

The Quest¹

You're among those gathered around the kitchen table, young in the ways of your people. Another carries with him the wisdom of the stories. The evening meal is finished, the table cleared and the story begins.

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There's a young boy...
It's early evening,
 he's just finished with his meal.
There he goes..
That boy is running through camp,
 between lodges,
 chasing someone?..
It's his sister!..
There they go,
 around that lodge,
 over there.
Faster he goes,
 not very careful where he plants his feet...
He's just about to catch up with her.
He reaches out to grab her.

¹The story text is from the contemporary Crow people of Montana. The story of Burnt Face expresses a common literary motif found throughout North American Indian oral literature. For additional ethnographic background, see Brown 1953, Frey 1987 and 1995, Furst and Furst 1982, Gill 1982, Lowie 1918 and Nabokov and Easton 1989.

He falls,
 falls right into a fire pit....
His face lands,
 where the coals of a fire still glow bright red.
All of the right side of the face is badly burnt!..
Cries of pain are heard throughout the camp.
An old man comes running toward the boy.
He gathers up the soft leaves of Prairie-dog-tail,
 which grows here,...
 there..
He places the leaves in his mouth,
 chews on them..
Standing over the boy,
 the old man very carefully lays the poultice of leaves on
 the face.
The burnt face can now heal,
 yet tears still flow from the eyes of that young boy..
Throughout the night,
 the old man,,
 and the parents care for the boy,
 a boy who had run so carelessly through
 camp..
By morning the pain is gone,
 a face bad to look at remains...
It's a terrible scar the boy must now live with...
Some time passes....
The young boy comes out from his parent's lodge.
Others,
 his sisters,
 his brothers,
 his friends,
 gather around to see him..
What they see is bad to look at.

They poke fun at the boy,.
 tease him...
"Burnt Face,

hey,
 Burnt Face!" they say...
His eyes look to the ground,
 fill with tears...
That boy returns to the warmth of his parent's lodge..
Some time passes....
It's evening,
 a great dance is taking place.
All are in their finest beaded buckskins,
 they have their faces painted in bright colors,
 reds,
 yellows,
 blues,
 black,
 white..

Good song is heard,
 everyone is dancing..
Here comes the boy they call Burnt Face..
His friends gather around to see.
What they see,
 through the bright colored paint,
 is a face,...
 bad to look at.

They tease,
 they poke fun at the young boy.
"Burnt Face," they say..
His eyes look to the ground,
 fill with tears....
Sometime ago,
 he'd been careless,
 fell into a fire pit.
All of the right side of his face is burnt,
 he's bad to look at..
Burnt Face goes back into his parent's lodge.
Seldom does he come out..
Some time passes....
"Mother,

make me four pairs of moccasins," he says.
She knows what her son must do,
she does not want to make the moccasins..
A sweat bath is taken.
In the heat,
prayers are given.
The boy is cleaned from the inside out..
A pair of the deer-skin moccasins are put on.
Dried meat is packed into the other moccasins..
He holds his father's finely carved pipe,
his beaded pipe bag,
and Burnt Face leaves his parent's lodge.
He heads for the great mountains to the south.
You know,
all true wisdom is to be found far from the dwellings of
men,
in the great solitudes.....
It'll be a long journey,.
Burnt Face is alone.
A little meat is eaten,
cool water from the stream that runs close by is taken..
After awhile,
holes are worn in the soles of his moccasins,
another pair is put on..
Farther he goes into the hill country.
Holes again come to his moccasins,
another pair are put on..
The forest is thick with tall trees..
Burnt Face continues toward the high mountains..
A little more meat is eaten.
Holes come,
another pair of moccasins are put on.

The trees are gone,..
rock,
wind everywhere..
Burnt Face goes higher into the mountains.

The dried meat is gone,
 holes are worn in the soles of the fourth pair of
 moccasins..
Burnt Face is barefoot.,
 he continues where there is snow.
It is mid-summer,
 the mountains here contain the cold of snow.
On a high ridge,
 where the Sun's rise,
 where the Sun's set can clearly be seen,
 Burnt Face rests..
It's a good place...
The pipe is filled with willow bark,
 with bearberry leaf,
 with kinnikinick.,
 the pipe is lit....
Burnt Face begins his prayer.
 "Spirit people.,
 Bird people.,
 Animal people.,
 take pity on me..
My face is bad to look at..
I hate part of myself.
Sometime ago I was careless,
 fell into a fire pit.
The right side of my face is scarred,
 they call me 'Burnt Face.'"

