

Where Are My People?

“Of the three phases of a rite of passage—*severance*, *threshold* and *incorporation*—the hardest to navigate, by far, is *incorporation*.”

I say this well-practiced line to most groups at the end of a School of Lost Borders program. I offer it as a wake-up call for the initiate. Having just survived the ordeal of a wilderness solo—no company, no food, no four-walled shelter—they will now return to a world that, save for a few precious friends, won’t understand much of what they say about their experience.

“Smudging and sacred space . . . intention and vision . . . authentic storytelling and mirroring.”

“Huh?”

Back in the world of jobs, 40-hour weeks, paychecks, and all the rest of urban/suburban survival, the initiate may feel as if the intoxicating world of a wilderness fast has become dream-like, perhaps even a touch “crazy”. The challenge of incorporation, then, can be summarized in three questions—questions that may take a lifetime to answer.

- *How do I embody the vision I received during my fast?*
- *How do I re-enliven everyday life with that kind of sacred feeling?*
- *To whom do I tell my authentic life-story?*

The last question might be rephrased: *Where are my people?*



Two of the behaviors that set early humans apart were the systematic sharing of food and altruistic group defense. Other primates did very little of either but, increasingly, hominids did, and those behaviors helped set them on an evolutionary path that produced the modern world. The earliest and most basic definition of community—of tribe—would be the group of people that you would help feed and help defend.

— Sebastian Junger, from *Tribe: On Becoming and Belonging*

When Junger’s book first came out, it set me pondering. Where is *tribe* – “my people” – in the lives of people in modern society? Is it to be found in family? A core group of friends? A church? Or, for some, does it simply not exist? As Junger writes, “A person living in a modern city or a suburb can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day—or an entire life—mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone.” How stark those lines read in contrast to what I have known with many a wilderness group, beginning with my first fast in Death Valley back in 1999.

I entered that first wilderness fast with one overriding fear. Not snakes. Not being alone. Not the dark of night. Not even four days of fasting. It was people—“complete strangers” as Junger writes. By that time of my life, I already had done about a hundred solitary retreats in nature, so I knew just how cracked open I would be after the four-day solo.

In that open state, I’m going to return to a circle of people? Yikes!

As it turned out, returning to that group was the greatest revelation of that first fast. In an expansive state following a solo, I learned, there’s no better group to receive you than a circle of fellow fasters. Upon my return to basecamp, a feeling of belonging bubbled up to the brim of my soul and spilled over. At the time, I didn’t have words to describe that special feeling. Now, borrowing from Junger, I need only one: *tribe*.

Or perhaps two: *my people*.

In the years since, I’ve learned much more about *tribe*, including the creation of my own definition. Junger points the way with his: *a group of people that you would help feed and help defend*. Mine is slightly different: *A tribe is a circle of people with whom you would share both food and authentic stories*.

So how about you? Where is your tribe? Who are your *people*?

Four Steps for Cultivating a Communal Circle

STEP 1: Include people you trust when doing a wilderness fast.

A Story from 1999: Prior to my first four-day fast, the lead guide asked each participant to write a letter of intent; I chose to send mine to the guide and also a group of friends. The essence of that intent: *I want to let die my old way of doctoring, motivated by anger at injustice, so that a new way inspired by compassion can emerge.* I then invited my friends to a birthday party, asking each to bring a symbolic gift that would help mirror my intent. Soon after, a month before heading to the desert, I did a sunrise-to-sunset *day walk*.^{*} I spent that day contemplating their gifts and then writing a thank-you letter explaining what those gifts had revealed. Later, after the four-day fast was over, I met with each person to tell them my full story.

I had no words for what I was doing. I do now. I was reaching out to “my people”.

** A day walk is the short-form of a four-day wilderness solo: fasting alone in nature without four-walled shelter, but for one day instead of four.*

Resources for Step 1:

- **Your own address book.** Creating a communal circle begins with sharing sacred, authentic stories—and good food, of course! Call upon your most trusted friends in this way, before and after a wilderness fast.



STEP 2: Make the practice of a leaderless day walk your own.

A Story from 2000: Six months after that fast, a dear friend was preparing to leave on a year-long trip around the world. She had done a vision fast the year before mine, helping to inspire me to do my own. Once again she offered inspiration, now in a simpler form. “As a way of saying goodbye,” she said, “let’s do a day walk together.”

At first light on a Saturday, we drove silently to Limantour Beach in Point Reyes. In the carpark we drew a threshold circle in the gravel, spoke our intentions, smudged each other, and then we each stepped out of the circle to spend the day alone. We reconvened in the late afternoon, built a beach fire, shared a meal, and told our stories. Together we honored her upcoming adventure, and my grief at her leaving.

The lesson my globe-trotting friend taught me is that the day walk—a simple, yet powerful ceremony—can be created anytime. The natural world is always waiting, and our inner world is always waiting. All that’s needed is to make the time for the walk, and then to ask a friend, or a circle of friends, to tell your story.

Resources for Step 2:

- **Day walk essay.** This essay can introduce the day walk practice to an uninitiated friend.
- **Packing list for a day walk.** More support for a novice.

(see link at end of this article to get copies of these resources)



STEP 3: Call a full circle together for a day walk.

A Story from 2001: That first Death Valley experience of real community was so captivating that, months later, I assisted the same guide with her next fast, and the following year I did the guide-training at the School of Lost Borders. In between, I began leading weekend day walks, calling in friends and their friends. The form was simple: reserve a nearby campground; offer dinner Friday night; hold an intention council after dinner; smudge people out early Saturday for a solo; feed them a break-fast mid-afternoon; and hold a storytelling council that ends by 8 p.m.. The form was simple, and yet the experiences were magical. The feeling of real community was coming alive in my life.

Resources for Step 3:

- **Sample weekend schedule.** Adapt this to your own form of a day walk—be it a day-long or a full weekend.
- **Sample logistical letter to the group.** Issues to cover when calling a circle.

(see link at end of this article to get copies of these resources)



STEP 4: Start an on-going circle of your own.

A Story from 2009: After six years of leading wilderness groups at the School of Lost Borders, I was hungry for a way to bring together a group that would support both my own inner work and that of others in the circle. I dreamt of an on-going leaderless group in which everyone would take turns organizing our gatherings—be it for a few hours, a whole day, a weekend or an entire week. That group is now in its tenth year. Not everyone comes to every gathering, but now we all know each other's stories so intimately that any version of our circle is a safe haven, a place for belonging. Somewhere along the way we even gave ourselves a name. Long before Junger's book appeared we started calling ourselves "The Tribe".

Resources for Step 4:

- **A friend to help organize a group.** The start-up year for a leaderless group takes major organizing. It can be done by one person, but even better would be a couple of people.
- **Guidelines for organizing a gathering.** Use this template to organize a gathering.

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I close by saying again: *A tribe, a communal group, is a circle of people with whom you would share both food and authentic stories.*

Who are your people?



Visit Scott's website for this article and related writings: www.scotteberle.net

For links to resources mentioned, visit this webpage: www.scotteberle.net/where-are-my-people.html

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