Evolution of Consciousness, Rites of Passage, and the Waldorf Curriculum

Alduino Mazzone

I would like to broaden the context in which "rites of passage" may be discussed and, in this article, will approach an exploration from two perspectives: the developments in human consciousness over long periods and a relevant approach for gaining spiritual knowledge today. I believe that a discussion of rites of passage will be more fruitful if considered in the light of longer-term evolutionary developments and their recapitulation in each individual's biography.

Firstly, I want to recall Rudolf Steiner's view that developments in the post-Atlantean epochs have resulted in the diminution of people's awareness of the spiritual world. He points out, further, that this gradual loss has occurred in parallel with both an increased capacity to perceive the sensory world and the development of intellectual thought.[1] Initiation training in the Mystery centres in different cultures aimed to re-establish awareness of the spirit.[2] A distinction must be made between initiation and rites of passage. The former refers to an experiential relation to the spiritual world, while the latter refers to one of many developmental passages in one's lifetime, of which one could be an initiation into the Mysteries.

The process of emancipation from an unchosen experience of unity with the spirit may be identified from the time when humans began to build an identity of their own from within and no longer derived their sense of self primarily from the cosmos, the gods, nature, their ancestors or from the family group. The loss of atavistic, clairvoyant consciousness was accompanied by the appearance of a new faculty of thinking.[3] This historical progression is recapitulated by every human being and these developments may be observed by Waldorf class-teachers and high school teachers, to varying degrees, in children's development throughout their school-life.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge the serious work of modern writers and practitioners in this field and establish, from those sources, a working definition of rites of passage. For example, in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion,* the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, writes:

Rites of passage are a category of rituals that mark the passage of a person through the life cycle, from one stage to another over time, from one role or social position to another, integrating the human and cultural experiences with biological destiny, birth, reproduction, and death. These ceremonies make the basic distinctions, observed in all groups, between young and old, male and female, living and dead.[4]

As Eliade infers, rites of passage are relevant to more than just adolescents because all stages of life have their transitions. Groff[5] has cited others, such as Joseph Campbell and Margaret Mead, to assert that the loss of rites of passage in mainstream, Western society has contributed to various social pathologies. One commentator, Malidoma Somé (a Dagara shaman and academic from West Africa),

has made the point that ritual is "the soil" upon which a community's future grows. "When ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered."[6]

This does not mean that rites of passage are completely absent from the cultural mainstream. For example, graduating from high school, getting a driver's license, the first sexual experience, voting for the first time, or even getting drunk are all seen as rites of passage. Indeed, many of the dangerous or unhealthy behaviours in which young people engage can be seen as misdirected manifestations of a natural or even healing impulse. This includes separation from family, initiations and ritualistic activities, special hairdos, clothing, piercing, tattoos and other accoutrements, consciousness-altering drugs, confrontation of fears, danger, and death, and testing of personal limits.[7]

David Lertzman, writes about "Rediscovery," a culturally based, outdoor education program run in the traditional territories of various "first nations," and highlights the value of experiencing rites of passage through adventure and wilderness activities for youth (both indigenous and non-indigenous). He comments about the importance of rites of passage and notes that:

> When these times of transition are marked, ritualised, witnessed, and supported, it creates a kind of experiential map of self-development. Without proper rites of passage, people can become disoriented and lose their way in life's journey. It is as if their life map is incomplete.[8]

A broader context for a distinction between initiation and rites of passage should become apparent in the following consideration about the roots of Waldorf pedagogy; mainly in the Mystery tradition (such as the Egyptian temple schools and the Greek Mystery centres). These were the places where acolytes were prepared for initiation. Communion with or experiencing the nearness of the spirit was more common in the far past and Mystery training made this more conscious. Steiner noted that:

> We have to remember that the Mysteries of ancient times were of such a nature and character that in the Mystery centres an actual meeting with the Gods could take place.[9]

Steiner further commented that "the principal of initiation is that, even during his life, man can ascend to the spiritual worlds and learn what takes place there."[10]

When the pupil realised himself to be a microcosmic reflection of the greater macrocosm, his relationship to the natural world deepened. That is to say, "the Spirit of Nature was actually perceived in the Mysteries—man felt himself at one with the whole of Nature."[11] But the relationship to the world was never one of a detached observer, rather, "There was always a moral element present when man took cognisance of the physical world around him."[12] Nor should it be assumed that Mystery training only took place in cloistered halls, for "…in the past pupils had been led up to mountain tops and downward into deep clefts of the Earth; and they made great efforts, exerting themselves inwardly in all sorts of ways, hoping thereby to rouse the soul within them..."[13] Thus, self-discovery and Initiation took many forms, but the end was a realisation of oneself as part of the World-All.

