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Let me trace the evolution of my thesis topic, Initiation in the Men's Movement, back a few steps to see what specific interests have led me to this point of departure. I have long been interested in mythology; how it seems to reflect cultural and personal psychology, and how the human imagination approaches meaning in the environment in which we live. I began to feel the *experience* of mythology on a journey to Sumatra. My personal adventure seemed to follow the basic pattern of a Heroic myth ( a long story I need not explain at this moment). What I also witnessed of more anthropological concern was a Batak healing ceremony, where I saw what I thought was one of their legends being enacted along with music and dancing among a family invoking the presence of their ancestors. Later I learn at U.C.S.C. anthropology classes that this is what they call ritual symbolism. I was not concerned with the effectiveness of these rites as healing tools, but more fascinated in the way the people seemed to temporarily suspend their identity and don a "mask" with which they could identify with and enact their mythological lore; seemingly bringing that which is supernatural and sacred among themselves. I have learned that in rites of passage, this state of suspension, is termed the "liminal period" ( a subject I still need to research).

This summer I began to read some of the literature and meet a few people involved in the "Men's movement". One of the largest problems they seem to bemoan is that in America there is no substantial initiatory rite of passage which clearly marks the men from the boys. The result they say is an ambivalent, insecure, emotionally dependant, middle aged man (the 'wimp'). The leaders of the movement are trying to draw upon mythological figures from Greek, Old European, Biblical, even American legends to re-create a strong positive male image. The initiation problem is still in the experimental stage, but I hear that the gatherings and rites of passage they hold are very elaborate and powerful.

I am interested in this area of research because it seems to integrate my anthropological interests with my more personal questions. I do have a vested subjective interest in this topic, and though I will conduct objective research, I will also include knowledge gained from introspection and reflection. In a few weeks I will be turning twenty-one, and soon enough financially independent from the

folks; a time of initiation for me. I am also feeling it is imperative for me to understand what are genuinely masculine (not macho), qualities.

So my thesis topic will explore initiation into manhood in at least three senses: gender, maturation, and personal exploration. I am also wanting to frame the psychology of the Self in this scenario. How is the Self defined before, during and after the initiation? What social and individual needs are being met? What kind of psychology is involved in designing the ritual itself? Does the ritual serve as an emotional catharsis? If so, what kinds of emotions are being released? What function does male bonding serve? How is feminist psychology involved? More questions are sure to arise. I would like to use Jung's theory of archetypes and individuation in my understanding and explanation of initiation, though I know these ideas are not as readily accepted among anthropologists as perhaps Freudian theory is. At this point I am shopping for a solid theoretical stance to take.

I see a few ways I can conduct my research; 1) The literature published on the movement is limited to relatively few books and publications. I feel it will not be too difficult to gain a comprehensive grasp on what is written. The research on initiation itself is another story, so I will focus on male puberty rites, and the "liminal period"; 2) I will conduct one or two interviews with group leaders with whom I have already made contact; 3) I will actually participate in an initiation rite as an initiate/undercover anthropologist.

I will want to explore the nature and structure of the ritual. How does one create an effective initiation within a culture that seems to lack such practices? Can we simply borrow ritual techniques and technologies from history and across the world, and hope for them to be meaningful? Are we witnessing a genuine integration of knowledge and practice in this ritual gained from the recent explosion of information gained from global communication and networking? I want to investigate what is universal about initiation. Is it imperative to the health of a society? What is relative and what is unique about this manifestation of a nearly world wide practice, and how does it serve our particular "meaning making" needs?

I see this thesis topic as a personal and professional investigation into an emerging social phenomenon.

This thesis is a comparative investigation into two male initiation rites in contemporary American culture. My first case study explores the events at a weekend workshop entitled "Initiation the First Step" given to a group of men by a medicine man of the Dagura culture from Burkina Faso. My second case study looks at the experience of an individual who designed and underwent his own "self-initiation".

While the people in both these ceremonies to some extent restructure rites and symbols of other cultures to suit their own needs, I argue that the force they hold for the practitioner depends the intimacy and familiarity he has with the context in which these tools are used. The workshop case involves men experimenting with one particular unfamiliar system of knowledge, while the case of the individual involves a syncretic appropriation of mythological symbols from various cultures. In the former, familiar symbols and their unfamiliar structures, systems and meanings are introduced together, and an attempt is made to use them ritually. In the case of the latter, personal meaning is re-invested in a collage of painted and collected symbols, working within a symbolic system using associations more integral to his understanding.

In both these examples we have the American men attempting to recreate rites of passage into manhood by means of symbols borrowed from alternative cultural traditions. I point to the factors which contribute to the affective power of the symbols for the initiates (were the rites personally transformational?). The relationship of individual to their community in these cases of initiation are unique because they do not resemble "traditional" patterns in which we can recognize a continuity of cultural knowledge transmitted from the old to the younger generations. The community to which the people in the case studies are being initiated are unconventionally different from traditional rites and from each other.

The question remains as to what form initiation rites are assuming in America, (the absence of a cohesive collective mythology has been seen by some as the missing factor), though I do see individualism and personal mythologies being factors in shaping rites which are genuinely transformative.

### **Traditional aspects of Initiation**

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines initiation as " ...the systematic ceremonial induction of adolescent youths into the full social life of the community". Initiation marks the point of transition from life episode to the next, the severance of one social category to the incorporation of another, with all its privileges and responsibilities. Initiation serves as a purposeful re-evolution of one's life. In a hunter-gatherer society, one may gain the ability to marry or hunt with the men. In our society, these markers of status can be seen in the ability to serve in the Armed Forces, the ability to drive, the right to purchase alcohol, possession of a credit card, sex and marriage.

These rites in traditional societies not only serve to usher the individual from a state of childhood to a state of adulthood, they also serve to categorize and distinguish the genders. It is usually a time when under severe taboos, males are kept separate from the women. This is seen by some as a means of a necessary separation from a childhood state of dependency and identification with the mother. Whereas we may see this process of separation leading toward individuation, (becoming more autonomous), I suspect that the initiate in most traditional societies are actually transferring a sense of obligation from their childhood matrix of the mother's authority, to the authority of the larger community and its heritage.

The importance of these rites is seen in the intense physical, emotional, and spiritual preparation which accompany confirmation of the individual into a new social matrix. Symbolic wounds such as circumcision at puberty in Arabic communities, or scarification upon the forehead such as in the Nuer, signify that the individual undergoes a painful and irreversable commitment as a member of his community. These is interpreted by Sam Keen as signifying that the individual must sacrifice his personal will to that of the larger community. Society indentures the initiate by way of his body; self-identity is molded by culture shaping his very nature.

Within this ordeal, a body of cultural knowledge (cosmogony, cosmology, mythology) is transmitted from the older to the younger generation. For the traditional man this re-evolution meant ritualistically experiencing the cosmogony according to the tribes mythology. The experience of the initiation ritual makes an indelible impression upon the very core of the self image; of personal and cultural identity.

“For symbolic repetition of the creation implies a reactualization of a primordial event, hence the presence of the Gods and their creative energies. The return to the beginnings finds expression in a reactivation of the sacred forces that had then been manifested for the first time. If the world was restored to the state in which it had been at the moment when it came to birth, if the gestures that the Gods had made *for the first time* in the beginning were reproduced, society and the entire cosmos became what they had been then - pure, powerful, effectual, with all their possibilities intact”

(Eliade p. xiii Rites and Symbols.)

As is generally customary in tribal initiations, it is the elders and the same sex relatives of the initiates who, having themselves undergone simialar

experiences in their youth, initiate younger members into their lineage. This experience connects the individual with what may be assumed to be an experience shared by his living elders and his ancestors. And ancestors, by virtue of their location in the afterlife, are connected to the mysteries, legends and mythologies of divine actions which initiated the process of creation itself. This is rootedness. "A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future" (Weil 1952).

