

Male initiation rites – Introduction to a Special Focus

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What makes me a man? It wasn't until I was about forty- two years old that I finally figured I had made it. By that time I had been working for 19 years, had been married and divorced, had sired one son and fathered another, and had undergone a vasectomy. I don't know why I decided at that time that I was a man. It was probably the collective of all the experiences society and I had conspired to put me through. I grew up with a professional father who was busy tending to the needs of others and had little time to devote to errant sons. Summer camp was probably as close as I came to a ritual initiating me into manhood. I was left alone to figure it all out for myself as were most of us. It took a long time, a lot of mistakes, a lot of pain, and a lot of trial and error. I don't think I'm done yet.

Most of us go through rites of passage in addition to the sexual fantasies of summer camp on our way to adulthood: learning how to share, prom night, church confirmation, bar mitzvah, graduation from high school and/or college, fraternity hazing, work, marriage, childbirth and lots more. There are even societal institutions such as "Promise Keepers", the Masons and others that provide further rites. Some provide guidance but none are specifically designed to turn wayward youthfulness into responsible adulthood.

For hundreds of years, more "primitive societies" felt it necessary to stage elaborate rites to move boys into manhood—to more directly confront the oedipal crisis that can occur when boys turn to look for male models with which to identify. These proceedings (Eliade, 1958) always involved four distinct phases: separation (rupture) from mother and from women; into a forced seclusion (isolation) in an all male society. Numerous "Rites of Initiation" followed over a span of time that may have taken from a weekend to six months. They usually involved pain, bloodletting, (ordeal) and introduction to the mystique of a kind of manhood that would involve arduousness, extreme danger, sacrifice and responsibility. Finally the newly ordained Men were triumphantly returned (reunification) into the tribal society.

Only after this initiation were the then men allowed to take part in the political and social life of the community with full standings as men.

Robert Bly, in his numerous writings bemoans that modern society contains no equivalent rite to mark the passage from boyhood to manhood and suggests that this loss causes confusion, hardship, and frequently results in prolonged adolescent attitudes among men who almost reluctantly take on the responsibilities of adulthood. He argues for the reinstatement of some kind of marking of the transition that makes it clear when a boy has become a man. A group, "Boys to Men" has actually attempted to put some of this into practice.

I wonder if these minor initiations or even what is practiced in Africa is enough to become what I would call a "real" man. I know a lot of males that are not what I would consider men. Is Bush a man? He has always struck me as a reckless adolescent who was stuck in his oedipal period by an absent father, by money, by alcoholism, and by drug addiction.

In tune with Ed's comments (herein) that we are never done with development into manhood, I like the thoughtful, but struggle-filled stages described in The Elder Within (Jones, 2001) that bring about "real" men: (1) Awakening--of a felt sense of failure of the old ways of being, thinking, feeling and behaving; (2) Choosing whether to be, in a different manner; (3) Struggling—facing one's own projections and shadows; (4) Resolving to grow and to nurture;

(5) Accepting—the turning point wherein one accepts who he is; (6) Becoming a male who is able to be, in being, and in serving others; and (7) Sharing—the giving of one's manhood as a mentor, and as a keeper of the dreams and the memories.

Dan Quinn (herein) takes off from here and sees the stages of the therapy hour as in many ways akin to the stages of initiation into life. He elaborates on these from a Jungian perspective.

Ed Tejerian looks thoughtfully and almost sadly at the role fathers, as well as other aspects of society, might play in the initiation of their sons.

We offer these humbly as food for thought.

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BOYS TO MEN: African Male Initiation Rites into Manhood

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In the classic mythical male coming of age tale, Parsifal leaves his mother behind and symbolically all of life that is female and naïve, and ventures forth to seek wisdom and his destiny as a man. He wears nothing but a crude cloth to cover him, ergo he is unprotected. Before he succeeds in his quest to become a man he fails, undergoes many painful ordeals, learning much about suffering along the way. Different cultures inform this tale in many ways but it is always necessary for the Parsifal figure, the naïve boy, to survive ordeals and to achieve some task or solve some problem in order to be made into a man. His arrival into manhood is never assumed, it takes time, it is not easy, and the maintenance of the status requires continual renewal (Johnson, 1989).

In Africa throughout recorded history, a boy is a boy and a man is a man—they are different entities. A boy is with his mother. A man is with men and does what men do. As with Parsifal, a boy becomes a man only through some form of stringent initiation ritual. The plethora of literature provided by anthropologists and sociologists about African male initiation rites suggests that it was, at least until recently, the experience of almost every African boy to undergo some form of stringent ritual which usually involved painful circumcision and/or body scarification as a rite of passage to manhood. There are literally thousands of individually identifiable tribes in Africa and tens of thousands of villages. Most of these social groupings had little or no contact with each other, yet within each, rites to initiate males into manhood arose. Only after successful completion of this test can a boy claim to be a man. Without successful completion of the initiation rites the boy remains a boy and does not have the rights and responsibilities of men. He may often not be allowed to marry and produce children and cannot

take part in village affairs and even express an opinion. Indeed in some cases a man who has not endured the prolonged ordeal of such an initiation is not even considered to be a person (Tucker, 1949).

