

Invoking the Wild Man:
An inter-generational, moving exploration of
American, male-centered rites of initiation.

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Introduction

In the post-industrialized, heterogeneous nation, increasingly focused on technological advancement, democracy, and civility, formalized rites of manhood associated with “primitive cultures,” have all but disappeared [Raphael. 1988:14-15,18-19]. In the absence of such formalized rites, faced with an instinctual, deep desire for transformation, youth stumble into initiatory processes that are either diffusive in their ritualization, peer initiated, or unconsciously self-initiated [Grimes. 2000:112]. These alternate routes, which lie mostly dependent upon mass media and peer groups, offer unrealistic images of archetypal heroic figures as well as unhealthy and oftentimes violent role models [Warfield-Coppock 1992:474; Johnson. 2011; Mahdi. 1987:117]. By contrast, traditional, formalized rites of passage, performed by the elders of a community, have a twofold purpose: to provide young men with a definitive transition from boyhood into manhood and therefore a feeling of increased self-worth; and to transmit culturally specific wisdom such as expectations of behavior and male identity within society [Raphael. 1988:12; Bly. 1990:15].

As suggested above, the disappearance of formalized rites of passage are due in part to industrialization, globalization, new technologies and the civility that democracy demands. Additionally, and perhaps most influential in the demise of formalized rites of passage, as gender roles in the West continue to change and the gap between the sexes narrows, the definition of “man” comes into question. With the very meaning of manhood constantly in flux, how can one be sure what a man is, let alone if he is one [Raphael. 1988:18-19]?

In exploring my own journey into manhood I do not see a definitive fixed point in space and time that can be underscored as the moment I “became a man.” Rather, the journey is messy, painful, and confusing. I was not initiated simultaneously by a group of elders but rather one by

one over the course of two decades. These individuals were not familial elders, but instead mentors, including my high school drama teacher, the artistic director of a dance company I worked with, and my ex fiancé. The lessons I learned from these pivotal figures in my life collectively represent my group of elder initiators. Without their influence I would certainly not identify myself as a grown man.

As our youth struggle to identify as men, the elders who would initiate them, themselves formally uninitiated, sit in adult care facilities, neglected and oftentimes abused [United States. 2002]. This points to the heart of the matter, which gives purpose to and validates the need for this project. As such, the aim of *Invoking the Wild Man* is to provide a vehicle for male elders to find renewed purpose in life and for male youth to consciously develop a sense of self and purpose within a society that denies them both support and guidance. *Invoking the Wild Man* seeks to empower and give voice to America's male youth and elders through the development of population specific, communal ritual and performance.

The project consists of five parts, including: secondary research into literature on ritual and rites of passage and their connectivity to dance and movement, a self-directed exploration of manhood, explorative group workshops, an informal community performance, and a formal staged performance developed from stories and experiences excavated from the previous two parts of the project.

Literature Review

The initial inspiration for this project came from the seminal work by Robert Bly on ideas of manhood and masculinity, *Iron John: A book about men*. Rooted in the Grimm Brother's tale of *Iron John*, Bly finds a mythic metaphor for the contemporary male's struggle of transition

from boyhood to manhood. Following the American male mostly through the twentieth century Bly recalls the 1950's male, the "tough guy" who objectifies the feminine, and the 1960's/1970's male, the "soft male" who raises up the feminine. These figures, including the contemporary male, though in different ways, all attempt to find the masculine through the feminine, while ignoring the true power and value of their masculinity. The root of the issue posits Bly, is the disappearance of the mentor, the "Wild Man," the traditional initiator of male rites of passage. Because of this disappearance, so too has the formalized male rite of passage fallen away. Bly calls for the reinvention of a contemporary rite of passage and the personal development of an "inner warrior."

Though my journey began here with Bly, it is perhaps best to first survey the very root of the academic study of rites of passage. Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, seems to be one of the earliest writers on rites of passage. He saw rites as a cohesive agent holding society together. [Grimes. 2000:152]

First formulated by Arnold van Gennep, a contemporary of Durkheim, classical rites-of-passage theory, based on change, speaks in spatial terms using the metaphor of a threshold. "...A rite of passage is like a domestic threshold or frontier between two nations." More than a mere moment, rites of passage both move and transform. "...When effective rites of passage are enacted, they carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one" [Grimes. 2000:7] Based on the image of a threshold, van Gennep identified three phases belonging to rites of passage, *preliminal*, *liminal*, and *postliminal*. To enliven the strong spatial aspect of these phases van Gennep applied a second layer of dynamic meaning to each phase resulting in the descriptors known and preferred by most contemporary rite of passage scholars, *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. "This...way of naming them makes them sound more

like phases in a process than places on a map, and it calls attention to their dynamic, rather than to their static, or spatial qualities.” [Grimes. 2000:104]

Victor Turner’s work, though very much a continuation of van Gennep’s is so radical and transformative of rites of passage theory that in the twentieth century, he became the major theorist of ritual. Turner believed ritual to be subversive and generative. One of his most valuable contributions to the literature on ritual and rites of passage is that of *communitas*, a temporary yet potent transformative community developed through ritual [Richard. 2007:18]

Ronald Grimes has been instrumental in my understanding of ritual and rites of passage theory through his cohesive, legible and exciting insights. His commentary on the work of Durkheim, van Gennep, and Turner are insightful and exhaustive.

