

rites of passage for men

Steve Banks

Steve Banks talks to Ron Pyatt about the Wild Dance Events – Everyman's Men's Rites of Passage, which is among the longest established forms of menswork developed in the UK. It was created by Alex Wildwood, Eric Maddern and Justin Kenrick in 1989, and has been running twice yearly ever since. Ron Pyatt became a co-facilitator in 1991 and has been its co-ordinator since 1994. In 1996, Everyman merged with Wild Dance Events in order to offer the men's Rites of Passage to a wider public. It is continually developing: a pilot Rites of Passage for men and women took place for the first time in June 1999.

SB: Why Rites of Passage?

RP: In the late 80's a lot of men were feeling the absence of a ritual transition into manhood – a Rites of Passage – and that was the ground out of which our form was born. But soon it became apparent that there were many other transitions inadequately marked by our culture, and a need in men to mark them. Rites of Passage began to encompass a whole range of transitions, from the spiritual through the social to the very personal.

The form of a week long retreat to focus on one's life in this way, bringing as it does a great commitment, lends an intensity to the event that can be both frightening and appealing. It's what makes joggers do a marathon, or meditators do a long session.

SB: Can you briefly describe what the Rites of Passage week involves?

RP: In the first two days we set up ways in which the men can settle into themselves, the environment and the rest of the group. This period is for building the container, the raft, on which we intend to journey deeper. We are building safety whilst at the same time walking the edge of uncertainty about where we are going. This is likely to include some time alone in nature, some time with partners to share one's life story, some movement and voice work and probably a bodywork session to loosen men up on an emotional level. We also do some sharing in the group and clearing any relationship issues that might arise. It's important that everyone feels 'safe enough' to go further into ritual space together.

We encourage the men to be as authentic as they can be in the moment. The more we can do this the better the process will work for them and the better the group will be able to accurately design rituals that are meaningful and transformative.

SB: So how does this happen, and what kinds of rituals come out of it?

RP: A man might be moved very deeply by something we have been sharing, or might have a sudden insight into why he is at the event. If he is ready, he explains his need; what he wants his ritual to focus on. He then leaves the group and waits alone in silence while the group discusses what has arisen, checking out our sense of his request. Requests might be modified and something the group feels more appropriate might be prepared instead. This is the 'edge', the catalyst that brings what could be a fairly mundane, controlled 'dial-a-ritual' type process, vividly alive. It brings men up against all their issues of trust. The power of the ritual will lie in the man's willingness to step into the unknown and the group's skill in guiding and then following the energy that arises.

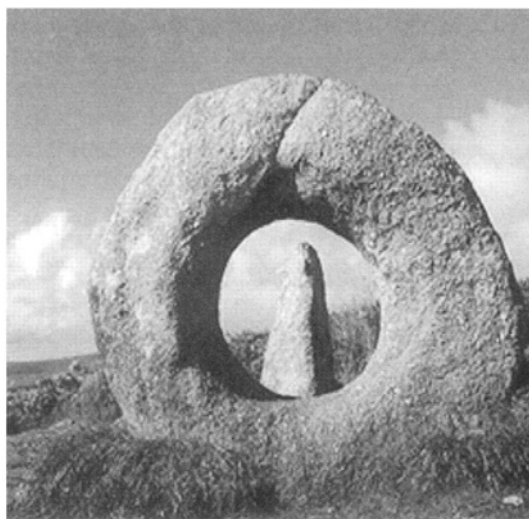
The surprises, the fine details, the synchronicities, the deep sense of the appropriateness of what is said and done are the resulting magic of working in this way.

SB: What effect does the Rites of Passage have on men?

RP: What I hear from a large majority of the men when we ask for feedback some months after the event is that they consider the event to have been very important in their lives, and many of them are still working with the

lessons of the event. Of course we do get a small number of men who don't feel satisfied by the experience or for whom we didn't get it right. We value their feedback as a way of reflecting on our practice and learning lessons as best we can. There are many men who tell us that it was one of the most important experiences of their life. When I say that I feel choked, but it's true.

SB: Can you say more about how this ritual element makes it different from therapy. Does therapy have a ritual element?



