

Daily Meditation 12/14/21

In Memory of Malidoma Somé, 1956-2021

Good morning.

In today's daily meditation, I'm sharing with you some of the interactions I had with Malidoma Somé, who unfortunately died last week.

He was a very special teacher, especially of rituals and rites of passage. And this is his story that made him so keen on the subject of Rites of Passage.

When he was a six-year-old boy, growing up in Africa, in his small village in Burkina Faso, he was kidnapped by Jesuits. And they took him to their seminary, which was quite a ways away, actually, where there were a number of other boys kidnapped from different parts of the area. And he got a good education there. He learned French and science and many other things.

But when he was 16, he threw a Jesuit priest out the second story window. So they concluded, the directors of that seminary, that Malidoma Somé did not have a vocation, as they used to say back then. And so he was expelled, and he walked home through the jungle.

And it took him days to return to his village, walking through the jungle. And he was very angry when he got home, because he had been kidnapped and taken away from his people, by the Jesuits, so he was angry at the Jesuits, but he was also angry at his tribe, because they knew where he was, and they never came to rescue him.

So he hung around the village for a couple years, quite angry, and finally the elders came to him and said, "You are impossible to live with. You're full of anger, because you missed your rite of passage. So this year, you're going to go out with the other 13 year olds (and he was now 18). And you're going to undergo your rite of passage."

And the rite of passage in Africa was a very severe thing. He said that about 65 boys went out with several elders and leaders, adults, and five or six of them did not come back. They died in the process of this rite of passage. But he did come back and he said it made all the difference that he got through his anger. And he became a responsible citizen within the tribe. And later he was called to continue his education, but also to come to America.

And, of course, that is where I met him. And I heard him tell the story many times; he lectured at my Institute of Culture and Creation, Spirituality at Holy Names College about the importance of Rites of Passage, especially for boys, because girls have their physical rite of passage every month with menstruation, but boys have to be more, if you will, more conscious and go out of their way to create rituals.

And I remember when he lectured on this one time in my school; there were about 65 students in the class at the time. And when he finished I asked people, "How many of you have undergone confirmation or a bar mitzvah?" And every hand in the room went up, except one. And I then asked, "How many remember this as a transformative experience?" Every hand in the room went down, except one.

So this really taught me how we have these rites of passage supposedly, in our attics, our religious attics, but they're not necessarily effective.

One time Malidoma was with us and sitting next to me, and there's this young 20-something black man who was ranting on and on about his experiences in and his anger toward our culture. And afterward Malidoma said to me, "that's what happens when young men don't have rites of passage." He said "I was so filled with anger in my village. But it was only when I underwent that passage, that my anger was diffused."

And there's healthy anger and there's unhealthy anger, and he felt that he was a very present experience of unhealthy anger.

So, the many stories to share about Malidoma Somé. We worked together with the Robert Bly ritual for 1400 Vietnam veterans that I wrote about a few days ago and it's interesting that Malidoma Somé died within a week of his friend and co-worker, Robert Bly. They worked a lot together; Robert Bly had a lot of respect for him. And Malidoma was very committed to men's movements and spiritual change.

But I allude in today's meditation to the role he played in our developing our Cosmic Mass, because he was so excited about the need for new ritual in the West that incorporated the new technologies, what I call the postmodern art forms of DJ and VJ and rap and dancing, which is really very pre modern, because pre modern peoples indigenous peoples of America, in Africa, and Australia and everywhere, they pray by dancing, not by turning pages in a book.

So now Malidoma was a wonderful human being and a wonderful mentor to many. And we lament his passing on the one hand, but on the other, we all have another ancestor to call on when we need it. Thank you, Malidoma.

We'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye.