

# What Is It Fifteen Year Olds Need?

## Notes on developing initiations appropriate to our times.

by Eric Maddern

### Introduction

The Minister of Education recently stated on radio that fifteen year olds have the highest crime rate of any age group in Britain. I don't remember how he planned to tackle this situation, but the question that came to me was: "Why fifteen year olds?"

What is it about that time of life that calls for a law breaking response? Why do youths in their mid teens want to push against the limits, challenge the norms of adults around them and test themselves against their peers?

Undoubtedly many theories have been developed on this subject. What I want to here is to put forward some ideas on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, based on experience with the Aboriginal people of Australia. I've thought a lot about what we might learn from the first Australians. Attitudes of respect and reverence towards the land might be one thing. Willingness to share resources equally with others might be another. However, my conclusion is that one of the most important lessons is to do with initiation into adulthood. So my aim here is to show what I think we can learn about an initiatory education from the hunters and gatherers of the southern land.

I should emphasise that this is a theoretical framework which has not yet been tested in a practical contemporary situation. I am offering it now in the belief that it may provide a valuable perspective for people involved with outdoor and environmental education in particular, and for those generally concerned with helping adolescents on their often difficult path to adulthood. It is offered in the hope that others may pick it up, reinterpret it and try it out in their own settings.

Adventure Education

There is no franchise needed on these ideas. They are free for anyone's use.

### Lessons from aboriginal Australia

The concerns of the first Australians may seem far from those of the modern world, and yet some of them are closer than we may initially think. It is now known that the original Australians had their island continent to themselves for about 50,000 years. This gave them plenty of time to refine their hunter-gatherer mode of existence. It is also known that for more than 99% of the last million years - the time it took *Homo habilis* (the first in the "Homo" line) to evolve into *Homo sapiens* ("us") - we lived as hunter-gatherers.

This means that most of our essential human characteristics evolved in the context of a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Of course there were many changes when we settled down and adopted the life of farmers and warriors. Further changes came with the disruptions and new freedoms of the industrial revolution, and we are now living in the midst of an information technology revolution which is changing us yet again. But nevertheless, many crucial elements of our humanness were shaped during those thousands of years of moving from place to place and telling tales round the campfire. One of those crucial elements is, I believe, how we learned to cope with the stresses and strains of reaching maturity. And that is why the Aborigines, who perfected their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, may have something to teach us about growing up children.

### Functions of Initiation in Aboriginal society

Initiation in Aboriginal society was (and

still is) a process that took place in stages from puberty to young adulthood. Usually the focus was on making boys into men, perhaps because girls naturally go through the physical and emotional transformations of menstruation and childbirth, whereas boys have no similar experience. This does not mean that there were no ceremonies for helping girls to make the transition to womanhood. However, male initiation was more elaborate and was developed, some anthropologists suggest, to provide men with an experience comparable to the one which inevitably comes to women. In the following description I shall mainly refer to the male experience, but today there is no reason why appropriate initiations should not be developed for girls as well as boys. Before looking at what such contemporary initiations might be, I shall briefly outline the process and functions of initiation in traditional Aboriginal society.

1. Symbolic journey: Initiation is a journey from childhood to adulthood which takes place on both real and symbolic levels. The meaning and power of the journey is intensified by placing it within the context of a ritual. There are symbolic acts to signify the departure from home, the various stages of the journey and the final return of the successful initiate. Ritual methods may include creating special ceremonial grounds, painting the body, wearing masks and costumes, dancing and performing the founding dramas of the land and people, singing songs and making music, listening to and telling stories. Such methods enable participants to travel far in time and space whilst physically staying in a relatively small area.

2. The Challenge: Initiations are always trying times. They include real challenges which have to be faced, and

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which may result in feelings of confusion, moments of intense fear, experiences of real pain and occasions when pressing needs cannot be satisfied. They are time, therefore, of coming to terms with difficult emotions, of developing the ability to cope with hardship. Although the initiators, the uncles and grandfathers, are responsible for setting up these difficult situations, they are also the ones who provide care, reassurance and emotional support at a time when it is most needed. The love and guidance of these older men is the key ingredient in helping the initiates pull through.