“Rites are not givens; they are hand-me-downs, quilts we continue to patch. Whether we call this activity ritual creativity, ritual invention, ritualizing, ritual making, or ritual revision does not matter as much as recognizing that rites change, that they are also flowing processes, not rigid structures or momentary events...There is a growing suspicion that the so-called Western way of life has reached a precipice. In a few hundred short years it has done untold damage to the planet and to indigenous peoples. Extraordinarily long-lived cultures such as the Hopi and the !Kung have an enduring commitment to ritual. Ritual is their way of attuning themselves to one another and to their land; ritual is their means of maintaining a sustainable culture. “Their” ritual practices may, in the long run, be more practical than “our” practicality. Psychologists and anthropologists are suggesting that the “spiritual technology” of ritual has survival value for the human species as well as beneficial

ecological consequences. If we do not birth and die ritually, we will do so technologically, inscribing technocratic values in our very bones. Technology without ritual (or worse, technology *as* ritual) easily degenerates into knowledge without respect. And knowledge without respect is a formula for planetary annihilation. It matters greatly not only *that* we birth and die but *how* we birth and die” [Grimes. 2000:12-13].

In connecting ritual and rites of passage to dance I explored the work of Byron Richard as well as Laura Apol and Tina Kambour. Highlighting the fact that dance is a male dominated art-form, yet has more female than male practitioners, Richard searches for a responsive, child-centered pedagogical style, through his exploring his own experiences as a dance student as well as an intergenerational pedagogical study focusing on boys and their fathers. Richard explores K.E. Bond’s contribution to the dance field of aesthetic community, similar to Turner’s *communitas*, and how aligning personal aesthetics through intersubjective phenomena in dance might lead to community cohesion. This, Bond terms “right dance.” In his study, Richard brought together a group of six fathers and their eight sons. Meeting over the course of seven consecutive Saturday mornings, Richard conducted intergenerational dance classes that allowed sons to interact kinesthetically, mentally and emotionally with their fathers. Richard’s study found “...increasing empathy, understanding and connection,” among its participants. Ultimately, new insights were revealed in regards to child leadership and helping children to explore and find individual interests and how adults might support this process. Richard’s explorations of Bond’s theory help to inform the development of the workshop in this project. [Richard. 2009]

Similar to the work of Richard, the work of Laura Apol and Tina Kambour with elders and female youth through inter-generational workshops in dance and creative writing has greatly influenced my thought on the structure and format of the workshops in this project. [Apol, Kambour. 1999]

Methodology

Though there is a great need for definitive rites of passage as evidenced above, the purpose of this project is not to develop such a rite. Instead, the aim of *Invoking the Wild Man* is to explore the social construction of manhood and maleness in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of what might constitute a contemporary rite of passage into manhood.

As the process of becoming a man is rooted in ones sense of self and cultural identity, the means by which a rite of manhood might then be developed must be both culturally and personally relevant. Therefore, the development of such a process must arise from the community being served and not from one that is prescribed.

Invoking the Wild Man consists of five parts, including: secondary research into literature on ritual and rites of passage, a self-directed exploration of manhood, explorative group workshops, an informal community performance, and a formal staged performance.

Delimitation

Invoking the Wild Man will focus on a community of youth and elder males of familial relation in the Greater Washington D.C. Metro area, of the United States of America. This may include grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and sons.

Preliminary Research

Initially, secondary research will be conducted to further explore academic literature as exemplified above, on the subjects of manhood, ritual, and rites of passage. Additionally, the role of dance and movement in ritual will be explored to set up a cohesive framework upon which this project can be built. Global practices of ritual and rites of passage into manhood will be used to inform the process of exploring personal and group ritual.

Self-Directed Exploration

In order to develop a richer, more thorough workshop, I will undertake a self-directed exploration of my perceptions and inherited biases of manhood. Throughout the exploration, which will take place two hours, twice a week, over the course of a month, I will journal my thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences in regards to the process and potential outcomes. To begin, I will pose questions such as: What is a man; what does it mean to be male; what does it mean to be a man in America; what does it mean to be a man in your family; when did you know you became a “man;” what is the difference between a man and a boy? Looking at these questions through movement and writing, I will record my responses on video and in writing respectively.