RP: Yes, therapists work with ritual, it's just not very developed, and sometimes unconscious. The very fact that you meet regularly at a certain time, come through the door in a certain way, sit in a certain seat, in a sense that begins to smack of ritual, and how you start and the end: they are all ways of creating a special space, maybe even a sacred space. Therapy is about opening up a space where you

can go deeper within yourself, as is the Rites of Passage, although the Rites of Passage tend to be much more outwardly complex. The kind of variety and surprises that are involved, the witnessing by a group of men, puts it out on a kind of public level that can lend more power to what happens. The ways in which things are spoken by the facilitators of the ritual, the energy and focus that they are maintaining, is often more intense, more focused for longer, than, say, a therapist's interactions with their client. So that again calls out a level of consciousness that is not commonly invoked in therapeutic situations.

SB: Is the Rites of Passage a response to feminism, if we take a broad feminist line that men need to change, because men have been oppressing women for thousands of years, and men drive the industrialisation and the tendency towards war that could terminate the human experience for men and for women?

RP: I don't know about all that. But it does offer men an opportunity to take off some of the armouring they have

developed, in order to try and live 'successfully' in our 'crazy' culture. In that sense it opens up the possibility for change. Feminists might welcome that change and they might not. Supporting women is not the main thrust of our work. Although we are aware of feminism we do not address it head on, and there may be things that happen that might be questioned by feminists. It's a matter of working with the art of the possible, rather than the challenge of the principle. We are working within the 'personal development' framework, trusting that given the time and a compassionate atmosphere, the healthy core in all men will have the opportunity to emerge. What will or should happen next is not for us to say.

SB: When you say 'armouring', are there any specific things that you could point to?

RP: Well I think one of the key things we work with is surrender to feeling and to the embodied state. A lot of men (women too in my experience) live in their heads in our culture. Our experience is that when that surrender takes place many of our anxieties and worries drop away and it is possible to see clearly the way ahead. That is the root of the work.

SB: Thinking now about the resurgence of interest in recent years in indigenous cultures, and the notion of initiation, which Robert Bly brought very much to the forefront with Iron John, is the Rites of Passage an initiation into manhood?

RP: Initiation is a part of life. People get initiated in the sense that they have to go through new experiences and they have to come to terms with them. That's one of the



things life is about. You move through to a new experience, enlarging your sense of who you are, and what life is. But initiations these days are often either unconscious or happen in isolation, unacknowledged by others. The whole process can be rather haphazard, lacking in depth, dignity and the celebration it deserves, leaving our lives impoverished. On the other hand, many traditional initiations are not appropriate in our culture. We live in an age with no immutable meanings. No one can say with any certainty, for example, what a man 'should' be. We have no fixed content for our 'initiations'; we only have the diverse evolution of each man's individual life and process of making meaning. Nevertheless, that is worth bringing to awareness, working with, and celebrating.

The phrase 'Initiation into Manhood' does not mean much to me. I think life initiates men into the man they are. Your life is basically a process of initiation, and you can help that go along consciously, or you can live it unconsciously. I have a personal preference for trying to live it consciously; some may say that's stupid, but I notice people get stuck in their lives and often suffer as a result. From personal experience I know there can be things that life is asking of us that we can't meet. When that arises, places of initiation coming from the outside seem to me to be useful. That could be therapy, it could be going to the local church, it could even be taking up a new hobby, if it were taken up consciously.

Sometimes men come along to Rites of Passage to be made once and for all into a man. We have to disillusion them. First we don't have any idea what to 'be a man' is except what we already are. Then we have to say 'But

there's work to be done' and men can and do come back again and again, whenever they know there's work to be done.

SB: We've talked about ritual, gender issues, and initiation; now coming to spirituality as a broad area: is the Rites of Passage a spiritual event?

RP: Is having a McDonalds a spiritual event? It depends on what kind of mind set you're in doesn't it? It is what men make of it. I think it

**The Rites of Passage
is primarily about
encouraging men to
be as fully present as
possible and through
that being
more truly alive.**

touches very powerfully on the level that some men, or some people, call spiritual; and I am fascinated by how that happens. I don't understand it, I'm constantly surprised. The level of synchronicity that begins to happen on many of the events is just astounding. This leads me to feel that we're working with something that's much bigger than who we are or, seen another way, that we are all much bigger than we think we are. I would call that spiritual. When I am outside that space, I don't know what it means. I don't have a fixed definition for it. When I'm inside that space such questions are irrelevant. Sometimes it feels like we're working with something that is other, and is orchestrated on a much larger



animistic view of the world, say, shrines to particular gods, maybe the elements. How does the Rites of Passage produce ritual without having such a communal cosmological frame of reference?