And he looks to the ground..
On this high ridge,
 he takes no water.,
 no food....

He gives up these things so that his prayers can be heard,
 that someone will come,
 that someone will take pity on him.....
With each rise of the Sun,
 with each setting of the Sun,

the pipe is filled with kinnikinick,
with fire.

Prayer is offered.

As the smoke rises,

so too do the words of the prayer..

Under the Sun's watch,

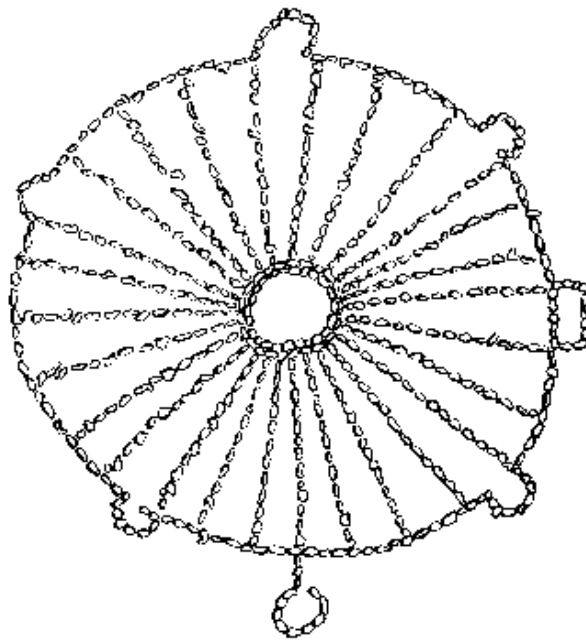
Burnt Face spends his days moving stones.

This stone here,...

that stone are selected,.

and carried to the ridge..

There's a good stone..



A great circle is formed,

rows of stone out from a center,

some eighty paces across.

It's a gift to the Sun....

You know,
 it can still be seen today,
 high in the Bighorn Mountains.
They call it a Medicine Wheel..
The days pass,
 one,
 two,
 three..
Burnt Face grows weaker..
Prayers continue to be offered,
 stones are moved....
It's the morning of the fourth day..
Burnt Face is looking east,
 out over the trees that lie below the high ridge.
He looks among the trees,
 something catches his eyes.
Something is moving through the trees!...
The trees bend this way,
 then that..
It's moving slowly toward the ridge..
It's a,...
 a whirlwind,
 a strong wind.
That's what it is...
The trees begin to bend so far over that they break!
They're like twigs,
 snapping at the power of the whirlwind.
Closer it comes..
Burnt Face feels the strength of the wind.
He leans into it,
 and his long black braids are blown back from his face.
He thinks that it would be wise to run fast from this great wind.
Burnt Face remembers what his grandfather says,
 "The gifts often come when you least expect them."...
The pipe is in hand.
Burnt Face holds his ground.
The whirlwind is just about to blow Burnt Face off the ridge,

into the valley below,
when it stops...
The wind is gone....
Where the wind had been there now stands,
a great Eagle..
"Why are you crying,
my son?" the Eagle says.
"Because I hate part of myself,
I'm bad to look at.
Sometime ago I was careless,
fell into a fire pit.
All of the right side of my face is badly burnt,
they call me 'Burnt Face,'" he says.
"If you'll help me,
my family,
we'll help you," he says.
Burnt Face thinks that's a good idea...
Burnt Face gets on the back of the huge Eagle,
holds on tight.
It's a huge bird...
The boy feels light,
they are among the clouds,
flying to a land far to the south..
When he looks down,
everything is so small,
he gets a little dizzy...
You know,
Burnt Face hadn't done much flying!...
So he keeps his eyes tightly closed,
not wanting to look down,
hoping the Eagle will soon land...
Some time passes....
The great Eagle begins to fly low,
just over the tops of the trees.
It's a land strange,
unknown to Burnt Face..
Just ahead is a clearing filled with tall grasses.

