

▶ BETWEEN



MARCO CASTRO

TWO WORLDS ◀

Malidoma Somé On Rites Of Passage

LESLEE GOODMAN

Malidoma Somé was born in the West African nation of Burkina Faso, and his name was given to him by his village's elders before birth. Malidoma means "one who makes friends with the stranger/enemy." When Somé was a small boy, he was taken from his village by a Jesuit priest and brought to a boarding school more than a hundred miles away, where the Jesuits were hoping to build a cadre of African missionaries to help convert the native population. Somé remained there for fifteen years of education, indoctrination, and various forms of physical and sexual abuse. He escaped at the age of nineteen and managed to find his way back to his village, where he was a stranger to his own people — unable to speak the language, uneducated in the ways of his tribe, and an object of suspicion because of his Western education and ability to read and write. In a final attempt to reintroduce him to village life, he was sent on a month-long initiation with a group of other village boys, most of them much younger than he.

Somé survived the initiation and returned ready to assume the responsibilities of an adult male of the Dagara tribe, but shortly thereafter the village elders told him that he would fulfill his destiny by living in the West as a teacher of African ways and wisdom. "You must go and let yourself be swallowed," they told him. "We cannot survive if you stay here."

So Somé traveled to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital, where he earned a master's degree, along with a scholarship to the Sorbonne in France. There he earned another master's degree and a doctorate in political science before coming to the United States and enrolling at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. He graduated with a third master's degree and a PhD in English and American literature. Somé then taught at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

For the past twenty years Somé has lived in the U.S., teaching workshops and conducting divinations, rituals, and traditional Dagara ceremonies. He is the author of several books, including his autobiography, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (Penguin), *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (Tarcher), and *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (Penguin). I first heard him speak at a conference sponsored by the mentoring organization *Boys to Men* and the *ManKind Project*, a global nonprofit dedicated to reclaiming the "sacred masculine." He encouraged us to grapple head-on with the paradoxes of life, an approach he summarized in the African proverb: "If we go forward, we die;

if we go backward, we die. So let's go forward and die."

Goodman: On the first page of your autobiography you write, "My elders are convinced that the West is as endangered as the indigenous cultures it has decimated." They sent you from your village into the "white wilderness" in part to help save us. In what way is the West endangered?

Somé: I learned from my grandfather that any person who sets out to hurt someone is actually more in need of attention than the person who is being hurt. So although the West was decimating my culture, the elders of my village recognized that the only way to address the issue was to understand the pain that was ailing the West. The desire to hurt someone or something comes from a kind of alienation from self and from nature and can often be attributed to the lack of initiation.

In Africa I have seen entire families and households destroyed by colonialism, and it starts with a forced turning away from the traditions of the ancestors and an embracing of a new culture in the name of "progress" or "development." The West has been very successful at destroying a society that was once fine.

Goodman: If it's any consolation, we did it to ourselves first. The West turned away from its own indigenous traditions.

Somé: That's true. But the West's problem is no longer the problem of a single culture; it is now a world issue. Left alone, the indigenous cultures that have been destroyed will not necessarily remember how to go back to their roots. I have colleagues who are fully Dagara, yet they have no clue how to perform an initiation. They live in those islands of civilization called "mission house" or "government administration" and know nothing of who they are. Most of them speak Dagara very poorly.

Goodman: So how can people get back to their roots?

Somé: It will have to start with the rediscovery of the rituals that were once the connecting rods between the living and the dead, between humans and the earth. It will require fine-tuning the ear to hear the subtle vibrations once more, enabling us to recognize when the sacred is around in order to show it greater respect. It will require a remembering of the practices that once kept the village and the tribe together. The only hope is that there are a few people who have held on to the traditions. It is these few — who have been pushed aside as having nothing to contribute — who might become teachers to

those who are willing to journey back into the past in the interest of healing the future.

Goodman: You say your initiation into village life gave you your identity. In the West we have gone generations without consciously initiating our young. What role should initiation serve in a functioning society, and what are we missing without it?

Somé: Initiation means a rite of passage from one stage of life to another. The absence of formal initiation in the West is why young people create their own informal initiations, such as engaging in reckless and dangerous behavior. Maybe drug addicts and alcoholics are trying to break into a different state of reality, as happens in a true initiation. The problem is their initiations never end.