Initiation as a rite of passage hinges gender, status, and rootedness, as issues of identity. If initiation occupies such a central role in a community as a mechanism of enculturation, we can see the potential for estrangement and alienation of the individual from their society if there is no such formal introduction to the values and legends of their culture.

#### **Absence of rites**

We may say disparity exists in this culture from the absence of these practices. Whereas graduation from high school in America used to generally guarantee the person a job or role in our society, now the (academic) individual struggles through graduate school, and does not leave the protection of the institutional matrix until his early thirties. As well, a thirteen year old American Jew undergoing Bar Mitzva is still unprepared for the responsibilities of manhood. Here we see that because of socio-economic changes, what used to be "markers of completion have devolved into empty gestures" (Virginia Hine in *Betwixt and Between*, 1987). People are less able to move out of home and support themselves after high school. As for a rite of passage in which nearly everyone in the larger society participates, that had significant impact upon the lives of individuals, graduation no longer is a guarantee that one will be accepted into the adult community.

It is surprising to most people that rites of passage do and have existed in America. High school and college sports, and especially the military have distinctive methods of breaking down the individual by physical and emotional exertion, in order that one may work as a efficient member of the team's unit. Some street gang initiations have codes of such severity where the task is to kill an unsuspecting victim or a rival gang member. Some college fraternities have less extreme rites of initiation, but like the street gangs are peer groups which ceremonialize membership.

What we may be seeing is a decentralization of initiation rites from larger institutions such as the high school graduation, toward a trend which works more effectively in smaller communities. Mechanisms of separation and incorporation are found among the diverse communities that do exist in America. Because these communities like street gangs and fraternities are factioned, they serve as markers that signify inclusiveness and exclusiveness to a particular group.

Considering the diversity of cultural awareness it is likely that people will continue to create their own mechanisms for separation, transformation and incorporation (the stages in rites of passage according to Van Gennep). How does the evolution of these rites of passage meet with the needs of the American male in the larger society as a whole?

### **Introducing needs of contemporary man**

A smirk comes over the face of most people when they hear of 'men's weekends'. Immediate associations are Robert Bly, drumming, mud smearing, male bonding, etc. Men's weekends which are being offered nationwide usually cost a pretty penny and end up stirring certain fathers and husbands into emotional excitement and enthusiasm. Can we picture Ward Cleaver throwing down his newspaper and beating his chest in an instinctive outburst of primordial male energy? I choose Ward as a counter point image, because he still exemplifies the stereotype of the dignified American Father in America; responsible, content, authoritative, kindly. Is it easier to picture Bill Cosby doing the same thing? For some reason, yes. His authority and confidence as a father is less sure, which is said by leaders of the movement to be representative of the larger state of affairs with the American male.

It is easy to satirize the efforts of these men, because they are admitting they are naive to this world, that they don't feel affirmed as men. If there is one stigma men worry about, especially presidential candidates, it is the 'wimp factor', where the power of authority is in question. As well, people are rightfully questioning why there needs to be a men's movement in the Winter of the Patriarch?

Leaders of the "Men's Movement" like Robert Bly argue that because of the absence of rites of initiation in our culture we are producing generations of ambivalent males, who do not have a strong, confirmed sense of their masculinity. Many men feel they have not psychologically completed adolescence, that childhood patterns of dependency run long into their mid life. I think the majority who are interested in initiation feel that it would clear up a lot of ambiguity in their lives as to how a man stands in relation to his culture, his past, the women in his life, to other men, and especially himself.

Important to the search of the contemporary male for initiation is the relationship between sons and fathers and the lack of communication between them. Some say the Industrial revolution has taken the fathers work out of the

home and therefore has no way of passing his skills to his son. The claim is made that many sons know their fathers through their mother's eyes, having a feminized version of what their primary male role model is really like. It is therefore necessary for men to group together exclusively in order that they may understand themselves better. The leader of the weekend workshop I attended addressed this need when he said "the son looks to the father for archetypes of greatness, and if he finds none, he will be seeking for models to emulate after his father's death, leaving a sense of incompleteness".

For these reasons men in America have found it important for them to group together and discuss whatever issues arise in the security of being in a purely male environment. They are attempting to establish a male community, which they see as a missing element in the lives of the contemporary man. They are an attempt to generate a community among men providing a context which allows for instinct, intuition, and group emotion to emerge. D.H. Lawrence, an author popularly referred to in the Men's movement says, "We must get back into relation... to the cosmos and the universe through daily ritual. To these rituals we must return; or we must evolve them to suit our needs"

While smaller mens groups seem to be collecting around the country, the major events that feature the leaders of the movement cost money, and the men who can afford them cast the majority of the patrons into the middle class. At the workshop I attended most of them were white, middle age, and middle class. Many of them were therapists, and a few artists from the Bay Area. What had they all come for? What were their expectations?

For a group of men to attend an initiation given by a Medicine man of questionable origin sheds light on the desperation for some American men to touch some base of ancient tradition with which they can identify. In the workshop we were uninformed as to where the Medicine Man was from until the lecture began. He could have been from any culture that had a tradition of initiation rites. The brochure had entitled the workshop, Initiation: an African Way of Knowledge.

Missing in this picture for the man in modern America are stable communicative bonds between the generations that would make a continuous tradition like initiation possible. What cultural information or sacred history and esoteric knowledge is there to be revealed in this act? What could possibly serve as a cosmogonic legend that initiates would recreate in their lives? America is a huge nation of many peoples, not a small tribal society. We as a culture do not legitimate our existence in the past, because as a nation, we are little more than 200 years old. Not only that, but we as Europeans came as conquerors to North America and in the process of uprooting the native peoples we uprooted ourselves.

Are we safe to say that men in America feel uprooted because cultural mechanisms like initiation are absent from common practise? Our entire ideology looks toward the future and progress for legitimacy, continually fabricating the "new improved". But to paraphrase Malcom X "you cant know where you are going unless you know where you are from." Let us look at the first of two



examples which innovate ways of establishing a connection of the individual with rootedness.

### **Berkely-**

The borrowing of another cultures initiation was observed by Colin Turnbull in his book on the Pygmies entitled the Forest People. He observed the pygmies youths undergoing the initiations of the villagers in order to get to feast afterwards. He observed how even the strictest taboos were playfully violated by the pygmy youths who had no reason to fear evil spirit vengeance, for these beings were not within their worldview. In the case of borrowed initiation rites that I observed, the American participants were solemnly and sincerely attempting to experience the ritual, trying to experience the reality of a worldview wholly different from their own. We shall see how Daguran rites and symbols, as they are taken out of context become restructures and reinterpreted to fit an American understanding.

Upon the arrival at the conference hall, we were give a stone as a passkey, which would serve as an instrument in the ritual and also as a token memorial souvenir. I say *token* because it seems as if it respresented the weekend as a token initiation experience. In many ways the weekend was an experemental, condensed, translated, representation of a tribal initiation. It could not have been otherwise and Dr. Some acknowledged this fact, pointing out that the unfamiliarity of the environment, the knowledge and the people had inherent differences which could not easily be overcome. My feeling is that the weekend served as an experience which propelled the participants to continue searching for the meaning of initiation upon their own.

