

A Tadpole's Tail

An Essay On Initiation Versus Tribalism

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A great deal has been said about the possibility of making initiations and rites of passage for non-Native, noncommunity, nonvillage, modern people. Tribal-type initiations have been touted as a remedy for the frustration that modern people feel concerning the desperate lives of their young people. In a nihilistic age filled with weapons, drugs, insolence, and depression, the parents of such children may be powerfully drawn to the wild, elegant lack of complication that can be seen in the eyes of a truly indigenous person. Perhaps they think that by simply obtaining a tribal initiation, the same way one buys a medicine, they will achieve that look of wholeness and belonging in their eyes, thereby avoiding the whole frightening landscape of the alienated synthetic existence of modern life.

What is in some modern people that desires once again to have the nature of a wild wolf usually looks more like an overdomesticated beagle when that wildness tries to surface. We can all remember a little of our ancestral indigenosity but very few people remember anything of how to be truly natural. That beautiful wild look does belong to all of us but it has been energetically and purposefully whipped out of most people's ancestors. You cannot hope to reclaim for your soul in a single year what two thousand years of spiritual oppression has banished into the furthest reaches of your inner bigness.

To have initiations again we'd have to find a way to bring this banished indigenous soul back home to us and we would have to have communities worth coming home to. To do so we have to go very, very slowly. A great deal of study, struggle, sacrifice, and love would have to be expended to make a real initiation for modern folk, one that wouldn't ring hollow. This cannot be accomplished by simply superimposing other cultures' rituals upon a modern people. Initiation has to come from the place where a people lives.

After sorting through the confusing amalgamation of ideas and approaches, the central question in regard to a true and authentic initiation remains, “How do you initiate young people when there are no initiated adults, or anybody around who knows what that looks like?” For me, true initiations would be impossible until the modern world surrenders to the grief of its origins and seeks a true comprehension of the sacred. A tangible relationship with the divine must be found: a relationship to ritual that actively feeds the invisible forces behind all this visible life. Initiation is about sacrifice and education; it must be a learning of the deepest source and yet governed by a wide consciousness of the historical reality of our ancestors’ suffering as well as their stupidity. Only then can a useful spiritual vision emerge from what is most ancient in us all that goes beyond the ancestral response and brings us into relationship with our true natures.

Initiations that are attempted without the spirit or a comprehension of the sacredness of the commonplace only serve to placate an uninitiated hunger for entertainment that hopes to fill the spiritual void of individuals and a whole culture with talk shows, corn chips, movies, dope, fast cars, and the like. That hunger is an emptiness that should be wept into, grieved about, instead of blocked and filled up. The Spirit I’m talking about is not human spirit or a churchy God, an elevated concept, an idea, or a metaphor but is something bigger, older, and more dimensional than maybe some scientists could even understand. Initiations with no spiritual root that are only engineered to make people into better people always fail because they are horrible travesties of what initiation really should be. Worse yet are rituals designed by psychologists to address psychological needs through mythological metaphors with no real encounter with the butt-kicking bigness and beauty of Deities, because then humans, not the Spirit, are still at the center of that kind of Universe.

Most of what has been presented up to now as initiation in modern society, such as school ceremonies, corporate inductions, military presentations and training, fraternity hazing, and boot camps, the secret rituals of clubs and societies, fragmentary New Age adaptations of Native institutions, and so on, are not what I call initiations. These are representations of what happens when you don’t have initiation or any true remembering adults.

There are also people who hear the word “warrior” and cringe when they think about the confusing issue surrounding initiation, particularly in reference to men. To me and to the Maya, becoming a warrior was not as necessary as was graduating out of warriorhood into adulthood. Being a warrior did not equal being a man. Nevertheless, most if not all men and

some women had to pass through some form of warriorhood to become eligible for their journey into manhood and womanhood.

The strong instinct young people have to be enamored of magnificent chieflike heroes, to follow political movements, to imitate celebrities or to espouse big ideas, comes from all people's natural gravitation toward a confrontation with the divine in this world. However amateurish, the young long for the spirit, for the deliciousness of living life beyond the calculated hum-drum and safety of their parents' world.

In their idealism, some youths want to "fix" everything. In a frustrated disillusionment other teenagers want to destroy everything that has gone awry in a world that was handed to them, a world already ruined by "stupid" adults. In either case, the youth want to charge up a hill at the enemy.

Their main enemy, though, is the realization of getting old and of having to die. It is the consciousness of human mortality that makes initiation imperative. The main reason adults seem so inept and stupid to kids is because after protecting them in their childhood, parents can no longer guarantee a teenager's immunity to death. If everybody has to die, then why live at all? Such youth become heroic or despairing as they wrestle with this tragic realization. This is the time for initiation. Someone outside the family has to help the youth survive their despair and fright.

The heroic instinct of some youth has been horrendously manipulated for millennia by uninitiated older people in high positions and exploited to supply soldiers for their idiotic wars, while screaming for Father, God, their Mothers, or their Mother Country. This is the activity of people with only two sections of the telescope: The child and the teenage warrior hero.

