

Coming to our senses: Rediscovering rites of passage for contemporary youth

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Coming to Our Senses: Rediscovering Rites of Passage for Contemporary Youth

Patrick Amos

Abstract

Cross-cultural research on the initiatory rituals and education of youth suggest that initiatory processes are archetypal and intrinsic processes of the human psyche, and will occur regardless of whether or not they are legitimized by any particular, official adult culture. However, in our secularized (modern, Western) society, a youth's transition from one life-stage to the next, while acknowledged, may not involve a profound transformation of his or her identity. As a contextual framework for this discussion, I will examine adolescent issues in light of the initiatory processes conceptualized by French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Following is my presentation of a recently developed and implemented wilderness-based rites of passage experience, influenced by traditional Aboriginal cultures. It is designed to expand the initiate's self-concept from one that is egocentric, to include a more eco-centric supra-personal (larger-than-individuated-self) identity with human and more than human relations. Finally, I will consider reasons for resistance to such practices in our contemporary society, including paradigmatic constraints, incomprehension, and the perceived dangers of engaging initiatory processes.

I used to think that life makes sense
I now think that sense
Makes life¹

Failing Our Youth

While it is generally accepted in our modern society that adolescence is to be characterized by a certain level of turbulence, discord, and confusion, we are increasingly faced with symptoms of a young generation in turmoil.

¹ Hugh Pepper (High School counsellor, former director of Outward Bound Wilderness Programs), personal communication, August 2002.

Some of these symptoms are extreme: tragic suicide rates – especially Aboriginal and northern communities, apparently senseless acts of violence in urban school yards, rapidly expanding gangs, and the perils and horrors faced by children living on our streets. Subtler symptoms are found in the everyday challenges faced by young people unable to excel in the mainstream educational system, many of whom express self-destructive habits as a way out of their confusion and pain.

In considering these issues, it is interesting to note that the term 'adolescent', and the stage in life it is referring to, is a discourse peculiar to our modern way of life. As William F. Pinar suggests,

during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century certain psychological, juridical, and medical discourses intersected under particular social conditions resulting in a discourse in which emerged the full-blown figure of the adolescent, a figure without existence prior to these discursive and non-discursive operations.²

Perhaps we should consider then, what has led to the development of this life-stage category in Western society? And, more compellingly, why has adolescence become a protractedly troublesome life-stage for so many of today's young people?

Many contemporary adolescent youth seem to realize instinctively, during a phase of often frenetic searching and questing, that they must find some supra-personal (larger-than-self) connection in order to emerge from childhood into adult identity. Traditional Aboriginal cultures – meaning cultural systems that have been minimally modified or unmodified by the

² William F. Pinar, William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman, *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 462.

influence of colonial imposition and/or industrial and post-industrial society – have generally acknowledged this need and have endeavoured to mark this transition in the human life-stage with appropriate initiatory rites of passage.³ Many of these cultures have long understood that puberty is a developmental period during which major physiological, emotional, mental and spiritual changes are occurring in the young person's life, and that such a major transition necessitates not only acknowledgement, but a sacred, holistic process of identity *re-creation*.⁴ Young people in these cultures are carefully led through elaborate practices and rituals designed specifically to help them emerge as integrated adult human beings cohesively related within their human community, and in harmony with the natural environment. In these rituals, the whole community is involved in some way or another, and when the initiates emerge from the ordeal with their renewed identity, the whole community is likewise renewed.⁵

French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep suggests that a rite of passage is a trans-cultural phenomenon involving three distinct phases. The first phase is *separation*, in which the participant is removed from the structure of everyday life in the social order. In the case of adolescent initiation, this involves separation from the family, community and childhood context. The second phase is *transition* or *limen* (meaning 'threshold' in Latin), in which the

³ The parameter I use for considering the extent of modification of traditional cultures is the degree to which their epistemologies – validated through multiple dimensions of consciousness and often inclusive of energies such as *ki/chi*, *prana*, and non-corporeal entities and energies, have been debased and delegitimized by (at first) the Church and more recently the orthodoxy of scientific materialism. No doubt, this lens evokes a spectral gradation rather than a clear (traditional vs. non-traditional) binary definition.

⁴ Christina Grof, 'Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness', in Louise C. Madhi, Nancy G. Christopher, and Michael Meade, eds., *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), pp. 3–16.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. ix.

participant undergoes an intense experience that is characteristically different from that which is normal. During this phase, reality becomes fluid and the former self-construct is encouraged to die and be dissolved. Finally, there is the third phase of *aggregation* or *reintegration* wherein the participant re-enters the social order as an essentially different person with a higher status or state of being, and a new socio-political and cultural role.⁶

While the relative elaboration of each stage will vary according to culturally specific practice and the particular objectives of the ritual, every initiatory rite of passage will still include the combination of *preliminal*, *liminal* and *postliminal* phases. The model varies from culture to culture and specific initiatory purpose, but the template remains essentially the same. Cross-cultural research in patterns of initiatory ritual and education suggest that initiatory processes are archetypal and intrinsic processes of the human psyche, and will occur regardless of whether or not they are legitimized by any particular, official adult culture.⁷ In contemporary Western society, however, one may argue that this kind of officially sanctioned initiatory process has all but disappeared. Although the outer form of ritual may in some cases still be practiced, much of the transformative effect has become dulled without a deep practical investment from both the initiate and community members. There still exists, for example, a variety of initiatory rites of passage experiences in our modern culture (e.g., high school graduation, driver's license, wedding ceremony, and so forth) that involve ritual and a socially recognized shift in status. However, these rituals rarely involve the intense liminal experience required for genuine inner transformation.⁸ While the ritual may be whole-

⁶ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960 [1909]), p. 11.

