

Hazing: Here to Stay?

“Where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown ups are bewildered.”

Malidoma Patrice Some

I was hazed. Hard. And I liked it. My attitude was “bring it on, is that all you got?” There were many men like me. We wanted to be hazed. We wanted to have to “earn” our way in. My hell week was amazing. Powerful. Then, once initiated, I turned this new-found excitement upon those that came after me and I hazed them. And, at some basic level it met a need I didn’t even know I had. Yet, as I reflect back upon my four years in the fraternity, it had all the underpinnings of a very abusive situation and was rife with trauma.

I grew up with a father who taught me to be tough and to “suck it up,” to hold back tears and, under no circumstances, act like a girl (I had no idea until recently that to be a man in this culture, meant to practice misogyny overtly). After my upbringing, hazing was not a big deal. I was used to being emotionally and verbally shamed. My skin was thick and I could take it. Underneath of course, I was a super sensitive boy, insecure and afraid of not getting the approval I needed so badly. In college it became some moral challenge for me to “take it” better than my fellow man, to prove myself. There were many men like me.¹ Not just in my fraternity, but in college, in high school, on sports teams, in gangs---all wanting the same thing: to go through an extremely hard experience and then to come out the other side, somehow different, better, altered, changed forever.

My initiation week was complicated and involved us crossing the five rivers of hell as outlined in Dante’s *Inferno*. We had to pass numerous psychological and physical tests. We were not Betas. We were made into Betas. We were forced to let go of our known identity so that we could become a well-respected active brother in the fraternity. We had to “take it like a man” to become men. This, of course meant that we all must act like tough guys and be the stereotypical, disconnected male, stuffing his feelings and his sensitivity to conform to the group ideal. Young men that didn’t make it or struggled were judged as weak, not worthy to wear the badge that set us apart from other men and other fraternities. This is where my shadow and the shadow of my social group emerged.²

Joseph Campbell, a mythologist who did a renowned series of interviews with Bill Moyers on *The Power of Myth*, outlines what he calls the hero’s journey. George Lucas drew from this model when he made the *Star Wars* epic. The hero’s journey has three basic stages: severance, initiation, and the return. In the severance stage a person will leave his community or family and begin a journey, often alone. In some cultures, the person is kidnapped, kicked out of the tribe, or he may leave the community voluntarily. During initiation, a man will go through a ritual of some kind, which may involve death and rebirth of some part of themselves. Here the initiate might be taught something by a

¹ For the purpose of this article I will speak in the context of men only, not to exclude women, but to speak specifically about who I am and who I work with.

² In Jungian psychology, the Shadow is the part of us that is repressed, hidden, unconscious. It is the part of us we don’t want anyone to know about. According to Jung, we all have a shadow.

teacher or spirit (Raphael, 1998). This is followed by a test or an “ordeal” the initiate must go through to test the waters of his newfound self (Hollis, 1993). The return symbolizes the man coming back to his community, his people, as a new person with new insights. Perhaps the boy leaves a child and returns a man. Essential to the return is being witnessed and received by community and/or elders. Campbell asserts that all cultures across time have one thing in common—a ritual marking some kind of passage into another life phase, and, in order to successfully move on to the next developmental stage in our life, we have to go through a rite of passage.

Most traditional cultures have specific rites wherein a boy becomes a man. In doing so, a boy receives some kind of training or transmission from the elders of the community about how to be a man in their village or tribe. Not only is the elders’ role pivotal, the separation from the mother is poignant and a necessary moment in a boy’s life. He leaves the safety of the womb of the protective mother and village, and must be tested by the wilderness and the men in the community. As long as humans have existed, boys have been cast into a ritual in order to become a man. How does this all fit into our modern situation? Quite simply, in our culture no such ritual exists.

If it is true that initiation is a necessary step along a man’s journey, what happens if he does not receive an initiation? If it is also true that in this culture there is no formal initiation into manhood, how is he supposed to know that he is a man? Is it when he first gets drunk? Gets hazed and survives? Joins a gang? Leaves for college? Loses his virginity? Gets his first job? Gets in a fight and wins? Whereas in other cultures, that moment is obvious, known, and acknowledged.

