

Swimming with Seals: The Developmental Role of Initiation Rituals in Work with Adolescents

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses the story of one young man's coming of age to consider the natural process of initiation as a model for intentional work with youth. The paper proposes a conscious and meaningful rites-of-passage approach to helping children and youth (particularly troubled and troubling or out-of-control youth) by assisting them in a successful passage to adulthood.

I want to begin with a tale about the individual metamorphosis of an adolescent boy. He was to be thirteen in a few weeks and his parents, conscious of the beginning of his teen years, invited the extended family of uncles, aunts, and grandparents to a special birthday dinner. My husband and I, close friends of the family, were included among the elders. It happened that we were ourselves entertaining a couple from California—the man, a successful movie and T.V. actor, and his wife, a gifted artist. They were also asked to join the celebration, especially because this young boy, turning toward manhood, had particular talents in both art and drama.

Gifts given, congratulations received, we gathered at the table, festive with decorations made by his younger brother and sister. The boy himself was seated at the head of the table, serving champagne for the elders and sparkling cider for the young ones. Instead of the usual toasts, his father asked that each of the men present give him a statement of wisdom from their own life experience. Those I remember were my husband's, "No matter how strong the pressures of the collective become, always find a way to be true. to yourself," and the actor's, "Never let your talents be sold out in any way that you cannot defend morally." Statements of morality, honesty, and honoring of selfhood.

Returning from the party, the actor expressed great admiration for

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this boy, especially for his sense of presence and honesty. Before he returned to his work, he had invited the boy to come to California to visit for his next birthday, his fourteenth. When the journey was to be taken the following year, the parents, sensing this as a potential initiatory adventure, agreed to pay his fare from the East Coast to Los Angeles, but gave the boy full responsibility for making the arrangements for the trip. After he had passed this test successfully, the parents drove him to the airport while dealing with their own mixed emotions of excitement for the boy and anxiety and concern about his safety.

In Los Angeles the young man, since that is what he seemed to have become in the preparation for this trip, was taken by the actor, like a young initiate, into the mysteries of the movie and TV world. Here he had a glimpse of what lay behind the scenes. There was indeed creative work, but also all the tensions and conflicts among the actors and directors and the enormous amount of discipline and patience required before the final production was completed.

The artist wife took him into her world, that of studio painting, gallery presentation, and printing. Both showed to him the processes involved in taking creative inspirations, manifesting them in various artistic forms, and then bringing those created forms out into the world. The young man was an observant learner, although these worlds were new and strange to him.

One weekend, in order to give him a break from the intensity of the city, it was suggested that he travel up the coast and spend some time with another artist, a friend of theirs who lived a quiet, simple life in the country. Again he made the arrangements, and he boarded a bus that took him along the exquisite California coastline. Arriving, he shared his Los Angeles experiences with his new mentor, who suggested that he now explore another aspect of his being—his physical strength. Together they went swimming in the ocean, an experience totally new and exhilarating for the young man. He learned the skills of diving under the surf and how to pit his constant awareness against the primal power of water and wind.

One day the artist decided it was time for the young man to be at the beach by himself. There were always others around for safety, but the older man sensed that his pupil was ready for another test. The young man was pleased by this show of confidence and felt assured of his own capacity to deal with the ocean. Arriving there, he saw a large crowd of people at one end of the beach, which he avoided. At the other end, resting on the edge of a surfboard, was a single surfer. Attracted, he moved to this lone person, sank down into the sand next to him and introduced himself. In the animated conversation that followed, the surfer shared his story of coming alone from Scotland to

celebrate his eighteenth birthday with his grandparents and his uncle. He was not new to the ocean, having grown up near it at home, and he had surfed since he was fourteen. Finding out that his new friend was just fourteen, he suddenly and with great excitement volunteered to teach him how to surf.

All day, stopping only to rest, the eighteen-year-old would demonstrate, the fourteen-year-old would try, staying up longer and more steadily as the hours went by. Exhausted, they lay on the beach, warmed by the sun and the sand, sharing their life histories and their hopes and concerns for the future.

