



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 129 – Rites of Passage with Sara Harris
April 17, 2022

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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to the Athena Wellness Podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.

I invite you to bring to mind someone who makes you smile every time you think of them. Someone who makes you feel lighthearted. Someone who is kind and wise and generous in spirit, always willing to share their wisdom. That's how I would begin to describe today's guest.

I'm joined today by Sara Harris, a retired psychotherapist and former elementary school teacher. Sara is also the co-founder of EarthWays, where guides trained in wilderness rites of passage conduct programs out on the land to help people reconnect with the earth and themselves.

Here's what we cover:



- What rites of passage are and why they're so important;
- Two key experiences that shaped the second half of Sara's life;
- What it's like to embark on a wilderness quest; and
- How listeners can better connect with nature in their daily lives.

Sara was gracious enough to allow me to include her email address in the show notes should you want to reach out to her for more insight on any of the topics we discuss.

And now onto the show. I hope you enjoy this lovely and uplifting conversation.

[00:01:59] Kathy: Sara, welcome to the *Athena Wellness Podcast*. Thank you so much for being here today.

[00:02:04] Sara Harris: Thank you, Kathy. It's great to be here with you.

[00:02:08] Kathy: Please, share a bit about your background with our audience.

[00:02:12] Sara: Well, I live in Northern California and part-time also in Southern Oregon. I was a teacher for about eight years and then I was a psychotherapist in private practice for 35 years.

I've been retired now for a bit. And I think what was really significant was when I was 50, I went on my first vision quest that really shifted both the focus of my work and my life. Then when I was 54, I had surprise open heart surgery and that also shifted the focus of my work and my life. And then these two kind of also braided together.



Currently, I'm on the board of VeteranRites, which is a rite of passage program for rites of return for male and female veterans to take them out on vision quests. And I also am part of EarthWays LLC, which is a nature-based program I started 20 years ago. And we do day-long programs and circles and lots of different things - "To restore our relationship with the natural world" is our mission. That keeps me busy enough, along with my new dog, Daisy.

[00:03:22] Kathy: Ah. [chuckles] If I had to pick a theme, that's a wonderful phrase, this idea of rites of passage. I think about the life experiences that you've already shared with us and then how you've chosen to, your word, braid them together. I think that's a beautiful visual.

There's a real transformational quality and an intentionality in how you've navigated this second part of your life. Before we get into the details, what are rites of passage and why are they important?

[00:03:59] Sara: Rites of passage are kind of organized, intentional ways that cultures have to help the youth become adults, help adults go through significant life stages of having children, of marrying, divorcing, partnering, starting something new. Any significant life passage can have an intention set to it so that the community witnesses it, an intention is set around it. You might go through some kind of an ordeal and separate from the way of life you had before to step over the threshold into something new. And then you are also witnessed, in most cultures, by a council of elders who verify and hear your story.



All of those steps make all the things we go through in life much more conscious, much more supported, rather than feeling like you're just freaking out going through this all by yourself. And people are much more apt to come out of a rite of passage with a certain gift that they've learned or earned through the ordeal they've been through that then not only becomes their personal gift, but it becomes part of what they share with their community.

Basically all cultures who were originally earth-based, all had rites of passage to help the children separate from the mother to become the adult, all those stages. We've kinda lost our way in our country, in our culture and modern Western culture and the rites of passage lost their-- they never went away. Everybody's always marked them, but they often got marked in profane ways that didn't really serve the soul or the growth, i.e., getting drunk. When you turn 21, you go get drunk. That's a rite of passage.

[00:06:02] Kathy: Indeed, it was. [laughs]

[00:06:05] Sara: Does it really serve a movement forward?

[00:06:08] Kathy: Indeed, it did not.

[laughter]

[00:06:12] Sara: Or getting your driver's license. Those things are significant markers, but they've been a bit stripped down, shall we say. They don't really carry the beauty of a rite of passage with them.



I remember when one of my nieces, who was learning about some of this stuff from me, but I was the weird old aunt who did this weird stuff. When she graduated from high school, she wanted me to “do that stuff.” She wanted me to do something, but she didn't know what she wanted me to do.