⁷ Michael Meade, 'Rites of Passage at the End of the Millennium', in Madhi, Christopher, and Meade, eds., *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage*, pp. 27–33; Grof, 'Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness', pp. 3–16.

⁸ Ken Andrews, 'The Wilderness Expedition As a Rite of Passage: Meaning and Process in Experiential Education', *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1999), pp. 35–42.

heartedly engaged, the deeper journey and process is merely parodied. Such experiences usually end up being what transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber refers to as *translational*, in that “the self is simply given a new way to think or feel about reality...”, rather than *transformational*, in which “the self itself is inquired into, looked into, grabbed by its throat and literally throttled to death.”⁹

Viewed in this context, could the extreme risk-taking behaviour that many adolescents exhibit suggest an otherwise unfulfilled hunger for this latter transformative experience? When official society does not offer viable experiences of ecstasy, transformation, and supra-personal identity, many adolescents resort to an array of alternatives, involving high-risk activities such as dangerous driving, unprotected sex, and mind-altering drug use. Because these activities and substances offer liminal experience and expansion beyond childhood consciousness that our official culture will not, they can become irresistible doorways to a new life and a new world.¹⁰

Without informed Elders and helpers to guide and manage the sacred journey, trans-rational questing can easily deteriorate into pre-rational regression.¹¹ Trouble arises when these activities are shunned by official society and the altered state experiences are devalued as amoral nonsense. Educational shock strategies, legal threats of incarceration, and ‘Just say no!’ (abstinence) publicity campaigns manage only to mock and repress the adolescent’s instinctual impulse for deeper ecstatic experiences. While drugs, for example, are used in many traditional initiatory ceremonies, their purpose is usually to facilitate an initial expansion of the initiate’s consciousness; a portal through which he or she can be introduced to new levels of consciousness

⁹ Ken Wilber, ‘A Spirituality that Transforms’, *What is Enlightenment?* (Fall/Winter 1997), pp. 24–5.

¹⁰ Grof, ‘Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness’, pp. 3–16; David Tacey, ‘The Rites and Wrongs of Passage: Drugs, Gangs, Suicides, Gurus’, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, vol. 1, no. 4 (August 1995), pp. 3–12, p. 7; Meade, ‘Rites of Passage at the End of the Millennium’, pp. 27–33.

¹¹ Tacey, ‘The Rites and Wrongs of Passage: Drugs, Gangs, Suicides, Gurus’, p. 8.

and trans-rational worldviews of the adult culture that the initiate is presently joining. But in our official adult society, which refuses to provide successive means of exploring the trans-rational realm, many young people resort to unregulated use of whatever liminizing methods are at their disposal. While many pull out of these patterns, others, who are unable to differentiate the transpersonal impulse from pre-personal fixations, obsessions, and dissociations, become caught in deteriorating spirals: suicides, drug overdoses (or dehydration at raves), HIV, STDs, high-speed car crashes, and so forth. When our young people are left to their own devices, transformational impulses, often presented to the psyche in symbolic and irrational form, can tragically manifest as literal consequences. As initiatory researcher David Tacey implores, it is all very well for we moralistic adults to be appalled by the increasing drug problem, but our moral stand is faulty if we cannot provide youth with an alternative to drugs. It is not enough to demand that they stop taking them, when their hunger for a life beyond the childhood self is at the root of the drug problem itself and must be fulfilled in some way.¹²

Observed within the context of Van Genep’s initiatory model, these problems could be manifesting because our modern culture is suffering from a protracted childhood ‘stuckness’, in which *individuation* of the rational, personal self is considered the ultimate stage of human development. In many of the dominant, Western educational and therapeutic models, the healthy individual egoic self is seen as the end stage in development. Consequently, all educational, diagnostic and therapeutic efforts work toward developing individuated ego strength.¹³

While many Western psychological models recognize the significance of stage-based development, very few acknowledge a full-blown transformation from the narcissistic childhood identity to a completely new transpersonal adult identity. Wilber suggests this failure is attributable to a *Pre/Trans fallacy*, in

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), pp. 208–13.

which a distinction between the *pre-personal* and the *transpersonal* dimensions of development is not made, and the latter is mistakenly lumped in with the former, which is judged as developmentally inferior to individuated ego development.¹⁴

This primarily individualistic identification is the very condition that the traditional rite of passage is designed to help the initiate transcend. Whereas traditional Aboriginal cultures lead the initiate into an expanded supra-personal identification with and awareness of sacred fundamental interdependence with family, community, ecology, and all that lives (animate and inanimate, manifest and non-manifest/energetic), our modern culture instead prepares the initiate for a life of distinctive individuated 'success', most often measured in terms of acquisition, display and consumption of material goods.

But the imbalances of our modern ethos are beginning to show. At the economic level, for example, getting a job and earning money is becoming increasingly difficult for young people. Technological advances in recent decades combined with the (single bottom-line) corporate profit ethos, have driven down the value of a high school diploma and apprenticeships, and meaningful entry-level jobs have all but disappeared.

Whereas most indigenous cultures ensure that their youth make an officially recognized transformation into adulthood in their early teens, our culture is now delaying the transformation years longer, resulting in postponement of the very individualistic journey that is being promoted! The overall experience is one of confusion and dissonance, manifesting as a protracted adolescence rife with identity crises and psychological problems.

