

# The Five Marks of Initiated Men

Adam's Return: The Five Promises Of Male Initiation by Richard Rohr, (2004).

## 1) LIFE IS HARD

**Initiation** is less about being a warrior than about being conscious, awake, alert. It helps us face the issues (as Alcoholics Anonymous does) and deal with our pain (rather than blame others for it). If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it in some form — in one or more of the following ways:

1. We will become inflexible, blaming, and petty as we grow older.
2. We will need other people to hate in order to expel our inner negativity.
3. We will play the victim in some form as a means of false power.
4. We will spend much of our life seeking security and status as a cover-up for lack of a substantial sense of self.
5. We will pass on our deadness to our family, children, and friends.

Human beings will do everything under the sun to avoid the problems of *me, now*, and *here*. Only suffering and certain kinds of awe lead us into genuinely new experiences. All the rest is merely the confirmation of old experience.

**Suffering:** initiates are often circumcised, and wound themselves; they do not wound or abuse others as the uninitiated always do.

**Then, again, there's paradox and mystery:** the contemplative mind is content here; the daily calculating mind works in a binary way; either-or thinking gives one a sense of control.

**True Self False Self.** Deconstruction of the false self tends to begin in midlife — *returning to where we started and knowing it for the first time* — T.S. Eliot, from "Little Gidding," Four Quartets (Gardners Books; Main edition, April 30, 2001) Originally published 1943." (T S Eliot).

**The Sacred Wounding.** *"Where we stumble, and fall is where we find pure gold"* (Jung). *"There's a crack in everything, and that's how the light gets in"* (Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"). *"I could not find a single example where a young man was not symbolically and actually wounded and scarred in initiation rites"* (Rohr).

**Naming and Marking.** Note the change of names in the Bible — Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul, Simon to Peter. 'At an initiation rite in Arizona, May 2005, we each stood bare chested, and declared a proud "I am [full name] and I am a beloved son of God.'" (Rohr) Note that Jacob was "marked" in his hip. **Genesis 32:22-32**, *"Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the*

*socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

## 2) YOU ARE NOT THAT IMPORTANT

Humility is of central importance for human truth and happiness. You are of the earth (humus), your only dignity is that you are a map being beloved of God. All else is window dressing. You owe respect to life, to creation, to others, to yourself, to God. But don't expect or demand that respect from others. You do not have the "right" to anything except the rights the Gospel gives you: to love and to forgive.

**Transformed people** tend to transform people (hurt people hurt people).

**Rites of passage are communal affairs**, led by elders and father figures (not low-risk stuff like sermons or a series of questions and answers). "I suspect that the basic reason that initiation died out is because there were not enough masters around. We had to settle for institutionalized priests and ministers, roles of authority instead of people of authority." (Rohr)

Jesus (a layman) knew he needed to destabilize a person's false self before they could understand they had a true self, but this is always a hard sell ("*What does it profit if you gain the whole world and lose your soul?*" **Matthew 16:26**)

**True masters are both prophets and pastors:** they deconstruct and reconstruct, so that we can "*receive the kingdom like a little child*" (rather than parroting answers, passing tests, and getting grades).

**The basic idea:** getting out of our own way, and we can't do that without help.

## 3) YOUR LIFE IS NOT ABOUT YOU

**Here's a Copernican revolution of the mind** — equivalent to that for earthbound humans when they discovered that our planet was not the centre of the universe.

One reason we Christians have misunderstood many of Jesus' teachings is that we have not seen Jesus' way of education as that of a spiritual master. He wants to situate us in a larger life, which he calls the "Reign of God." But instead, we make him into a Scholastic philosopher if we are Roman Catholic, into a moralist if we are mainline Protestant, or into a successful and imperialistic American if we are Evangelical. Yet the initiatory thrust of Jesus' words is hidden in plain sight.

Study, for example, his instructions to the twelve disciples, when he sent them into society in a very vulnerable way (no shoes or wallet, like sheep among wolves). How did we miss this? Note that it was not an intellectual message as much as it was an “urban plunge,” a high-risk experience where something new and good could happen. It was designed to change the disciples much more than it was meant for them to change others! (See Matthew 10:1-33 or Luke 10:1-24.) Today we call it a reverse mission, where we ourselves are changed and helped by those whom we think we are serving.

When read in light of classic initiation patterns, Jesus’ intentions are very clear. He wanted his disciples—then and now—to experience the value of vulnerability. Jesus invites us to a life without baggage so we can learn how to accept others and their culture. Instead, we carry along our own country’s assumptions masquerading as “*the good news.*” He did not teach us to hang up a shingle to get people to attend our services.

**“I live no longer, not I,”** Paul shouted with his one daring life (Galatians 2:20). And this one-man show turned a Jewish sect into a worldwide religion. Paul allowed his small life to be used by the Great Life, and that is finally all that matters. Your life is not about you. It is about God and about allowing Life and Death to “*be done unto me,*” which is Mary’s prayer at the beginning of her journey and Jesus’ prayer at the end of his.

#### **4) YOU ARE NOT IN CONTROL**

**The essence of modern self-help:** “*Take control of your life!*” (but the Twelve-Step program teaches that you must admit you are powerless before you can find your true power. The virtues in the first half of life are about self-control; in the second half about giving up control. “*This is how we grow:/ By being decisively defeated by ever greater forces*” (Rilke). “*If you are willing to serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter*” (Therese of Lisieux). Learning that your life is not about you means re-educating the intellect; learning you are not in control means **re-educating the will**. (Predictability might be good for science, but it is not helpful for the soul).

