



Rites of passage and the importance of ritual

Terry Cooper

In 1999 I organised a rite of passage to celebrate a particular moment in my son Jodie's life. This was the beginning of his life as a man, he was 18. Nine years have passed since this experience and Jodie is now 27. I welcome being asked to write about it now as it gives me an opportunity to reflect on the experience and assess its value.

Having been born in England, which is practically devoid of any sense of celebration, and having grown in a non-religious working class family, I had little experience of rituals which recognise and celebrate significant events in peoples' lives.

But having many close Jewish friends meant I had, over the years, been included in a number of Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies which are a traditional Jewish religious ritual held for boys and girls when they reach the age of 13 to acknowledge, facilitate and celebrate their transition into adulthood.

I was always touched by these experiences. Preparation for the ceremony requires a lot of effort on the part of the individuals going through the process, and can take a year or longer. Seeing the care and warmth of the people in their community ushering these young people through the ritual, is deeply moving. It is also refreshing to feel the spirit of inter-generational co-operation that is present at these gatherings.

As a psychotherapist I have learned a lot about the value of ritual in people's lives and especially its application within therapeutic work. Rituals in this context are structured experiences which the therapist and client create together to help the client make and manage

transitions. A ritual may be to manage ending a behaviour or phase of life that the person has or is trying to outgrow. It may be to begin a new behaviour which they are trying to form or simply to acknowledge and mark a particular event or experience to give it deeper value. Rituals can be both a way of marking significant experiences and of making experiences significant.

Forming a ritual to support the ending of a particular behaviour is making a boundary or drawing a line. It is saying "I want to do something, (create an action) which affirms to myself that I have made a decision to end and let go of this old behaviour". There are endless ways of doing this, from writing and drawing exercises to more dramatic statements. For example, you could burn a piece of clothing which you associate with a particularly painful event or you might plant a tree to represent what changes you would like to make within yourself. It could simply be to write a kind and supportive letter to yourself, written through the eyes of a real or imagined friend. There are endless possibilities for structuring experiences to support the change process and expand our sense of self, which is really the purpose of ritual; to grow ourselves.

Rituals can generate new experiences at behavioural, cognitive and feeling levels, replacing old behaviours and their associated feelings with different, more satisfying experiences. Recognising the importance of creating rituals to help us engage in the forming of transitional experiences also heightens our awareness of natural transitions that otherwise might have passed unnoticed.

Rituals can be used when we are on our own or with others. They can be used to form a relationship to ourselves, and many have a social

value such as weddings or funerals. These are about being imbedded in a community and involving the community in witnessing important events and transitions. I will talk more about this later.

It is important that the ritual is physical. Physical action (behaviour) changes an intention, idea or dream into something more concrete and through this experience we empower ourselves. Ideas stimulate but do not empower. Empowerment is always connected to an action. The action may be very subtle or dramatic, though often the smaller steps lay better foundations on which to build.

Rite of passage

According to Arnold Van Gennep, a French ethnographer and folklorist (1873-1957), rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. In the first phase, people withdraw from the group and begin moving from one place or status to another. In the third phase, they re-enter society, having completed the rite. The liminal phase is the period between states, during which people have left one place or state but have not yet entered or joined the next. There are also micro transitions that are like mini rites of passage that occur in the normal passage of time, more often than not they are part of a consultation process over the years between the parents and child. These are commonly about separation and increased independence. “Can I cross the road”? “Can I have a private space”? “Can I stay out”, “Can I stay at so and so’s house”? Having these managed experiences of separation are essential to support the growing adult within the child. A formal rite of passage is to affirm already existing developmental processes. If this is not worked out through co-operation, it might be through defiance. I’m not a believer that defiance is necessary and it is

often an indication that families do not know how to arrive at decisions through other means.

After attending a Bar-Mitzvah or Bat-Mitzvah I would always be thinking about Jodie and the culture we lived in and the fact that the only rites of passage on offer seemed to be peer-led, such as drinking, drugging, staying up late, etc. Going against the adult community seemed to be the norm.

I think it is quite interesting how deep the need for a rite of passage is and that kids will find a way of forming it for themselves even if it isn’t provided by their community. As we know, many kids form their own rituals as well as participating in the rituals of the community. My own opinion is the rituals of peer-led rites of passage are not in competition with that of the community. They serve different functions and even if the traditional rituals are felt to be old and uncool, they still provide a glue that is important for the continuity of social identity and sense of place.

I mentioned earlier that the Bar-Mitzvah and Bat-Mitzvah is held when young adults are 13. When Jodie was that age, and every year after until he was 18, I waited to see when he was becoming ready for a ritual to mark the transition from being a youth to being a young man.

When Jodie was 18 I felt him changing, he appeared to be more solid in himself and was talking more about his own future and what he wanted for the next few years. At this time he was also preparing to leave home and go to university in America. I began to think about what I might do to acknowledge his changing and the transition he was in.

I had been working for fifteen years in Iceland leading weekend workshops and my work was

coming to an end. My sponsor and I had dreamt for many years of organising an experience for men in the Icelandic countryside. The idea was that I would invite some men from the UK and that he would invite men he knew from Iceland and we would tour around the country in four-wheel-drive cars, camp out, be in nature and have time in groups to discuss issues relating to being male.

It occurred to me that this journey would be the most wonderful way to honour Jodie's changes. The idea that the personal journey he was making in himself toward becoming a man would be supported by an outer journey really appealed to me. My sponsor and I spoke about it and it was agreed.

I asked Jodie if he would like to go to Iceland and be part of a men's experience and said he could bring a friend. I didn't tell him my agenda and he was very excited just to be part of the experience and spend time with his best friend Martyn.

I had been working with men in men's on-going groups for 20 years in a programme I call Men for Men and I have been inspired by how much can be achieved when men support each others personal growth and development. An outcome of men sharing their concerns with other men is that a powerful warmth emerges and this generates feelings of trust and confidence. When men increase their comfort level by being with other men in this way it not only strengthens their identity as men but also how they manage themselves in their close relationships and in the world in general.

I invited a number of men from the UK who I liked and respected and told them of my plan. I said, at some point I would like them each to share with Jodie something important that they

had learned from all their years of experience that they valued and thought would be useful to him in life and that this would be their gift to him. This particular group of men had never been together before and many of them didn't know each other. It was a diverse group. One was a good friend from America who had his own electrical installation business. Two were friends and colleagues from my therapy world. One was an acupuncturist and another worked in finance in the City of London.

The Icelandic men were my business sponsor and his brother and another man who I had known for many years through the workshops and trainings I held in the UK and Iceland. The ages of the men ranged from mid thirties to sixty, most were in committed relationships and half had children of their own.

Including myself, Jodie and Martyn, we were eleven in all.

The group met for the first time at The Pearl (Perlan) restaurant in Reykjavik. The Pearl is a large glass and steel dome sitting upon huge silver geothermal water tanks on top of a hill overlooking the city. The whole restaurant rotates once every two hours and has incredible views of the city.

I wanted our first meeting place to be somewhere inspiring and unusual as a way of marking the importance of the trip as well as generate high expectations for the week. The Pearl certainly lived up to this.

The group was very excited about meeting and as we sat down to a memorable meal of Icelandic lamb our Icelandic hosts were full of information about Icelandic culture. One little detail I remember was that when you eat out in Iceland and you want more of the course you ordered, it

is normal for the restaurant to give you more without charging you for it. I think this represents the kind of positive regard people have for others in Iceland.

I gave a little welcome speech and thanked our hosts for taking care of us and organising cars and equipment and wished everybody a good week.

The older men went back to the hotel to sleep and the younger men headed for the clubs with Jodie and Martyn in tow. It was July and being in the land of the mid-night sun meant that although it was late, the sun was still shining as we all went our separate ways.

Officially, Jodie and Martyn were too young to go into the clubs, but one of the Icelandic men was a genius at negotiating in just about any situation and got them in. It became clear to me that there were three different stage of life groups on the trip, Jodie and Martyn who were young adults, a group of energetic alpha adults in their thirties and a group of elders who were mid-forties and upwards.

I really appreciated this younger group of men taking Jodie and Martyn out on the town. It was part of what I wanted for them, an initiation of sorts with good men watching out for them. It wasn't something a father could have possibly done.

