

Living Myth Podcast

Episode 381 – Coming of Age in an Age of Chaos

Living amidst the cascade of crises that shape and characterize the contemporary world is like stepping into a rite of passage that is well underway. Collectively, we are already in a state of radical transition that not only needs to shift social patterns, but that might also truly transform culture. In many ways, we are being called to transform our ways of seeing and being in the world. And in that sense, what is being called for is a transformation of humanity itself.

There's an old idea that states that human culture began not simply with the process of caring for infants and children, but more truly, with the inevitable difficulties found in helping young people transition from the end of childhood to the beginning of their lives as more fully grown people. On one level, the transition out of childhood is about the awakening of the inner life of each young person. And on another level, it takes place within the issues, dilemmas and conflicts that make up the atmosphere into which young people must grow. In that sense, the rites of passage for youth involve both personal awakenings and societal cultural challenges.

And it is in that context that I have been following two dramatic stories that involve young people and that to me, also seem to signify that we are in an unconscious collective rite of passage. The first dramatic and actually tragic story involves the troubling pattern that youth suicide continues to be on the rise in communities across the country. Recent reports show that for middle and high school age youth, that is to say ages 12 to 18, suicide is the second leading cause of death. For college age youth, that is ages 18 to 22, suicide is the third leading cause of death. For adolescents from ages 10 to 14, there has been an alarming increase in suicides that have more than doubled in the last decade. And overall, suicide is the second leading cause of death for all use from ages 10 to 24. As another report put it, more teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined.

Unfortunately, and perhaps not surprisingly, LGBTQ plus youth are the most affected with 45% of LGBTQ plus teens, saying that they have considered suicide and more than 20% saying they have actually attempted it. Perhaps also, not surprisingly, in the most recent reports, there appears to be a radical increase in suicides amongst young people of color. Sadly, the most severe trend is a continuing increase in the number of Native American youth who come to the conclusion that their own life is not worth living.

One of the few things that might unite all of the different faces, as well as all of the many troubles that afflict young people in America, might be the combination of feeling unwelcome, and at risk in their own society at the same time that life on Earth itself is at risk. Perhaps not surprisingly, suicide rates were more than three times higher for teenage boys than teenage girls, with guns increasingly playing an outsized role. Boys and young men represent 80% of all suicide deaths, and 90% of all those who in taking their own life use a gun. One of the many recent reports on youth suicide ended with this

statement, "These statistics paint a dismaying picture of the mental health of youth. Stymieing efforts to turn the tide, the field of youth suicide research itself is still young," my emphasis, "And suicidal behavior is under researched in youth of color, as well as other groups." Meanwhile, researchers and clinicians are now working to understand the nuances around youth suicide, and trying to learn ways to view risk in a more holistic way.

I would suggest one way to approach this problem is through the old idea of rites of passage, that is to say, young people intuitively know that something must die in order for a greater sense of life to become born. And working with suicidal youth, one of the things I learned to say to them is that something in you may want to die so that you can have a greater life. And it is easy to confuse the notion that a part of you needs to die with the idea that you need to die all together.

Issues of violence and apathy as well as depression and suicide in young people often stem from a lack of blessing and confirmation of the inner nobility that is a natural inheritance of each soul. The devaluing of individual life in modern mass societies falls more heavily upon the psyches of young people who are naturally trying to find themselves and become worth something in the world. What they seek secretly resides within them. Yet, they need clear confirmation of their inner value and their innate self-worth from older people that they respect. Each young person needs to be specifically invited into life in the same sense that a newborn child needs to be welcomed and held and blessed.

What modern researchers often do not know is that young people become fascinated with death because they sense that to truly grow up and become themselves, something must die. Traditional coming of age rites would introduce each young person to the presence of, and to the knowledge of death. Not the simple sense of death being the end of life, but the greater sense that the end of childhood involves a metaphorical death that would lead to an experience of the mystery of death and rebirth that is at the center of nature, and all of life.

In the meantime, youth tend to act out the psychological conditions that underlie the culture in which they must grow and try to become themselves. Youth tend to be a living barometer of the underlying and unfazed emotional and psychological conditions of the culture around them. Currently, the levels of polarization and nihilism found in most areas of life put all children and young people at greater risk of taking their own lives. The instinctive longing for self discovery, and the drive to seek some sense of fulfillment cannot be completely rescinded. But the lack of support and blessing that characterize modern cultures becomes part of an unconscious rite of abandonment that endangers all modern youth.

