

## Rites of Passage

October 7, 2007  
Rev. Martha Niebanck  
First Parish in Brookline

**Reading:** “*Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*” Malidoma Patrice Some

We need ritual because it is an expression of the fact that we recognize the difficulty of creating a ... special kind of community. A community that doesn't have a ritual cannot exist. ... What we need is to be able to come together with a constantly increasing mindset of wanting to do the right thing, even though we know very well that we don't know how nor where to start. ... Knowing what spirit to invoke and what to do with that spirit depends on your ability to stay focused on your purpose. You must be willing to speak of your inabilities, your clumsiness....

You must walk your limp in order to stay with your purpose. This is important for you to truly shine, to really be at home with yourself in ritual and in community....

Whatever happens in a ritual space, some kind of power is released if given a freedom in which to live. This is the only way those who participate in the ritual can continue to benefit from the power. The forces aroused in the ritual function like a power plant into which every individual is hooked. When one leaves the ritual space, the power of the ritual goes wherever the person goes....

**Reading:** “*An Archetypal Journey*” Sallie Nichols

The tarot card of "The Hanged Man" describes the time of initiation as a time of enforced stillness — The hanged man is suspended between life and death. By facing this ordeal of enforced inactivity he calls on his own inner strength and is reborn. Living deeply into (the end of an era) is like being the hanged man — suspended between life and death.

An initiation of this sort can occur at various times in life, usually whenever we have reached the end of a certain phase or stage of existence and life demands a transition to new ways. It is an awesome moment, for we must give up the old and tried ways of functioning and must entrust ourselves to the unseen and untried new life. It demands sacrifice and courage.

All of us, perhaps in less overt and dramatic ways than the one pictured (in the Hanged Man tarot card), have undergone periods in our lives when we were similarly hung up by circumstances, times when old behavior patterns could no longer keep us upright, when life pulled out the rug from under us so that we felt suspended between worlds and could only wait and pray.... It is as if the pattern

of spiritual growth were like that of a tree's unfolding. Before fresh branches can blossom forth at the top, the roots must sink deeper and spread wider to support this new growth.

**Sermon:**

When I was nearly 40, I was sent by my church on a week-long retreat for lay leaders to learn about leading in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I expected to attend lectures, take notes, meet new people, and share ideas. We did that and we did more than that. On the first evening of the retreat we were asked to go off by ourselves and “let an altar build itself.”

Intrigued by the syntax of the instruction, I allowed the rocks and the stream and the ferns to direct my hands. When they finished with me my mind was as blown as if I'd taken LSD. A simple ritual, done in the spirit of receptivity, changed my mind, changed my understanding of my place in the world forever.

At the time, I was in the middle of training to become a family therapist and began reading and learning about the power of rituals to help families transform relationships in ways that a simple prescription for change could not accomplish. I learned how to guide families and individuals in the creation of personal rituals — rituals to quit smoking, rituals to prepare for marriage, rituals for preparing for dying and death.

A friend asked me to join her at the Jung Foundation in New York City to co-lead a workshop for women in midlife. We ended in a ritual circle, crafted by the participants, marking the transition from the first adulthood to the second adulthood — the transition from cultural adulthood to a creative-meaning making adulthood.

I joined with another friend to offer the same workshop for men and women at the UU Conference Center. One the fourth day of the workshop, the day when we were to begin the work of crafting a ritual, I learned that working with Unitarian Universalists was not the same as working with clients at the Family Center or the Pain Unit or with women at the Jung Foundation.

At least a third of the group objected to the idea of a ritual on two grounds — if a ritual is real, it can invoke real power, demonic power like the Nazis did with torchlight parades and hypnotic musical; and if it is not real, it is empty of life and hypocritical. I am grateful to these objections because they required us to be reverent, humble and fully present.

Before we could craft a ritual together, we had to take responsibility to be clear about our intentions, committed to the process, connected to each other, and fully present to ourselves. We were neither sloppy nor asleep. When the ritual was completed we went our separate ways transformed and supported by the communal energy we bound together with ritual.

A rite of passage transforms and binds community. A rite of passage is concentrated, focused, and named by the whole community. We take a moment outside of ordinary time and become rooted in the facts of life — birth, passion, dreams, discipline, wisdom and death. Everyone takes time away from the ordinary to make special time — the way the Cordio family arrived here to witness a particular transition — the blessing of a new family. We are each transformed at the same time by remembering the facts of birth, life, and death together.