The workshop was took place was in the Berkely Oddfellows hall, a 19th century men's society associated with the Freemasons. The large, carpeted hall hall was lined with oversized, sturdy old chairs. Illuminated stained glass symbols adorned the high centers of the four walls. Atop the center overlook was an image with a single eye and three chain links beneath it, to the right an image of book superimposed upon a cross, at the back the image of an hourglass with wings, and to the left side was the image of a hand holding a heart. Surrounded with mystical symbols of some tradition we knew little or nothing about seemed to preclude our particular situation of preparing to learn about the the Daguran way of initiation. The soft sounds of recorded African drumming set the tone for friday evening, the initial segment of the weekend workshop

Dr. Malidoma Some, the medicine man(as stated on his buisness card), is originally from the Dagura tribe of Burkina Faso, West Africa. A man who seemed to be in his late thirties, Malidoma wore a sparkling blue African overcoat with a matching hat, with embroidered numbers and symbols all over. He was late in his plane arrival from Detroit where he is a professor of Literature at Brandeis

University in Michigan. He introduced himself and his position as a "man of two worlds"; having been born in a tribal community, being raised in a Catholic mission, having returned to his community as a stranger fifteen years later, and had to initiate with the pre-adolescents. He eventually returned to the Western world and became an accomplished scholar, having received Phd's from Sorbone and Brandeis Universities.

In many ways I saw him as a "cultural broker". Dr. Some being a man of both traditional and modern worlds had the responsibility of introducing us Westerners to his culture. He said his name translates to "make friends with stranger" and therefore saw it within his life's duty that he be in a position to introduce his culture to foreigners. He had strong opinions about the role of anthropology in the understanding of his culture, mentioning that "armed with pens and tape recorders, the intrusive anthropologist is interested only in the objective, stagnant, preservation of something which is dynamic, alive, changing and elusive. Though it was he who was being the anthropologist to his own culture, in trying to explicate the ways of his tribe in terms we Americans could understand. He expressed warm receptivity to the curiosity of westerners interested in exploring the rapidly vanishing initiation practices of his tribe.

He said that initiation practices were no longer obligatory for the youth of his tribe, recent laws being passed that young people have a choice, when before they did not, whether they are willing to undergo such ordeals. In his culture he said the young men were being lured away from their rural tribal communities by the glamour of the city life. These developments portray the optionality of lifestyles in a modern world; whereas the youth of his tribe can make choices about what used to be mandatory initiation rites, it also by our choosing that we can dabble into various tribal rituals. We, unable to truly penetrate fundamental cultural boundaries, will always be looking through a window, whereas the youth can return to their home, as Malidoma had. His hopeful logic worked that if there is an apparent interest by westerners into the initiation practices of his tribe, than the youth of his tribe will reconsider abandoning their traditions for what seems to be a civilized existence.

The group of thirty men were seated in benches, chairs and on the floor, while Malidoma presided with shoes off lounging on a set of stairs above us. Next to him throughout the workshop was Steven Kessler, (who is planning to go with Malidoma to Bukina Faso meet the "Gatekeeper" and undergo initiation there) a psychotherapist who helped to coordinate the workshop.

Malidoma said there is no literal translation for initiation in his culture other than "apprenticeship with knowledge". In order that we grasp an understanding of how initiation as a rite of passage works in his culture, he had to introduce the structure of knowledge upon which it is based, which is what we spent Friday evening and much of Saturday discussing.

Initially, he contrasted received knowledge with autonomous knowledge. (i.e. knowledge received as in a classroom creates a dependant relationship

between teacher and student, while autonomous knowledge is revealed from an individual's silent relationship with nature). Physicality and visibility were seen as the world of decay and were mutilations and distortion of Essence which is purely invisible. The process of revealing knowledge was seen as orienting ones perspective from the internal outwards. He explained that in his traditional system of spiritual heirarchy, minerals and vegetable kingdoms were of the higher intellegence, for it was they who knew the language and discourse of silence. Animals were next on the chain, and lastly it was the humans. Form, language and the external were dense and invisibility and silence and internal were of the Spirit. He said initiation was the process of exposing this knowledge.

He went on to narrate a few of the experiences that he underwent:

He was commanded by the elders to sit in front of a tree in absolut silence and motionlessness for as long as it took for him to see something that was invisible to his everyday eyes. Conditioned by his catholic school, he was full of doubt and pretended to see images to get out of the ordeal. He said it took hi a day and a half in the hot sun and cold evening before the tree suddenly transformed into a veiled feminine entity, which drew toward him in an ecstatic embrace. He said he held this figure with a deep dear love, and never wated to let go until he felt the soft skin grow more and more coarse, until he found himself emberacing the trunk of a tree.

A second trial he underwent was the story of Daguran youths lining up to jump into a goat skin that the elders held, upon which they waved a wand and opened up a portal into a firey pit. He said he was falling through a shaft of a volcano, surrounded by fames and an overwhelming "silent roar". He could not move his hands until he was able to held onto something, and at that point he was pulled out by the elders. On the ground people roll around to put the fire out, some come out mutilated, some never come out.

How are we to percieve these experiences of Malidomas initiation? In his prolonged subjective involvement with that tree he became consumed by a vision. Yet what would someone observing him uninvolved with his emotional investment see? What was it that suddenly became real for Malidoma? The question subjective and objective reality in this case is difficult to determine, but an important one because in the workshop no one had such an intense experience as just described. With what eyes (Malidoma's and we as the listeners) are these visions seen?

My point is that that kind of knowledge is based on entirely different structures of attainment structures Americans are unfamiliar with and thus cannot access in a weekend workshop. The reality of the experience for Malidoma need not be assessed with the structures of knowledge that are used to understand reading a paper. The question is does he who experiences visions of

metamorphosis and merging differentiate that from a dream like reality or an objective one? Gananath Obeyesekere writes on this matter :

"the dream experience is a real spiritual one, an actual adventure taking place on a different plane, above the mundane. He can therefore narrate the experience as if it had naturally occurred, like an everyday experience. From our point of view, not his, he has constructed a set of images consonant with his cultural symbol and meaning system. His is a myth dream" (1981)

The extraordinary tales told by Malidoma of his initiation experiences set me up for expectations of the ritual that we would practice this weekend. he encouraged us that to really experience these rites we must abandon completely our skeptical and critical natures. I was wondering what could possibly happen that I would have to abandon my objectivity; was he going to open a portal in a goat skin into which we were supposed to jump through and find ourselves falling through a volcanic shaft into a firey pit ?

The first exercise that the group conducted that Saturday was to numerologically define our position on the Dagura medicine wheel. We were to plot out names and birthday on a chart which corresponded the letter "A" to number "1", and "Z" to number "26", a very simple system. Each of us had a unique set of numbers in ratio to Earth, Fire, Water, Minerals, and Nature which occupied the four directions and the center upon the medicine wheel. Each element had an associated trial in the ritual process which composed the totality of the initiation experience. Each person had certain strengths and deficiencies in the ration of their numbers, and we were to identify with the elements with which we had the strongest ratios. I was Earth. The group was divided so that the four directions and the center of the room held the design of the medicine wheel.

We were first asked to feel what it was like to resonate with this group. Because majority of the people were involved with psychology the groups conversation had the tone of a group therapy session. ("I feel... , because...") I remember one therapist commenting on his experience with systems, and how this fit into his experience with the medicine wheel. He was able to align it with his astrology chart, and where he lay upon the enneagram, a system of personality types in popular psychology. I observant at how he could simultaneously contrive and integrate networks of meaning into his personal chart. What it felt like to be "earth" had to intersect into systems of meaning already established.

At first I was curious as to how was this numerology, using a Roman alphabet and numerals were supposed to work for the traditional Daguran system of elements within a medicine wheel? The next day we were explained that we needed to suspend our critical side for the while and work with this seemingly irrational system. Malidoma said it was the medicine wheel dealt with a mystery beyond logic and we need to accept the strangeness at what may appear arbitrary.

Encouraging an attitude of relaxation, where rules and judgements could be suspended.

