

## Vision Quest

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**Medicine man and Sun Dance chief Thomas Yellowtail is a pivotal figure in Crow tribal life. In this chapter from *Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief, An autobiography as told to Michael Oren Fitzgerald* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman,1991), Yellowtail exposes the path of spiritual realization according to the Plain Indians.**

One of the main rites of the Sun Dance religion is the vision quest. It is a period set for solitary prayer at a remote place.

A person will usually spend three or four days of fasting on the vision quest, saying his prayers during all that time. He goes away up in the hills, gets away from people, and goes off by himself, and there fast and prays for either the three- or four-day period he selected before he began his quest.

There are many intentions that a person may have when he prepares to make a vision quest. He may want medicine, some kind of power to help him in battle or in all of his life. Strong medicine powers would protect the man so that he would not be wounded and could not be hit by an enemy's arrow. That kind of medicine would make a man successful in battle with the enemy. A lot of men seek those kinds of powers, and that is what they have in mind when they start out on the vision quest[1]

Some men might seek different kind of medicine power or understanding. They may to be able to heal or doctor people. They may seek the answer to a question or a problem that is bothering them or the family or tribe. And above all, a man may want to pray in this way because this is a way to come closer to Acbadadea. In this rite each man may awaken in his heart the knowledge of the Maker of All Things Above. A man may pray for any of those things because they would be helpful to him, his family, and his tribe, but a man also must pray for virtue and the correct understanding with which to face life.

In olden days, all young men had those kinds of feelings, and that was only why they would go on the vision quests. Sometimes a few of them would go out together. Maybe four or five of them would take a sweat bath together and start out together. When they go out to the hills, each one would go on his solitary way. Each one had to face the medicine powers alone. One would take that pointed hill over there; another one would take the next hill. They would scatter, each by himself, putting in his days. Some would stay four days, some less. Some of them might have received something by the time they came back; some may have come back without anything. Some of them would have been successful and might have had a vision, have been visited by an animal, or have had a dream or something to bring back, and that is good – that meant something. Another would come back and say that he did not receive anything. It means that he would have to try again later, and usually he would. He would try again later on and try again and again. Many of them ended their days by saying, "I tried not once, but a number of times, and

finally I was visited by a bird or animal that gave me medicine, and I finally have some medicine, some kind of power or understanding.” And that was the way in those days.

They would have kept trying until they got something. Some of the most sincere ones would probably receive something the first time they went on a vision quest. It depended on the sincerity of the person. If they have a good, strong intention, then they may have been the ones who were successful in their dream or vision right away. They would have been told afterwards what to do to preserve the medicine power given by the bird or the animal, and they would have done what they were told. Perhaps they might have been told to make a medicine bundle or carry part of the animal with them when they went on their raiding party against the enemy or when they needed to make the medicine.

Before a man would go on a vision quest, he would first consult with a medicine man. It was the duty of the people who asked for instruction to bring a pipe or a smoke to the instructor. If the medicine man accepted the responsibility to instruct the younger man, then they would first offer the smoke with a prayer. Then the medicine man would tell the young man what to do to prepare – how to go through purification before going up and all the other necessary information. He would explain to the young man how to seek war medicine. Some would have had a different purpose. The instructions for the prayer depended on the young man’s intention.

In those days when people wanted to go fasting, they first prepared themselves by taking a sweat bath to purify themselves. This is still my practice because it is very important to undergo a purification before and after every major undertaking. Right after he was through with the sweat bath, the vision seeker would get up to where he wanted to spend three or four days upon the hill and high mountains. According to his own choosing, he would select a place where he wanted to fast. Many would sacrifice a finger when they got up there. They would chop off the top of their finger and offer it to the Great Spirit or to an animal. If a bird came and took that piece of finger, then the bird would probably come back after a while and adopt that person, give him medicine, and tell him to go home. This could happen in one or two days’ time, although the person’s intention may have been to spend four days. If he was visited by an animal of some kind who felt sorry for him sitting there torturing himself, then the medicine power would say, “I have come to see you; you are torturing yourself; you had better stop that and go back home, and I will give you some kind of power and tell you what to do.” After the man would get home, that bird or animal – it might be a hawk, or a crow, or a meadowlark, or any kind of bird or animal – would come to visit that person and tell him what to do. The person would end the fast right then and there and go home; he would have received something already.