In the epoch of the Sentient Soul, the soul-spiritual was drawing more deeply into the life-bodily members, resulting in a gradual sharpening of the senses. Experiences that drew the soul closer to the elements, or heightened awareness of spiritual beings working in the earthly kingdoms of nature, were sought out by those seeking Initiation; for example, by braving snow and ice, rain and fire, and wind and storm on land and sea. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* highlights the human need to confront the forces of nature and seek immortality (for example the affirmation of continuity of the spirit following bodily death) and likewise the confrontation with elemental powers is portrayed in many Nordic sagas.

There is evidently a great fascination in our own times with certain types of physical challenges that are reminiscent of Sentient Soul initiation practices. Self-selected sporting trials, such as rock-climbing, caving, sailing, skiing, sail- or snowboarding, skydiving, surfing, and many others, all provide challenges to the physical body that call forth endurance, courage, and a greater knowledge of one's own limits. To what extent could a sufficiently developed program in Spacial Dynamics or Bothmer Gymnastics provide the type of physical challenges that would satisfy the Sentient Soul needs of young people?

Mystery experience changed as the relationship between humans and the beings of the spiritual world became more distant (or as the old Mysteries became decadent). The end of the Ephesian Mysteries in the fourth century B.C., for example, was a further marker of the transition to Intellectual Soul development.

That is the important change in the nature of the

> Mysteries that meets us when we pass from the ancient East to Greece. The ancient Oriental Mysteries were subject to the conditions of space and locality, whilst in the Greek Mysteries the human being himself came into consideration and what he brought to the Gods. . . .There the first sign of personality makes its appearance.[14]

Mythological stories and legends from Greece, such as Perseus and Medusa, Theseus and the Minotaur, The Twelve Labours of Hercules, and the adventures of Odysseus, as depicted in Homer's *Odyssey,* are descriptions of Initiation trials that indicate, in imaginative form, the pupils' struggles to transform and master aspects of their astral nature. Initiation into the Mysteries faded into the background following the death and resurrection of Christ "…not that Initiation ever ceased; it was the form in which the candidates found their way that changed."[15]

In the Medieval period of the Greco-Roman epoch, "…here and there were individuals, living simple, humble unpretentious lives...whose pupils were scattered in various directions in accordance with karma….[16] and these were the unlikely hierophants who initiated the pupils that sought them out. Some wonderful descriptions of Mystery centres in the Middle Ages may be found in the lecture cycle just cited. However, with the dominance of the Western intellectual tradition in an increasingly secular formal education—an education that was for a long time conducted by learned clerics—and by the incorporation of rites of passage in sacraments like baptism, communion, confirmation, and so forth, the need of the populace for connectedness to the sacred was satisfied.

The training role of the medieval guilds (the Freemason lodges being one example) maintained an element of initiation in the passage of young men along the path of apprentice, journeyman, and master. In this training, an attempt was made to provide instruction about universal meaning while mastering the skills in the various trades. At its best, it provided the ultimate in holistic education because young people were challenged and supported to learn with their whole being: their will, feeling, and thought. In the process of acquiring a wealth of practical skills and knowledge through training, mentoring, and oral instruction, something even more important transpired: they learned how to be human beings within their culture.

During the High Middle Ages the pursuit of the artes liberales was at its zenith. Recall the School of Chartres, in which scholarship, artistry, and moral action were fostered through a study of the Seven Liberal Arts. This broad liberal education fulfilled the needs of the whole person because learning was not yet materialistically based, nor had it become intellectualised. With the advent of the universities in Europe, the pursuit of academic excellence followed a staging process—for examples, degrees from Bachelor to Master to Doctor—and this form continues to this day. The ideal of the "Man for All Seasons," inspired by Renaissance Humanism, led to the "well rounded" training of the courtier. However, the broad education of the "Head, Heart, and Hand" was only available to the privileged few, the gifted, well-to-do, and the leisured classes (such as the nobility). Recall that free, compulsory and secular secondary education was introduced only in the middle of the 20th century in some Western countries.

The Consciousness Soul epoch dawned during the Renaissance and, along with awareness of personality, the fragmentation of religion, art and science began to be experienced, especially with the rise of empiricism. From the middle of the 19th century, materialistic thinking began to be accepted as normal. In this 5th post-Atlantean epoch, cultured westerners began to experience in their souls, together with feelings of greater cosmopolitanism and individualism, an increasingly distant relationship to the religious and spiritual life. In contemporary times, sacraments, rituals, and rites of passage are more often considered to be hangovers of a former age when people's religious and moral life was conditioned and contained in the broad arms of "Mother Church."

However, in the early centuries of the 5th post-Atlantean epoch, significant changes also took place in the "esoteric underground." The Michael age began (1879) and Kali Yuga ended (1899), and this enabled more people to have the possibility of such threshold experiences as seeing the spiritual within the material. A resurgence of interest in esoteric knowledge was evidenced by the emergence, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, of various "esoteric" movements (among them the Theosophical, and later the Anthroposophical, Societies). The Rosicrucian activity continued–and Rosicrucian initiates helped their pupils to maintain–a balance between their spiritual and earthly natures. This had been a goal of initiation training in the Mystery centres. Waldorf pedagogy fits comfortably within the Mystery schooling tradition in a way that is appropriate for contemporary times.

