Journey to manhood in the liminal space

It is easy to caricature men’s initiation rites as gatherings where participants howl and beat drums in the wilderness. But the Rites of Passage devised by the Franciscan Richard Rohr usually mark a turning point in the lives of the men who undertake them.

I first heard of Richard Rohr in a slightly offhand diary item in The Tablet 10 years ago. It was about how this Franciscan was coming to deliver a workshop for men in Britain but seemed to be saying that nobody here would be much interested.

I was. For some years I had been in and out of non-religious men’s groups, but was driven away by invented rituals – a bogus spirituality that felt a little dangerous. Rohr’s work looked different. Six months after that slight mention in The Tablet, I was on my way to the desert in New Mexico, stopping only to buy a drum in a Native American shop in Albuquerque.

The drum was optional, but in the next five days I was to learn its thunderous value in building a community. The only essential items I had been asked to bring were two T-shirts, one black and one white and, most importantly, “beginner’s mind” – a term borrowed from Buddhism to ensure that those who come are in a state open to what initiation brings.

But why “initiation”? Why do grown men – and many who come are over 40 – need a rite of passage? The answer lies in something other than words, and speaks to a failure in our civilised, “developed” world, described with precision by Thomas Merton. He wrote of men in Western society who are “themselves less human than their fathers were, less articulate, less sensitive, less profound, less capable of genuine concern”. And despite 2,000 years of male leadership, Churches did not address this sense of ennui.

After a lifetime of different kinds of spiritual teaching, Rohr studied societies across the globe and found common threads. In all so-called primitive societies, young men are taken off by elders to learn the ways of manhood. It usually involves some testing and an awareness of wounding (and often physical harm leaving a symbolic scar). And it always involves a celebratory welcome for men returning from initiation to take their new place in the community.

Our civilisation does actually know this in its heart. From the Arthurian legend, through Kipling’s Jungle Book and Kim, to Luke Skywalker’s training as a Jedi Knight in Star Wars, we share an appreciation of archetypal stories of initiation. But we do not do initiation well – or even try at all. The initiation rites of organised religion, such as confirmation, are pale imitations of the real thing, and carried out too young. And so we end up with a society where masculinity is not well understood, and men too easily end up on paths of violence, addiction, or the destructive lure of extreme overachievement.

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Rohr’s response was to create an event drawn from the common experience of initiation in “primitive” societies, updated and recalibrated by his Christian faith. The most common reaction of men who come on the rites of passage (and I had this myself) was of instant recognition that what was happening was valuable and profound. Like so many, Marty Tugher, now one of the leaders of this movement in Britain, wrote that he went to the rites not knowing what he wanted, but that “this was definitely what I needed”.

It is easier to say what does not happen than what happens. It is not a religious retreat, not the Alpha course, not rigorous spiritual exercises, not a manual for life, but a grounding of experience. It is not best explained in words, but is the spiritual event for people who do not usually read spiritual books. It is not about achievement, but examining failure – to be experienced, not analysed.

Nobody gets physically harmed, unlike the initiation rites of some primitive societies. It is not about physical endurance (beyond fasting), but it is physical. Those who have led these events for the last 15 years have learnt that men respond best to simple tasks and messages. Each man takes a journey on the rites of passage using the essence of life – earth, fire, water, blood – to understand better our own place in the world, and so to find God.

In the desert in New Mexico, I discovered that an authentic Christian message lies at the core of this; not a gospel in a comfort zone, but a message (like so much of Christianity) that can be glimpsed only through paradox, where experiencing descent is essential if there is to be ascent. This is at the heart of Easter – with its direct connection between suffering and glory. Job on his dung heap is the patron saint of the rites, and a line from Leonard Cohen its anthem: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

But this makes it sound very gloomy. Understanding how to manage the journey of descent is as important as the journey of ascent. When the light shines, it is on men who wish to grow up before they grow old, men who have found something they missed. Undertaking the rites among other men safely holding the space gives us the courage to fail, and the hope of finding wisdom in knowing how to laugh, rather than growing old in the bitterness of lost opportunities.

The witness of other men is a really important part of the process in shared silence and non-judgemental listening. There is an awesome and humbling power in men telling their stories, and out of it has come “a com-
community of grown-up men, who have stared life’s realities in the face, and have stopped reaching for them like big oversized teenagers’, in the words of another leader of the movement, Stephen Ashton.

Richard Rohr led the first Rites of Passage here, and I was sceptical about whether it could be done without him. But I was wrong. What is happening is true and does not rely on a guru, so a group of British men now lead an annual event – although this summer in Scotland I imagine that those who come will again face their own trial by rain when sent off alone. I was lucky to have the sunlight of New Mexico.

Access to desert or wilderness is an essential part of the experience, as is the removal of mobile phones from those who come. Real change – of the sort that inspires the mind and melts the heart – happens outside normal comfort zones, at the edge, in “liminal space”. (This essential spiritual truth is so widely shared by other faiths that it is surprising that it is not the focus of every church service.) For example, The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám tells of “a strip of herbage grown. That just divides the desert from the sown” – liminal space, not wild nor tamed, where spiritual work is done.

Understanding the language of the edge, Marty and others in the north-east of England who have undertaken the Rites now hold weekends for men called “Keeping the Edges Hot”. It is not a message of retreat, but a call to a deep involvement in humanity. Rohr runs a Centre for Action and Contemplation, for neither works without the other. Walking this path can offer unexpected strength. There is a wonderful image in the film Of Gods and Men when conflict in Algeria threatens an isolated monastery. The monks say to their Muslim neighbours that they rely on them, but they are told firmly it is actually the other way round: as a villager says, “You are the branch and we are the birds.”

The urgent message of the Rites of Passage is about life in its fullness in this world, via another paradox that it is only through undergoing this kind of process of looking inwards that we can take a full role in society.

One of the key founders of the men’s movement in the 1980s was the great American poet Robert Bly, who designed his own initiation rite for much the same reason as Rohr – because it spoke to the depths of men through myth and archetype that were stronger than words. His was a secular path, but he had great respect for the place of faith.

Some years ago, Bly phoned Rohr to congratulate him, saying that he thought that, while the secular men’s movement would come and go, Rohr’s work would endure.

David Loynt is the BBC’s international development correspondent. The next Men’s Rites of Passage take place in Scotland, 27-31 July. For more information visit http://www.malespirituality.org

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