



Before You Read

The Vision Quest

Reading Focus

How important are goals? Can an experience be useful even if you fail to reach the goal you set?

List Ideas List some benefits a person might get from an experience even if the original goal is not reached.

Setting a Purpose Read to discover what one young Sioux learns from striving to reach a goal.

Building Background

The Time and Place

The events of "The Vision Quest" take place somewhere in or around South Dakota. The time is not specified, nor is it important, since the tale is timeless.



Did You Know?

Visions have always been an important part of Native American culture. Among some peoples, the quest for a vision is an initiation into adulthood, and the

vision helps shape the young person's goals. However, individuals who face major life challenges or who feel the need for spiritual guidance might also seek a vision. Some vision quests involve fasting and solitude; others require physical suffering. The search for visions is still an important ritual in Native American culture.

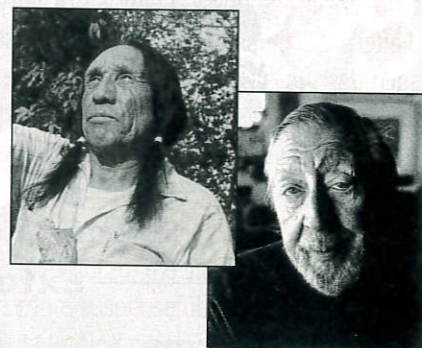
Vocabulary Preview

brash (brash) *adj.* boldly disrespectful; p. 90

obliterate (ə blit' ə rāt') *v.* to destroy completely; p. 91

gaunt (gônt) *adj.* extremely thin and hollow-eyed, as from hunger or illness; looking like skin and bones; p. 91

humility (hū mil' ə tē) *n.* the quality of being humble or modest; p. 91



Meet Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes

Recalling his own vision quest, Lame Deer said,

"I thought of my forefathers who had crouched here before me . . . I felt their presence."

Lame Deer is a spiritual name that has been handed down from father to son in one Sioux family. The Lame Deer who told the story "Vision Quest" is also called John Fire.

Richard Erdoes was born in the early 1900s in what is now Austria. He came to New York in the 1940s. As an artist and writer on assignment in the United States, Erdoes met many Native Americans and became involved in their civil rights struggle.

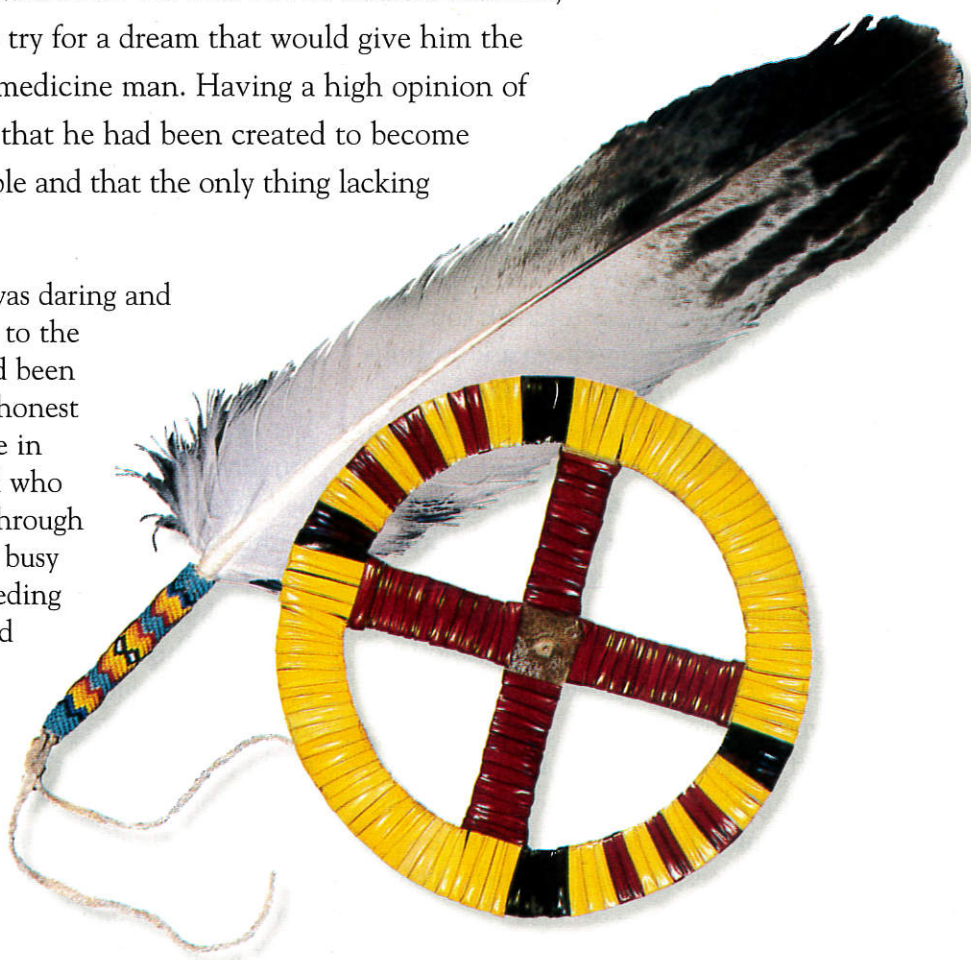
John Fire Lame Deer was born in the late 1800s. He told this story to Richard Erdoes in 1967.