Around the dinner table, after the night of her graduation with the family, I put a big heart-shaped rock in the middle of the table and she got very embarrassed. She said, "Sara had this idea and she's going to do this thing." Then I said, "We're going to pass this rock around." I just said it very lightly, "And everybody, when you take it, just give Kate either a blessing or a piece of good luck or a wish or something." Well, the family just sits there for a minute [laughter]like, "Oh my God, what are we going to have to do?"

Fortunately, my brother, bless him, reached right out and took it and said something very beautiful to her. It went around and even her younger brother, who was like 13 at the time, gets the rock in his hand and he said something like, "I think you'll do really good, Kate." [laughter]

Basically, what we did was a little tiny mini ceremony where we just stopped for a moment and said something personal and real and blessed her and then put it back in the middle. And it changes the dynamic. It changes the shape. Now, many families do this in many ways. But that's just one little example of not making a big deal out of it and yet honoring.

[00:08:05] Kathy: I just love that because sometimes we think we're not doing it right or it needs to have certain elements and this is - you're getting to the heart



and the spirit of what was going on and how we wanted to send her off. I think that's a really beautiful story.

I'm also the weird old aunt, at least I'll be prepared now should that request ever come my way. [chuckles]

[00:08:27] Sara: Yeah, one of my nephews wanted me to marry them because he said, "You know about that threshold thing." Sure enough, when they came up to me to get married, I had put a line of flowers that they had to step across and then they jumped back over it. There are so many things like that that are woven into cultures that we're just not very aware of or they've lost their importance, but people want to do them anyway.

[00:08:57] Kathy: I will tell you, I'm sure many, many years from now, that's what they'll remember. They'll remember stepping over that line of flowers and they'll remember, she'll remember when she graduated high school and everybody had something nice to say to her. That's really beautiful.

[00:09:14] Sara: It can be so simple. Because it's in our bones, people do it all the time. But for these big life passages, sometimes people feel like they don't know what to do or they wish they could offer more or they wish they could have some people support them with something. Because it's also a way of seeing people and that has never gone out of style. Everyone needs to be seen and witnessed. We all do.



So, if your friend's going through a divorce and a couple of you just get together, for instance, and maybe create a circle that she comes in and sits down and tells the whole story and you sit and listen for a while. And then maybe give her a certain something to drink, something to eat and have her state her intention about the new life she wants. Mirror that back and you all bless her on that in some way, encourage her.

Right there, it's like then the community lends energy. I think that's why rites of passage were so important because the community couldn't live if people didn't succeed in getting through these passages and continue to grow up and mature and become initiated adults. How would the children get fed if people didn't take their place in the culture? I think that's why they've been returning more and more because they're elemental, they're archetypal. The need for them has never gone away, no matter what the era or culture, where in the world, doesn't go away.

Everybody has the need to be seen and witnessed and to know, not only that they have a gift, but that the culture needs their gift. And that there are people who see that and will reflect that back to them.

[00:10:56] Kathy: Yeah, and I think it takes on even more importance because for as much connectivity as there is with our devices and our electronics that we're finding more and more people are lonely and feeling isolated. The impact of really being seen and witnessed, it feels like this work is more important now than ever.

[00:11:19] Sara: That's what we feel. Even when we do a day-long, which is not a whole rite of passage. We'll do a day-long where people gather together in a



circle, state their intention for the day, then we send them out over a threshold to be alone on the land for maybe two or three hours. And many people say, "I would never go out alone in nature if it wasn't for this."

They come back, we welcome them back in, have a little snack, they fast when they're out there. They don't talk to anybody else. They can journal. It's not a hike. It's to just wander, just to be. You might hike, but it's not going out for your fitness walk. It's going out for a different purpose. It's a little bit more ceremonial.

Then when you come back, you have maybe 10 minutes just to talk about what happened out there. Then, we as the guides, just mirror back what we heard. What animals spoke to you out there? What was the experience? Our job is to weave it back and reflect back your own story back to you. It takes one day. You can do it in half a day with a friend.

