

The McKay Method School of Energy Healing

Graduate Project

Bringing Spirituality into Wildlife Tours
Through Native American Culture and Religion

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August 2012

INTRODUCTION

Seven years ago, my husband Nathan and I bought a tour company that mainly does 5-day wildlife trips with a focus on wolves. Our intention was to provide in-depth tours of Yellowstone Park, with an emphasis on biology, behavior and management of wildlife from the perspective of professionals that have worked in the area for most of their career. I believe this is the reason our trips have been so successful—because we have such intimate knowledge of the animals in the park. I have a Master’s degree from studying wolves and Nathan has a PhD from studying the relationship between wolves, elk, and vegetation in the park. We’ve also worked for state wildlife agencies, non-profits, and universities throughout the Rocky Mountain area prior to obtaining this company.

In the past couple years, I began thinking that our trips had something missing, that we could do better. While the biology and behavior of Yellowstone are fascinating, I knew it had more magic to offer than simply describing and seeing wildlife that inhabit it. Also because of my own interest, I wanted to incorporate the Native American presence that was in the park up until the late 1800’s, when the US Army took over due to heavy poaching. The Park Service was born out of that, which is run with some of its military style management still intact. While I was working for the Yellowstone Wolf Project in 1997, I had the honor of being able to take Sioux elders from South Dakota to see wolves. During that trip, they told the story of how their people came to be in Yellowstone Park — from following a wolf to a carcass in the middle of a harsh winter. The meat sustained them so they were able to survive, and began using that area seasonally. There are 26 tribes that the park officially recognizes as having used the area up until they were relocated in the late 1800’s.

I decided to do my graduate project on incorporating the Native American history and presence into our wildlife trips, focusing on culture and religion. This would create an avenue for me to experiment with bringing more mindfulness and spirituality to our trips as well. For years, while I was taking classes through The McKay Method School of Energy Healing, I kept my business life (which was centered around biology) separate from my interest in alternative methods of healing. It got to the point that my involvement with The McKay Method was the thing that would revive and nourish me from the seasonal burnout of running a boom-and-bust type business. I was apprehensive to bring a spiritual element into our trips since we market them as biologist-led tours. However, I have been amazed at the favorable response we have gotten since doing this, and how it has breathed new life into my work. It has become clear to me that this unusual and refreshing combination, promoting science AND spirituality, was the key to providing a profound and unique experience of Yellowstone.

THE PROCESS

Looking back on it, I find it interesting to think about the way this project has unfolded—the thought of tying this component of spirituality into Native American culture and wolves in the Yellowstone area. Over the years while guiding people in the park, they are sometimes so moved when they see a wolf for the first time that they get tears in their eyes. Many people tell us that it has been on their “life list” of things to do. Wolves are a keystone species in that they have a widespread effect on the ecosystem in which they live. They are also symbolic in that they represent wilderness to many people, since they need large tracts of undeveloped land to survive. The thing I didn’t realize was that the spiritual component was already in place;

I just needed to bring it forward and create a safe place for people to feel and express it. This has proven to be easier to do than I imagined. It also made me realize how rare it is for people to experience spirituality and sacredness during the hustle and bustle of their daily lives in the city. It felt so perfect to blend a spiritual experience with a wildlife tour, something that one would never expect.

I thought the best way to do this would be to invite a Native American to join us that has strong historical ties to the area. I knew it would make our trips even more powerful to have this person share their culture and reverence for this place with us. I read recently that most people won't even meet a Native American in their lifetime, and yet they played such an important role in American – and Yellowstone's - history. I was hoping to capture the spirit of Native Americans in the park, and bring it out more on our trips.

I first met Scott Frazier in 1996 when I had been working in the park for a only few months. I caught wind that Scott and another Native American were going to do a ceremony honoring the return of the wolf. Nathan and I joined them for this very beautiful ceremony, and it really stuck out in my mind as something that added a sense of spirit to this otherwise scientific experiment that I was working on at the time. Last year, I had been thinking about how to capture that essence for our trips and I ran into Scott in the field after not seeing him for 15 years. I knew at that point that things had come full circle and he was the perfect person to enlist in our adventure.