Is it possible then, that men in this culture are unconsciously seeking out initiatory experiences that come from deep within their psyche, and that they actively engage in high-risk behaviors to meet this end? Is it possible that they are longing to be initiated, to be pushed, challenged, forced into an ordeal that would give them meaning, understanding, validation - of themselves, their community and their world? Is it possible the role of the military, a gang, sports teams, and the modern college fraternity has become a place where boys become men through being pushed, challenged, and hazed? Is it possible that we have boys initiating other boys into manhood through fraternity rituals and games?

In recent years, anti-hazing groups have grown and have done their best to educate, inform, and reprimand perpetrators of hazing. Organizations such as StopHazing.org do ongoing education and research, helping to pass laws against hazing. However, are we really seeing a decline in hazing? According to Stophazing.org over half of all college students report being hazed and 47% report being hazed before they entered college.

In the most recent research done, the national study of student hazing, Allan and Madden (2007) found that “more students perceive positive outcomes than negative ones (pg 26)” when it comes to hazing. In fact, the study goes on to report that when students who had been hazed were asked “why they did not report their hazing experience,” half of them gave their own explanation. Examples include:

- “It was no big deal.”
- “No one was harmed.”
- “I didn’t consider the hazing to be extreme or troubling.”
- “I had a choice to participate or not.”
- “I knew it would occur and was willing to be hazed. Consequently I didn't feel it bore reporting.”
- “I was happy and willing to do all of the things I did, I have no desire to report them.”
- It “made me a better man.”
- “It made me and my brothers better people. It was a positive experience!”
- “Feelings afterward outweighed the pain or stress felt during it.”
- “It was tradition so I didn't mind.”
- “Hazing is a rite of passage. If you can't take it, get out.”

What does all of this suggest? From the research one could conclude that many college undergraduates not only want to get hazed, they do not view it as a problem. This information confirms the responses of the college men I work with each year. For the past seven years I have worked with more than 200 college men in an outdoor leadership setting. Each trip we have a discussion about hazing and I informally survey the group. When I ask them if hazing was helpful to them, nine out of ten men answer yes. Ten out of ten would do it again. Each man comes from a different hazing experience. Many of them describe their experience as “intense,” “brutal,” “tough,” or on the other side, “we weren’t really hazed,” “no hazing took place, but I wish it did.”

Joseph Campbell believes that the hero’s journey has been with us as long as man has lived in community and participated in rituals. Since men today lack a conscious, loving initiation into manhood, they attempt to become men through their own misconstrued, haphazard attempts. In other words, they initiate each other blindly, without intelligently looking into what it is that they are really trying to do. Many men’s organizations such as the Mankind Project assert that the single biggest problem with men in our culture today is that they have never been formally and consciously initiated into manhood.

Hank Nuwer, hazing expert and author of *Wrongs of Passage*, states in his book, that “modern psychology” offers some possible explanations as to why hazing exists. He cites that, “The gusto with which some hazers perform activities suggests that hazing satisfies some sort of primitive psychic need to symbolically take revenge for hazing that they themselves once endured.” I agree with the first part of his statement; that it stems from a “primitive psychic need.” The second part of this statement might be true, but it still does not explain why hazing began in the first place. Again I assert that this need is a man’s intrinsic longing to go through something difficult to become the person he needs to become.

Nuwer calls hazers “extremists.” If this is true does it mean that over half our college students are extremists? I don’t think so. Hazers are people like you and me. We may not haze another person, but we share one thing in common---we long for something deeper in life, some meaning, some difficult experience that will define us, make us who we are.

I agree with Nuwer that hazing is about belonging—belonging to a group. Most young people are willing to go through something difficult to belong and be accepted in the group. Although this is true, it is only half of the equation.

Nuwer also researches the origins of hazing and points to the fourth century and medieval times where hazing was quite common. He goes on to discuss many tales of hazing mostly in academic settings. There is no mention of traditional cultures and hazing. But the origins of hazing can be found in the roots of human psychological development that spans cultures, gender and time, well beyond academia. If we are really to look at hazing, we must go further than the academic and social institutions and look to the larger, global human situation.