A camp is to one side.
It's the camp of the Eagle,
his family..
The journey has come to an end,
Burnt Face feels heavy again,
glad to plant his feet on the ground again...
Burnt Face is greeted by two small Eagles,
children of the Bird.
"Why are you crying,
my brother," they say.
"Because I hate part of myself.
I'm bad to look at.
Sometime ago I was careless,
fell into a fire pit.
All of the right side of my face was burnt.
They call me,
'Burnt Face,'" he says.
"Over the ridge there,
there's a fast moving river.
In that river,
lives the Long Otter..
He sneaks about in the brush,
tries to take my children.
We're not safe....
You must help," he says..
It's a huge otter,...
very dangerous..
Burnt Face offers to do what he can to help.
He's just a small boy,
and it's the Long Otter!....
Burnt Face heads for the river.
Along the way he picks up four rocks,
like those used in a sweat lodge ceremony,
he brings them along..
At the river's bank,
dried driftwood is gathered.
He piles it high...

A fire is lit.
The four stones are placed on top.
Soon the rock is filled with fire.
Each stone glows bright red..
A little more wood is gathered,
 the fire is kept alive..
Burnt Face waits..
Some time passes.....
A fog moves off the river's waters,
 covers the day with darkness!..
A stillness is everywhere.
The birds can no longer be heard.....
The fog is gone.
It is as it was.
The birds are heard,
 the sun shine upon the waters,
 the trees.
It's all very strange....
The fog again clouds the day into night,
 not a sound can be heard..
The wind had rustled through the leaves of the trees.
Now all is still....
The fog is gone.
It's day again...
The fog comes again,
 the light,
 the sounds of day are gone.
The waters could be heard splashing up against the river's rocks.
Now it's quiet...
As fast as it came,
 the fog is gone.
The Sun is bright in the sky...
The fog moves over the land again,
 bringing a darkness,
 a stillness with it....
The day becomes a night,
 nothing can be seen,

nothing can be heard.....
Burnt Face waits....
All is still.....
Something is heard in the fog!
It's very faint...
It gets louder,....
louder....
Thump,.
thump,.
thump...
Louder it gets..
Right in front of Burnt Face,
the outstretched jaws of the Long Otter....
Shining in the darkness,
the sharp teeth of the huge beast.
Just like that,
Burnt Face throws one,
two,
then a third.
Then the fourth,
red hot rock goes into the mouth that seeks something else.
The rocks burn the stomach,.
steam,
smoke bellows from the mouth.
The Long Otter rolls this way,
then that,
back into the waters of the river.

The Long Otter swims off,.
never to be seen again...
The Sun returns,
bright,
warm..
The birds sing a glorious song..
The great Eagle is there.
"Look into the waters of the river there," he says.
Burnt Face looks down...

Tears fall into that which he sees.
 What Burnt Face sees he had hated.
 He no longer has hate.
 What had brought him so much pain is now gone.
 The tears are of joy...
 The Eagle pulls from its tail one of its feathers,
 places it in the hand of Burnt Face.
 "When you are in need call upon me with this feather,
 I will stand at your side," he says.
 The Eagle is as a father to Burnt Face....
 Burnt Face journeys north,
 back to his family,
 this time he stays on the ground..
 He'd had enough flying...
 He enters camp.
 His parents,
 sisters,
 brothers,
 all of the camp gather around Burnt Face..
 None poke fun at him.
 None tease him.
 Tears fill the eyes of many.
 What they see is a young man,
 strong,
 true,
 a man who will become a great leader
 among his people.....
 It's said that Burnt Face lived to such a great age,
 that he was so old that when he moved about,
 his skin would tear...
 That's old!...

* * * * *

Later that summer, a vow is made to give of yourself. In the
 heat and steam of the sweat lodge, words of prayer are spoken. When
 you leave the canvas-covered lodge you're cleaned "from the inside

out." Alone, you make your way to the high mountains. All true wisdom is to be found far from the dwellings of men. There you offer yourself up, going without food and water. You offer up sincerity, *diakaashe*, "really doing it." With the rising and setting of the sun, cigarettes are lit and prayers offered. In the smoke the words go forth. An offering is given. And you listen, listen with your "heart."

