

Spiritual Perspectives on Suicidal Impulses in Young Adults

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We are led to a mystery that is embedded in all initiations and in every rite of passage: the end of a previous form of existence is felt as a real death.

Thomas Moore (1992: 63)

Introductory

I would like to discuss the problem of suicidal impulses in young people within the context of spiritual life. I have been working on the topic of spirituality for a number of years (Tacey 1995, 2000, 2004), and recently a community of psychiatrists asked me to address this topic in relation to the urgent and pressing issue of suicide prevention.

I have been developing a narrative in which suicide can be read in terms of a rite of passage which has taken a tragic turn. To understand my approach, we need to imagine a 'rite of passage' in psychological terms, as an aspect of ordinary human experience. The term is borrowed from anthropology and religious ritual, but I am using it in a psychodynamic sense, to refer to mental transitions during crucial periods of our lives.

I speak as an intellectual and a writer, but also as someone who has been affected by suicide in my family, friendship circle, and student population. Because of this personal connection with suicide, I feel compelled to find out more about it, even though I am not a medical specialist or a suicidologist. Tragedy motivates my quest, and I like to believe that understanding can make our experience more bearable. More than that, it is hoped that understanding may even have a role to play in suicide prevention.

The suicidal impulse is deep and non-rational. We find it hard to fathom, until we have been there ourselves and experienced the power of this particular impulse. I don't believe that normal, everyday logic can get us far in solving the problem of suicide. I have a hunch or intuition that there is something in suicide that we are still not seeing. The spiritual dimension is largely hidden from our awareness, and is hard to access. However, contact with Aboriginal elders and healers in Australia has convinced me that there is a spiritual element in this tragic problem.

Care of the soul: recognition of the second self

In our responses to suicidal youth, the community seems to recognize that the endangered young adult needs encouragement and support. There is something at work in the psyche that is self-destructive, and we try to counter that impulse by making the at-risk person feel better about him- or herself. We sense the problem of low self-esteem, and we try to help the person feel connected, loved, supported.

Often, no matter how hard we try, our efforts are in vain. Something deep and resistant to outside support is in control. The young person still feels alienated, despite our attempts at love, still feels disconnected, despite our attempts at support, and feels ghostly, despite our attempts to make things real. Something in the unconscious may be urging the person to relinquish or destroy his or her former existence.

How can we know this, and how can we gain access to it? If we reach into this inner life, and listen to its message, we might be able to liberate the sufferer of suicidal urges from the compulsion to suicide.

I want to suggest that we have two selves, and that having two selves is entirely normal; I am not talking about schizophrenia (Jung 1961: 62). One self governs our conscious realm, and the other our unconscious. The first could be called the ego, or the 'first self', while the second is the soul, the 'second self'. The ego is not first in priority, only first in terms of our self-knowledge and experience. We come to know it first and refer to it as 'I'. The second self is unconscious in the beginning, and its appearance comes as a surprise, a shock, or even a traumatic disruption. It is clear that this thing we call the 'self' is complex, multi-dimensional, and contains hidden depths we can hardly imagine.

Our two selves have different points of view about who we are and where we are headed. The ego defines itself in terms of personal likes and dislikes, social adjustment and connectedness with the outside world. The ego feels fulfilled and satisfied when personal needs are being met, and when its standing in the world is being acknowledged.

The second self, however, operates on a different wavelength, and is based on different needs. This is the self that says, 'man and woman does not live by bread alone'. The soul is concerned with a connectedness of a different kind. It wants to feel connected with Spirit, with the cosmos and the world. It is not nourished by social status or financial success, but only by meaning, value, and purpose. The soul requires meaning that comes from connection to transcendent values. The soul's origin, according to Greek philosophy and most world religions, is transcendent, and it only feels 'at home' in this world to the extent that it is connected with a transcendent source. Some people feel this longing more acutely than others, especially people of highly sensitive or artistic natures.

Needless to say, our society knows very little about the second self and generally does not acknowledge it. Society attempts to be rational about everything, and the second self is not rational; it derives from a different part of human nature (Jacobs 2003). When a crisis occurs, the needs of the second self become exposed, and its neglect becomes a serious and urgent reality. It therefore becomes quite irrational for our so-called 'rational' society to ignore the reality of the soul.

It is especially important for health and psychological discourses to take the reality of the soul into account, otherwise the task of understanding human nature becomes impossible (Thoresen 1998; Swinton 2001; and Orchard 2001). In recent years,

the recognition of the spiritual element in human character and development has been strongly emphasized, giving rise to a series of works which point to a fundamental shift in our self-perception (Crick 1994; Roach 1997; Rumbold, 2002; Hay and Nye 1998).

Loss of soul in the modern world

The unattended soul is recognizable in terms of its terrible symptoms: there may be a deep, crippling inner emptiness that prevents life from going on in the normal way. This hollowness, which indicates that something crucial is missing, may express itself as despair, chronic anxiety, deep uncertainty, various kinds of addictions, or suicidal feelings. When we look within and see our spiritual poverty, we can be shaken to the core and made to feel worthless. This poverty can assail us, no matter how well adjusted we seem on the surface, and despite the existence of a caring, concerned family, school community, or friendship network.

What we urgently need in society is more emotional literacy, more concern about nurturing the second self. We educate the mind and the intellect, and we do this relatively well, but we leave a lot out. We generally do not educate the heart or the emotions. Where in our society can the soul go to school? The soul or second self has been traditionally the province of the religions. In our increasingly secular society, the authority of religion has been reduced. This means that the second self is no longer bolstered or supported by tradition in the way that it used to be. Without a religious language to access the soul, we are unable to get a handle on this problem most of the time. For the soul is invisible, and is only made visible in symbol, ritual, myth, and religion. It requires courage to treat something invisible as real, and our society does not yet possess this courage.

The job of religion, in a therapeutic sense, is to keep the second self alive, to 'save' our souls from atrophy, repression, or loss. One problem with Western religion is that it has not been alert to the complexity of the inner life. Interiority has been abandoned, and religion has emphasized 'belief' as the path to salvation. But interiority has to be recovered in the West; this is an urgent problem that we face. Young people often turn to indigenous religions, or to Buddhism, to find out more about the soul than is available in our Western traditions. Parents and teachers should be supporting them in this quest, since knowledge of the soul is now a life or death issue.

'Loss of soul' can undermine our life in an instant. It can cause us to be disturbed, depressed and confused. When soul is lost, the sense of meaning and purpose goes out of life, as if the life-blood had drained from its face. If the soul is unattended, and yet everything else is going fine, our lives can shrivel up and disappear like withered fruit on the vine. One of the core symptoms of this withering is depression, which afflicts us today like an epidemic. Numerous other symptoms, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, fatigue, and suicidal ideation can be read as expressions of the diminished vitality of the soul, although mostly they are read through theories of social behaviour and the bio-medical model. We are 'dis-eased' at the level of meaning, and most of our theories are unable to access this level, because they do not take the spiritual dimension into account. Spirit is seen as too abstract for science to be bothered with, and yet this is an illusion: nothing is more concrete than a reality that bestows purpose and value to life.

Society believes it can get along without spirit, but it cannot. Very soon there will have to be new reckoning, a new kind of enlightenment. We can't keep denying these facts. We will be driven to a new recognition by widespread mental illness and

psychological imbalance. This is the dreadful paradox that besets our society: just when things seem to be getting better, easier and more controlled, we are beset by mental health problems. As life becomes simpler, more efficient, it also becomes unjust and more traumatic.

This is the cost of our loss of soul: in normal conditions the soul lifts us beyond the human into elevated heights, but in abnormal conditions, when soul is absent, our experience is debased, so that the quality of life become subhuman, dangerous, and raw. Civilization could be driven to the wall by this problem: the soul needs to be recognized, else we fall into despair. Going back to the Old Testament, we do well to recall the warning of the prophet: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29: 18).

It is clear that people are perishing for no apparent reason. The modern sickness of alienation and despair is invisible, and almost impossible to reach with the logic of the left-brain.

Self-esteem: who or what gives value to the person?

Today we are bedeviled by the problem of low self-esteem. This is because it is the soul, or the second self, that supplies our sense of deep worth. A great many people are talking about the problem of self-esteem, and there are many secular attempts to resolve it. But it is hard for secular approaches to deal with this issue, because there is a mysterious dimension to self-esteem. Something other than the ego or society gives us our sense of being worthy.

I have been helped in my thinking about this by Aboriginal culture. I once asked an Aboriginal leader why so many youth – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – are harming themselves, sniffing glue or petrol, or attempting suicide. His response was simple and direct:

They don't know who they are. (personal communication, June 2003).

He seemed reluctant to say much more, as he was thinking about sacred matters, and the sacred is protected by secrecy. When I enquired further, he did say that the 'natural' self is unable to understand its true identity. The task of culture, he said, is to tell the person who he or she really is. When they know who they are, they no longer want to harm themselves, for they have received, as a gift from life, their true dignity and worth.

We can learn an enormous amount from indigenous cultures, even though we cannot imitate these cultures or appropriate their rituals, as sometimes happens in the New Age activities (Tacey 2001).

Spirit in ancient initiations and rites of passage

I grew up in the deserts of central Australia, and was able to experience, albeit at a distance due to racial barriers, the powerful spiritual world of indigenous people. This is a primal world in which spirit is felt to be close at hand, and powerfully real. But it was also a world in which spiritual transformation was never sentimentalized. The *otherness* of the divine remains, for these people, a primal otherness which is never finally humanized or made familiar. The spirit is a taskmaster, not a masseur of our ego or a force that makes us feel comfortable.

In archaic societies, before the experience of spirit had been humanized and rendered relatively 'safe' or harmless by the rituals of the world religions, there was a sense that contact with the spirit was arduous and difficult, involving a complete

upheaval of normal life. I think we are gradually moving back to this ancient milieu today, now that many of us are forfeiting the safety and containment of the world religions. Contact with the spirit is problematic at all times, and most difficult of all when it is not controlled by religious tradition.

The movement into the life of the spirit is ritualized in the form of the tribal initiations. There were many kinds of initiations, but they conceived of life as a series of rites of passage from a natural to a higher or spiritual state. The encounter with spirit was often precipitated by personal difficulty, disorientation, trauma, or rupture. The tribal societies held no illusion that the spirit was a friend or helper, but understood that spirit belonged to a different world, even as it attempted to reach into and transform this one.

In his classic work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade shows that in ancient societies the movement from the natural to the spiritual was conceived as a 'violation' of the natural man or woman:

In archaic societies, one does not become a complete man until one has passed beyond, and in some sense abolished, 'natural' humanity. (1957: 187)

The archaic initiations are always ordeals and trials, involving scarring, mutilations, and great physical and mental difficulty. In symbolic as well as physical terms, the natural state is cut across or impeded, to make way for a different kind of reality, which cuts across the given condition.

I speak of 'cutting across' quite deliberately, to highlight the image of *cutting* in philosophical and literal (scarification) contexts. The movement into maturity is to some extent an *opus contra naturam*, a work against the natural state, and even a violation of it. It is regarded as 'natural' to want to 'stay the same' and resist transformation. In tribal societies, youth often reluctantly set foot upon the initiation fields, as they do not welcome the ordeals that are to follow (Van Gennep 1908). They have heard how difficult the ordeals are, and rumors abound, often intensified by the secrecy that surrounds the sacred rites. Despite human squeamishness, however, tradition dictates that such ordeals are to be endured.

Central to this ancient thinking is the idea that we are not complete beings at the time of birth. We need to be 'born again', to grow into a different sense of ourselves and to gain intimacy with our creator:

Initiation rites express a particular conception of human existence: when brought to birth, man is not yet completed; he must be born a second time, spiritually; he becomes complete man by passing from an imperfect, embryonic state to a perfect, adult state. In a word, it may be said that human existence attains completion through a series of 'passage rites', in short, by successive initiations. (Eliade 1957: 181)

The man of the archaic societies does not consider himself 'finished' as he finds himself 'given' on the natural level of existence. To become a man in the proper sense he must die to this first natural life and be reborn to a higher life, which is at once religious and cultural. (Eliade 1957: 187)

In the primal experience of early man, the word 'natural' seems to have two meanings. It is 'natural' to be egocentric and contracted, blind or asleep to the life of the spirit. And yet it is 'natural' to be woken up from this sleep, and stirred to new life in a way that demands reorientation. Spirit is seen as a part of nature, but it is a part that is deep, profound, and often hidden. It is natural to hide from spirit and it is natural that spirit should seek us out.

In his writings on these matters, however, Eliade uses a dualistic language. For him, the state of unconsciousness is natural, and the act of waking up from slumber is by implication 'unnatural' or *contra naturam*. I understand what he is saying in terms of my induction into the Christian West, but in terms of my exposure to indigenous Australians, I am not sure he is right. It is not apparent that early man made the same distinctions. While early man understood the conflict between spirit and matter, this was felt to exist in the *one* world. The danger of any Western attempt to describe indigenous religions is that we tend to see spirit as a force outside the natural order, rather than as a transforming energy within it. Spirit is the aspect of nature that seeks transformation. There is no dualism if we understand nature as a self-overcoming unitary system.

The metaphor of death

Nature desires life but it also asks life to become more conscious, more connected to the whole. Nature is prepared to put a stop to forms of life if they do not cooperate with this evolutionary process. Its credo appears to be: sacrifice for the larger design, or be sacrificed to growth denied. In archaic systems of knowledge, the pattern of spiritual transformation always operates under the insignia of death:

In initiatory contexts *death* signifies passing beyond the profane, unsanctified condition, the condition of the 'natural man', who is without religious experience, who is blind to spirit. (1957: 191)

Eliade says that 'rituals illuminate the symbolism of initiatory death' (1957: 189), and 'death is the preliminary condition for any mystical regeneration' (1957: 190). Initiation is a descent into the condition of death, followed by the hoped-for rebirth and regeneration:

The novice dies to his infantile, profane, nonregenerate life to be reborn to a new, sanctified existence, he is also reborn to a mode of being that makes learning, *knowledge* possible. The newborn is not only one newborn or resuscitated; he is a man who *knows*, who has learned the mysteries, who has had revelations that are metaphysical in nature.

During his training in the bush he learns the sacred secrets: the myths that tell of the gods and the origin of the world, the true names of the gods. (1957: 188)

This is tough, difficult language, about difficult experiences. We might be tempted to enquire: surely we no longer need to go through these ordeals in today's civilized world? Surely we no longer have to pretend we are 'dead' in order to enjoy a fuller life? Surely we have outgrown the need for such painful initiations?

Life crises and traumas replace the initiations

This is where our modern attitudes need some correction. There is more meaning and contemporary relevance in these initiations than we are able to grasp. We are no longer tribalized and no longer suffer the ordeals of the initiations. We read these events and stories as if we are delving into the ancient past, long dead and almost forgotten. But not quite. Eliade gives us the clue to our present situation, when he writes:

In modern nonreligious societies initiation no longer exists as a religious act. But the *patterns* of initiation still survive, although markedly desacralized, in the modern world. (1957: 188)

The patterns of initiation survive in our lived experience. Society no longer conducts rites of passage for us, but we are forced to go through the sufferings of the soul that bear a remarkable resemblance to the rites of passage from earlier times. We no longer have

painful initiations, but instead we have personal traumas, crises and life-transitions. We no longer have initiatory deaths, but instead phases of depression, burnout, self-doubt, when our lives appear completely unreal and empty. There are times when we are 'beside ourselves', desperate, suffering, ghostly, and alone. Society no longer initiates us into the mysteries, but the human soul goes through its age-old patterns of change and growth, and reaches for new stages of development.

Today we are burdened with a troublesome inner life, and what society fails to accept as its responsibility falls to the lot of the individual, who has to make of the situation whatever he or she can. Without supervised initiations, we still need to make the perilous transition from one state to another, from innocence to experience, from egocentricity to spiritual responsibility. The spirit still pushes us from one state to another, from inertia to expansion, from self-enclosure to openness. This is an innate, evolutionary process, and nothing can stand in its way, not even a secular, materialist society that has no conscious belief in the power of the sacred. These transitions cannot be reduced to a biological process, because we are being urged to transcend ourselves and embrace something more. It is biological and spiritual at the same time.

Our consciousness may be emptied of all content regarding the initiations, but there is an older, unconscious part of the mind that still thinks in these terms, that continues to imagine life in terms of death and rebirth. Something in us knows that we have to die, be displaced or interrupted, so that a greater life can emerge. The language of our dreams still speak the language of death and rebirth, and our emotions and desires continue to be influenced by this archaic or mythological thinking. We may no longer 'believe' in spirit, but we experience its demands and claims in similar ways to primal man.

Today, instead of being called to the initiation fields, we will suffer a crisis or a breakdown, where we realize we can no longer continue in the old way. A previous form of existence has to be sacrificed, and we have to take stock, reassess, and move on. This may occur during adolescence, when we have to put the child in us away and take on a new life as an adult. Or it may be at midlife, when we realize that the old way of being in the world is no longer satisfying to the soul. At such times of transition, something in us has to die, so that something new can live.

We may dream at these points about symbols of death and rebirth, or we may have desires to die and be reborn. But without public symbols or ceremonies, we might not know how to go about this process. We might experience the *impulse* to terminate our previous existence, but not know how to carry it out. Without a symbolic language for the soul and its processes, we stand helpless before these impulses. In this situation, with desperate inner emotions, we might harm ourselves in some way, or entertain the idea of suicide as a way out of the impasse.

Without symbol or ceremony, we are helpless and vulnerable. The psyche impresses the idea of death-and-rebirth upon us, and we are at loss to know how to react. Our doctor might say we are suffering from suicidal ideation, and we should put such morbid thoughts out of our head and embrace the world. But a persistent desire will keep nagging away, demanding attention. 'You can't go on like this', it might say; 'you can't go on as before'.

Indigenous people listened to these impulses carefully, and responded appropriately. But we do not know how to negotiate the psycho-spiritual transitions of our lives. We are blind to the spirit, and mostly we have no markers, rites, or symbols.

We have no language, except, 'I am not feeling so good today', or 'I am depressed and fatigued', or 'I think I want to kill myself'. Needless to say, it was more noble and dignified to speak the language of ritual death and rebirth. It was healthier to mark our transitions by linking our inner lives to ceremony. It was healthier to mark our transitions communally, in society, and to share our suffering with elders, rather than suffer in isolation and in the quiet desperation of our private corner. Where is the advancement in how we live today?

Suicidal ideation and initiatory process

The first of the initiatory ceremonies occurs during the teenage years. In Aboriginal cultures, these are referred to as 'men's business' and 'women's business'. There is a complete separation of the genders at initiation, a belief that older members of the same sex are best equipped to induct young people into the spirit (Stanner 1989). Typically, the candidate is taken to the initiation fields, where a three- or five-day ordeal is constructed to carry the candidate to the condition of adulthood.

The timing of this initiation is significant for us, since it is the teenager or young adult in modern society who is often afflicted by self-harming behaviors or beset by suicidal urges. We say we have no way of understanding these tragic impulses that afflict large numbers of our youth, but indigenous cultures provide a window into a new way of looking at this problem. Certainly, the problem today is huge. According to epidemiologist Richard Eckersley:

A study of Australian university undergraduates ... found that almost two-thirds of the students, with an average age of 22, admitted to some degree of suicidal ideation or behaviour – broadly defined – in the previous twelve months. 21 per cent revealed minimum ideation, saying they had felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up'; another 19 per cent revealed high suicidal ideation, agreeing they had wished 'my life would end', or that they had been 'thinking of ways to kill myself'; a further 15 per cent showed suicide-related behaviour, saying they had 'told someone I want to kill myself', or had 'come close to taking my own life'; and 7 per cent said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'. Another study found 27 per cent of a sample of university students indicated suicidal ideation in the 'past few weeks'. (2004: 176-77)

Psychiatry generally interprets this problem in terms of students' self-punishing responses to the pressures of higher education. The menacing force driving them to suicide is said to be their perfectionism and performance anxiety (Hamilton and Schweitzer 2000). But in my opinion, this response is too limited. The deeper force driving them is not environmental but internal, not rational but archetypal. That force is the desire to live authentic lives, not to be fake, phony, or feel worthless. Young adults cannot stand an inauthentic life. It is hoped that psychiatry will look beyond its current horizon and begin to address the larger existential issues.

In tribal societies, the young adult is encouraged to embark on an ordeal, or a trial of initiation. In this ordeal, which is supervised by the elders, the candidate is made to experience the 'death' of his or her former self through ritual process. From the symbolic enactment of death, he or she is expected to arise in a new form, as a fully initiated member of the adult community. The young person is no longer oriented around personal goals or needs, but rather around collective, tribal, transpersonal and cosmic needs. This process is felt to be vital to the health and wellbeing of the soul. The tribal member breaks free of the ego-bound state and enters into relationship with a greater world of sacred values and visions (Thompson 1982).

He is 'born again' to a larger world, and here the assumption is that the ordinary ego is not an end in itself, but a kind of transitional object. It is a vehicle to carry us to a larger life and worldview. We are not meant to remain as shrunken egos. The ordinary ego is not, in itself, large enough to carry or contain the soul, the whole of life. It must be shed like an animal skin, so we can put on the new body, which is why some indigenous cultures adorn themselves in the skins of sacred totemic animals at the time of the initiations. This is the sign that the profane life has ended, and that the sacred life has begun.

The contemporary education theorist Joseph Chilton Pearce understands the importance of the role of 'spirit' in the developmental life of the young adult. He argues that young people know, instinctively, that there is more to life than what society presents them:

A poignant and passionate idealism arises in early puberty, followed by an equally passionate expectation in the mid-teens that 'something tremendous is supposed to happen' and finally by the teenager's boundless, exuberant belief in 'the hidden greatness within me'. A teenager often gestures toward his or her heart when speaking of these sensibilities, for the heart is involved in what should take place. (2002: 53)

A transformation *should* take place, but often it does not. The young person can be overwhelmed by negativity if the change that needs to happen does not happen. Who or what am I? What is my place in the world? I need a big cause to believe in, but what cause is big enough to contain my idealism? Why do people say I am too big for my boots? Am I expecting too much from society? Is there something wrong with me? Why don't I fit in?

The self-questioning can go on endlessly, and there comes a time when a limit is reached. Idealism turns to despair, hope turns to cynicism, and the 'hidden greatness within me' collapses into turmoil and confusion. There is a *frustration of spiritual intent*. We are repressing a developmental process, and life won't stand for it.

A similar idea is found in the 'sayings of Jesus' in the Gnostic gospels. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, from 140 A.D., we read the following:

If you bring forth that within yourselves,
that which you have will save you.
If you do not have that within yourselves,
that which you do not have within you will kill you. (Saying 70; p.41)

This is a harsh and difficult truth, but the idea of something needing to be born within the self is as old as humanity. Ancient civilizations did not need psychology to tell them that the self is not a static thing but a dynamic process that has to give birth to forces beyond itself. The self is to act a midwife to a second self, and we cannot afford to block the second self or allow it to become stillborn.

Hazing and trials in indigenous cultures

In tribal initiations, there are numerous methods used to enact the death of the first self. Hallucinogenic and mind-altering drugs are used to create an altered state of mind, and with it, the conviction that a change is taking place. This, of course, casts the problem of teenage drug addiction in a new light. There may be forces at work in the teenage use of drugs that our secular authorities know nothing about (Zoja 1989). This is not to condone drug taking, but to suggest that dangerous habits in today's youth may be

following ancient patterns, and we would do well to study this problem in a broader context.

Intoxicants have long been used in African and New Guinea initiations, and the mescaline-rich peyote is used in Mexican and American-Indian rituals. In some cultures, the initiate is led on a 'vision quest', often accompanied by deprivations and trials. A common feature of initiation is to half-starve the initiate, or to frighten him or her with unearthly sounds, noises, and tribal dances. There is a 'rushing of forms', sometimes referred to as 'hazing', and often associated with totemic animals (Keen 1994). Popular culture, rock videos, and film clips are fast, dizzying and disorienting. Perhaps some of the fascination for these technical forms derives from a desire to collapse normal perception and turn the mind around.

In some Aboriginal rituals, the initiate is painted white and placed in a shallow grave, to signify the death of the self. Sometimes an eyetooth is knocked out, scars are made across the chest, and the ritual of circumcision is performed on boys, to signify the death of the natural man.

In this weakened state, the elders introduce the initiate to the sacred stories and mysteries of the community, and these are offered as a source of strength. Often the initiate is given a new name, to symbolize the emergence of a new identity, and he or she is re-introduced to the community as a different person.

These trials are painful, and the early Christian missionaries and anthropologists were often horrified by the rituals (Berndt 1974). However, the transitions of life *are* painful, and it is better to ritualize the pain, and share it with the community, than to experience it in a solitary way. Organized rituals have the effect of containing pain, which otherwise might go on without closure. Today, without rituals, self-harming behaviors may go on indefinitely, and adolescence is lasting longer and starting earlier.

In tribal cultures, which could not afford the luxury of a long adolescence, with its rebelliousness, personal awkwardness and social alienation, the 'teenage' period was terminated by the decisive act of initiation. As an Aboriginal elder said to me:

For us, adolescence lasts 5 days – the time of the initiation. Before initiation he is a child, after initiation, he is an adult. (personal communication, June 2003)

I should point out to the reader that in Aboriginal culture there is a strict protocol about gender and sacred knowledge. Since I am a male, I can only be spoken to in the context of male experience and men's business. If I show interest in the experience of females, Aboriginal elders will stop talking and see this as a violation of sacred knowledge and cultural taboo.

Cutting, piercing, tattooing

In many rituals, minor wounds or violations are inflicted upon the body. Young adults emerge from the initiation grounds with scarring across the chest, back and body, with cuts and abrasions to the arms and legs, missing teeth, and circumcised genitals. According to Eliade, such violations are outward signs that the human person, the mortal body, has been 'marked' by spirit and interrupted by another reality (1957: 190). We have been touched by eternity. The 'natural' is no longer innocent; the divine has scarred it.

This provides the archetypal background to a variety of modern practices found in youth culture. Many schools and colleges are reporting that teenagers are practicing self-

mutilation. Young men and women are cutting themselves, using blades or knives to wound their limbs and bodies. Sometimes, hands and fingers are cut, and there is reported violation of the abdomen and thighs.

Less pathological, but within the same range of activities, are the popular habits of body piercing and tattooing. There is a desire to 'mark' the body, to announce that one has been 'touched' by something decisive. The body is no longer normal, no longer free of markings or imprints. The innocence of the body has been lost, and this has been sacrificed. Today we find rings, studs, and pins in nostrils, ears, tongues, eyebrows, navels and sundry other locations.

In his study of American youth culture and its 'irreverent' styles of spirituality, Tom Beaudoin writes:

Like its related trend, tattooing, the permanent cut of body piercing is more than just teen folly. To pierce one's body is to leave a permanent mark of intense physical experience, whether pleasurable or painful. The mark of indelible experience is ... proof that something *marked me, something happened*. Contemporary youth are willing to have experience, to be profoundly marked, even cut, when religious institutions have not given them those opportunities. (Beaudoin 1998: 77-78)

Beaudoin points out that safety pins are used in body piercings. 'A pin named *safety* – an artifact meant to avoid harming babies – becomes a social statement about harm and danger'. Young people sense that the world is not safe; we have not constructed the 'safe haven' that is supposed to protect us from the intrusions of the sacred. Something unsafe bears down on us, and it is not just the threat of external terrorism or violence; we are not protected from the incursions of the spirit. Contemporary fashions such as piercing and tattooing are acknowledging that something unnatural and unsafe makes its presence in our lives. We cannot remain innocent, but something else is at work, leaving its signature, its imprint, its cut on our bodies.

Beaudoin believes that contemporary youth perform these rituals consciously, as deliberate attempts at religious experience. My reading is that they are spontaneous acts of behavior. I am convinced that most teenagers are unaware of the religious significance of their actions. They just 'do' these things because they feel impelled to do them by an inner impulse. The fact that these ritualistic acts, such as cutting, binge drinking, and drug taking, are pathological and harmful is itself the sign that they are unconscious. When religious acts are performed consciously they are never violent, demeaning, or pathological.

We need more than a response of disapproval or moral outrage to these practices. We can say that the cutting is bizarre and it should stop, or that the tattooing is in poor taste and it should stop. But youths are trying to mark the body, because there is an innate need to mark their passage from one state to another. A youth is driven to 'unnatural' acts because something 'unnatural' needs to happen in life. If this does not happen in the mind, the body is used as an outlet for unnatural activity. We might say that the less successful we are in changing the mind, the more likely we are to inflict pain on the body.

Rebirth and renewal

Ritual death is followed by ritual rebirth. Here again the ancient cultures have the advantage over us, because it was made clear to the young person what they were being reborn to. The process of rebirth requires a cosmology or a sacred vision large enough to

draw the inner spirit out of the person and to keep it held and stimulated. The cosmology acts like a magnet, drawing the second self out from its hiding place.

As this happens, personal isolation is overcome, because the spirit by definition links us with other people, other beings, and the world. When this occurs, healing takes place: the person stops harming himself and starts healing himself. Evolution has achieved its second birth, and anxiety and terror give way to equanimity and acceptance. Now the person knows who he is, and he sees the vision that bestows meaning to all things, including his own suffering.

In tribal culture, it was the job of society to supply this vision for each individual. In our time, we have shrugged off the social religion as oppressive, and we say we want to find our own meaning. This gives us freedom of a kind, but it exposes us to dangers. We might not find a meaning which can draw out our spirit, to begin the healing process. This requires trust, love, and surrender.

All along we had hoped for something tremendous to occur, and if we are unable to find it, rebirth cannot occur. Our ability to see truth and defend it becomes an existential requirement: our lives depend on it. It is hard to endure the death and suffering phase, but if we have hope in our hearts we can always look forward to what lies ahead. Hope is important psychologically and biologically; it enables us to endure difficulty with a positive attitude. Without a larger vision ahead of us, we are more likely to remain stuck in the death phase of our transformation.

At the climax of a ritual in central Australia, the elder moves forward to the initiate, and, showing him the sacred churinga, he says:

Here is your body, here is your second self. (Neumann 1949: 289)

There are parallels in all the world religions. Hinduism might refer to the second self as the Atman, which replaces the ego. Buddhism refers to the Buddha-self, which ousts the ego as the master of our fate. Or in Christianity, we have the witness of St Paul, who felt the sacred presence in his soul: 'I live, yet not I but Christ lives within me' (Galatians 2: 20). Every sacred tradition has its own version of this transformation, which deposes the ego and gives honor to the highest value. When we live from that second self, we live properly.

The rites of passage are guarded with secrecy and taboo, because the process of transformation is central not only to the individual life, but to the community, whose spiritual existence is validated and revitalized by each new act of initiation (Keen 1994). These rites can neither be trivialized nor made widely public or profaned, because so much is at stake, and the effectiveness of the rites is influenced by their mysterious or otherworldly character. The initiate must be made to feel a sense of awe and wonderment, a sense that he or she has been visited by an encounter with the numinous and transformed by a higher spiritual authority.

The world religions have systematized this sacred process which is found in its elemental form in tribal communities (Eliade 1956). Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism have their own codified and creedal understandings of this basic element of the spiritual life: the need to be born to a higher reality. In Christianity, these processes are expressed in baptism and confirmation, which are simultaneously inductions into the spiritual life and initiations into the community of the faithful. However, these potentially powerful and transformative rites have become so routine and

automatic that the power of the spiritual transformation has seemingly been lost, or at least muted.

Among the Jews, we find the process of transformation expressed in the bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, where the child symbolically dies, and in its place the adult self is born. This is a second birth, not of the flesh but of the spirit: the person matures in and through the spirit by learning the sacred texts, by internalizing the sacred law of the Torah, and by basing his or her new identity upon the spirit. The products of this second birth are maturity, a new sense of responsibility to others, respect for elders, and a faith in the reality of the sacred source that makes life possible. As with Christian rites, Jewish festivals can also be muted and disempowered by a routine or conventional awareness, and a merely mechanical repetition of events. It depends on the level of commitment of the family and community, and the passion and belief of the novice, as to whether these rites are effective or hollow.

Spiritual transformation cannot be guaranteed by the mechanical enactment of a ritual performance, which is why stealing ritual contents from one culture and handing them to another is ineffective. It is not the 'external' ritual that transforms the person, but his or her belief in the symbolic activity. Effectiveness must be seen as a combination of ritual action, community belief, and emotional conviction of the subject. Tribal communities cannot afford to have hollow rites, or to lose the intensity of their sacred ceremonies, because the livelihood and survival of the group depends upon the success of ritual in converting people from egotism to responsibility and community-mindedness.

Without wisdom, the people perish

Today we live under enormous psychological pressure. Any culture without wisdom is living a lie, and eventually the lie is exposed. An Aboriginal man in Alice Springs once said to me, 'You white fellows are a curious people, to us it looks like you are not initiated'. He was saying that we still live, like infants, from the ego. The first self has not been broken, we have not given birth to the second.