Scott is Crow and Santee, and it is his Crow heritage that has historical ties to Yellowstone. I had always been told that Native Americans had been "gone" from the park since the late 1800's until the 1990's when the Park Service created their Cultural Resources Division. In speaking with Scott, I was astonished to find that he had been coming to the park since he was a boy to fish and explore (it was near where he grew up in Billings, Montana.) During a meeting I took him to a site that was rumored to have historical tipi rings. Upon examination, Scott taught me how it couldn't have been a tipi ring since there was no door to the east where the sun rises, and no escape route since the site was hemmed in by rivers and mountains on all sides. These things definitely peaked my interest as to his intimate knowledge of the area.

Scott described what we would be doing during our trips as an "informal" ceremony since it would not involve fasting, piercings or buffalo skulls. This informal ceremony would honor the wolf in Yellowstone, and everything it provides for us.

Our 5-day trips are designed so guests arrive and have an orientation on the first day, are in the field with us for the next 3 days, and a final breakfast and head to the airport on the last day. Since our participants often don't know each other before the trip begins, they always become more at ease and bond as a group as the days progress. For this reason, we decided to have Scott join us for dinner on the 3rd day, and go into the field with us the following day when the group already had a strong affinity for each other. There is a sample schedule and field experience attached. We had 3 consecutive trips during May and June where we incorporated our new offering.

We often have guest speakers during our trips, so I described Scott's involvement during our introduction on the first evening to set the stage and entice people's curiosity. During our dinner with Scott, I described how Nathan and I met him when was conducting a ceremony for the wolf reintroduction. Scott would go on to talk about his background, his experience growing

up in Montana, and touched on his experience of being Native American. Even though the group was tired by this point in the trip, they were always fascinated by Scott's stories and asked many questions. This broke the ice so that in the bus the next morning, they had thought about the presentation and asked more questions as we drove out to look for wildlife. It became clear to everyone how rare and special it was to have this open conversation with Scott about his Native American philosophy.

Scott described the creation story of his people and how it relates to the use of tobacco. He said that they came out of the earth and they didn't have anything. The creator came and gave them tobacco. He told them that with tobacco they can say their prayers and things will come. Tobacco was the first plant that they received, and it was used for "communications" as opposed to recreation. It was given to them as a sacred item. They were nourished with prayer first; prayer for their spirit.

During the informal ceremony, Scott sang a song that has an amazing history. It is called the Song of the Meadowlark. His brother, John Potter, was fasting in the mountains and a meadowlark came and gave him the song. John gave the song to Scott to sing, and Scott has sung it in many parts of the world. He sang it in Jerusalem on the Day of Reconciliation to about 10,000 people. He sang it in Parliament in Budapest. He sang it in the land of the Maoris and he has sung it in Yellowstone. Scott tells that if he sang it properly, he would have sung four verses and then we would have started to sun dance. He clarifies that this means four days of no food and water. He went on to say that since he only sang three verses, "I gave you a break!"

The song, as well as Crow and Santee words that Scott speaks during the informal ceremony, have to do with vibration. Scott refers to them as a creed or a chant that is used when you are trying to invoke something to listen.

CONCLUSION

Most of our guests on the three different trips came up to me at some point during the day or on the following day and commented on how much they got from the experience. I was especially surprised when I got comments the day after but it was clear that people were still processing the experience. The following are some remarks that I received.

One gentleman has been to Yellowstone numerous times before, including with us. He described his "Native American experience" to his wife on the phone. She opted out of this trip since she had been so many times, but after hearing about it on the phone told her husband "darn it, I should have come." He told us that we should have this event with Scott every time and said "I mean, how many people get to experience that?" He also told me that he just got back from a 3-week trip to India looking for tigers. After several days on this trip, the tracker was having difficulty finding any tigers. He stopped at a road side shrine, got out, and "lit a bunch of things." The people on the trip were saying "what's he doing?" The next day, they saw 4 tigers! Even the researchers couldn't believe they saw a male, female, and 2 yearlings all together. The gentleman remarked "It does make you think. You can deny it all you want, but there is an awful lot of evidence that something's going on."

