

Chapter 8

From Boys to Men of Heart

“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

- Mark Twain

Nobel laureate, Albert Camus said , “A man’s work is nothing more than to rediscover through the detours of art, those one or two images in the presence of which his heart first opened.” Michael Meade, author of the wonderful book, *Men and the Water of Life: Initiation and the Tempering of Men*, sees art as including myth, emotion and ritual, and men’s work as rediscovery of “the doorways to their hearts and the territories of the soul.” The proper initiation of young men to adulthood aims at many targets, but its success is measured by opening the heart.

Wherever men are they hold within themselves the potential to protect and provide, which throughout almost all of human life has carried the awesome and terrible prospect of killing whether to procure food or fight with enemies, animal or

human. Male initiation rituals intend to balance the destructive potential of masculinity with the compassion and caring of the heart. The essential process of rite of passage was defined by Van Gennep: There is a departure from daily life, a suffering of ordeals and dramatic episodes, and a return as a marked and different person. Turnbull characterizes rite of passage as separation, indoctrination or preparation, and re-incorporation. Initiation is the dramatic way the psyche shifts the ground and orientation of an individual in response to the expected and the unexpected breaks in life.

There is within each of us a program and desire for shifts of identity as we pass through the primary stages of the human life cycle. Eliade says each initiation is a creative death, meaning that as we move from one stage to the next we need to look death in the face, as Ian Fleming said. The brush with death may come from risking survival in the external world or it may be psychic death, but in either case the previous stage dies and out of it we are reborn into a fuller life. The classic stages are birth, childhood, maturity, elderhood and death, with initiations between successive stages.

I would add that ordeal is central to male initiation precisely because it promotes ego transcendence. Left alone to survive in the wilderness without previous training leaves the boy at a loss. When he realizes that his ego is not capable of guiding him through, he discovers another guide he can trust absolutely. Spirit is not analytical, nor does it call on memory files, intellectual training or preparation, and in my personal experience of ordeals it has been perfect, infallible, examples of what Joe Pearce terms "unconflicted" state of being.

Once as I followed cheetahs on foot in Nairobi Park, I turned around to see an adult male lion a few feet away looking in my eyes. I had just walked about one foot from his forepaw. I recognized it as the same lion that had attacked my convertible Land Rover the week before after I kept driving too close to take photos. "Oh no, not you," I thought.

Alone and unarmed I had no idea what to do, but after momentary fear, I became quite calm as a mysterious, transcendent power took over and directed my every movement with precision: Pearce's unconflicted mind.

The same thing happened a week later when I came upon an old Kikuyu man who had been run over on the road, his bicycle and body crumpled and twisted, a pool of blood from the back of his skull collected on the tarmac, one leg snapped and the whites of his eyes staring up at the midday equatorial sun. No Africans would stop to help him. Bad juju. As I knelt over him I witnessed that same Higher Power take over and place my right hand on his left shoulder and hold it there for a while. Then that lifeless body moved! His chest began to rise as he inhaled, and even now, forty years later tears well up in my eyes as I recall that moment so deeply etched in my mind, because I knew then as I do now that it was not me who brought the old man back to life. I was merely a willing servant.

On another occasion my girlfriend slapped the general of the Nepal army in front of his armed men, not a good idea at any time in a country where women rank somewhere between children and livestock, least of all at night in an obscure jungle

camp where no one would wonder what became of those Americans studying elephants. I held her in my right arm, the general in my left and asked myself, "How did I ever end up in this situation?" And that very moment an incredible power infused me and looked through my eyes into the general's eyes with such ferocity that he literally fainted. These and other stories I am collecting elsewhere under the title "The Greatest Things I Never Did."

Without ordeal, without facing real danger, challenge or hardship beyond the capacity of the conscious mind, the young man never discovers that a far greater power is available to him, and that he accesses it through his heart.

Without culturally established rites of passage centered around the primary developmental phases of the human cycle, life presents us with initiations like mine in Africa and Nepal. As Meade says, "they can be provoked by any unexpected, dramatic event: accident, divorce, abortion, the death of a loved one, the loss of a career, an eruption from nature that destroys the shape of a life. All severe separations in life evoke the sense of initiation in the psyche and open a person to psychological and mythical territories of unusual depth. Initiation is the psyche's response to mystery, great difficulties, and opportunities to change. The ground of the psyche shifts and breaks and opens. Past and future frame this opening – the past can be re-viewed and the future can be glimpsed and felt. Once the opening has occurred, the psyche is animated with the expectation that the beginning will be carried through to a new organization of inner and outer life....Traumas, shocks, mistakes, and losses that we are encouraged to 'put behind us' and 'get over' often contain detours that did, and often can again, open our hearts and our inner resources for change."