Next, based on recent research in epigenetic memory, genetically inherited memory [Cornish. 2013], I will develop a movement-meditation, finding its basis in Body-Mind-Centering (BMC) and Authentic Movement. Beginning with a BMC visualization-meditation, I will embark on an inner venture to the molecular level of my body in order to explore the possibility of epigenetic memory related to rites of passage and manhood that may or may not be bound up in my DNA. As this process cannot yet be verified through evidentiary-based science, I

will treat it simply as an exploration of these ideas within the psyche. Following this exploration, I will engage these same ideas through an authentic movement practice. Authentic movement is an exploratory movement practice of self that is fueled by an engagement of the somatic unconscious [Wyman-McGinty. 1998:240]. Additional explorations to be undertaken during this self-directed experience will develop as I delve further into preliminary research of the field and the set of questions posed in the self-directed exploration itself.

Workshops

In order to further excavate perceptions and meaning associated with manhood and maleness from sources other than myself, inter-generational, male workshops, with youths and adults of familial relation will be employed. These workshops taking place for three hours, once a week, over the course of eight consecutive weeks will mirror, to a degree, the self-directed exploration I will undertake including having participants keep a journal of their experiences throughout the process.

A possible schedule of the first workshop may include: individual creation of an acrostic poem and movement signature to be shared with the group. This would be an effort to encourage intra and inter-familial bonding amongst participants. The purpose of movement signatures is to embody ones self-perceived identity, informed by the somatic unconscious thereby encapsulating ones common movement choices, in a short movement or phrase. Acrostic poems using each participant's first name will allow for a similar process in writing. Apol and Kambour, in their 2000 study found that the poems of elders contained life wisdom that seemed to be an attempt to transmit lessons learned to the youths involved in the study [Apol, Kambour. 2000:109]. This might hold great benefit in exploring the transmission of cultural wisdom in rites of passage and

what that wisdom might be. Next, elder participants would be asked to write about their experiences and perceptions of manhood; what they believe makes one a man; the process by which one becomes a man; and what they as elders believe to be necessary to transmit to a young man beginning the journey into manhood. Young adults would be asked to explore and write about issues that the contemporary male must deal with while approaching manhood. Youths would be asked to investigate and write about perceptions and preconceived notions of manhood and maturity.

In January of 2014, I will participate in a workshop with Liz Lerman, through the Dance Exchange Winter Institute, in Takoma Park, Maryland. The workshop will focus on intergenerational engagement and dance making. This in concert with the outcomes of the self-directed exploration will greatly inform how I structure each individual workshop and the series as a whole.

Performance

Informal

Following the workshop series, participants will have the opportunity to share their stories, experience and wisdom relating to rites of passage and manhood during an informal performance. This will be a minimally produced event that would be more about culmination, community, and catharsis than it would be about presentation. The details of the informal performance will depend upon the participants, as they will contribute greatly to the structure and presentation. It may manifest as a large community gathering, or an intimate talk with family and friends. Whatever the outcome, the event would take place in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, at the University of Maryland, College Park campus.

Formal

Following the informal performance and with the permission of workshop participants, stories and experiences shared during the workshops and informal performance, that hold the greatest potential for inclusion in a formalized, hybrid, dance-theater performance, will be culled to be presented either in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Main Season or Second Season, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at The University of Maryland, College Park campus. Following the formal performance, participants will be invited to a final gathering to discuss their feelings, perceptions, experiences in regards to the project and the presentation of their stories within the formal performance.

Analyzing and Evaluating Outcomes/Findings

At the conclusion of the formal performance, data collected from that and all previous parts of the project will be thoroughly analyzed. Data from the self-directed exploration will be compared and contrasted with the data obtained through the group workshops. Data collected from the performances will be compared and contrasted as well and cross referenced with the data collected from the self and group explorations. In synthesis of the data, a document will be produced detailing the project and findings. If substantial in meaning and scope, the project will be submitted for presentation at various conferences.

Conclusion

Again, the aim of *Invoking the Wild Man* is to explore the social construction of manhood and maleness in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of what might constitute a contemporary rite of passage into manhood. Based on the success of the project there may be the

possibility to carryout a second phase including workshops and performances that explore a potential structural framework for rites of passage in the post-industrialized, heterogeneous nation. The purpose here would not be to develop a complete “one size fits all” process, but to illuminate how dance and ritual might inform the process for each unique community and individual who might choose to adopt such a model. This may or may not bring us closer to a uniquely American ritual to facilitate the transmission of cultural wisdom from elder to youth.

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