It is part of our human fate to be born at a particular time, and each young person must grow up within the issues and struggles that characterize the time in which they live. And that brings me to the second phenomenon that I have been tracking, which is the spread of protests against war that are now affecting university and college campuses all across the country. To be alive at this point in time means to be more exposed to the raw forces of nature, but also to the raw emotions and extreme edges of human nature. And at this moment, the extremes of human nature are being played out in the terrors and atrocities and tragedies that are tearing apart both Palestine and Israel.

I'm not speaking here historically or politically, but rather feeling the continuing shock and sense of loss, including the loss of sense and the loss of common humanity that are affecting people on all sides of a conflict that can bring agony to the heart of anyone, but especially young people who cannot help but feel the deepest anguish both in themselves and in the world. Something about a university campus in particular inspires activism of all kinds. Even in this age of social media and digital distractions, the physical proximity to a community of young people, many of whom are thinking critically about the world for the first time, helps incubate social movements that attempt to somehow deal with the very events that their elders cannot handle.

The word University refers to the idea of a universal center of learning where all subjects are present. And young people are taught both in classes and outside of their classes to question those things that they see and feel and encounter. This happens all around the world, and it is typically young people who are at the forefront of modern social movements. At the same time, the more conservative elements of a society tend to overreact when the students inevitably react to issues of injustice, death and destruction. In American society, in my experience, there has been a persistent sense throughout major social movements that young people are simply disrespecting their elders, and taking the value of their education for granted, and otherwise are simply acting out.

Recent protests on college campuses have not reached the scale of the major student protests of the late 60s against the Vietnam War, for instance, or in the 1980s against South African apartheid. But on American campuses, they may be the largest student movement so far in the 21st century. They were mass protests against the Iraq War, and after the killing of George Floyd, but they were primarily happening off campus. Now, just like the protests that came before them, students are being arrested and suspended for setting up encampments to protest the agonies of life rather than simply going to classes.

Again, I'm not commenting on or claiming to have insights into the nuances of the various positions. I am noticing once again, because I've seen it many times, the overreaction of administration's police forces and politicians faced with the attempts of young people to express themselves in the midst of dilemmas that affect them deeply, and that also defy the attempts of their elders to solve. Even after what came to be known as the Kent State massacre that occurred about 54 years ago, in the beginning of May in 1970, polls showed that the American public sympathized more with the National Guard troops who has shot and killed young protesters, than with the young people who had been sacrificed themselves.

If current university administrators and police departments continue on the path of simply trying to stop the young protesters, they might see it backfire on them just as it did over 50 years ago. Overreacting and trying to suppress young people can only serve to accelerate the anger and the sense of injustice that motivates them to begin with. By their nature, protests tend to stir up all kinds of animosities and the full range of human emotions. And in the midst of that stirring up there are always those who try to take advantage. On one hand, there are always bad actors, others who pretend to be part of the students protest. And on the other hand, there are always politicians who try to take advantage for their own purposes. Allowing either of those distorted attitudes to distract from the underlying issues seems

a common fault that somehow points to the lack of maturity, wisdom and understanding on the part of the authorities who could and should know better.

We live in hard times, when the tendency to be hard-minded and hard-hearted can intensify as a reaction to the pressures of great uncertainty, and the forces of radical change that are affecting everyone, but especially young people. Any real change, whether it involves the individual life, or the collective life of a culture, must involve periods of chaos and struggles with issues of meaning and purpose, justice and ultimately, freedom. Whereas modern societies tend to consider the time of youth to be a stage that young people would or should naturally outgrow, traditional societies imagine that the transition through which young people become aware of themselves involves a radical transformation that requires the support, as well as the guidance of genuine mentors and elders.

Although coming of age has come to mean becoming legally recognized as an adult, the coming of age rituals traditionally involved coming upon what is truly ageless inside each person. In coming of age, a person touches that which is universal and enduring in human life, as well as that which is unique and most valuable in that life. In particular, coming of age means coming in contact with big dreams that can reveal the inner truths, as well as the inevitable agonies of life. The specific struggles of youth become the twists of fate through which they find the seeds of their own story, while at the same time learn not just the simple norms of society, but also the dilemmas and challenges that their society faces.

Such a genuine awakening inside each young person requires an outside drama that can match the intensity of the thing trying to awaken in their own soul. Something inside each young person knows that they are wildly incomplete. And that something drives young people to extremes that lead far from the common behaviors and typical norms of mainstream society. Call it their inner spirit, call it their soul, call it their fate, call it their destiny, for it is all of those things that they have legitimately inherited as part of the human soul. And that radical internal aspect of them will try to have its day in order to become better known, in order to become eventually integrated, and in order to eventually serve not just their own life, but serve the very life of their community.

