



The Invisible School: The Art of Cultural Mentoring

AN INTERVIEW WITH JON YOUNG BY TOBIAS BODINE

IN 2000, IONS acquired 200 acres of rural land for its offices and retreat center. Since then, the Institute has been collaborating with the Permaculture Institute of Northern California (PINC) in a volunteer effort to restore portions of the land degraded by human activity. Last year, tracker and naturalist Jon Young was invited to the IONS campus to give public presentations on cultivating awareness of the natural world around us.

Jon, who helped found the Wilderness Awareness School and the Institute of Nature Awareness, mentors both adults and children in traditional ways of nature perception. The following article on Jon's unique mentoring philosophy and practice was drawn from an interview with him as part of the IONS Research Department's Transformation Project (see page 38).

Tobias Bodine: Jon, what do you do as a mentor to invoke transformation in your students?

Jon Young: I work with people by using the art of integral tracking, which really is just using the senses and attuning them to patterns in nature. This process causes specific and significant impacts on how they view the world. When students begin the journey of tracking and awareness, they slowly become more sensitive. Studying the language of birds, for example, helps them open up to the reality that when a fox moves in the forest it causes a response in the sparrow. They realize, "I can actually see the fox through the sparrow." They're getting direct feedback, and soon they can actually feel the mood of the environment in their bodies.

My goal is to help cultivate a more sensitive state of being, so that people make more community-oriented and holistic choices. When they start to read the language of the Earth with the body, mind, and other aspects of

perception, then I see them shifting their worldview. They start to see themselves as part of a bigger picture; they redefine the choices they're making based on larger contexts and the impact they might have on others. Most realize that they—like the fox—make waves in the environment. This causes them to ask the question, "How do I not make such big waves?" I look at this as a rebirthing of the indigenous or community mind.

TB: What was the path to the practices you do now?

JY: Like a lot of little kids in my neighborhood in 1971, I spent a lot of time outside. I'd go fishing, catch frogs—that kind of thing. I was similar to other suburban kids and was moving towards more involvement in sports when I happened to meet a person on a street corner who changed the direction of my life. He was a tracker who himself had been specially mentored for eleven years in his early boyhood by an elder Apache tracker.



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He began to cultivate awareness in me through a series of practices that I now call “core routines.” One of them was adopting a particular spot to sit in and explore every day (see sidebar on page 26). In my case, it was a small clearing on a hill in a forest with an old ash tree bending towards the west. I used to sit with my back to that tree for an hour or two at a time, sometimes tending a little campfire or working on crafts, and then I would go home. That doesn’t seem like much of a practice, but what brought it to life was that around dinnertime I would often get a phone call from my mentor. He’d ask me three bands of questions that were designed to pull me past my edge of awareness. The first questions would awaken what I *knew and felt* solidly. The second set brought me to an edge where I was *guessing or hypothesizing* about what my observations and memories were. And the third set of questions would always take me *beyond that edge*.

From my earliest visits to my secret spot, I’d come home and he’d call me up and ask me what I did there. “Well, I

leaned against my tree.”

He’d ask, “Your tree . . . what kind is it?” I would think about it and say, “A big tree.” That was really all I was capable of; but I was confident that it was a big tree.

“Is it a pine tree, or does it have leaves that fall off?”

“Um, it has leaves that fall off.” He’d continue, “What kind of tree would that be?” “I’m not really sure.” In my mind, I’d picture that tree as hard as I could to be sure I was remembering correctly. This is an important frontier for developing knowledge and skill—this phase of guessing from experience. That is the edge of knowledge that naturally inspires research.

