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Humanity's Rite Of Passage:  
A World Tended By Adults

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*For one who has perception,  
A mere sign is enough.  
For one who does not heed,  
A thousand explanations  
Are not enough*

**Hajji Bektash Wali**  
13th Century Persian Mystic,

During the past twelve months, it has been reassuring to see vast numbers of individuals in the United States awakened to the reality that life on this planet has profoundly shifted and will never be the same. Many have radically altered their career goals, spending and saving patterns, and their long-term priorities. When I witness such changes in human behavior, I am encouraged, and I become cautiously optimistic about our ability to read the signals and respond wisely.

At the same time, however, the majority of citizens, greatly enabled by mainstream media, remain clueless about what is happening around them, or even adversely in their personal lives. Marinated in denial and entitlement, they naively await a "return to normal" and persist in doing more of everything that hasn't worked, isn't working, and never will. So I must ask, how is that humankind, supposedly "the measure of all things" can behave with such recalcitrance and obliviousness to reality?

For the past two decades, alongside engaging in exhaustive research on empire and all that has brought us to civilization's collapse, I have been a student of myth and archetypal psychology, as well as indigenous traditions. The fact that for the most part, these topics are foreign to our culture as a result of Western civilization's inculcation, speaks volumes about our behavior toward ourselves, other humans, and the earth community. So-called "civilized" humanity has been exiled from its rootedness in nature and the organic process of human development so conscientiously observed and nurtured by indigenous peoples. Consequently, the culture of modernity is not only disconnected from the earth, but in a large sense "developmentally disabled". An integral aspect of the disability is modern humanity's disavowal of the initiatory process in the care and training of children.

As I have explained in my book *Sacred Demise: Walking The Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization's Collapse*, most indigenous cultures have elaborate initiation procedures for their young people during the age of puberty; however, in the modern world, one does not have to be a member of an indigenous community to experience initiation. In fact, Carl Jung asserted that initiation is an archetype or fundamental motif inherent in the human psyche. That is to say that something in us wants and expects engagement in the initiatory process, not only at the age of puberty, but throughout our human experience. The process is so fundamental, Jung believed, that even if we do not participate in a formal rite of passage ceremony as we transition from youth to adulthood, our human journey will provide us with initiatory events for the purpose of deepening our humanity and our connection with the cosmos and something greater than the human ego.

Examples of initiatory events which humans frequently encounter are loss of meaningful work, loss of livelihood, loss of home, loss of health, loss of relationship, loss of future security, loss of life, or loss of place. I have intentionally reiterated the word "loss" because loss is the hallmark of modernity. The irony is that civilization has promised us inestimable gain but fundamentally delivered infinite loss at every turn of our path toward embracing its demands.

In tribal cultures where formal rites of passage are practiced, it is understood that life on earth is fraught with loss-that in fact, loss is the hallmark of human experience but that the bone-marrow ordeal of the initiatory process grounds the young person moving toward adulthood, by way of loss, into his or her permanent place in the community. Thus, regardless of what losses one may endure, for the initiated man or woman, one's connection with community and with the sacred are constant. As a result, one is equipped to face and navigate loss with remarkable fortitude and grace, not alone, but

supported by elders and peers in the process.

I do not wish to idealize tribal cultures or imply that they are without challenges or devoid of dysfunction. Indeed, the more they are encroached upon by civilization, the more dysfunctional they become. My intention is not to focus on indigenous peoples per se, but on the archetype of initiation that I believe inhabits the human psyche. If my premise is correct, then much of how we as a species have arrived at the current predicament of committing planetary suicide makes perfect sense.

Moreover, if the reality of initiation is deeply embedded in our humanity, it is likely that survival and navigation of the collapse of civilization will be enhanced by our perception and response to collapse as an initiatory process.

Furthermore, in our fundamental human origins, we are all indigenous people. Whether or not we claim our indigenous roots, "white roots" do not exist. We are either actively acknowledging our indigenous roots, or we are ignoring them, but in fact, all of humanity has been colonized by civilization, the collapse of which offers us the opportunity to reclaim our heritage and liberate ourselves from conquest.

This then leads to the question: How does an uninitiated species respond to the predicament it has created, and conversely, what is the initiated response to the collapse of civilization?

### **Capitalism: A Children's Story**

The capitalism to which I refer is not that of the small business enterprise which began flourishing in the Middle Ages, but rather corporate capitalism, which is synonymous with the proliferation of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of an elite oligarchy. It is rooted in a world view antithetical to the common good in which certain individuals, by virtue of privilege and a sense of specialness and entitlement, exert influence on neighboring entities and institutions in order to deploy myriad varieties of economic and social control. It is the apotheosis of uninitiated, puerile engagement with the world.