While each individual initiation may vary in format, content, and symbolism from tribe to tribe, from village to village, each in its own way includes six characteristics: (1) separation and seclusion away from the rest of the tribe—especially mother and women generally; (2) some form of pain and suffering—physical and emotional; (3) specific educational instruction; (4) cutting of flesh—usually circumcision or/and scarification of the body—and spilling of blood; and (5) entreaty to spiritual and/or ancestral elements; and (6) reincorporation back into the tribe/village as changed persons. These six aspects may be specific and taught or may be inferred symbolically but they are to be found in almost all of the initiatory rites noted in the literature.

Separation usually takes the form of seclusion of the initiates somewhere outside of their homes, outside of the village, usually in the bush in a totally male environment. This may last as long as three months or more, and involves privation. These boys are often cloistered together in small huts for days at a time, sleeping on the ground; they are sometimes required to be scantily clothed or even naked; and they may be exposed to wild animals. While separation and seclusion may in itself be considered painful, other experiences such as the very strict, harsh discipline of the camp, having their heads shaved and their bodies painted, eating only certain kinds of food, sometimes going without food for a period of time, catching and/or killing wild animals, learning lore, proving themselves in various ways, all of these add to the intensity of the initiation process. Often the rites include various taunts and humiliations delivered by the elders to the initiates who desire to join their ranks.

Educational instruction usually involves some kind of orally transmitted stories of the tribe, secrets of male society into which they are being initiated, specific sexual instruction on appropriate modes of coitus, specific societal rules and taboos that must be adhered to, more philosophical topics that bring in the lore and the history of the tribe and of initiation itself, and often, existential questions about life. These can be transmitted by riddles and song or didactically taught. Sometimes the initiate is assigned an elder mentor who guides and instructs him through the process. Gitywa (1976, pp169-70) provides us with illustrative, albeit specifically Xhosa teachings, as follows: “Speaking in low tones with courtesy; Being outspoken in a guileless manner which comes from the heart; Quarrelling and forgiving one another; Service and obeisance to chiefs; Reasoning at the courtyard; Righting the wrongs of life; To support the home by caring for the family and caring for the stock; Looking after the parents; Bearing the difficulties which single out men; Obedience to law of the home and of the nation; He <the guardian> disparages till the mouth is dry those whose guardian he is.”

The cutting off of the foreskin—circumcision—is almost always part of the changing/rebirthing process that transforms boys into men. It is essential to the attainment of manhood (Carstens, 1982) and it is shameful if not done (Sagnia, 1984). With the act of circumcision the boy that is left behind as the foreskin is cast into the river is transformed into a man. (Droogers, 1980). This physical transformation is how the man is identified. It is a visible physical proof of manhood. It is a necessary precursor to marriage and in fact an uncircumcised man may be spurned by the

female members of the society (Heald 1999; Gitywa, 1976). The act is seen as a physical cleansing that has been esteemed for time immemorial (Tucker, 1949).

The surgical act of circumcision is often made more painful than it needs to be and the boy is admonished to stand stoically still and not flinch (Heald, 1982). Endurance of pain is part of the male hardening process (Droogers, 1980), making the man able to face an ordeal without fear (Heald, 1982). Clearly the ability to endure pain in the future with indifference is a goal of this process.

The beginnings of the practice of circumcision in Africa are unknown. Myth and oral histories surrounds its beginnings and they are often attributed to women (Brain, 1977; Beidelman, 1986; Heald, 1999; Droogers, 1980). It is said in one myth that men saw women cutting their daughters and believing that this act made their daughters “too strong” they began to cut their sons. In another myth, it was said that some women of the village were at the riverside when they noticed an empty canoe drifting along with the current. When they looked in the canoe, it contained a knife, medicinal preparations and a set of pictorial directions (assumedly on how to conduct circumcision). This event had been predicted by the ancestors (Droogers, 1980). When women instigated the practice of clitorrectomy on their daughters three of the daughters died and the practice was abandoned by women. Men took up the practice and were more successful. Thereafter it frequently became an exclusively male affair.