On another occasion as I was driving a father and son to the airport, they brought up Scott again and raved about the event. They thanked me profusely for doing it. The son, who was in his late teens, said this is the most spiritual experience he's had in his life so far. The

father, who is very fond of wolves, said it was the best part of the trip. He said “I hate to admit this because we’re guys, but we had tears in our eyes.” I told him just about everybody did. He thanked me for such a spiritual experience, and said it took him by surprise; it really snuck up on him.

At the end of one of the trips, several people disclosed that they were apprehensive about how the day with Scott was going to turn out. They told me they were very pleasantly surprised and that “he is the real deal,” referring to the way that Scott incorporates his spiritual beliefs into his life.

One delightful woman worked as a social worker. She was so moved by the experience that she asked us if she could lead the group in a short but powerful exercise that evening after dinner. We ended up doing it, and she asked people about their experience and “take away” from the trip. At the end, we did a brief ceremony that she learned in Guatemala. People were so open already that they shared many personal insights with a group of people that they had only known for 5 days.

Scott is excited about continuing to work with us in the future. He describes what we did as being “very powerful.” Scott says that he wanted to make people think about things, whether they bought into it or not. “Just to get people thinking, that is success,” he remarked. He says that the experience of the tours was tops and thanked us for including him. He is a very gracious person. During a discussion with Scott, I came to the realization that everyone found value in this experience, regardless of their diverse backgrounds.

As far as this project is concerned, I absolutely love what we created. It is something that we welcome into our business and will continue to incorporate and expand upon in the future. I have been somewhat unsure about how my healing practice would evolve, and I now know that this is going to be a big part of it. The overwhelming response from our clients was beyond my expectations. What this succeeded in doing was getting people out of the monotony of their daily lives and giving them space to be reflective and humble. Personally I felt very fed and nourished on a spiritual level. It was quite gratifying. It took me many years of self-exploration with the School to get to the point where I could hold the space for an event like this. I am proud of myself!

Nathan has echoed this idea of including this as a permanent part of our trips. He has taught a class on mythology surrounding wolves for the past 13 years. During that class he uses Animal Spirit cards, encouraging the students to select a card and ponder the qualities of that animal as they pertain to themselves. I could see by his inquisitiveness during Scott’s stories, as well as the ceremony, that he enjoyed it. My excitement had to have rubbed off on him since we work so closely together. Nathan says that he felt it worked well and that our program was enhanced by Scott’s contribution. Our trips are often supplemented by interesting speakers that people get to meet and who have different perspectives and experiences that they can share. Scott contributed a Native American perspective that most people aren’t exposed to. One example of Scott’s that Nathan recalled was of Yellowstone Park being more of a reservation for animals as opposed to a preserve. Animals such as bison are kindred spirits with Natives because they can’t leave their “reservation”, and Native Americans couldn’t for so long either. Nathan says that our programs are based on knowledge and science, and including the Native American perspective brings an emotional side that is captured in a ceremonial activity. This is quite new for us as a company, and rare to find in any program like the ones we offer.

MY PROCESS

I first began attending classes at The McKay Method School of Energy Healing after overhearing Bear discuss healing possibilities for carpal tunnel with a woman on a plane! My curiosity was peaked because I had recently been thinking that I wanted to get back into meditation and learn more about energy healing. I had taken energy healing classes when I was quite a bit younger but since then had gone to college for two science degrees. The scientific community tends to shy away from energy work in general so I had left that part of my life behind for awhile, but I did have past experiences with it that I could not deny. The message I got from the scientific community was that to be a good, objective scientist, there is no place for emotions and feelings if you want to excel. Not only is this unfortunate and inaccurate, but it is destructive to the human spirit as well. There is so much richness in life that is lost with this way of being. I am a much more fulfilled person for having delved into the fabric of my own soul.