**Holistic hierarchies:** Ken Wilbur, “*Actualization hierarchies are parents in relationship to children, bodies in relationship to cells, hosts in relationship to parasites — Hierarchy and wholeness are two words for the same thing.*” (Jesus would call it servant leadership). Liberals have rejected authority in favour of a specious equality; neoconservatives, longing for some sort of stabilizing order, are on bended knee before presidents, popes and principles. “*The whole country (U.S.) is filled with gangs, and not just street gangs, but AT&T gangs, Enron gangs, Pentagon gangs, Capital gangs, Bishop gangs?*” (the late Ronald Johnson, who worked with black boys at risk in California).

**Male Love Needs to be Earned.** In later years, men largely recall and remember their tough teachers and demanding coaches, those who pushed them to their best and to their limits. A male knows that his other teachers did not take him seriously — and he did not take them seriously either. Love does not work for the male when it is given away too cheaply, too quickly, or too easily. It turns him into a lazy manipulator instead of a strong man. (Cheap grace is not grace at all). *"The healthiest people I know had a combination of both conditional and unconditional love from their two parents."* Personal discipline and internalized values were never assumed in the young man historically. In fact, they were assumed not to be there until they were taught, demanded, practiced and tested.

The single greatest weakness of most systems and churches is that there is no **accountability** system for what one says and does.

**Father Hunger.** Men crave male attention at all ages but cannot openly ask for it. So, they hang around other men at sports events, in bars, in Lions Clubs, at military academies, in wars, and at work sites, and hope that it will rub off somehow.

**The father wound is in every culture** — especially in those where the father is macho, distant, addicted, or emotionally unavailable. Boys need to know their father really wants to, to give them his attention and affection, without their asking. They love it when he takes the initiative, even though they won't always let on. For a child to have to enter the larger world unsupported and unguided by his father is a life-long and gnawing sadness.

## 5) YOU ARE GOING TO DIE

**The mortality and impermanence of your own life must become very real to you.**

Life here is limited and everything happening to you is a school for death. Everything is passing away. You are now baptized into the death of Christ. All wounding must now be allowed to become "sacred wounds" to prepare you for the final letting go.

**Two classic male patterns overcoming death:** looking backwards (a search for "firstness") and some kind of heroic project (and which is part of the conservative /radical tension). Authentic initiation gives the man a connection with ancestors: if there is no foundational sacred experience, he is basically adrift and eccentric.

**Healthy religion finds God more in the present** than in the past. Educated people may prefer aesthetic substitutes (art, fine words, bells, and smells, religion) and the uneducated tend to prefer sentimentality and the certitudes of popular religion (religion as spectacle and reassurance). But men look forward, wanting to become famous, strong, significant, remembered, smart (and super-religious). The heroic instinct, according to Becker (*The Denial of Death*) is man's attempt to live forever. But it is what Becker calls a *"vital lie"* — a lie that gives man energy, vitality, and direction, but only for a while, and eventually his heroics will and must fail him. He argues, the heroic projects of men are mostly overcompensations for a paralyzing fear of death, powerlessness, and diminishment. Until men move into death and live

the creative tension of being both limited and limitless, he says they never find their truth or their power. Too often, egoism, performance, ambition, and bravado in the male proceed from a profound fear of failure, humanity, and death. The heroic project never works for long, and it finally backfires into anger, depression, and various forms of scapegoating and violence. **In avoiding death, a man ironically avoids life.**

Every initiation rite I've studied had some ritual, dramatic, or theatrical way to experience crossing the threshold from life to death in symbolic form. We cannot experience rebirth, being "*born again*," without experiencing some real form of death first. Most "born again" churches do not seem to have recognized this. The old self always has to die before the new self can be born, which is the Passover experience we resist. In the language of **John's Gospel (12:24)**, "*The grain of wheat must die or it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies bears much fruit.*"

**The initiate must be led to the edge** of his normal resources, so he is forced to rupture planes and gain access to his Larger Self. Often this takes the form of solitude, silence, and suffering over an extended time, which are the only things strong enough to break our ego attachment to the false self and move us to a new level of awareness and identity.

Inside the sacred space of initiation, there were invariably ritual enactments like drowning, dipping, burying, entrance into one's tomb. Men lay naked on the earth in ashes, which is the one obvious remnant of ancient initiation rites still practiced inside organized Christianity (still an embarrassment to some) on Ash Wednesday. There were sacred whippings and anointings for death and burial, which became the harmless slap (which we dropped) and anointing of Confirmation. The old Benedictines used to lie prostrate before the altar at their final vow ceremony, the funeral pall and candles placed over them, while parts of the requiem Mass were sung over their "dead" bodies.

**Ritual of death and resurrection was the centrepiece of all male initiation.** It is probably why Jesus sought out and submitted to John the Baptist's death and rebirth ritual by the river, when his own temple had become more concerned with purity codes than with transformation. It is probably why Jesus kept talking to his disciples, three times in Mark's Gospel, about the necessity of this death journey, and why three times they changed the subject (8:31-10:45). It is undoubtedly why Jesus finally stopped talking about it, and just did it, not ritually but actually.

**The transformational journey of death and resurrection makes you indestructible.** The real life, God's life, is running through you and in you already. But allowing it to flow freely doesn't come easily. When you do, the spiritual journey really begins. Up to that moment it is just religion.