He’d go on: “Is it an oak, or is it a maple, or something else?” “I don’t know.” So *that* question brought me past my edge. Then he said, “See if you can find out for me what kind of tree it is. I’m really interested.” I figured it out the best way I knew how, and told him the next time that it was an ash tree. He’d then ask, “What kind of ash tree? . . .” And the cycle began all over again. ➔

Little by little, through that questioning, he *evolved* me. My exploration of nature, and his commitment to question and monitor me caused my perceptions to grow. Over seven years my world expanded through a variety of awareness and other related practices, until I had developed an “indigenous” perception in a modern body.

Through a series of guided practices that include this “art of questioning,” these same techniques can be used to pull people out of their self-absorbed mind and into their senses so that they develop a more meaningful relationship with their environments. This is pretty much a basic indigenous practice that you find worldwide in cultures highly successful at tracking.

I was about nineteen when the first development stakes were put into the ground near my secret spot. Once it turned into a subdivision, my path really became activated because I started to ask myself, “Wow, what is the consciousness of this place that still lives inside me now?” The geography was no longer the same, but the place was *still alive in me*. I started to realize that we human beings have a powerful response to the land in our bodies. And through our history as humans, we have had that deep relationship with nature, so our brain still responds to it actively today.

TB: What transformations do you see in a person who is taught in this way?

JY: It’s hard to put a finger on when or where it will happen, but there are clear changes in a student’s behavior. The process is marked by certain transition profiles that we can recognize symptomatically just before he or she moves through one mode of being into a new space—which is really a very old space. We call these “stages of the rites of passage” or the “profile journey.”

When people are on a mentoring journey, one of the first things they encounter is “child’s universal passion.” I’ll hear things like “I haven’t felt this way since I was eight years old” from adults who are becoming more aware of the environment they’re in. You can see that their whole body responds with enthusiasm. They don’t quite know why they are excited, but I believe there’s a body memory of what it was like to be young and truly engaged by the world.

In the second profile, they begin to focus sharply on a particular aspect of the core routines we teach. For instance, they might focus on bird language or plant identification or practicing wilderness survival. The student becomes locked on one discipline within a greater fabric of



THE SECRET SPOT. We call the practice of sitting in one place the “secret spot” or the “sit area routine.” It’s not necessarily secret because it’s hidden, but rather it’s somewhere you go by yourself to activate your relationship with a particular place. Find a quiet spot near where you live or work. Be sure you are safe there. Visit this place as often as you can, try and aim for at least twenty minutes a day. Sit or stand quietly and open your senses; develop questions about the place. At night, tell the story of your visits there to friends or to a journal. Get to know the birds, animals, plants, soils, and even the winds of your place. You are developing a constant meaningful relationship to all the elements in the natural world through your senses, and that is our core practice. —JY



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possibilities. They might obsess over animal tracks and ignore plants. I say “obsess” because a native tracker doesn’t really have the luxury to ignore plants for animal tracks: All information is taken in equally for survival and safety. People at this stage will often put their arms across their chest, wrinkle their brow in seriousness, and make very stern statements: “Well, I know the whole path is about X.” They become intense because they think they really know something.

Now I know they can’t do that for long. You can’t totally control nature, but you can have a sense that somehow you are fulfilling something inside yourself by *being an expert*. Fortunately for the mentor, this doesn’t last too long if the student keeps up with the core routines in their fullness!

They then enter the third stage. They come back after some kind of humbling experience and their furrowed brow is gone. Here’s what I mean by “humbling experience”: In learning tracking, students have the misperception that they have a lot more control over their learning than they actually do. They will “see” a set of bobcat tracks because they “know” that those are bobcat tracks. They will “teach” the other “beginners” around them that those are bobcat tracks. Then one of the beginners asks, “Hey, farther down the trail here, the bobcat has five toes. What does that mean?” The “expert,” in his or her intense focus, has forgotten that raccoon tracks, with five toes, can closely resemble bobcat tracks

in certain conditions and with certain behavior patterns. Awareness training is a journey fraught with hundreds of examples like this in all subject areas, at all times of year, and in every ecosystem I have ever explored. It is almost as if nature is designed to humble us.