Unfortunately, our awareness of corporate capitalism's treachery and even our contempt for it, does not exclude us from its seductive manipulation, for its roots penetrate our psyches deeply and insidiously. We have been conditioned by industrial civilization far more profoundly than we may ever be able to consciously discern, by a legacy that extends far back in time through innumerable generations. Thus, if we are to astutely prepare for the demise of civilization, we must critically ponder the myriad ways in which we have internalized its fundamental world view and attendant values. Detached as we may be from the day to day trappings of civilization, even as we rail against the evils of corporate capitalism, it behooves us to notice our physical and emotional responses to the topic of the collapse of the systems we proclaim to disavow. Understanding that no sane human being welcomes suffering, death, and untold misery, our emotional responses and ensuing attitudes to the unraveling of civilization may reveal our level of awareness regarding the initiatory process and our participation in it.

### **What Developmental Disability Looks Like**

Around us and even within ourselves, we notice a host of responses to the current predicament. Some of those might be:

**\*\*Entitlement:** This should not be happening to me. I have worked very hard in my life and deserve to be gainfully employed doing meaningful work. I grew up in a poor or struggling middle-class family, and my parents worked hard to make life better for me. I've paid my dues. I shouldn't have to rent or shop in thrift stores or tighten my belt. After all, this is America, and I deserve to enjoy the American Dream.

**\*\*Positive attitude:** You can wallow in gloom and doom if you want, but I'm going to maintain a positive outlook. If I look at the negative things that are happening, I'll get stuck in negativity and won't be able to come up with creative solutions. Besides that, I'm afraid I'll get depressed and won't be able to dig myself out of an emotional dungeon.

**\*\*There are solutions to these problems:** Somehow, someone is going to come up with solutions. Technology and human ingenuity will lead the way. If we just work hard enough, we can create a mass movement that will transform consciousness and the systems that created these problems.

**\*\*Sustainability will save the day:** If enough people recycle, cut carbon emissions, buy green products, and use renewable energy, we can prevent the collapse of civilization.

**\*\*I deal with problems when they happen instead of obsessing about them ahead of time:** I don't want to spend my energy worrying about these things now. I'll take action when I need to, and I'm sure that when I need to, I'll make the right decisions.

**\*\*I want to enjoy life; I don't want to spend all my time thinking about the future:** It's important to live in the here and now, and right now, my family and I are OK. It's mentally unhealthy to be thinking and talking about the collapse of civilization.

**\*\*The love/fear polarization:** I want to take action, but I don't want to do so out of fear. Fear is not a good motivator. I prefer to focus on love and compassion.

Unfortunately, these attitudes are not only denials of reality, placing their adherents in abject danger, they are self-betraysals. Within each one we hear the echo of the fundamental tenet of civilization: It's all about me and mine. No mention here of future generations; no cognizance of an earth community and the urgent need for working together to care for one another, the planet, or our descendants. Ironically, the self-absorption inherent in these responses is a ghastly form of self-destruction that colludes with civilization in committing planetary suicide. Let us remember that the word "collusion" simply means "the sharing of an illusion"-as in, "recovery is right around the corner; everything is getting better; just hang in there."

### **What Does Developmental Durability Look Like?**

Conversely, what some responses to collapse from the initiated perspective?

**\*\*Non-special engagement with humanity:** Yes, I've worked hard in my life. From that experience I have gathered many skills which will be useful to me as the earth community undergoes enormous shifts. Because I am not separate from that community and because we are all deeply connected, I am being called, along with all other beings who inhabit the planet, to not only experience these momentous changes, but to contribute my talents and skills to enhancing our common well being in this process.

**\*\*A willingness to confront what is, not how I'd like it to be:** I do not enjoy looking at unpleasant realities, but if I don't look, then I cannot see, and if I cannot see, I am not serving myself or anyone else. I will look, and I will feel the feelings that surface as I do so. I will remember that within the word "emotion" is the word "motion" which means that feelings are fluid and shift and change like the flow of water. Feeling sad today does not guarantee that I will feel sad tomorrow or that I will become frozen in any one emotion. I will ask my community to look with me, and we will support one another as we do so.

**\*\*There may be no solutions to the issues created by humanity's greed, self-absorption, and cruelty.** We may be encountering a predicament that cannot be solved but only responded to. How can I and my loved ones and community best respond to these daunting challenges? How can we work together to minimize loss of life and care for each other? If there are no "solutions", then what does this mean? What is the message in this unprecedented reality?