I've done it in half a day with a friend. But that thing of coming back and speaking and having someone hear you and wandering out in nature and being silent and alone. And yet, you know, you're safe and held and somebody knows where you are and is expecting you back. When I do that, I feel like I've had a vacation. It's just a matter of hours.

And so people sign up for these because it's so hard to make the time to go out for a day or a half a day to just be quiet in nature. All the to-dos come in. So, that's a thing where we've taken from the larger rites of passage, and we've taken the universal elements and condensed them into just even a small day event where



you have an intention, you separate from your regular life. You're not taking emails that day. We even encourage people to leave their phone in the car.

You cross over a threshold of some sort, could be a stick you step over, could be the way two trees come together, you step under it. In that, you're in different time. You're now in different time. Then you're out alone in the underworld just seeing what presents itself, what happens. Then there's the return. The return is you come back over the threshold, you're welcomed back. Here's the mini-village. You're welcomed back. Tell us what happened out there.

And then the next step begins, which is incorporation, which is taking on in the body, taking on in your life, whatever you got out there. Sometimes you don't even know. Might just be you go back into your day a little calmer. Now, for a huge vision quest, which is maybe a three or four day solo, we say the incorporation, taking back into your life, takes up to a year.

[00:14:20] Kathy: Wow.

[00:14:22] Sara: Because it's a long time to understand and to incorporate and to begin the new life. These stages, people are hungry for these ways of marking time that are moved from the sacred to the profane. The busy, busy time into stillness or to quiet nature time.

[00:14:45] Kathy: What's really resonating with me is how much of this sometimes can just happen naturally. What I noticed last year, and definitely this year, is no headphones, no phone, I do my workouts in the morning, and I go out in the



afternoon and there is one secret place that's not too far from where I live. It's like a little secret cove and a little path around a lake. Over the last year or so, I've made connections with the wildlife there. I was playing hide and seek with a heron for the [chuckles] longest time, it's like, we would find all these different things.

But I go into these walks with, "I wonder." That's it, just an open hand, I wonder.

Sometimes, as you say, something happens and sometimes it doesn't. But I never made the connection that this is really what I'm doing. And the way that this can be enhanced is how might I be able to do this with somebody else. Whether we agree and can be in separate places and then we'll come back and share. I just love that.

I love this idea because it creates conversation that comes from a very different place than if you just were to sit down and have a chat with somebody.

[00:16:08] Sara: It really does. In fact, so often, when you go out walking with somebody, I find that I'm not very aware of the natural world, I'm all in the conversation. So when you go out with this, "I wonder," and you're playing hide and seek with a heron and you're present to the world, you're present to the natural world in a way that creates so much space inside. And is so reconnecting.

And if you and a friend went and just don't even-- you go different paths. I've done this with a friend. You just meet up back at the car and you both take a minute. And it's not like, "Oh, how was your walk?" Not chatty, but it's like, "So tell me..." You just take a minute and say, "Wow, this heron."



And the other person might actually have an observation about that. Something might intuitively come. And maybe not. Sometimes just to be heard. And it's kinda like a sacred space together, rather than just chatting, that being heard.

With the vision quest, you've been out for four days and four nights alone. There's no way you could tell the whole experience nor should you. You just trust what comes to be shared and the guide mirrors that back. Often, I don't even remember what they said but I remember how I felt at being seen. The words maybe don't stay but the experience of being seen is what stays. You just grow bigger when you've been seen. You just grow bigger.

[00:17:44] Kathy: You mentioned something when you introduced yourself that at 50 you went on a vision quest and at 54 you had an experience and it really changed the direction of your life. What about those experiences would you like to share with us? And beyond the experiences themselves, how it really changed the trajectory of your life?

[00:18:06] Sara: The vision quest was so powerful. I had never been alone for four days and four nights out in nature without seeing another person. It was so huge, that I realized, what began to come when I came back is that I wanted more.

Well, as a therapist, of course, I was watching the process. And I realized that one vision quest felt like it was worth about two or three years worth of therapy, frankly. And that's coming from somebody who had given their life's work to therapy, so I'm not being critical. It just felt like it was so intimate and so confrontive and yet so safely and beautifully held, that the experiences that I had out there I could trust.



