

The Day Walk

*The day walk is a journey upon the face of the earth, a ceremony of preparation, a pilgrimage through the mirror of nature. In the natural world, signs and symbols of your inward journey are reflected. The walk is a distilled version of the threshold phase of the vision fast*¹

—Steven Foster and Meredith Little

It has been said that all spiritual stories, across cultures, have the same plot line.² A hero comes to an impassable river, or other obstacle, which is guarded by a demon. The hero withdraws to gather strength, to prepare spiritually. Only when ready, the hero calls forth the demon to do battle. By defeating, befriending, or taming the demon, the hero takes it on as an ally, absorbing its powers, which then allows a crossing of the once-impassable river. Consider how that plot line informs the task of a day walk: a solitary, ritualized day spent in nature, meant to clarify a stated intention and to incorporate it into one's life. The day walk is a spiritual story with three phases. First comes *severance*: withdrawal from one's day-to-day existence, the severing of ties, the preparation for the struggle to come. Next is *threshold*: the time for threshing the wheat from the chaff, for doing battle with the demon and then passing over the previously impassable. The final stage is *incorporation*: taking the lessons back into the body of one's life.

Severance

Preparation: The day walk is best begun at or near the dawn of a new day: the dawn of a new state of awareness. If you wait until the morning to pack, to mill about the house, to say goodbye to those you leave behind, you risk a distortion of thought, of feeling, that may ripple through the rest of your day. If you can, complete your packing the day before. You might even drive yourself to the place of the walk the night before and camp-out overnight. If not, try to arrive close to sunrise.

Intention: Perhaps the single facet of “a day walk” that most separates it from “a simple walk in nature” is intention. Any spiritual practice begins with intentionality: a mindful attention to the *how*, *why*, and *what* of one's inner life, and how they relate to the outer world. Preparation for a day walk, therefore, best begins in advance of the actual day.

Ask yourself: *What's up for me?* Perhaps it is a relationship with something outside yourself: another person, a group of people, a job, a duty, a path—whoever, whatever. Or perhaps it's about something entirely your own: an unresolved emotion or uncertainty, a healing or unhealthy practice, a personal commitment to be made or rescinded. Or maybe you want to deepen your relationship with one of the three phases of a rite of passage that's active in your life. *Severance: What is dying, or needs to die, so I can move forward in my life?* *Threshold: How am I now in between the old and the new—and what hopes and fear comes with that?* *Incorporation: How can I mark or celebrate or embrace the rebirth that is happening?* Finally, a day walk may also be used as preparation for a vision fast—a fuller rite-of-passage ceremony that incorporates the same elements as the day walk, but in a more expanded form.

Whatever the reason for the walk, whatever the intention, see if you can distill it into its essence. “Tomorrow, I walk the earth to . . .”

Threshold

Solitude: So much of a person's self-definition is derived from outside relationships that mirror back *who* and *what* and *why* we are. While this is an essential part of human life, these relationships may become habitual and confining. A retreat to solitude offers a person the chance to explore, perhaps even shift, this self-definition. By removing oneself from the day-to-day, we allow something new to emerge. Anthony Storr, a psychiatrist and author, warns us: “This is not without its dangers. Any form of new organization or integration within the mind has to be preceded by some degree of disorganization. No one can tell, until he has experienced it, whether or not this necessary disruption of former patterns will be succeeded by something better.”³ It's wise, therefore, to prepare before the walk and to receive support afterward.

Ritual: Begin and end your walk by marking each transition, as though you are truly crossing over a *threshold*. To another person, or a circle of people, declare your intention aloud before leaving (and again before telling your story upon returning). Or if alone, sing a song, smudge yourself, step over a line in the ground or between two trees—whatever feels right. The idea is to create a simple ritual that marks the transition from the day-to-day into sacred time, then back again.

Throughout the day, consider what other simple rituals you may perform to mark the working through of your intention. Perhaps you'll experience a climactic moment or a special insight—something that needs to be externalized. Or maybe you'll come gradually to some deeper understanding, as your intention evolves inside you. Keeping a journal through the day can be an important part of this process, helping both to clarify what is unfolding, and to find an expression for it through ritual.

When you're done, be sure to mark another threshold to return to daily life.

Fasting: The most obvious part of the day walk's fast is the act of not eating. On the walk, you also are called to fast in other ways: from talking, from working, from being in outside relationship, from following habitual patterns. The act of fasting from food then becomes, at once, a physiological event and a metaphor for this day walk practice. It changes the very biochemistry of how we are nourished, while also asking us to consider what it is that truly nourishes us in our daily life. Similarly, closing the day walk with a celebratory evening meal is a dual act: a change again in biochemistry and an opportunity to celebrate the recreation of community.

Nature: The natural world is naturally sacred. If we respect its beauty (as well as its power and unpredictability) and we walk it gently, then Mother Earth in turn will behold our own beauty and will hold us gently. A day walk is an invitation to explore this relationship. You wander. You sit and then walk. Walk and then sit. All the while you look for signs and symbols that have a charge—that choose your attention. What do these outer signs have to teach you about your inner life, about your specific intention, about what has brought you on this sacred walk? How is the outside world a mirror to your inner life, your inner struggle, your inner path? Walk the land with intuition as your guide. Perhaps you'll be drawn to one special symbol that speaks most clearly to your intention. A tree half-dead. Or a bird screeching. The vast open sky. Whatever the symbol, welcome it in as a guide to this deepening of insight.

In sum: explore the outer landscape as though you were exploring the inner landscape of your own self.

Incorporation

Storytelling: When we tell our inner stories out loud, we make them real, we give them shape, we invite them back into the body of our lives. You might tell the story of your walk to a trusted friend, a counselor or guide, or within a safe circle of people. Choose carefully. Just as “the day walk” is not the same as “a walk in nature,” so too is the story best told within “a council”—a person or a group of people that will honor the story—rather than as “a casual conversation” that may rob the story of its sacred power. Borrowing from *The Way of Council* by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle,⁴ the rules for sitting in circle are few, but powerful: speak from the heart; listen from the heart; be lean of expression; be spontaneous; and maintain confidentiality. In this special setting, a deeper inner wisdom may find expression in the outer world, giving it form, making it real, declaring it to be true.

In the days after the walk, ongoing journaling—a different kind of storytelling—may further reveal what your intention has called up. What meaning is to be found in the symbols you encountered? What was said to you by creatures or objects that you met along the way? How were you guided on the walk? When and where did you encounter the strongest emotions? How is this walk a reflection of your own current journey through life?

¹ *Trail to the Sacred Mountain: A Vision Fast Handbook for Adults*, Steven Foster & Meredith Little.

² *The Way to Shambhala*, Edwin Bernbaum.

³ *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Anthony Storr.

⁴ *The Way of Council*, Jack Zimmerman & Virginia Coyle.