

The Three Thresholds to Wilderness Attunement (Unedited tape transcript)

Why is it that some of us feel fairly comfortable in the Woods for a few days, then just have to leave, while others of us can get by for a week or so, then also feel compelled to go back? And still others of us can stick it out for several weeks, until we feel we just can't take anymore, and then have to pack out also. The reason is that there are three thresholds that we meet and need to transcend, one before the other, before we reach a place of comfort and acceptance — before we can feel at home in the Wilderness. I call these thresholds the Psychological, the Tolerating, and the Gifting.

The Psychological Threshold is arrived at in about three days. The doubts and the fears and the regrets and the relationship turmoil and the other unfinished business that we bring with us into the Wilderness all of a sudden have no easy distraction. There is nothing else but us and our thoughts and feelings. They can completely possess us — it's all we think about, there's no diversion, no way to get away from them or drown them out. Where is the serenity we came to find? By around the third day we have either found some peace with our demons or we have given in to them and gone home to either deal with them or dance around them.

The Tolerating Threshold is reached at around a week. Most of us can put up with a general level of physical discomfort for about that period of time. You know, the nights-are-cold and-I-don't-have-a-heavy-enough-sleeping-bag, it's-been-raining-continuously-and-I-haven't-been-able-to-get-out-much, I-ran-out-of-peanut-butter, I-haven't-found-any-berries, the-fish-aren't-biting-and-I'm-eating-the-same-food-every-day stuff. Sure we could go on if it were a life- and-death matter, but we are bored and miserable and no longer have a point to prove. So we quickly pack our gear and make a bee-line for the comforts of home.

If we have evolved adequate shelter, are at peace with the weather, and have found sustaining food, we will then coast through the Second Threshold and be pacing our way to the third — the Gifting Threshold. I also call it the Feast and Famine Threshold, because when we are in the Outback for a longer period we experience the up-and-down cycles of the natural way of things — hot and cold, wet and dry, bounty and scarcity. We who understand these cycles know that if it is raining for several days it will eventually stop and Sun will again shine. We know that if our sleeping bag is wet we will eventually be able to dry it out. If the Fish aren't biting today they eventually will, or perhaps we'll find some Clams or a Marsh full of Cattail roots over the next hill.

I could also have called this the Lucky Threshold, because we are often getting by on little more than that. Most of us can tolerate this for but a few weeks at most. A moon (month) is usually the limit; by then we have lost a good deal of weight, we are dirty and probably have an infected wound or

two, and we have come to dread facing another day. Feast and famine will sustain us no longer. Luck has its limit and we've reached it.

However, if we have found our Balance with the cycles of the Wilds, we will ride through this threshold as though it didn't exist and enter what I call the Gifting Way. It will no longer be Man against Nature — a struggle to find food and stay warm and dry or hope/trust that we will stumble upon something to eat. It will be as though we are being given what we need, as though our mother is watching over and providing for us. For that is exactly what is happening.

We have grown into the Awareness that brings trust and the Attunement that brings the gifts of trust. We are now comfortable and warm and dry and well-fed, for that is the Gifting to those who know Balance. Now we can dwell in the Wilderness indefinitely. We have our feet firmly on the the Path of our Ancestors and we are walking side by side with our Native kin of all the Relations — the Human, the Finned, the Furred, the Feathered, the Rooted. We are now just as comfortable as we are in our living room, just as well-fed as at a restaurant. If we choose to leave the Bush we can return at any time, knowing we have a place there.

"OK," many of you are now saying, "how do I learn to grow through these thresholds so that I will be accepted by The Mother-Wilderness?" That is the subject matter of many of the articles in this magazine. Keep reading and studying and practicing. Keep paying attention to your growth as an individual. Go out in the Wilderness for progressively longer periods of time without pushing yourself to the point where you have to face a threshold. As with all skills, it takes practice, and as with all awarenesses, it takes exposure.

These thresholds actually apply to all of life, whether it be a job, a lifestyle, or a relationship. So it is not coincidental that those who have found the way to Balance in their personal lives are also likely to find Balance in the Wilds.

Work Ethic (Threshold Addition) (unedited tape transcript)

We come from a culture in which we are trained to be single-minded, to be single of focus, "Put your nose to the grindstone," "Keep your mind on the task," "Be goal oriented," "Finish one job before you start another," and so on. This works in Civilized environs because in isolating ourselves from the natural realm we have eliminated all variables and can thus focus on one particular task. It cannot work in the natural realm because life is an interplay.