In a functioning society initiation raises awareness of life's purpose and is not just oriented toward getting a job and making a living. We each need to have a personal mission that contributes to the well-being of the world. Finding one's purpose is the primary goal of initiation. It also teaches responsibility toward community, village, and culture. The indigenous formula says that we all come into this world with a gift that we must give to the world. We must undergo initiation to discover what our gift is and how to share it.

Goodman: In a Western school system, we educate children to become employable adults, not to fulfill their own destiny.

Somé: Both approaches, indigenous and Western, focus on gift and purpose, but the indigenous also aims to maintain the person's identity. Traditional initiation protects the integrity of the individual in order to maximize the chance of that individual's gift coming out. Modern society heavily emphasizes survival and material success. As a result, Western education fails to take into account the core human being.

People in the West have forgotten — or never learned — how to perform an initiation that serves individual identity as well as purpose and gift. Once upon a time the West was indigenous. What happened to that path and those teachings? Was the Western indigenous path so bad that it had to be destroyed and replaced by Newtonian perception? How could it be that a path that served for so many thousands of years is now irrelevant?

There is a fundamental flaw in the radical rejection of past practices in the name of "civilization." To return to old practices that are nature based and that open the door to experiencing the magic and beauty of this world, we must de-emphasize consumerism and reemphasize spirit. A lot of young people I work with come alive when the spirit is present. They can be themselves and show their genius.

Goodman: How do you introduce young people to the sacred?

Somé: I use ancient indigenous rituals based on the elements — for example, a water ritual for cleansing old wounds and conflicts. It might look like a Christian baptism, but there's



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a higher level of intensity. It gives people access to a layer of themselves they didn't know existed.

Goodman: Why doesn't Western religion give young people this experience?

Somé: My sense is that most religion has become too dogmatic and led by concern for empty ceremony. True ritual is controlled by the spirit. Organized religion alienates a lot of young people who hunger to go into the wild, unpredictable space and experience another dimension of consciousness.

Goodman: What are some initiation rituals you've used successfully with young people in this country?

Somé: A successful initiation involves three parts: a separation, an ordeal of some kind, and a homecoming. We might take the individuals into the woods and leave them alone to face the uncertainty of whether they'll make it out. Or we might bury them up to their neck in the sand so that they face extreme discomfort, intense emotions, visions, and even hallucinations.

Goodman: You mentioned that young people in our culture create their own initiation rituals by abusing drugs, joining gangs, or even going into the military.

Somé: Yes, but the final stage — homecoming — is missing from such informal initiations. Separation and ordeals happen to just about everyone in this culture. Homecoming requires recognition and acknowledgement that the person has survived. Most people don't get this, which causes them to go back into the ordeal. That's what I see in the case of veterans. They go through a war, and then they come home, but there is no community to welcome them with open arms. So they reenlist.

It's not really viable to think of formal initiation without community support. Not a lot is required. All people need is to be held, to be told that they're safe now, that they have arrived home. An adequate homecoming doesn't have to be a big feast and celebration. What people need is someone willing to create a space for them in which they can be seen, honored, and praised for what they have been through. The psyche knows when a homecoming is genuine.

Goodman: In your autobiography you write of jumping bodily through a hoop into another world as part of your initiation into adulthood. Were you speaking metaphorically?

Somé: No, I was speaking literally.

Goodman: So you physically jumped through a hoop into another dimension, and some of your number didn't make it back? They were lost forever?

Somé: They weren't necessarily "lost." That's a modern interpretation of what happened to them. They're somewhere else. Perhaps the best example I can give in modern terms is quantum reality — the idea of multiple dimensions. What if a specific cognitive pathway can lead not only to a vision of another dimension but also to physical involvement in it?

I experienced this other reality and survived, while others who were more likely to survive didn't make it. That led me to go deeper down the rabbit hole in an attempt to understand my "otherworldly" experience not just from a spiritual perspective but from a theoretical, intellectual perspective. I came to the conclusion that the intellect, as it is programmed by modernity, may not be equipped to comprehend certain kinds of reality. The modern mind has alienated itself from indigenous cognition in order to obtain a kind of control over the world. Modern and indigenous cognition are like parallel lines that cannot meet. They cannot be placed on a scale to measure which is stronger or more valid than the other.

