

“A RIDE OF PASSAGE:  
Connecting a spiritual journey to the works of  
Parker J. Palmer, Rachael Kessler and John P. Miller”

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Education  
(Educational Studies)

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September, 2011

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
School of Graduate Studies

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Educational Studies)

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## ABSTRACT

“A RIDE OF PASSAGE: Connecting a spiritual journey to the works of Parker J. Palmer, Rachael Kessler and John P. Miller”

Daniel Brouillette

This thesis explores the journals written by the author during a 16,000 km solo bicycle journey around the United States, seven years ago, upon his graduation from university. This was his attempt at a spiritual quest. In this thesis, upon revisiting his journals, he argues that the original framework he used for this quest was flawed, leading to unsatisfactory results. Seven years ago, he was convinced that self-discovery was best attained through solitude. Instead, a new reading of his journals demonstrated that he learnt and benefitted most in contexts of social engagement, meaningful relationships and mutual exploration, all major themes in the works of Parker J. Palmer, Rachael Kessler and John P. Miller. He then argues that had he been guided to follow the successive phases described in Kessler’s structured rite of passage (preparation, severance, threshold and ordeal, and reincorporation) the intended and anticipated outcomes of the experience would have been more beneficial. He suggests that he was missing three of Kessler’s essential phases during his ordeal (solo bicycle journey) he had planned for himself: preparation, severance, and reincorporation. The author concludes that it was possible to reflect anew on his experience by using Kessler’s theory and this process provided a more accurate interpretation of his journey, allowing for spiritual development seven years later. This is encouraging for teachers lacking the opportunity to lead their students through a rite of passage in Kessler’s prescribed manner. They can build upon ordeals students have experienced independently, to create anew conditions for reflection, revelation, learning and reintegration.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my supervisor: Professor Arpi Hamalian

You provided me with the space and silence necessary for me to discover a truly meaningful exploration. I place a metaphorical apple on your desk, thank you.

To my defense committee: Professors Ayaz Naseem and David Waddington

David, thank you for enlightening me about the science of discerning apples from oranges. And Ayaz, cheers for showing me that if we squish that fruit into applesauce, such discernments may not matter.

To my beloved wife:

Thank you for feeding that applesauce to our son over the past year despite all of your other responsibilities. You inspire me.

And finally, to my parents:

The apple didn't fall far from the tree. Thank you for encouraging my continued journeys.

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND METHODS

*What started as a journey of one,  
Became an adventure amongst many,  
Ended in the arms of a few,  
Now opens up to the whole world.*

### INTRODUCTION

The significance of the verse above lies not in its artistic merit, but that I wrote it at the age of twenty-one never having been compelled to write poetry before. Its optimistic and purposeful tone seems to point to a faith I was exuding at that time; the shift from singular to collaborative vocabulary suggests a humbling discovery that my accomplishments will never be done alone. It appeared I was growing and my effort at poetry provided demonstrable evidence of that change.

I penned the poem near the conclusion of a bicycle journey I took alone around the perimeter of the United States in 2004 and 2005. I had happily returned home convinced that cycling at a slow cadence for ten months had afforded me the opportunity to draw wisdom from a spectrum of natural and cultural environments. Additionally, I upheld the notion that traveling alone had unearthed many self-truths that would guide me into adult life in steady, authentic direction.

#### *Statement of Research Problem and Questions:*

Six years after my trip, I am uncertain about the education my journey awarded me. I maintain many ideals formulated on the road, yet my actions often belie those convictions. I feel empowered with the knowledge that I can accomplish difficult feats, but do not know what challenges to pursue. I am confident my future will be secure yet struggle to hold onto the optimism that came so easily when I had first returned. At times

I seem to relate better with the person I was before the trip than the person I seemingly returned as. My life seems not simpler and more directed since the trip, but increasingly complex, to the point of confusion.