Though these horrible military events are not really full initiations, in the sense that this book talks about initiation, the camaraderie that people experience during abnormal times of crisis does have some of the heartwarming elements of true ritual initiations. Most village rituals are basically finely tuned and deliberately choreographed disasters aimed at avoiding arbitrary catastrophe and loss of soul.

Recently, the business world in modern cultures has begun to remember the traditional and ancient relationship of warfare with trading, and raiding with slaving. Trading was considered

to be what warriors did in peacetime. Well, it's all war, and war is violence, no matter how you dress it up. The notion promoted by corporations that their ladder-climbing executives are actually warriors in a samurailike elitist society of individuals who skillfully use competitive numbers and appearances as a sword to kill and outmaneuver the army of opposing companies, seems to me like an attempt to make gray into a legitimate color.

If these corporate executives are warriors, they are anonymous warriors, and in the end they are just as faceless as soldiers. They are given meaningless medals and promotions, to reward them for some soon-to-be-forgotten struggle for having gained the top of some imaginary corporate hill for their company and their superiors who care nothing about them personally. Having been awarded hollow honors, increased comfort, and money by their feudal lords, they continue to live synthetically, unauthentically, and uninitiated, with no true village belonging. They are most certainly removed from their organic nature and their human need to be part of the world of people, earth, water, animals, plants, and to be able to die a good death.

It is not the heroic warrior who is the culprit here; it is the lack of graduates in the study of adulthood that is to blame.

If the hero is suppressed by his or her elders or thrown away by the culture, then it reemerges in a sinister subversive form as vicious corporate soldiers, the "sensitive" killer, the passive-aggressive betrayer, the sociopath, the neighborhood gang member or neo-Nazi skinhead depending on what neighborhood the person was neglected in. This heroic warrior stage has a real use but must have the guidance of life-loving adults who have developed through and beyond the warrior to keep this powerful being out of his own hands and the designs of the unscrupulous. By employing warrioriness he or she can fight her way out of an overextended youth into becoming a mortal human on the long useful road to adulthood where a person can cease being only a warrior.

This stage of a teenager's ability to fall deeply in love and desire to fight heroically for a worthy cause was known by my initiated Tzutujil elders as the very force that had saved their entire internal Earth from annual cyclic destruction at the hands of us humans as we cut, burned, farmed, and mined the world to feed ourselves.

The main difference between the cultures who send their youth to war or corporations and the culture of a Mayan village lay in the fact that the village elders did not send their youth off to

war armed with computers, swords, rocket launchers, or tanks to kill and raid, creating more Death. Very significantly, they sent their Rainwarriors to fight against the Deity of Death, to fight Death itself, not to make more death but to coax Death into releasing life back to us.

By employing the very same instinct of heroism, romantic moodiness, patriotic tribalism, competitiveness, and the need for physical confrontation that has repeatedly destroyed cultures and worlds and threatens this one even as I speak, the Tzutujil elders sent their Mayan warriors down into the Underworld to ritually confront Death. This was not a fake Disney-like event or a mock battle. Men had died doing it, but no human enemy was ever attacked, no other race or tribe was demonized as the enemy.

Armed with an acute oral literacy of courting, poetry, history, and above all a well-developed relationship with nature as a divine female being, these “spiritual warriors” attempted to fight Death, to convince Death to release the Female principle of the Universe, the Woman Earth, as well as the boys very own soul, which was a Female too; his “Spirit Bride.” What those spiritual warriors saw and experienced in their dangerous wrestling match with Death was not what they expected. A soldier’s training was of no use in the underworld. Shooting, cutting, bullets, bombs, explosives, trapping, piercing, deception and the like were tools and weapons of Death itself and you cannot kill Death with Death.

Men who didn’t fight Death in adolescence were destined to live in a walking death. Already killed, depressed, and dangerous they become wreakers of violence, makers of death, corporate soldiers, and, more importantly, they become the destroyers of all that is Female. Because they had not fought Death, Death still had their souls, their Female Spirit Brides. Because these uninitiated men have no souls, they begin to “steal” women, to “rob” the Female Earth of its minerals, trees, and wealth, in a vain attempt to fill that hollow place in them where the Female soul should have been sitting, trying to steal a soul, just as Death had stolen the Goddess from life to fill his emptiness. In their attempt to obtain position, respect, and fulfillment by raiding, pillaging and dominating, they only create ghosts. Instead of finding their souls, they create hungry phantoms that demand more violence to keep them fed.

Let it be clearly stated that the Goddess was in no way a human woman’s soul and a human woman’s spirit was not being rescued. To become an adult meant a man had to marry his own soul, his Spirit Bride, before he could truly love a flesh-and-blood woman. He had to use his young spirit warrior to rescue “Her” from the literalist Underworld of Death, whose

overriding characteristics were its lack of images, eloquence, and meaning, and its inability to remember anything besides who had to die next to feed its emptiness. This was Death's amnesia.