Malidoma pointed out that the weakness of the medicine wheel is not that it is based on mathematics and numbers but that it is the symbolic shrinking of the invisible into a contrived system. The symbol necessarily distorts the signified because of its very materiality. Symbols are communicative though, in that they are the medium through which we may be able to understand the abstract and the invisible. Naked meaning can overwhelm the mind, he said, and the wheel offers a guide with which we can channel and exchange the energies of group.

This ritual ended the first day of the workshop, and I was interested in how the group began and closed their sessions with the invocation of spirit familiars. Invoked were various totem animals, spirits of deceased friends, male relatives as well as few obscure gods. At the closing circle we all held hands and maintained silence. When someone suggested we do a chant, one guy suggested the Tibetan Buddhist mantra "OM MANI PADME HUM". With all the men in the group we certainly had a deep resounding vibration, but I could not help but observe that here was another symbol that we have appropriated from another culture, and use for our ritual purposes; still, as to the meaning of the symbols themselves, we have little or no understanding. How does a mantra which is the core teaching of a religion thousands of years old fit into the closing ceremony of an initiation workshop in Berkely given by an African medicine man?

### **mentor**

On the second day we used the medicine wheel to have a mentor ritual. The intention was to tend to the need argued by some that the American male suffers from the absence of a person who introduces the young person to society and the world outside the family. In this context we chose people from the groups whose elements in which our ratios were the lowest, attempt to have a conversation concerning the element the mentor represented. My guy was fire.

We were to visually fixate, from our designated positions as elements, upon the face of a man, whom we would like to be our mentor. The next step, and I think the process was being created as we went along, was for everyone to follow their chosen mentor. With each person being a mentee following a mentor, we had a little dance going where the crowd of thirty was mixing all around in a circle until we came to a sudden stop. Everyone pointed to the person they followed, and of course some had many fingers directed at them while some had none.

Fire in the Dagura tradition means clarity, lucidity, and illumination, in contrast to other references like, purification or consuming passion. As we spoke to each other I began to see how in our conversation, so many of the symbolic representations of fire began to interweave with one another, to the point where I could not see how the symbol of fire could be contained within any one traditional

meaning. The Daguran reference probably had the most unfamiliar association for us, though because we were instructed in its meanings we could integrate that into our conversation as well. It was as if the symbol of fire was hanging above our heads and we were pulling all our associations together from our personal experience and cultural learning. Our conversation revolved around fire as being an element of vision, lucidity, clarity. He told me to see through borders, through limits. He said that one must see through objects as well as seeing outwards from their center. I was told to "see through the surface of objects into their Constellations of geometric forms, and organic patterns which we can hold onto if we are to carry visions across a threshold into manifest reality as creative gestures"

If symbols were working out of context, we adapted them to our understandings. Fire was not Daguran fire anymore though it was within the Daguran medicine wheel, that we could find meaning in the symbol. I thought it was interesting that in this exercise, each of us were acting as repositories of knowledge of our respective elements, and that in this role, we were all potential students and teachers. Though the element, and its meaning would differ with each persons interpretation. While all of the people in the workshop were seekers of an initiation experience, in this exercise acted as mentors, sources of wisdom for each other.

The next ritual was an attempt to silently communicate with nature by means of our token stones. People were to choose from the basket of stones until one man in an instinctive outburst scattered them all over the floor. We were asked to focus on the stone by silently listening to it for a half an hour. The room was darkened with the only light coming from the illuminated stained glass eye.

As people wandered their own ways, at this time I lay down on the carpet and placed the stone on my forehead trying to meditate on its message. In my sleep deprived state, images passed through my mind of eyes, hands, and the sound of my name, amid the occasional shuffle and door slamming. The half an hour seemed to go by quickly. The director, Steven Kessler, started to chant softly "AWAY away AWAY away, Ela, Ela ,Ela". Men began to circumambulate the room, while others remained sitting.

One man, a drummer, fell to the floor and began weeping and laughing. There seemed to be a general concern for this man, and Malidoma came over, held his head. At this time he began to convulse as if he were having a seizure, shaking violently. Perhaps this was a trance experience of some kind, though I had the feeling that it had to do with deep emotional issues. Perhaps he had found some nugget of primal grief.

The group convened in a circle before we left for lunch, and the director asked everyone to maintain some sense of the mood we had created while in the city hustle of Berkley streets and Telegraph avenue. I was eager to talk with the Steve Caton the anthropology professor from U.C.S.C. who accompanied me. I had

the feeling of not wanting to identify with the sentimentality of the group. I was wanting to make objective observations, because I felt that a deep subjective involvement with the group was too sensitive and vulnerable .

Outside, Steve and I encountered a few men from the group who had missed the last ritual, because they were tired of all the talking that we were doing and not enough action. They were dissapointed to hear that they had missed the stone ritual, but did not return after lunch. What was it about the fact that we weren't "doing" enough that caused them to leave the workshop? I will address this question under the section "Materialization of the Primal"

After lunch some people wanted to share about their experience with the stone consciousness. Some of the reactions were words like "whole", "still", water, "I am cool, still, soothed by water, help me find majic in you". One guy drew a picture of men holding hands in a ring of concentric circles, and showed it to the group in a silent presentation, one man saw his two rocks as testes or ovaries. I had a picture of a hand with an eye. The reactions that the men shared seemed to me to be personal projections, rather than any particular message coming from the stone itself.

The group finalized the weekend by gathering together for a standing circle for the last ritual of the day. I found this one most meaningful, for it integrated the teachings of the weekend and brought the group together in individual contact with each other member. If we are playing by Van Genneps model of rites of passage the stone rite is the period of seperation, while this last one has the element of incorporation within the group.

Each representative element group was called upon one at a time to go within the circle. With warm sincerity each person was to endow each other person in the group with the essence of the element they themselves embodied. As a representative of Earth, I went to each man and held their hands in mine, looked straight in their eyes, and said in a soft, strong and determined voice, "may you be nourished, empowered, fulfilled" Others came to me with their gifts, (fire being associated with dreams and visions, nature with majic, minerals with resourcefulness, and water with community) and I accepted these immaterial empowerments. I think the experience of direct connection with every other individual brought the workshop to a proper sense of completion. It united individual and the community in dynamic involvement, for each person had something to give to the group, and many things to receive.

The division of the group among elements within a medicine wheel, allowed the individuals within the group to function as separate but indivisible parts within an integrated system, even if it was a complex system beyond our understanding. The interrelationship of the elements within the wheel was compared to the way in which organs work together within a body. It is the responsibility for each individual to perform his own function, each an essential part of an integrated whole. Malidoma explained that the community depends on the individual for

wholeness, yet the individual cannot depend on the community to provide that for themselves. The individual must find the balance of their elements within their relationship with nature, in their quest for autonomous knowledge.

It is unlikely that this group of men will ever meet again. What united this group of men is that they were all curious as to what initiation would mean in their lives. Rather than feeling as if we were initiated into the Dagura tribe, if we were initiated into any community, it was a temporary collection of American men all questing for the personal experience of belonging and confirmation.

### **Fascination with the primal**

The men in this workshop were not particularly interested in Daguran culture in particular, but the rite of initiation itself, and for that nearly any traditional culture may have sufficed. The cultures we in the west consider "primal" or "tribal" or "traditional" have for certain people have a kind of alluring power or mystery about them. Movies like "Dances with Wolves", or books like South African novelist J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting For the Barbarians* play with the theme of westerners crossing cultural boundaries into the world of the native. Perhaps the attraction these cultures have is that they are seen to live a more meaningful or spiritual life closer to nature than our ways of secular science and technology. Perhaps they see traditional cultures having worldviews that place the individual in stronger connection with their community. Perhaps it is the rootedness traditional people have with the past and their ancestors, a stability that attracts the modern man.