My confusion brings into question the lasting effects of my journey, which contradicts existing literature. It has been argued that adventure-learning, particularly the coming-of-age-journey, bolsters the inner development of students (Loynes, 2010) and has longer lasting effects than traditional learning models (Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards, 1997). Given these contradictions, and that outdoor education can contribute insights to traditional learning models (Viadero, 1997; Allin and Humberstone, 2010), exploring the reasons why my journey fell short of impacting me in the long run may inform how best to augment the inner development of students in formal and non-formal environments.

*Overview of the Thesis:*

In the pages below I explore significant moments from my journey guided by the works of three authors promoting spiritual mentoring in the classroom: Parker J. Palmer, Rachael Kessler and John P. Miller. I then assess whether my experiences may have left more enduring impressions had I structured my journey according to Kessler's "right of passage" theory.

I conclude that my inner-self was most nourished when drawing connections to others who were secure in their identities and whose words were congruent with their actions. I then argue that my lack of preparation both for these encounters and for my re-entry into everyday life subverted the long-term incorporation of these experiences into

my epistemology. The preparation I lacked could have been provided by Kessler's protocol for a structured rite of passage. Finally, I conclude that my experiences support many of the methods for integrating spirituality into formal education proposed by Palmer, Kessler and Miller.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One describes the research questions and methods I used to analyze the experiences within my trip and how I compared those experiences to different authors' guidelines for promoting spiritual growth. In Chapter Two I survey contemporary literature to provide a definition for spirituality and contextualize my study within an emerging dialogue about spirituality's inclusion in schools. I then give a short synopsis of my journey. The section titled "The Elders" compares the works of Palmer, Kessler and Miller to the richest moments of my trip, working with older men who became mentors as our relationships developed. Chapter Three suggests that my experiences with The Elders would have been more fruitful had I prepared for my bicycle journey using Kessler's theory of structured rites of passage and ends with a summary of my findings and recommendations for teaching practice.

## METHODS

### *Data Collection and Materials*

I revisited my journey by reading the journals kept during the trip. There are a total of five hand-written journals ranging from 100 to 197 pages in length each. The first journal entry was written on the first day of my journey, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The last entry was written two weeks after the conclusion of the trip on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005.



### *Data Analysis*

I employed a multi-step process to examine spirituality on the bicycle trip. First a literature review of spirituality in education was done. Specifically, definitions of spirituality, arguments for its inclusion and the methods suggested for incorporating it in classrooms were examined.

Second, I read my journals in chronological order. This exercise served to re-familiarize myself with my experiences and to detect general themes in my writing.

Third, I reviewed the books by Palmer (1993, 1999, 2000, 2007), Kessler (2000) and Miller (2000) according to Mitchell and Weber's (2003) protocol for using popular works in a self-study. Each text was read for a global impression. They were then read a second time in order to ascertain what topics or examples evoked connections to my experiences. I read the books guided by Mitchell and Weber's prompts which urge the reader to dissect parts of a text that seem controversial, adhere to stereotypical narratives, or resemble real-life experiences. I kept hand-written notes in bound notebooks during this phase. These notes were then transcribed and organized by theme using a word processor.

Fourth, I re-examined my journals according to the major themes that emerged in the transcription phase. Van Manen's (1997) approach to writing about lived experience and Mitchell and Weber's (2003) method for undertaking individual memory work were then employed. Van Manen suggests choosing experiences that stand out for their vividness: experiences in which one's mood, emotions, physical state and sensations can all be recalled. He also recommends focusing solely on the experiences rather than

offering the conditions that produced them or any casual observations and hypotheses. Finally, he states the writing should be simple, avoiding language and phrases that aggrandize the moments described.

I used Mitchell and Weber's suggestion of reproducing experiences through two drafts. The first draft was given a title, and was guided by as much detail as possible. The second was guided by reflection, seeking meaning in the details shared. These resultant descriptions were then analyzed according to the themes unearthed in the literature review.