At the same time, we are faced with a growing public awareness that our present modes and levels of consumption are unsustainable. In the last decade, an increasing number of the world's top scientists, Nobel laureates among them, have been declaring that

¹⁴ Ken Wilber, 'The Pre/Trans Fallacy', in Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, eds., *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), pp. 124–29.

we are in grave danger of ecological collapse unless we make core changes to the way we live.¹⁵ That respected members of the scientific establishment have begun to echo the serious concerns of most environmentalists and traditional indigenous people, marks an epochal shift in human consciousness in which, for perhaps the first time in human history, no matter what our cultural affiliations or political opinions, we can no longer assume that 'everything is going to be okay'. As the teacher, scholar, and Elder social activist Joanna Macy points out:

Until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed, without questioning, that its children and children's children would walk the same Earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures, and personal death were encompassed in the vaster assurances of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.¹⁶

To frame these issues within the context of Van Gennep's initiatory model: our society is decreasingly effective in enacting the first stage of 'separation' from the family environment. It is only partially tolerant of – yet unwilling to guide or sanction – the second stage of liminal questing ('It's just a phase they're going through...'). And, for the third reintegrative phase, we leave our young people to the whims of popular culture, led by corporate interests who pay some of the sharpest minds on the planet incredible sums of money to advertise their products and create the illusion that *this next product* will bring fulfillment, and then this

¹⁵ Duane Elgin, 'Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing', *Report to the Fetzer Institute*, October 1997, <http://www.awakeningearth.org>.

¹⁶ Joanna Macy, 'Working Through Environmental Despair', in Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), pp. 240–62.

next one... and then this one.... And on we go, chasing individualistic wants. Our youth are confronted with mixed messages of, on the one hand, individuated maximizing of consumption, and on the other, the dangers of ecological degradation.

While many researchers, educators, law enforcers and lay public speak their concerns about the increase in ‘disaffected’ behaviour among adolescents today, I would argue that, upon broader reflection, it is our contemporary mainstream culture on the whole that is disaffected. The supra-personal meanings and worldviews that our culture is peddling have little to do with balance, harmony and community with the human and more-than-human world, and the consequences of this imbalance are beginning to show. As adolescents experience the powerful, archetypal impulses to form a new supra-personal identity within society, they are simultaneously confronted with an emerging common sense that the dominant cult of shallow consumerism and unregulated pursuit of individual wants might somehow be faulty.

Rediscovering Rites of Passage

With an awareness that an increasing number of contemporary youth are acting out their own undirected, and often problematic initiatory journeys (e.g., drinking excessively, drug taking, fast driving, and unprotected sex), and with a deep concern for the well-being of *all* our relations in this world, my colleagues and I in the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program have set about developing and implementing a wilderness-based rites of passage model designed to facilitate a genuine initiatory experience for participants. Whereas many wilderness-based educational and therapeutic programs focus on personal development and improving self-esteem, we focus, additionally, on transpersonal development by helping people to experience a deep holistic/somatic awareness of their fundamental interconnection with all life. Our broader aim is to help people emerge as healthy, balanced adults who are able to embrace a wider, fuller reality of interdependence in a sustainable society.

Development of this idea began long before our core staff had met, as each of us had gone about our personal explorations of indigenous initiatory rituals from around the world. All of us had experimented extensively with drugs in our late teens and twenties (and one in his thirties). Some of us had experienced chemical or behavioural addictions. Some had served long-term prison sentences. Others had been through near death experiences that drastically altered our perception of reality. All of us, though, somehow or another, had managed to navigate through these experiences to discoveries of deeper growth, disciplines and health practices such as yoga, meditation, martial arts, and First Nations traditions such as the pipe ceremony, *yuwipi*, sundance, and vision quest. When it came time for us to gather and consider what were to be the essential ingredients of this program, we experienced a natural awareness of connotative similarity between these practices, and a fluid translation of the core elements in our experiences.

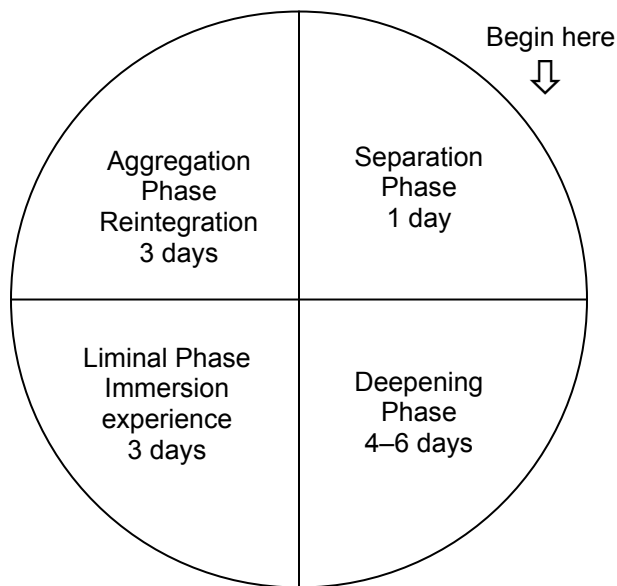
Specific development of this rites of passage model has been in evolution for over a decade now, stemming very much from the ‘solo’ experience in Rediscovery programs (one of the most successful eco-culturally based programs to emerge in the past twenty-three years). More recently, our model has evolved as an integral 8-day component of the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program – a ‘renaissance’ holistic guide-training program for educators, and Aboriginal community/youth workers. Presently, this model manifests itself in stand-alone ten-day programs for adolescent males (‘Grizzly Spirit’), adolescent females (‘New Moon’), and adults of all ages and backgrounds (‘Wolf Dreamers’), offered through Ghost River Rediscovery, Alberta. The model is also an integral component of the five-month ‘Youth Leadership Program’ offered through Ghost River Rediscovery, and the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program, offered through the Department of Child and Youth Care First Nations Program at Malaspina University-College, British Columbia, and the Institute for Child Rights and Development at the University of Victoria, BC.

For the next phase of this paper, we will review the rites of passage model, discussing

theoretical foundations in relation to common ingredients of age-old initiatory practices, and practical considerations for contemporary application.