In another telling, circumcision is seen as a punishment for some mythical male transgression against the original ancestor who began the practice (Vansina, 1955). Another writer suggests that the male envy of women and their ability to give birth and to bleed automatically on a monthly basis led males to take up a practice that resulted in “rebirth” of their sons through the spilling of blood (Sagnia, 1984). In fact, circumcision is usually seen as a rebirth of the boy into a man and is often accompanied with the giving of a new name. (Kreamer, 1995). In any case it appears that the beginnings of the practice of circumcision happened independently in Africa in many other different places, for many different reasons.

For most African peoples, spirituality is inseparable from life (Smith, 1946); it is thus inseparable from initiation and circumcision (Gitywa, 1976; Heald, 1999). The specific act of circumcision is said to bring the boy closer to his ancestors and to the supernatural world (Gitywa, 1976). The practice, while introduced by women is attributed to the Gods or to the fore-bearers who are considered Gods, and is done with their approval and with much entreaty and invocation for them to look kindly on the rites and on the young men who must endure the ordeal set for them by their elders (Beidleman, 1997). In many cases animals are sacrificed to ensure the protection of the ancestors and to help ward off any evil spirits that may bring wrongs (Heald, 1999). Initiation and circumcision are ties that bind males spiritually--to the land, to the spirit ancestors who have gone before, to the living, and to those yet to be born (Sagnia, 1984). If a boy dies during the period of initiation it is accepted fatefully as the will of the Gods (Droogers, 1980).

The activity and celebration that surrounds the initiation ritual frequently begins many months prior to the actual seclusion of the boys. The culmination of the process of initiation, however, ends with the boy's symbolic rebirth and reintegration into the village society. A joyful

ceremony greets the return of the boys heroically having endured the trials and have become men. Numerous symbolic rituals often take place to reintegrate the boys back into mixed society. No justification is needed for the celebratory ceremonies that accompany the re-incorporation of these now men into the society other than their safe return from what is seen as a heroic and dangerous mission.

Different cultures may stress one aspect of initiation over another. The Xhosa, (Gitywa, 1976), for example, emphasize preparation for adult citizenship in the tribe with marriage and childbearing being a *sine qua non*. A formal mentoring system held over several months inculcates tribal characteristics and ideas about life. Other tribes choose to stress the dangers in life and the need for toughness, fearlessness and bravery (Heald, 1982; Droogers, 1980). For some the act of circumcision, replicates the cycle of life through the spilling of blood from the reproductive organs--similar to menarche in females (Sagnia, 1984). The implication here is that circumcision is born of male envy of female power as the givers of life (Brain, 1977). Circumcision also symbolically transforms the individual male from an asexual to sexual being.(Droogers, 1980). The initiates are also “born again” and sometimes even given new names (Tucker, 1949; Kreamer, 1995; Gitywa, 1976). In some cases the process is seen conceptually as bringing out from within the boy an internal maleness (Heald, 1999). In other cases initiation is seen as a strict and necessary imposition of male norms and behaviors onto the initiates—the literal making of men (Gitwa, 1976). For others it is merely a rite of passage that separates boys from men and binds them with other men, to the tribe, and to their ancestors, assuring the tribe’s continuity by and linking the male for all time with his community. (DeJong, 1997; Sagnia, Muytisya, 1996).

Levi-Strauss (1967) tells us that ritual is informed by myth and that while myth exists on the conceptual level it is ritual that transforms myth into action. Initiation and circumcision are ritual acts and as such their meaning and function are understandable only by subjective interpretation and educated speculation. Anthropologists have attempted to offer many answers to the inevitable question of why African societies need to initiate boys into manhood and why this kind of transformative ritual occurs almost universally among African cultures that have historically had no contact with each other or with the greater outside world. Native tribesmen usually explain that these processes and rituals are spiritual and involve the imputation of special power to men (Kreamer, 1995; Moore, 1976). They describe the need to test and produce men that can stand up to the rigors of this difficult life and defend the tribe against adversaries (Droogers, 1980; Heald, 1982). Explanations of scholarly investigators often run the gamut from practical explanations that are similar to those offered by the participants, to deep psychological discussions of fear of sex, incest, pollution and death (Brain, 1977).

On a more practical note, social survival depends on society’s ability to solve the problems of reproduction, safety, and production. Roles for each of these tasks must be assigned either to males or females. Females are usually less physically strong and are biologically physically predisposed to the role of child bearing and child rearing. Males have few biological imperatives beyond impregnation but are the physically stronger of the two sexes and thus the roles of protectors and providers have been taken up by them.

The roles of provider and protector have historically involved hunting for wild animals, taking part in war, fierce competition for resources, and other risky, dangerous, and life threatening behaviors. As Gilmore (1990) stresses in his seminal text on Manhood in the Making, in societies where hardiness and self-discipline are required and where resources are scarce, men may need to be prodded into taking on the role. A special moral system, “real manhood”, is required to ensure a voluntary acceptance of appropriate behavior in men” (p221). Boys then must be taught that it is their honored duty to become men and to take on the dangerous and often arduous roles of protector and provider. They must be toughened emotionally and physically and must realize that the survival of their tribe depends on their willingness to accept this role.