The challenge in teaching about this other reality in the West is finding the proper language to convey it. Needless to say, it hasn't been easy, but it has helped me understand some of the limitations of modernity. When I take a group of Westerners to my village to undergo rituals, they find themselves broken down, dismantled in the face of indigenous experiences that they have no language to describe. The only option left to them is to throw open the gates of their heart, which results in tremendous outbursts of emotion. This made me wonder whether the West's distrust and dismissal of sacred indigenous ritual is linked to a fear of losing emotional control. In the West public expression of emotion is not really acceptable, especially for men. Is there something about emotion and the sacred that runs the risk of overwhelming people? If emotion were culturally authorized, would indigenous spiritual experience be more acceptable? I would say yes, but the orderly society we know might become rather disorderly.

Goodman: So emotion is a direct line to the sacred?

Somé: Yes. Anyone who desires to experience this type of reality will have to de-emphasize the analytical mind and reemphasize the heart. The heart has to be allowed as much self-expression as the mind, if not more. When Westerners participate in native rituals, many break down in tears about death, drought, hunger, suffering, and injustice. When the heart is open at that level, the eyes see differently; the senses respond differently. It has nothing to do with whether you are from a developed country or an underdeveloped country. It has to do with you as a human being in a world that is *all magical* and has always been that way and is best left that way. We just need to learn to read the hieroglyphics that it offers us.

Goodman: Do you think solutions to global problems might become apparent if enough people had their hearts blown open?

Somé: I believe that is the only way it can happen. There are certain problems that we're not going to be able to get our heads around, no matter how much effort we apply, because we have kept our hearts shut. It's as if we're sending a message to the other side that we don't want to see it; we don't want to experience it; we don't want to feel that way. This must change,

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because the greatest gift we have is a heart that can feel.

Even after my initiation and thirty years of experience, I'm still learning the how and the why of what I call "indigenous technologies." We forget that thousands of years ago people were in touch with a different kind of technology — non-Cartesian, non-Newtonian technologies that could get us from point A to point B without environmental side effects. Somehow we are not imaginative enough in the West to consider the possibility of a parallel technological pathway that does not cause illness, pollution, or the extinction of species.

There are certain experiences that, once you become privy to them, shatter

so many things you have learned. When a shaman in my village takes me to a cave, opens a portal to another world, and walks there and back again, I have to ask myself, "What kind of technology is this?" When this same shaman lifts himself off the ground — that is to say, levitates — I have to wonder, "What kind of technology is that?" When another shaman is capable of walking on water, I have to wonder, "What is the technology that enables him to float?" And so on and so on. But modern science has grown so grandiose that it is unwilling to break out of its narrow thinking to explore alternatives that might better serve human consciousness and the world.

Goodman: And you have witnessed these things without the aid of psychotropic substances?

Somé: In my region of the world, psychotropic substances are not used. That's why I am referring to them as "technologies," not drugs.

Repeatedly I find that my biggest obstacle to understanding indigenous technology is the way my mind has been shaped by the West. Let me give you an example: A few years ago I decided that I needed to learn some of these technologies. I wanted to know how to open a dimensional portal. I wanted to know how to defy gravity. I went back to my village and worked with an elder, who first asked me to spend a night at the cemetery. He gave me very explicit instructions before sending me off: "When you see the dead, get up and run to the house. Don't look back. When you get to the house, don't enter through the door, but turn your back to the wall like you're leaning against it. You will find yourself in the medicine room."

So I went to the cemetery and sat in the dark for hours, fighting panic. Come two o'clock in the morning, the whole cemetery lit up, and there were all the dead, rising from their tombs, dressed the way they'd been when they were buried. I did as I'd been told: I ran without looking back. When I got to the house, I leaned against the wall, and it worked! I found myself in the medicine room.

The next morning the elder told me that I was only the fourth person to have survived that experience in the last two years. I was beside myself. If I had known that, I would not have done it! I'm fifty-three; I don't take those kinds of risks

anymore. So I decided not to go through with the rest of the training.

In order to learn this type of consciousness, you have to have a certain commitment to it — a need, really — that overrides even the fear of death. It's a different educational model. You have to be willing to jump into it with very little information and follow instructions such as "Go sit in a cemetery in the middle of the night."

The Western mind likes to ask questions. There's a legitimacy to that, but at the same time, with the type of learning we're talking about, the more you know, the less likely you are to succeed. You will learn things *after* the experience. But being fully conscious of what you are getting into will act like a wall that prevents you from being swallowed by the process. The Western mind has to be tricked into learning this perspective.