The Initiatory Journey

In developing the initiatory model we borrowed from Van Gennep's three stage model discussed above, but decided to add an additional *deepening* phase between separation and liminal. The following is a more detailed explanation of the different phases.



Leaving the civilized world (separation)

The participants' transition from a largely urban or rural farming area, along a bumpy dirt road to the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rocky Mountains – the final few kilometres of which they have to traverse along a river bed – brings them into a completely different environment in which they feel a long way from their known comfort zone. Electricity, heat, shelter, and many other taken-for-granted comforts and conveniences are abruptly left behind with participants' family and friends.

The wilderness immersion (deepening)

In traditional Aboriginal cultures, the difference between day-to-day living and ritualized ceremony can be interpreted to be indistinct. The sacred and the mundane are one and the same. Young people in these cultures grow up in a world where time is understood as cyclic and in tune with the natural rhythms of the land. They experience simple things such as day and night, the seasons, and the tides as a spiralling cycle rather than a linear progression. Space, instead of being measured in linear distance, is measured in experienced distance. One of the Elders we work with, Sequoyah Trueblood, conveys this while explaining the traditional use of the sweat lodge:

When our ancestors entered the sweat lodge it wasn't for any special sacred ritual – it was how they took their bath and cleaned their bodies. It was sacred to them because *everything* was sacred to them. We think of the sweat lodge now, as a special ritual only because we have lost touch with the one and only sacred ritual there is – *life!*¹⁷

When these young people are led from their familiar environment through an initiatory journey, they have already had a lifetime of cohesive learning in which trans-rational appreciation of the present is both practised and valued.

Because of this profound difference between the day-to-day mindset of modern culture and traditional Aboriginal culture, we felt it was important to add a distinct transitional phase during which time participants could gradually disengage from city life and immerse into the natural rhythm of wilderness before entering the full liminal phase. These few days of deepening bring an enlivening of the senses in which participants gradually open their awareness of new sounds, awesome sights, interesting textures, and different smells and tastes. They move away from sight dominated 'perspective' and begin experiencing the natural world in a 'timeless', more holistic, *felt sense*. In these

¹⁷ Sequoyah Trueblood, personal communication, August 2002.

days leading up to the solos we engage in a number of growth disciplines, including sweat lodges, meditation, yoga, and morning rituals of greeting the sun and cleansing with a dunk in the ice-cold river. These practices help us to notice and let go of our blind, conditional reactions, helping us to deepen our acceptance of what is present. This combination of experiences, when participants are able to transcend their culturally defined experience of fragmented, compartmentalized, and desacralized time and space, opens them up to new and different levels of reality, preparing them for the deeper transformation to come.¹⁸

Solos and vision quests (liminal experience)

The solo, in which participants spend three days and nights alone on the land without food or significant shelter, is based on the traditional First Nations practice of vision quests, in which the initiate would retreat to the wilderness for long periods of isolation, fasting and meditation to receive a guiding vision or spirit guardian. Some native people still pursue vision quests as the highest form of their religion; when understood in this way, to even mention the practice out of its traditional context borders on heresy.¹⁹ Given that many of our participants have not been raised and educated in the traditional cultural framework, we have adopted the *solo* experience, which still includes a spiritual focus, but within a less culturally specific modern framework. This three to four day experience of wilderness isolation involves a number of key ingredients:

Induced discomfort – Participants are placed in solo sites without food and a minimum of shelter and creature comforts. Sometimes, if they are feeling ambitious, they are placed in a circle that is too small to lie down in, and are instructed not to leave this circle for the entire period of three days and nights.

Attention focusing – While experiencing the growing discomfort, participants' minds will engage in a disparate array of distractions to escape the unwanted sensations. To help manage the discomfort and uncertainty, they will have been coached in methods of attention focusing. This may involve the continuous shaking of a rattle, singing of a song, rocking motions, or noticing breath and other bodily or environmental sensations.

As discomfort and uncertainty mount, many participants experience crises of courage. Given the situation, however, their best option is to redouble efforts to focus their attention and, in so doing, they eventually discover that once seemingly unavoidable discomfort can now be transcended. With this incredible new discovery, their capacity to focus their attention grows manifold and they are able to still their mind, opening it to deeper awareness of the environment within which they are immersed. With a reduction in conceptual thoughts comes greater awareness of subtle sensations, and participants begin to sense the material world at a deeper vibrational level.

With the dawning realization that they are going to be okay despite the lack of shelter and creature comforts, participants open up to a genuine familiarity with the land, and many of their deeper fears and hostilities dissolve. This is a truly liminal experience, with a transcendence of their previously learned capacity and the former boundaries of their personal identity. Some participants might also experience supernatural (meaning rationally inexplicable) sound, movement and light, as well as possibly the voice and/or image, and/or touch of ancestor beings or spirit guides.²⁰ In all cases, their felt sense of community is expanded to include a profound awareness of interconnection with life, elements and energies around them.

¹⁸ Robert Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', in Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, pp. 122–35.

¹⁹ Thom Henley, *Rediscovery: Ancient Pathways, New Directions* (Vancouver: Western Canada Wilderness Committee, 1989), p. 102.

²⁰ Because past conditioning helps to define our perceptive boundaries, experiencing the presence of spirit beings tends to be contingent upon the cultural background, preparation and focused intent of each participant. Unless one has strong belief in the existence, or past experience of the presence of such beings, they tend not to manifest as such.