The conversation turned to sexuality. The Scottish fellow began with much concern to talk about AIDS and about keeping himself safe and not making girls pregnant when he began his sexual explorations. To make his point vivid and clear, he told some sad stories of friends who had not been careful. But most impressive to the younger boy was his mentor's description of a spiritual background that had provided a deep foundation for his life ever since he was very young. He talked about his faith in resources that would sustain him against the pressures of the collective to ignore the consequences of his action. Finally he said, "I don't want to control my behavior just because I am afraid for myself, but because I'm here to make life better for myself and others, not worse!"

After his final instruction, the two young men decided to catch a last "big wave" together. For this they would leave behind the surfboard which had provided a solitary adventure and swim side by side, honoring their brief friendship and their emerging manhood. Cresting a high wave, there was suddenly a shout from the older one, as he pointed to the space between them: "Look there, it's awesome!" There was a third presence, a huge gray seal. It was riding the waves as if to demonstrate nature's approval of this action of initiation and maturation. For half an hour the seal swam back and forth with them—almost seeming to laugh with pleasure at sporting with such companions. Having blessed them it went to join the rest of seals sunning on a big rock nearby, signaling the end of this day of initiation.

Later, returning to his familial home, the boy began a totally different exploration of life. Living at the base of a forested hill, he built for himself a shelter out of natural materials, twigs, pine branches, and leaves. He slept there at night, watching and learning about the stars' movement in the sky, and he spent the days reading about the natural edible foods that grew in the forest. Eventually he learned to blend these plants in a soup he prepared over a small fire. For the rest of the summer he lived in this hut, learning about the wild and subtle rhythms of nature. Toward the end of his time, he invited a few special friends to share his discoveries, becoming a mentor to them.

The young man is now eighteen. When he was sixteen he produced and starred in "The Music Man," which was performed in his home town of 26,000. He had raised funds from the city for the performance. When he was seventeen he began a monthly revue for talented young high school and college students so that they would have a place to perform their creative and original work. He also created a space for students to show their visual arts in a small gallery that was open during the evening the review was being performed. His stage hands were adolescents hired from the local residential facility for juvenile offenders.

This year, being eighteen, he has moved away from home, supporting himself through his work as a sound technician, and has just produced a play with eight- to twelve-year-olds. This play, which he wrote, was based in the ideas of this group of children and came out of their concerns with ecological issues, handicapped and ill children, and the treatment of diverse ethnic groups, particularly the Native American peoples that once lived in their area. The play was proof to many adults that children and adolescents have much to say and to suggest about the conditions of their world.

His latest contribution to the community is the formation of a Youth Coalition. Besides articulating youth's views on social issues, one of its functions is to match young adolescents with mentors who could initiate them into the world of work and of service to the larger community. Sensing the significance of his own experience, he has taken responsibility to give the same opportunity to others.

Understanding Passage

I tell this tale because it illustrates some of the elements of initiatory rites of passage from childhood to adulthood that have been extant in many traditional cultures for thousands of years. These elements seem to be so universal that one can assume that they correspond to a pattern of growth that is common to all humanity, perceived through lived experience and ritualized in community.

The basic structure, described by many cultural anthropologists in their investigation of traditional ritual form, was summarized by Arnold van Gennep (1960) as a period of separation, transition, and incorporation. I would like to review this structure more specifically in relationship to this story of spontaneous initiation.

The first stage would be a separation from the immediate family, allowing the initiate to partake of a larger sphere of instruction. A sacred or special place is prepared, honoring the fact that this event or time period is above and beyond ordinary daily life. Here the birth-

day party of the boy of thirteen is a preparatory celebration which gathered the forces of the community, especially the elders, for the next stage. The advice was given by men, since the passage is a boy moving into manhood. It is the first stage of teaching, almost like the sacred prayers or blessings that traditionally were used to invoke the larger energies—the higher powers—needed for this transition.