In most Western study there's a reduction of events to a subject-object relationship, but magic requires that you dive into the unknown. There is a lot of emotion in it, and fear is an essential part. I remember when I was sitting in the cemetery in the middle of the night, I was on the verge of panicking. Then, in a moment of inattention, my mind thought about something else, and it was at that moment I realized that the whole cemetery was in daylight, and the dead were there. But my mind had to be tricked, distracted, so that another form of cognition could become operative.

Goodman: How do you know if you're ready for this type of experience?

Somé: There's an African saying: "If we go forward, we die; if we go backward, we die. So let's go forward and die." A person who is looking at it from that perspective is likely to learn something. That person is likely to be swallowed, to be transformed. That's not to say he or she is unafraid. A proper understanding of this situation involves a certain apprehension. I've noticed that people who attend my workshops in the West aren't afraid to speak of the topic. In the village if you talk about a ghost or a creature of the underworld like *kontombili*, people want to get away from you.

Goodman: Maybe it's because they believe in them.

Somé: And the reality of them is quite frightening. In the indigenous paradigm, what you see is only the tip of the iceberg. Rituals are ways to uncover the part that is hidden. Those hidden parts are both exciting and dangerous. The other world is exhilarating, but when you come out of it, you want a break. Commuting between the two worlds often exacts a toll on one's physiology and consciousness. Time and again you have to wonder what dimension you're in.

Goodman: A lot of Westerners don't want to have anything to do with powers that might be dangerous. We want God to be beneficent.

In the absence of the elders there is chaos and instability. The young are in charge but don't know where they are going. That's the situation in a society that has decided to put its elders in retirement homes or keep them out of sight one way or another.



Somé: African spirituality is not based on faith. It has an experiential grounding. The fear comes from dealing with the unknown. Africans' knowledge of other-dimensional realities doesn't necessarily include an understanding of how those realities function. Because the great majority don't have the key to manipulating these realities, they're afraid of them. *I'm* afraid of them, even though I do have the key to manipulating them, because they're like a jungle that you enter without a weapon.

Goodman: My cosmology says that the world is governed by a beneficent intelligence, although I realize this may be unrealistic. For example, I love hawks and eagles, but I don't want to see them eat a mouse or a marmot, because I also love mice and marmots.

Somé: Yes, the beautiful eagle remains so until you see it using an innocent mouse as a meal. All of a sudden you have a contradiction: the beautiful eagle did a not-so-beautiful thing. This is where we encounter

the paradox and the mystery of life. How is it that something so beautiful can be so violent? How can something we love be associated with actions that we find repulsive? We forget that the reality of the eagle is not our reality. When you put yourself in the shoes of the eagle, you will find that the meal of a mouse is quite beautiful. It's part of the bounty of the world, and that is the beauty of *all* things. If we can see ourselves as nourishment to the beauty that we see, then the beauty that we see can also be nourishment to us.

Goodman: So we have to be willing to be eaten, to be consumed?

Somé: That's right. If you cannot offer yourself as a meal to the eagle, or whatever it is that you love, then it is impossible to be fully present in the world and to understand the cycle of birth and death. In an indigenous perspective we see ourselves as an offering, just as everything we see is a gift to us. It is not healing or constructive to see ourselves as just the recipient of beauty. We must also be a gift to that beauty.

That doesn't mean we're not afraid. We still long for safety. This is something to be respected. Fear is an indication that we are human. We love to talk about "spirit," but we cannot predict what we are going to do when we are face to face with it. Back in the early eighties someone from this country asked me to take him to Burkina Faso because he wanted to see proof that the other world existed. He was so eager and sincere and insistent that I finally succumbed. We went to my village and walked into the hills with the gatekeeper, who opened the gateway to the other world. The granite wall of the cave melted away and revealed a new reality. My young companion panicked. He screamed that it was a trick and went running down the hill. I felt rather stupid because I'd trusted his sincerity.

Years later I realized that it was not his fault. Beyond his eagerness he had an idea of how the other world should look, and when the other world showed up as it is, he had no way to take it in. I should have respected his point of view. If the other world had looked the way he'd expected, perhaps he would have knelt down and bowed in front of it.

So it's important that our longing to see the other world be checked against our readiness to accept what comes. I canceled my own initiatory process that began that night in the cemetery because of my fear and desire for safety. Thirty-five years ago, when I was first initiated, I would rather have died than *not* go through with the process, but at that time my motive was more compelling. This more recent experience was a quest for additional information that was not essential to my being, so I could cancel with no consequences. But my initiation into adulthood determined whether I had an identity or not.

