

Daily Meditation 6-16-25

Report From the “Healthy Masculinity” Summit Gathering

Good morning.

This is Father’s Day weekend. It’s also a weekend that I write about today's meditation, where there was a three-day conference on *The Healthy Masculine*. And my role was to give a talk on that topic, and also be part of a panel, that I share the results of in today’s meditation, some of the questions that came up. And I’d like to just go a little further with some of those questions.

One of them was, “what is the difference between an elder and an older?” Obviously, we all grow older, but do we all grow as elders? And the answer is no, unfortunately. We can, but our culture does not encourage us to do so. It’s not in our culture to lay out the agenda, if you will, or the invitation, the vocation, the role that elders can and need to play, Because the young need elders, and the more the better.

When Adam Bucko and myself wrote this book several years ago together, *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation*, part of our method was to send out a questionnaire. We sent it out to many hundreds of people, young people, asking them to respond to certain questions. And one of them was, ‘what is the role of elders in your life?’ And we were stunned by the response. 95% said, “I want elders in my life, but I can’t find them. I want them, but I can’t find them.”

I think this names the problem we have in our culture, that elders are not real visible. You really have to go out of your way to find them. Now. again, as I said, there is not just someone with white hair, or someone who’s lived a long time. An elder has done his or her inner work.

Someone was quoted at our panel saying that Robert Bly says “you’re not an elder until you’ve tasted ashes.” What I like about that phrase, is that he is talking about the Via Negativa. He’s talking about coming apart, the chaos, the depth loss, and of letting go and letting be, and not being in charge, letting go, the surrender to what is, even when it’s unpleasant, tasting the ashes.

The wisdom we learn from the Dark Night, as I read about in my new book on John of the Cross, which isn’t out yet, but I feel I’ve finished it. I talk about the triple Dark Night

that we're all living through today: a Dark Night of our Souls, and a Dark Night of our species as it faces extinction, and the Dark Night of the Earth as she undergoes this travail, this trauma that is impacting everything from agriculture to economics, migrations and immigrations, therefore, and the rising of the seas and all that. What that means for the largest cities in the world, etc, etc. So it's a very uncertain time. It's a time of not knowing, of unknowing.

Again, the mystics talk about this, and they say this way of knowing is very powerful and very regal and very important. It's a necessary dimension to wisdom. Again, tasting of the ashes.

To me, eldership is not just tasting of the ashes. That's the depth of the Via Negativa, if you will. It is also that other dimension of Via Negativa, of being still: learning to calm our reptilian brains, of recognizing, looking around and recognizing how visible and how omnipresent and powerful the reptilian brain is, how it seems to be dominating so many decisions that leaders are making in our time, especially authoritarian leaders.

Because the dynamic of the reptilian brain, I think, is a win-lose thing. I win, you lose, raising competition to an idol, to an ultimate value, which it isn't. It's one genius of our species that we can play with competition, and that's what we call sport. And you learn to lose as well as to win. And you learn excellence, you learn to practice, to discipline oneself to do one's best, be as excellent as one can be. And very often in team sports, of course, one learns to cooperate, and to know there are different gifts on the field, and different positions to be played, different roles again.

And that's one of the lines I like very much in our panel that I shared with you, that the elder people show up differently. Masculinity is not, should not, be a singular word. We should talk about masculinities. People show up differently. Diversity — in spite of what certain politicians say — is a Truth. It's the way the universe is, it's the way humanity is. It's even the way animals are. Our pets have different personalities. Our children can have very different personalities, and our grandchildren. And one's job is to intuit and to listen.

That's another dimension to eldership in the survey that we put out, Adam Bucko and I: not only did they say "we can't find elders and we want them, but they said those who we do find, talk too much." In other words, I think the first job of the elder in our time is to listen, is to listen and listen deeply. As what young people are going through today, given this triple Dark Night that I've named, is profound and perhaps without precedent in our history as a species. And so elders have to listen. Our experience, while it's valuable, is not necessarily point-for-point applicable for what the young are going through today.

And of course, another part of being an elder and being a healthy version of masculinity, is to experience the ecstasy, the joy of Father Sky, of the cosmos that we're learning about today as a species. We are learning the stories from today's science. We're receiving the pictures from the Webb telescope and so forth, they're truly invigorating and awesome in our 13.8 billion-year journey to get here, to where we are. Why would we want to end it? Why would we want to eat each other up, or eat the earth up, and thereby end our own journey and experiment as a species here on this planet?

Now Robert Bly was invoked by one of the panel members. He was important elder to this particular person. And my relationship with Robert Bly goes way back before he was even talking about the men's movement. I would invite him to come to our program at Mundelein College in Chicago. And once a year, he would come and read his poetry and his translations of Kabir, for example, this wonderful mystic from 15th-century India who was very ecumenical, and also very engaged in the psyche and the cosmos expanding together. And I loved Kabir's poetry translation that Robert Bly made. He was criticized for not being literal, but I love the fact that he ran with Kabir. He passed it through his own soul and through our contemporary images and language, and made this mystic from the 15th century come alive. So here's one of Kabir's beautiful poems as translated by Robert Bly:

Inside this clay jug (that's us, our bodies), there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains. All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars. The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels. And the music from the strings that no one touches. And the source of all water. If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth. Friend, listen: The God whom I love, is inside. That celebration of the vastness of the universe that dwells within us, within our souls, within our minds, within our hearts. We are in it, and it is in us.

And this is what mystics do. They expand the soul. And this is part of what being an elder is. The elder has died, not just into the ashes, but also into the wonder and the awe, the expansiveness of existence.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.