There was no intermediary, there was no interpretation, there was no psychologizing. It was just me and the juniper trees or the earth or wherever I was, going through whatever I went through and coming out the other side.

And I'm not going to romanticize and say it was all great visions and stuff. I'd get really bored. [laughter] You don't take books or anything and I'm a reader. I'd sit there reading the ingredients on the toothpaste. I'd be so like, "Oh my god, I'm going to die." [laughter]

But I realized, both for myself and anybody I worked with, I wanted them to have more direct connection with the earth. So that came into my work more and more. And it made me realize I needed more times in nature that were more dedicated.

The other thing that changed in my life was I realized there's an ordeal quality that has to be in a rite of passage. Which is why when teenagers try initiating themselves, unconsciously. Look how they're always doing ordeals. They make up ordeals. See if you can drive at a hundred miles an hour and don't get caught. Right? [chuckles] But it's an unconscious ordeal that's not being validated by the community. They validate it for each other, but it misses something.

So, you have to go through an ordeal for a real deep rite of passage. To go out alone, fasting and alone, for four days and four nights with no shelter and no company is a huge ordeal. Going through that, I realized I had way more strength than I knew and that I could really get through a lot of things. It really reaffirms your strength in who you are.



I've had women come on a vision quest with me as a guide who have never even camped and yet they feel called to do this. They're so brave. And, of course, they get a lot of support going out. They're very safe. Safety's the number one thing. And they might only do three days or whatever, but they come back in and the light in their eyes and the strength in their being. Well you know, you've trained for athletic events. It's just like, "I could get through a lot. I can do a lot!"

I notice even around here in Northern California, of course, we've had terrible wildfires and had to evacuate. I said to my husband, a lot of my neighbors were so terrified. And I said, "Wow, we have skills from that. Skills that we may need to use in our neighborhood to help our neighbors."

You know, there are skills from surviving something hard that we haven't been taught to draw on. Everybody has been through hard things and they could, if they were heard and mirrored correctly, that could actually become part of their offering and skillset, like, "Wow, I've been through that."

But if it's just like, "Oh, I got through that and that was awful," then people don't really get the gifts of what they've been through, that they could then draw on again. So, that changed my life in that way.

And then going into open-heart surgery, I realized I had skills from the vision quest way. I could view it as an ordeal. I could cross the threshold. I could make it more of a ceremony. I could really mark the whole year after a major surgery as the whole return. What do I have to learn? What do I embody now in this new body?



That I could bring all that to that, which helped enormously. Because the hospital is not going to help you with this ceremony of your surgery.

[laughter]

[00:22:55] Kathy: For sure.

[00:22:57] Sara: I could write about that. I could help other people prepare for surgeries in a little more conscious, prepared way. So, I think it helped how I approach things is how it changed my life.

[00:23:11] Kathy: Do you think that preparation also helped, not only with the integration, but with the healing as well?

[00:23:16] Sara: Yes. Yes, because, for instance, just in that small category of surgery, all the research shows that if people going into surgery are better prepared – they've done relaxation tapes, they've done some imagery, they have support – the infection rates are lower, the recovery rates are faster. There's just more integration rather than going in terrified and alone, which many people, sadly, have to do.

That's how it really changed my life. It's the way I approach things. I look at them more as that they have these steps. And that, yes, this will be an ordeal, but the purpose of an ordeal is to find out what the gift is down there in the dark. And then to bring it.

[00:24:04] Kathy: It's the hero's journey.



[00:24:06] Sara: Yeah, yeah. And yet, the hero's journey often has been more of an upward trajectory. Parts of the hero's journey, as we were taught it, is you just go higher and higher and higher. Rather than like, sometimes you have to fall apart and die. And then you find the gift and you come back.

Sometimes we don't like that part of that hero's journey in our culture. We don't want to have to die first. [laughter]

[00:24:30] Kathy: Right. But you can't carry, you've got to let something go, right?

[00:24:35] Sara: You gotta let something go.

[00:24:37] Kathy: And with that comes death. And with death comes grief.

