Swimming with Seals: The Developmental Role of Initiation Rituals in Work with Adolescents

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses the story of one young man's coming of age to consider the natural process of initiation as a model for intentional work with youth. The paper proposes a conscious and meaningful rites-of-passage approach to helping children and youth (particularly troubled and troubling or out-of-control youth) by assisting them in a successful passage to adulthood.

I want to begin with a tale about the individual metamorphosis of an adolescent boy. He was to be thirteen in a few weeks and his parents, conscious of the beginning of his teen years, invited the extended family of uncles, aunts, and grandparents to a special birthday dinner. My husband and I, close friends of the family, were included among the elders. It happened that we were ourselves entertaining a couple from California—the man, a successful movie and T.V. actor, and his wife, a gifted artist. They were also asked to join the celebration, especially because this young boy, turning toward manhood, had particular talents in both art and drama.

Gifts given, congratulations received, we gathered at the table, festive with decorations made by his younger brother and sister. The boy himself was seated at the head of the table, serving champagne for the elders and sparkling cider for the young ones. Instead of the usual toasts, his father asked that each of the men present give him a statement of wisdom from their own life experience. Those I remember were my husband's, "No matter how strong the pressures of the collective become, always find a way to be true to yourself," and the actor's, "Never let your talents be sold out in any way that you cannot defend morally." Statements of morality, honesty, and honoring of selfhood.

Returning from the party, the actor expressed great admiration for
this boy, especially for his sense of presence and honesty. Before he returned to his work, he had invited the boy to come to California to visit for his next birthday, his fourteenth. When the journey was to be taken the following year, the parents, sensing this as a potential initiatory adventure, agreed to pay his fare from the East Coast to Los Angeles, but gave the boy full responsibility for making the arrangements for the trip. After he had passed this test successfully, the parents drove him to the airport while dealing with their own mixed emotions of excitement for the boy and anxiety and concern about his safety.

In Los Angeles the young man, since that is what he seemed to have become in the preparation for this trip, was taken by the actor, like a young initiate, into the mysteries of the movie and TV world. Here he had a glimpse of what lay behind the scenes. There was indeed creative work, but also all the tensions and conflicts among the actors and directors and the enormous amount of discipline and patience required before the final production was completed.

The artist wife took him into her world, that of studio painting, gallery presentation, and printing. Both showed to him the processes involved in taking creative inspirations, manifesting them in various artistic forms, and then bringing those created forms out into the world. The young man was an observant learner, although these worlds were new and strange to him.

One weekend, in order to give him a break from the intensity of the city, it was suggested that he travel up the coast and spend some time with another artist, a friend of theirs who lived a quiet, simple life in the country. Again he made the arrangements, and he boarded a bus that took him along the exquisite California coastline. Arriving, he shared his Los Angeles experiences with his new mentor, who suggested that he now explore another aspect of his being—his physical strength. Together they went swimming in the ocean, an experience totally new and exhilarating for the young man. He learned the skills of diving under the surf and how to pit his constant awareness against the primal power of water and wind.

One day the artist decided it was time for the young man to be at the beach by himself. There were always others around for safety, but the older man sensed that his pupil was ready for another test. The young man was pleased by this show of confidence and felt assured of his own capacity to deal with the ocean. Arriving there, he saw a large crowd of people at one end of the beach, which he avoided. At the other end, resting on the edge of a surfboard, was a single surfer. Attracted, he moved to this lone person, sank down into the sand next to him and introduced himself. In the animated conversation that followed, the surfer shared his story of coming alone from Scotland to