Part of the incentive needed to prod boys into becoming men is the increase in status achieved in the process, being raised above females by the tasks that are set for them to accomplish. A boy seeks solace and protection at his mother’s side and will perhaps continue to do so if left with her. This overwhelming urge must be overcome; the male must leave his mother behind if he is to assume his self-reliant role in the society (Droogers,1980; Webster, 1932). It is the task of the older men, through specific initiation rituals to carry out this passage, this transformation. A clear difference in attitude and behavior is expected from a man who has undergone initiation (Gitywa, 1976).

Modernization, the loss of much of the wild bush, formal western style schooling, and the imposition of Christianity and Islam (and the subsequent subrogation of manhood rites) have resulted in the abandonment of the practice of initiation and circumcision among many tribes—especially among those living in the cities (Sagnia, 1984, Carstens, 1976; Van Vuuren and DeJong, 1999). Often, circumcision is performed on boys in the hospital soon after they are born and scarification of the body has become frowned upon. The rites of initiation and circumcision seem to be dying out (Mutisya, 1996). The supernatural force which was once omnipresent in the lives of Africans (Smith, 1946) is now relegated to mosques and churches and taken care of by assigned intermediaries. Western style classroom education and modern health care methods are supplanting more traditional modes of education. Life is more outward looking and the village and tribe are not the cohesive centers to which everything is connected. While modern life may be less stable, it is also less physically combative and dangerous, and the need for male bravery and aggressiveness is lessened if not completely unnecessary.

When something as central to life as formal initiation into manhood dies with nothing to fill the void that it leaves behind, it is hard to know what the implications may be. There are those who decry the great loss represented by its discontinuation and suggest that it has led to the diminution of manhood itself (Bly, 1992). Some urge that the practice be reinstated and established even in the United States and other Western countries (Bly, 1992; Mustisya, 1996). It may in fact be that with the decline in the physical rigors and dangers of life, it has outlived its usefulness and the need for the symbolism and ritual that surrounds artificially imposed male separation and definition is no longer. Time will tell.

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Initiation in Modern (or Post-Modern) Life

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Reflecting on my years of doing psychotherapy with men, I would say that their fathers were much more likely than their mothers to be the focus of men's longing, need, conflict, and anger. Of course, this was not invariably true. One of the deepest therapeutic processes that I have ever been engaged in was that that with a young man whose mother committed suicide when he was ten years old. But that was the exception. More common sources of sadness were the experience of separation from the father because of divorce or death, or the sense of a lack of emotional involvement on the part of the father.

Is "initiation" a meaningful concept in a complex and fragmented society such as ours? One of the characteristics of initiations in simpler societies seems to be that everyone goes through the process. There may be ordeals and challenges, but a prerequisite is that everyone succeeds, everyone "passes," no one fails or is left behind. For us, there is no universal rite de passage that everyone goes through. Another relevant question to ask when talking about initiation is: just what are boys or young men being initiated into? Masculinity? Manhood? (Are the two things the same?) Into "adulthood?"

I think that in a non-communal society (such as ours) organized around the family as the primary source of socialization and nurturance it falls to the father—not an organized group of elders—to provide his son with the experiences that represent the foundation of his initiation into manhood. He does this not by playing ball with him or going fishing or doing any of the other

stereotypically “masculine things,” but rather by bonding with him in a close and loving relationship. The security of that bond initiates his son into an inner sense of himself as a worthwhile and competent male person, a foundation that he can continue to build on for the rest of his life in society.

But many fathers are not very good at doing that for their sons. When I was teaching a graduate course in Adolescent Psychology, I would ask each student in the class to do a case study of an actual person. At the end of the semester, I asked my students to rate both parents of the person who had volunteered to be their subject for a case study. Were they “good enough” or not? Typically, about two-thirds to three-quarters of the mothers were “good enough.” However, I don’t think I had a single class in which even a majority of the fathers were rated as “good enough.” It seemed to me that, especially as the family grew larger—say beyond two or three children—the fathers got overwhelmed with the responsibility of being (typically) the primary wage-earner and, of course, spending more time away making money and not seeing their families. Sometimes, the father became a grouchy, somewhat remote figure who did not provide a lot of emotional sustenance. And not feeling sufficiently loved or appreciated himself, he was more susceptible to becoming bitter or even alcoholic. The upshot was that he could not provide his son a solid bond of closeness and affection that would serve as the foundation for his son’s sense of himself as a man. In other words, he could not be the initiator of his son into manhood.

