

The Men's Rites of Passage: a personal reflection

I blame my wife. It was she who had picked up a book with a rather strange title, "From Wild man to Wise Man", by an American with a foreign sounding name: Richard Rohr. It was she who read it, and it was she who saw an advertisement for this weird-sounding event, the Men's Rites of Passage. It was she who talked, no, bullied me into attending it. It is she to whom I am eternally grateful.

When I made my way to Launde Abbey, somewhere in the middle of rural, rolling Leicestershire, I had very little idea what the Men's Rites of Passage was about. I had filled in a rather challenging application form, which asked me questions like, "in what way has life initiated you?" to which I didn't really know the answer, because I didn't really know what such a word as "initiation" was supposed to mean.

I found out. It was something to do with a 21st century approach to the rather important task of growing up. Of course, I was grown up in the obvious sense: mid 40s, with four more-or-less grown-up children; but in the centre of me, my spirituality if you like, I'm not so sure. I wasn't reacting so well to my own story – of which more later.

Over the course of the five days of the Men's Rites of Passage, I learned a great deal about myself, and about my fellow men. In the middle of this gentle, rolling countryside I learned five hard lessons. I'm not going to say what they were, it would take too long. But I should perhaps alter 'learned' to 'experienced', and that's very different.

To tell you a bit about myself: in the few years preceding the Men's Rites of Passage, I lost my prestigious job, my father, and my mother, in that order. I'm only going to speak

about the last of these, but each holds its own story. My mother died, or rather she rather gracefully declined, with Parkinson's disease surrounding her final years. The time came when clearly she had only weeks or months to live.

Because all her children are geographically dispersed, we agreed a rota whereby we would all spend a week with her in turn, over the coming time. She was still living in her own home, supported with wonderful palliative care.

My week arrived. What they hadn't told us about the palliative care, with its potent mix of morphine and other drugs, was that one of the side-effects was constipation. In the week preceding "my" week, she hadn't been able to use the toilet. In the middle of the third night, I heard her crying out and went to her. There she stood, in the bathroom, her whole tired, tired body covered with body waste. In her confused mental state, she had only managed to make things utterly, awfully worse. There I was, a middle-aged man facing the humbling fact of having to deal with my mother like a recently-born child, facing square-on the full circle of life.

Reader, I washed her. I stood her in the bath and restored to her dignity, as best I could. Somehow, I bundled her back into bed and, like the child that she had become, she slept.

I didn't, much, that night. It was really only in this time, just before she died, that I realized that now, I was on my own with no-one to 'run' to, and that in a sense, 'growing up was the only option'. But this wasn't a calm, mature reflection: it was angry at the lack of information that had led to this, angry at her and my humiliation. It was only later, during the process of the Rites themselves, that the phrase I had read in the application form became real: "for many people, life initiates you anyway..." that scene

came to mind. Spending that time with my mother, before she died, I experienced not only the gracious elegance of her sanguine moments, but also, by my earthy participation in her inglorious path of descent, the supreme privilege of sharing her death, and seeing in it, the humble pre-figuring of my own... the down became as valuable as the up.

Now, I relate this story not because it's special, but because it isn't. I have come to hear many men's stories and the 'path of descent' that they have engaged with has been so different to mine. But the common thread has always been the realization that there is death, there is failure, and there are times where there is nothing "good" to say. But how you deal with this, how you embrace it even, as I embraced my mum, is what comes to matter. Participating in a "wake-up call" towards a mature, adult approach to the things in life that simply don't work out the way you had planned them to, is a wonderful liberation. Coming to be of service to other people as they come to the same realization is a wonderful privilege. Forming a community of grown-up men who have stared life's realities in the face, and have stopped reacting to them like big oversized teenagers, is a simply magnificent.

This whole process of developing an adult male spirituality which the Men's Rites of Passage sets out to initiate was for me of profound, almost immeasurable value. The reconnection that it enabled me to undertake between my own story and my own emotional response to it, (I haven't told you about my job and my father yet...) was profound.

I also need to make it clear that this sense of re-connection, coming in all different shapes and sizes for different men, was a common experience for everyone who attended the Rites with me, and, as I have come to learn, is a common experience for almost everyone who attends to their spiritual growth in this way. The Rites provided us all with a framework for emotional re-connection that stands alongside, adding depth to, and not in contradiction with, any religious or other views.

So all I can do, is relate my story, and try to convince you with these few words that the invitation to attend the Rites is a fantastic opportunity for every man: any age, any set of religious values or none, any sexual orientation, any race, skin tone; any history of success or failure or both, whatever topic, whatever scale. Even people who like model trains (only joking). Download the form. Think gently about the experience it is inviting you to reflect on. Take the risk: fill it in, send it off. Join us on starting the rest of your life with a clearer vision and dare I say it, the possibility of a deeper, more grounded, masculine spirituality.

Stephen A