We often get to a point in life where we don't want to put what we've established at risk just to increase our consciousness. This modern world is so risky that we don't want to risk any more. This is why we keep taking out one type of insurance after another! [Laughs.]

Goodman: But is the modern world really so risky, or have we just gotten so used to controlling everything that we don't tolerate *any* risk?

Somé: Leslee, don't pound on the West. Be gentle! Yes, it is true, we want to control our lives, but that desire has a lot to do with consequences we have suffered in the past due to our failure to control something. We've learned to limit unpredictability. This is quite cozy and empowering. We have to recognize that.

Goodman: As a parent I wouldn't allow my children to undergo any initiation that might kill them. When you were initiated, weren't the parents in your village equally anxious about their children's safety?

Somé: They probably were, especially because quite a few of them had a family history of children lost to initiation. But they went ahead with it, because initiation was part of the culture, just like learning to drive a car is here. Those parents wanted their children to acquire the knowledge necessary to face the demands of this world. Contemporary society almost requires that an adult be able to drive. That is a risk that this culture can live with, so it is widely accepted. But if you bring in indigenous initiation, then that's too much risk for a parent to accept: life is already risky enough. It is common sense to labor hard to reduce risk. The downside is that we lose the magic and the supernatural in the process, and what we lose actually far outweighs the risk.

Goodman: Is it possible to initiate modern young people without the risk of death?

Somé: Yes, but we shouldn't start by saying, "Let's remove the danger," because that takes the juice out of it. Let's recognize that we want our children to come back whole, but we shouldn't remove from their minds the possibility of death. Look at how teenagers live their lives: always at the edge. It's up to us to organize something contained and safe without

letting them know that we are watching out for their safety. A sound initiatory curriculum must take them out of the familiar and into the unpredictable space of nature.

In light of the threats that modern youth are facing, I wouldn't dismiss initiation on the grounds that it is not safe. Instead I would say that if we love these youth, we will come up with an initiatory process that is life-giving, not life-threatening. But nothing is 100 percent safe. The army tries to make boot camp safe, and recruits still sometimes die. And leaving kids to initiate themselves is unsafe too. Life is deadly, when you get down to it. The question is: How fully can we live it?

Goodman: You also work with adult men. What is the purpose of that work?

Somé: My work with men began in 1992, when Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade — the central figures of the mythopoetic men's movement — invited me to speak at a conference about initiation, ritual, and purpose. In this culture masculinity is so competitive that when men get together, it's almost always to compete. My work provides a different reason for men to get together: to explore their heart, their feelings, their spirit, and their purpose for living. Men can support each other rather than compete with each other.

So many men feel useless. They're not free to express their emotions and show when they are hurt. In Dagara culture there is a feminine side to being male that is repressed in the West. But through the men's movement I've learned that Western men *do* have these feelings.

In Dagara culture a child's maternal uncle is called the "male mother." The closest equivalent in English would be a "mentor." The male mother is both nurturing and challenging at the same time. When I returned to my village as a young man, my male mother saw in me what I couldn't see in myself. The simple act of being seen as a person with a purpose was the beginning of a massive change in me. He single-handedly protected me through the ritual transformation so that I came out the other end a completely different person. He taught me many of the abilities that are now part of my daily life, such as how to divine, how to perform rituals, and so on. His complete belief in my capacity to become a good man made me who I am.

Goodman: Is that what men in your workshops do for each other: believe in each other's capacity to be transformed and redeemed?

Somé: They at least go home knowing that the issues they thought were theirs alone are common to most of us, that every nightmare or horror story in their past has also been lived by someone else. There's a sense that they stand together in this world. They may be challenged, but they're not alone. They can hold hands and face those challenges with other men.

Goodman: Are most men comfortable "mothering" each other?

Somé: We have to create a ritual space where this can happen, because it isn't possible in the world "out there." In the safety of this space, we conduct a water ritual in which men help each other wash away the guilt, deception, disappointment, and other painful feelings that they have stored inside.

I've been humbled to see men holding each other tenderly in the water. Within the ritual context the mind steps back, and the nurturing, emotional self takes over. There is some learning — or some *un*learning — that has to transpire before this can occur.

Goodman: Is masculinity broken in the West?

