

Inner Work Guidebook
ACTIVITY: DEATH LODGE
Description and Detail of Activity

What is it?

The concept of the Death Lodge can be traced back to approximately 1500 BCE when rubber was first discovered by the Olmecs...the mother civilization of Mesoamerica. The Death Lodge is part of an ancient teaching about the experience of dying. This teaching was found throughout the Americas as far north as the Midwestern plains.

According to the Cheyenne version, consciously preparing for death involves four psycho- spiritual stages. The first step consists of stepping onto the decision road, which indicates that you have recognized that death is approaching and you have accepted this fact. The next stage is the Death Lodge.

The Death Lodge is the place where a dying person receives final visitors. If old wounds still exist between the dying person and the visitor, this is the opportunity for forgiveness to take place between them. It is also a chance for final goodbyes.

The last two stages, the Purpose Circle and the Great Ballcourt follow the Death Lodge, and are an accounting of one's life and "playing ball with the Lords of Death" in the transition between this world and the next. The "soul" is thought to pass back and forth during this time, immediately before the final physical death.

Why do it?

For our purposes, we will discuss the Death Lodge in and of itself. We have heard the admonition that in order for one to live fully...one has to first learn to die. There can be many occasions to die little deaths well before dying our final death. Many times we can live more fully by attending to these little deaths. Ask yourself: "Why wait until the absolute end to face some of these issues, when I can confront them, name them and let go of them now (i.e. die to them), thus freeing myself to live more freely?"

How to do it?

Preparation Prior to the entering into the experience of the Death Lodge, use reflection, discernment and contemplation to determine what aspect of you has to die. Perhaps you might consider over-identification with an attitude or person, an unhealthy relationship, some aspects of your false self you have identified, self absorption. Also consider your Loyal Soldier and "his" strategies and behaviors. It is personal and specific to you and the current situation attending your life field. Be specific and narrow this down to one or two issues.

In selecting the focus of your Death Lodge experience, and using other inner work practices/disciplines, begin to collect some symbols that will work for you, in focusing on the aspects of your life which need to die. As the Death Lodge is an intentional period of time in nature (generally 24 hours), assemble equipment necessary for being outdoors overnight: correct clothing based on the local environment, a hat, rain gear, insect repellent, sunscreen, a tarp for shelter, rope, sleeping bag, matches, fire-starters if allowed, a compass and a map if needed, other necessary implements (pocket knife etc.). This is not complete and you will have to consult with those in your locale for the necessary equipment.

The Death Lodge Day

Once you have chosen your issues and symbolic ritual items, you are ready to go. The idea of the Death Lodge, through fasting and wandering in nature, is to become present to yourself and be in the movement. As the day progresses and you are wondering, try to avoid letting your thoughts drift to everyday concerns. It is advisable to begin your day with a time of sitting contemplation. As the day of wandering turns into night, prepare yourself for your personal ritual of letting go, and setting up your camp for the night.

If a campfire is allowed and advisable, begin your evening with starting the fire and settling in. Again, a contemplative sit to mark the time of completing your wandering and to prepare yourself for the evening would be a good way to center yourself. You may want to journal, read some reflections of the period leading up to your Death Lodge or other readings/poetry, or pray. You structure your night and your ritual of letting go in whichever way you choose. You might want to include forgiveness in the letting go and hold yourself accountable for the part you played in your relationship to it. Also express gratitude and love...all major issues for Jesus as well. Another suggestion at the close of your ritual of letting go or dying, is to offer up this death by burying your ritual symbol, or having it consumed in fire as a sign of total release.

The Death Lodge in our inner work has the following associated with it over a period of 24 hours:

- Fasting from food, while respecting the needs of your own body. Be sure to drink at least 2- 3 quarts of water during the day
- Lodging should be no more than a simple tarp cover and ground sheet
- Letting-go Ritual

During your wandering and later at the camp, be alert to what presents itself through nature. It may be a visit from an animal, or an encounter with a tree or a beautiful scene or sunset. You might dialogue with whatever presents itself to you. It may seem unusual to consider speaking with/to an animal, especially for those of us who are products of Western Civilization. We should keep in mind that indigenous peoples for millennia recognized the sacred in animals.

In your dialogue with nature you may simply express yourself as in a normal conversation. Also consider asking a question. This may include asking what your soul “calling” is...what your “soul name” is. Then sit in silence and continue to be aware of your surroundings, and what presents itself to you.

The Morning After

The morning following your Death Lodge, be sure to honor your sacred space and the local natural environment by packing out any refuse, being sure your fire is out, and that nothing is left behind. It is a good practice to take the position of “zero impact” camping. Thank the Spirit for your time there and for any gifts or insights that came to you during this time. Depart in silence.

The Death Lodge is not necessarily a one time event in your life. Periodically there will be passage times...times of liminality in which your movement out of particular challenges can be marked. The Death Lodge would be an appropriate way to mark these times of dying to a part of yourself.

Suggested Resources for this Activity

Soulcraft by Bill Plotkin

The Final Crossing by Scott Eberle