

Aimless Wandering: The Power of the Medicine Walk

by David Moskowitz

When I was a teenager I learned something very valuable about learning: that it doesn't just happen in a classroom. One of the things I learned outside of the classroom was the value of solitary time in Nature. Time spent alone outside teaches many things, especially about oneself. Over the evolution of human cultures this has been recognized again and again. Given half a chance, many children stumble across these same lessons on their own. How many of us have memories of special "secret spots" that we would visit in order to escape adults, or just to be there for its own right?

What is a medicine walk?

Different cultures have rituals and traditions which draw on the powerful educational, therapeutic, and spiritual power of solitary time in the natural world. Solitary time in nature is a vital component of all Journeys' rite of passage programs. The medicine walk¹ is one of the activities we use to help participants prepare for and process the lessons of a vision fast. It is also used in its own right to encourage them to explore their personal relationship with the natural world, learn to listen to their instincts, gain self confidence, promote curiosity, and explore and challenge their fears.

There are many variations to the medicine walk, but in its simplest form, I like to think of it as "aimless wandering". The goal of the walk is to be without a goal. Watches get left at home or in camp. Participants are encouraged to go wherever they want (within reason, see safety precautions below), to wander off trails, through the brush, along streams, wherever seems interesting. They are encouraged to let go of the worries and concerns of daily life and to focus on the present moment--each moment. Wandering slowly across the landscape, exploring interesting trees, taking a moment to reflect on a stream, following a deer trail through the brush, students become engulfed in the world around them, losing themselves in the stream of the present moment. The experience can be incredibly joyous and relaxing.

Where does the insight and learning come from?

Humans learn experientially. The learning that comes out of a medicine walk might come from physical experiences that the student has during their walk such as getting lost for a time, watching fish feed along the edge of a stream, discovering the tracks of a bobcat, or watching the sun move through the sky as the day progresses. Students learn about the physical world around them, learn about their own physical and mental abilities, and learn to be more acute observers. The human mind and psyche seem to work in mysterious ways. Often insight and awareness are preceded by a "letting go" of the problem or concern. Shutting down our rational mind, while at the same time flooding our senses with the beauty of nature might be a catalyst for innovative insights into deep seated concerns a person might have. Many people talk about experiencing things on a medicine walk and then realizing that the experience was a metaphor for an issue in their life. This realization often leads to new insight about how to approach this issue.

Is wandering around alone in Nature safe?

The medicine walk can be a very powerful experience. Its power stems in part from its simplicity. However, it should not be approached without preparation and awareness. There are no set rules about the "right way" or the "safest

way” to facilitate a medicine walk, there are areas that one should take into consideration. As a guide, responsible for the safety and well being of program participants, there are several things that I pay very close attention to:

- The skills and capabilities of the participants (how I set up a medicine walk for a group of adults with experience in the outdoors, is very different from how I set it up for children).
- The physical hazards of the landscape in which the walk will occur (Is the area a safe one for this activity to be run? Some places are not).
- My own skills and capabilities to deal with problems which might arise from the activity (such as a student turning an ankle and needing assistance to get back to camp).

Some things which I often do in order to ensure a safe experience for participants include:

- Require walkers to wear a whistle and making sure that their whistle will be heard by others wherever they might end up during their walk.
- Set clear boundaries for where participants can and cannot go so as to ensure I know where to look for them should they not show up at the predetermined meeting spot.
- Choose an area which will not pose difficulties they will not be able to deal with in a safe way
- Make the meeting destination obvious and large enough to people to get to with ease (a dirt road often works well: “Down hill to the road, down stream to the camp”).

This is by no means an exhaustive list of safety concerns or precautions. It is up to the guide to assess each situation, landscape, and participant in order to determine a safe method to facilitate the experience.

Why are we doing this? Framing and Debriefing a Medicine Walk Experience.

Before I send participants off to wander, I want them to understand what the experience is about. I might choose a guiding theme that sets the stage for the walk. With a group of youth on a coming of age program who are preparing for a solo vision fast experience I might pose a question relating to family relationships or upcoming changes in their lives. As a group we will discuss their thoughts on the subject. This sets a context for their walk and their interpretation of their experiences of it.

I try to bring students together in a way which will allow us a smooth transition from being alone to being together as a whole group again, as opposed to straggling in and beginning to discuss their experiences informally before everyone has returned. Once together, we discuss people’s experiences, starting with interesting stories of animals people saw, or an exceptionally beautiful flower or a tranquil grove of trees. I then might guide the conversation to how they felt out there: free, scared, bored, etc.? Eventually I try to bring participants to focus on insights they might have had, or to bring meaning to their feelings and experiences through reflection and personal interpretation. It is not uncommon for one person in a group to have an incredibly moving experience and for someone else to claim that it was totally boring and uneventful. As a guide I try to help them find meaning in both of these cases. “Why was it so boring for you?” “Why do you think you didn’t notice anything “interesting”?”

Since I first discovered the art of aimless wandering as a teenager, I have done hundreds of informal and formal medicine walks in many different places and in many contexts. Each experience is different and insightful in a new way, whether it is the discovery of a plant I have never seen before, insight into why I have been so frustrated at

home lately, or just a refreshing breather from the daily grind. For me, and many others, wandering aimlessly in nature really is good medicine for the soul!

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1 The term "Medicine Walk" is commonly used in Wilderness work. I first saw the term in print in Steven Foster & Meredith Little, *The Book of the Vision Quest*, Prentice-Hall Press, New York, 1988, P. 34.