Return to base camp (early reintegration)

The reintegrative process begins when participants are welcomed back from their solos into base camp. Their return into the camp environment is marked by ritual, signifying their transition to a new identification and level of understanding. A ‘give away’ circle in which each person offers a valued personal possession as a gift follows this ritual. By offering up this valued possession while still in a heightened state of awareness, participants can experience a profound letting go of narcissistic possessiveness, and in exchange, find the energy of generosity, sharing and interconnectedness as they reintegrate within a human community.²¹ During the remaining few days after the solos, we stay mostly in camp and engage in sweat lodges, meditation, and yoga. By engaging in these growth disciplines during this time of heightened sensory awareness, participants are often able to re-access their transcendent awareness through experiences other than the intense solo. This helps them to realize the benefit of continuing to engage in these, or related practices once they have returned to their normal lives. As a core principle, we encourage them to pursue any practice that, through the direct experience of sensations in the body, helps to replace blind reactions with equanimity and awareness at the deepest habit pattern of the mind. These include most any martial art (especially the softer arts that involve grappling and/or subtle awareness of movement), health arts such as yoga and dance, meditations such as *vipassana*, and First Nations traditional practices such as sweat lodge, fasting, sundance, and related rituals and ceremonies.

Going home (reintegration)

When participants finally return to ‘civilization’, they carry with them not only memories of a wonderful time in the bush, but also a deeply felt sense of their fundamental interconnection with the natural world. Participants also come away with a support

²¹ Many participants comment afterwards that this ‘give away’ has been one of the most deeply moving experiences of their life.

network of friends and staff whom they can call upon in times of need, and a tool kit of already experienced growth disciplines and health practices to help them continue on their journey. Most important, they come away with a many-layered sense of community and belonging and a realization that liminal experiences can be accessed by means far healthier than drugs, and far more life affirming than violent gang ritual, promiscuous sex and fast cars.

Other Key Ingredients

Experience in wilderness

One ingredient common to most any indigenous rite of passage is experience in wilderness.²² In this environment, success and failure are not measured in the terms of a driven society or peer assessment, but in terms of very basic, tangible, and potent life instincts. For contemporary youth especially, this environment can provide a necessary and unforgiving reality check with deeply felt consequences. For example, if participants do not take the time and effort to set up a tarp properly, they might find themselves soaking wet and freezing after a surprise night rainstorm. They might complain and blame the weather for a while, but, sure enough, the next night their tarp is bombproof. Whatever dysfunctional and maladaptive behaviours may have worked for them in an urban environment are quickly transformed by very real, visceral and primal instincts to ‘be well’. In order to ensure protection from rain, the shelter must be built. In this sense, wilderness is a leaderless teacher; when participants are able to exercise their intelligence autonomously, and make choices based on personal interest, their struggle turns to natural evolution, and the personal transformations that occur arise from their interactive exchange with the elements. The motivation to improve emerges from within, rather than being imposed

²² I define ‘wilderness’ as the minimally modified or unmodified more-than-human world. The less we have altered this natural environment, the more likely (for the most part) it will have developed into complex, biodiverse ecosystems of synergistic balance.

by an external authority structure applying extrinsic motivators such as mandatory attendance, required courses, and competitive assigning of grades.²³

Humility

Raised as most of us were in Western society, our staff members are acutely aware of our capacity for *not* 'noticing' that which we have not been equipped to notice. With evidence of many Western anthropologists having made epistemological assumptions that limited their capacity to perceive the essence of indigenous ritual practices, we dare not assume we are free of subconscious judgements trickling in from our dualistically trained rational intellect. Our staff members all know the experience of presuming that we have understood what was essential in ritual and what was superfluous, only to discover later (through a deepening in consciousness) that our assessments had been shallow and erroneous. How are we to know if this is not still the case? Ultimately, what helps us the most in this process is coming to it with a great humility, without which we would not have gained the trust and guidance of Elders, mystics and healers who have tolerated our accidental prejudice and helped us along the way.

Elders

The traditional Elders we work with all live healthy, balanced lives, and understand better than anyone the importance of having clear energy and intent around the highly sensitized and vulnerable initiates. These people include: Cherokee Choktaw Elder Sequoyah Trueblood – an internationally respected ceremonialist, mystic and healer who works closely with Kogi Mamas, Hopi, and other Elders around the world; Salish Elder Agnes Pierre – who serves on a number of national councils (including RCMP) as an advisor on Aboriginal issues; Metis (Cree) Elder Christine Joseph – who has run women's shelters for over 40 years, and has been a counsellor for Rediscovery for over 10

²³ Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', pp. 122–35.

years; and Cree Elder Albert Daigneault – respected throughout the north as a powerful medicine man, Mishum (Grandfather) works with anyone who seeks his help, including terminally ill patients (referred by regional hospitals) whose healing he is often able to facilitate. We also work with a number of younger cross-cultural specialists, including: Susan Powell (Lakota) – who has traveled the world studying traditional health practices, drawing connections back to those of her own culture; Bboy Daigneault (Cree) – raised in two worlds, Bboy continues learning the traditional medicine practices of his father while practicing *hatha* yoga, meditations, and working with people of many cultures; and Georgina Rollins (Nakota) – raised by her grandparents, Georgina has a deep familiarity with the land on which we travel.

While the forms of their teachings will vary, these people have a deep connection with their traditional ways of knowing, and a common appreciation of trans-cultural issues. Many of their prayers and ritual practices are engaged to invoke the assistance of helper spirits and to ensure our healthy alignment in the ever-manifesting subtle field of causality. These people understand, from their own extensive experience, the trans-rational dimensions of consciousness that our initiates are being exposed to, and they make every effort to facilitate optimal conditions for the journey. The stories, advice and rituals they provide are often steeped in metaphor, enabling initiates in the process of re-integrative framing, meaning-making, and the transferring of learning to many aspects of their lives. Sometimes, though, the Elders' teachings are not meant to be understood right away, but rather, are planted as seeds and nutrients to help people grow more aware of our relationship with the natural world. And it is only when we have this 'aha!' of consciousness that comes to fruition days, weeks, months, or years (maybe even lifetimes) later, that we begin to realize the embedded nature of their caring intent all along. The incredible depth of knowledge that our Elders bring to these programs cannot be learned from a book, or in a university... but only through their deep life-commitment to these practices. The wisdom they provide is invaluable.