**\*\*The crisis the planet now faces is far more immense than responding with mere sustainability.** Sustainability means that something lasts, and living sustainably is a natural and inevitable response to living in connection with the earth community. Living in this way at this late hour is unlikely to prevent the collapse of civilization. I will not feed the puerile paradigm of civilization for the sake of supporting green products because it's "the right thing to do" or because it makes me feel good. I want to live sustainably not because it will "save" the earth but because my connection with the earth community compels me to do so.

**\*\*I am willing to deal with both the present and the future.** It is foolish to only live in the present moment. Time is a tapestry of past, present, and future, and I need to prepare for the future as well as enjoy the present moment. Because I am an adult, I need to be mindful of the well being of myself, my loved ones, and my community, as well as generations that will succeed me, and therefore, I cannot afford to live exclusively in the present.

**\*\*Ironically, the more I consider the likely consequences of the future, the more I appreciate the here and now.** Each moment, each meal, the reality of having food, shelter, health, friends, and my faculties I savor more intensely because I am aware of the likelihood that in the future, these gifts will be much harder to acquire than they are now. In fact, humans have the capacity to read the indicators of how the future might be based on compelling evidence; not to do so or having done so, then choosing not to prepare would be mentally, physically, and emotionally unhealthy.

**\*\*I will not polarize the emotions of love and fear.** Fear in humans serves an evolutionary function-to warn of impending danger so that one may take action to prevent harm. From the initiatory perspective, love and fear are complementary, not conflicting, emotions. Through fear, humans often tap into layers of courage that were previously unknown and unused. The word "courage" has its roots in the French word *la coeur* which means heart. To have courage is to have heart and to be motivated by love and compassion.

In a recent [interview](#) with author, Barbara Ehrenreich, she asserts that "positive thinking is permeating our society, from medicine to business, and is even contributing to our financial crisis." Although she does not frame her objections to positive thinking in terms of an uninitiated perspective, her description of positive thinking and its impact on modern civilization accurately describes a world view devoid of initiation. While I do not wish to champion cynicism or clinical depression, the positive thinking craze, which in this country grew out of the Victorian transcendentalist movement, is a hallmark of privilege and has been utilized by the entitled ruling elite to pacify and manipulate the remainder of society.

In indigenous traditions, positive thinking is held differently than in modernity because from the initiated perspective life is a holistic mix of positive, negative, and everything in between. In fact, in its purest application of the indigenous perspective, experiences are what they are, and humans are not wise enough to determine at the outset whether an experience is "good" or "bad." Only from hindsight can we begin to evaluate them. The qualities of joy and celebration are fostered in indigenous traditions, particularly as antidotes to human suffering, but not as positive thinking per se. Rather, one looks squarely at the challenges confronting oneself and the tribe, but a cornucopia of emotions are allowed in the process.

I'm reminded of repeated scenes in the movie "Dances With Wolves" in which medicine man, Kicking Bird, asks his white ally, John Dunbar, how many more white people will be arriving on Lakota land and when. The medicine man's question is typical of what Native Americans in those days who were aware of the burgeoning presence of the white man were asking. While some nineteenth-century Indian people may have turned to alcohol to help them forget the conquest, many did not and wanted to know the specifics of the very bad news of European invasion. Had Dunbar given Kicking Bird anything but the honest answer of, "there will be as many as the stars" or encouraged him to "think positively", the Lakota holy man would have at least lost trust in Dunbar, or worse, decided that he was completely crazy.

The initiatory process of indigenous peoples has developed organically throughout their history as a result of their intimate connection with nature. Anyone closely observing nature comprehends its capriciousness, volatility, uncertainty, and inherent inequities. One species painstakingly nurtures its young only to have a significant number of its offspring annihilated by another species. From the human perspective, nature is extraordinarily cruel. Initiation evolved in part as an attempt by humans to make sense of nature's uncertainties and serves to teach the initiate that life is a series of challenges which evoke all manner of emotions and opportunities for finding meaning in multifarious, bewildering adversity. Thus the initiated person views all harsh conditions as part of the initiatory process—even the conquest and ultimate extinction of his or her tribe.

But initiation in indigenous cultures have served an even more momentous purpose than any of those mentioned above. It was a necessary and pivotal preparation for elderhood, which had little to do with age and everything to do with wisdom. Male and female elders were the overseeing parents of the tribe—guardians of the community's purpose and destiny. All initiatory roads led to becoming an elder whose fundamental function was to mentor new initiates and keep the process of birth, initiation, elderhood, and death intact, for the benefit of present generations and those yet unborn.