The human soul has a natural expectation of awakening to a greater sense of being meaningful and purposeful. And coming of age means to come to know something of one's own inner self and awakening to the way that we each are called to be meaningful and find some purposeful way of living.

When young people are not invited into a conscious experience of awakening and self-discovery, I mean beyond what might be offered in their classes, those things which touched them so deeply they can never be forgotten, when the young people are denied that they will create their own rites of passage, just to fill the void. And since both life and death are involved in all major transitions, things can go darkly awry. At the same time, when the inner life, the deep dreams and the elements of purpose within young people do not become revealed and become confirmed, young people can remain disoriented throughout their life, carrying an internal sense of being unwelcome, unwanted, and not really needed. And whenever this inner spirit, this unique essence, this natural genius of a young person goes unrecognized and unblessed, it makes it much more difficult for them to find a genuine orientation to life, and to learn how they might contribute, not simply to the drama, but also, more

purposefully, to the ways in which they might contribute to the healing, the renewing, and the reunifying of the world for everyone.

Traditional rites of passage that are found all over the world until modern times can be seen to serve two primary purposes. On one level, the rites of passage can involve a process of bringing childhood to an end, while introducing a young person to social practices, to the common norms and the typical roles of responsibility. That's the part that you often hear older people using as a critique, and even a dismissal of young people when they seek to protest what seems to them inhumane, unjust and nihilistic aspects of their own community and culture.

At a deeper level, the point of a rite of passage becomes the awakening and the revealing of the inner spirit and the natural genius that are present in the life of each young person. It may not be evident to those simply observing from the outside, but in the midst of protests and other forms of activism, a young person can enter the spirit of the times in which they live. They can experience the conflicts of life, but also the instinct to find the deep universal values like truth and meaning, inclusion and blessing.

In the midst of what can seem confusing and mostly turmoil, a young person can find themselves, and if there are those involved who are not simply overreacting or being rejecting, but rather understand the nature of mentoring and the need for blessing, if they are involved, then a true transition can occur that has not just the result of that young person becoming a more genuine version of themselves, but also have the effect of a culture learning about its own inner troubles, and possibly finding ways to reconnect to the origins, which include the basic values of humanity, which continually are lost in the course of history, but also continually tried to be found through the varied dramas that those who prefer to be settled in their life tried to avoid.

The two levels of a rites of passage can be viewed as the confirmative process on the one hand, and the more transformative way on the other. The confirmative process typically aims at introducing young people to the responsibilities that define adult behavior. At that level, the focus may remain primarily in the area of family, of collective values and also of basic social practices. But in the more radical rites of genuinely awakening to the nature of one's own self, a young person enters a life path that aligns with a deeper sense of meaning and a greater sense of purpose. And the idea here is not simply leaving childhood behind, becoming a responsible adult, but rather, the opening of a path that leads to lifelong learning, as well as to psychological and spiritual growth.

Besides the awakening of the inner character and true life spirit of young people, rites of passage could also serve to make bridges for a meaningful exchange of knowledge between one generation and the next. Specifically, that exchange of knowledge would happen between the elders who have extensive life experience and the younger ones who do not yet have that experience, but however have the burning sense of spirit and the deeper sense of meaning that is necessary for all of life. In this old understanding, the generations taken together become the living body of culture. And the loss of these ancient understandings leads to an exaggerated separation between younger and older people. What has become commonly known as the generation gap actually represents a failure of one generation to engage the one following it. And that becomes a gap in which meaning and purpose, as well as healing and understanding can be mostly lost.

When seen from a deeper place, the heat of protests can be seen not simply as a reckless fire intended to burn bridges, but more as an alchemical fire intended to release passions and emotions that need to be expressed, while at the same time finding ways to build bridges of understanding that can bring the generations back together. And that can contribute somehow to the healing of conflicts that keep intensifying and now have become global in their reach.

Whether it is the pressure of an unreconciled world that falls like a weight on adolescents and young people, causing them to consider or try to take their own life, or it is the eruption of deep emotions, but also the deepest values of humanity trying to be recognized and brought to bear again, as experienced in genuine protests, what used to be known as the sage in the heart of each person seeks to awaken and become known through exactly those experience that seem to be a matter of life and death. When the dark times come, it is both the eternal youth carrying the dream of life and the wise old sage inside each life that are trying to be found and be brought together again.