of unconscious incubation, that students retrospectively realized what was important about their vision quests.

### *Environmental Context and the Sign*

The vision quest is a wandering that has meaning and intentionality. It is a living projective test in which the participants, consciously or unconsciously, drift to surroundings that reflect their intrapsychic life. One student, who jokingly referred to himself as a "latent schizophrenic," spent his quest sitting on the dividing median of a busy highway; another walked back and forth across a bridge while questioning her decision to marry her boyfriend after graduation; another sat below a weeping willow tree to reflect on her childhood experiences with her distant, neglectful mother. The unconscious impetus underlying the wandering is evident in the sensation of being drawn to a particular place without fully realizing why. For many students the pull was toward a familiar setting from their past, often from childhood, which paralleled their recollecting early events and relationships. Students exploring new aspects of their personality ventured into unfamiliar, and sometimes risky, locales.

One shy, introverted woman, who lamented the subjugation of her artistic self to the part of her that insisted on a practical, successful career, decided to break away from the trail in the woods near her home. She followed a stream into an unfamiliar area of the woods, "driven by the feeling that I was looking for something . . . that I had to find out where the stream ended." She discovered that the stream ended in an old, murky pool of brown water. At that moment she recalled a dream that, surprisingly, became reenacted in reality at that point in her quest:

The scene I was faced with triggered a memory of a dream I once had. I was exploring a stream, and yet I was being hunted, or something. I thought I was all alone out there until I heard voices down the hill. . . . Oh God! They are shooting guns! Real guns! What do I do? I'm scared to move! I've got to get out of here but if they hear me they might think I'm a deer and shoot me by accident. . . . (after running through the woods and finally reaching a familiar road) . . . I can't believe I was that stupid! I took a chance and look at what happened back there. I should have stayed on the trail.

The dynamic interplay between self structure and external environment has an impact on the person at various levels of conscious aware-

ness. To the reader, the log entries resemble the cards of a projective test, richly packed with data, open to multifaceted levels of interpretation. At times it is clear that an event during the vision quest helped associations break through to new, productive avenues—though the person did not or could not fully verbalize this effect. In some cases, realizing the influence of a “sign” was just below conscious awareness—only later fully surfacing as a result of the interpretations which I (J.S.) offered in the margins of their log. One student came to my office excited about one of my comments. Most of her vision quest centered on ruminations about her hostile, apparently schizophrenic mother, and grandiose stories about being independent and able to overcome her problems by herself—yet she felt withdrawn and isolated from others. I had suggested that her sign, the symbol or self-representation of how she had adapted to her family, was the turret that had captured her attention during the vision quest:

As I was retracing my steps back to campus, I once again passed a house with a turret. Turrets had always fascinated me. Maybe that's what was so appealing a prospect that led me to visit all the castles in West Germany. Some music from the campus spilled over onto this serene scene. The song I recognized was “if I build this fortress” (and continues “around your heart . . .”). How eerie that song playing as I pass this turret.

The most psychodynamically eventful and therapeutic vision quests were those in which the sign—and its meaning—clearly registered on a conscious level. The most impactful signs occurred (or were “realized”) suddenly, unexpectedly, catching the person off guard. The subjective experience was that it happened “out there” but simultaneously gripped one's intrapsychic world, triggering an idea, memory, or emotion. In some cases the meaning of the sign was instantly clear—it may have led to a fresh insight or simply “rubbed one's nose” into something one already vaguely knew about oneself. In other cases, only the strong feeling that an event was indeed significant, in some way, captured one's attention. Layers of meaning then slowly unraveled during the remainder of the quest, sometimes as a result of the sign interacting with other signs. The sudden experience of a sign and the subsequent deciphering of its meaning parallels the inspirational and elaborational phases of creativity (Kris, 1952).

Most common were the perceptions of other people in the environment as signs pertaining to problematic relationships—for example: seeing a mother kissing her child, which stimulated associations about early maternal deprivations; or seeing an old man resembling the father “who must have loved me underneath all that drinking.” The sign also took the form of a situation that coalesced around the individual, as in the case of the person who found himself stuck driving between two school buses on their afternoon rounds, which provoked associations about his feeling

trapped at college and by the course his career was taking. For one student, whose quest led to a breakthrough in understanding her reactions to a friend's recent death, the sign surfaced as a bouquet of flowers in the cemetery where she was walking. At first she perceived them as "gorgeous," but then was gripped by confusion and frustration:

It's beginning to drive me crazy that I'm alone. I don't know why I just don't leave this cemetery. I feel trapped by my own self—like there is some sort of answer *in here*—and then I don't think that way at all. I feel confused and negative about everything—which isn't like me. I'm beginning to hate this place. I hate these flowers and I hate the emptiness of this place. I feel like screaming but there is no one even here to hear me.

She realized that seeing the bouquet "made me live through the funeral all over again," that the flowers represented her lost friend. Her subsequent log entries indicated that she was beginning to work through the feelings of abandonment, anger, and guilt related to the grieving process.

It is important to note that the students were not always aware of the environment or open to the appearance of signs. "I was solely into myself—I did not know if it was day or night, cold or hot." "Nothing around me even phased me." Some students were completely inner-focused and did not search for signs at all. Most oscillated between intrapsychic preoccupation and outer-directed attention, a rhythm of withdrawal and contact. Perhaps it is this rhythm that sets the psychodynamic stage for the appearance of signs.

