

Rites to a Good Life: Everyday Rituals of Healing and Transformation

From **Chapter 11: Covid-19 and our Planetary Rite of Passage**

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I've been writing, making films and giving talks about the archetype of initiation, of Rites of

Passage, for 20 years, but I never expected what happened in 2020! The entire *planet* going through a Rite of Passage?! Certainly, in history there were single years, or 2-3-year periods, when the entire planet confronted cataclysmic change: the World Wars, perhaps the Great Depression and the Plague years. Even though I have studied, and to some degree, prepared for so-called "collapse," I never in my lifetime imagined I would experience anything like the number and degree of economic, social, environmental and political shockwaves that occurred in 2020. Though far from over, I will now write about this planetary ROP in order to extract what I see as some key lessons from this time and offer it as a present-day teaching to contemporary readers.

For most of the world, the official beginning of Separation (or Severance) began in March 2020. China was already locked down to a great degree by then but the rest of the world, perhaps especially the U.S., was slow to act. March 2020 was like watching a house of cards collapse in slow motion as country after country took steps to limit the free circulation of its citizens. Normal work life? Gone. Normal patterns of shopping, socializing, exercising, entertainment, spiritual or religious practice? All gone. Sense of safety? Gone. Our once familiar world was immediately and irrevocably unfamiliar. We were forced to let go of all our traditional ways of being. Just like indigenous Initiates who are suddenly, even violently separated from their everyday life and taken to the sacred sites of initiation, we were forced into wearing masks, told to limit our time outside - basically locked down in our homes. No less wrenching than if we were boys from the tribe spirited away to the forest, the jungle, the outback or the desert, escorted by Elders into the complete, and completely fear inducing unknown.

Now, as I write this at the end of 2020, we find ourselves in Ordeal - that Liminal Space between the worlds. Like most ROP, we Initiates - now the entirety of the human race - did not overtly ask for this. But it is worth reflecting upon that it was not some random act of a wrathful God. Personally, I feel like it's our collective human karma - paying the piper. It's the simple law of cause and effect. For too long we've lived disconnected from nature and each other, driven by shadow and an isolated sense of self - looking out for #1 - and not acting from a deep-seated awareness of how we're all connected to each other. So, I view this time as a logical outcome of our historical human choices and behaviors. No, we didn't ask for it, but in many ways, we deserve it.

Ultimately, how it got here is less important than the fact of its arrival. Our task starts with accepting these shocking new realities, doing whatever we need to grieve the passing of our old way of life. All emotions - anger, rage, grief and fear at losing loved ones, life savings, a much-needed job or worse, a home, shame at all the bad prior life choices - are to be welcomed. But then they need to be safely and consciously offloaded and put to rest. After that, we can try to resist - we can scream, moan, stay in bed, medicate ourselves with drugs, alcohol, TV and movies, repeating the

mantra over and over in our heads “this shouldn’t be happening, this shouldn’t be happening...” None of it will do a damn bit of good. Resistance is futile. The new reality is here.

We are now on a collective journey through the Underworld. We are in the belly of the whale, the Dark Night of the Soul. Phase Two of initiation is upon us. We are in Kairos time. Who hasn’t lost track of the days? I recently forgot what month it was. That sense of dislocation, that severance from Chronos, from “the normal flow of time,” feels absolute. After Phase One has stripped everything inessential away, the Ordeal fundamentally tests everything we have left – everything we are as human beings: our morals and values, our belief systems and our understanding of the meaning of life and death. Even though we didn’t choose this ROP, we nonetheless have important choices to make. “What do I need to let go of in order to live most meaningfully? What in me needs to die in order to be reborn?”

Initiation confronts us with death. It forces us to wake to the preciousness of life by threatening our life, sometimes even taking it away. Is there anybody you know right now who is not concerned about their health? Not obsessed with their health care providers? Not losing sleep over the insurance they have or worse, *don’t* have?