What happens when a father is absent altogether from a boy’s life while he is growing up? It depends, I suspect, on whether we are speaking of absence caused by an abandonment seen as avoidable or death (which is not.) Even as I write this, I know that many hundreds of American and Iraqi boys (and girls) already find themselves in the situation of having lost a father to an untimely death. (So unfortunately, we may learn more about that question in the near future.) Is it possible to develop an inner sense of a worthwhile and competent male self in the absence of a father? I would think that the answer is: yes, it must be possible. Certainly, a good relationship with a mother who understands and values his maleness and personhood can go a long way toward helping a boy to build a sense of himself as a worthwhile and competent male person. Also, both as a boy and a young man, he can seek out other, affirming relationships with older men in his life. And these can provide some of the initiating functions of the absent father.

In recalling patients I have had in therapy who lost a father (or mother) to death before adolescence, the absent parent remained a powerful, unchanging presence with whom the sense of a loving inner bond, tinged with a sense of longing and sadness, was maintained. In the case of the young man whose mother had committed suicide when he was ten years old, it was more complicated. Since she chose her own death it was also, inevitably, also experienced as an abandonment. The guilt, longing, and repressed anger (provoking more guilt still) because of this was a pretty potent and problematical mixture. His father, however, remained a loving, if sometimes insufficiently demonstrative, figure in his life.

When abandonment is the primary factor, the sense of rejection can leave toxic residues of anger. One of my students, a teacher at Rikers Island (the temporary holding prison in New York City) did a study for me with a young man who never knew his father, because he had been one of a succession of men that his mother had temporarily had in her life. As a late adolescent, he turned to robbery and drug dealing and ended up being arrested for murder. The one dream he told my student was of a little black man (he was African American) whom he chased but could not catch—the unknown father. At the end of the class, one of the other students approached me and said he understood the revulsion that most of the class felt toward the ex-armed robber and drug

dealer. But he knew from experience (he was also African American) why he had done those brutal things. He (the young man in Rikers) wanted others (all his victims were men) to feel his inner pain.

As for himself, my student said that what had saved him were religion and his girlfriend. My interpretation is that the church was symbolic of the benevolent, nurturing father he had lacked in his family life, and that a woman's devotion helped him to further build a foundation of a worthwhile and competent male self—which is what “initiation” is all about.

As indicated in this story, if the relationship with the father is not available to help a boy develop such a foundation, alternative avenues—and relationships—will undoubtedly be sought. I recall a male patient of mine who felt that his role in the family (he had one older brother) was to be the “drop-out nothing.” His father was inconsequential in the family structure and his stance toward his son was one of laissez-faire ineffectualness. Perhaps as a way of expressing his desire to identify with the kind of masculine strength that he could not get through bonding with his remote father, my patient began to ride a motorcycle. Unfortunately, he broke his leg when a car—in the classic maneuver of the idiotic driver of a car who fails to “see” a motorcycle approaching in the opposing lane—made a left turn right in front of him. While laid-up and recovering, he got a camera, started experimenting with taking pictures, and looked for work in the field after he was back on his feet. He got hired by a well-known photographer who took him on as an apprentice and gave him his start in what would become a successful professional life. The photographer was a man old enough to be his father and played the role of mentor and initiator in his life. Not infrequently, he appeared in my patient's dreams as a father-figure. Indeed, my patient remembered sometimes slipping, when they used to work together, and actually calling him “Dad.”

How about initiation into the sexual aspects of manhood? Almost nowhere does our sex-obsessed society break down more spectacularly than in dealing with adolescent sexuality and its discontents. The subjects of my students' case studies were young people typically in their early twenties so that adolescence was already officially over and we could look at how they managed to get through it. What one saw was that, lacking anyone to help them develop a sense of themselves as sexual beings, adolescents did it for themselves. Thus, a boy would get initiated into the mysteries of sex and manhood—in a sexual sense—by having sex with a girl hardly out of childhood herself.

We should be concerned with helping boys (and girls) to move into society as sexual beings. But that process has fallen victim, like so much else, to the “culture wars.” On the one hand, an unholy alliance of religious zealots and cynical politicians refuse to acknowledge adolescent sexuality at all, while simultaneously raising the specter of homosexuality and the “gay agenda.” On the other hand, through the media, adolescents are regaled with images of sexual romance and physical perfection. (Take a look at the junior version of People magazine called Teen People.)

Yet when looked at closely, almost all male initiation rites have elements of eroticism. As Marty Wong points out, initiation rites in traditional societies very frequently have circumcision as a nodal point of a symbolic transformation. The intense focus on the boy's penis by the men of the group has to do with initiating him into the sexual and social life of the community. Although the women are also aware of and welcome this ushering of the boy into sexual manhood, it is the

erotic energy generated by the intensity of male bonding across generations that is the prime mover in the symbolic transformation from child to man.