On the third day a visitor arrives. It's one of the *Awakkule*, the Little People, who live in the mountains and reveal themselves only when a special gift is to be given. A vision is received that will guide you your entire life. The *Awakkule* have adopted you as their child.

Extensions

Rites of Passage

Despite societal variation, some form of rite of passage is at the core and foundation of virtually every Dream Animal educational, social and spiritual dynamic. Whether it be in an individual vision quest or the collective Crow Sun Dance, in the initiation rituals associated with the Aranda Karora totemic society or with becoming an Iglulik shaman or Crow *akbaalia*, or even in the oral narrative of Burnt Face, the symbolic structures and processes of each expression encompasses a rite of passage. In tribal-oriented societies, the entire life-cycle of an individual, from childhood to old age, for both men and women, is marked by a series of rites of passage.

In Euro-American society, while much less overt and pervasive, rites of passage are nevertheless operative and critical. Induction into the military or a fraternal organization, or participation in a religious retreat: all entail rites of passage. To a certain extent, the educational system, from kindergarten to high school and college is a rite of passage.

Rites of passage serve not only to publicly acknowledge the transition from one educational, social or spiritual status to another, but more fundamentally, to facilitate and bring about such a

transformation in the first place.² Four universal components to the symbolic structuring of any rite of passage are evident. These structural components can be found expressed not only in ritual behavior, such as initiation ceremonies, but also in the literary motifs of oral and written literature. In the instance of American Indian oral narratives, next in prevalence to the trickster motif, is the orphan quest motif. The structural components of a rite of passage can be readily identified in the orphan quest motif in this oral literature. Let me outline here what are extremely elaborate and complex processes. While my reference point is tribal-oriented societies, rites of passage pervade the entirety of the human experience.

First, a rite of passage presupposes an orphaned status. The individual neophyte is symbolically understood as an "*orphan*," somehow incomplete. In oral literature themes, the individual is represented as alone and often abused and bullied by an adversary, in need of help. Whether it be in ritual or literature, the individual is as an impoverished child, either without parents or lacking in some significant attribute, such as the knowledge and skills of an adult, the integration provided by social kinship or the spiritual insight and power of a shaman. Something vital is missing. A void needs to be filled.

Second, a rite of passage involves a *separation, a journey* and a *sacrifice*. The neophyte may be physically removed by the elders from his or her village and taken to a "bush school" for a period lasting several weeks or even months. The neophyte himself may venture on a vision quest to a far mountain site, the quest lasting up to several days. An apprenticeship may occur, initiated by the neophyte with an established sage, teacher or healer and lasting for many years. It could also be the case that an individual, often while ill and close to death, is involuntarily visited by a spirit guardian. In all these instances, a symbolic "journey," full of challenges of all kinds, transpires. It is a journey to a world distinct from the ordinary. "All true wisdom is to be found far from the dwellings of men."

²For additional discussion on rites of passage, see Eliade 1964, Turner 1967 and van Gennep 1906.

The neophyte enters a "liminal state," "betwixt and between," removed from the mundane and the ordinary. The neophyte is physically and socially cut off from the only world he or she has known. In the "bush school," the neophyte goes nameless and unwashed, without social definition and status. In the instance of a vision quest, the neophyte will undergo several purification procedures--a sweat bath, rubbing self with sweet sage and incensing of sweet cedar, for instance. The site of the vision quest may be a distant butte or hill, far away from the human community. At the site, a bed of sage will be prepared. The individual humbles himself, showing total humility. While at the site, which may last from two to five days, a sacrifice is given, going without food and water. You "die" a little as you watch your life leave your body under the hot sun. As the Inuit say, when you go out and seek a vision, you must have an "intimacy with death."

