

Rites Make Right

Reflection by Rev. Ron Phares

When you all called me to this pulpit, you did so - I hope - knowing that the Unitarian Universalist propensity for fascination and self-congratulation was a no go for me. Which means, presumably, the same is true for you. We are not here to confirm ego and entertain. Can I get an amen?

We are here to do something, to help each other do something. I am called to this role for two primary reasons. One, I yearn for spiritual connection. And two, I very earnestly want to save the world. On the way I am learning that those two things are actually the same thing. I assume that on some level, whether you admit it or not, you are here for similar reasons. We know that, for reasons rooted in both effectiveness and integrity we can't do any of that alone. And so here we are. So... whaddya say? Shall we actually do something?

We better do something because we are at an inflection point. By "we" I mean this congregation, this city, this state, this country, this whole world. I mean all of us together. We are at what, in fiction, they call the pinch point; that point where the odds become so wildly stacked against the protagonists that there seems to be no possible way to achieve a happy resolution. In triumphal stories, the heroes navigate the pinch point to victory. In a tragedy, they do not. Both can be meaningful. But, especially when we are the protagonist, one outcome is preferred.

We are at that pinch point. Either we make it or we don't. If we make it, it will be an initiation of a kind, a global rite of passage, beyond which, as is the case with all rites of passages, is a new way of being. Looking at it like that is kind of funny though because one of the reasons we are at this inflection point is because we have forgotten and/or lost our ability to conduct meaningful and relevant rites of passage.

Dereliction of rites of passage is both a symptom and a cause of the malady that afflicts us. That's sort of the central thesis of the first part of today's reflection. Dereliction of rites of passage is both a symptom and a cause of the malady that afflicts us - globally and personally.

You see, for millennia, humans knew that rites of passage were key to both the development of spiritually and psychologically healthy adults and the maintenance of a culture flourishing in its ecological niche. That is what rites of passage do: develop the individual and maintain the culture. All of which rests upon a shared world view, a shared story.

One of the main reasons we have let our rites of passage fade and find ourselves at this inflection point is because our shared story is no longer appropriate. Our shared story lost its connection to

place, became ungrounded; all transcendence, no immanence, mistaking aspiration for accomplishment, lacking humility and relationship, all ego, no family.

It may be that the story shattered because it was too rigid and brittle to withstand change and expansion. Or it just got too high off the earth and depressurized. It's hard to say if we lost enthusiasm for our rites of passage because we lost our story or if we lost our story because our rites of passage no longer made sense and forgot their reason. Whatever the cause, our shared story has been shattered and subverted.

This, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. It may even be a necessary thing. After all, part of a rite of passage is the disintegration of an old story of self and a discovery of a new one. In that case, the fracturing of our shared story may not only be necessary but, despite all the destruction it may bring, its dissolution might actually be good in the long run. IF we manage to be victorious rather than tragic. If we are to navigate the pinch point. If we reinstitute effective rites of passage.

Let me step back a minute and just clarify what I mean by a rite of passage. A rite of passage is a community supported ordeal that initiates individuals into a new way of being. It produces people who are secure in their personhood, their power, and their role. A ceremonial technique it uses to produce that security entails metaphorical but very much real death and rebirth; death of the old stage or role and rebirth into a new stage or role.

The present watered down ceremonies we refer to as rights of passage do not have anything near that level of duress. And we are weaker and more fractured for it.

This ritualized death and rebirth is also good practice for all the deaths and rebirths that life foists upon us without our consent, up to and including the final and actual moment of death. Rites of passage prepare us to face all of that with courage, grace, and enthusiasm. They are simply good practice.

When you are properly tempered enough to face difficulty with courage, grace, and enthusiasm, the chances of prevailing are much higher. Tragedy, if that is to be our fate, is turned, if not beautiful, then meaningful.

It is important to note that, like our shared story, initiation and rites of passage are inexorably from and in relationship with the land. Story, self, and land are all intertwined. For it is in the interdependence of person, place, and people that harmony is achieved, evolutionary niche is enjoined, and something worth maintaining emerges.

What we are talking about is the holy trinity of Person, Place, & People.

What this means is that to lose our rites of passages is to lose our shared story and is also to lose our relationship with the land, with the earth. Losing our rites of passages is losing our sense of interdependence, losing our interbeing with the world. Losing ourselves. When we forget our embeddedness with the world, our culture becomes fractured, as do our own souls. This reveals that, in a sense, we are the land.

