

Rucksacks and Memory Bags

By Peter Fishpool

We recently buried a much loved and respected member of our Quaker meeting. Tom was clear that his death would be a transition—a passing over. This life is such a medley of miracles and mysteries—Tom felt in his heart there would be another level of consciousness beyond. Death would be a gateway to a different awareness of the essential loving force that lies within everything.

Jenny, my wife, died after three years battling brain tumours. As she faced up to death, Jenny called our daughters and me around and specifically encouraged me to find a new partner when she had gone. This generosity was characteristic of her lived compassion and force of character.

I found Sarah. This second marriage is a kind of rebirth for me. When I find the strength, I can leave behind those foibles which did not serve me well in my first marriage. It is a second chance in which to explore the boundaries of our loving and challenge elements of my being which remained unexplored in the youthfulness, habits, and accommodations of my first marriage.

Jenny died longing to see her daughters settled and wishing blessings for the grandchildren. Now Gemma, the only child Jenny and I made together, is herself pregnant. At the same time I hear my elderly aunt probably has cancer. Thinking of the likely trajectory of my aunt's health brings back memories of sharing Jenny's struggle with her tumours. I wish Jenny were physically able to be alongside to support the new birth, our daughter's first child.

What might have been, missed opportunities, remembered hurts, actual failures—all these we carry as shadows behind us. Some manage to process their griefs and disappointments and set them aside. Others end up weighed down with a rucksack of disillusionment and ill will.

Expectations and Memory Bags

Recently I formally greeted nine 18–25-year-olds at the start of the Rites of Passage which would initiate them into manhood. They had arrived with rucksacks loaded with tents, sleeping bags, and kit to see them through five days of camping out.

They also carried all the expectations put in a young man's head: media representations of success and achievement. They had their own

ambitions to make their mark, and consequent fears of failure. They bore assumptions laid on them by siblings, friends, parents, and teachers.

There were also bruises and scars of whatever their lives had already delivered to them. Some had experienced parents separating and absent fathers. One had seen a close friend's suicide; several knew of illness and deaths in other generations. Their rucksacks were filling up with sadnesses and shadows.

We older men would share with them patterns they could use to process encumbrances and the dilemmas to come, so they might learn to leave baggage behind. The Rites intend to celebrate the beauty of all beings, to model a life of renewed joy and a deeper understanding of loving communion.

Early on, each young man was given a "memory bag," in which he could keep his journal and keepsakes to help recall the five teachings through the Rites. He might later return to these, to help process difficulties in his pilgrimage through life.

Our camp was in a sheep pasture, in the bottoms of two limestone quarries, fields away from Hadrian's Wall. Woodland surrounded us, so the dawn chorus was enchanting. As the sun rose, the slugs and snails slimed their way back into the shadows. There were frogs and rare newts. High overhead glided gulls, game birds, and hawks. The long grass was peppered with meadow flowers. As night fell, the bats twittered and we saw the barn owl. We could not avoid the intricacies of the cycle of life and the regenerative power of nature.

Embodiment, Rituals, and Spirituality

Our group, The Male Journey, has become used to presenting male initiation rites to an older generation of men. This time we were experimenting with embodying the teachings more physically, to fix them in young men's muscle memory. We started each day with a physical exercise and made conscious use of the five senses to get under their skins and penetrate through to the heart.

The rites involve a symbolic cutting open. They work through to a vigil, an act of forgiveness for the hurts we have given, then a healing and closing up. There is surrender and rebirthing, making them ready for the next stage of the journey.

The Holy Spirit can surprise us. We had spent many hours thinking through our processes, assessing the risks of the challenges we laid before the young men. A couple of times, present to the here and now, Elders went "off-script," pushing harder at the boundaries. The young men met all the challenges with strength and grace. They found their mettle and showed their worth. It was a glorious five days.

A key strand is encouragement of the young men to share their stories, shoulder to shoulder. So often we men repress emotions, often through fright of how they could overwhelm us. Here we sat alongside, learning to share honestly and listen deeply.

Our Texan Elder, Jim, spoke of the impact on him, as a six-year-old, of witnessing his parents' alcohol-enflamed fights. Within a couple of years his mother took her life as a consequence, and he was left feeling that he, himself, was responsible. In what he now sees as a misdirected commitment, he tried always to get things "right." He trained in the pastorate through a strict evangelical seminary. Over the years since, he has found ways to leave behind his ghosts. His Christian faith remains deep, but his engagement with the world is open. Currently he takes training with the Navajo in the ways of these indigenous people's spirituality.

Jim told how he had commented to a Native American Elder about performing the Rain Dance to break the drought in the desert. He was chided by the Navajo for the Western addiction to needing to make things right. The Rain Dance is about acceptance of things as they are, celebrating the arriving rain and preparing the tribe for the sudden transitions the torrents deliver in the desert. In Northumbria we celebrated the rain too. On the last morning, as we performed our morning yoga Sun Greeting, the rain showered our bare chests and rose in condensation off our shoulders, flushed with the warm blood of our exercise.

The young men left the Rites, on the next stage of their journey, anointed with a name of their choosing. Some reaffirmed the name given by family; others chose something to mark this transition. Hopefully the Elders have given them a rebirthing. It was an opportunity to leave behind some of the dross, misapprehensions, and darkneses that weighed down their rucksacks upon arrival. They went away with memory prompts to the repeating spirals, the ascents and descents that characterize our journey. The key ritual has the young man flinging his arms wide open and hollering a huge "YES!" to life.

In our seeming plainness, Quakers often miss the significance of our own rituals. Our bodies are the temples of the Inner Light. We should use them well, to remind us of the truths they embody. Robert Cohan, the dancer, speaking of the ritual of daily dance class, said:

It's when you make the body come alive with consciousness. And in that sense, like any prayer, it's a litany, it's a ritual. Not in the abstract sense, but in the real sense in which you perform a magical act within your body that's going to make you alive.