The first mentor or elder appears to be in charge of the movement away from the personal milieu of the family. Here it was the actor who invites the boy to California. The reason that the initiatory tutor was traditionally someone outside the family—that is, not the parent—is that the boy (or the girl, if she was the initiate) had already experienced the father (or the mother, in the case of a girl) as a role model. Although the parents may be very good models, the two-fold movement of the adolescent—both to a clearer claiming of one's individuality and to a sense of belonging to the larger community—suggest the importance of having an "outsider" as the role model at this stage of development. For this boy, the identification with the actor supported and expanded his own given talent so that he could be "true to himself" even against the collective pressures. In this way, neither he nor the collective is cheated of the value of his gifts. On the other hand, there is something to be gained by experiencing other aspects in the collective that are new to the youth, that is, which may not have been experienced in the confines of the singular family context. In this case, the Scottish mentor of surfing brought this boy into an experience of his own physicality which was new and the same time brought him into the collective of his age group—those surfers who beautifully and courageously challenge the forces of nature.

The leave-taking—in this case, the plane and bus rides on one's own—was traditionally taken very seriously. There could be a time of wailing and mourning by the mothers, who knew that a child was leaving and an adult would return. Consequently it was often seen and experienced as a death—often ritualized by covering the initiate with white ashes signifying his death, or sacrificing something by discarding old belongings, or having one's hair cut or shaved. Once separated from the familiar, the initiate entered into the strange new, unfamiliar territory, lost to the old but not yet related in a clear way to the new state of being, or status. This was often a time of isolation, perhaps in a hut in the forest, alone or with other initiates. Sometimes they were blindfolded and led deep into the forest or bush, deliberately disoriented. Here, for this adolescent boy the unfamiliar was in the journey, the trip alone, the sights and sounds of a big city, and finally the ocean and its power. Nothing in his past had quite prepared him for these experiences.

The meaning and purpose behind these rituals of confusion and

strangeness is the understanding that there is a tendency in all of us to prefer the familiar, out of habit and security—even though we are pulled toward adventurous growth. The disorientation does not allow for turning back to the previous state. That way is lost. Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs are eaten by the birds.

It is in this disoriented state of being lost that instruction is given by the elders, the masters of initiation. There is an openness, a longing for orientation that allows the teaching to go in deeply and transformatively. Traditionally the teaching was threefold. It included an introduction into the mysteries of sexuality, the passing on of spiritual beliefs and practices, and a requirement to be committed to social responsibility, so one could “defend oneself morally.” The teaching was intense and was intended to be awesome and inspiring.

In the case of this adolescent, the emphasis was on strengthening individual talent in the context of social responsibility, as was evidenced in his later years. His teaching in sexuality and spirituality did not come from two elders in this tale, but from the young Scottish man just slightly more experienced in life, who passionately desired to pass on what he knew.

The initiation always included a test, sometimes very harsh, in which physical hardships had to be endured. This was especially so in cultures where survival depended in the capacity to be strong even in the face of severe pain. This young man was tested in one aspect of survival in his culture, that of mobility from one place to another. Perhaps more striking was the physical demand of dealing with the forces of the ocean. The numinosity (aesthetic impact or “holiness”) of nature's response to his successful passing of the test was awesome.

In the period of testing there was a time of isolation, often taking place in the forest, away from other demands of the culture. It was a time to become stronger in one's self, a time to reflect on the changes that had taken place in the initiation, and a time to solidify those changes before going back into the collective. It was an amazing event that this boy spontaneously chose to take this time in the forest, emerging at the end as a mentor to others, as the Scottish boy had been to him.

The final stage of the traditional initiation is incorporation into the community as a fully accepted adult ready to fulfill the tasks required for maintaining the larger society. These include ordinary collective tasks and the extraordinary ones that individual talents brought to the whole. Acknowledgment of having made the passage well and safely—of having ridden the “big wave”—was usually celebrated by special dances, feasting, and gifting. New clothes, jewelry, a new name, and/or a special sacred object blessed by the elders were given so that the “new ones” would be recognized by all.

It was felt that not only had the initiates been transformed, but the whole community was changed by their entry into it. Therefore, the celebration was not only for the initiates, but for the renewal of the community as well. In the case of this young man, his work in the theater brought a particular ingredient to the community that had not been there before, not only for himself but for those who worked with him and those who participated as members of the audience.