Meade says, "Initiatory experiences carry a person away from what they know and outside the normal rules, beliefs, and boundaries. While in that separated state outside of normalcy, radical change can occur and radical healing is possible. Initiation involves both suffering and healing, makes the 'self' a territory of great learning, and connects a person to the essential mysteries of life..."

Tribal initiations often include deliberate woundings, such as scarification, which permanently mark the initiate. Usually the scars are visible and inform everyone that the marked individual has passed into a new stage of life. A person's relationship with everyone in his society is changed by initiation.

Modern life lacks rites of passage, but initiatory experiences may leave physical marks though more often they leave psychological and emotional scars. The wounds may serve as doorways between inner and outer realities.

One of the fundamental dimensions of male initiation to adulthood is descending into our wounds. Mentoring in which older men present stories about their and the ancestors' wounds, reveals that everyone is wounded, that wounding is a part of life and that grieving our wounds is what transmutes them into gifts for the community, as Robert Bly says.

In the absence of traditional rites of passage, there is no clear demarcation between death of the old and birth of the new, and that results in much confusion. According to Meade, "Initiatory experiences inhabit the same deep psychic ground as birth and death...Seen through the eye of initiation, death is not the opposite of

life, death is the opposite of birth. Both are aspects of life....Seen through the eye of initiation the scars of initial woundedness and of life-changing events turn out to be the openings to imagination and the heartfelt experiences of life. When these experiences are contained in art, in poetry, story, song, and dance, the limits of the individual and of time are shed, and the timeless territory of the heart and the imagination opens.”

Turnbull’s assessment of rites of passage for adolescents is, “In adolescence we are in many ways like empty but organic receptacles, fully formed though still growing, waiting to be filled. And like receptacles we are capable at that stage of life of receiving with all our being, becoming one with what is within us. Sexual and spiritual awareness as modes of experience are just as valid as physical and intellectual awareness, and like those other modes of apprehension they can be turned in any direction, inward or outward, restricted to the individual self or encouraged to expand and encompass the infinitely greater social self. They can be poured into the empty receptacle, to work the wonder of transformation, or spilled upon the ground, leaving us empty and unfulfilled. Education and socialization can be accomplished in the solitude of the rational domain, but it is the intensity that these other modes of perception can bring to each and every experience that gives such education and inner significance, endowing it with a vital force. It is this intensity of perception, together with integrity of being, that can make a human society a living, thriving, truly loving, joyously full and exuberant organism, rather than a cold, mechanical, empty theoretical concept. That is the magic of transformation, and that is the potential of adolescence.”

Meade is a master story-teller who has employed ancient stories to heal grown men who were not initiated to adulthood via rites of passage. In tribal societies, stories, legends and myths that teach a culture’s principle morals and values and what it expects of adult males are part of the initiation of boys to manhood. There are stories about initiation itself that symbolically reveal its process of transition. One such story comes from Africa and is entitled, “The Hunter and His Son.”

Heed this tale of father and son!

A hunter and his son went to the bush one day to pursue their quarry. They hunted all morning but all they found to sustain them was one small rat. The father handed the rat to the son to carry. It seemed of unimportant to the son, so he threw the rat away. They saw no other game that day so at dusk the father made a fire and said, “Give me the rat to roast, son, so at least we’ll have something to eat.” When he heard that the son had thrown the rat away, he became angry, and in an outburst of rage, he struck the son with his ax and returned home, leaving his son lying there on the ground.

Later that evening, the son rose up and returned to his father’s village. He stood at the edge of the village waiting until every one was asleep, then went into his parents’ hut, gathered up his things and left. He walked late into the night following a

path that eventually led to a large village where everyone was asleep. He went to the center and came upon the chief's hut. The chief was wide awake. The son of the hunter entered the hut, naked.

The chief asked, "From where do you come?"

"From another village," the son told him.

The chief asked how the boy was.

The son explained "My father and I went hunting in the bush, but we killed only one rat. He asked me to carry it, but it was so small that I threw it away. In the evening, when we built a fire my father told me to roast the rat. When I told him that I had thrown it away, he became angry and struck me on the head with his ax and knocked me out. In the night, I recovered and came to this place."

The chief said, "Can you keep a secret with me?"

The son said, "What is the secret?"

The chief said there had been a war and his only son had been taken captive and killed. "Now I have no son," he said. "I want to tell the people that you are my son who was captured, and that you escaped and have found your way home. Would you keep that secret?"