According to the American Indians, the sign will surface and lead to insight when the person psychologically merges with the external context. Similar to mystical states of consciousness, the loosening of self boundaries permits a freeing of the self to mingle with facets of the environment, resulting in a dynamic interplay between self and world. Self and object representations become more mobile, more easily projected onto external cues. The sign is the use of an external event to help elevate unconscious affects or representations to conscious realization. Insights are achieved by borrowing useful images from the outside world, temporarily incorporating them into self-object systems, and thus applying them as fortuitous handles for stimulating intrapsychic change. The sign is a type of transformational or transitional object (Bollas, 1986; Winnicott, 1953) to which the self surrenders and fuses in hopes of moving itself through a healing metamorphosis. The sign—something the person sees, hears, feels, or does—serves as tangible sensory-motor event, a "concretization of experience" (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984) that symbolically reveals and confirms a formerly hidden aspect of self. For the American Indian, it was the appearance of the totem, the animal that

represented one's essential nature. Unlike simple introspection, or intellectually exploring oneself, encountering a sign relies less on conscious efforts and delves deeper into unconscious processes.

### *The Restoration of Self*

In his studies of ancient religious rituals, Eliade (1959) identified the importance of "anamnesis," the ritualized act of returning, remembering, reliving one's origins. The ontological need to restore or re-create one's history appeared in nearly all the vision quests. The students were drawn to their past, sometimes to actual places from their childhood. They reflected on the relationship of their present life to their past and future, looking for causes and themes, ordering their life story into a "narrative" (Spence, 1982) that conveyed important truths about themselves and established a sense of self continuity across time. They also felt the need to recapture "something that was lost" (childhood innocence, according to Indian tradition) and tended to idealize their child self-representation—as if they were attempting to reconcile themselves with developmental losses.

Being by oneself, away from home, observing people from a distance, activated separation-individuation issues. It stirred in the students feelings of loneliness and isolation, leading them to struggle with their needs and fears about relating intimately to others, to more fully realizing the importance of their relationships to their sense of self. They seemed to reenact and grapple with conflicts from the practicing and rapprochement phases of development (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Memories of past separation achievements (traveling, moving away from home) were recalled with pride. One student, suddenly experiencing a boost of confidence about perambulating through the city streets, omnipotently stated, "I admire my courage to walk alone and be myself." Other students felt considerably anxious about being alone, as in one student's vivid reports of growing more and more distressed as she walked away from campus. A common theme was the rapprochement conflict between the urge to separate and the fear of separating, the ambivalent balance of excitement and anxiety about individuation:

I want to be everything. That's the problem. But when I step forward to achieve, my mind's doubt holds my foot back. This causes anxiety. I don't feel myself walking. I'll be on my way.

Paradoxically, restoring the sense of self during the vision quest also may evolve from the momentary loss or dissolution of self. Many students felt drawn to natural settings such as woods, lakes, and rivers. Merging with and losing oneself in these surroundings (a type of fusion with a maternal self-object) created feelings of peace and contentment. It was a

variation of the search for oneness (Silverman, Lachman, & Milich, 1982) that can rejuvenate one's identity—as if submerging and then emerging from a state of fusion brought the features of one's self into focus. In particular, gazing at bodies of water conjured up associations of the loss of self (drowning) as well as purification and rejuvenation. Nearly all the students thought about the inevitable negation of self—death. Yet these reflections seemed to be self-enhancing as well as anxiety provoking. The dynamic between themes of self disintegration and integration were symbolized in observations about houses decaying and being constructed:

One particular house caught my eye. It was old, broken down, and virtually falling apart. Surrounding this house were more new and stable houses. Outside was a small garden with few flowers in bloom, yet some still seemed to survive. Like nature, life is revived, or faces death. Life is constantly changing around me, forcing me to change with it. Just as the house has become worn and old, and the flowers face the change of seasons, I too must enter into different stages in my life.

### *Conclusions*

Although we have attempted to outline some of the basic elements of the vision quest, we must acknowledge the considerable complexity of the exercise and the significant individual differences in how people reacted to it. Various phases are embedded within the overall process—periods of doubt, hope, curiosity, frustration, boredom, impasse, and venturousness. Within and across individuals there were a wide variety of resistances—intellectualizing, dwelling on issues, early termination, and avoiding anxiety-provoking thoughts, often by fleeing from the environment that stimulated them. There were also significant variations in the styles of overcoming those resistances and actively engaging the exercise.

No psychotherapist is present to stimulate or guide the vision quest. Therefore, we must assume that there exists a natural, internal impetus toward psychological growth—which is consistent with theories about self-actualization—and that the vision quest may tap this resource. However, the students' experiences undoubtedly were influenced by the implicit presence of the psychologist who sent them on their quest. Transferential themes about authority figures, including wishes for someone who could rescue or heal them, often surfaced in the students' thoughts. In addition, by providing feedback on what transpired, the psychologist played an important role in interpreting the students' experiences, especially their signs—not unlike the role of the shaman in the ancient practice.

Many elements of this modified version of the vision quest resemble aspects of psychodynamic therapy. Perhaps this ancient practice could be employed as an adjunct to psychotherapy, or in the training of psychotherapists and public education. It might serve as a useful tool for en-

hancing the awareness of one's intrapsychic life and for activating the individual's ability to draw on internal therapeutic resources.

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You cannot see yourself; and in somewhat the same way the chance is that you are not aware of those principles or ideas which have the chief rule over your mind. They are hidden for the very reason that they are sovereign and so engrossing.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN  
*Lectures on the Present Position  
of Catholics in England*

As the repetition of those symbols which evoke the feeling of that primordial event which initially called the community into being with such power that it effects our presence at the event. . . . In other words, represents the primordial event.

URBAN HOLMES  
*Ritual and Social Drama*

Gods, as in Greek tragedy, force themselves symptomatically into our awareness, our pathologizing is their work.

JAMES HILLMAN  
*Re-Visioning Psychology*