[00:24:39] Sara: Exactly. And in every rite of passage, what is the knowing in it? Again, cross-culturally, is there can be no rebirth without death. You can't move to the next stage without letting something go. That's very un-American. You know, it's just not what we get schooled in. We feel like if we're going through grief and letting something go, we're doing something wrong. Rather than something new is being born. You know, we have to make the space for that.

And I knew all that from being a therapist, but there's something about embodying it or enacting it or having other people in on it. It's the enactment. Like the soul really understands it when you enact something. Rather than if you only think about it. You've got to be able to feel it and do it and then it moves. It really moves.



[00:25:37] Kathy: I'm curious about the process of a vision quest. You said something that really piqued my interest, which was before you did it, you had never been alone out in the woods for four days and you said without shelter. So there isn't even a tent?

[00:25:53] Sara: No, generally, in most rites of passage, you go out unsheltered. Modern-day rites of passage for us modern-day Western psychological types, and where I trained, is you take a tarp. And you're trained beforehand all the different ways you can put the tarp up to keep you safe from sun or wind or rain so that you can create shelter for yourself.

Now, as I get to be older, [chuckles] I now actually take a tent for myself and it doesn't matter. But I think when you're a bit younger, the tent can not make it quite as much of an ordeal because you can crawl in at night and zip that thing closed and then you're a little bit separate. There's something about sleeping out on the ground under the open sky alone that, ooh, it brings stuff up! You know, it's big. It's vast.

[00:26:46] Kathy: What was that first night like? And I ask this as somebody who grew up a mile from the Lincoln Tunnel. [laughter] No nature whatsoever. And as you're describing this, I think I can handle it now, but I can only imagine when I was younger, that would've terrified me.

[00:27:05] Sara: Yeah.

[00:27:06] Kathy: What was that like?



[00:27:07] Sara: A good guide knows that if your participants aren't a little bit scared to go out, there's something wrong. Because you're on the edge of something big and, of course, you better be a little scared. It's healthy. It's healthy because it keeps you alert. It keeps you oriented.

I had backpacked and camped and stuff, but always with other people. So, that first night alone, oh, my goodness, my senses were on high alert like, "What's that? What's that? What's that?" Every sound, I don't think I slept. Each night, for me, got successively easier. Yeah, your senses are very heightened.

And fortunately, with doing this in a group, in a contained ceremonial way, you know the guides are in base camp. You know if any car came along, they would be on it. They're protecting you and they're protecting your space. So you don't have to be worried that you're not going to be okay. I've also fasted in the woods and in the desert and it's very different because in the woods, there's all kinds of things that rattle around. A bird in the leaves can sound like a bear. [laughter] You know? So it is, it's scary.

This is why the teachers who taught me said people have to be prepared to know why they're doing this. They got to know what their intention is. Because if you're clear why you're going to do this, why else would you do this crazy thing? If you know why you're doing it, you're going to be safer physically, psychologically, spiritually and emotionally. Because you're oriented. It's like, "I have to do this if I'm going to declare this," or "get through this stage of my life," or "begin this new aspect."



[00:28:58] Kathy: That was actually my next question. What brings a first-timer to this type of experience?

[00:29:06] Sara: Often it's feeling stuck. Like, "I've tried a lot of things and I still don't know where I'm going in my life right now." Often it's, "I just finished school and I don't know what I'm going to do." Or sometimes it can be like marking a divorce or preparing for a marriage. I've had people come out who say, "Before I commit to partnership, I need to go out alone for a while."

[00:29:37] Kathy: Mmmmmm

[00:29:39] Sara: It can be, "I'm turning 50 and I'm starting a whole new decade." It can be, "I've never actually marked my rite of passage into being an adult and I'm 40 years old and I still feel like a teenager much of the time. I feel like an imposter. So I need to go out and mark my adulthood." Sometimes it's like, "I'm turning 60. I think I better start thinking about what it might be to be an elder. I'm going to see what that's like to-- I'm going to go out and mark my elderhood."