Likewise, an embedded, ecologically informed culture has the capacity to hold immense diversity, exactly as ecospheres do. Diversity is necessary to a healthy eco-range. Meanwhile, a disembedded, disembodied culture, fractures along the same differences that make a healthy system flourish.

There is no fully realized person without place and people and no coherent people without place and fully realized persons. We are interbeings. And when we do not feel that - as most of us do not, even if we want to - if we don't feel that in our blood, then we are broken and sundered from ourselves which is also the world.

That is where we are. The pinch point. At the gates of initiation without any experience in navigating the passage.

Complicating what needs to happen for a successful global initiation is the fact that our loss of rites of passage as more localized communities has not equipped us to navigate this collective initiation with grace and courage. It's a bit of a catch 22. For, if we are to navigate this pinch point we need a shared story reinforced by rites of passage. But to have a shared story we need rites of passage to maintain the shared story that we no longer have!

So where do we start? Well, after exhaustive research, I can confidently say: somewhere. Anywhere. Time is tight. And we have started. We've been mining the ancient stories to see if any still resonate in our bones enough to resuscitate into a shared story. But that is a long and abstract process. So we need to try other means as well. Pointedly, we need to bring back the rite of passage, the initiatory sequence, complete with an encounter that challenges our notion we will survive it.

To that end, beginning this April and running into June we will conduct a Rite of Passage Program at All Souls. We'll have an information session on zoom on the evening of April 8 for those who are curious. Look for details in upcoming e-bulletins.

We're looking for 6 to 8 people who are at a personal inflection point or period of transition. Are you retiring? Facing a difficult diagnosis? Considering a life change? Is there a particular and

critical question that embracing may move you into a new phase? Are you eldering or exiting a prolonged adolescence? If so, you may wish to consider this program.

Here's the general shape of the thing. We are evolving what used to be our Firetender program into the Rite of Passage program with a couple crucial additions. The firetender program is about going deep with connecting a particular question or intention to the land by loosening our grip on our assumptions so as to allow the spirit to move and meaning and connection to emerge.

To that we are adding three important aspects. One is an encounter; an ordeal to rival the rites of old. Ideally the Firetender program will prepare you for this to some extent. The ordeal could be a wilderness vigil, a multi-day fast, a facilitated plant medicine journey, breathwork, or whatever practice is appropriate just so long as there is an aspect of the ordeal in it; the experience which ushers one through the fear of death and into the soundness of life.

But while I am conducting the program, I am not a plant medicine guide or a wilderness vigil leader. Therefore, the encounter will be by and large outsourced, which - unfortunately - may entail some financial burden on the participant.

The second thing we're adding is more community. Participants in the rites of passage program will need to enlist two to three people to companion them - not to come to all the meetings or participate in the encounter, but to scaffold the participants with personal support and spiritual care and accompaniment.

The companions will be there for the introductory feast and ceremony and for the feast of return and welcoming ceremony. Also, we will take some time during a Sunday service to offer blessings and acknowledgement to the participants. The program is ultimately a community event.

This is incredibly important. There are plenty of rites of passage programs out there. You can find them online. But they're sort of a drive through window rite of passage. They are not conducted within the container of any kind of lasting community.

This was my own experience with the psychedelics for religious leaders retreat I participated in back in 2020something. It was an invaluable and hugely meaningful experience. But it was also missing something. It was missing community. It was missing something that could reintegrate my experience, acknowledge my experience.

And then, my personal relations were not formally prepared for the state I would be in upon return. For while an encounter may end, its effects continue to ripple out and it is likely that sensitivities remain elevated for a little while. And so it's good to have prepared companions.

The third addition is the appropriate response of a newly initiated person to a supportive community; which is to say: service. In this case that service will be offering a reflection on a Sunday about their experience in the rites of passage program which would be, among other things, a contribution to the shared story that is Unitarian Universalism.

You see, in the end, the rites of passage program is not just for the seeker but for the whole community. Eventually, the support, participation, and service will begin to form a positive feedback loop. The community element is so critical that there will be a requirement that the participant be a engaged member of All Souls for at least a year. There will also be some consideration around mental and physical health and some covenanting meant to keep both participants and our church safe.

So that's the shape of the thing. Person Place People. This is how we find connection and save the world; by becoming full persons and cultures capable of navigating the pinch point. Do not settle for ego and entertainment but rather participate in your yearning; find connection there, and save the world. Do something.