It was in the Melanesian culture area—encompassing Papua-New Guinea—where, well into the 20th century, the erotic—in fact homoerotic—energy of male initiation was perhaps most clearly evident (Tejirian, 1990). There, transactions of semen between older and younger males were a pervasive feature of male initiation. Among the “Sambia” with whom anthropologist Gilbert Herdt lived, boys were turned into men by being isolated from their mothers. Living in proximity with adolescent boys, it was necessary that they perform fellatio on the older, sexually mature boys since it was thought that only by the ingestion of semen on a regular basis would they be able to mature sexually themselves.

Among the Marind-anim, who were inveterate headhunters, initiation involved a ritual in which initiates were made to have sexual intercourse with any number of men on a night when the village was visited by Sosom, a dema (spirit)—who was a giant that walked with his penis carried over his shoulder. Later, the boy went to live with his maternal uncle for a while—the only man allowed to have intercourse with him. In this culture area, older males infused the younger ones with sexual power through the act of direct, physical transmission.

We see echoes of these homoerotic elements in some of the hazing practices in high school and college athletic teams and fraternities, however, what is lacking in these situations is the adult guidance and supervision that would ensure that things do not get out of hand. I ran across an account, on the internet, of a college boy who was paddled as part of the hazing ritual of the fraternity he wanted to join. In this context, this constitutes an erotic act, a displacement of the anal intercourse to which the Marind-anim youths were subjected. But in a society that would heavily censure an openly homoerotic ritual of initiation, its denial makes it susceptible to being transformed into sadism. In the case of the fraternity pledge, it turned into a beating that required a skin graft.

The African rituals spoken of by Marty that promoted maleness and male bonding have their counterparts in traditionally all-male societies from the Knights Templar to the Masons. In the early 15th century, Philip the Fair of France and the Inquisition combined forces to accuse the Templars of holding homoerotic, satanic initiation ceremonies as a pretext for destroying the order and seizing all of its assets. Williman Benemann (2006) in his interesting book entitled *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* relates how rumors of homosexual rituals in their initiation ceremonies circulated with respect to the Masons in the early 19th century. There is no evidence that sexual rituals were actually taking place in either one of these fraternal orders, but the false charges reflected both an insight and a projection. The insight is that, in such orders, the identification and friendship both within and across generations incorporate an emotional eroticism that is present in all male bonding. The projection comes from the fact that a society that censures all male to male sexuality confuses emotional and physical eroticism, projecting the latter onto the former. In other words, such a society obsessed with homosexuality looks for it everywhere—exactly the situation we have at the present time on the political and religious right in this country.

The obsession with it is such that, each year, many men (and women as well) are discharged from the military because they have been found to be gay. The irony is that the introduction of women into the armed forces has undoubtedly caused many more problems of a sexual kind than would the open recognition of the presence of gay men. Certainly, other countries that have

dropped prohibitions against gay soldiers, including our closest geographical and cultural neighbor—Canada—have not reported significant problems after the change.

But how about women? Do they play a significant role in male initiation other than in initial sexual contact? In a great many societies—including ours—men are expected to marry, and marriage is the next to the last rite de passage in the achievement of social adulthood. I say “next to the last” because fathering a child might be considered the last step in the progression from boy to man. (In a complex society such as ours, these steps are not absolutely required.) Still, the old patterns—perhaps a Jungian might say “archetypes”—can continue to exert power. In fact, the power of the marriage archetype might be one of the elements in the drive for acceptance of same-sex marriage.

Is there a difference between looking for love from and with a woman and looking to her to complete a process of initiation that in some deep, archetypal sense, is meant to be completed through a male to male relationship? I think there is. There are men whose sense of themselves is so tied to validation by a woman that relationships to their children—daughters as well as sons—are completely subordinated to that need. Such men, after a divorce, maintain only a tenuous tie with the children of their first marriage. Freud said that he could imagine nothing more important to a child than his father’s protection. As we know from clinical experience a man whose own father failed to meet that need might react by trying very hard not to fail his own son in the same way. On the other hand, we know that the reverse is also not infrequently true: he repeats his father’s failure with his son.

In the current context of war-time, the news media report stories of young men who use the military as a kind of initiation into manhood. Television ads used to show the army as a place where a young man can “be all that you can be.” Training and education were also promised. The ads for the Marine Corps would show a young man in Marine dress uniform with the slogan, “The few, the proud....”

Turning to look at ourselves, the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity—many of us grew up under the sign of “Masculinity”—a culturally defined set of gender role prescriptions (and proscriptions) that, as has been correctly pointed out, was excessively restrictive and therefore false to what boys and men are really like. If one was lucky enough to have a warm, supportive father who did not judge one by those values, initiation into a sense of worthwhile and competent maleness could still take place through the bond with him. But everyone is not that fortunate.