Along with the possibility of real death, we have to face metaphoric death. All the systems of human interaction and belief are now up for grabs, hanging in the balance. Politics? Democracies are shaky and some are crumbling. “Neo-feudalism” is ascendant. Dictators and plutocrats worldwide are seizing power. Economics? The inherent inequities of winner-take-all capitalism have never been clearer. Poor people are dying in greater numbers because they don’t have health care, sufficient living space to social distance, jobs, money in the bank or food to put on the table. They don’t even have schools to put their kids in. And the homeless? Indigenous people like the Navajo? Situation desperate. For years, the oppressive social realities of millions of indigenous and homeless people have been ignored. This new reality may mean a death sentence for many. Religion? Some say these are the end times. I disagree. Despite the environmental crises that have already arrived – desertification, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and droughts – and worse that may still come in the way of vastly rising sea levels flooding coastal cities worldwide, I’m confident human life on the planet will survive. The question becomes what kind of world do we want to live in?

The dominant ethos of Western society for hundreds of years has been “me, me, me.” “I’m looking out for #1. To hell with the other guy.” We can try to persist with this worldview, but COVID-19 has already exposed its illogical and harmful impracticality. Just look at how connected every human being on the planet became in a brief few weeks to a wholesale food market in Wuhan, China! Whatever might have happened there is impacting us all. The speed of that is breathtaking.

To deny the reality of our interconnection and interdependence going forward is downright dangerous. I heard stories in the 1980s, perhaps apocryphal, of people infected with AIDS taking out their frustration on others by infecting them. That is extreme shadow behavior. “I’m hurt; therefore, I’m going to hurt others.” Yet that’s how many of us live our lives. Revenge, whether on individuals or institutions that have hurt us, is an ever-present temptation. We have to grow up. We have to make wiser, more compassionate choices. The choices we make with COVID-19 are a matter of life and death for others and the choices others make could mean life or death for us. We simply and literally cannot survive without each other. “Us, us, us” is the only way forward. Through initiation, the universe has graciously, if painfully, invited us to grow up and to step into full adult maturity and adopt this way of living that indigenous people practiced for thousands of years – oneness with the environment and all living things. Health care workers, having already accepted

the credo of “us, us, us,” are dying by the thousands. I call that service to the greater good deep maturity. What about you? Do you accept the invitation?

Homecoming, the final phase of the archetype of Rite of Passage, may still be a long way off. Even with the vaccines, COVID-19 could be with us for another year or two. The economic and political fallout will likely last much longer. And then there could be other viruses to come. So, our present Phase Two, Ordeal, is not going away anytime soon. That’s the bad news. But the new world is here now. The time to grow up is now. The stakes are too high. To persist otherwise is not only to remain in our suspended adolescence, it is to risk killing most of us. We don’t have to wait for ceremonial closure, for things to become less chaotic, less insecure. So, how are we to behave?

The good news is that we have time to contemplate essential life questions. “What kind of world do I want to live in? What brings most meaning to my life?”

In our old world, too many lived disconnected from their true purpose - their greater calling. It’s partly for that reason that planetary life got so out of balance. As geodesic dome popularizer Buckminster Fuller noted, “When everyone on the planet does exactly what they’re called to do, the world will live in perfect harmony.”

So, what are you called to do? What are you passionate about that you may not be doing already? What is it you’ve always wanted to do that you told yourself before was unrealistic, unachievable, or a mere fantasy? For many it’s making some kind of art - being a writer, a musician, a painter or a filmmaker. It could be a profession you’ve felt called to but thought would be too expensive, time consuming or difficult to learn: becoming a doctor, an engineer, a hairdresser, an auto mechanic, a quilter or a therapist. Now is the time to think through what you most yearn to do and start doing it. Most likely it won’t take a lot of thought. Think back to your childhood and the dreams you had. What excited you? Lay out plans and make it happen. Your gift(s), your talent(s) or your discovery(s) might just be the very thing that helps save the planet.

Though it may not lead you to doing that particular thing full time, that passion will lead you where you need to go, fulfilling your destiny. Once you open one door, you will find the universe responds by opening others. I never imagined that my own initiation into Mature Masculinity would later lead me to making films on Rites of Passage and writing books like this one. I never imagined that turning to Buddhism to alleviate my own suffering would later lead me to teaching meditation and dharma. As my friend Mark Oravsky put it: “Not being able to answer the questions, ‘Who am I?’ ‘What is my purpose?’ and ‘What gifts do I have to share with my community...?’ is a very, very dark place.” This planetary initiation extends a clear invitation to us out of that dark place.