The following paper consists mostly of analysis, augmented with narratives only when necessary. Van Manen (1997) stresses that phenomenological study not recount personal details of an event, but describe how one's experiences could come to represent how others experience a phenomenon as well.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DATA

### CONTEXTUALIZING THIS STUDY

#### *Defining Spirituality, Authenticity*

Palmer suggests no general definition may be given for spirituality. He writes, “Every spiritual search is and must be guided by a particular literature, practice, and community of faith” (1993, p. 14). A common definition of spirituality arises from the authors seeking to integrate it into formal education. I provide this definition below and use it in my discussions throughout the paper. This viewpoint has seven characteristics:

First, spirituality is derived within the individual. Spirit, or true self, is unique to each person and pursuing externally derived notions of perfection or morality only distances one from that inborn and unchanging truth (Armstrong, 2004; Palmer, 2000). Living spiritually therefore requires committing to inward reflection, a task best done alone (Teasdale, 1999).

Second, spirituality cannot be isolated from natural, cultural and historical contexts. Although it originates within the individual spirituality is expressed in, and receives feedback from, the external environment. The spiritual person therefore seeks to nourish her unique spirit while embracing a greater purpose; to positively interact with and support the people, places and traditions she interacts with (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006; Palmer, 1998; Teasdale, 1999).

Third, to be spiritual is to live authentically, or with integrity. The authentic individual maintains a consistency between her convictions and her actions over time and between contexts (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006; Palmer, 2000).

Fourth, there is no finish line when striving to be authentic. Individuals are introduced to novel experiences, perspectives, and information throughout their lives and must augment and reform their values accordingly (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006). Authenticity is therefore discussed as a continuous, lifelong goal (Glazer, 1999; Teasdale, 1999; Palmer, 1998).

Fifth, spiritual life paradoxically entails contemplating the meaning of one's experiences while committing to those experiences unreservedly. One should strive to get the most from and put the most into, present moments (Armstrong, 2004) at the same time as one strives to be as authentic as possible (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006; Teasdale, 1999).

Sixth, there may be cases in which external values should prevail over one's authenticity. One's authentic state need not be positive (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006) but living spiritually implies sustaining and improving community health (Tisdell, 2003). If an individual's authenticity is inherently damaging of others' well-being, it is noble for one to live counter to one's nature (Palmer, 2000).

Finally, spirituality does not imply religiousness. Spirituality focuses on an individual's inner development and therefore does not require, but may be aided by, religious tradition (Teasdale, 1999; Palmer, 1998). God can be defined outside of religious terms and through the individual by identifying it as the thing someone most values in life (Stoll, 1979).

In summary, the spiritual person seeks authenticity from within, is anchored in and participates with community, performs actions consistent with her convictions, genuinely attends to the present, acknowledges that maintaining authenticity is a lifelong

journey, acts to preserve human well-being, and does not necessarily abide by religious doctrine.

### *Spirituality in Education: A Missing Element*

Dewey (1938) warned that reactionary dialogues would detract from finding common, forward-thinking educational models and this helps to explain the lack of spirituality in formal education today. A paucity of spirituality, both in dialogue and practice, occurred in the twentieth century (Lewis, 2006; Chickering, Dalton and Stamm, 2006). Authors suggest ‘the separation of church and state’ has been erroneously interpreted as ‘the separation of spirituality and state’ (Palmer, 1998; Glazer, 1999; Haynes, 1998; Kessler, 2000). Costly court battles over this distinction have led administrators and teachers to avoid the topic (Halford, 1998). The fear that fundamentalism will infiltrate schools on one side and the fear that spirituality will deteriorate religious values on the other, then keeps the topic taboo (Glazer, 1999). These polarizing dialogues have steered public discussions about education away from finding spiritual meaning.