Somé: Sadly there is a certain brokenness in modern men. Western society has a one-dimensional masculinity that presents impossible challenges to both men and women. Masculinity has crossed gender boundaries, so that any person caught in it — man or woman — becomes either a victim or a perpetrator. Because of this, masculinity has been demonized and associated with violence, recklessness, competitiveness, and abuse. These attributes pervade virtually every aspect of the culture, even religion. When Catholicism, for example, insists that only men can be in charge, it says something negative about masculinity. Why are only men capable of running that organization? When I see men allowing their hearts to be opened and showing how fragile they are, then I find hope for the restoration of healthy masculinity.

Goodman: What do you mean when you say that anyone growing up in our masculine culture ends up becoming either a victim or a perpetrator?

Somé: I mean that no one is exempt from the iron fist of competition and hierarchy. This culture creates what we could more gently call “winners and losers,” rather than “perpetrators and victims.” The overwhelming majority are losers, yet they're the ones least spoken about, while a few winners are hailed by everyone. No one talks about all the losers we have to have to create one winner — who turns out not to have been so lucky, after all. He becomes altered so that you have to wonder whether winning isn't the worst thing that could happen to a person. These are the forms of victimhood I'm talking about.

Goodman: Why don't you work more with women?

Somé: I don't conduct female initiation because in my culture gender plays an important role in the rites of passage into adulthood. It takes a circle of women to be the container in which a group of girls become aware of their purpose in this world and embrace it. I may serve as a consultant to Western women who are interested in initiating young women, but I do not participate in the actual event.

The initiation into elderhood, though, is open to both genders. It takes place in the village, whereas the initiation into adulthood takes place in nature. I've performed an elder initiation twice in this culture with groups of men and women.

Goodman: What is the role of the elder?

Somé: An elder is a repository for the wisdom of the ancestors, the culture, and the tribe. He or she is familiar with the various protocols for maintaining relationships with the other world and is the keeper of the various “recipes” that sustain the soul and the spirit of the community. Elders are the most obvious link to the ancestors. The young, who are just arriving here from the realm of the ancestors, are drawn to them because they want familiar faces to talk to. This is one reason why a grandparent is expected to spend a great deal of time

with his or her grandchildren. The elder's role is to provide the stable space in which the young can fulfill their purpose. In the absence of the elders there is chaos and instability. The young are in charge but don't know where they are going. That's the situation in a society that has decided to put its elders in retirement homes or keep them out of sight one way or another, while the children who need them the most are kept in day care.

Goodman: You have a much more alive and vivid relationship with your ancestors than Westerners do. Americans typically have no relationship with their ancestors: they're dead.

Somé: And gone. [Laughs.] As I see it, the structure of a society must take into account the dead as well as the living. As far as the living are concerned, the elders, too, must be respected. Without my relationship with my grandfather, I wouldn't be who I am today. I saw him as a role model, a person so versed in magic that my whole universe was molded by him. My grandfather was a representative of the core values of the Dagara culture.

When I go from that to a culture where *elder* means “elderly” — someone to be weeded out of society and confined to a minimum-security prison called a “retirement home” — I see that as another ill of modernity. We cultivate a perpetual youth culture, and those who fail to stay young are asked to get out. I imagine that a grandparent must feel very sad at not being with his or her grandchildren. We need to rediscover the beauty of being old. Let's erase the concept of “elderly” and keep “elder,” a person who has “been there” and can hold the light for the younger generation and guide them on their path.

Goodman: Focusing on youth is also a way of denying death. What would be a more appropriate relationship for our culture to have with death, and how can we get there?

Somé: The indigenous approach reminds us of our mortality, but not as something to fear. A person who is afraid of dying runs the risk of never learning how to live. This could be the most pressing issue facing the West.

Once you have a healthy approach to death, all of a sudden the dead are not gone but have only taken on a new shape and are still among us. There comes a time when the vessel called the “body” becomes worn out and has to be shed, but that just means that our spirit can finally run naked, free of all the fashions that are popular on earth. It will never go shopping again for new clothes, because it has reclaimed its original appearance.

It will be very difficult to restore our communities as long as the ancestors are excluded from them, because a true community has to include the living *and* the dead. If a community is limited only to those we can see and who share our geography, then it lacks dimensionality. Those on the other side have gifts to bring to this world, and those in this world can bring gifts to the other side.

Goodman: What kinds of gifts can the living give to the ancestors?