For example, if I would like to make a bow, I would first need to gather my materials, some of which have their season, and some of which would be available to me as the result of other endeavors. Sinew would be gifted me from the hunt, perhaps by a Deer or a Caribou. Glue would come from the

hide scraps. The bow stave might come from a lightning shattered Tree that I come across on my winter trap line, and so on. As you can see, it might take some amount of time before I gather all the materials needed to make a bow. I might, in fact, start the bow with materials I have at hand, then let the project sit until the next materials come along that I need and pick it up again.

If I were focused on one project, this bow, I'm sure you can see how attempting to complete the bow could get pretty frustrating as I might have long periods of wait between procuring the materials that I need. So, I might have a number of projects going at once, at any particular time working on the specific project for which the season is right and I have the necessary materials. In this way, I am continually making progress and living in balance with the gifts and energies of the seasons.

My gathering and hunting trips are also as multi-dimensional. For example, if I'm going out to pick Blueberries, on the way I might notice some Deer tracks that tell me there is an old doe who is lame and therefore might be one to hunt. Perhaps I'll see some new Hazelnut shoots that I'd like to come back and gather later for arrow shafts. At the base of the ridge where Blueberries are growing, I'll see that a Spruce Tree was blown down by last week's storm. I'll make note of that so on the way back from picking berries, I will pull up some of the roots to use for lashings on the Birchbark canoe I plan on making the following spring. As I'm pulling up the Spruce root, I'll see that there's a healthy patch of Golden Thread which I will tell my Mother about so that she may come by to gather some of the root for medicine.

As you can see from this example, what may initially appear to be a single-focus gathering foray is actually quite multi-dimensional. This fits hand in hand with the use of the materials that are gained in the gathering. Herein lies the dilemma for the person newly returning to Native Ways. He wants to be productive, he needs to accomplish certain tasks, but he is frustrated because he cannot focus on one task at a time and bring it to completion as is his accustomed way. He is facing a threshold.

Threshold Addition

In our civilized lives we are accustomed to gaining emotional gratification in concentrated doses that are not necessarily part of the flow of our lives. This may take the form of movies, books, sporting events, workshops, dates, ceremonies, parties. Whatever the event, the scenario is the same. The preparation, which involves detachment from one's regular life. The anticipation, which creates expectations. The peak event, which usually includes intense emotional involvement and release. The let-down,

many find themselves in a state of depression, low self-esteem, self-questioning. Boredom, we resign ourselves to what we consider our normal humdrum lives and re-integrate ourselves into it, our normal humdrum life. Preparation, we make plans for the next emotional high, which future-projects us out of our boredom.

We become locked in an endless cycle of emotional high and depression. The high becomes an addiction.

Here's an example. A man who is a month-long into the year-long wilderness living experience that I conduct, felt this intense need to leave for a weekend to participate in a bow-making workshop. He came back, telling us all about the intense emotional high he experienced there. He said that it was such an intense, beautiful experience that people in the workshop were drawn to tears. Then, he woke up the morning after he got back and he crashed.

He felt depressed, he started questioning if he should be involved in this year-long experience, and then he looked for another emotional high to try to recapture the one he had over the weekend. He hadn't been able to start a fire by friction yet, so he pulled out his bow-making kit, achieved a fire, and experienced an intense emotional high.

That evening, when we talked about the experience, I guided him to an awareness of the cycle he was trapped in. He asked how to break the cycle, and I replied that he was already doing it. By connecting with the means and ends of his existence, he would find emotional nourishment in all aspects of his life, as opposed to settling into a stale, everyday existence and living for periodic emotional highs.

He came to realize that the bowmaking class experience could not sustain him. It was an isolated experience, it was not a part of his life. Had he gotten to know the trees, their spirits and qualities, and then had respectfully gathered the wood for his bow, used the tools he had grown to know and developed relationships with, and then made his bow in the context of the lifeway in which he would use it, and taking the time and the energy to come to know the ways of the animals he would be hunting, and the sacred way of the hunt, he realized that his making of the bow might not have occurred on that particular weekend and when it did happen, it would be part of a greater, sustaining, emotional experience that was an integral and long-term part of his life.

He realized that to respond to his impulses for instant emotional gratification was reinforcing the addictive pattern, and that he had to, first of all, accept his emotional patterns, secondly, to not suppress the feelings but to allow them to come up and have their play because otherwise they would boil up in other ways, and then to give himself the time, dedicate the energy to cultivating a rich and sustaining emotional climate around himself that was based upon real life, the life he was living, and to change that life if it was not emotionally fulfilling rather than to try to supplement it with

emotional fixes. He knew that this could take some time, as old habits die hard. He had already learned that giving is receiving, that he would have to have the wherewithal to invest if he was to expect change. By this point, he had also come to know that it actually takes less effort to heal than to maintain dysfunctional ways.