### *An Emerging Dialogue*

Despite spiritual development remaining mostly obsolete in classrooms (Kessler, 1998, 2000), the issue has been increasingly discussed in the last three decades (Chickering, Dalton and Stamm, 2006; Suhor, 1998). Many authors urge schools to nurture spirituality (Palmer, Zajonc and Scribner, 2010; Miller, 1998, 2000; Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 1993). Lewis (2006) charges that institutions of higher education should

prioritize morality and character development over other subjects and is supported by Suhor (1998) who refers to these themes as “supradisciplinary concepts.” This increased interest in spirituality has led some to refer to the present as a worldwide “spiritual renaissance” (Williamson, 1994) or the “Interspiritual Age” (Teasdale, 1999).

Increased support for spiritual learning rests on the premise that formal education has become a necessary setting for modeling spirituality. Schools are not inherently needed for this task as some authors have implied (Wojnar and Malinski, 2003), but contemporary social structures have made external influences less capable of teaching students about spirituality. Decreasing amounts of unscheduled and unstructured time leave little space for students to reflect on their lives (Miller, 2000). Traditional means of character development such as student employment and family life are eroding, and schools provide a viable venue to fill this void (Tyler, 1985).

### *Integrating Spirituality into Education*

Pedagogy that straddles both student and teacher needs has been recommended for nurturing spirituality. Glazer writes, “the heart of learning is revealed within each one of us: rooted in spirit” (1999, p. 1, author’s italics). Palmer (2007) argues that the teacher be seen as a learner as well, seeking greater understanding of the topics they teach alongside their students. He refers to this as “subject-centered education” (p. 117). This outlook is reflected in pedagogies “rooted” in the learner but chaperoned by the interests (Miller, 2000) and goals (Kessler, 2000) of the teacher. Diminishing the focus on regurgitating facts offered by teachers and textbooks promotes self-discovery in students (Lewis, 2006) and affords them the opportunity to pursue questions that give their lives

meaning (Palmer, 1998). The teacher's role shifts from lecturing to accompanying students as they seek their unique paths negotiated within community contexts.

Creating comfortable learning environments allows students to challenge themselves and others, thus promoting spiritual development. Palmer writes, "A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible" (1993, p. 74). The physical setting should be spacious and uncluttered, promoting an openness of mind and spirit (Palmer, 1993). Teachers are more likely to evoke self-discovery in their students when they exude empathy (Miller, 2000), and share their own potentials, limits, fears (Palmer, 2007), passions and prejudices (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006).

Students can further define these spaces themselves by establishing rules of conduct, including expectations for mutual respect (Kessler, 2000). Students are more likely to share and test their preconceptions when they know they are not being judged for them. They can then benefit from new insights, information and criticisms offered by classmates. Additionally, students may connect with others as they discover they share similar worldviews (Kessler, 2000, 1998). Finally, within these spaces, students should not be forced into participation, but be given the freedom to participate on their own terms (Miller, 2000).

Once a student-centered environment is established, spirituality may be explored in diverse ways. These include: Seeking new perspectives through original creations or discoveries (Kessler, 2000; Miller 2000; Palmer, 1999), exploring silence and solitude and building humble relationships with nature (Palmer, 2003; Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2000), looking for joy in simple things, testing one's perceived limits, going through rites

of passage (Kessler, 2000), analyzing one's fears (Palmer, 2007; Kessler, 2000), asking questions that expand one's understanding of meaning and purpose in life (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2000), journal writing (Miller, 2000), and developing interpersonal and community connections (Palmer, 2007; Kessler, 2000; Boston, 1998; Hagstrom, 1998; Krystal, 1998).

### *A Brief Description of My Journey*

In the spring of 2004 I graduated from a university in my hometown of Montreal, Quebec and worked on campus for the summer. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004 three friends drove me over the Canadian-American border to St. Johnsbury, Vermont. I left our campsite the next afternoon by myself, riding a bicycle weighted down with camping gear, clothes and food.

