



Review of Bret Stephenson, *From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2006), xiv + 290 pp.

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Stephenson's main concern is that contemporary society does not offer adolescent boys appropriate initiation rituals to facilitate their journey into manhood. He adopts an "archetypal perspective" (p. 4) that relates to a commonality of experience among all boys and men, regardless of time or place. Anyone vaguely familiar with men's movement literature will recognize these themes and will not be surprised to discover Stephenson refers to Robert Bly on seven separate occasions. He also opens one chapter with a quote from Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, who have been responsible for some problematic writing about initiation and archetypes. However, Stephenson thankfully manages to discuss these themes without any of the femiphobia and homophobia of his predecessors. Similarly, while "archetypal," Stephenson refers only once to Jung and resists the typically one-dimensional behavioral models promoted by other archetypal treatments of masculinity.

The archetypal adolescent path Stephenson charts is: the search for identity; individuation and leave-taking; dealing with paradox and abstraction; egocentrism; idealism; a sense of pride; puberty; sexuality; seeking non-ordinary states of consciousness. Stephenson argues that if contemporary society does not provide an initiatory context for these unavoidable steps in a boy's development, they manifest themselves in other, inevitably destructive ways. For example, inappropriately addressing sexuality may result in irresponsible sexual activity, or ignoring the need for non-ordinary states of consciousness may result in drug abuse. Stephenson's years of working with adolescent boys enables him to deal with such themes without retreating into fear-based denial. Discussing his habit of handing out condoms to teens he writes, "abstinence is like anarchy and communism in that it looks great on paper but seems to fail the human test" (p. 30). Similarly, despite the current war on (some) drugs he notes, "it seems to be a universal human need to alter one's perception of the real world occasionally" (p. 30).

Stephenson argues that initiation, as a rite of passage into manhood, requires two key ingredients: risk and community acceptance. Traditionally boys would be separated from their community, undertake a dangerous initiation of some description and return to their communities as men. Stephenson says we need to responsibly recreate such rites of passage, for example via rituals connected with wilderness vision quests, rock climbing or river rafting. Once boys have undertaken such rites they need to be treated differently, as men.

His call for initiation is, however, an incomplete argument. It rightly identifies certain problems in contemporary society, perceives such problems to be absent in tribal societies, and hooks on to initiation as the key variable. This may or may not be the case. But even if it is, there is the assumption that the new order initiation brings is better than the status quo. But this new order is never fully explored: We are simply asked to accept that more responsible behavior is the single, inevitable outcome. However, one could reasonably speculate that the sense of belonging that initiation brings to boys comes with a cost: conformity and hegemony. While initiation rituals in the West could help solve issues of destructive behavior, they may also quash self-determined identity and plurality within society and, instead, create an alternative specter: the tyranny of the majority.

The book's subtitle, *Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age*, is not strictly representative: The majority of the book does not speak of spirituality. It is a common assumption that to describe something as archetypal is to invest it with some kind of spiritual meaning. While archetypal realities can be spiritual, they are not necessarily so, and much of what Stephenson talks about is arguably more psychic than spiritual, i.e. psychological traits that dwell solely within the individual rather than those traits which reach out beyond the person into a spiritual reality. It is only the penultimate chapter, "A Transpersonal Approach," that can be described as spiritual.

Stephenson claims that "inherent in transpersonal psychology is a foundation in Eastern philosophy, and a belief in the value of native cultures and wisdom and the inclusion of Spirit" (p. 183). The transpersonal approach for creating rites of passage include creating a mythical/magical context, instilling locations with a sacred meaning, building small altars, and weaving prayer ties. This certainly appears to be moving from the psychic into the spiritual realm, but the reader is still left to draw her own conclusions about what "Spirit" actually means. Similarly, Stephenson liberally uses the word "sacred." What, for example, makes a fire a "sacred fire" (p. 215)? No doubt he intends the spirituality of each individual to be brought to this meaning. However, in the same way the discussion of initiation focuses more on the means than the end, so too does the discussion of spirituality. Stephenson's assumption that the spirit is self-evident results in the spirit having little meaning at all.

Readers who are attracted to archetypes, Jung and Joseph Campbell will find Stephenson a satisfying read. Readers who find such approaches outdated will doubtless stumble upon numerous problems, as will those who lament the terminological dilution of "spirituality." However, Stephenson's experience working with adolescent boys does come through, and the way he writes about them can be moving. Stephenson also does a reasonable job of avoiding the unsavory models of masculinity favored by his predecessors. In this respect the book is a step forward in reconciling archetypal masculinity with real masculinities.

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