But today Aboriginal society itself is racked by destruction. Since the trauma of European colonization, traditional culture and law has been undermined, and morbidity is prevalent in society, especially in young adults. In the Pitjantjatjara lands of the centre, I spoke with an *ngankari*, or spirit doctor, named Ilyatjari. Conversations with this remarkable man have already been recorded in the work of the American Jungian analyst Robert Bosnak (1996). I asked Ilyatjari about the high incidence of drug abuse among his people, and of the high rate of suicide. He said:

There's too much concern about preventing suicide, and not enough about showing these boys how to die in ceremony. If we show them how to die, their living takes care of itself. (personal communication, June 1997)

He was suggesting that these young people might not be actually 'suicidal' at all. They are not unusual, pathological, aberrant, or wrong. They are simply in need of spiritual transformation in a time and place that does not understand such things. It is the culture or society that is aberrant or defective, because it fails to provide young people with the necessary rituals and ideas to allow the termination of the natural self and the emergence of a new personality.

In similar vein, Mircea Eliade writes:

In initiatory death ... men die to something *that was not essential*; men die to the profane life.

(1957: 196)

By this reckoning, it is not the individual who is mad or crazy, but society itself. Ilyatjari was saying that living outside sacred law is a dangerous state, and that the boys he was referring to were all detribalized and secularized. The key here is the spiritual responsibility of society for its own members: If we show them how to die in ceremony, that is, in symbol and in spirit, then their living will 'take care of itself'. It is an absence in society that brings us to moral insanity and self-mutilation, because the duty of care that was invested in our spiritual wellbeing has been abandoned by a 'modern' or 'enlightened' attitude. This was the voice of tradition casting judgment on the modern secular world.

A similar view was put to me by another Aboriginal lawman from the Kimberley region of the northwest country. David Mowaljarlai expressed his concern about the young men in the Kimberley who had succumbed to petrol or glue sniffing, known as 'chroming'. Mowaljarlai visited a hospital ward which was full of young men who had practiced chroming. He explained the situation this way:

All these boys, you see, lack ceremony. They haven't died in initiation. If you take away the sacred law, you take away their lives. (personal communication, November 1996)

The Aboriginal men of high degree view the problem of self-destruction from the inside, not externally. They recognize that the human being is spiritual, and the spiritual core has needs, and if these are not attended to the results can be tragic. We need a spiritual goal, a pathway that can link us with truth. The only way to free the spirit is to think symbolically about the needs of the spirit. The way to stop us from killing ourselves is to teach people how to die in the spirit, so that we can be reborn in the spirit.

Symbolic thinking as the key to rebirth

Jungian psychology uses a similar language to the spiritual discourse of Aboriginal culture. In his book *Suicide and the Soul*, James Hillman (1973) writes that when we are beset by suicidal ideation we have to ask a psychological question: what is it within me that wants to die? That question not only yields insight, but it also shifts something in the soul. The dark force is no longer against us, but it now works with us. Or rather, we are working with it to determine what change needs to occur.

In another work, Hillman makes a similar kind of statement:

Everything the psyche presents is metaphorical. If you have images of suicide, there is some kind of movement toward the realm of death. It's an attempt to get to death in one way or another, or to leave some kind of thing that has been identified with as life, whether its body or world or family. (1976: 146)

The psyche presents this urge as metaphorical, but it is not going to be experienced metaphorically by the person in great distress. That, of course, is the meaning of culture, or of 'ceremony', as the Aboriginal view puts it. The purpose of culture is to provide metaphor and symbol for our inner urges, so that these urges do not have to be acted out. We are no longer at their mercy, because we have understood their meaning. There is a relevant saying from medieval alchemy: 'for he who has the symbol, the way is made easy'.

In the context of the need to think symbolically about spiritual death and rebirth, I am reminded of the encounter between Jesus and the rabbi Nicodemus.

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. (John 3: 3)

Nicodemus asks: ‘How can a man be born when he is old?’ ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?’ Jesus is astonished by this literal thinking, which leads Nicodemus to imagine that incest is the way to be reborn. Jesus repeats: ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’ ‘Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.’ In other words, if we think in terms of the flesh, our thinking is literal, and we can only imagine rebirth as a return to the mother’s womb. Symbolic thinking comes from the spirit, and this generates a new spiritual approach: hence ‘spirit gives birth to spirit’.

Jesus admonishes Nicodemus for his literal cast of mind: ‘You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again”’. Jesus loses his patience: ‘What, are you Israel’s teacher, and yet do you not understand these things?’ (John 3: 10). Now, what would the voice of wisdom say today? Wouldn’t it say: don’t be surprised if you feel called to die? For something in you needs to die, so that something else can live.

What we can learn from the ancient wisdom of Palestine and Australia is that where there is symbolic understanding, then the spiritual aspect of our impulses can be realized. Where there is no symbolic understanding, the impulses that well up from the soul are wrongly interpreted, leading to ideas of incest or suicide. The impulses that drive us to transformation are powerful, and lethal if misinterpreted. There is almost nothing more practical, useful, or pragmatic than a spiritual wisdom that makes sense of the impulses that drive us from within.

I would like to end with some hints or clues about how to restore hope to our human situation.

Ten Summary Points: about fostering wisdom in a world without initiations

Question: What can adults do to counter the fatal impact of transitional impulses?

1. the importance of developing an awareness of the second self

We can help foster an awareness of the reality of the second self in children and students, from the earliest age. If we grow up with the expectation that we have more than a single self, then the emergence of a second self might not catch us unawares or unprepared.

We have to counter the willful ignorance of society, which pretends that life is about ‘number one’, that there is no second self, no transformation. This is a toxic environment in which to grow up, because the absence of wisdom leaves us helpless before the powerful transformational impulses, which can be fatal if not correctly interpreted. They are not calls to death, but calls to rebirth. If mishandled, they can be lethal.