The young spiritual warrior could not conquer this Underworld Enemy, this Death. He could only wrestle it and weaken it as much as he could with his teenage imagination, idealism, his recently trained and blossomed eloquence, and his youthful memory, filled now through initiation with his people's spiritual histories and mythologies, which are the life-tethering roots of any peoples.

Nonetheless, after considerable weakening, the only thing eloquence wrestling accomplished was a stalemate with Death. The Goddess of life and the boy's Spirit Bride were released to the boy only when he made an agreement with Death to trade his youth and immortality for his Soul Bride. In this way the boy returned to life with his soul knowing, as all initiated people do, that this full feeling in his heart meant he'd signed a lease agreement with Death to die of old age later on. Part of the fine print in that contract was his promise to continue "feeding" Life, the Goddess, his soul, and that by doing so, he agreed to move out of being only a warrior into the pursuit of adulthood by marrying and feeding children. He stopped following an empty longing and began carrying a worthy fullness, dedicated to feeding the spirit with his worthy mortality of being a regular man.

He didn't lose the warrior ability, of course, but its qualities were absorbed into him and distilled into something even more useful. If our parents were like frogs who laid eggs, and we as teenagers were their tadpoles, then our long beautiful tails were our youth, which went into feeding our enormous swollen heads. At least that's how I was. Both the little ingenious child and the heroic warrior are in that swishing tail we dragged behind us in our youth until it was slowly absorbed and incorporated into a fine jumping body that leaped out of our parents' pond into the dangerous outer world of infinite fresh air, beauty, and fascination.

We don't have to cut off the tails of our youth when we become initiated adults because without it we could never have become adults. The greatest terror of today is that people who have never been initiated, who have never wrestled Death with their beauty, art, poetry, or their will to find what they love, are often found leading whole cultures and generations of uninitiated people who mistake tribalism for culture, fundamentalism for indigenosity.

The exclusivity and racism inherent in tribalism is dissolved by a true initiation. For this reason the old-time Tzutujil put their teenagers from opposing village divisions, economic levels, and classes side by side in the rituals, so they could, little by little, work together to form a new generation of villagers who were aware that Gods, Nature, and their destiny were greater than the destructive prejudices of the families, clans, races, and tribes.

Indigenosity happens when a people are at home with who they are and are unafraid of losing their identity. Once initiations are dead, village memory collapses, respect for the old evaporates, and the people melt into adult adolescents with an amorphous identity attached only to their personal wants. If you have a lot of money you could be a yuppie, imagining yourself to be what the TV says you should be. But if there is no food and no resources and there are many of you, tribalism sets in with the most disturbing soul-destroying results.

When there are no true initiations and the people lose their land, entire country, or purpose, their relationship with the Earth evaporates. One of the most common ways groups of destroyed people try to reinvent themselves is by pointing to some others and saying “We are not that” instead of being able to say “We are this.” What they “are” in this scenario remains unformed. This sometimes escalates to the point where a tribalizing people will build fortified societies, countries, or subdivisions, and in the worst cases, everything that is not “us” is destroyed in pitiless civil wars, or political imprisonments, mass incarcerations, “final solutions,” and the senseless massacres of ethnic cleansing. What these lost people call initiation into their violent tribalist despair is not initiation at all. They need to be braver and grieve, face Death, with art and spirituality. But not create death, otherwise this is tribalism at its worst. The Tzutujil were not tribal in this sense.

Fundamentalism is just another form of tribalism. Fundamentalist Christians, Jews, and Muslims are certainly not the only peoples tribalizing themselves into fortress mentalities out of fear. When cultural amnesia is imposed upon any group by other violent uninitiated forces from without, the hollow shame they are left with is a pile of devouring ghosts who thrive on fear and narrow-minded thinking. There are tribalist fundamentalist movements in every nation of the world now, peoples who had their original relationship with their stories, music, ancestral histories, and customs destroyed or trivialized by the heavy tread of some other traumatized people whose ancestors’ souls are still waiting in the Underworld. All of these people need someone who will bargain with Death in the Underworld for the release of the

Goddess, their cultural and individual identities, and their indigenous souls. It would take a lot of grief rituals and some very brave, unarmored, highly initiated poetic shamans to do that.

Tribalism is not good, fundamentalism is not good, but the freedom of individualism can be only as good as there are a waiting village of well-cooked, open-armed, laughing elders who know worldly compassion personally and the complexities of the spirit world well enough to catch us, hold us down on the earth, and protect us from ourselves.

If initiation is about culture and the modern world desires initiation it will have to redefine itself. A new culture would have to develop where humans and their inventions are not at the center of the universe, and where God too is not at the center. What could be at the center is a hollow place, an empty place, where both God and we humans could sing and weep together as a team pushing magical words into that sacred Hole. Maybe together, the diverse and combined excellence of all cultures could court the Tree of Life back out of its frightened and fugitive existence in the previous layers where it was banished into the invisible by our scared literalist minds, dogmatic religiosities, and forgetfulness.

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