Of course, us oldies were up at the agreed time to get the cars loaded, but the young men were deep in sleep and not easy to rouse, they were like zombies when they finally appeared. Gradually, over the day, little bits of information about the night before began to come out, such as how friendly the Icelandic girls were and how fantastic the clubs were and how they wanted to return one day. One of the big excitements was

that Kevin Costner was in the club. Evidently he likes blondes and good salmon fishing. Or was it good blondes and salmon fishing. I will forever be grateful for the good time those men showed Jodie and Martyn that night.

We loaded up a Land Rover and a Japanese 4x4 with all of the camping equipment and our personal belongings and set off. It is always amazing to me how, within a few minutes of travelling in Iceland you see completely new and spectacular countryside. It is the most interesting and extraordinary landscape I have ever been in.

Passing through green, fertile farming country bathed in golden light to deserts of black sand and brilliant white and turquoise glaciers, we made our way anti-clockwise around Iceland from Reykjavic. The first night on the road we slept in a community centre. The sand on the beach nearby was black and the sky a brilliant orange. Jodie and Martyn saw a high grassy peak nearby and decided that was where they wanted to sleep.

This became the pulse of their connection to the group throughout the trip, to be in the group and separate at the same time. I noticed at times that I was disappointed. I had thought this was going to be a close bonding experience with Jodie and yet he was more connected to the Alpha males in the group than he was to me. It took me a while to realise that we were having a different bonding experience and that this had been the whole point of the trip. He clearly was separating and determining his world, making choices to respond to himself and use himself as a reference point, not me.

Looking back I now see clearly that when somebody close to you is going through a transition you are also going through one, that

you are bonded together for better or worse as the saying goes. It hadn't occurred to me that I was also going through a transition and that my world was also changing. Sometimes the role of parent can blind us to what is really being lived.

The next day we arrived at a sea port where a trip had been organised to take us on a fishing boat to a special bay along the coast. We were all excited to be on a boat and took turns steering, the sea was rough but the boat handled it well. The rock formations alone were worth the trip, they were incredibly dramatic. The place we were going to was used for fishing and for putting up people who were hiking. The only way to get to it was by boat or hiking. When we arrived at the drop off point we were driven in an old Russian jeep which had no brakes. The driver had to slide it into a rock each time he wanted to stop it. I noticed there were horses in a coral at the back of the building and after a great fish lunch we arranged to go horse riding.

Horse riding in Iceland is like nothing else in the world. It is said that the horses are descendents of a Mongolian breed. They are small, very tough and very strong. They are unique in that they have five gaits, the fifth being fast trot. We mounted and for the next hour raced all over the hills and wetlands at the end of the bay. We had fantastic fun and laughed until it hurt. Staying on these frisky and spirited horses was in itself a major achievement even for those of us who thought we knew what riding was about. Only in a place like Iceland, where the health and safety brigade doesn't exist and a certain amount of acceptable danger is recognised as a necessary part of being alive, could you feel such a great sense of freedom.

After travelling across a region of conical shaped mountains, which looked man-made they were so perfect, and crossing a series of narrow

mountain roads with steep drop-offs, we arrived in a beautiful green valley with a river running through it. For the first time we erected our communal tent, which we used to congregated in, and put up our personal tents for sleeping in. The big tent became a source of fun and teasing. It looked like a cross between a circus tent and the tent of a medieval knight. The valley was beautiful, all you could hear was the running of the river and the wind. It had an incredibly peaceful atmosphere about it and as luck would have it we were in the middle of a very rare Icelandic heat wave which meant we were warm and dry for the entire trip.

One night when we were gathered around the fire I decided it was the right moment to talk about the main reason for the trip. I talked about the importance of having men in our lives and being able to share with them personal experiences as well as work interests. I talked about being proud of Jodie and hoped he would remember this trip as a way of marking his transition into becoming a man. I also talked about the importance of Martyn being there and how important it was for both of them to be on this journey together, to have friends who were also going through this life change. At first, they were embarrassed and giggled at the emotional tone of the moment, but they collected themselves together and managed to be really present and take in what was being said.