Somé: In my village the living give the dead resources from this world that the dead don't have direct access to — like water. People who have passed on to the other world use water

to make sure the obstacles we face become fluid. They wash away conflict and allow our journey to flow. When we are facing uncertainty or danger, we give water to the ancestors and ask them to make our journey as smooth and flowing as liquid. We also give them ashes, because ashes are what the fire could not burn. The ancestors use the ashes to make a protective shield around us, so that adversity cannot penetrate, cannot even see us. At the start of any important project, people are asked to bring the ancestors water and ashes. Unless we pass these items into the other world with an explanation of what we would like the ancestors to use them for, we're dependent upon whatever luck may bring us.

Goodman: You call this "a gift to the ancestors," but it's actually a gift to ourselves.

Somé: That's right. We're really helping ourselves.

Goodman: How does one begin to have a relationship with one's ancestors?

Somé: Just by telling them, "Look, I know we haven't spoken before, but I've heard that you can make it possible for things to flow in my life."

Goodman: Is it necessary to address them by name?

Somé: Yes, speak to one whose name you know. That ancestor will call a meeting, because they all know each other on the other side. I usually call my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and I tell them, "Please inform the rest and make sure things work out." Then you just pour the water on the ground. I have done this for forty-five years, and it has taken me from one place to another without my knowing exactly how I've gotten there. It's because of the positive results that I keep doing it. Otherwise I'd be looking for other means.

Goodman: At the start of the interview we talked about how your elders sent you into the "white wilderness" to help the Dagara survive. It's clear that your presence has helped Westerners, but has it also helped your people?

Somé: Yes, in a limited fashion. The physical help has taken the form of assistance with various projects, the most important being digging wells to provide fresh water. The Dagara people are better known today than they were before, which makes them feel appreciated. The elders who remain take pride that they have me out here as griot on their behalf. [A griot is an indigenous bard, telling the stories of a certain land and culture.] There's always someone from the West visiting my village. People read my book and just show up. When villagers see a white person, they say, "It's Malidoma at work again." Ninety percent of these people I've never even met, yet the villagers take care of them.

Goodman: This weekend you're going to be leading a grief ritual. Do you get asked to lead rituals often?

Somé: Yes, people can't get enough of rituals in the West. They are starving for ritual in this culture. When one is over,

It will be very difficult to restore our communities as long as the ancestors are excluded from them, because a true community has to include the living and the dead.



they shed tears of dread: now they must return to the so-called real world, where there is no room for what they have experienced. It is not valued or even tolerated. This is a serious problem. The community we create during the ritual is only temporary. Until there are communities in which these rituals are done consistently and can be reconciled with everyday living, there will always be what we call "workshop junkies" — people who need to return every weekend to get replenished. Some are able to maintain the energy for a while, but for others, as soon as they get back on the freeway, it's gone. There seems to be some demon out there who takes away the healing energy that has been built up in

the ritual.

But there are benefits that endure and transcend the challenges of the mundane world. Some people are so transformed that they do better on the job, at home, and in their relationships with their partners and children. So although the high is fleeting, the benefits remain.

Goodman: Why is the experience so powerful? Is it the teaching you give participants before the ritual?

Somé: No, it's not the teaching, because I don't really teach them anything. I explain to them about tribal life and about different kinds of rituals, but a ritual is a series of experiences, not a series of explanations. For some reason the context of ritual puts people in a different mind-set, so that they drop their need for explanations. They stop asking, "Why are we doing this? Why are you doing that?"

Goodman: They drop their mind.

Somé: Their mental inquiry stops, and they're completely in their bodies, experiencing their anxieties, their self-control issues, and so on. But eventually they let go. During the ritual itself I never have to explain anything. I just tell people what they need to do. Once they start doing it, they get something out of it that keeps them going deeper and deeper. In the end, when we sit down to talk about what they have experienced, they tell me how they've been transformed.

I've never heard of people in the village being so intoxicated by a ritual, because they're participating in them all the time: there's nothing to talk about. But people here need to tell each other how amazing it was. Villagers don't do this because the mundane life they return to is not devoid of spirit. They have an ongoing experience of the sacred. It's just one seamless whole.

The loss of the village community in the West is damaging, but it is also an invitation to think. Those who have experienced the ritual energy must figure out how to keep it. But they can't do that *and* keep their current culture, because the current culture is the problem. Westerners need to break out of the jail that they drive into when they leave the ritual space. No villager can tell them how to do it. Westerners will have to solve that problem themselves. ■