The Vision Quest

Told by Lame Deer ~
Recorded by Richard Erdoes

A YOUNG MAN WANTED TO GO ON A HANBLECEYA, or vision seeking, to try for a dream that would give him the power to be a great medicine man. Having a high opinion of himself, he felt sure that he had been created to become great among his people and that the only thing lacking was a vision.

The young man was daring and brave, eager to go up to the mountaintop. He had been brought up by good, honest people who were wise in the ancient ways and who prayed for him. All through the winter they were busy getting him ready, feeding him wasna,¹ corn, and plenty of good meat to make him strong. At every meal they set aside something for the spirits so that they would help him to get a great vision. His relatives thought he had the power even



1. Wasna is a high-energy food made of meat, fat, and berries pounded together.



Did You Know?

A *travois* (tra voi') is a V-shaped sled made of hide or netting supported by two long poles that are harnessed to a horse or dog.

before he went up, but that was putting the cart before the horse, or rather the travois before the horse, as this is an Indian legend.

When at last he started on his quest, it was a beautiful morning in late spring. The grass was up, the leaves

were out, nature was at its best. Two medicine men accompanied him. They put up a sweat lodge² to purify him in the hot, white breath of the sacred steam. They sanctified him with the incense of sweet grass, rubbing his body with sage, fanning it with an eagle's wing. They went to the hilltop with him to prepare the vision pit and make an offering of tobacco bundles. Then they told the young man to cry, to humble himself, to ask for holiness, to cry for power, for a sign from the Great Spirit, for a gift which would make him into a medicine man. After they had done all they could, they left him there.

He spent the first night in the hole the medicine men had dug for him, trembling and crying out loudly. Fear kept him awake, yet he was cocky, ready to wrestle with the spirits for the vision, the power he wanted. But no dreams came to ease his mind. Toward morning before the sun came up, he heard a voice in the swirling white mists of dawn. Speaking from no particular direction, as if it came from different places, it said: "See here, young

man, there are other spots you could have picked; there are other hills around here. Why don't you go there to cry for a dream? You disturbed us all night, all us creatures and birds; you even kept the trees awake. We couldn't sleep. Why should you cry here? You're a brash young man, not yet ready or worthy to receive a vision."

But the young man clenched his teeth, determined to stick it out, resolved to force that vision to come. He spent another day in the pit, begging for enlightenment which would not come, and then another night of fear and cold and hunger.

When dawn arrived once more, he heard the voice again: "Stop disturbing us; go away!" The same thing happened the third morning. By this time he was faint with hunger, thirst, and anxiety. Even the air seemed to oppress him, to fight him. He was panting. His stomach felt shriveled up, shrunk tight against his backbone. But he was determined to endure one more night, the fourth and last. Surely the vision would come. But again he cried for it out of the dark and loneliness until he was hoarse, and still he had no dream.

Just before daybreak he heard the same voice again, very angry: "Why are you still here?" He knew then that he had suffered in vain; now he would have to go back to his people and confess that he had gained no knowledge and no power. The only thing he could tell them was that he got bawled out every morning. Sad and cross, he replied, "I can't help myself; this is my last day, and I'm crying my eyes out. I know you told me to go home, but who are you to give me orders? I don't know you. I'm going to stay until my uncles come to fetch me, whether you like it or not."