RP: That's a question to which I don't have a fixed or clear answer. But one way might be to see ritual as a potential way of making meaning or shaping ourselves which is wired in through our evolution as human beings. Like the capacity to use verbal language, it is not limited to a particular culture, it's a universal capacity. Whether or not we have, for example, an animistic view of the world is not important. We are human beings with a capacity for meaningful ritual.

Take the ritual device of a shrine. One of the

scale than we can ever imagine. And sometimes I think that that 'Other' is us. I guess both are true.

So I don't have a fixed position and part of me suspects that such a position could be a mixed blessing. I just like it when it happens, and do not bother about labelling it. And it's possible for men to come to Rite of Passage and not have any sense of there being anything happening that they would describe as spiritual.

SB: Ritual has its roots in indigenous cultures, which have a specific cosmological framework, an

things a shrine does is mark a place to attend to. It is a place to be reminded of what truly matters to you, what is in your heart. On your shrine you place anything, from a goddess or god whose qualities you value and hope to possess, to pictures of people you love and cherish, to a beautiful flower or branch. Mantelpieces act as a form of shrine. Its effectiveness is not dependent on beliefs: it goes with the territory of being a human being. We all have the capacity to create and evolve our own rituals. What matters is the truth in our hearts and the clarity of our intention. Then we can freely

create our own ritual, use forms from any culture including our own, adapt them to serve us now in the late 20th century.

SB: So is that what you do on Rites of Passage, mix together elements from many different cultures plus the creativity of the group?

RP: Yes I guess that's true. We certainly sometimes use frameworks of rituals developed by other cultures to meet the felt needs of men in the present.

SB: So, it sounds like something more post-modern, in the sense that it belongs neither entirely to an old form, nor to a modern one, but creates something new, drawing on both.

RP: Yes, if that means the form is not as sacrosanct as the spirit with which the form is developed and worked with. That is where the real vitality of meaning is. So it doesn't matter whether you're doing a ritual using a computer, or whether you're using ancient shamanic objects: both have happened on the Rites of Passage. It's the intention, the spirit that matters. It's the meaning that's coming from your heart.

The Rites of Passage is primarily about encouraging men to be as fully present as possible and through that being more truly alive. Something that is very beautiful and unique evolves in that moment. You create a ritual space here and now, and then you let it go. If you don't let it go, it starts to become a museum piece, and it starts to accrue traditions that people feel attached to. Then you're into all the problems that can arise with ancient traditions, of lack of authenticity and felt meaning. I think that many ancient traditions have a lot

to offer if we make a long term commitment to them. But we are not working on that time scale, we're not pretending to be such a tradition, but what we do can be very alive in the moment and deeply transformative.

Further Information

Wild Dance Events

Tel/Fax: 0171 813 4260 for brochure of events, including the Rites of Passage, and other workshops on gender, mythology and ritual.

Men for Change Network

A national network of men acting as contact points for men looking for local men's groups and menswork activities. Write, enclosing SAE, to

Achilles Heel, c/o Steve Banks, 36 Beechwood Road, London N8 7NG. Tel/fax: 0181 348 9266.

email: sympathy@movingmen.demon.co.uk
Website: <http://www.stejonda.demon.co.uk/achilles/men4change.html>

Achilles Heel Magazine

Excellent, and only, UK radical men's magazine.

Phone 01822 853165

Ron Pyatt trained in Reichian Process-Based Psychotherapy and a student of Zen. He has been leading groups for men in the *Everyman/ Wild Dance* programme since 1991. Since 1994 he has co-ordinated the *Rites of Passage* programme. This year he is pioneering the development of a *Mixed Rites of Passage*. He has recently become a community member at Grimstone Manor the personal development venue in South Devon. He is also a practising artist and a GRANDAD! He can be contacted on 01822 855911.

Steve Banks is a member of the *Wild Dance Events* team. He has written on menswork for *Achilles Heel* magazine, and is co-ordinator of the *UK Men for Change Network*, and a trainee *Psychosynthesis* counsellor.