Over the next two months I rode down the east coast and ended up at a childhood friend's house in Georgia. As the holidays approached, I grew lonely and decided to fly home. I reflected at the time, "Although it was great to be greeted by my mother at the airport, walking into the cool winter air did not refresh me. Instead I was disappointed in myself for not sticking it out in Georgia."

In early January, I resumed my trip flying back to Georgia and continued riding down the east coast to Florida's pan handle. There I turned westward and rode for several months until reaching the pacific coast in San Diego. I followed the coast northward until reaching the home of my father's brother and his family in central California.



At this point I again halted my journey, flying to Missouri for a cousin's wedding. In less than a week, I was back on the road riding from California to Washington state. There, I turned east to commence the final leg along the southern side of the Canadian-American border. My journey concluded on August 28, 2005 at my parents' home north of Montreal.

I spent nearly ten months on the road, pedaling over 16, 000 kilometers. I stopped several times to find temporary work that provided me with funds to sustain my journey. The longest pause I had for work was six weeks and the shortest was one day. I also stopped to visit friends and family at several points along my route for a few days at a time.

I spent most days cycling alone, however I happened across others on similar journeys along my route. I rode with some of these men for only a day and others for up to three weeks.

A vast majority of my nights were spent alone in my tent, hidden in backwoods or settled at campgrounds. On particular nights I also stayed in a motel or hostel. Each night I wrote in my journal, a habit never attempted before. I had a lot of time to myself and writing became a tool to express what I thought I was discovering about myself and the world.

#### THE ELDERS: FINDING CONNECTION, COMMUNITY AND SELF

My journals reveal that long before the end of my journey I had concluded that isolation would provide me with the strength to accomplish future feats; indeed, my journey started in a solitary effort and was to end in the same way. Similarly, it was easy

to think that I alone possessed the insight to discover my true, inner self; After all, many personal insights came to me while lying alone in my tent journaling at night, or riding down some stretch of deserted country road. Thus, I returned home ready to face future challenges alone.

Examining the contexts within which my journal entries were written reveals that my conclusion to embrace isolation was based on the *nature* of my trip rather than the experiences therein. Although it is true that I biked most of the distance alone, an inherent result of the design of the trip, I had overlooked the countless interpersonal interactions that provided the motivation to continue pedaling and the fertile ground upon which I could reflect about my personal inclinations and ways of interacting with the world. Tenting alone most nights, another artifact of the voyage's design, had provided me with ample time to reflect on myself and my place in the world, but the most profound journal entries were not born of this solitude. Rather, the most thoughtful reflections were based upon my encounters with others along the way. The ideas and ways of life I was exposed to provided much needed similarities and dissimilarities against which my own ideas and habits could be examined and broadened.

Three encounters stand out for their lasting impact on my memory and on the quality of the ideas captured in my journals. All three encounters came during a respite from cycling for various reasons including injury, needing an emotional rest, or having to stop to rebuild my finances. All three instances resulted in me meeting a much older male (who I will collectively call The Elders below) who instantly took interest in my trip. These individuals, rather than simply asking questions about my journey also shared connections from their own lives, forming mutual relationships. They invited me to stay

and work with them on their individual projects and I became infused with their passions, just as they had with mine. In each case I was keenly aware that my enthusiastic presence was creating a surge of pride for their vocations and life histories. Thus, as these men shared their skills, daily routines and ideas with me, I felt I was reciprocating with similar contributions. The results were intense, intimate and candid relationships through which I had ample opportunity to experiment with my self-conceptions.

My experiences with The Elders share several themes discussed by Palmer, Kessler and Miller including subject-centered education, mutual exploration, connecting deeply with elders, the interplay between autonomy and community, and providing safe learning environments.

### *Subject-Centered Education*

The three Elders lived and worked in community settings: a hostel, a campground, and a backcountry retreat. The nature of their work however, mostly maintenance and construction, meant they spent many hours of the day alone. Upon hearing about my journey the men eagerly invited me to join them on their daily tasks. I took them up on their offers, seeing opportunities to help pay for my room and board. My interest also lay in acquiring new skills such as roofing, installing housing insulation, plumbing, and campsite maintenance.