The son said, "It will not be difficult."

The chief started to play his drum – boom, boom, boom, in the middle of the night which awakened the mother of the house who came out and said, "O Mighty King, he who causes all to fear, why are you playing your drum in the middle of the night?" The King said, "I am celebrating the return of my son."

Then the mother shouted out in joy and awakened the whole village. Everyone was asking, "What has happened in the king's hut that they are playing drums and singing so late in the night?" A messenger went around to tell everyone that the king's son had come home. Some of the people were joyful, others were doubtful saying, "Indeed."

At dawn, the son was bathed and anointed, dressed in fine clothes. The chief gave him gifts and presented him to the entire village to be welcomed. Some of the chief's counselors doubted it was his son, but others said that it was.

The counselors called together the sons of the village, dressed them in fine garments, and called for their best horses. The counselors told the sons to go to the house of the chief and call out the chief's son. "Tell him to bring a horse and his sword. Say you are taking the horses for exercise, then ride out to the clearing and dismount. Taking your swords and slay your horses. Observe what the chief's son does, then report back to us here." The counselors gave swords to their sons, and the young men headed for the chief's hut.

"There was an informant present who heard the counselor's plan and quickly revealed it to the king. The king made preparations and called the son to him and said, 'Take this sword and horse, and when the sons of the village call for you, accompany them. Whatever they do, you do it, too' When the sons of the counselors came and called for the king's son, they all set out together and rode to the clearing. When the son of the king saw the others slay their horses he did it, too.

The sons of the counselors returned and reported to their fathers that the king's son had slain his valuable mount. They exclaimed, "Only the son of a king ever would

display such complete disregard for valuable property!"

The counselors still had doubts and said, "Indeed." They decided to make further tests. The next day they gave a slave girl to each of their sons. They told them to invite the son of the chief to bring his slave girl and accompany them to the clearing. Then they should slay the slave girls and observe what the son of the chief did. Once again the informant was present and informed the king, who told the son to take his slave girl when they came for him, and to do whatever he sees the sons do. At the clearing, the sons of the counselors took their swords and each slew a slave girl. The son of the king did it, too. The sons returned to the counselors saying, "Only the son of a king would act as he has done." This satisfied the counselors who offered no more tests.

Time passed and the son lived with the king. Then one day the hunter appeared, looking for his son and questioned the people, asking, "Have you seen one who looks this way, who acts like this and that?" The people responded saying, "No, we don't know him, we haven't seen your son, but the son in the king's hut looks like that." The hunter went to the hut of the king, entered and greeted the king, who was seated with the son. The hunter spoke to his son, "Will you get up and return home with me and live as before?" The son was silent, but the king said, "Hunter, if you would keep the secret with me, I will give you however much gold you wish." The hunter said no. The king then offered one hundred times whatever gold the hunter would request. The hunter refused despite all the offers and begging of the king. The son remained silent.

The king asked for three horses to be saddled and one sword to be delivered. The three of them, the hunter, the king and the son, rode off to the clearing. When they reached it, the king handed the sword to the son and said, "We are unarmed, though you hold a sword. There is nothing left to do. Either you must kill me and take my goods and return with your father to his village or you must kill your father and return with me and live as we have been living in my village."

The son didn't know what to do.
If it were you, what would you do?
Kill the father or the king?
What would you do?

The father and the son are both joined and separated by the wound the son receives early in the story. The son is not simply hurt by the wound, he awakens to his own life through the wound. The emotions surrounding the wound generate the rest of the story and propel the boy into manhood. Meade says, "A genuine community of men forms around shared wounds." In a sense it is the woundedness of the boy that wins him admission to the fraternity of men. It is the glue that binds them together.

Robert Bly makes much of the inevitable shaming of boys that leaves them with the wounds into which they must move to transfer the dark side of the personal to the light side of the collective.

The father's gifts to the son are the rat and the fire: food and warmth. But they

cannot satisfy the son's passion for life. Full of great expectations for the success of their hunt and his future life, the son easily discards the rat. In a sense it indicates the faith the son has in his father and his father's world. But the expectations of the father and the son are not the same. The father is hoping that the son will learn something about the uncertainty of life and the value of embracing gratefully whatever life provides.

Following the father's footsteps presents the son with what may be the most primal and yet significant lessons of initiation: the fact that something will die to sustain their lives. The father's footsteps lead to the issue of life and death. The son knows deep inside that one day he too will kill to provide as his father has provided for him.