2. A *sweat lodge* is a hut made of branches bent and tied to form a framework, which is covered by hides or blankets. Inside, steam is produced by pouring or sprinkling water over red-hot rocks contained in a central pit.

Vocabulary

brash (brash) *adj.* boldly disrespectful

All at once there was a rumble from a larger mountain that stood behind the hill. It became a mighty roar, and the whole hill trembled. The wind started to blow. The young man looked up and saw a boulder poised on the mountain's summit. He saw lightning hit it, saw it sway. Slowly the boulder moved. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, it came tumbling down the mountainside, churning up earth, snapping huge trees as if they were little twigs. And the boulder was coming right down on him!

The young man cried out in terror. He was paralyzed with fear, unable to move. The boulder dwarfed everything in view; it towered over the vision pit. But just as it was an arm's length away and about to crush him, it stopped. Then, as the young man stared open-mouthed, his hair standing up, his eyes starting out of his head, the boulder *rolled up the mountain*, all the way to the top. He could hardly believe what he saw. He was still cowering motionless when he heard the roar and rumble again and saw that immense boulder coming down at him once more. This time he managed to jump out of his vision pit at the last moment. The boulder crushed it, obliterated it, grinding the young man's pipe and gourd rattle into dust.

Again the boulder rolled up the mountain, and again it came down. "I'm leaving, I'm leaving!" hollered the young man.

Regaining his power of motion, he scrambled down the hill as fast as he could. This time the boulder actually leap-frogged over him, bouncing down the slope, crushing and pulverizing everything in its way. He ran unseeingly, stumbling, falling, getting up again. He did not even notice the boulder rolling up once more and coming down for the fourth time. On this last and most fearful descent, it flew through the air in a giant leap, landing right in front of him and embedding itself so deeply in the earth that only its top was visible. The ground shook itself like a wet dog coming out of a stream and flung the young man this way and that.

Gaunt, bruised, and shaken, he stumbled back to his village. To the medicine men he said: "I have received no vision and gained no knowledge. I have made the spirits angry. It was all for nothing."

"Well, you did find out one thing," said the older of the two, who was his uncle. "You went after your vision like a hunter after buffalo, or a warrior after scalps. You were fighting the spirits. You thought they owed you a vision. Suffering alone brings no vision nor does courage, nor does sheer will power. A vision comes as a gift born of humility, of wisdom, and of patience. If from your vision quest you have learned nothing but this, then you have already learned much. Think about it."



Vocabulary

obliterate (ə blit' ə rāt') *v.* to destroy completely

gaunt (gônt) *adj.* extremely thin and hollow-eyed, as from hunger or illness; "looking like skin and bones"

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Responding to Literature

Personal Response

What aspect of this story struck you most forcefully? Did anything surprise or impress you? Share your reactions with your classmates.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What kind of vision is the young man expecting? What does his expectation tell you about him?
2. What are some of the things the voice in the mountains says? How would you describe the vision quester's reaction to the voice?
3. How does the young man's vision quest end? Based on what he reports to the medicine men, what do you think his attitude is about his quest?
4. What response does the vision quester's uncle give him? In your opinion, is the response appropriate?

Evaluate and Connect

5. What is the central **conflict** in this story?
6. Do you think that the humor and modern language in the story added to or took away from its effectiveness for you? Use examples from the story to explain your answer.
7. Look over your response to the Reading Focus on page 88 and think of a time when you failed to reach a goal you had set for yourself. What did you learn from the experience?
8. **Theme Connections** In what way was this experience a transition for the young man? How was he different afterwards?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Debate the Question Do you think the young man would ever undertake another vision quest? Form two groups, one that will support a yes answer, and one supporting *no*. Hold a debate, with each group giving details from the story to back up its position.

Creative Writing

Summary in Verse Write a song, poem, or limerick that summarizes the main points of "The Vision Quest." First, decide which elements of the story should be included. Then, include those elements in either a serious or humorous poem or song.

 **Save your work for your portfolio.**

Literary ELEMENTS

Legend

A **legend** is a traditional narrative, such as a story or poem, that has been handed down from one generation to the next. It is presented as a type of history, even though it may not be factually accurate. Most legends help convey a culture's learning, knowledge, and values.

1. What Native American custom is central to this story?
 2. Which parts of the story might be true and which parts could not be proven true?
 3. What are some of the values that this story transmits?
- See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R7.