Twelve or so years from now, Natalie, even if she is a perfect child of perfect parents, a beloved and devoted daughter, will, like teenagers from the beginning of time, get an irresistible urge, every now and then, to "do something crazy." Perhaps you can remember your own adolescence for some examples — driving fast, breaking curfew, using mind-altering substances — a whole gamut of urges, even ones we cannot imagine now, will arise in Natalie and her peers.

Ancient cultures responded to these urges, what some call “developmental psychosis,” by separating young persons from the tribe and subjecting them to painful and dangerous rites of passage while they taught them the secrets that only adults know. Traditional cultures had a way of tapping into that energy of risk taking and pairing it with learning something important.

In our time and place, young people ritualize the new powers that come with hormones and extra brain cells: by getting a driver's license, playing chicken, losing one's virginity, getting things pierced and tattooed, smoking, getting drunk, going to war. Most of them do all of these powerful things without the benefit of initiation by elders — Elders who honor those powers with the focus and intention of a challenging rite of passage.

When Natalie is a young adolescent I hope she'll participate in another sort of rite of passage, a coming-of-age ceremony in which she will begin to turn herself to relationships outside of her family and to making real the ideals that she will be claiming as her own. She will meet with the elders of this congregation and learn about relationships, passion, and danger.

The program will be a challenge because she'll have to learn to organize her time and commitments in order to complete all of the required tasks. She will have to make choices with the help of mentors rather than via the nagging of her mother and father.

I expect that this community will create a doorway in time for Natalie and her peers, a doorway that will organize all of our powers toward a sustainable and passionate future. I hope that she will have a community of elders to initiate her into this community.

How many of us here feel ready to be named as an elder? Have you been initiated from young adulthood to midlife? Have you moved from thinking of yourself in the middle of your life to thinking of yourself as a sage, a person with one foot turned toward the door?

Is your yearly birthday party a ritual that raises and organizes new energy and new community for you? Are you transformed by the ceremony of blowing out candles?

I just returned from a visit to our partner church in Korond, Transylvania. On the Saturday before the annual Thanksgiving service, another ceremony took place in that 17th century sanctuary. All of the 50-year olds in the town were invited to gather. Their family and friends had given them bouquets of flowers as gifts as they entered. The minister preached a sermon inviting these 50-year olds to remember those who had supported them in their growing up during the horrifying times of Ceausescu. Many were weeping as they remembered.

After the service they were to walk to the cemetery to leave the flowers on the graves of those who had made a difference to their life, while making a promise to do the same for the next generation. Last month the 40-year olds had a ceremony, next month there will be a ceremony for 60-year olds; every month will honor and obligate a new decade of maturity.

If we are to be present to Natalie's initiation into adolescence as guides, mentors, and sages, we too need a focused, communal rite of passage. Something that takes seriously the time between being young and being old, the space of being suspended between the sky and the earth.

Each initiation into the next stage of maturity teaches us that the "growth of each of us depends upon the growth of all. The more successful one generation enters the next stage, the more it enhances the ability of those before and after it to enter theirs. The young are within us; so are the old." (Mark Gerson, *Coming Into Our Own*)

Next week, Rev. Larry Peers, a member of this church, and I will begin a three-session workshop to explore the pathways of maturity and listen to the soul signals that become audible in the second half of life. We hope you'll join us, not just for yourselves, but for Natalie and for all the children of Natalie's generation. Natalie and her mother and father will need us when she enters the time of developmental psychosis.

In order to be present and passionate, disciplined and creative in the building of a doorway in time that can hold that energy, we must have been initiated into this way of powerless power. We must have lived through a time of "enforced stillness, suspended between life and death."

As Some teaches, "Knowing what spirit to invoke and what to do with that spirit depends on (our) ability to stay focused on (our) purpose. We must be willing to speak of our inabilities, our clumsiness. We must walk our limp in order to stay with our purpose. In order to shine, we must be really at home in ourselves and in community."

This is the work of maturity we are called to do together, that we do for Natalie, and that Natalie does for us.

In a world without end, amen.

**Closing Words:**

Charles Stevens

I wish for you a troubled heart at times  
As woes of the world and friend come close beside  
And keep you sleepless.

I wish for you the thrill of knowing who you are,  
Where you stand, and why.  
Especially why.

Not prosperity, but dreams I wish for you;  
Not riches, but a sense of your own worth I wish  
For you.

Not even long life, however proud we'd be to have it so.  
But life that is crammed with living, hour by hour.

And love I wish for you;  
May you give it frequently.

I wish for you solitude in the midst of company,  
And a mind full of company within your quiet times.

Full today's, I wish for you, and full tomorrow's.