The wounding of the son is what separates him from his father and leaves him alone outside his parent's village looking for a second father, a new king. Though Gurian proposes that fathers accompany their sons on rites of passage, **fathers cannot initiate their own sons.** In order for a boy to give up his previous life as a child he must separate himself from his parents and their home then prove himself worthy in the eyes of other men. Without the shaming the father gives to the son, he would never be compelled to separate from his childhood and family and seek outside approval for his new life as an adult in a community of adults.

In leaving the father and entering the king's hut, the son has awakened a king in his psychic village. The parents no longer rule the son's psyche. Meade says, "The dynamics of this story reflect the instincts in the depths of the human psyche, for somewhere we know that if we accept loss fully (as we must accept death to be unconflicted and capable of transcendence) we open up to unknown possibilities both within and without...The son is looking for something that will father what is royal in him....The king becomes the second father by accepting the grand imagination that seized the son and caused him to toss away the rat. The sense of self-importance that flooded the son with spirit and feeling is the secret that is shared by the king and the son. And this sense of grandness allows the son to step into a symbolic world where he has another father."

Meade suggests that below the family guilt and shame, the negative enculturation that generates fear and doubt, there is a carefully guarded belief that in the core of the soul there is a seed of royalty, and around that core the soul grows. Each of us has a royal heritage, an inherent claim to mythic life, but those who are destined to become royal are at first abandoned, the function of "separation" in rites of passage. It is that feeling of abandonment that forces a person to be close to the part that is hidden – one's true self. Proper initiation finds boys alone, abandoned and naked – the "ordeal" in rites of passage - with naught but the true self and its heroic destiny, the true self being divine spirit, transcendence its heroic destiny.

The slayings of the horses and slave girls are not about hurting women and animals, as some women fear are the eventual consequences of hunting by boys. Stories are full

of swords and heads rolling; Meade tells us, "for this is how the psyche changes – by being cut off and then growing again." The horse is a metaphor of the instinctive power of masculine force. To become the son of a king – a king within himself – the

boy must slay his drive to power, his tendencies to charge about and get on his high horse. In another word he must transcend his ego to become the son of a king which is God.

The slave represents an habitual way of seeing and doing. To become the son of the king, the boy needs to slay his habitual self, not only his egoism but the negative conditioning and programming of his culture. The clue to where this slavishness exists lies in his attitude toward “girl” and his own immature, feminine self, Meade says. So the son must cut through two areas of his psyche that he takes for granted: the dimension of masculine instinct, power and force; and, his inner feminine. The son kills the horse before he slays the slave girl because the war-horses in a man’s psyche must be cut down before he’s able to cut through his habitual view of the feminine. Which is to say that only by overcoming the power of masculine instincts can a man set free the feminine within – his own heart. The slayings of the literal layer of the masculine and feminine is what opens “the full emotional and imaginal life of the man.”

Deer symbolize gentleness, and in slaying a deer many young men have slayed the habitual image they carry of girls and thereby discovered and opened their hearts.

At the story’s end the son receives a sword, a symbol of what the son has become. The sword represents the temperament he has received from the father’s wound and the king’s blessing. The pain and anger carried in the wounds of the son may turn inward and destroy him or break out and become a threat to others. “If the fathers and elders of a culture don’t meet the sons on the grounds of their wounds and tempers, everyone is in danger of feeling the sword. The core of grandness in the sons, the spark of royalty, won’t be released without drawing out the fire that surrounds it...The sword metaphor combines the capacity to judge with the ability to feel. In the sword, thinking and feeling come together and the capacity to slay is tempered with the feeling to protect.”

The sword is a symbol of the son himself. Just as the sword is made by tempering the blade from fire to water, hot to cool, the son moves back and forth between father and king until he learns to separate them. The story is part of an old idea that a man is not born but made, “forged from the blows of his family and the hammerings of the kings that temper him.”

Though ancient, the story of the hunter and his son comes from an era after domestication of animals, as seen by the existence of horses, village life and its social hierarchy. Yet the father was a full-time hunter, indicating that the culture was still a mixture of foraging and subsistence agriculture. The initiation of boy to man among some hunting societies consists simply of demonstrating hunting ability by killing an animal of sufficient size to establish his worthiness as a provider. Among the Kalahari Bushman, for example, the killing of an antelope qualifies a young male as an adult.

As the original rite of passage, the hunt includes separation from family and dependence on it, ordeal in terms of facing wilderness and risks alone for the first time, taking an animal’s life which is a symbolic death of the young hunter’s childhood, and reincorporation or rebirth as an adult provider.