Sitting around the fire created a special atmosphere and gave great depth to the occasion. It was calming and led us into a reflective mood, appealing to our primitive instincts. I asked each of the men to say a few words of what they had learned in their lives that had been useful to them. One said "Accept the things you cannot change, and have the courage to change the things you can". Another said, "Failure stops being a failure when it becomes learning and

when you decide to do something. Don't wonder whether you should be doing it, just look at how to make it happen. When what you are doing stops being where your heart is, then it's time to re-evaluate and create a new vision". And another said " It is important not to become stereotyped as a man burdened by responsibility, remember to play and to enjoy relationships with other men, this was an important part of what supported me in my growing up".

The sharing was very personal and rich.

Jodie was also given a few gifts. One man gave him a stick he used for hiking, another a medallion and I gave Jodie and Martyn each a Buck hunting knife. This was to symbolise their becoming responsible.

Just as we ended our time of sharing we heard horses and looked up to see two men on horses at the top of the valley. Slowly they made their way down the steep side of the valley and rode toward us at a fast trot. I was fascinated at this spectacle as were our Icelandic hosts, there was nothing but wilderness either side of us for many miles and here they were at our fireside. For a moment I had the experience of how it felt to meet strangers away from civilisation. The excitement and caution of not knowing one another, the sizing up and watching for signals which would tell us how to place who we all were. Of course the Icelandic people had language to aide them in their assessment of the situation. They told me that the riders had been surprised to run into us and were fascinated as to what we were doing there.

They were very red faced, rugged, in their mid sixties, well built and solid looking. They wore leather riding boots, tweed britches and jacket. They were incredibly well turned out and eager to have social contact. They sat by the fire and

took out liquor flacons and offered them around. It didn't take them too long to realise we were not there to party. They stayed a while to enjoy the fire and told us that every summer they saddle up and ride for three weeks sleeping out and spending time together. They had planned to meet their wives to camp with them for a night or two but hadn't found them yet. Just as they told us this a four-wheel-drive car appeared some distance from our camp and the reunion was complete, we bid them farewell and off they rode.

There was a mythical quality of meeting these two men. They carried themselves and communicated as if they were centuries old, time travelers, and it was a pleasure to be in their company for this brief time. They had arrived about midnight when everything was saturated in a luminescent golden hue which made the whole experience of being with them dream like. When they left, the excitement of their presence and the connection we had had left us full and satisfied, as if something had completed itself.

The days that followed continued to be full of amazing and funny adventures. Jodie and Martyn visibly grew in their confidence to play and be themselves and it was refreshing to be around them to remind us of things about ourselves and to be in touch, close up, with the men of the future. It was in a way inspiring and reassuring, refreshing to be around them. We were reminded of the similarities and differences between them and ourselves when we were at their stage of life. And there was also something very affirming and satisfying about recognising more sharply through this experience the phase of life we were now in.

Looking back

Recently I visited Jodie in America in Vermont, where he lives and works as a commercial welder and sculptor. I was looking forward to asking him about his experience of the Icelandic trip. He was preoccupied with working on a nine foot tall metal sculpture of a man, for a local Chamber of Commerce arts initiative in which the artist's works are publicly exhibited and then auctioned to raise money for local causes.

This was, in fact, the first time I had been with Jodie when he was in the middle of working on a big project. I was very excited by the whole process and in particular the workshop atmosphere. Outside of the workshop, there was deep snow covering the ground and it was cold and peaceful. Inside, the fire, sparks and illuminated smoke of the welding, grinding and cutting made its own art, turning the light into a dynamic dance of rich colours. Over the days I watched Jodie form an intimate relationship to his work.

It took me a couple of days of watching this relationship grow before I realised, here I am watching this man make a model of a man out of steel and I'm here to ask him about what he thought about his rite of passage in Iceland nine years ago. In a way I felt my question had already been answered by what I had seen and experienced. However, I wanted to hear from Jodie what he had to say about Iceland.

One morning as I was writing this paper I asked him what he had got from going to Iceland and in particular if it had meant anything to him. He said it had meant a lot to be with other men and, that for him, to be with Martyn and the men and the fact that there were no women present, had been really important.