Although a patriarchal Church's embrace is no longer considered by many to be appropriate or relevant, the yearning for security, predictability, and

guidance continues to linger. In countries once exploited by European imperialism, the initiatory practices and rites of passage of indigenous people have been rediscovered and are providing meaning to those estranged by materialistic values. The nature of the predicament being faced at the start of this millennium may be characterised as one of "holy insecurity," a situation in which people do not really want to return to the limitations of the past, while the present is filled with uncertainty, and there is no clear vision of the future.

I doubt that the hoped-for benefits of reintroducing traditional rites of passage can be achieved by what, in some cases, seems to be reverting to Sentient or Intellectual Soul practices. Today, religious rituals or like-experiences are still available for families that want them. Most young people can benefit greatly from participating in outdoor adventure activities. These activities also serve the aims of regular school curricula. The building of self-confidence, social cohesiveness, cooperative behaviour, leadership, survival skills, and so on, can be achieved without the necessity of creating a special rite. Confidence and self-development also arise when people voluntarily serve others and are recognised for it. Many students find relevance and meaning by participating in community projects, joining local land-care groups, or become volunteers for emergency services, fire fighting, St. John's first-aid, and others.

Steiner presented teachers with the task of grappling with the challenging spirit of Waldorf education. He was aware that, in their consciousness, children inevitably experience a descent from heaven to earth. It is one of the crucial tasks of teachers, as they accompany children from grade to grade, to help "member" them into the evolutionary stream of time. They do this by traversing the past and presenting an imaginative retrospective of the descent from a spiritual all-one-ness to an earthly alone-ness. This mirrors what happened through the epochs and happens again in childhood and youth.[17] Teachers can introduce appropriate experiences because in all curriculum areas, content can be found that will inform the young: "This is where humanity has been, this is where we are, and these will be some of your future challenges."

Curriculum requirements in the Waldorf high school offer countless opportunities for achieving outcomes in personal growth, but while one can hope that this "growth" will occur, it should remain an unintended by-product of the students pursuing their normal studies. Only then can the claim be made that Waldorf schools provide an education towards (spiritual) freedom.

While a gradual maturation does take place (and is always a wonder to behold), the twelve-year Waldorf schooling process is not a rite of passage, yet it gives meaning to "rites of passage." Increasing maturity does not just provide greater freedom; it also strengthens and empowers young people for undertaking greater responsibility in life. They must still go out "into the world" and meet the challenging demands of the times, but this "going out" should already begin at school because the hindering powers do not quietly wait for them to leave before recruiting them to their causes!

Today, initiation involves grappling with issues of both personal survival and world survival. What the individual needs is also what is needed for the world. Students should be encouraged to find their own unique link between self and world for herein lays their "mission." Many possible examples of challenges to be faced can be found and presented to, or selected by, students as choices, perhaps, for a Year 12 Project (which may be considered an example of a rite of passage). Here are suggestions of generic themes with which students can begin to grapple:

Confronting the media. This will involve being initiated into the power of the media—how it is useful and how it manipulates and exploits—and learning to use, counter, or survive its illusory power.

Confronting ecological realties such as the unsustainable nature of modern industrial culture in ecological, socio-economic, and existential terms. The issue at hand is the transition to sustainability in all these domains.

Confronting inequalities in the social order. Grappling with Steiner's Threefold Social Order ideal can leave students with profound questions: how can I use this knowledge and understanding to order my own values, to help identify the position held by the spheres of culture, rights, and economy around me, and to provide a basis for how I can contribute to my society?

I have covered, albeit with broad brush strokes, several facets of the theme of "rites of passage." Much more discussion is needed in our profession before any conclusions can be drawn about what is appropriate in our schools. Waldorf schools occur worldwide, and teachers (with the support of their students' parents) must decide on what are appropriate activities to challenge their students. A deeper understanding and an acknowledgement of the diverse needs of adolescents should be the starting

point for decisions affecting their physical and spiritual health and safety.

References

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6. See, D.S. Lertzman, "Rediscovering Rites of Passage: Education, Transformation, and the Transition to Sustainability," *Conservation Ecology,* Vol. 5, no. 2 (2002): 30. URL: http://www.consecol.org/vol5/iss2/art30.

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11. Rudolf Steiner, *World History in the Light of Anthroposophy* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1977), p. 76.

12. Ibid., p. 79.

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14. Steiner, *World History,* pp. 81-82, 96.

15. *Rosicrucianism and Modern Initiation,* p. 20.

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17. Alduino Mazzone, "Let's Quickly Go Over That Again. . . Recapitulation and the Waldorf Curriculum," *Research Bulletin* (The Research Institute for Waldorf Education) Vol. 7, no. 2 (June 2002): 24-28.

Alduino Mazzone is one of the founding teachers of the Mount Barker Waldorf School (in South Australia, 1979). After many years teaching as a class teacher, he now works in adult education and as an educational consultant.