When the need for initiation—for laying the foundation of a worthwhile and competent male self—has not been accomplished earlier on, it can remain a lifelong quest. From what is known of his life history, George W. Bush is his mother’s son, not his father’s. (Bush Sr. warned the press that if they criticized his son, they would have Barbara to deal with.) When questioned about whether he had asked his father’s advice on important issues, George W. retorted that he looked for guidance to a “different” (heavenly) father now. Nevertheless, in 2000 he chose as his running-mate an older man who is regarded as the most powerful and influential vice-president in the history of the Republic. At the same time, he chose an older, extremely powerful Secretary of Defense to whom he remains devoted in spite of the latter’s demonstrably disastrous policies.

In the Viet Nam era, when so many young men rebelled against the war, George W. Bush did not; yet, neither did he complete his tour of service in the Air National Guard. His whole career

seems to be that of a man to whom much was given and of whom little was asked. Helen Thomas, the doyenne of the Washington press corps noted, during a press conference, that all the reasons he had given for the invasion of Iraq—Saddam’s connection to 9/11, WMD’s, etc.—had turned out to be without foundation, while there was evidence that soon after taking office he was determined to have this war. Why had he wanted it? Of course, he said, he had not “wanted” war (he would not permit her a follow-up question.) But I think the answer is obvious: inwardly, his initiation remained incomplete and the war was necessary for its completion. This perspective gives a whole new meaning to the famous “Mission Accomplished” banner and his landing (re-birth and descent from heaven?) on the aircraft carrier.

I see in SPSMM three interweaving strands: First, a repudiation—and a fixation—on a set of gender role constructions (“traditional masculinity”) that seems increasingly irrelevant to a great many contemporary—especially younger—men. In this, we may still be “fighting the last war”; Second, a real push to bond around an alternate set of values that involve openness of feeling and mutual support among men; Third a dependency on women (via the “feminist theory” of the Mission—that word again—Statement) that implies that men need women to help them with an initiation process that they can’t complete alone.

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Self-Generated Initiation in the Clinical Hour

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Throughout the world, as far back as our history can reach, village shamans and elders have led their young through carefully ritualized practices to help them complete their education and cross the threshold into their adult lives. An aboriginal boy in Australia, a Massai boy in Africa, or a Cherokee boy in North America performed remarkably similar rites, faced similar ordeals, and often encountered similar visions. In these high stakes rituals the adolescent initiates might perish before they could emerge as adults on the other side, but the village elders understood that allowing uninitiated adults to claim a place in the village would risk the unraveling of that village society.

An African Dagara elder, when asked if an uninitiated man would be allowed to marry, responded with horror, asking, “Would you put an uninitiated man in the same hut with a woman?” (Some, 2001) He knew it would be an invitation to disaster. (Couples therapists, take note.) It’s dangerous to allow inflated, uninitiated boy/men to wander the village (something we might consider in selecting presidents).

No shamans, no elders, no village. Our contemporary society attends poorly to the needs of boy/men and girl/women, and teens go looking for transformative ordeals on their own--in gangs, joyrides, drug addiction or fraternities. Or, a middle-aged uninitiated “teenager” may find himself in the office of a therapist when the neglected need for initiation arises within him unbidden. It appears that the psyche, in the absence of eternal structure, will create its own initiatory processes in the therapist’s office (Henderson, 2005, Hill, 1992), and a patient struggling with symptoms of anxiety, phobia, or depression in therapy may be attempting to self-generate an initiatory experience.

In fact, the therapy experience mirrors the age-old experience of initiation in many ways. For example, both processes usually include rigorous containment of a highly ritualized change process, and equally call upon both a patient/initiate’s instinct to be tested and challenged and the therapist/elder’s instinct to test and to challenge. Both rely upon meaningful, transformative ordeals and the sometimes terrifying destruction of a subject’s identity before a more adaptive one can be formed. And like modern therapy, the ancient work of transformation took time: Plotkin (2003, 2006) emphasizes the importance of recognizing that initiatory rituals are not, alone, the maturing agents, but a symbolic recognition and the culmination of work accomplished over many years as an initiate was guided by the village toward the next stage of life.

The three stages of initiation which Van Gennep (1960) first identified (departure, liminal/threshold, and return to the village, see Marty Wong’s article in this edition) all broadly apply to the therapy process as well, but Joseph Campbell (1949) and others identified, within those stages, more discrete initiatory components. These components – found in initiation rituals, within myths, and within most stories – include such recurring dramas as “The Crossing of the Threshold,” “The Encountering of Tests, Allies and Enemies,” and “Resurrection and Transformation Before Reentry to the Ordinary World.” (Campbell, 1949, Vogler, 1998) These archetypal enactments frequently occur in the therapy hour. While it is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to discuss them all, let’s reflect upon a few.