People on the Crow reservation today still use the vision quest. Young men and women go out on vision quests. Some come to me, and we pray, and then I take them into a sweat bath. I have to go to work and cut some wood and build a fire and heat up some rocks and sweat with them in there and pray for them; then they purify themselves and set out afterwards. We take the sweat bath during the day so that they will still have daylight to go up to the place of the fast, right after they are through with the sweat bath. If they don’t have a place in mind, then I recommend a good place, take them there, and I say, “Now this is where you should stay for the fast,” and then I go away. The person should then stay in exactly the same place. We carry wood along with us which we gather as we go to the spot. They do not have fire all the time, just in the morning and evening. One in

the morning, just as the sun rises, and one as it sets in the evening. They build little fires and put some sweet cedar or sweet grass on the fire to purify themselves and their pipe. They will carry a pipe or some cigarettes. For such an important rite an Indian pipe is better than cigarettes. They say their prayers, and they retire when the dark comes. Even when the vision seeker sleeps, he or she would face the east.

In the olden days, the man going out to seek his vision would wear a buffalo robe, moccasins, and sometimes a loincloth. When he reached the area of the retreat, he removed all of his clothing and almost always was exposed to Nature unless he covered himself with his robe while he slept. I instruct those who ask my advice to follow the traditional way of the old timers. Plenty-Coups and all the great Absaroke warriors sometimes went into battle without clothing, and so it is also in spiritual warfare. We will speak again of the different clothing for each of all the rites of the Sun dance religion, and you will see that in almost all cases the person participating in the ceremony must first humble himself before Creation, both outwardly and inwardly, before he can receive something of value.

I tell them all these things, and many more: "Watch out if you are visited by an eagle; watch him; he may talk to you and drop a feather to you. If so, go and get that feather; it was given to you by the bird; it means something great."

Yes, I have been consulted by certain people who want to go on vision quests; they come to me, and I take a sweat bath with them, and then they start out. If they don't know where to go, I go with them and get them to the right place. I sometimes give them special advice on what they might say in their prayers. All of this keeps me busy, but that is what I am supposed to do if an Indian youth comes wanting to go on a vision quest. I give them some sweet cedar for incense to be put on the fire, and on the way to the place where they will fast, we stop and gather quite a bit of sweet sage for bedding. When we arrive, we lay sweet sage in a circle over the entire area where they will fast. This includes the place where they will sleep. At the edge of the bed of sweet grass we make the area where they build the fire in the morning and evening. This is done toward the east. Light and knowledge come from the east, and this is the main orientation of the prayer.

When a person is on a vision quest, he must have certain attitudes and intentions for his prayers to be sincere, and then he must carry these over into his daily life. It is easy to forget what you learned during the trial; unless you remember to carry on your prayer continually during every day of your life, you will not have learned one of the most purposes of the vision quest. Each time we talk about one of our sacred rites, you will hear me talk about the spiritual attitudes which a person must possess as that person participates in any rite. It is possible to learn the outer steps that must be accomplished in a rite without learning the inner meanings that they are the keys in these sacred traditions. Each seeker must therefore open his heart to the Great Mystery as he tries to follow these sacred ways, because the perfect accomplishment of these outer steps of a rite will be worth noting without the knowledge of the inner meanings. If the intention of a person is to achieve outward glory and superiority over other people, then that person will never be given great medicine, because that person's intention and attitudes are not in harmony with the correct spiritual purpose. If the reason you participate in a rite is wrong, then you will receive no reward. If you participate because you know the purpose of the rites and

you want to express your gratitude and love to the sacred ways, then you may eventually received a great reward.