Meaning-making

In our programs, we are acutely aware of the effect our conceptual framing and metaphorization will have on our initiates, and we make every effort to ensure that our teachings are grounded in values of all-inclusive kindness, empathy and compassion. During reintegration, initiates are inevitably reflecting, processing and making sense of the new levels of reality they have just experienced. When helping them to engage this process we endeavour to discuss their experiences – especially those of transcendent resonance – in as broad a cross-cultural context as possible. We offer perspectives on Holy Spirit (Christian), Brahmic plane (Hinduism), *Nirvana* (Buddhism), and explain principles of *ki*, *chi*, *prana*, *kundalini*, and loving Consciousness, found in a variety of non-Western philosophies. We also make mention of how these concepts can relate to emerging scientific understandings of sub-atomic physics. The Elders speak of this in terms of everyone and everything being our relations, including all our ancestors, whose atoms now move through us.

Beyond these efforts to offer a wide selection of concepts, stories and metaphors, we do little else to prescribe meaning for our initiates. Instead of working towards specific conceptual consolidations and developmental outcomes, we trust instead that we have triggered an ongoing process of psycho/spiritual discovery. Joseph Campbell, the well-known authority on comparative mythology, offers some wisdom on the matter:

Creative mythology... springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thought and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value. Thus it corrects the authority holding to the shells of forms produced and left behind by lives once lived. Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it will be or as it should be, as it was or as it

never will be, but as it is, in depth, in process, here and now, inside and out.²⁴

Learning Process

We believe that a person learns best when the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional dimensions are engaged in a whole and balanced manner.²⁵ This includes a balanced valuation of both ‘imposed/transmitted knowledge’ (e.g., Elder teachings, conceptual academic material and lectures, book knowledge) and ‘emergent knowledge’ (e.g., tracking and elucidating what arises from participants’ own embodied sense of experience). With the latter, we are also mindful that we are not too narrowly focused on rational translation of these tacit/intuitive dawnings. This is not to devalue cognitive meaning making – yes, let’s have lots! But, in a sense, we must be careful not to dwell (as most modern educators do) in this mode of knowing, which at times means purposefully *not* focusing here.

The principal ambition of our educational process is the empowerment of people in their own lives. Yet much of what disempowers people is their conditioned reliance on ‘expert knowledge’ held and delivered by those in authority. All too often in our modern culture, this expert knowledge is delivered in the currency and realm of rational cognition, which, in effect, creates a narrowly recognized knowledge-economy that can be used as a means (intentionally or not) of gate-keeping the means to a learner’s self-worth. This kind of rational processing is worth learning, of course, but we are mindful of the relative (e.g., complete) emphasis it is given in most contemporary educational settings. We prefer instead to help participants find ways to access direct awareness, and notice and value their own tacit emergence – *without* necessarily inducing (that which is pre/sub-rational) or reducing (that which is trans-rational) to rational, descriptive expression. In this way, we can deeply empower learners, encouraging their

²⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 7–8.

²⁵ A. Pattel-Gray, *Through Aboriginal Eyes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), p. 4.

curiosity to learn creatively and identify with the sacred through various states of consciousness.

Our overall challenge, then, lies in striking a healthy balance among the perennial wisdoms of Elder teachings, contemporary academics, and initiates' valuation of their own experiential awakening.

Problematic Issues

As wonderful and powerful as this initiatory rites of passage experience can be, there are a number of problematic issues that can arise. For the remainder of this paper, we shall explore what I perceive to be the most troublesome, and consider ways to effective resolution.

Reintegrative troubles

During the reintegrative stage, a number of problems can arise. Upon returning back into the 'civilized' world, participants often report initial feelings of novelty and euphoria, but find that these feelings can fade within hours or days to be replaced by a heavy fatigue and sometimes depression. This condition is often referred to as being 'bushed', which is an unfortunate misnomer in that it implies it is our time in the wilderness that has worn us out and from which we must now recover. An alternate (and in my opinion, more accurate) explanation is that our consciousness, which has fully opened and immersed in a harmonious natural environment, returns to a culture laden with forces that have split consciousness from nature in the first place. In the painful 're-entry' experience, we *feel* our newly opened and connected beings congeal into hardened, separate, well-defended selves.²⁶ The open, expressive, and relatively unfiltered awareness is quickly assaulted by mechanical noise, hurried schedules and the cloistered or expressed angst of people living *koyanasqatsi*.²⁷ Inevitably, one must recalibrate one's armour.

It is worth noting that in most traditional indigenous cultures, the reintegrative process is highly regulated, with an extended phase of actively supervising the returning initiates. This

²⁶ Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', p.133.

²⁷ This is the Hopi word for 'life out of balance'.

process is endorsed by the community, and is managed by cultural specialists whose role it is to ensure that the initiates are both guided and protected during this vulnerable stage. For example, in Coast Salish culture, the 'Winter Dance' initiate will remain in seclusion in the wilderness for at least a month after the liminal phase, bathing in the icy-cold stream each morning and focusing intently in prayers and ritual and specifically mindful activities. The only people the initiate can speak with are guides and Elders whose duty it is to monitor the initiate's progress and help keep the initiate's new identity clear of dangerous spirits and energies.²⁸

While reintegrating and living again within our fast-paced, competitive culture, we must find ways to nurture and protect this newer expanded consciousness. This is the *crux* of the reintegrative process, for if initiates are unsuccessful here, they will face an intense cognitive dissonance between an amazing new depth of life and a 'normal' culture that is blind to it. Without ways of reinforcing their experience, initiates will eventually feel a need to either devalue the new awareness in order to 'fit in' again, or feel alienated and confused.