Or in the case of seekers of initiation, I think affective power of ritual and ceremony in their religious life and especially in rites of passage captures their fascination. I have observed myself having certain kind of envy for the people in tribal cultures at the intensity of subjective involvement that one hears about within traditional rites of passage. Myself and others I know would like to participate in a rite powerful enough to affect an all encompassing and consumming yet transformative revolution of known reality. Whereas this altered state of reality may sound disorienting, we search for this as a means of reorientation. The Kaluli people transform into birds, the Huichol into their ancestors, Australian aboriginals into their totem; why does this kind of ritual magic not "work" for us?

### **Materialism and Initiation**

The situation in which the "...Domain of religion" if not perhaps ritual, has "contracted", becomes a matter of individual choice rather than universal corporate ascription, and where with religious pluralism has become a veritable supermarket of religious wares" (Turner 1977), is upon us. Americans as consumers are constantly faced with multiple representations of realities. At our disposal at this time of the postmodern explosion, is an abundance of cultural artifacts, symbolic tokens representing cultures from around the world. Ethnic gift shops intersections of material culture from around the world as they abound with African masks,



ceramic Aztec calendars, Balinese wood carvings, etc. It is little wonder then that when Americans are curious of the cognitive and spiritual systems that underly the forms which we find so asthetic, that these more subtle and complex areas of understanding elude us.

We are collectors of symbols out of context, without systems in which they were inspired and understood. The meanings we invest in them are reflections of our own structures of understanding. The 'optionality' of their presence in our lives precludes that we know less of their context and thus less of their places in the symbolic systems in which they might operate. But our understanding of these artifacts as representations of 'primal culture', being brought into our homes is superficial as long as they are unconnected with inspiration. We can safely assume that the meaning these symbols held for the people who inspired them was more central to their worldview than their role as asthetic decoration in America.

In this postmodern society, being exposed to samples of so many different cultural realities, we are deficient in an all encompassing mythology that is revealed as in many cases of initiation for societies which have maintained their traditions for centuries. There is a vacuum of absolute meaning and a need to fill it. Thus we are flooded with an abundance of stories, myths and symbols which have an alluring appeal of the exotic and the "primal". Yet if they are all borrowed and out of their context, and there is no cohesion, they make little sense in our lives. Their meanings are peripheral to our daily lives.

A conflict of values that were being played out between the men in America and the men in the tribal societies. American men caught in a material worlds are in a paradoxical search for fulfillment, for they are trying to engage with a consciousness that is grounded within a system alien to their worldview. They are dissapointed to find that the spirit still lodged in the material when we are unable to activate symbolic systems like the Daguran initiation workshop. But what may prevent this understanding is the assumption that much of our needs for existence are framed as material items, and thus commodified.

I found it interesting that before the weekend was over about five or six people had left. I spoke with one group and they had felt that there was too much talking and not enough "doing". I assume what they meant by "doing" was ritual excercises. They had a definite picture of what that experience was going to be for them, and when it semed that the lecture was dragging on, they grew impatient and left. The expectation of a "peak experience" may have been in their minds and it did not happen, so they left.

Such attitudes characterize the way in which Americans see many experiences, but a few things about the context contribute to its lukewarm sentiment. This was a "men's weekend", a time when men could be away from their work and their wives; a relatively small part of their lives, yet a large chunk of their free time. Another thing was the fact that we had to pay one hundred and fifty dollars for professionals to conduct the ceremony. How does the fact that the weekend is framed as a commodity affect the experience of the men? "Money

destroys human roots wherever it is able to penetrate, by turning the desire to gain into the sole motive" (Weil, 1952). Perhaps the factor that the weekend was a workshop that need to be "purchased" as well as the unfamiliar people, environment, and symbolic systems contributed to the fact that the initiation experience was less than revolutionary

Symbols are empty of any real value unless they work as tools that provide meaning, which may require extreme imaginative effort, for "...there is no culture at all unless it is reconstructed carefully and painstakingly in the living brains of each new generation". (Reddy, 1979) The fact that symbols can be "filled" with meaning points to the ability of the American to appropriate and create symbolic systems by investing the traces of other culture's symbols, which are so available, with our own needs for meaning. The introduction of foreign rites and symbols to Americans means they are not necessarily misunderstood, but are reinterpreted. Espousing vanishing tradition he doesn't have, the seeker of initiation is propelled to find his own keys to experiencing a meaningful re-evolution in his life.

### **American Individualism**

If there is an American mythology, the strongest cultural symbols are based on individualism. The solitary bald eagle, the nuclear family, The Declaration of Independance, Manifest Destiny; all these symbols and institutions proclaim personal liberty.

These symbols stress unconventionality, "doing it on one's own", pride, independance, adventure, personal fortune. The nuclear family as well is based on a separation of the young individual breaking away from their family and community, and from an established base of reference, which would link the individual to their heritage. The ethic of capitalism certainly contributes to the encouragement of the individual to seek and discover ones own fortune or destiny.

In cultures with a established base of tradition, the youth may face initiation as an inevitable experience of growing up, with only one way of doing it, a strict, sober and sacred way; and this way being intrinsically connected with familiar cultural assumptions, beliefs, and everyday language. They are being introduced to the roots, the core worldview (fundamental assumptions of reality), of their culture. Another aspect initiation is that it is an experience to be elusively sought out, as in the Native American "Vision Quest" where the individual sojourns away from the community to find personal connection with nature. It is this aspect of initiation, being a personal, individual quest for autonomy, that I think applies to more to my second case study than to the first. Here the individual feels an approaching urge and foreknowledge of the what initiation may be, and in the absence of a culturally provided rite of passage, he designs and undegoes his own.

## **Personal Account**

### **How it came to be**

I am now shifting narratives to first person. My second case study is actually the documentation of my personal account of how initiation became an important theme in my life during the time surrounding my twenty-first birthday. In writing my senior thesis on initiation rites in America, I have been able to academically research the themes on initiation as well as use the applied knowledge of ritual studies for my own needs. Strange as it may seem, I have taken this chance to integrate my school life and personal life, in this experiment, where I changed my name, got a tattoo, and held a ceremony on my birthday last October 21 1991. As far as his applies to culture, it is not symptomatic as far as I know of any social trends, though I make a case that the unique aspects of individualism in this case may relate to the American values of independance

One reason I became a student of anthropology was because it offered an approach to understanding the dynamics of ritual symbolism, an area of cultural study which fascinates me greatly. I am most interested in how symbolic action can bring about the transformation of consciousness. So, it is not surprising that at a time in my life when I am graduating college, and facing the challenges of the world as an independant individual, that I find meaning in the rite of initiation as a means toward which I may facilitate my own growth process.

### **playing subject and object**

I as the anthropologist play the role of informant and observer. The reader may wonder if my observations are subject to criticism because they are impartial. I assert that in being the subject of such a study, my personal insights and reflections are valid in themselves, though for the purposes of the thesis they are valid to the degree I can articulate them empiracly. My personal involvement strengthens my analysis of the study, because I understand more than anyone the context, which in this case involves not only the rite itself, but the process which led up to it, as well as the aftermath. The challenge is for me to be able to properly categorize the totality of my initiation experience. The paradoxical role of subject and object in this case has been difficult because I have had to analyze what for me was a deeply personal experience.

It has been a struggle to discriminate what to preserve for the purposes of secrecy and what to expose in this documentary. As of late, I have been explaining my case in the third person, which in one sense lends for an objective perspective, and on the other hand disassociates me from my own involvement in the rite. Here, I own my actions by explaining them in first person because I feel that the literary 'trick' of writing in third person is deceptive and unnecessary. Though I feel there as been a shift in my personality, it is difficult for me to subjectively determine what has changed besides going by a new name and having a tattoo.