3. **Opening the Door to the Dreaming :** Initiations are times when doors are opened to the Dreaming. The dreaming is our translations of various words used to describe the complex, many-layered system of myth, knowledge, value and skill that underpins Aboriginal society. It is composed mainly of long song cycles which describe the travels and adventures of ancestral beings, part animal, part human, back in the Dreamtime. The songs therefore cover creation stories which explain how the world came to be the way it is; they show how each individual is connected to country, animals, plants and the beginnings of time; they tell people how they are related to each other; they include mapping information essential to survival in often vast and difficult landscapes; they are the source of law and of spiritual power; they offer a way to sustain the vitality of nature and society. These are adult concerns, and it is during initiation that they are first taken on by young people.

4. **Responsibility :** With the knowledge of the Dreaming, and after transcending the emotional and physical tests of initiation comes the recognition of responsibility. Responsibilities in Aboriginal society are directed firstly towards the land. These may entail conducting fertility ceremonies in particular places and at certain times, as well as practices of landscape care and conservation. Secondly they are directed towards other people, and involve taking on obligations to provide for relatives and to share resources so that all get what they need. Responsibilities could be summarised as being a) to the Earth and b) to Society.

5. **Community Participation :** The final stage of initiation is returning to the community. An important factor at this time is the recognition by the community of the new status of the initiate. The child has gone. A man has come back. All the adults in the community know what this means in terms of what the new person has been through, what he has begun to learn and what he is now expected to do. Gone are the indulgences of childhood. Come is the self-discipline and responsibility of adulthood. This is a transformation which, though regretted and grieved for at first, is now respected and celebrated by everybody.

### Are Initiations Relevant Today?

Clearly most of the methods and content of Aboriginal Australian initiations are inappropriate now. They were devised for a way of life very different to the one most of us live today. However, it is likely that the process of initiatory education has a universal relevance, and that the functions fulfilled by initiation are needed still. The central problems of growing up are the same now as they always have been. of course there are new and peculiarly contemporary problems we have to deal with too. But because of the complexity, scale and rapid rate of change in modern society, many of the basic steps which should be taken during adolescence have become obscured. Often the education, work and recreation structures provided for young people today do not adequately take these steps into account.

That, in turn, may be why we suffer such high rates of vandalism, crime and apathy amongst the adolescent population. Kids often don't have the chance to test their limits, discover their strengths, learn how the world was made, find out where they fit in, recognise their responsibilities to the Earth and to society, participate actively in and with their community.

It is possible to argue that the whole curriculum for thirteen to eighteen year olds should be based on the process and functions of initiation. However it is unlikely that such an argument will be accepted very widely as yet, and besides it would take much more than a short article to develop it in detail. So all I shall try to do here is to briefly sketch some ideas about how the functions of initiation might be fulfilled in modern society. The full development of these

ideas must await another day.

### A Basis for Contemporary Initiations.

1. **The Symbolic Journey :** The journey from the child to the man/woman is one that takes many years. Initiations are moments in that journey symbolising steps, sometimes leaps, along the way. They are events of special importance which mark particular changes of status. In the past they took place in what would have been regarded as "sacred time and space" giving them a quality of timelessness and infinity.. The religious purpose of such occasions was to help the individual feel harmoniously connected to a larger whole. There is still a need for people to feel a sense of meaningful connection to a larger pattern, but the language of much religious ritual is no longer appropriate. We need new ways to think about who we are and how we can relate to larger wholes, be they families, localities or the earth itself. The new ideas which are emerging to describe the larger pattern will be touched on under "The Vision".

Much of what was called ritual in earlier societies has now evolved into what we call "the arts". Modern initiations, involving symbolic enactments and celebrations of the stages on a person's journey, can be dramatically intensified by using these arts - poetry, music, song, story, mask, painting, costume and dance. People with skills in improvisation and drama may be particularly helpful in creating appropriate rituals.

