

Lost Borders

**COMING OF AGE
IN THE WILDERNESS**



STUDY GUIDE

Lost Borders: Coming of Age in the Wilderness

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*Information about the film., and a list of similar programs worldwide
can be found at www.lostborders.org*

*The video is available from Bullfrog Films, PO Box 149, Oley PA
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STUDY GUIDE

LOST BORDERS: COMING OF AGE IN THE WILDERNESS

About the Film

Lost Borders was filmed on location in the California Eastern Sierra at the School of Lost Borders, a training center for wilderness passage rites. The teachers, Steven Foster and Meredith Little, co-directors of the school, have been working with young people coming of age for 25 years. This 10 day experience was divided into the three traditional phases of a rite of passage.

Severance: The young people prepared to undergo the wilderness experience by talking about their lives, their hopes for the future, and their fears in council with the “elders.” They were also given specific training enabling them to survive their wilderness solo. (Four days)

Threshold: The young people lived alone in the wilderness for three days and nights without food or shelter. (Three days)

Incorporation: The young people returned to a council of witnesses at the school, which included the teachers, their parents, and several trainees. During this council each told his or her story of living alone. The witnessing “elders” responded by identifying the beauty and the gifts inherent in the young persons’ stories. The parents were also given the opportunity to respond to the stories of their children. Gifts were exchanged and the young people were empowered to live their lives as prefigured by their stories. (Three days)

The film is addressed to young people nearing the age of adulthood who are looking for meaningful (and legal) ways of marking or confirming their ability to live their lives as adults in modern culture. The three phase process they undergo was used for thousands of years by indigenous cultures to bring children through the passage into adulthood.

The film is not just for teenagers about to leave home, but for their parents, who must let them go to live their own lives, and

for those who are seeking ways to verify that the young people in a community are ready to put on the mantle of maturity.

In a larger sense, the film depicts powerful “eco-psychological” techniques that may be of great interest to those who do counseling or therapeutic work with adolescents and their families, or to wilderness guides and leaders who seek to implement the therapeutic power of nature in the lives of modern young people.

Above all, the film is an answer to question: how do we bring our young people into meaningful contact with the natural world, which is our true environment.

Who Should See the Film?

“Lost Borders” is probably most useful among young people who are looking squarely at the demands of maturity and the complex roles of true adulthood. Awareness of the future builds through the high school experience, especially the senior year, and climaxes at graduation. During this time almost any group of high school students would be open to, and moved by, a showing of the film.

The freshman year in college, or the first year after high school is also a time of crisis. The crush is on. The old friends and days are gone. The young person is realistically assessing her/his ability to live as a young adult.

The film can also be used effectively among specific populations. For example, this same therapeutic process has been employed with benefit among the delinquent, the learning disabled, the addicted, and the suicidal.

Potential audiences:

- High school graduating seniors and/or their parents
- Students in continuation and alternative high schools
- Students in English, social studies, history, religion, and health courses
- “At risk” youth in drug rehabilitation, counseling, detention, half-way houses
- Youth church groups and organizations
- Youth counselors in one-on-one, family, and group settings
- College courses in social anthropology, ecopsychology, psychology, environmental studies, health sciences, and travel/study abroad programs

- Wilderness adventure training programs for youth (Outward Bound, Sierra Club, NOLS, etc).
- Any group of people in the community from teenage to retirement, who are interested in the subject of rites of passage.

How Can the Film Be Used?

- Show it without any context or preparation, and allow the audience to simply react to it intellectually and emotionally. Then you can lead a debriefing session, allowing any and all expressions of opinion and feeling.
- Make it integral to a study or unit about coming of age in the modern world, or initiation rites among various cultures, or the problems of adolescents in today's society, or "eco-therapy," or wilderness adventure work.
- Make it part of a therapeutic or educational process, with individuals and groups, using activities and exercises from the **Nature Therapy** section outlined below. The film is a splendid example of practical "ecopsychology."
- Show it to help prepare a group of young people to go into the wilderness to enact the same kind of rite of passage (assuming that you are trained in the process).

Note: The film cannot be shown without a personal element creeping in. Every young person (and probably every adult) who watches this film asks him/herself, "Can I do this?" Most reactions stem from the answer given to this question, and often include a good deal of ambivalence.

Before Showing the Film

We recommend that you view the film before you show it to any group. It would help to be aware of the rites of passage tradition, whether it be prophets in the wilderness, Buddhas under trees, heroic legends and myths, puberty rites among indigenous peoples, the Plains Indian vision quest, traditional councils and elders, the story telling traditions, shamanic journeys, the healing properties of nature, the idea that human is a part of nature, and, of course, the various dimensions of the adolescent world — emotions, feelings, memories, dreams, states of self-consciousness, ideals, and the whole range of spiritual convictions and values. Such awareness may help you present the various underlying themes of the experience depicted here.

Given the length of the documentary (1 hour 20 min) you will need to decide whether you want to show the entire film in one sitting. There must be time afterward to adequately assess the response. See **Discussion Questions**. If the film is shown in two parts, end the first showing at the conclusion of the severance phase (just before the young people go alone into the wilderness).

