

The Outpost Exchange
Growing Good Men/Male Initiation
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When does a boy become a man in American culture? The answer differs drastically depending on the source: a boy might be considered a man when he gets his first paying job. For some, it's when he can legally drink, or perhaps when his voice first cracks. For others, the answer is when he experiences his first sexual encounter. Becoming a man might be when he joins a gang, learns to drive a car, can vote, or celebrates his bar mitzvah.

And just what does it mean to be a man? Again, divergent answers. Being a man might mean going off to war or moving out of the parental home or becoming a father. To many American males, "being a man" probably also has something vaguely to do with not crying or showing emotion.

"When looking at rites of passage and what it means to be a man, our culture is pluralistic and there are many sub-cultures," said Milwaukee psychologist Jim Morningstar, PhD. "It all depends on what system you value as to what is the passage of boy to man."

The fact that there is no universally accepted moment in our culture when a boy becomes a man and no clear definition of what exactly a man is creates an identity void for men in America, according to organizers of and participants in men's support groups. Furthermore, a culture that stifles the emotional side of men leads to a gender that is not fully realized, they contend.

"Most of us are told what we *should* be, but few of us are taught how to be who we are," stated Herb Stevenson in a recent telephone interview. Stevenson, 52, is the founder of the Cleveland-area's Medicine of Men program, a year-long initiation program based on the Native American medicine wheel and Jungian psychology.

Male Initiation Programs

The idea of such a program is not new. From the Boy Scouts of America to the New Warrior program which started in Milwaukee in the mid-1980's, there are a number of entities that address being male. Some, such as the Boy Scouts or Racine's Pride Program, seek to teach practical skills to boys. Programs such as the New Warrior Training Adventure, Hero's Journey and the Medicine of Men use differing approaches to guide adult men to being more fully realized males.

Through the course of Stevenson's program, men from all over the country come together at regular intervals to be "initiated into a mature man, or a mature masculinity," Stevenson said. Being initiated "enables us to be more fully who we are as men in today's world. We are able to be strong and compassionate, fully balanced, and wise and far-seeing," he said. He points out that his view is not one of assuming men are broken

and need to be fixed; rather, that they have just never had the opportunity to be fully who they are. “I want men to see that there are other choices in life that allow more of their self to be expressed.”

Stevenson, who is an executive coach, a management consultant and on the faculty of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, views this rite of passage as a means to take back control of one’s life. “It’s the tail wagging the dog. If you’re not initiated, you’re being controlled by living life how you were told it was supposed to be,” he stated. “If initiated, you’re operating from an internal knowledge of what you want and need and desire.”

John Griffin, PhD, is completing the Medicine of Men program this fall. The 38-year-old consultant from Washington, D.C. was first introduced to the idea of an initiation program by an instructor at Georgetown University. “He suggested it would be a good idea for me to get a better understanding of my warrior energy,” Griffin shared in a phone interview. After looking into a number of programs, Griffin decided on the Medicine of Men.

Griffin undertook the program with the goal of being more fully present in his life. “I wanted to be more intentional in terms of my actions, thoughts and words; be more aware of the choices I was making and be sure they were in alignment with my core beliefs and values,” he said. “I wanted to be more grounded and balanced.”

The Medicine of Men program appears to be ideal for goals like Griffin’s, considering Stevenson’s emphasis on present-based philosophy. The participants, he said, are “constantly checking in: am I present? Am I not reacting from old behaviors?” He describes four “requirements” in his Medicine of Men program:

- Show up and be present without preconceived notions;
- Say what is so, when it is so, without blame or judgment;
- Pay attention to what has heart and meaning; if you don’t, you’re back to doing tasks that have no value;
- Be open to outcome

Griffin believes the program has helped reach his goal. In addition, he’s learned a new way to relate on a deeper level with other men. “There’s a lot of social and professional interactions that serve as anesthesia to limit that ability for those emotions to come out and true connections to take place,” he observed.

Mark Way of Medina, Ohio is a 55-year-old retired computer programmer. A few years ago he was experiencing a personal crisis. “I was having a love affair, loving two women at once,” he said. “I was at my wits end spiritually.” Counseling led him to a men’s group with Stevenson, which then led him to the Hero’s Journey program in Pittsburgh. “The Hero’s Journey is all about testosterone and facing your fears. It’s incredibly intense—walking on fire, crawling through caves, doing a sweat lodge,” he described. “I loved it. But there wasn’t a lot of process time.”

When he learned Stevenson was starting his own male initiation program that was more of an inner journey, Way signed on. “The program helped me make the call,” he said. The “call” was to end the relationship with the woman to whom he was not married. “I still love both, but I had to make a call...The program helped me see that I was being selfish. You can’t have everything. I needed to make a choice.”

“The big pay off is that I grew up and for the first time, at age 54, I felt like I was a man,” he said. When asked what that felt like, he stated, “It feels cool. Wow. Peaceful and powerful simultaneously.” Way describes the process as being akin to a near-death experience. “Life becomes more valuable, the senses become more alert. You feel more alive. Life feels like a gift and an adventure.”

