What Is It Fifteen Year Olds Need?

Notes on developing initiations appropriate to our times.

by Eric Maddern

Introduction

The Minister of Education recently stood on radio that fifteen year olds have the highest crime rate of any age group in Britain. I don't remember now 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 forth 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?

Unfortunately 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. Willingly 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 from 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 into adulthood. It is offered in the hope that others may pick it up, rethink it and try it out in their own settings.

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 land continuous 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 99.9% of the last million years - the time it took Homo habilis to 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 world 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 transitions of menstruation and childbearing, 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 initiated 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 con- 
Ilusion, moments of intense fear, expe- 
riences of real pain and occasions when 
pressing needs cannot be satisfied. 
They are time, therefore, of coming to 
terms with difficult emotions, of de- 
veloping 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 elder 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 transmissions 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 travails and adven- 
tures 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 individ- 
ual is connected to country, animal, 
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 landscape; 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 
I 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 initia- 
tion comes the recognition of responsi- 
bility. Responsibilities in Aboriginal 
society are directed firstly towards 
the land. These may entail conducting fer- 
ility 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 ob- 
ligations to people for relatives and to 
share resources so that all get what they 
need. Responsibilities could be sum- 
murised as being al to the Earth and bj 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 grown. 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. 
They are the custodians of the next generation. 
The whole is a self-discipline and respon- 
sibility of adulthood. This is a transfor- 
mation which, though resented and 
grieved for at first, is now respected and 
celebrated by everybody.

Are Initiations Relevant Today?

Clearly most of the methods and contents of 
Aboriginal Australian initiations are 
inauspicious 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 initiation 
education has a universal relevance, and 
that the functions fulfilled by initiation 
are needed still. The central problems 
of growing up are the same as they 
always have been, of course there are 
new and peculiarly contemporary prob- 
lems we have to deal with. 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 spe- 
cially among the adolescent population. 
Kids often don’t have the chance to test 
their skills, discover their strengths, 
learn how the world was made, find out 
where they fit, recognise their respon- 
sibilities 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 be- 
sides 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 sket- 
h some ideas about how the functions 
of initiation might be fulfilled in modern 
society. The full development of these 
ideas must wait another day.

A Basis for Contemporary Initia- 
tions.

1. The Symbolic Journey: The journey 
from the child to the man/woman is one 
that takes many years. Initiations are 
memories in that journey symbolising 
steps, sometimes laups, 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 
spac" giving them a quality of timeless- 
ness and infinity. The religious purpose 
of such occasions was to "help the indi- 
vidual 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 de- 
scribe the larger pattern will be touched 
on under "The Visioning".

Much of what was called ritual in earlier 
societies has now evolved into what we 
 call "the arts". Modern initiations, involv- 
ing symbolic enactments and celebra- 
tions of the stages on a person's jour- 
cy, can be dramatically intensified by 
using these arts - poetry, music, song, 
story, mask, painting, costumes and 
dance. People with skills in improvisa- 
tion and drama may be particularly help- 
ful in creating appropriate rituals.

In ancient times rituals took place in 
specialty chosen outdoor sites - sacred 
places charged with numinous power 
whence the presence of the sea-elements 
led gardener 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 
become sites for contemporary initiations. 
But it is important not to forget that we rely 
ultimately for our survival on grace 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 frathand 
appreciation of their importance, recogni- 
tion of our responsibilities to the "living Earth" can never develop.

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

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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, grief 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-gathers of Australia we need to learn to turn fear into excitement, pain into courage, anger into compassion, doubt into confidence, confusion into vision, grief into self-discipline. Learning to make these transitions 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 these 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 awe-inspiring 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 subject 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 splintering 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 paleo-anthropology. This does not mean that elements of the old story - folk tales, parables, myths and legends - so not have enduring value. It just means that we ignore the new story at our peril.

Contemporary initiatives 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 dawnning 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 new and positive identity. There is no better time to start doing this than on that adolescent journey, in the symbolic arena 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 an inner-city flat, a backyard, a cow pasture or a patch 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, unimpeded by national boundaries. Pollution of the atmosphere by the few may have dire consequences for the many. And the spiritual, which has taken thousands of
year to form, can be washed away in one flood if left without protection. Part of our exaltation 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 is what: "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 having allowed to vote in an election and drink in a pub; as our principal change 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 quality 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 genuine initiatory experience. They may even receive genuine social recognition for having done so. But these success tales 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 picking 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 this if greater weight was placed upon it. We now have the skills of group work, problem solving and counselling to help make sense in the community a more effective. The bonuses of community theatre, for example, has shown how a project which researches and celebrates the life and times of a particular place can find people together and give them new-ground strength. This can be equally 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's in the world now, but with a people that has laid down over thousands of years of human evolution.