Nuwer does however make an important statement that, “numerous scholars have concluded that hazing in the Middle Ages allowed newcomers to demonstrate that they possessed the stamina and courage necessary to survive symbolic *ordeals*.” Then, if we go back to the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell, and look at the male initiate, we realize he must face “trials, tests and enemies” and lastly the crux of his journey is the “ordeal” wherein he must face his biggest fear. In the ordeal a certain part of him dies and a new part of him emerges. The ordeal is meant to call forward an essential part of our psyche that needs our attention. It is in the ordeal where we discover more about the possible roots of hazing. In an authentic initiation, the ordeal is done from a place of love and respect. Unfortunately for us in this day and age, and since “the shadow” is always operating in all of us, many groups such as cults, gangs, religious extremists, the military and yes, fraternities, co-opt the basic principles of the hero’s journey and actually brainwash, manipulate and traumatize individuals with the goal of forging the initiate into a pawn who betrays his own inner integrity and conforms to the group identity. As a result, men remain developmentally immature. Poet and mythopoetic men’s movement writer Robert Bly agrees and calls these men “half adults” (Bly, 1996).

Why is it important to determine where hazing comes from? For me, it is an essential question. As a psychotherapist and coach, I work with a range of people, all of whom have a longing to be who they are. We now know that hazing is prevalent in just about every sector of society and crosses socio-economic lines, gender, and age. I notice the lack of conscious initiatory practices in our culture and hazing is one unconscious attempt to meet this end. What if we brought awareness to this process? What if we understood the deeper psychological and archetypal longing to be ourselves and to become a man/woman? What if men were aware of the longing that they feel inside but cannot name? What if we attempted to initiate our men in a healthy way? Would there still be hazing?

I assert that hazers are themselves victims, wounded souls who are acting out their own unfinished business. Perhaps we are all hazers, perpetrating upon one another in ways that go against our innermost integrity. We have all been hurt and we have all caused another person pain. To point the finger only at the hazers in this system is not good enough. I believe that the desire to go through something difficult is to be human. The desire for some of us wanting to be hazed is valid. If it is true that men want to go

through an ordeal to become who they are, to become men, it makes sense that men haze and want to get hazed. Perhaps it is we that are dropping the ball, refusing the call to initiate our young men. Have we not learned that eradicating hazing is like eradicating war, drugs or violence? Instead of pointing the finger at those who haze, can we not look at the longing behind the behavior and address it head on?

First, we need to be aware that there is a deeper psychological need in all of us, particularly those in adolescence, nearing adulthood. Next, I believe we need to meet that need with conscious initiatory practices that involve all aspects of the hero's journey, not just a test. Likewise, the ordeal must be real. It must bring forth a part of us that lays buried within our psyche. Through the ordeal we must help men unlock their soul's calling. It is not good enough to do a ropes course or facilitate team-building initiatives. Something much more intense and radical is called for. Men also need mentors, older men who have made the difficult journey to become a man, who are willing to show them the way of being "a good man." These older men must be re-initiated so that they too get the experience of a conscious ordeal. It is not good enough to look to the media and pop culture to define manhood for us. It is time to consciously initiate our young men in a way that includes aspects of a hero's journey.

Many administrators have done a great job brainstorming potential "hazing alternatives." However, none has the true aspect of an ordeal. The closest to this is a seven-day wilderness trip done by several fraternities. We cannot expect a gang member who faced severe trials during his initiation to go rappelling down a mountain with his peers and feel that he accomplished something and is now a man. We need to look well beyond "outdoor activities" toward a new kind of initiation. We also need to look to men that have actually done a real, authentic rite of passage—men like Malidoma Some, a West African Shaman who has written many books on the subject.

Part of the issue here is that an "authentic" rite of passage involves very intense experiences, few of which our modern society might support. That said, a few possibilities that might come close to a real rite-of-passage are: Attending a group meditation retreat sitting still for hour after hour, day after day for 30 days; spending four days and four nights alone in the wilderness in the same spot with no food; spending two weeks alone in a 10x10 foot cabin contemplating one's life purpose; living homeless for a week in an urban city; going off into the Alaskan wilderness alone like the main character did in the movie *Into the Wild*; or hitch-hiking across South America alone. It is during these experiences that a man comes face to face with himself and his mortality, and wakes up the part of him that must enter manhood and live his purpose.

So then, we need to ask ourselves, are we in the business of initiating boys into manhood? If not, maybe we need to let go of the notion that it is our responsibility altogether and stick to doing what we do best, whatever that is. At the same time let us realize, acknowledge and accept that unless we drop deeply into the art of initiation, hazing is here to stay and minimizing its risks might be the best we can do.

BIO:

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