Any rite of passage involves a "ritual death." To "die" is to sacrifice and give up something. If a quest is to be successful, if one is to receive a vision, the neophyte must offer up what is most cherished. Reciprocity and a gift exchange between the self and the spirit world must occur. The neophyte offers up his or her food and water, perhaps his own flesh as small pieces are cut from the arm, and most importantly, his or her own sincerity. During the "bush school," the sacrifice may be expressed as a circumcision, subincision, tooth-knocking out or some other form of scarification ritual. The circumcision and subincision "cutting" vividly symbolizes not only an offering up of flesh but a severing from one gender identity and an affiliating with another, i.e., the boys have been taken from their mothers' arms and brought into the world of men. In all instances, the offering of oneself assumes two active agents: a giver and a receiver.

To "die" is also to be brought to the threshold of the sacred, to be torn from the living, separated and stripped from one's mundane existence and identity. Without a name and social conventions, the neophyte is rendered void, as nothing, emptied, and thus very receptive. Stripping away the mundane reveals and exposes within oneself what is most essential to the neophyte, the soul. During the initiation, "you watch as your flesh is ripped from your body and you see your own bones, you get down to your bones."

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The *Ashkisshe*, "imitation lodge," the Crow Sun Dance is into its third day. Most of the hundred and twenty dancers, men and women, are up dancing strong, "charging" the center pole. Two days before, in the prayers of those who were about to use the chain saw, assistance was sought of the Cottonwood Tree, green with foliage. Permission was asked, and permission was given. The tree was cut down and moved with care to the field that would hold the Sun Dance.

The cottonwood center pole now stands watching over the dancers. Below its two forks, the eagle is hung to the east and the buffalo head faces west. From the lips of the dancers, eagle-bone whistles sound the cry of the bird, and from the lodge entrance, drumbeat and voice offer song. Each of the dancers has made a prayer to *Akbaatatdia*, the Maker of All Things First, a vow to give of him or herself so that another might be helped. All have gone without food and water; all now dance under the hundred degree heat of the July sun. From within the circular lodge of freshly cut lodgepoles and cottonwood brush, open to the sky, the center pole is "charged" again.

Deaxkaashe, Eagle, circles high above, watching over all those who sound his cry.

You begin to sway, no longer able to "charge" and dance back from the center pole in a straight line. You continue for some time, though no longer in time. And then you take a "hard fall," collapsing to the ground. Others jump to their feet and without disturbing you, cover your body with cattails and sage cuttings. The dance continues, though with one less dancer.

You're now receiving a great gift, a vision. *Bishee*, Buffalo, or perhaps *Deaxkaashe*, Eagle, has come down from its watch and is guiding you on a journey. It's a journey that will instruct and guide you throughout your life. *Bishee* or perhaps *Deaxkaashe* has adopted you as its "child."

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Third, a rite of passage involves the *acquisition of power and knowledge*. Having been rendered receptive, as warmed wax, the neophyte can be molded in the imprint of the sacred. The soul is exposed to the spiritual teachings and sacred archetypes. It is during the "liminal state" that the neophyte may witness the creation time as the mythic beings are brought forth in the performance of the great ceremonials and in the telling of the rich body of mythology. In the "bush school," the initiated elders dance and tell of the sacred truths during the night and disseminate the social and economic knowledge required of an adult during the day. The wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors can be gained as the great mysteries are revealed.

While on a lonely butte, a vision and adoption by a spirit guardian can occur. If the gift of oneself is judged worthy and accepted, a vision is rendered. The previous state of two active agents is transcended, becoming as one, in union, with ordinary time and space dissolved. The neophyte communicates with and learns of the spiritual truths. He or she is instructed and guided by an animal spirit as it appears in the vision. Rules of respect and taboos to honor the spirit guardian are revealed. The vision establishes an adoption relation, a parent-child dyad, as the neophyte is adopted by a spirit guardian. The Buffalo or Eagle is now as a father, a parent to the neophyte. The adoption solidifies a spiritual kinship, a father who is close by to guide throughout one's life.

* * * * *

While asleep, an *aassahkee*, a clan uncle has a dream, a vision of an event that is yet to occur. In his dream he sees his clan nephew walking up to an eagle and pulling, from its twelve tail feathers, the two center feathers, the evenly matched ones. This he sees clearly in a dream.

The next day, he shares the dream with another elder of the tribe, but not with the young man seen in the dream.

Several weeks pass. The young man of the dream is driving back to the reservation from Billings on the Interstate. Something catches his eye, and curious, he pulls over onto the shoulder of the highway. A rock outcropping now shields what caught his eye, so he

takes a walk. What he finds is an eagle. It must be injured, for it does not attempt to fly off as he approaches. The eagle just looks at him. He doesn't know why, but as he stands over the bird, he reaches down and pulls the evenly-matched pair of the twelve tail feathers from the eagle! The eagle continues to look on. Once the feathers are in hand, the bird takes to the sky and flies off to the east.

The young man doesn't know what to make of all this. So he takes the feathers and the story to an elder and tells what had just occurred. And the old man tells him of the dream his clan uncle had some time before and that these feathers were meant to be his. They were a gift from the Eagle to the young man. The feathers were blessed in the smoke of sweet grass and given prayers. They are now used by the young man when he dances in the Sun Dance. The Eagle is close by.

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Fourth, any rite of passage involves *affirmation* and *rebirth*. With the knowledge of the ancestors gained or the vision of a spiritual guardian received, the individual returns to the ordinary world, his or her self redefined, with a new status. He or she returns triumphant, overcoming what had been an "orphaned status." The linkage with this new status and knowledge may be overtly symbolized and maintained through the possession of a medicine bundle and medicine songs. Having come down from the mountain top or out of the bush, the wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors is applied, wounds are healed, and the power to fly or cure is affected.

In passing through a rite of passage, the various educational, social and spiritual transitions through which an individual moves are thus not only publicly acknowledged, but the transitions themselves are accomplished. The ascendancy to a new status is socially validated. A child becomes an adult, redefined in the eyes of others. The individual is also offered a means to shed one identity and orientation for another, thus acquiring and re-orienting his or her entire world view, socially, economically and spiritually. New knowledge and skills, new responsibilities and obligations, new awarenesses and sensitivities are effectively imparted and assimilated.

Rites of passage transform the very being of an individual, providing a mechanism for life-cycle transitions.

Knowledge From All Things

"Everything was possessed of personality, only differing with us in form. Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals that shared, alike with us, the storms and blessings of earth. We learned to do what only the student of nature ever learns and that was to feel beauty."

So wrote Luther Standing Bear in *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933).

* * * * *

"One should pay attention to even the smallest crawling creature, for these too may have a valuable lesson to teach us, and even the smallest ant may wish to communicate with a man."

So Black Elk spoke.

The Circle

The way of the world is a great circle. It has no beginning, nor an end, for time is as a circle, always repeating itself. The life of any four-legged or two-legged is as a circle, from birth, to maturity, to old age, and back to where one came. The sun, the moon, the stars and the earth are as circles and move in circles as well. The great winds move in circles, move around the stones, trees and flowers that are all rounded as the circle. The birds make their nests as circles and their young are born out of the circles of eggs.

This we all see with the circles of our eyes and come to know in our hearts. This we live by. Our lodges were once round as the nests of birds; now we are reminded of this when we set up our tepees each August at Crow Fair. Throughout our land our ancestors built great circles of rock, which we now call medicine wheels. At our pow wows at New Year's and during Crow Fair we dance the round

dance. We give prayer and clean ourselves from the inside out each time we enter the circle of our sweat lodges. When the medicine bundles are opened, we sit in a prayer circle and watch the smoke circle from our cigarettes, carrying our prayers with it. Each summer, when we build and give of ourselves within the circle of our Sun Dance lodge, we are reminded of the great circle of life and of the world.

Our lives and the lives of all the peoples make up a "great wagon wheel." Though the non-Indian came to this land on them, we've always had the "wheel." Ours can be seen in the rock medicine wheels and in the Sun Dance lodges. Each spoke of the great wheel is as a particular religion, a particular people--the Sun Dance, the Christian, the Moslem, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Indian, the non-Indian, the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the wingeds. Each is unique, with its own language and traditions. But all are of equal worth; all are of the same length. To shorten or even remove one of the spokes would only cause the wheel to wobble and fall. All are needed. Nevertheless, all the spokes are linked to the same hub, the same God. Though each of us may address it differently, each with our own way of praying, it is the same God, uniting all the peoples. To live is to live in the circle, as a part of the great wheel.