### **Logic of appropriation**

Symbolic form may *embody* the cultural meanings of the original makers (as Geertz might say), though out of their initial context, symbols may serve as other cultures' *vehicles*, depending on the context of the human "meaning makers" around them. Symbols can work as vessels of meaning which can be filled and emptied. In my case I have created a personal mythology with borrowed symbols from Javanese, Tibetan, NorthWest Coast and Mesoamerican sources, though I am assuming the meanings they hold in my symbolic system have little bearing on what each meant in its original context. While the original meanings of the symbols themselves are of great interest to me, my primary interest is in their meaning as they relate to each other in the system of my own design.

While this 'logic of appropriation' has given me the freedom to interpret nearly anything I want into having bearing on this episode in my life, it also has questionable side effects. Am I disrespecting the cultures from whom I borrow their sacred symbols by reinterpreting them into my own system of meaning? All the 'coincidental' happenings that surrounded the time of my birthday were taken as portentous signs and omens and in reflection, necessary aspects of my initiation. The formation of what I am calling an initiation rite has been entirely an personally improvised and innovated; thus it hangs together loosely as a symbolic system, for it is less defined than it is interpreted.

### **Sources of inspiration**

Information on initiation has come from academic studies of people such as Van Gennep, Victor Turner, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Henderson. Literary inspiration, passages from which were used in the ritual, has come from more poetic authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Herman Hesse and Rudyard Kipling. Some elements such as the breaking of the stick and the concluding gestures of the group were inspired from images of my dreams.

It was the book *Iron John* by Robert Bly which brought to my attention the absence of initiation rites in American Society. Without this definitive social event he says the American male struggles with the ambivalence of not knowing whether he is a man or a boy. The problem being that we are and remain ignorant of what it means to be a man in society like ours creates problematic relationships with our fathers, mothers, wives and children. It did not seem to me that any group was going to provide this experience for me, thus I undertook the responsibility myself and in doing so held a self-initiation.

These are matters which take time and experience to genuinely evaluate however. The rite being less than six months in the past from the time of this writing, I am still discovering the implications of what the experience meant to me. I can honestly say that the changes in my identity were not immediate, (perhaps because there is not a community who would immediately recognize the rite as signifying a shift in social roles).

My case stands as one example of an American individual in the attempt to re-create the experience of initiation for himself. I do not in any way represent the majority of Americans who are currently seeking to fulfill that quest. Much of the popularity of men's groups is reflective of the need for American males to create a brotherhood of men, trying to establish a strong ground for evaluating what manhood means to them. There are groups of men who are also designing initiation rites, sometimes performed in groups of over one thousand men. My case study has less to do with such groups, than does with the investigation of what one person does to create the initiation experience for himself, with the use of more personal symbols.

### **emergent symbols**

The psychiatrist Joseph Henderson in his book *Thresholds of Initiation* observes how initiation emerges as a theme in the dream life of his patients. Specific personal symbols he says, are keys in the form of images with which the patient may unlock potential ways to facilitate mental health. He says Initiation is an archetype emergent in human development. This accounts for the nearly universal presence of initiation. He takes a cross cultural look at mythologies which involve initiation themes and correlates that to the dream symbology of the patients in order to draw reference to the symbolism.

This psychology implies that initiation is an inherently human experience which exists within the unconscious and emerges at specific needed life event, such as coming into manhood. I believe that the theme of initiation consciously and unconsciously became a pressing need for me personally to explore and express by use of ritual. An observation noted by Eliade concerning initiation and the Modern Man supports this basis of belief; "In the Western world, initiation in the traditional and strict sense of the term has disappeared long ago. But initiatory symbols and scenarios survive on an unconscious level, especially in dreams and in imaginary universes" (Eliade, 1969). In my case both of these elements were involved and used to design a "self- initiation".

### **The story begins**

The mythological themes of "crossing of the threshold" has preoccupied me for years. The theme of initiation, however, became important for me in the beginning of Summer 1991. I was seeing myself soon to be crossing a 'threshold', but not knowing exactly how or by what means I was to make this shift happen, turning from boy to man. Researching contemporary men's issues seemed to me very timely, because I was asking myself just what were the roles and responsibilities of a man if I was in a position of turning twenty one and soon to be graduating from college.

At this time, I was in a position of vulnerability, having returned from school to home and was having personal and relationship difficulties. Some of my problems were rooted in the inability to trust my own authority and decisions. I was in a slump of my confidence and power. The Iron John book had me

questioning my relationship with my father, I was attempting to know him as another man, though I had the book encouraged me to break away from him as a dependant child. I was looking for a way to come more into my own power and autonomy as a man.

### **Would you be consumed?**

I initially became strongly attracted to symbols which represented purification through immolation. Many times I went to the exhibition of Tibetan thanka paintings at Golden Gate Park, among the spectacular collection of Buddhist paintings. I felt most gravitated towards the ones which were the "protector" dieties. These were dark paintings, often depicting horrible visions of monstrous demons commanding a storm of human pain misery and suffering in some underworld domain. There were also the images of a more refined diety who wielded a sword of discriminating intelligence above his head. Sometimes I would spend hours looking at these images, feeling strongly attracted to their commanding presence.

What was the power of these images and what have they to do with initiation? In many traditions the initiate is symbolically devoured and regurgitated by a totem animal of the community, this being an act of surrender, death and rebirth by the forces of a sacred power greater than oneself. I was attracted to these paintings because I knew their threatening gestures were actually gestures of purification, of consummation, and sacrifice of ignorant self to the enlightened self. These horrific visions were to me beautiful in their strength and power, and they seemed to be aligned with a source of wisdom within myself that I was afraid of, yet needed to trust. I wanted to be consumed, and I wanted to rid myself of all my ambivalence and doubt that I felt I was unnecessarily carrying.

### **Council of the elders**

Over one weekend during the the summer I had a three interactions with people whom I considered "The council of the Elders". My way of understanding the encounters, is to interpret them as synchronistic events, and like my more important dreams, and rituals they are framed mythologically.

Initially, I met Shepard Bliss, a coordinator of men's workshops. I felt he was the first of the "council" who were to affirm my quest for initiation. The second elder was paralyzed Rabbi, who I knew from my childhood as a singing and dancing kind of guy, who with his twin brother rabbi married my father and step-mother. This man could not speak but did recognize me, and he just held my head and locked me into his gaze. Something about his eyes seemed piercingly sharp and clear, and it seemed he was trying to communicate to me a silent word.

The next day I met a man named Carl Little Crow, an African Cherokee mixblood in Golden Gate Park, who had a way of speaking that was hushed and subtle, poetic yet seemingly profound. He told me he had worked in a psychiatric hospital for ten years, and upon reflection, I wonder now if he was perhaps a patient rather than a doctor. He had a terrific strong presence however and, I saw

our meeting being a mythological encounter of questions and answers. When I asked him about the meaning of initiation, he said something like "when extrinsic and the intrinsic meet together in fusion with ones DNA, and this will transmit the words of our ancestors. By listening to these voices ones personal sphere of action shall radiate from that source of autonomy." I was filled with awe at these words, though I don't necessarily understand them, I felt they helped me a great deal in knowing that this encounter was an important transmission of knowledge. Having kept his words in the back of my head going through the motions in creating my mythology, in regards to the symbolism and meaning of my tattoo his words seem prophetic. He also advised me to read Rudyard Kipling's "IF"; a poem on entering manhood.

