

The Path of Initiation

Finding meaning and purpose in the face of struggle

There are circumstances in our lives that clearly mark an initiation, a crossing of a threshold into a new territory or phase of life. Initiatory experiences involve intense change leading to a deeper understanding of self. A clear example of this is the first time we leave home as a young adult. The shift from living in the comfort and protection of our parents' home, to fending for ourselves and learning to navigate school, jobs, and family leads to new skills, growth and understanding our place in the world. This passage into young adulthood is often celebrated as a graduation party where friends and relatives gather and honor this accomplishment, giving us gifts to support the journey.

However, life holds more than one initiation for us, and most are not so clearly marked and defined. They certainly are not as well supported. These events often go unseen and unrecognized by everyone, including the initiate themselves. Our life may feel like it's getting turned upside down by a series of events that bring unexpected change or places boulders on our path forcing us to choose a different direction. These events can leave us feeling puzzled, bewildered, frightened, lonely, distraught, and at times, completely out of control. Perhaps it isn't a clear event that has brought us to our knees, but a continual struggle that leaves us exhausted, depressed and sometimes doubting that change will ever occur.

It is at these times where our soul is at the helm steering our life in a direction that will bring us to a new place, if we are willing to let go and surrender. The events that lead to this crumbling of our life is our soul's way of pushing us through the initiation, across the threshold where new beginnings, new knowledge, and perhaps new abilities await. It brings us closer to our divine purpose and to connecting with a mission that is our personal gift to the world.

There are three basic elements of initiation: separation, ordeal, and homecoming. Many tribal communities would initiate their youth by separating them from the tribe and sending them off into the wilderness alone. They would then have to fend for themselves, perhaps find their own food and water to survive. After successfully surviving this experience, they would be welcomed back into their communities and honored for their completion of their initiation.

Today, we don't have such clearly defined and orchestrated experiences other than events such as leaving home, giving birth or getting married. As we get older, our initiations are often less tangible. Our separation may not be a physical event, but an emotional or spiritual separation. As we enter into despair and grief, we become separate from experiencing the goodness of life and the knowing that we are supported and connected to a source larger than ourselves. It is a painful separation. Much like the tribal youth sent to survive in the wilderness, we work hard at surviving with such pain, desperately looking for ways to heal and to bring about the much desired change.

What is it that prevents us from having a successful initiation? Well, first of all, how many of us are taught about initiations in our lives? Most of us have not been raised in a culture that recognizes our struggles as initiations and opportunities for growth. They are not framed for us. We can become lost, sometimes spending years with no guide or road map on how to traverse this landscape. For some of us we may enter into co-dependent relationships with others or with substances to help ease the pain. However, this is not sustainable and the perceived sustenance we may gain is not lasting, life changing, nor does it address the needs of the soul. Not having any frame of reference or understanding of initiations is a big reason why they can be so difficult and easily aborted. We often will direct our discomfort to the blaming of others, never truly descending into our pain and embracing the darkness where transformation begins. Framing our situation as a soul's passage brings our struggle out of a place of the victim and into an act of power. We begin to

recognize the elements of a quest and a journey that will bring us to a greater understanding of ourself, transform our life and heal the wounded heart. It summons our inner warrior where courage is needed.

The other reason is fear. I've been through many initiations and fear has always been present. The fear of facing our own mortality is an essential core element of initiation. We have spent many years building our own personal structure based on our beliefs of who we think we are in the world. In the process of initiation, our structure begins to collapse. Our very core of who we think we are is being threatened and we can feel incredibly vulnerable. To understand the natural process of death and rebirth is very helpful. As with the seasons, death is followed by rebirth bringing new growth, possibilities and transformation. As many times as I've gone through an initiation and know exactly what they look and feel like and the universal law that presides over them, I still can be terrified as I step over the threshold. The death can feel very real. Whether it's letting go of a loved one, a job or a perception, it can feel frightening and the only thing waiting on the other side is the unknown.

However, with the help of someone guiding us along the way, comfort can be found even within the chaos. A good friend or mentor can help us to traverse our inner landscape. It is essential that our "guide" has personally gone through a similar experience and understands the task at hand. The experienced mentor and witness will understand the struggle, the pain and ultimately the wisdom gained from such a journey. They will be able to provide us with the frame and through personal stories and myths, provide us with inspiration and courage. They become the vital witness to our journey and offer us a homecoming, the recognition and honoring that is food for our soul after such a journey.

Upon completion of our initiation, we will once again be aligned with the goodness of life and feel the connection to the universe and an intelligence much bigger than ourselves. We will see the beauty in all things and be able to

create our lives from a more authentic place with our new found wisdom and sense of self as our foundation. We will be able to look back at our journey and see the meaning and purpose. Where there was darkness, the clouds will part and the sun will shine. We will experience a deeper sense of alignment with our soul and the energy to generate the lives that we desire.

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