The quick-fix mentality

One of the most troublesome and dissonance-inducing forces our initiates are confronted with upon return to modern society is the sheer pervasiveness of the *quick-fix* mentality. The idea of seeking spiritual transformation through an arduous journey or persistent practice of growth disciplines runs anathema to the prevailing influence of our consumer culture, which is driven by principles of instant gratification and maximization of comfort. A striking example of this contradiction is evidenced in the burgeoning popularity of yoga in contemporary North American society. Originating in India, yoga was developed as a system of psycho/physical spiritual and philosophical disciplines designed to bring about a profound transformation in the person through the transcendence of the ego.

²⁸ William White (Salish Elder and cultural specialist), personal communication, October 2001.

Yet, as Indologist Georg Feurstein suggests, the purpose of most modern interpretations of these disciplines has been diminished to:

enhancing one's self-image, becoming better at playing the ego game, rather than recognizing that it is in a place beyond all that, and beyond any particular talents or skills that we might develop, that the whole wonderful area of genuine spirituality really lies. Genuine spirituality is about transcending the very thing we are so fond of, which is our personality. This is and has always been the traditional approach, and it is exceedingly demanding. And because very few people in our society are prepared to hear this, what has happened by and large is that these teachings have been butchered in order to better suit our consumerist mentality – which has to do with getting something very quickly, applying it, and feeling better about ourselves.²⁹

When the transformational initiatory practices are undertaken in earnest, a number of discomforts – even terror – will sooner or later arise, as shadowy fears are exposed. Right about this time, however, is when we begin to think, 'Hmmm, this is getting ugly, must not be for me', and step back to dabbling, or move on to another flavour-of-the-day health practice. This influence of this cultural norm can be enough to deter people from (re) accessing transcendent dimensions of reality.

Given the prevalence of this comfort-seeking ethos in our North American culture, many parents and educators cannot fathom our reasons for wanting to engage such an arduous initiatory process in the first place. So, we are stuck in a kind of catch twenty-two. In order to guide our participants through genuinely transformative liminal experiences, we face the potential of hostile misinterpretation in the eyes of an increasingly litigious society. In designing and implementing initiatory rites of passage experiences, it becomes all too easy to slip into habits of parodying a genuinely transformative

²⁹ Georg Feurstein, 'To Light a Candle in a Dark Age', *What is Enlightenment?* (Fall/Winter 1997), p. 37.

process by backing off and resorting to a less demanding level of ritual practice. Sadly, this often translates into *entertaining* ourselves with practices that are meant to transform.

Paradigmatic concerns

I believe that much of our society's inability to comprehend the ontology of our programming stems from the metaphorical use of language that currently encodes our perspectives, experiences and cultural assumptions.³⁰ In contrast to most traditional Aboriginal cultures, our Western worldviews are constrained by paradigms that separate subject from object, the human from the non-human, and the animate from inanimate. Our language is filled with nouns and possessives (my, your, his, her...) that perpetuate this conceptual fragmentation of knowledge, and render difficult the task of explicating alternate ways of perceiving the world. Consequently, we find ourselves in a double bind whereby the epistemic codes embedded in the language determine the limits and direction that our educational empowerment can take.³¹ By focusing on the development of rational, uni-state consciousness, with the inherent assumption that *mind* is a function of individuated entities, we limit ourselves, inevitably, to an impoverished disconnection from the holistic breadth and depth of multifold consciousness and inter-relational experience.

The only Western theoretical paradigm that seems holistic and comprehensive enough to include liminal experiences, supra-personal identification and sacred connections is the *transpersonal*. As Thomas Roberts and Frances Vaughan-Clark, two of the founders of the modern transpersonal movement explain:

The development of a comprehensive educational psychology requires a theoretical framework which includes all the phenomena related to human learning, and must therefore include areas of human

³⁰ C.A. Bowers, *Critical Essays: Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), p. 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

experience which previously have been ignored by traditional academic psychology...

An underlying assumption of transpersonal psychology is that physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth are interrelated, and the optimal educational environment stimulates and nurtures the intuitive as well as the rational, the imaginative as well as the practical, and the creative as well as the receptive functions of each individual. Transpersonal psychology has focused attention on the human capacity for self-transcendence as well as self-realization, and is concerned with the optimum development of consciousness.³²

More recently, Vaughan, together with Roger Walsh, has offered important distinctions between the *multistate* nature of transpersonal disciplines and the predominantly *unistate* disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and education, which

are centered in, and focus on, a single state of consciousness – namely our usual waking state – and accord significantly less attention and importance to alternate states.

By contrast, multistate cultures accord more attention and value to states such as dreams and contemplation and therefore derive significant parts of their worldviews from multiple states. Examples of such multistate enterprises include shamanic tribal cultures, Buddhist psychology, and Taoist philosophy. ...Contemporary transpersonal disciplines are attempts to forge modern multistate disciplines to bring the understanding, expression, and induction of transpersonal experiences and phenomena to the modern world and to combine the best of

ancient and cross-cultural wisdom with contemporary disciplines.³³

Exactly what correlation this bears to the greater inclusion of trans-rational paradigms and rites of passage practices in our educational counselling systems is difficult to say. However, one would hope that, with mounting evidence of the efficacy of well-designed and implemented wilderness-based rites of passage programs, the academic community, institutional administrations, and funding bodies will warm up to the transpersonal principles that inform much of our way of knowing in these programs.

Dangers of engaging liminality

It is necessary now to focus on what I believe to be the core danger that leads to most abuses – intentional and accidental – of the initiatory process.