Consider “The Call to Adventure,” often delivered in stories by heralds or messengers, which launches the initiatory process as well as many a hero’s journey. Somebody or something suddenly appears with an invitation to adventure. In the village, when it’s time for the male initiation ritual, the call often arrives in the form of howling or chanting men, dressed as gods, who come to take the boys away. One rarely sees a patient being dragged into a therapy office by a gang of men wearing masks, but he may be pulled in by dramatic pressures exerted from within, the anxiety, the depression, or other forms of intolerable dysfunction, an urgent, wild, perhaps mostly physical sensation that something must be done. Instead of discomforts to be erased, these symptoms may be welcomed as heralds who are surfacing to call upon the patient to embark.

That call, that restlessness, is described by mythologist Michael Mead as the African Gisu people’s concept of *litima*, “that violent emotion peculiar to the masculine part of things that is the source of quarrels, rootless competition, of possessiveness, of power-drivenness, and of brutality. But (*litima*) is also the source of independence, courage, upstandingness, wildness

rather than savagery, high emotions, ideals, the movement toward individuation and the very source of the desire for initiation... Litima names and describes the willful emotional force that fuels the process of becoming an individual.” (Bly, Hillman, Meade, 1991) Shall we consider a DSM-V diagnosis of “Uninitiated Litima?” The Gisu know to expect litima in the uninitiated teen, and know that the intervention of the ordeals and rites of initiation are required to help him contain and channel it.

Not everyone is delighted to receive the call to initiation, and many resist in what Campbell calls, “The Refusal of the Call.” (1968) When the great Father Snake god comes roaring for the foreskins of the boys of the Australian Murngin tribe, the boys run to their mothers. (And who can blame them?) The mothers pretend to protect the boys with spears from the costumed men, and they wail with grief when their sons are taken away. (Campbell, 1968) If not dragged, how many Murngin boys would go voluntarily? How many of our patients, frightened by the roaring of an internal force, are refusing an essential call?

The Call, The Refusal of the Call...these belong to van Gennep’s first stage of initiation, Departure: the need to leave one’s family or home, to leave the warm (or sometimes cold) embrace of the mother, the family, or the role of child behind. In therapy, one thinks of patients who dread leaving their apartments, or who seem to hope that every person they encounter will be a mother substitute. In object relations, we might think of The Call as the precursor to the development of a depressive position, “The negation of subjective fantasy where all wishes may be satisfied without limit or end.” (Colman, 2006, p.23) In The African Kurnai tribe a newly circumcised boy completes his journey by crossing from the group of women to the group of men, turning to throw water in his mother’s face. The shaman crosses between the women and the men, severing an invisible umbilicus. (Eliade, 1958)

Any therapist will tell you that sometimes a patient comes to therapy looking for a good fight. But it can be hard for us to grasp the significance of another phase Campbell terms, “The Atonement With the Father,” during which the initiate is forced to conform to the will of the group. (Campbell, 1968, p. 126) John Beebe refers to this as, “the necessary humiliation.” (2005) In one contemporary example, during the boot camp rituals of the elite Canadian Airborne Regiment, bread is passed among those who are already initiated, and vomited and urinated upon before being eaten by the new initiate. (Winslow, 1999) In another example, the Australian Arunta boy during this stage stays alive by drinking the blood of his maternal uncles, who sometimes pass out from blood loss, while the boy lays his head on his father’s thighs. (Campbell, 1968) (See also Ed Tejerian’s description of Sambian fellatio and similar rituals elsewhere in this edition.) Paradoxically, the assumption of the heroic mantle requires a submission to the will of society, and a defiant, inflated young man (or an angry middle-aged woman, or...) may show up in the therapy office looking for someone he respects enough to battle, or to whom he is willing to submit. “When a young man says ‘Fuck you,’ he is saying, ‘You’re hired.’” (Some, 2001)

So many of the dramas enacted in the therapy office can be understood as elements of an initiation process. When we prescribe exposure treatment for phobia – aren’t we sending the patient off to Slay the Dragon? Aren’t patient defenses a contemporary manifestation of The Guardians at the Threshold, warning us away from the adventure? A patient awash in

previously unfelt grief can certainly appear to be in *The Belly of the Whale*, and what about the grin of a patient who finally holds his own – can that be the look of *The Triumphant Return*? Our patients may be presenting themselves to us with the hope that we as therapists will take up with them some irreducible, timeless enterprise, the work that strains in them for mentoring and the challenge of meaningful ordeals, the project that was abandoned by their village.

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