In the incorporation back into the community the ingredient of social responsibility was paramount. The initiate now belonged to the group, no longer to the individual family, and was responsible to the whole. It seems so clear in the case of this adolescent that the actions he continues to take—teaching the young, allowing their voices to be heard regarding social issues, being concerned with disadvantaged, delinquent youth by helping them become part of the community, and the passing on of his own experience with an elder in an apprentice relationship—are all signs of a true initiation well-prepared and well-received.

The remarkable aspect of this story of a successful rite of passage is that it was not consciously prepared as such. The events took place in a spontaneous way, supported by a community that was willing, out of affection for this young man, to participate in the process. That this is an unusual story in our time is obvious. The family was stable and sensitive, the boy was gifted, and the collective of extended family and friends was present and available. But what is most striking is how this unrehearsed, unplanned initiatory experience is to those that are so carefully ritualized in many traditional societies. There is, in this commonality, some evidence that the initiatory experience is a basic human process, understood and ritualized in traditional and coherent communities. However, it is also a process that, because it is so natural, can occur in individual circumstances—if the conditions are right—even if it is not consciously understood or ritualized.

Implications for Practice

What this means for our time is significant. If we can bring the basic elements in the process to awareness as structures already existing in the human psyche, perhaps we can begin to plan consciously for events that will allow the process to fulfill itself, resulting in the transformation of our children into adults through the involvement of their mentors in guiding and testing the development of their spiritual, sexual, and moral qualities. In particular, seemingly out-of-control youth, with whom many in the field are working, appear to lack such appropriate transformative experiences. Looking at some of

their behaviors through the perspective of earlier initiation rites, it becomes clear that some of the natural processes have become distorted.

One of the initiatory tests of a Masai boy in central Africa, for example, was to kill a lion. The lion threatened not only the lives of the members of the tribe, but also the cattle upon which their survival depended. Therefore, protecting oneself and the tribe from this dangerous enemy was seen as essential to manhood. On the streets of New York, however, there are gangs that demand that a member kill a *human*. When the member does, he is said to have "gotten strong." This is a test, similar in nature, but in a context in which the test is destructive both to the moral character of the gang member and to the community at large.

Likewise, many of the suicides of adolescents, epidemic some years ago and continuing at high rates in some communities, could be a reflection of the element of initiation that is viewed as death of the old in order to become the new, but here the death becomes literal, not symbolic. What seems to have happened is that the initiatory process has become distorted in the absence of active shaping and guidance from the community and the wisdom of the elders. If any attention at all is given to the initiation process in the community context, it is now in the form of intellectual education, disciplinary control, and incarceration for aberration as a means of making adults. Mostly it is ignored.

In 1991, the New York state legislature convened a symposium of professionals working with young people called "Rites of Passage." This was a remarkable focus for a meeting convened by a state government, but it is understandable in the light of the desperate condition of the youth in the big cities of the state. There were approximately thirty participants, all actively engaged in creating conditions in which significant rites of passage could take place; for example, by working with community elders, with the educational system, with parents, and with the prison system to foster processes that might affirm passage to adulthood for youth. Most of the programs worked directly in creating rites of passage for the young, functioning in the role of elder or to coordinate elders and to establish links with youth in difficulty.

A number of such programs have been created in settings across North America. They draw on Native American and other cultural traditions to create "vision quest" experiences for work with juvenile offenders and other youth in difficulty. One example is a program that takes young people across the country in wagon trains. These youth, mostly from urban settings, are responsible for care of the horses, for setting up tents, and for cooking meals. There is a high ratio of staff

to young persons in the program, with an emphasis on establishing relations that offer warm affection but are also strong in expectations and discipline. Some of the elements borrowed from Native American cultures include the use of sweat lodges, talking circles, and the creation of ceremony and rituals to mark transitions and successes. The program is designed to be diversionary, substituting for incarceration, and adopts some of the street language normally associated with jail time that leads to claims of a person "getting strong" through imprisonment. The work on the wagon trains is hard, the instructions are clear and demanding, and the tests are many. Other ways to "become strong" are made evident through such a process. The context includes moral development within a community of caring and responsibility that can lead to a sense of pride in the self and in the accomplishment of meeting the tests of living on the road.

