



INITIATIONS

David Polak

In this article David Polak argues that the absence of male initiation ceremonies has created a hole in the psyche of men and subsequently in society as a whole. There is a need, David argues, to plug this gap. Here he introduces a modern day initiation and ritual drawing on Gestalt and Shamanism.

"Initiations and rites of passage were ways in which traditional societies consciously assisted and enhanced life's essential patterns of change. When a culture forgets to assist its members through necessary changes, the passage happens with less awareness, usually less consciousness and eventually with a loss of continuity throughout the society" (Meade, 2006)

It is the role of elders in tribal traditions to initiate their men folk. These initiations are often tough ordeals that reflect the harshness of the environment that tribal men will have to survive in. The purpose of these initiation rites of passage is to create the kind of men that can sustain the community, protect and provide for the women and children and transmit cultural values and beliefs. In this way the tribe maintains its identity,

cohesiveness and therefore its survival.

While some of the practises that accompany these tribal initiations are controversial, such as tattooing, scarring and mutilation, the end result is often a society that has clear parameters and codes of conduct for its men folk and a stable identity that men can identify with and pass on to their children.

In observing our society, and particularly the role of men, I would argue that there has been a destabilising of the male identity and presence. Fathers are often absent, either literally or otherwise, being emotionally absent and unable to relate effectively to their children and spouses, or too busy working. Men are often struggling with the limitation of having to either be tough and unfeeling, or soft and ineffective.

I believe this is partly due to a lack of effective initiation and also initiators. Once it was the Shaman who would serve the community in performing initiation rites, later the church through baptism, or synagogue through Bar Mitzvah. However it seems that these religious forms and religious leaders have lost their significance and relevance in an increasingly secular society. Therefore boys and subsequently men, have to look elsewhere for their initiation experiences.

"Early adolescence is the time traditionally chosen for initiation to begin, and we all recall how many injuries we received at that age. Adolescence is the time of risk for boys, and that risk-taking is also a yearning for initiation" (Bly, 1990)

Without formal initiation into society there is an attempt by adolescents to create their own initiation. These are often dangerous, unsupported by elders and without context for their lives as adults and the roles they have to play in an adult world.

These initiations might take the form of drug experiences (as in my own case) or through the casual violence reported on our inner city council estates. You do not have to look far to read another story in the paper about the latest teen stabbing, as adolescents seek out the security of gang culture to provide initiation, usually to the back drop of absent fathers and the accompanying spiritual and moral vacuum.

"In today's society, the father's absence is reflected in the lack of these rituals designed to help a young man make the transition from adolescence to adulthood" (Corneau, 1991)

Typical middle class forms of initiation, such as going away to University or the ubiquitous 'gap year' spent travelling the world, also seem to be generally inadequate for preparing our young men for manhood. Indeed most men only seek formal initiation when they enter therapy in mid-life (if they come at all), usually when the detritus from their uninitiated lives starts catching them up. This often includes divorce, broken homes, alcohol abuse, work addiction and depression, all of which then contribute to creating the next generation of disaffected and uninitiated men.

As such, it is my belief that society suffers from the lack of initiation of its men folk, as the personal and cultural wounds go unhealed and are passed on to the next generation. Men become absent and unable to relate to their partners and children. They lack purpose, meaning and direction and so the vision of the people and the community becomes lost. If you consider the many global crises around us you can see the evidence of a people without vision, without a common aim and goal. Responsibility for all of this does not lie at the feet of men alone, but a considerable amount of damage and therefore potential healing, is in the hands of men.

John Rowan proposes that therapy can provide a modern day initiation for men because it is here they can undertake the journey of transformation, going inwards to disentangle themselves from old forms.

"By initiation I mean something that affects a person at every level, and offers an all-round opportunity for transformation ... It now seems to me inescapable that only therapy has the power to do this" (Rowan, 1997)

Here they can begin to seek their true selves, to integrate their masculine and feminine qualities, to heal the wounds of childhood and culture and begin to grow spiritually and emotionally. Therapy invites men to be themselves in their entirety, with their anger (so often denied to them), their tears and strength and vulnerability, all of which are necessary in order to successfully navigate the world around them.

Individual therapy is one option, but often the primal calling to be among other men, draws us back to the need for community, something in women generally appear to be more accomplished. I personally observed this when having our first child; my wife quickly surrounded herself with a network of new mothers, while I got on with managing my own experience in a typically solitary male fashion.

It is not just community that we seek, but also ritual; ritual that helps us to create structure and symbolic meaning of our experience. This innate need to

make meaning of our experience through ritual and community lends itself to the form we have chosen to create our modern day initiation for men.

"And so it happens that anyone-in whatever society-who undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolic figures"(Campbell, 1993)

In my experience, the initiation of men is best undertaken alongside other men, with male elders at the helm (or those further along the path) supporting and guiding the work. Men understand other men and what they need and it can help them to separate from the women in order that they may return with a deeper sense of their own separate gender identity and appreciation of that difference.

"When initiation is in place, the old men help the boys to move from the mother's world to the father's world" (Bly, 1990)

By living together on the land, we create a community of men that gathers to explore the themes in our life that need to be tackled if we are to cross the threshold into manhood, or second manhood. We support work to explore the shadow side of our nature, to express and uncover that which has been hidden and suppressed and to take the journey inwards. This allows us to emerge more whole, more complete and confirmed in an integrated male identity.

"What initiates us also strips us down to the inner essentials and releases qualities and powers that were hidden within" (Meade, 2006)

Drawing on these ideas I have developed a group open to men from 18 to mid-life and beyond that involves a plethora of creative approaches, blending Gestalt and Shamanism with the use of story telling, ritual, music and song. We create a separate space where men can openly express their anger, fears and tears with the containment of other men around them. This process of change and growth is a clear demarcation of a change in identity, attitude and relationship to self, others and the world around us.

Obviously this cannot be achieved solely over the course of a four day workshop, but it can be the beginning, or the cementing of the transformation experience, normally alongside ongoing therapy. It is also a formal experience; an event and ritual that remains with participants

long after it is over, something that truly leaves its mark on them indelibly (Tattooing and scarring optional)

The aim is that we return to the world empowered, liberated and free to be present for our families, communities and in our lives, in ways that were not possible before. We do not feel shame to be men anymore; we feel a sense of purpose and vision. This vision connects us to a common purpose as men, whatever our religious beliefs or political convictions, to bring more of ourselves into all areas of our lives.

I do not believe that 'Initiations' is a new concept, it is instead a reinvention of old forms, old forms that are still desperately needed and relevant. I believe that it can make a contribution to the health and wellbeing of individual men and, as a result, to society as a whole. A society that suffers from "not enough father" needs its men folk to reconnect with the power and true strength of masculinity, in order to become present again and restore some balance to a chaotic world.

Further Reading

Bly - Iron John, Element, 1990

Meade - Men and the Water of Life, Greenfire Press 2006

Rowan - Healing the Male Psyche: Therapy as Initiation, Routledge, 1997

Corneau - Absent Fathers, Lost Sons, Shambala, 1991

Cambell - Hero with a Thousand Faces, Fontana Press, 1993

David Polak (MA, UKRCP) is a BACP accredited Gestalt psychotherapist working in private practise in North London. He regularly runs groups and workshops for both men and women, including 'Initiations'. Details can be found at www.davidpolak.bacp.co.uk