### **American Date Rape**

To be uninitiated, psycho-spiritually, is to remain an emotional adolescent in the modern world. Civilization perpetuates the anti-initiation process which fixates human beings on the world of puerile pursuits and guarantees that civilization's mission and values will never be closely examined. Consumerism and fostering the identity of the citizen as consumer, attended by the mandate of positive thinking, delivers the end-product of the eternally adolescent adult who is literally, putty in the hands of the corporate capitalist rapist.

Ehrenreich notes in her interview, as does Michael Moore in "[Capitalism: A Love Story](#)", that the interminable, tantalizing carrot held out to the middle and working classes by corporate capitalism has been the hope that "you too can be rich someday" alongside the Horatio Alger "anything is possible in America" delusion. The fantasy has been brilliantly wielded to evoke envy and unfounded admiration for the titans of affluence, holding at bay bone-marrow resentment against the ruling elite for fear that exposing their insidious machinations might permanently preclude the lowly worker from joining their exclusive club. In other words, maybe if I don't criticize the filthy rich, I'll have a better chance of being one of them some day. Or in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich:

I'm saying this is an ideology that takes away all the indignation there might be about extreme economic polarization.

If you think you're going to be rich someday, why would you be resentful of million-dollar bonuses or \$10 million CEO salaries, you know? You're going to be there, so it would be against your own self-interest to stand up for your class interests.

Hence, the perpetually adolescent citizen in awe of the wealthy, with internally blathering litanies of positive thinking a la Oprah, Suze Orman, or The Secret reverberating in the mind, is fundamentally incapable of discerning the lethal essence of corporate capitalism or penetrating its odious marketing skullduggery. Thus when the rapist slipped the ruffies of "riches in real estate" or "turn your home into an ATM machine" into the middle class American lexicon, the result was collusion: the sharing of a catastrophic illusion that resulted in colossal financial plunder, leaving the adolescent victims battered, burglarized, and bewildered to awaken and discover that they had participated in the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the human race—at their own expense.

At this point, two things should be self-evident: It is time for the human species to grow up, and it is time for us to frame our experiences of humanity's converging crises through the lens of planetary initiation.

Tribal initiations always involve some type of ordeal in which there is no guarantee that the initiate will physically survive. It is, in fact, an intentional brush with death. In some instances, the initiate has a choice about when to engage in the ritual and always has the choice not to participate at all. However, most choose to participate as a result of a lifetime of preparation for it by the community. And while a young man or woman may have fear or dread of the experience, he or she is well aware by the age of initiation of the personal and community consequences of opting out of the ritual.

In no way am I suggesting that individuals not raised in tribal cultures should participate in literal initiation rituals, but I am proposing that perceiving the collapse of civilization as an initiatory experience is a meaningful, salutary, appropriate, and empowering response to it.

While on the one hand I agree that everyone is at a different level of awareness regarding the demise of Western

civilization, I also believe that this should not excuse us from incrementally educating our minds and cultivating emotional resilience in order to navigate future crises. Not all children at the age of five may be ready for kindergarten, but a ten year-old who has never begun a grammar school education is a walking tragedy.

Although many of us speak freely of living in a post-peak or post-industrial or post-petroleum world, we have no clear picture of what that world will look like. What we do know, however, is that navigating the transition to that world and surviving in it is not for the faint of heart. To accomplish either or both will require something beyond a five years' supply of food. In fact, it will demand that we perceive the crisis as an evolutionary threshold-a crossroads in the odyssey of our species that I believe is most accurately understood as an initiation.

Only collapse as initiation can illumine, at the deepest levels of our being, the choices we make as we attempt to transform a devastated civilization. The transition is utterly dependent on inner transformation. Otherwise, we are unlikely to create anything but a mirror image of industrial civilization.

So what might a world forged by initiated adults look like?

Surely it will be a world in which every aspect of human functioning will be carefully designed and lived in intimate connection with the non-human world. (A specific design system, [permaculture](#), is ideal, and it behooves anyone contemplating life after civilization to become familiar with its principles.) It will be a society in which relationships have been transformed and honed by collective suffering and mutual support. The most anxiety-producing events will not be about being stuck in traffic gridlock, being forced to change one's weekly hair styling appointment, or discovering that one's internet server is down. Rather, world views and values will be dictated by having or not having food, water, shelter, personal safety, clothing, physical health, and supportive friends and neighbors.

The world to which I am alluding is a world in which every moment, every encounter, every experience is an initiatory exercise challenging its inhabitants to practice gratitude, compassion, kindness, alertness, discernment, and be present in the body and emotions. These realities will be doorways, not merely to a new society, but most importantly, to a new strain of humanity-a planet protected and nurtured by initiated elders.

No one needs to wait for the dire repercussions of collapse in order to begin the initiatory journey. One need only open the eyes and heart to a deeper level of perception so that "a thousand explanations" will not be necessary.