

## **One Man's Rite of Passage by Tom Gilbert**

The male bonding began long before we reached Ghost Ranch. I rode on one of two coach buses that left the Albuquerque airport on a warm Thursday afternoon in August. We chatted amiably -- the typical surface talk of men. This was the first visit to the desert southwest for many and as we gazed at the landscape we marveled at the expanse of our skies, the billowing thunderheads and deep azure color. The mesas spread out before us and recent, much needed summer rains had brought out colors of yellow and purple that wonderfully accented the brown hills and light green sage.

North of Santa Fe we drove through a thunderstorm. Curtains of rain danced across the valleys and fingers of lightning dynamically jabbed mountain peaks. I described to some of the guys the strange visual of virga -- rain that falls but evaporates before hitting the ground -. Nature's way of teasing our dry land.

When we arrived at Ghost Ranch all of us were anxious and talkative. By the end of our Men's Rites of Passage (MROP) we would be just the opposite.

I find it easy to talk and write about my experience with the MROP, but I must qualify this statement. It's easy to share about it with other men who have also undergone this type of experience. Here lies the key: a true spiritual initiation rite is experiential. All the wonderful books that have been written about male spirituality and all the great talks can only introduce and prepare a willing initiate. The real work -- the transformation -- occurs in each man individually and collectively with the help of God and rituals that tap deep archetypal memories.

The holy ground we walked at Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico offered up many moments of grace. We were given frequent occasions of silence and solitude. During these times I often felt small and overwhelmed. I also experienced moments of great spiritual bliss and gratitude. Grace rained down, just like the thunderstorms that burst upon us more than once. The sound of thunder rattling through the canyon and the jolting shards of lightning seemed orchestrated perfectly for each day. It still plays like a movie in my head.

One of the greatest needs men have for an initiation through the Rites of Passage is to escape the false reality we spend so much time in. I know I've constructed a great deal of it and I've eaten at the banquet table of materialism. Indeed I've encouraged it. This false self must die so that the true man may be born. It's the pattern of all creation. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot grow and bear fruit. This is not business as usual for most Western men.

I cannot adequately convey the bonds of brotherhood that formed among us, particularly with the men in my small group, my beloved "Elijah" brothers. It's hard to believe that real intimacy can be achieved among total strangers, especially in such a short time. Witness the power of the Spirit working in and among us. A great deal of credit goes to the elders who've paved the way and were present to pass it on. Father Richard Rohr also deserves much credit for toiling long and hard in this area, but I suspect any of the men present would agree that the Higher Power was orchestrating it all. Many served as channels of peace and love.

Real and lasting change seems elusive in our society. Perhaps you have experienced the spiritual highs of multiple conferences and retreats, only to fall back to your old ways just weeks, if not days, later. True transformation is a process and no single event will do all the work. I know that I am different now – significantly so.

My initiation has led me through death, grief and acceptance and eventually into joy. The freedom I felt after a day sitting alone and apart in the deep recesses of the Ghost Ranch box canyon is a gift to always treasure. I know it is not mine to selfishly hold. My responsibility as an initiated man requires me to continue this work. It is the best job any man can have for it is real living. Other men, women and children need the help that spirit-filled initiated men can give them. To quote St. Paul, “when I was a boy I lived as a boy, but now I’m a man and I live as a man!”