### **The Fall**

This was late summer and I was preparing to leave for school soon, when I discovered some very emotionally distressing news I need not explain for the purposes of personal confidentiality. The day before leaving, I had an extremely painful accident which was physically representative of the emotions I was feeling. Earlier in the summer I had tripped and ripped a tendon in my ankle, and at this time I fell again and re-tore the wound. The first time I passed out from the pain I awoke to faint glimpse of a colorful bird figure. It was a vision that would have traces in the later development of the key mythological symbol I chose for my tattoo. It was an unbearable pain and I was incapable of doing anything that involved physically moving around. The next day I was delivered to my new home in Santa Cruz by my step-father and I was in an entirely new matrix, wounded and vulnerable, without a secure environment. I saw this symbolically as my Achilles's heel, my most vulnerable place that was wounded

### **The wounded healer in the walls of a new matrix**

The next step is very important in understanding the personal symbology surrounding my initiation ceremony. With all the things that I decorate my room; collections of Indonesian batiks, shadow puppets and masks, ethnic tapestries, weavings and embroideries, flags, personal paintings, Tibetan thanka prints, I unconsciously arranged them in such a way that I discovered a continuity within the images that composed the tale of an epic journey.

This depiction of the epic journey of my Javanese shadow puppet covered three walls and half the ceiling of my new room. I need not go into in-depth details of what the progression of images signifies to me for that would be too lengthy and unnecessary without the images themselves. Someday I would like to compose the story in verse form. As for now, I can briefly say that it involved a series of descents into a stream leading into the mountain of my existential personal world. Departure from this mortal realm precludes a journey involving a meeting with a teacher, receiving of a quest, a journey into the fiery underworld, undergoing shamanic initiation of immolation, receiving elixirs of transformation, and eventual metamorphoses of elephant nature to bird nature (material to etherial).

One large section of a wall has these cloth fabric has these depictions: 1) A purple batik sarong represents the initial ascension to angel filled heavens. 2)The journey leads through the dense flock of angels to reveal an open crater at the center of which is an image miles wide (represented by a Mexican weaving with a bird with two heads and a spiral belly), built in mounds, an image similar in form to images found the Nazca desert in Peru. This image to me symbolizes a vanished primordial community of the ancestors of the bird realm, which could intuitively communicate among themselves and be not individually possessive with the fruits of their actions. It was this image, along with the central design from the last civilization that were superimposed upon each other to make the design for my tattoo. It was these symbolic communities into which I initiated myself.

The paintings that surround this image depict subsequent epochs of civilizations that came after this one (Appolinian and Orphean). The Orphean, civilization of which I just spoke represents the forces of beauty and transformation, and acts as a transition point for the next wall. The last wall is entirely covered by a collage centered around a mandala of my own design. Surrounding it are Tibetan Buddhist paintings and designs with abstract energy fields and resonating vortexes, generative circuits and powerful centers.

In terms of seeing the way these symbols work together for me I will borrow a term, *femmage*, used by Miram Schapiro to describe the "process of collecting and creatively assembling disparate elements into a functional, integrated, whole piece."(Kay Turner 1982). What is interesting is that all disparate elements were originally functioning as symbols invested with much meaning inside their own cultures, mainly Tibetan, Mexican and Indonesian. Yet they had been in my possession for years as, regarded as aesthetic (and somewhat mysterious) objects. Yes they seemed to be imbued with some mystical quality which I did not understand, though I did not feel I had any personal connection with them. It was not until all the objects had been placed on the wall, with my only compositional attention being given to grounding the corners and bringing out the centers of my room, that I began to realize that I had created a story in images.

It was then up to my imagination to make the connections between images and elaborate the "epic". I was able to draw upon my mythological knowledge from various Greek, Hindu, Tibetan, Dantean, NW Coast Indian, legends, lore and mythology to embellish the fantasy I was in the process of creating. Certain images seemed to hold new meaning for me because they were surrounded by other meaningful images which gave them strength and support, as if they all occupied a seat within a realm of the wall.

### **Commitment to a key symbol**

The most significant image pertaining to this thesis is the one of the Mexican bird because I thought that this connection with the primordial past, the "sacred history of the world and humanity" , (Eliade), was necessary for a proper initiation.



I knew however that my "messages" were nothing more than my projection of meaning upon these images. Which is why for the purposes of my initiation I had to commit myself to that particular image of the Mexican bird by having it tattooed on my back.

I associate the tattoo with many facets of deep symbolism:

1)The image is of a Eagle, which to me means to me Ascension, freedom, non-attachment, solitude, sovereignty and independence; the spiral belly connotes snake, which to me means Earth, Nature, the Creative Womb. Thus in the image heaven and Earth are united. This image is encircled by a mandala ring of eight unique shapes symbolizing the "Sacred Ground", a designated protected space, that Eliade has observed common in initiation rites. That all the shapes in the mandala ring are proportionally equal though not identical has personal significance; harmony and transformation.

2)The painful ordeal of having a tattoo, is an act of bloodletting, a wound which is a common theme among many initiation rituals. (See Bruno Bettelheim's Symbolic Wounds)

3)The design acts as a power center upon my body, a threshold or symbolic orifice which acts as a receiving and transmitting channel of "energy". It is actually upon a point on the center of my spine which is called "The Door of Life" according to a Taoist system of Chi energy circulation I practice in meditation. At the same time it serves me as a shield, a crest or a "coat of arms", which compliments the image's function as a not only as an open gateway, but one that can be closed at will.

4) The tattoo is a bold statement that I have taken conscious choice over my actions, I am held responsible for them and that this decision will remain with me, permanently, for the rest of my life. With this I contemplated the fact that my parents, who may or may not approve of what I did, are still my parents, but I no longer am their child.

5) The image is on my back, a place on my body I cannot see with my own eyes. I see the tattoo only in reflection; in the mirror or through other people's eyes.

### **The birth day**

On the day of my twenty-first birthday, I had woken up before the dawn because I wanted to see the butterflies awaken at Natural Bridges. I rode down there on my bicycle and waited until a cluster flew from the branch. Then I took a dive upon the ocean and dried myself off with the cloth bearing the image of the Mexican bird. I rode to my friend's place, where in the back he does tattoos inside a large domed tent. For four hours he inscribed the symbol upon me. I was very dazed after the tattoo, and if ever there was a state of being in the "liminal" period, a period of undefined transitoriness, it was then. I saw myself in some ways as an insubstantial, transparent shadow of a human being. I had to speak softly. I had no hunger, but for some reason I bought half a dozen yams; perhaps I needed their solidity and groundedness.

I went to my anthropology class that afternoon. I came back to my house, for I told my closest friends I was having a mask making party that evening. After many of my friends had gathered, drinking wine(I had just legally purchased), and eating food, I waited for the right moment. I cleared all the furniture out of one room and gathered the people around each was given a candle to hold. I asked that everyone remain silent for one half hour, in order that each person to focus their attention wholly within themselves. I sat in the center of the room upon the woven image of the eagle. I invoked and I literally felt the energy pouring into me from my head. I was in the center of a very charged space, sitting on the original weaving of the image, bare chested.

I then requested that each individual give me a word, a chant or a mantra, carefully chosen, that they will consciously project into the center of my tattoo. The key word that I gave everyone for silence was "FIG TREE". "Fig Tree" is the first line of the 6th elegy written by Ranier Maria Rilke, a poem I memorized for its invocative imagery and symbolism which could be understood as appropriate for rites of passage. In the rising sound of harmonics and rhythms, I slowly rose from the posture of the curled up fetal position, to embracing the sky with outstretched arms. There was an emotional energy that was raised by the group of which I was at the center

I screamed "FIG TREE!!" and then proceeded to recite the elegy. The last line of the poem is this: "For whenever the Hero stormed through the stations of Love, each heartbeat intended for him, lifted him up beyond it. And he stood there, turning away, at the end of all smiles, TRANSFIGURED" With that last word, over my knee I broke the stick I had found that morning (symbolizing the death of my former identity, an image taken from my dreams) and announced to everyones surprise that my name is now DEMIAN.

