

Native 'vision quests' release healing power of nature

In July 1996, I pursued a vision quest—a four-day fast, alone in nature—under the guidance of an Ojibway elder. One year later, during a time of burnout and overwhelming sadness, I turned once again to the native tradition for a healing retreat.

Each time I wrestled with the discrepancy between what I was doing and the spiritual values of my parents and grandparents.

On my first quest, I received my name—*Kinu Anaquit Eque* (Eagle

Cloud Woman). The love of the eagle and the insight of the cloud are both honourable and humbling gifts. Facing the ongoing challenge to be an instrument of healing and hope, I accepted this spirit name with gratitude.

I travelled the path of the medicine wheel, beginning with the red from the east—the place of the eagle and the joys of all creatures, those that fly, swim and crawl. The love of the eagle initiated me on this quest and I knew I was surrounded by this powerful love.

Moving south to the green—the place of youth, of trust and innocence, of the plant world—I relived my

adolescence and prayed for the youths in my life. I was nourished by the trust that they are cared for. The plant world became alive for me in this place—the different grasses, the wild flowers, the clover bursting with sweetness.

The blue of the west—adulthood, introspection and deepening faith—is the place of the rock. I sat every day on a huge grandfather rock. It warmed me, and as I communicated with it, I could feel its aliveness.

Meditating on this rock, I sang many times: "No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to the Rock I'm clinging. Since Love is Lord of heaven

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and earth, how can I keep from singing?"

Finally, the north—the place of our elders, of wisdom from three grandmothers, of love and assurance that I will have the strength to love my children the way they need to be loved.

I was also assured that I will receive the insight and grace to proceed with my career in the way of the Creator. Three geese honked loudly overhead, confirming the assurance.

Every bird and animal, plant, tree and sound had something to teach me. Truly I was blessed, like Jacob who, after sleeping with a stone for a pillow, said, "This is a sacred place, and I didn't realize it!"

The creation spirituality of the fourteenth century theologian, Meister Eckhart, had prepared a bridge for me between the traditions of Christianity and native spirituality: God the creator is in all the works of creation.

In 1997, when I returned to the native tradition for healing, I was given a different task: fasting for two nights by the fire and two days by the water. The teachings I experienced from the water and the fire have allowed me to walk across the bridge between these two traditions with peace and resolution.

Sitting by the water broadened my understanding of the compassion in the incarnation. On my first day, I was graced with lessons from the dragonflies. In response to my tears of weariness and despair, a beautiful blue dragonfly came and sat at my waist. I looked down into the tender face of this insect, its deep, crystal clear eyes full of compassion. The eye contact we shared was a timeless experience of the depth of God's compassion—a kind of incarnation.

Sitting by the water, I was visited by many dragonflies, some azure and others rusty red. I waited for another soothing encounter, but these had a different lesson to teach. As they flitted happily about, they taught me about vibrancy and love of life. I longed for one more delicate dragonfly to alight on me, but the very disap-

pointment taught me about letting go and experiencing life to its fullest.

During my nights at the fire, I received powerful lessons about gratefulness. Underneath my sadness at losing a dear friend, I felt fear. Whenever I felt it, I burned cedar—the "protection medicine." As it burned, I prayerfully released my fear to the fire, to be cleansed and transformed into positive energy and love.

This experience joined me to the spirit of Jesus who said, in his darkest moments, "Not my will, but thine be done," and who responded to the sick, "Go in peace, your faith has made you whole." While I sat alone, an answer emerged: "It all begins with gratitude. Greet the divine light in everyone and be grateful for everything—for life, suffering, for brokenness and loss."

My vision quests have graced me with the opportunity to integrate mystical, practical and sensual aspects of my faith. My experience of oneness with creation enhanced my experience of oneness with the Creator through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Tangibly, in creation, I am touched by the Creator, who in the incarnation also walked this earth in bare feet, and felt the spirit of creation breathing through his pores and sweat glands.

Mother Earth, whose womb we enter in the steamy darkness of the sweat lodge, is supporting me as a physical expression of God's love. The incarnation comes alive as I experience the energy of God's presence when I counsel clients, just as when I admire a tree.

My encounter with the divine is expanding beyond the definitions of any one tradition. For this I am humbly grateful.

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