In ancient times rituals took place in specially chosen outdoor sites - sacred places charged with numinous power - where the presence of the raw elements lent grandeur to the scene. Today tower blocks, power stations, airports, football stadiums, supermarkets, rock concerts, and TV studios are all awesome and symbolic settings, and should perhaps feature in contemporary initiations. But it is important not to forget that we rely ultimately for our survival on grass and wind, trees and rain, and that the sun is the source of all life on Earth. These elements still need to feature in our initiations, because without firsthand appreciation of their importance, recognition of our responsibilities to the "living Earth" can never develop.

2. **The Challenge :** Growth takes place as a result of having the courage to



It's not easy to find this kind of confidence at 15.

*"Growth takes place as a result of having the courage to tackle awkward problems, the confidence to rise to a challenge. But the problems can be hard. They can fill us with anxiety and self-doubt. Often our schooling doesn't help us cope with these negative emotions - fear, pain, greed and others. We may learn how to tackle intellectual problems, but physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually we are bereft. Many of today's problems could be viewed as a result of our inability to handle these emotions."*

tackle awkward problems, the confidence to rise to a challenge. But the problems can be hard. They can fill us with anxiety and self-doubt. Often our schooling doesn't help us cope with these negative emotions - fear, pain, greed and others. We may learn how to tackle intellectual problems, but physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually we are bereft. Many of today's problems could be viewed as a result of our inability to handle these emotions. Like the hunter gatherers of Australia we need to learn to turn fear into excitement, pain into courage, anger into compassion, doubt into confidence, confusion into vision, greed into self-discipline. Learning to make these transformations is partly what becoming an adult is all about.

There are some opportunities in our society for young people to learn how to cope with discomfort and anxiety. Those working in outdoor and adventure education know how to put people into challenging situations, and how to provide the support and guidance they need to respond successfully to those challenges. Abseiling off a cliff for the first time usually causes a moment of intense fear. Successfully landing at the bottom usually brings elation. So in many ways outdoor education is fulfilling at least one of the functions of initiation. How far it goes to fulfil the others is a matter of debate.

3. The Vision : I have called this section "The Vision" rather than "Opening the Door to Dreaming", for one main reason. In Aboriginal society the dreaming refers backwards to how the world was made and how laws were set down at

the beginning of time. Because Aboriginal society changed slowly, the ultimate value was maintaining the Dreaming, keeping things as they always were. But now we live in a rapidly changing world. Whilst it is of utmost importance for us to have a sense of how we got here, we must also think about what we want for the future. The idea of "vision" can cover not only opening the door to where we've been, but also to where we're going.

Today we have, as a result of two hundred years of scientific endeavour, a new creation story which explains in awesome detail how the world came to be the way it is. Unfortunately the scientific approach is abstract and objective, which removes us personally from the object of our study. So it's hard to identify with the scientific version of the origins of the Earth and the evolution of life on Earth. And yet it is our story. That's how we got here. Sadly we never get told this story at school, perhaps partly because of the still spluttering controversy between evolution and creationism, but also because science is broken into disciplines which, until recently, have rarely worked together. And to tell the new creation story we have to cross boundaries and draw from many scientific disciplines, ranging from physics and cosmology to evolutionary biology and paleoarchaeology. This does not mean that elements of the old story - folk tales, parables, myths and legends - do not have enduring value. It just means that we ignore the new story at our peril.

Contemporary initiations should include opening a door to the new creation story.

For catching a glimpse of this awesome tale is to be a human being. It can help us see where we fit into the evolutionary scale of life, can help us know that we are part of an ecological web that covers the planet. Not only that, it can help us understand the exceptional nature of the times we live in. Never in its four and a half billion year history has the Earth been subjected to the rapid changes it is undergoing today. Now life itself, in the form of human beings, is transforming the face of the planet on an unprecedented scale. With that new found power is dawning a new kind of responsibility. The future of the Earth is in our hands. We have the opportunity and the obligation to choose what sort of world we will create for the generations to come. That means we need to forge a vision for tomorrow and the next millennium. There is no better time to start doing this than on that adolescent journey, in the symbolic fires of initiation.