“I had no model of what manhood meant,” Way said. His father, a ranger, was often absent. “I believe this is the norm in Western industrialized society; there’s no nurturing relationship between father and son...men are simply not comfortable with emotional intimacy with other men. That’s why we chase women; for the emotional intimacy we’re lacking. But we never really get it.”

Way related a seminal moment with his father that took place about 15 years ago. His father had suffered a stroke and, while at the hospital, was experiencing a full emotional affect. “As I’m leaving, my father grabs my arm, pats it and says, ‘You’re a good boy.’ Do you know what that one connection means to me?”

Way recently started a software corporation with his three daughters. He notes that his initiation impacted the relationship with his daughters as well as with his wife. “I’m closer with them now and they’re more open with me. For some reason they trust me now. That feels pretty good.”

Rick Broniec, 52, of Milwaukee has been involved with the New Warrior program/ManKind Project for 14 years. Started in Milwaukee in the mid-1980’s, the entity now known as the Mankind Project is a non-profit organization that has initiated more than 10,000 men in over eight countries since its inception through its New Warrior weekend training adventure. An optional eight-week integration support group follows the weekend.

“A lot of men are lost as to what it means to be a man,” Broniec stated in a recent telephone interview. He relates that in cultures past and in some indigenous cultures yet today, a young man would be taken away from the village by the elders to undergo an ordeal to mark the beginning of manhood. Upon completing the ordeal—which, in some cultures, was life threatening—the boy and his community knew he had crossed over the threshold.

Such ritualistic rites of passage were lost as our culture became industrialized in the 1800’s. “The ManKind Project believes there are generations of men that lost that mentoring and training that helped us know our place in the world in healthy ways,” Broniec said. “We’ve fallen into unhealthy ways to mark the passage into manhood:

gangs, missions that are focused on selfish gain, getting drunk for the first time, joining the military, losing one's virginity. Those ways of identifying with men are more destructive than constructive," he said.

"We're trying to help men become initiated into a new state of being that is generative and constructive and a more positive form of masculinity that serves to enhance society rather than hurt or destroy," he explained.

To that end, participants come out of their training with a mission statement that is their life's testimonial. Broniec looks at his daily to remind himself "why I am on this planet. Today I make decisions in my life based on my mission statement. If it's in keeping with my mission, I do it—and do it joyfully and am energized by it. I've cut out stuff I used to do because I thought I had to out of duty or for money, because it is not in alignment with my mission."

Creating a personal declaration for being "tends to be a deeply spiritual process," Broniec shared. "It's determining what one cares about, what's important, what needs to be transformed in the world and what we can do to transform it." He points out that many men's mission statements lead them to working on or creating community service projects.

The Men's Movement that is associated with Robert Bly's *Iron John* has waxed and waned a bit since its hey day in the late 1980's and early 1990's. At its height, tens of thousands of men were gathering in stadiums not for a sporting event, but to commune together as men in such programs as Promise Keepers, or taking to the streets in activities like the Million Man March. Such massive displays of sensitive masculinity are few and far between these days, but entities such as the ManKind Project continue to grow and evolve.

One aspect that has been added to the program in the past 10 years is the idea of elders. These are men age 50 or older who are considered to have the wisdom and experience to bless a younger man's endeavor: his marriage, divorce, having a child. Once a month the elders of Milwaukee do something very Milwaukee—they meet for a fish fry. "Anyone is welcome to come and be in the aura of these elders. They might smoke a cigar, have conversation. This is often where the blessings happen," Broniec said. He emphasizes that the concept of elders is based on the universal archetype and that there is no specific religion, creed or culture inherent in it.

Do-It-Yourself Initiations

Although the structure and support of a formal program is an advantage to most going through a rite of passage, individuals can create their own initiation traditions. Men of Medicine's Stevenson suggests that parents "sit down and talk about the passage into adulthood with their kids; talk about responsibilities. Do it jointly, so that the child feels they are a part of it and have a choice." A simple "initiation" activity might be a father taking his son out camping. "Teach him how to listen and learn and not be afraid," Stevenson advised.

Sixteen years ago Hartland artist Joel Pfeiffer created an impromptu father-son initiation when he invited his then-13-year-old along to watch him do his first fire walk. His son “got so fired up, he walked with me,” Pfeiffer, now 50, recounted. “It opened up a deeper connection that transcended to a spiritual level as well. It was a kind of initiation that became a father-son shared rite of passage. It took us beyond our barriers and opened up a new line of communication.”

One of the service endeavors the ManKind Project’s Broniec developed based on his mission statement was a father-daughter weekend. The weekend has become an annual event the past eight years for not only Broniec and his girls, but for other fathers and daughters as well. “We write each other love letters, make masks, swim, talk.”

Griffin, the consultant from D.C. has many degrees to his name, but believes those don’t quite qualify as true initiations. “Those are goals and rites of passage in a way, but you’re not really aware of what you’re doing at the time. They could have more meaning if society were to slow down and ask ‘What meaning does this have?’ If I were to make a suggestion to society, I’d say, ‘Look at the initiations you have in life and make them meaningful and powerful.’ You could take it to the every day level and view each morning as an initiation. Ask yourself, ‘How do I want to live my life today?’”

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