



Let us come back once more to the primitive mysteries of initiation. Everywhere we have found the symbolism of death as the ground of spiritual birth – that is, of regeneration. In all these contexts, death signifies the surpassing of the profane, non-sanctified condition, the condition of the 'natural man', ignorant of religion and blind to the spiritual. The mystery of initiation discloses to the neophyte, little by little, the true dimensions of existence; by introducing him to the sacred, the mystery obliges him to assume the responsibilities of a man. Let us remember this fact, for it is important – that access to the spiritual is expressed, in archaic societies, by the symbolism of Death.

Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams

Throughout human history there have been many forms of ritual initiation. The form that we hold in both The Gift and The Grail is one such form that has proven extraordinarily powerful in its capacity to allow transformation within the individual and the collective. It holds the echoes of the ancient mysteries within a contemporary context.

Honouring life passages – life, death, rebirth

Essential to all passages of initiation is the entry through the present 'state' of being, into an expanded, greater awareness of one's intrinsic nature and its relationship to the cosmos, or all of life. As Eliade suggests, it does indeed require a 'death'; a willingness to let go of what has passed or is no longer needed, and surrender to the forces of nature so much greater than the personal will can envisage. Within Shematrix, we acknowledge the lack in our culture of ritual forms of initiation that honour the uniqueness of each individual within a society. Without this recognition, the individual can become alienated from his or her place in life and the very fabric of our humanity suffers. It is the intention of this page to explore a little of what occurred in the past, in order that we may retrieve something of the wisdom of the ancients, and bring what is relevant into our lives today.

Within earth-based cultures, initiation was held as essential to the wellbeing of the individual and his or her connection to life itself. A young girl's first bleeding, a couple's first sexual experience, boys becoming men, the miracle of the birth of a child – all were events marked by some form of ritual or sacred drama that acknowledged the power of these transitions. Honouring these passages as a community both validates the experience of each person and weaves it into the tribal story. Each knows his/her place within the tribe and everyone participates in the creation of the world.

Initiation as soul journey

Essentially, initiation is a soul journey. It may be stepped into consciously, or it may take us when we least expect it! It often comes upon us unbidden, with the elemental force of a hurricane or an earthquake. A loss or death of a loved one, or any sudden change of life circumstances, can catapult us unsuspecting into an altered reality. It is the passage of awakening to the new and unfamiliar circumstance that tests our capacity for evolution.

A soul is tempered by what has had to be let go of, not by how much we have clung to or acquired. The willingness to surrender 'control' of the old and comfortable condition requires a maturity of soul that arises through living, not by theorising. There is a necessary shattering of innocence, of trust in the safety and comfort of the known. No instruction can describe the first sexual ecstasy. Nothing prepares one for the demands of birth, mothering and the altered circumstances of a new life. And no amount of denial will protect us from the inevitability of our own physical death. Facing our worst fears, and meeting these powerful and often painful points of transition in a human life, is to consciously connect with the mystery, with the order of the cosmos, with existence itself, and to be opened by its infinite potential. To call on this greater power is prayer. To create ceremony to invoke it is ritual. To connect with it so deeply that it passes through you and leaves you irrevocably changed is initiation. Ritual initiation is a sacred journey into the unknown, undertaken consciously and made as an offering to life. It asks a death in return for the birth of the new. And because it opens us to the vast universal powers, the neophyte needs the old ones, the initiated ones, to guide or watch over the journey. In ancient cultures, the elders were revered for the life passages they had endured; the closer they traveled towards death, the greater the value of their life experience.



Descent into the underworld

In Arnhemland, the higher initiation is to 'go into the mother' – to descend alive into the earth, sometimes even being dusted with white powder to be like a corpse. At the Greek mysteries in Eleusis, much of the time was spent underground without light. Inanna is transformed by surrendering to her dark sister/self, Ereshkigal, in the great below. In contemporary initiation, much time is spent in the underbelly of the self and of the cultural persona, allowing the unacceptable, forbidden and darkest aspects to instruct the soul.

These are all descents to the underworld, which despite our distaste or our fear, is always the place to head when seeking transformation and renewal. But in our culture, we like to hang on to heaven. We want only the light, only the happy endings. We fear death. We are taught to avoid it. We hold it as alien to life, as opposite to life, as other than life. Earth-based peoples don't make this separation. Death is the unseen or hidden part of life. Life and death are a continuum and this is revealed in initiation; that the end and the beginning are back to back, that life is circular.

Experiencing the mystery

Initiation is a mystery and, as such, it can be known but not spoken. As with all mysteries, the form tells us very little. Whether one chooses a solitary vision quest, a sacred medicine journey, a pagan ceremony or any other form of opening to the mystery, what guides the initiate is his/her intention and the support he/she summons from the unseen world. It is an invocation of spirit to occupy matter, to allow visioning, knowing, and transformation beyond what has previously been understood as possible. From the outside it appears that certain steps may be taken, but only from inside can we experience, for ourselves. A great trust is required, often in the face of tremendous doubt or skepticism, for we have been well indoctrinated by the fear of the unknown, and our own inner voice of guidance may be the last we are used to heeding.

Each experience of initiation is unique. Through ceremonial witnessing of these passages to reclaim the soul, we also learn to honour and validate individual subjective experience as a high truth. We learn to listen to our own soul voice, and to hear and respect that of others. We can directly experience god/goddess within ourselves and each other, and the profundity of witnessing divinity within such ordinary humanness is a paradox of divine order! We are in the realm of religious experience here, the direct embodiment of the sacred. The glorious transmission that is often held as unattainable is the birthright of all beings and can be experienced totally within the present moment.

A sacred experience for our time

To speak of 'religious experience' can evoke discomfort. For many, spirit as a living force has been excluded from our lives. Invoking spirit, allowing that there are realms outside our physical and limited experience, requires a certain humility. It also requires extraordinary courage to step outside the known and risk being seen as unacceptable, an outcast, an oddity. Yet it is, paradoxically, that willingness to face aloneness – to be separate from the false, the inauthentic or the outworn – that unites us once more with the whole. When initiation is part of a culture it connects us deeply to ourselves, to each other, and to all of life. It re-awakens the divine. It activates courage, compassion and acceptance of all beings.

Within Shematrix and the work of The Gift and The Grail, we are using a contemporary, but timeless, form of initiation to activate a network of support for all those in major life transition. There are few places so sacred and safe to encounter one's deepest truth. If you feel called to the possibilities this evokes, you are invited to take your place among the circle of initiates.