

The Cherokee elder said to his son before he sent him out on the great Vision Quest, “Why do you waste your time brooding, son? Don’t you know you are being driven by great winds across the sky!”

I have spent much time in the last twenty years observing and researching the state of the male psyche, both in the secular and spiritual worlds. My work in many countries allows me to do it in a comparative way, and my retreat work, I hope, allows me to do it in an in-depth way. The conclusions I have come to are rather discouraging, but they also confirm the reasons why most cultures deemed the “initiation” of the male absolutely necessary for social survival. It was a fundamental structure of almost every traditional culture.

The young male, it seems, has always been the loose knot in the social fabric. If he was lost to the world of community and spirituality, all the other members would soon fall through the social net— his female partner, their children, the next generation, and eventually the society itself would deteriorate. Today we have men “on the loose” without any social or spiritual mandate. Just their small egos guiding them. And even worse, many a young woman is now imitating the same toxic pattern. It is the only pattern that the West now knows.

In the past twelve months I have worked with groups of men in South Africa, India, and Brazil. With some wonderful exceptions, I saw there what has now become a crisis in America and Europe: the spiritual immaturity of the typical male. Older cultures seemed to assume that **unless the male is led on deliberate journeys of powerlessness, he will normally seek and abuse power.** The only external power that you can trust is in men who have also found their real inner power. Power it seems is the key fascination in the male soul and in every male archetype. It does not go away by churchy preaching or cultural poverty. It just takes disguised and different forms and finally comes back to defeat most worthwhile projects or worse, keeps them from ever getting started. If the male does not experience his power and his possibilities, if he does not let others educate it and tame it, power needs/ego needs tend to control his whole agenda. It does not go away. Primal cultures understood this to an amazing degree, and they took steps to insure that it would not keep happening and subverting their community. In the church, we thought the sacraments of initiation were doing the job, but they clearly became more about tribal membership and personal worthiness instead of any real transformation of the ego into a larger Self. Now the word initiation strikes most people as quaint or meaningless, and its only association is with the bizarre rituals of college fraternities.

The males of most cultures will ordinarily define themselves by external performance, self created ordeals, and ego affirming tasks—**unless they are offered a very real inner world and larger outer world that is even more alive and challenging.** If his inner life does not connect him with “The Larger Life,” he will spin around in his own self-created dramas. Initiation is an inherently “religious” task, and our secular societies are finding it almost impossible to address because they live in a world of merely “market” values with almost no sense of inherent value. Western culture is unprepared and incapable of giving the male (or the female!) any sense of their inherent value and dignity. But even religion is finding it hard to rediscover its own roots in transformative experience, because religion, in my opinion, has had more to do with a belonging system than a seeking of God. Only healthy religion and authentic initiation give men the true power that make lesser power trips unnecessary and even unattractive. Without transformation, the male will always seek false power. Why wouldn’t he? It is the only game in Mudville.

Positively put, we see in all young men the desire to be “great,” to be a part of something significant and important. You cannot take it away from them, in fact, if you try, “it is better that you have a millstone tied around your neck and you are thrown into the sea!” It is good and needed, as far as it goes. It is really his first attraction to transcendence, but without male initiation, it is usually drained into merely belonging to “a big something”: a marching army, a large corporation, a cheering sports event, a megachurch, public attention, or a loud rock concert. That much noise, public visibility or movement feels like it *must* be important! His love affair with false power has begun. Spiritually speaking, he has become another mirror in a large hall of already co-dependent mirrors. He has met nothing but his own extended ego, but now “in drag,” as Ken Wilber puts it. Nothing significant, foundational or genuinely new will happen here. And this is where men often live their whole lives. Look at our heads of state and even heads of church. Our cynicism about power is at an all time high, and this after all of our formal education, all of our balances of power, and all of our supposed Western enlightenment. Law and education can give *information*, as Paul teaches in Romans, but they cannot of themselves give *transformation*.

All historic spiritual traditions discovered another language and a necessary spiritual journey. (I bet you cannot disprove me on that!) This “path of descent” as I call it, is counter cultural and yet ironically, absolutely necessary for the very survival of culture. Maybe that is why we Christians called it “divine revelation.” Each great tradition found its own words for it: the path of the fall, the paschal mystery of death and resurrection, samsara, the Buddhist way of detachment and emptiness, Shiva’s dance of death, the dark night of the senses or the soul, the 1st step of the 12 Step Program. Without it, men are usually toxic to society and even destructive to themselves. It is amazing that we should even need to point this out, it is so obvious.

I guess we have cynically grown used to immature and self-seeking men (which is an uninitiated man). We think it is destiny, and many have unfortunately given up on men. We hear the bitter language in movies, TV, dating patterns, gender programs, and even greeting cards. While misogyny is clearly considered evil, misandry (hatred of men) almost shows you are enlightened! But I do not believe that true masculinity is the same as patriarchy. The great traditions offered a way to this true masculinity. It is a path that men must be intentionally taught or unintentionally learn (life usually initiates you and sometimes converts you in spite of your best attempts to avoid life and God!). Men are made not born, it seems. Boys are born and not yet made, and you can be a 60 year old boy.