When students reach the third profile after the humbling experience, they relax and open up quite a bit. They start to walk around barefoot. They often don’t have a watch on anymore. They tend to get really playful and have a twinkle in their eye. The eight year-old that was remembered in the first stage suddenly is now truly *embodied* in everything they do. They don’t like commitments at this point, and we don’t expect them to. What they are really trying to do is to get back to something they truly left behind when they were kids. Because of all the barefoot stuff, and eating berries, and laying in the shade, and just really enjoying themselves, they begin to remember what it is to be “free.” They say, “Wow, the deer and the birds are free. The whole of nature is free. But what about us humans? Are we free?”

They then hit what is called the “wall of grief.” Some people spin down for a while and get real depressed; others get busy so that they don’t feel anything. There are a bunch of different responses, but we know them all as part of the same phenomenon. As a rite of passage, this stage is big because the mentor can’t ignore what students are feeling.

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We have to help them come to terms with the state of the world for what it really is, and not what their projections have always wanted it to be. So we work very closely with people during this time.

When they come out on the other side of the wall they stand taller. They become quieter inside, and they've moved into the potential for real service. This is where their awareness of a larger consciousness comes in. They realize they are caregivers to a larger community—other people, the land, the water, and the air—and these choices today affect their children and grandchildren. They become “big picture” people, and usually are spurred into action. They're actually thinking for the future, not just for themselves.

From there they transition into a place of wisdom and leadership, where they start to recognize universal patterns, and they start to see those patterns in others. They also develop an awareness of synchronicity, and they understand that the power of creativity is one of the greatest gifts that a human possesses. Things in their life begin to manifest in a beautiful way.

TB: These developments seem to be the result of long-term practice. Is it possible that they can just happen spontaneously?

JY: I carefully study the effect of brain-patterning routines, especially with respect to nature, and how they affect our consciousness. In more than twenty years of mentoring, working with students over three or four years at a time, I've never seen anyone's transformation be spontaneous. It might happen, but I've never seen it myself. It always grows out of routines of expanded awareness and deeper inquiry—directed not only to the world around a person, but also to the world within him or herself.

There are times when transformation can *seem* sudden. Because of the effects of the core routines, sometimes a particular dramatic event can trigger the transition to the next phase. It might be a beautifully powerful or spiritual event—the overwhelming shift of consciousness that comes in transitions could lead one to believe that it was spontaneous. But I've watched them go predictably through all the stages. It's usually not until years later that they start

to look back on their trail long enough to realize that the conditions for that transition were actually set up when they were young.

TB: How important is the mentor, and what if there isn't one specifically?

JY: I'm clear that if it wasn't for my mentor's commitment to me, I wouldn't know the first thing about bird language and tracking. When he introduced me to a group in 1994, he said, “This is Jon Young. He's the only one I had the luxury to mentor exactly the way Grandfather mentored me.” Hearing that, I felt a sudden responsibility to pass this on to others, so I really analyzed the mentoring process. I began to realize that it's rare that people just stumble on to this kind of thing.

I've gone on to look for other people who are powerful role models in indigenous awareness, and I've seen that if it isn't direct mentoring causing transformation in a child, then it's the culture itself that's the mentor. We might assume that a facilitator is a living flesh-and-blood human being, but sometimes it doesn't have a face. The facilitator might be the village and the practices of the people: the gathering and the harvesting, the songs that are sung. I believe the mentor is essential if there isn't a strong culture, and what that mentor draws from are *cultural models*.

Also, in my experience, the less visible the facilitator, the more powerful are the results. It should seem to students that they are the first ones to discover the world. They make discoveries themselves, and they think they have created the journey for themselves.

Throughout history, though, behind it are really wise elders who have always known how to tweak the fabric of the community to cause that surface area of discovery to be large. It is my vision and commitment to bring this back again—this time in a way that fits the times and the challenges we now face as a species. 🌍

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