And the guides help you hone your intention very specifically to a statement or whatever. Or with these veterans, it's like, "I was never welcomed home properly and I've been carrying around that war. I need to be welcomed home and I need to go out and do whatever I need to do to arrive back no matter how many years it's been and start a new chapter with what the gifts were out of that sorrow or out of that grief or out of that trauma."



So usually, people are going out because there's something hard. But not always. I know people who just actually now go out alone, do this with another friend as their spiritual retreat every year but that's a pretty [chuckles] small group of people, I have to say.

[00:31:00] Kathy: Yeah, yeah. A few things come to mind. One, what a beautiful act of generosity to your potential partner to do that before committing. It sounds like it's this self-reflective thing but it's like, "I want to make sure that I'm ready for this." Boy, the divorce rate would probably plummet if there was [chuckles] a level of intentionality behind crossing that threshold.

And the other thing, when you were talking about the veterans, and I guess this applies to everybody, that just making that decision is really the first step of accepting whatever it is that may be coming their way. And just committing to doing a vision quest feels like--

[00:31:47] Sara: It's huge. That is the first step. Actually, when you say yes is when it begins. Sometimes people start having different kinds of dreams. Steven Foster and his wife Meredith Little were the ones who brought this ancient ceremony, this pancultural ceremony to the modern-day Western psychological types like us.

And he would just say, "Why else would you do this crazy thing?" I mean, you got to really-- You feel called. It's crazy to go do this. "Put it out of your mind," he would say to people, "Don't even think about it." [chuckles] He would play the trickster and go the other direction. And he would have people commit a year in advance so it would work them. That doesn't happen in our culture so much anymore.



But yeah, it's a gift to yourself and to your community to take time alone and go out like that. You know, I have to say when I did my first vision quest at 50, my husband was 59, and at 60, he did his first vision quest because he said, "Whatever happened out there, I want it."

[00:32:55] Kathy: Wow.

[00:32:56] Sara: Because I came back. I just felt so alive, just so alive. And reawakened to myself because of just the non-interference of the modern world. So that inspired him to want to go. It's kinda funny. So, it can be any age. It can be modified for you.

[00:33:19] Kathy: So, how do you keep that light that was ignited at 50? Because it's still sparkling in your eyes.

[00:33:26] Sara: Yeah.

[00:33:27] Kathy: What is it that you do to keep that fire ignited?

[00:33:31] Sara: Well, I do know sometimes when I need to get a day or a half-day out on the land. And what I will do is call up another friend who knows this way and say, "I need to do a walk and I'm going to go on this day for this many hours and can I call you afterwards?" Or even to my husband.

So, I do set aside times once in a while to do that because it's completely different and it freshens me. Sometimes I'll just go sit outside on my back porch and really sit with the night sky, just look at the moon and the stars. It's just like reconnecting



with nature. Sometimes I have to say, "Wait a minute. What's trying to die here? What do you need to let go of? What no longer serves me?" So those kinds of questions all come out that, too.

Or if I've just been through a big experience, I might say to somebody, "Can I just tell you the story?" Or suppose if somebody has had a big experience, I might say, "Why don't we sit down and light a candle and tell me the story?" And I get energized by hearing it in that way too, where we take time for each other's stories rather than just chat about them.

A story, as you know and the work you do, a story is a gift. A story received is a gift and a story well-told is a gift to the receiver. So to have two people sit down and tell each other a real story feeds me, feeds both sides.

[00:35:06] Kathy: Well, Sara, I can tell you that this conversation was a true gift.

[00:35:12] Sara: Thank you.

[00:35:13] Kathy: We didn't know where this was going when we started and I'm just blown away. I can't wait to listen to this again and to take some of these practices into my own life. It feels like the time is right and you are so wise and so generous to share this with us. I can't thank you enough for your time. This has been amazing.

[00:35:33] Sara: Thank you. It's very enlivening for me to share it. As you know I just love this and I love what it gives people, this kind of stuff so for anything in life. So, thank you so much.



[00:35:44] Kathy: Thank you. Really fun.

[00:35:45] Sara: Enjoyed it.

[00:35:46] Kathy: All right.

[music]

[00:35:49] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!

[music]

[00:36:50] [END OF AUDIO]