Nature Therapy

Simple ecopsychological activities can be clustered around the film. They all involve going *alone* into nature and bringing back a story, a story about the person. The story must include feelings, thoughts, and insights, as well as outward activity.

- Take a long hike and bring back something that represents you.
- Sit under a tree and listen to what it is saying to you. Bring back a story about it.
- Go alone to a natural elevated place and watch the sun set or rise. Bring back a story about what you experienced.
- Take a walk alone at night in some natural place. Don't use your flashlight unless you have to. Stop and sit down on the ground. Be silent for an hour. Bring back a story about what happened.
- Tell your troubles to a tree, a brook, a bush, a flower. Bring back a story about what happened.
- Spend an afternoon in nature and take along a symbol of someone who has hurt you — or someone you have hurt. Do something with that symbol while you are there. Bring back the story.
- Go to a natural place and be the child that you always will be. Play and enjoy yourself without self-judgment. Bring back your story.
- Sleep through the night in the backyard, or at a park or campground, on the ground, and look up at the stars, and try to decide what you want to do with your life. Bring back your story.

If you are the one who assigns the activity or responds to the story, remember to restrain your tendency to “therapize” or judge or criticize. In traditional councils this is not done. Rather, the “elders” look for the power and gifts embedded in the fabric of the story. “Empowerment” may be defined as pointing out and approving these powers and gifts. The film carefully points out this fact.

Discussion Questions

Simple questions can be posed that will provoke hours of discussion. Some of these questions can be asked before viewing the film and some can be left for afterward. All represent important dimensions of the coming of age experience. To most of these questions there are no answers, only a learning.

- Define: a true adult in today's culture. What is the definition of true human maturity?
- What is the value of living alone for three days and nights in the wilderness without food? If rites like this existed for thousands of years in human history, can they still hold value for human beings in the 21st century?
- What does this kind of experience have to do with adulthood or maturity? What abilities are tested? Are these abilities required of a true adult?
- What is a rite of passage? What rites of passage has the culture made available to you? Are they adequate?
- With whom in the film do I empathize most? Why?
- What kind of teenagers would do such a thing? Am I one of those? Am I not one of those? Why?
- Am I creating my own kinds of initiation into adulthood? What are they? How many of them are legal? And how many illegal? Do I really care if they are legal or illegal?
- Identify the elders in my life. The true elders. What do I want from an elder? What if there were elders' councils like the one depicted in the film. What if these elders' councils had the power to confer and validate my attainment of adulthood? Why don't these councils exist any more?
- How will I know when I have reached full adulthood? What makes me a real man or woman? What will I do with the law when I am a real man or woman?
- What kinds of life crises are depicted in this film? Are they typical of teenagers today? Why? Why not?
- Am I a hero in my own eyes? What is my mission on earth? What did the GREAT MIND want me to do on this earth? Why was I born?
- If I did this sort of thing, would my parents come to the council and honor the maturity in me? How does my mother and/or my father see me? What kind of man or woman does my father or my mother want me to be? Do I want to be that person? Is it all

right to have values different from my parents/society? How do I take responsibility for my value system? Do I truly love my parents? Do they truly love me? What have I — or they — done to make it difficult for me to realize myself as a man or a woman?

- What must I do to realize my dreams? What must I do to become the woman or man I want to become? How do love and sex fit into the picture? What am I learning from my relationships with my lovers and my friends?
- Is a personal relationship with nature important? Does this relationship have anything to do with being a man or woman?

These suggested questions represent but a few of those raised by the real life stories of the film. Ask your own.

Research Topics or Papers

Research on the subject matter can go in many directions. Here are a few suggestions:

- The pan-cultural traditions of fasting alone in the wilderness
- The social function of initiation rites into adulthood
- The relationship between rites of passage such as the vision fast and dying/death.
- The ways in which modern youth are being initiated — or are initiating themselves
- The effects of the initiatory experience on the psyche
- A psychological exploration of the effects of solitude
- What are the attributes of true adulthood?
- Shamans and altered states of consciousness
- Elderhood in modern times. Who are the true elders?
- The relationship between human wellbeing and natural wellbeing
- Wilderness passage rites as experiential education
- The effect on the immune system of risk and fear
- Rites of passage stories in history, myth, folklore and fairy tale
- The passage rites of “primitive” cultures
- What is my way of becoming adult?
- A personal rite of passage experience

Organizations Offering Similar Wilderness Experiences for Youth

Many organizations and individuals offer similar wilderness passage rites for young people. Most of these are members of the Wilderness Guides' Council. For comprehensive information about who does this work and where, contact Marilyn Riley, Netkeeper, Wilderness Guides' Council, Box 482, Ross, CA, 94957, rileymr@earthlink.net

Certain organizations, having established a reputation for safety and professional knowledge in this field, offer training programs in the requisite skills to bring this work to the youth of one's own community. Among these are:

Kedar Brown, Rites of Passage Council Training, 319 Greenwich Dr., Aiken, SC 29803

Stan Crow, ICA Rites of Passage Journeys, 22421 39th Ave. SE, Bothell, WA 98021-7941, 206-646-8662, icarle@igc.org

Steven Foster and Meredith Little, School of Lost Borders, Box 55, Big Pine, CA 93513, -lostbrdrs@telis.org

David Knudsen, Temagami Experience, Northwaters Camping, Box 477, St. Peters Village, PA 19470, 610-469-4662

Rick Medrick, Outdoor Leadership Training Seminars, Box 20281, Denver, CO 80220, 303-320-0372, 800-331-7238, www.olts-bt.com

Bill Plotkin, Animas Vision Quest, 54 Ute Pass Trail, Durango. CO 81301, avi@rmi.net

Marilyn Riley, John Hendee, and Betty Warren, Wilderness Transitions, Box 482, Ross, CA 94957, rileymr@earthlink.net

Anne Stine, Wilderness Rites, 20 Spring Grove Ave, San Rafael, CA 94901, Astine@aol.com

Annotated Bibliography

Bly, Robert. *The Sibling Society* (Addison-Wesley, 1996). Analyzes a modern culture without adequate rites of passage where adults remain children and where children have no desire to become adults

David Blumenkrantz, Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family and Community Services, Inc., Box 816, Glastonbury, CT 06033-

0816. Promotes positive youth development, assists children in their transition through adolescence, facilitates research into complex issues facing communities, families and their children, and disseminates educational information (see Newsletter, "The Hummingbird").

The Box: Remembering the Gift (Terma Co., Santa Fe, 1992). The three gracefully written books in this collection (*The Book of Sorrows*, *The Book of Grace*, *The Book of Reconciliation*) are filled with reflections, activities, and pertinent information for anyone researching the subject of wilderness passage rites.

Campbell, Joseph. *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Bollingen, 1970). A classic examination of the mythical underpinnings of pan cultural rites of passage.

Eliade, Mercia. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (Harper and Row, 1958). The mythical and spiritual anatomy of the initiatory process.

Estes, Clarissa Pinkola. *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (Ballantine, 1992). Rites of passage and initiatory experiences of women. Delightful, profound and life-changing story-telling from a Jungian perspective.

Foster, Steven and Little, Meredith. *The Book of the Vision Quest*. Revised Edition (Prentice Hall, 1981). The re-creation of an ancient rite of passage in modern times, and the experiences of those who undertook this intensely personal journey.

Lost Borders: Coming of Age in the Wilderness (Lost Borders Press, 1998). A useful and evocative handbook for youth preparing to participate in the coming of age ceremony depicted in the film.

The Roaring of the Sacred River (Lost Borders Press, 1998). A comprehensive training book, based on the famous American Indian vision quest story of Jumping Mouse, for those who wish to lead rites of passage in the wilderness.

Johnson, Scott, Ed. *Circles on the Mountain: A Journal for Rites of Passage Guides*, Issue no. 9 (Focus on Adolescence), circles@jps.net
Web page: www.jps.net/circles A journal dedicated to the personal, societal, and ecological need for meaningful rites of passage. Contains helpful information and resources.

Lawlor, Robert. *Voices of the First Day* (Inner Traditions, 1991). Contrasting modern values and rites of passage with those of the Australian aborigine, this beautifully illustrated book opens new possibilities for the future of humanity and the planet.

Mahdi, Louise, Foster and Little, Eds. *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* (Open Court, 1987). New insights into the basic elements of initiations and passage rites in a culture bereft of their power. (Includes a compendium of rites of passage films.)

Mahdi, Louise, Christopher and Meade, Eds. *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage* (Open Court, 1997). A multidisciplinary collection of contemporary thought on adolescent passage rites by psychologists, anthropologists, social and religious leaders, doctors, educators, and parents.

Meade, Michael. *Men and the Water of Life: Initiation and the Tempering of Men* (Harper San Francisco, 1993). A mythic tapestry of multi-cultural stories that encourages both young men and women to find the seeds of initiatory experiences in their lives and community.

Spinrad, Norman. *Child of Fortune* (Bantam, 1985). A thinly-disguised science fiction allegory of a modern culture in which there are universal rites of passage for youth. A young heroine finds her way through drugs and illusory thrills to womanhood.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild* (North Point Press, 1990). An exquisite, far-sighted articulation of what can be possible between human and wild nature.

Van der Post, Laurens. *A Story Like the Wind* (Hogarth, 1972). *A Far-Off Place* (Hogarth, 1974). A classic novel in two parts of the coming of age of a young man and woman in the wilds of South Africa.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage* (U. Of Chicago Press, 1960). The classic anthropological examination of rites of passage of indigenous cultures throughout the world.

Zimmerman, Jack with Coyle, Virginia. *The Way of Council* (Bramble, 1996). Exploration of the dynamics of the council tradition as practiced in modern settings. A training method in basic communication skills among modern teenagers.

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