Jodie's comments reminded me of just how important relationships with men had been to me and how much I had worked at this. When I was younger I stereotyped other men as emotionally limited and thought they had nothing to offer me. I preferred the company of women. It was through my work with men that I really felt their value, and as we all struggled to figure out how to be our own person and what person we wanted to be, we transcended the boiling seas of the war of the sexes to find ourselves entering the calm flat waters of humanness, a very special place to be.

I was pleased that what Jodie valued most from going to Iceland was being with men. And I was thrilled at arriving to find him making a figure of a man.

Summary

Through visiting Jodie and writing this paper I've learned that there are many more layers to this rite of passage experience than I could have known about or written about at the time it took place. It is as if the experience continues to grow, like a snowball being rolled, it gathers more mass as time passes.

In Iceland, we had, for a short while, the feeling of what it might be like to live as a nomadic tribe. We had no programme or deadlines to meet. We cooked on the fire, bathed in streams and slept under canvas. We felt free to do what we wanted when we wanted and sought out adventure and play at every opportunity. We laughed, we rested, we argued, and we had to work out conflicts a number of times. We were all well outside of our comfort zone at least once during the ten days. For some it was riding, for others it was heights and for some the degree of social contact and sharing was, in itself, a

challenge. We were all stretched and we all grew in our own way.

Being that it was a very physical journey it also became clear to us what it meant to be in our own particular phase of life, and what our strengths and limitations were. All of this made us more in touch with ourselves, more defined and more real, in a way.

The fact that I had organised a rite of passage for Jodie, was already an indication of the relationship I had with him. We played together and shared in many new and exciting experiences as he was growing up. As adults we shared a love for motorcycles and rode together in recent years. I have always tried to encourage who he is and what it is he would like to do with his life. And mostly I have been there for him.

But I must admit I was expecting something transformational to come out of the ritual in Iceland and I have at times pursued Jodie for feedback I wanted to hear, such as how incredible it was, which of course he has not said.

Being with him in Vermont this winter allowed me to stand back and look at where he has arrived at within himself and I see that at 27 his life is full of all the things I would have wanted for him. He has good, long-lasting male and female friends, he has a strong work ethic, he has found direction and seems clear about what he wants to do. He is intelligent, sincere and truthful. He is somebody who you would want to be with if you were ever in an emergency situation and he takes good care of himself. He has close male friends whom he confides in and he feels generally in charge of his life.

Many years have past since the rite of passage experience, and reflecting on it from my now

perspective has shown me that you have to see the ritual within the context of the whole of a person's life. A rite of passage is not a magical event which exists for only a particular moment in time to change a person's life or transform them, it is continuity of an already existing value system. A celebration of what has already grown and what might be in the future. As the years go by and Jodie takes charge of his life I see an unfolding of a life, a flowering of values and qualities. No one thing determines the success of an individual life, it is many things. But from my own experience being supported and encouraged helps a lot.

It is important to remember the social aspect of the rite of passage ritual. For the most part these rituals are not chosen, they are given by the community. It is important for the communities' survival and future that its young adults are shaped and encouraged toward greater responsibility. These rites always involve a challenge of some sort, the challenge for Jodie and Martyn was to go off and live with a group of older men for a week, most of whom they didn't know.

Jodie's rite of passage was a special experience. It was designed to be. The place, the men who were there, the natural world we immersed ourselves in, the kindness of the Icelandic people, the dramatic landscapes, learning to drive four-wheel-drive cars, diving naked into glacial rivers, white river rafting and, of course, the ritual we made as a group around the fire sharing experiences and gifts with Jodie and Martyn and the generous thoughts from everyone made it so. From what I can see, if a rite of passage is putting up some sign posts to say, "This way son," It seems to be working.

From my own experience I see these events grow in significance over time. At 58, I look back, at

people who were there for me when I was young,
people who are no longer in my life now, and
their value increases as time goes by.

I would like to end with a quote from, John Dewey, an American philosopher and educationalist from Vermont and one of the founders of the philosophical school of pragmatism and the father of functional psychology (1859-1952). The quote captures my philosophy of life and what I have tried to convey in telling Jodie's story. *"The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action."*

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