This transformation is actually easier than it might sound, because what we are doing is transforming into our natural selves. As a species, we evolved in a climate of sustained emotional nourishment. This is how we are biologically programmed to function best. So, once we start our evolution, which is actually an evolution into our real natural selves, it gets easier and easier with each step.

A Native doesn't work, he moves according to inspiration and guidance.

When we reach the _____ Threshold we encounter a change in work habits/attitudes. In our regular lives we worked by the clock, worked for an abstract reward (money), worked because of an ethic, worked for a nebulous future. In other words we worked because we didn't have to. Now, as those reasons for working evaporate, we find it hard to motivate ourselves. We worked for so long when there was a sketchy connection between our work and our real life that now, with those secondary reasons for work evaporated, we not only see no reason to work, but develop a distaste for it.

Yet there is a reason to work—one we are not yet attuned to. Instead of the clock there is the turning seasons and the spawnings and ripenings. Instead of money there is warmth and food, instead of an ethic there is one's place in the Circle of life, instead of a nebulous future there is the very real present, the now. But these things mean little to one who is not accustomed to them.

So we find ourselves adrift between the fading past and the fuzzy future. We feel unmotivated, lethargic, even angry with ourselves.

Then one cold morning we gather some firewood and bask in its warmth and something clicks—I gathered firewood, therefore I am warm! I am connected to the means and ends of my existence! It's that simple—Giving is receiving. We have crossed the threshold. Work is no longer work, but direct involvement in our lives. No free lunches, no labor for no visible lunch or to fill someone else's lunchbucket. Just a sweet berry if you pick one, hunger if you don't. Anxiety lifts, anger dissipates, the concept of work transforms into a lust to be involved in a life that makes sense!

Get more specific with thresholds? I can only speak in generalities because the threshold experiences are different for everyone.

After a while (the time varies widely from individual to individual) we

start doubting ourself. We no longer trust our decisions, we have trouble believing things are as we perceive them. We grow disillusioned with ourself, some of us will get frustrated and angry with ourself. We are accustomed to a black and white world, where cause and effect are the modus operandi. We see things, process garnered information, make decisions based upon the information, and then act. Usually our actions produce desired results. If not, we usually understand why.

Not so in the natural realm. What we perceive is usually much more complex than what we are accustomed to in our civilized life. And sometimes what affects us were not able to perceive. There is no one person or event or object or agenda item to relate exclusively with. To trust in any one of them is erroneous, because it could be just a piece of a greater puzzle. Or it may be just an illusion created by our ego in its struggle to fit unfamiliar information into an old paradigm.

Even more confusing it is a doorway to a greater perception. When we are not aware that it is a doorway, we tried to quantify it, make something of it. We end up hanging on to the doorway rather than stepping over the threshold.

The scenario usually goes something like this:

- We feel first reveal disoriented, sometimes depressed. We wonder what is wrong with us, or we may externalize and start doubting someone else.
- Nothing changes, so soon we become self-critical and questioning of our beliefs and the decisions we've made.
- Our ego looks elsewhere for the problem, blaming or accusing the environment or other individuals.

This brings us to a threshold: By not being able to trust our feelings and perceptions, we disconnect ourself from our Heart-of-Hearts. In doing so we have worked ourselves into a corner of isolation — we have created a personal crisis. We need to be functional, we need to feel sane, and we cannot do either when we cannot trust.

What causes this dilemma? Inexperience. We are used to trusting ourself — making our own decisions, ruling our own destiny. And we are used to trusting others — they making our decisions and ruling our destiny. When this construct begins to crumble (and crumble it must, for it is just an illusion bought into by the ego), we the go into crisis. We no longer have an operating system, so in desperation we lash out. We either take it out on ourself or pound up somebody else. Our operating construct tells us that when things don't go the right way (i.e. our way), someone/thing is to blame. And, to justify our feelings, that someone/thing is also to shame.

What is the way out? More appropriately, we should be asking, "What is the way in?". If we were to draw an image of ourself as a functioning being, we would probably depict ourself with a large head, a tiny stick-figure body, and a little dot for a heart. Is it any wonder that we would have

difficulty in relating with the immense, complex and beautiful Web of Life?

The way in is getting caught in the Web. It's scary, because we'll no longer have control.

The Web is powerful — much stronger than the ego. And the Web is all-encompassing — far more intimate than our construct. Is it worth embracing our fear to do it? Go and ask Sparrow, ask any Flower, ask a Rock. Anyone who lives the Old Way will tell you that the Bliss of Communion is the Unending Orgasm of Life. Can you imagine anyone trading that in for the illusion of control?