4. Responsibility : Australian Aboriginal initiation results in the recognition of responsibilities to the land and to other people. A similar recognition should emerge as a result of modern initiations, except that we are now talking about the Earth and all its people. So now not only do we need to learn how to ensure the vitality of our own little patch, be it a room in a flat, a city neighbourhood or acres of farmland, but we also need to think about ensuring the survival of the whole Earth. The lessons of interconnectedness are coming home. Water and air flow everywhere, uninterrupted by national boundaries. Pollution of the atmosphere by the few may have dire consequence for the many. And precious soil, which has taken thousands of

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years to form, can be washed away in one flood if left without protection. Part of our initiation into today's world must be to recognise these connections and our ensuing responsibilities.

But we are also connected with people. In the past our circle of caring extended mainly to our family, perhaps our village and in times of crisis, our nation. Now the circle needs to stretch wider to embrace not only people all over the world but also the generations to come. A question to ponder on the initiation quest is: "How can we ensure that the world is still beautiful for our descendants one thousand years from now?"

Pondering questions is not, of course, enough. We have to have practical skills with which to put our answers into action. Today a young person is faced with a myriad of possible skills to learn, which can be discouraging and even overwhelming. It would make sense to choose skills according to how useful they are in meeting our responsibilities to the Earth and Society. Initiatory education should, therefore, provide at least a sampling of, for example, farming and forestry (with a firm foundation in ecology), design and making (using elements from craft and technology courses), computing and communication (including interpersonal as well as IT skills), management and accountability. Now there's a basis for a national curriculum!

5. Community Participation : One of the most destructive changes since the industrial revolution has been the breakdown of community life. Social and geographic mobility may have brought freedoms, but it has also undermined longstanding patterns of community support, resulting in widespread loneliness and alienation. This breakdown, and other rapid changes of the last few decades, have eroded the authority of older people and weakened whatever structures of initiation remained. Now we are left with passing the driving test, and being allowed to vote in an election and drink in a pub, as our principal changes of status in growing up, and often these pass relatively unnoticed. Rarely do big celebrations attend such transitions. Community recognition is minimal. We save our main applause for

the successful passing of exams, but only some qualify for this and the whole exercise is almost entirely cerebral. The whole person is noticeably absent from such occasions.

This is not to say that some young people don't succeed in going through what amounts to a genuine initiatory experience. They may even receive genuine social recognition for having done so. But these success tend to be in spite of the educational system rather than because of it. It is as if the need to be initiated wins through in the end. However, it is probably only the lucky few who manage to pull off some hair-raising adventure which takes them to the ends of the Earth. The rest are left kicking cans and plotting minor break-ins, or winding themselves up for the next big football match, in which case they succeed only in capturing the negative attention of the community at large.

So, in thinking about setting up appropriate initiations for young people today, we need also to imagine new ways they can return to the community and be recognised for the transition they have made. One way for this to take place would be for some initiatory experiences to involve work in and with the community. Community work for youngsters is a well established practice in some areas. But it could go much further than it does if greater weight was placed upon it. We now have the skills of group work, problem solving and counselling to help make work in the community more effective. The success of community theatre, for example, has shown how a project which researches and celebrates the life and times of a particular place can bind people together and give them new-found strength. This can be particularly valuable for the young people involved. Examples of worthwhile community projects which could feature as part of the journey to adulthood can, I'm sure, be multiplied many times.

All of the elements I have suggested for inclusion in a modern initiatory education are being done somewhere. But usually they are being done separately from each other. I hope that these notes will provide a way for us to start thinking about how the elements can link together into a meaningful whole that fits, not just with what we and the world need now, but with a pattern that was laid down over thousands of years of human evolution.