From the earliest age, we need to look beyond the child’s ego to the larger life that is already present within them. Despite their muddle or confusion, we need to hint all along that they are more than what meets the eye. There is a larger person waiting to break out, not just once or twice, but repeatedly in a series of ongoing transformations. It is healthy and vital to educate the young into a sense that life is large and mysterious, that things happen beyond our understanding.

2. finding a language that is not alienating

There is no point in using a language to describe this process or reality if it is alienating to the young. We need to find a language that speaks of spiritual journeying which is not too ‘religious’, because so many young people are suspicious of religious language. We

may need to find a ‘secular spirituality’ that is non-denominational, otherwise the young may see it as doctrinal, ideological or coercive.

For instance, the language of first and second self is suitably suggestive but not overly religious; it also has a psychological aspect, which may appeal to the scientific spirit of the time.

3. the birth of the new self is linked to pain

Indigenous traditions teach us that the birth of the second self is linked to pain. It cuts across and displaces the first self, and this is experienced as a violation or attack.

However, the best way to reduce or delimit the pain is to go with the process, and allow the new self to appear.

We have to expect difficulty in life, despite the dangerous social message that life is about the avoidance of pain. If we learn to expect pain, we are more likely to endure it. It is a matter of finding the sacred in our woundedness, and in draining the profane from the pain.

For instance, drug taking or addictions, binge-drinking, chroming, self-mutilation, loud chaotic music, trance parties, tattooing, body piercing, risk-taking behaviors; all can be contextualized as initiatory impulses. All can be seen as profane attempts to attack the self, as a prelude to rebirth. But rebirth to what?

4. the diversity of expressions in the process of rebirth

In each case, ‘rebirth’ will mean, and imply, different things to different people. There is no longer a standard formula, to be imposed by elders or society upon young adults.

There are a variety of religions, cosmologies, spiritualities, causes, and ideas. But we have to encourage the young person to find his or her own way to one of these big ideas or causes, which then may act as a catalyst to renewal, reorientation and rebirth.

Parents and teachers should try not to be too judgmental if the young person selects a big idea that does not appeal to their taste or background. For instance, a Christian parent might be alarmed if the child selects Buddhism as the vehicle for transformation; an atheist parent might be surprised if the child moves into charismatic Christianity; an industrialist might be upset if ecology or environmentalism is the larger concern, or a scientist might be alarmed if the child enters cosmology, kabbalah, or yoga.

The postmodern world is synonymous with diversity and plurality, and correct parenting at this crucial time of transition involves tolerance, suspension of disbelief, except perhaps where the interest is demonstrably harmful, i.e. an apocalyptic sect or a suicide cult. Parents and teachers should always be looking for initiatory signs in the experiences and interests of young people. The golden rule: never quash a large idea unless you can offer another one to replace it.

5. cultivating a sense of the specialness of every individual

The Greeks referred to the special essence of the individual as his or her ‘daimon’.

Living in harmony with the daimon gave rise to *eudaimonia*, a condition often translated as happiness or wellbeing. Today we might talk about relating to the ‘true self’ or ‘inner self’. But no matter what we call it, relating to young people in such a way that we convey the recognition that they are potentially ‘more’ than they seem (more than their

ego) can be liberating. Something deep inside is empowered by being seen, being noticed.

Recognition can be the key that frees the inner self that is inside, giving young people the permission to be more fully themselves. Recognition can act as midwife to the birth of the new self, and it can make the rebirth less traumatic because it has been anticipated. Again, the special talent or special interest may not accord with the parent's taste, and tact again is crucial.

6. adults, teachers, parents need to nurture the second self within ourselves

If we adults fail to see the potential greatness in ourselves, then children are less likely to respect or sense the greatness in them. We owe it to our children and students to cultivate a spiritual awareness in our own lives, and to tap the hidden potential that we sense below the surface of our first self. This is very hard to do in professional contexts, where role-play, social persona, and investment in our own seriousness, might mask the murmurings of the inner self.

But it is crucial for our own resilience, the resilience of our children, and the resilience of society as a whole. It is the one thing we can all do to build spiritual and social capital.

7. learning to read the soul's expressions in unusual phenomena

Cultivating a symbolic awareness is important, in addition to the moral judgment that teachers and responsible adults typically adopt toward young people. For instance, instead of showing revulsion toward body piercing, tattooing, we might interpret these acts symbolically. Instead of just saying no to drugs, drinking, or risk-taking behaviour, we might try to explore what impulse lies behind it. Instead of telling them to turn the music down, we might try to find out what the lyrics are saying.

8. learning to look for signs in dreams and imagination

Dreams usually express the processes of the inner self, in symbolic language that few of us can understand. It might be worthwhile for some of us to actually study the language of dreams and to be alert to signs of transformation or of struggles that are taking place in our children and ourselves.

9. the importance of same-sex relationships across the generations

Indigenous cultures put a lot of emphasis on boys being initiated by older men, and girls by older women. We need to take this to heart today, to act as mentors for young people. The older person of the same sex has a particular kind of psychic power: he or she is like oneself, yet *other* than oneself. He or she is a mana figure: like yet unlike, similar but older and wiser. This may serve to activate the wisdom and maturity-generating powers within the young person's psyche.

10. the recognition that forces at work in children are larger than us

Despite our best efforts to reach out to the child or student, there are forces at work in all our lives over which we can have little or no control. We live in a time of disruption and confusion, and this falls hardest on the young, who are the most vulnerable. As parents, we do our best, but we cannot control all that impacts on our children, as some of us know only too painfully. We must recognize, in our wisdom as elders and mentors, that

there is a powerful force in every life, and a deep structure in every soul. They might be our offspring, and the fruits of our lives, but they have a sacred otherness that must be respected. In this disruptive time in history, there are forces at work that we are unable to control.

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