I had two experiences after calling the School, speaking to Stephanie and then Bear, where I had to sit down afterwards because I was overcome with a wave of what I can only describe as pure love and relaxation that lasted for minutes. While I was blown away by this sensation, it served as a confirmation for me that I was on the right track and that I had found authentic healers and teachers. Once I began taking classes, there was never any question in my mind that I would continue because I have never experienced that level of personal growth in my life before and I couldn't get enough. It has been an exhilarating journey of self-exploration, and I've learned immensely from the School and those on their own journey around me. I have gained much more compassion for others as well as myself, and an understanding of humankind. I am so thankful to have had this experience, which really is only the beginning. I can say that studying energy healing has helped me make so much more sense of my life, and appreciate the path of those around me.

Sample Schedule and Field Experience

5:00am: Pick up guests at hotel in Gardiner (this is the 4th day of a 5-day program.) Scott accompanies the group on the bus as we drive out to Yellowstone to watch wolves during the peak activity times (6am to 10am.)

10:00am: Brunch in the field.

10:30am to 11:30am: Linda's introduction; Scott talks about his perspective as a Crow and Santee Indian.

11:30am to 1:30pm: Drive to Mammoth and have lunch at the dining room.

1:30pm to 2pm: Drive to a specific location we chose for the ceremony experience (such as the Blacktail Plateau pullout across from the Children's Fire Trail.) The locations were beautiful, always green with lots of birds and clouds in the sky. I explain what is going to happen during the ceremony to set the intention.

2pm to 3:30pm: Ceremony. We walk a short distance down the dirt road to a meadow, out of view from the main road so as not to attract attention to ourselves. The group forms a large circle with Scott in the center. I hand out a sweet grass braid to everyone and pass around lighters for them to light the braid with. When lighting them, the end of the plant goes to the earth, and the tip to the sun. Scott says "you can say you started your sweet grass in this place." I pass out a pinch of tobacco, which is a sacred plant used as an offering. While the tip of our sweet grass is smoking, Scott begins speaking. His words begin like this: "First Maker of all things, we pray to the sun and the moon and the stars and the sky. We pray to the earth and the wind and the fire and water..." After this, he speaks using Crow and Santee words. There is a moment of silence, and he sings the song his brother was given by a meadowlark.

At the end of the ceremony, I give people 10 minutes to walk off, give their tobacco as an offering, and meditate as a means to solidify this moment. They can walk out in the meadow or to the banks of the river. This provides a beautiful moment of reflection for what just occurred. We ask that they not speak during this time of reflection. I give them a theme to think about such as one of the following, and ask them to share when we reconvene.

1. Scott discussed how Native American's view nature as their church. How do you apply that in your life? Can you relate to that concept, having the outdoors as a place of spiritual connection?
2. Reflect on the therapeutic properties of the natural world.
3. Reflect on the inspiration and/or gratitude that you get from nature.

Upon reconvening, Scott speaks about purification. He says that heat will take power away from sweet grass, so don't store it in the sunlight. Every place on the planet has a way to purify your self. When in doubt, always go to the water, such as a river or the ocean. Let the power of the water come to you and purge you. If he wants to give something that he wants to come back to the people, he goes to the river and puts it in the river. If he wants it to "terminate," he puts it in the fire. The water comes from the mountains. It carries our prayers all the way down to the end, to the ocean. It will pick up all the prayers from all the people, and by the time it gets to the oceans, it has all of those combinations of prayers.

After the ceremony, I talk about my transformation from just teaching about biology to realizing there was more to offer in our trips. I wanted people to know that we were striving to go below the surface to create a more sacred experience.

Note: from a logistical perspective, this area has a high concentration of grizzly bears so we ask that people not walk so far that they are out of view, and we watch for bears as well. Also note that this event is taking place during the spring when the grass is green and fire danger is low.

3:30pm to 4:30pm: Drive back to Gardiner and drop guests off at the hotel.

6:00pm: Meet guests for dinner.