I have no hope that we can recreate a “tradition” of initiation when it has not been a tradition for centuries. Our own M.A.L.Es (Men as Learners and Elders) program here in Albuquerque has set a realistic goal of five generations from now! My only hope on the practical level is that the churches can rediscover and retrieve a radical sacramentality of baptism, reconciliation, communion, and confirmation. At least we have some sacred memories and rituals that we can build on, although the non sacramental churches are going to have an even harder time since they don’t believe in “rites” of passage for the most part, but only words of passage. I guess we all have to leave it up to God who just believes in *passage*! Sometimes it has been called exodus, passover, night sea journeys, conversion, repentance, or enlightenment. Karl Jung said that the Judeo-Christian images are the only ones planted indelibly in the Western psyche, and all the necessary images of transformation are there. We can’t create totally new rites of passage completely from zero at this point in history.

It is fascinating to me that the classic sacramental rituals mentioned above perfectly correlate with my present understanding of the key elements of male initiation:

- 1) Baptism (Separation from and death of the false self, similar to Paul's radical theology of baptism in Romans 6:1-11, the drowning pool and washing imagery),
- 2) Reconciliation (Analogous to the extended "grief work" and ritual humiliations found in most initiation rites),
- 3) Confirmation (the Spirit led encounter with an alternative universe and one's True Self. "Now I know for myself, and not just because someone else told me to believe this"),
- 4) Eucharist (unitive and ecstatic experience of the True Self in God, Rich banquet imagery).

To these four, I would also add the very subversive Ash Wednesday ritual, which is one of the most direct hangovers from primitive initiation rites. We have it all in highly softened ecclesiastical rituals, but the message has become largely garbled, churchy, and made both inaccessible and innocuous to the typical male. Initiation rites were always done in a way that the male psyche would respect and honor. They were physical, concrete, brutal and honest about life and death and God, more ritual experiences than words. More like present "tough love" and Outward Bound programs than the ecclesiastical dressing little boys up in baptismal gowns and later in white ties and suits. Rolling naked in black ashes is something that a young man respects and remembers; a white suit is something he cannot get out of quick enough. It does not name his experience, which is the deepest power of a true sacrament. The male comes to God by struggling with his shadow, not by denying it or covering it over. The male comes to God not through soft pieties but by hard realities. The male comes to God not by fearing hell but by going through hell.

When men can experience and exhibit a truly new kind of power, spiritual and inner power, it is only then that they can let go of their ordinary power games and agendas. But what the great teachers seem to say is that **the only time we can trust this new power is when it is a result of its exact opposite—powerlessness**. The only real life is the One Shared Life that is experienced after various forms of necessary dying to the small ego. "Unless the grain of wheat die, it remains just a grain of wheat." Initiation ritualizes and facilitates that dying process early in a young man's life, just as the drowning pool of baptism once did. Jesus said it so clearly to the first group of 12 initiates, who also "wanted to sit at his left and right, and argued about "who was the greatest": "Can you drink of the cup that I must drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I must be baptized?" "We can!", they said with typical male bravado. And he answered "*You shall. . . and you must.*" (Mark 10:38-40) These patterns never change.

"And *when all is made new. . . you yourselves will set on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel*" (Matthew 19:28). Jesus does not say that power is bad, in fact, he offers it and invites them to it. And neither does any initiation rite that I have ever studied. They simply say that power must be purified and "suffered through to" or it is never true power, the "dynamis" of the Holy Spirit. You can't buy power like a commodity, you pay your dues instead, the dues of life chosen and death not run from. The four commonly used male archetypes: Lover, Magus, Holy Warrior, and King are each in their own way about the holding and managing of various forms of power: affective, intellectual, physical, and political. Even these are still referred to in the Catholic baptismal rite when the initiate is anointed for a life of love, as "priest, prophet, and king." We still have all the right words, but we have stopped "practically" believing them for

centuries. The male instinctively knows that power is not bad, and in that he often differs from some recent feminist interpreters. The male instinct about the importance of power is correct, it is only that we have not taught him or trained him in how to find true power or how to correctly use it. The loss to society is monumental.

We will not create a new world by some kind of flat earth society or pseudo egalitarianism, but by each man (and each woman!) finding their true power in themselves and in God. Not coincidentally, they are one and the same finding and one and the same journey. Male initiation rites, as the very word reveals, felt you had to get yourself correctly aligned in the universe *at the beginning*—and then the rest of life would take care of itself. We have made the Christian message largely anemic by pushing most of the concern into the future, a giant reward and punishment story line instead of an experience of something now

If the male does not experience **the power and importance of his true life now**, I have little hope that any set of threats, rewards, commandments, church services, or even enlightened information is going to be strong enough to really change him. Jesus said to his spiritual sons, “Turn around, believe the Good News. The reign of God is within you.” Always the elder must offer the apprentice an experience of a bigger and better world that he can know and live in now. Nothing else will be strong enough to allow him to let go of the false promises and false power that the system is offering him at every turn. You won’t leave the beer of Mudville until you have tasted the wine of Paris! Initiation’s work is to give the young man just enough of the vintage wine so that he will never be satisfied with anything less. It is that daunting task that makes healthy religion so rare and probably why we gave up on initiation all together. It is pretty hard to orchestrate conversion, yet that is what we need.