It will not be the extent of the outward achievement that determines spiritual rewards. Those individuals who possess great physical strength may be asked to give much more in order to show their sincerity. All men are not given the same physical gifts, and when you remember that it is the interior values that make the real worth of a man woman, you can see that some individuals must sacrifice much more in order to express the same degree of sincerity than another person who has less to give. Everyone should keep these thoughts in mind as they try to understand the Sun Dance way and the meaning of the spiritual tradition that it represents.

For those who have been sincere in the solitary invocation, Acbadadea will send a reward in the form of some medicine power. There are many different medicines a person can receive in different ways: different animals, different birds, maybe the little people, or one of the powers of the universe. When a person returns to the world after a vision quest, he does these things: first, when he gets home, he takes care to say prayers; he must take a sweat bath using sage, and so forth, to purify himself again before he gets back among his people. Then the meaning of the vision must be explained by the medicine men at home. After the instructor hears the whole story of the vision, he can help explain things to the young man which may not be clear. The medicine knows what must be done by the recipient of the medicine in order for the recipient to protect the medicine. So after the young man tells his story, we take a smoke and say prayers; then the medicine man tells the young man what he has been given and what he must do. The recipient of the medicine usually is instructed to make a medicine bundle that will preserve and protect the medicine power. I have spoken of the bundle which protects the medicine rock of Chief Medicine Crow and the great care which is exercised to protect the medicine in a sacred manner. In the same way, many men and women will make medicine bundles for their own medicines in accordance with the instructions of a vision or a medicine man. These bundles serve as a constant reminder of the spiritual gifts we have been given and the corresponding attitudes which must always be present in order to safeguard our spiritual blessings. The medicine man will instruct the young people in both the outward procedures and the inward attitudes to be remembered by the successful vision seeker.

Young people may think they know enough, that they don't need help or instruction, but that is not so. It is necessary to consult a man who has had experience in the sacred ways in order to help a younger man follow the straight path. Some men may need less help than others, and some men are given great gifts without great effort. You can never tell, because some men will work hard for years and years and they may never receive great rewards that we can see. But all men should seek the help of a man who has learned the spiritual ways before they try to do something by themselves. You can better understand spiritual matters after years of following a sacred path. There is always more than can be done, and you cannot keep your power or understanding unless you continue your walk through life in accordance with the rules regarding spiritual matters. A man must be humble before the great mysteries will grant him anything. A humble man will ask for guidance from a spiritual man.

This is the explanation of one of the four major rites of the Sun dance way. The sweat bath, The Sun dance, and the use of the pipe or smoke with prayer are the other main

rites. There are many other rites which were important in the sacred lifeway of the olden days, and some of these other rites are even carried on to some extent today. While these other rites should not be neglected, it is important to remember that the four main rites makes up the center of our spiritual heritage, and without them we would be lost. In our modern world today, we may seem like drowning men because of the loss of much of our spiritual tradition. As drowning men we should cling to these four rites as our lifeline and never let go, because this lifeline can save us.

*The representation of the Medicine Man as a nude figure is not a mere fancy ... for in many of thee religious rites the priest appeared in such manner. This nudity is not without its significance, it typifies thee utter helplessness of man, when his strength is contrasted with the power of the Great Spirit. With his best intelligence and greatest skill in the use of his hands, man is powerless to bring into existence even so much as the tiniest flower, while out of thee force of the will of the Mysterious One, all things in the heavens and the earth have come into existence with beauty, grandeur and majesty.[2]*

Francis LaFlesche, Omaha

[1] Among all Plain Indians, each member of the tribe may receive his own revelation, creating a collective prophethood which is strictly regulated within the framework of the tradition in general. This widespread prophethood has many different degrees and does not prevent major tribal revelations such as the Sun Dance, sweat lodge and Indian pipe. The apparent “individualism” of the Indian is partly a product of fidelity to one’s own vision, or “medicine”, a personal relationship with a particular theophany which is supported by the relationship between the individual and the tribe with a reciprocity of virtues, gifts, and duty.

[2] Francis LaFlesche, *Who was the Medicine man?* (Hampton: Hampton Institute Press, 1905)