"Vision quest" programs are attempts to regain some of the rites of passage processes that manage challenge and testing to produce adults who serve the needs of the community as well as their own needs in becoming successful adults. Physical challenges can serve as the basis for the formation of moral and community values in an imitation of rites of passage. In order to use rites of passage appropriately in our time, what is needed most is an understanding of the natural process of initiation to adulthood within the human being and an understanding of the psychological and social conditions required for the successful completion of this process, both for the youth and for the culture.

Once the necessary work of understanding is in place, it will be possible to create and support ritual events that are relevant to the youth of our time and to the cultural and social contexts in which they live. The opportunities to borrow the essential forms of traditional ritual and to clothe them in contemporary configurations are limited only by our capacity to be creative.

A confrontation with mortality that is based on stillness or lying in an earthen hollow—an imitation grave—for several hours may lead adolescents to a better understanding of the finality of death, making both murder and suicide more realistic and, therefore, more difficult. Youth living in difficult circumstances may have frequent encounters with death and have a strong need to ritualize those passages as a way of learning about mortality and as a way of meeting loss and grief. Street youth are often exposed to the death of a peer, a pet, or a significant relative, and understanding a process of passage as an initiation to life's difficulties and as a way to meet and manage them psychologically and socially might prevent a variety of self-abusive or violent responses.

The transitions or life-changes to be marked by rites of passage

that make change evident through rituals and ceremony can be celebrated in ways that affirm maturation and affirm taking up responsibility for who we are becoming in our community.

For example, in the Apache culture, the first menstrual cycle of a young girl is celebrated by a week-long event (Farrer, 1987). Apaches come from great distances, since it is felt that if this ceremony is not done properly the tribe will disappear. Several girls are usually initiated together. While the men construct a Ceremonial Lodge, the God-mothers dress the girls in traditional clothes of buckskin with elaborate decoration and jewelry. For each girl there is a Singer who will sing Sacred Songs for her and, consequently, for the community. After they are dressed, the Singers apply yellow corn pollen to the girls' faces, making a cross of the four directions signifying the balance of life. Each girl is thus placed in the center of this harmony. The girls then bless the Singers and the crowd that has gathered by repeating the corn pollen blessing. The ritual proceeds with each girl lying down, head to the east. Her God-mother then presses and molds her into a fine strong woman. There are a number of strenuous tests including running and dancing from dusk to dawn, all carefully supervised by the watchful care of the God-mothers. The girls also receive instruction in sexuality and social responsibility.

After four days of public ceremony the now young women are painted with white clay by the Singers to signify the strength and purity with which they have completed the test. Again the people are blessed and the whole community celebrates with a feast. The process of a rite of passage is not only to mark a transition for the participant but is an affirmation of the community in which that person is taking up his or her adult life.

Conclusion

One of the challenges in working with disattached youth is to create community contexts that can be celebrated in the taking up of life. The community context is a critical part of the process, and it is necessary to foster a sense of belonging and a celebration of belonging. It is not always a matter of gathering an extended community, but of acknowledging what can be celebrated as a way of making community and creating context. I have often said to mothers of girls about to become women, marked by their first menstrual period, "At least you could send her a dozen roses." The ritual can be simple. It needs to be surrounded by adequate instruction—in this case, appropriate physical and sexual knowledge—and deep appreciation of the beauty, strength, and potential contribution of the young to our world.

To use rites of passage processes as way of connecting young people to the world, as a way of helping them to mark their coming of age and the taking up of adult life, is to encourage them to be responsible, to live in a community that matters to them and for them. It is to help them understand that they can contribute to life and be capable adults. Whether it is a young boy being handed over to friends for a journey of self-discovery, a young girl becoming a woman through a puberty rite, or youth in difficulty finding new challenges to redirect their energies, there is a natural process in the human being that can be recognized and used as a basis of assisting youth in becoming adults and assisting adults to welcome and embrace the new life taking shape in their midst.

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