When an initiate enters the liminal state, he or she is opening to levels of consciousness beyond the familiar rational waking-state, often involving transcendent awareness of subtler, vibrational levels of reality. This can be an incredibly powerful experience during which the initiate's identity, values and worldview become prone to any re-association. In all instances, this trans-rational experience, however fleeting, can be construed to confirm the ethical principles of the path that one is on. This is not automatically a bad thing, nor is it automatically healthy. Unless the initiates are equipped with a healthy ethical base and rational meaning-making skills, such experiences can be horribly misguided and misinterpreted.

I believe the root of this problem lies in the failure to discern between conceptual thought with which we frame and make meaning of our experience, and non-conceptual awareness that brings us deeper into the direct experience. While these different levels of mental activity can appear to be one, our mind can flicker back and forth between these states up to forty times per second.³⁴ At a grosser level, these modes of

³² Thomas Roberts and Frances Vaughan-Clark, 'Transpersonal Psychology in Education', *Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation*, fastback (53) (1975), p. 7.

³³ Walsh and Vaughan, eds., *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*, p. 6.

³⁴ This distinction between mental states was first brought to my attention during my first *vipassana*

activity have seemingly merged, but they are still, epistemologically speaking, *distinct*. Without mindful discernment, these states can appear continuous, much like the fluid imagery perceived by a film projector flashing a rapid-fire sequence of images. And herein lies the danger. Whatever conceptual and ethical principles have been aligned to frame the transcendent experience can be mistaken for pure, direct, impersonal experience. One's tacit emergences, however seemingly pure, are vulnerable to the influence of conceptual imprinting. This erroneous correlation can then serve as a powerful confirmation of whatever (conceptual) *truth* the initiatory guides are peddling.

Because of this danger, I believe it is crucial that we (leaders of initiatory processes) endeavour to help our initiates discern between conceptual thought and non-conceptual, direct awareness. In this way, we can minimize the likelihood of people forming abusive or exclusionary associations from their liminal experiences. Furthermore, our practices must be engaged with compassion and be grounded in an ethical base of inclusive kindness. We must be mindful of the imprinting that our teachings, energy, and intent (both conscious and subconscious) will have on our initiates. From this place of self-awareness, we must also be vigilant about discouraging others who are abusing initiatory processes with exclusionary motives, realizing that any attempts to mould our (personal and collective) selves as exclusively separate from the totality, will only perpetuate fragmentation in our destabilizing world.

retreat a number of years ago. The instructors were adamant that we make every effort to discern between different levels of mental activity. Many scientific studies of meditative states identify numerous categories of brain-wave cycles ranging from higher speed 'alpha' (around forty cycles per second), to 'theta' (around three cycles per second) and slower. One of our Elders, Sequoyah Trueblood, speaks of attaining zero cycles per second, which he describes as undistorted communication and undifferentiated oneness with Creator/Loving Consciousness.

Concluding Remarks

While many educators, counsellors, and concerned researchers hold a genuine concern for the growing plight of our young people, most continue to advocate only for minor adjustments in our educational and/or socio-political systems. Very few have identified the need for officially sanctioned, fundamentally transformative initiatory rites of passage that enable us to recalibrate the way we perceive and construct reality. While many adults are unfamiliar with techniques of inner transformation, and would prefer not to engage in this liminal realm with such permeable trans-rational boundaries and questionable navigational guidelines, much evidence indicates that these initiatory processes are at play, regardless of our rational volition to ignore them. Drug use, promiscuous sex, extreme sports, gang violence – all are signs of engagement in liminal experience, however unconscious and haphazard this may be.

As concerned Elders, educators and counsellors, it is clearly within the scope of our activity to responsibly engage in, and guide our young people through the trans-rational realms of liminality, transcendence, and related multiple states of consciousness. Initiatory rites of passage experiences in wilderness environments offer a doorway to these realms, and evoke an opportunity for genuine transformation in which we can (re) discover our sacred inter-relation with all life and consciousness. Through purposefully induced, liminal experiences and mindfully guided conceptual framing, we can expand our identity *beyond* our personal sense of self, and engage an inner journey of growth and expanding kindness (*kind, kinder, kindred*) with all existence. By embracing these initiatory practices, and mixing a wholesome essence of both 'new' and 'old', Western and non-Western, scientific and indigenous ways of knowing, we can offer contemporary rites of passage to a wider audience, and draw a new picture in an ancient pattern of original teachings.

Finally (and foremost) is the matter of what I myself can do. Those of us who would guide young people on profound personal and transpersonal journeys in wilderness settings must embody a range of skills and sensitivities,

experiences and understanding that take great care and dedication to develop. The extent to which we can understand and appreciate the ritualized experience of our participants depends very much upon the extent of our own experience of these ritual practices and their resulting altered states. With this in mind, our responsibility as Elders, counsellors, educators, mentors and guides becomes immense. To help young people realize a change into adulthood in a sustainable, compassionate, society we must first *be* the vehicle for and embodiment of such change, which starts (and continues in each moment) with ourselves becoming what it is we ought to be. This is no small undertaking.

I would like to conclude this paper with a remark by Michael Hull that is at once inspiring and cautionary. Hull, as the first white man ever authorized to lead the traditional Lakota sundance ceremony, has a clear sense of what is at stake:

I believe that we stand on the precipice of great possibility. Public willingness to consider alternative ways of building loving healthy communities and relationships is growing – and the need has never been greater. We who are responsible for the gifts of the spirit have an opportunity to help create a passionate world filled with relatives who are kind and good mannered – a world that is divine centered, love based, and compassion driven. Failure of personal integrity is the fastest way to waste the opportunity. Let's not screw it up.³⁵

³⁵ Michael Hull, 'Walking the Red Road: Learning to Caretake the Gifts of the Spirit', *Shaman's Drum*, No. 59 (2001), p. 57.