After this I had everyone hold hands, and I wrapped myself within the center of this chain of human beings, friends and strangers. I brought the energy back into a silent state of being, and the ritual was concluded.

### **Name change; the Book of Demian**

Now I will explain the significance attached to the fact that within the ceremony I chose to change my name. My full name is Jeremy Demian Marx. My parents agreed to use the name Jeremy not only because they liked the sound, but also because it was within the Judaic tradition from which my father descended. My mother liked the name Demian, having read the novel "Demian" by Herman Hesse when she was younger. I have always considered naming my child Demian. And at the time of my initiation I was wanting to chose symbolic actions that would serve to transform my sense of identity as well as assert the fact that I hav conscious choice an autonomy over my life and actions.

We were instructed in the power of naming in the Dagura system. Each name is like a mantra, a word that is charged with personal energy. Each time it is spoken the power is reinforced. In the Dagura culture name were divined by an

inquiry to the soul through the mother before the birth of a child. He said that a name works on a person, and a wrong name can lead one astray from the path toward their personal fulfillment. And if our names and person are incongruous, that we have the power to choose our own. "one who change their own name has greater authority over himself than another who has signed him" said Malidoma. The power to choose ones name is a statement that the one word with which we resonate more than any other, the word which is continually being reinforced as a stimulus/response reaction, is no longer something which is attributed, but something which is chosen. I have that power and it was within the ritual that I changed my name.

Now it so happens that the novel Demian by Herman Hesse depicts the growth of a young man becoming a whole human being. In Hesse's mythological style of writing, the autobiographical character, Sinclair, meets the mysterious Demian, who acts as a kind of guardian angel. The interaction between the two is a series of lessons in which knowledge is transmitted between them. It also happens that a very important and central symbol in the book is one of a large bird. A message given to Sinclair by Demian concerning the bird is this;

"The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. He who would be born must first destroy a world. That bird flies to God. That God is Abraxas."

One can imagine how with my logic of symbolic appropriation, that I saw this being intricately interwoven with my symbolism of the bird on my wall. This message seemed to speak of the death and rebirth process that is central to the initiation mythologies of many cultures. I regarded the novel as an aspect of my personal mythology which replaced the cohesive cultural mythology that seems so absent in American culture. I was able to correlate my experiences with episodes within the book, my myth on the walls, Hesse's Literature (and Rilke's poetry) was serving as a framework within which I found and created meaning.

### **Problems of recognition**

In my case of the initiation, there is no sure place for where community plays a role, as it did within traditional societies. In Van Gennep's pattern of rites of passage being composed of a period of 1) separation from the community and past identity, 2) liminality, or a state of transformation of identity, have been marked, but the issue of 3) incorporation, returning to society in a new social role, is the stage in which my case is ambiguous.

The problematic area I have encountered in this initiation process is the area of recognition and reincorporation within the community. Not everyone has read the book Demian. Very few people have been indoctrinated into the narration of the epic journey on the walls of my room. People may even label my actions as somewhat psychotic, because I seem to be creating my own reality (though I can discriminate between what is fact and imagination). The problem with my self created ceremonies of initiation and personal symbols is that while a universe of personal meaning is created for myself as an individual, the larger community and even my family was not so involved with the process.

We could also say that because of the disparity that exists between the individual in America and their lack of ties with their own heritage (or ancestors), that this is an example of an attempt on an individual to bypass their own familial heritage, (which happens to be Jewish/Lutheran, East and West European), in the replacement of a more abstract conception of a universal heritage. I, in a sense have chosen to align myself with that which represents all the ancestors, not specifically those on my family tree. In way it is an attempt to reestablish a link between myself and the past, however I have had to bypass focusing on my own familial relations in order to do so.

My father was one of a few significant others who were absent from the ritual. I wonder if that issue of the presence of these people would have had more of a effect of incorporation surrounding the initiation process. My father understandably had trouble and accepting my symbolic actions. In the article titled Self Created Ceremonies of Passage, Virginia hine observes "The restless searching of our youth for "grown up" experiences which satisfy their need to be "adult" too often result in feelings of frustration, low self-esteem, or alienation, especially if peers and parents are as confused as they" For months after the rite, he and I had been working through feelings of alienation and psychological separation, and lately we have found ways in which we can relate as man to man. Part of the difficulty arouse because he saw me as trying to create a 'personal religeon', which in a sense I am, but this does not agree with his efforts to find meaning in a more conservative attitude he is adopting towards Judaism. We have been communicating lately in new ways, though he still has trouble calling me by "Demian".

I see upon reflection that initiation serves at once to break a bond between the child and parents, but also serves to reestablish new ones. It is a time where I have recognized myself being a product of my own culture. I have had an awakening of how I am at once vulnerable to and empowered by those elements of culture I use to define myself. I have broken ou of the confines of "American culture" to embrace what seems to me a more "global culture" though the method by which I did this reflects American cultural traits by way of individualism and cultural appropriation.

The community present at my rite of passage was not exclusively male. As to why I chose not to adopt this rule of most male initiation practices which are traditionally being segregated by gender, I can only say that it is perhaps more of a reflection of my own personality that I be surrounded by friends, and that no one be excluded. Indeed one of the more powerful contributors to the mood of the evening was a woman, my friend Shannon.

### **Conscious invention of tradition**

In terms of tradition, I have invented it. It is certainly not grounded in one, nor an attempt to recreate one. "To refer to (the past) is a symbolic rather than a

natural relationship" (Handler & Linnekin 1984). The symbolic relationships which I have constructed for myself which are consciously metaphoric. The ancestors are everybody's. And coming from a culture that does not practice apotheosis of dead ancestors one may wonder why I am trying to fulfill this need. Perhaps it is an attempt to find rootedness in a culture which is so oriented toward progress.

I think being in a position which has an awareness of so many mythological and initiation traditions, the boundaries can be blurred between them and they become an abstract grouping of cultural entities. For me they become the global mythology. In my story a Kwakiutl picture of salmon fish urge a Javanese shadow puppet to venture down a Hmong tribe's embroidered underground stream.

My network of symbols has been a selective process of my personal choosing rather than a given by the hands of the elders. Being aware that initiation involves experiencing going to the deepest core of ones being in a process of death and rebirth, for which the symbols are peripheral, I found a key did lie in some kind of construction of a symbolic network. It was a conscious and an unconscious process. However I began to construct the network unconsciously, as a wounded person trying to create a healing space in a new environment. And in my attempts, I do feel that there has been a force alongside my investigation that has guided me through. This force may be my abstract personification of all the dreams, encounters, events of synchronicity, inspiration and despair that help to compose this episode of my life. Perhaps it is an archetype, but I will not argue over the term. It feels though that there is a capacity, a faculty or a voice that is responsible for directing these events.

My initiation, which I feel has been effective for the most part in terms of catalyzing a shift in personal identity, I have been self-reflective, in that I have designed it consciously. I have been reacting to the secular, rational American world in which we live, and embracing the signs and symbols of various cultures which appear to me to be predominately, instinctual/intuitive and spiritual. In my attempt to understand the symbols around me I have seen them on a common ground of "other", though finding an important significance for them in my "self". In this way I have perceived "self" as a crossroads for a global consciousness; though it is a context wholly defined within the understanding of my personal world.

## **Conclusion**

In this document I have tried to show the importance of context in initiation rite and how it defines the effectiveness of the ritual to the individual. Symbols and rites can be imported and borrowed, though as long as they are removed from having meaningful associations for the individual, they will be at most 'luke warm' tools for personal transformation. While Americans will continue searching for effective rites, I believe others like myself will find meaning in personal mythologies. As for whether culture evolve to incorporate those personal

mythologies into a system which can be communicated openly and be understood, I cannot say; though I do believe communication is possible among those who have shared concepts .

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