The Elders were experts in their trades, starting each day with concrete objectives. Examples of these goals include building a roof for a cabin or fixing the plumbing at a campsite. Despite their expertise and approaching each day with clear objectives, the men were very open to hearing my thoughts on how our tasks could be approached

differently. Thus, while they patiently taught me the skills essential for completing our projects, they found time to earnestly discuss how best to attain our goals.

The Elders' management styles mirrored the teaching strategies offered by Palmer, Miller, and Kessler. All three authors stress that teachers should approach their lessons with clear plans and objectives, but they equally encourage teachers to leave room for spontaneity and student inquiry. They claim the teacher's job is to allow students to explore a topic while ensuring they do not stray too far from a lesson's objectives.

Palmer suggests the balance between student inquiry and teacher guidance is best attained through a "community of truth" (2007, p. 101) or "subject-centered education" (2007, p. 117). Although he acknowledges a teacher is required to lead a class and share the basic concepts and techniques needed to study a subject, he urges that teachers present themselves as having no greater potential to understand a subject than their students. This strategy contrasts with traditional models of education that place teachers as the sole experts on a topic in the classroom, relegating students to merely knowing the teachers' interpretations of a topic rather than interacting with it themselves. Palmer's model eliminates this hierarchy, replacing it with a community that, through their collective experiences and the knowledge of others (found in textbooks for example), may come to define truths about a subject.

Palmer (2007) warns that a community of truth should not function as a democratic process and its findings not be seen as permanent interpretations of a subject. For if truth was defined by majority rule it would be too easy to ignore the truths and inner landscapes of individuals. In addition, history provides evidence that unique ideas

may usurp collective views: we may still believe that the sun rotates around the earth instead of the other way around had common beliefs persisted in the times of Copernicus and Galileo. That truths may change over time must also lead us to accept that the truths a community defines are capable of changing given new insights or information.

A nondemocratic process for deriving truth necessitates conflict. As a community may contain diverse views on a subject, these ideas will have to be pitted against each other in order to attain a communal truth. Palmer (2007) argues that this conflict can be healthy if it is creative rather than competitive. Both teachers and students must withhold their desires to win a debate for the sake of their egos. In doing so, collective gains are prioritized over personal ones. Palmer claims this unselfish act is made possible because community connections define reality, thus we may only come to know reality or truth by being in community ourselves. If one stands to gain from collaboration, rather than competition, individuals may therefore relinquish their fears of being the ‘loser’ in a debate and contribute more truthfully. When conflict is creative, rather than competitive, it is educative for all parties involved.

Kessler (2000) ties the concept of a subject-centered education into spirituality. She writes that creativity can be a gateway to inner knowledge. Therefore participating in the creation of communal truth may bolster spirituality. This conclusion mirrors the definition of spirituality offered in the introduction to this paper: Our inner truths are grounded in our connections to community, whereby embracing our connections to community we may arrive at more robust understandings of our inner selves.

Miller’s choice of words seems to contrast with the premise of a subject-centered education, but may be interpreted to agree with Kessler and Palmer. He suggests teachers

advise their students there is “no right answer” (2000, p. 73) when trying to promote participation and self-discovery in classroom exercises. This relativist perspective may lead students to omit negotiating their beliefs within their community’s truths. Indeed, as Palmer (2007) points out, if everyone’s viewpoint is untouchably true, there remains nothing to learn from one another and therefore no reason to engage in conversation. Palmer (2007) would agree however, that learning might take many directions initially, but that these diverse routes should eventually be reigned in by staying focused on a particular topic or end goal, defined by a teacher’s lesson plan; Teachers and students should collaboratively elucidate a communal truth. Miller’s statement may therefore be expressed more elegantly as, “do not let your preconceptions of what you think is the right answer guide your explorations, but do consider others’ perspectives.”

### *Mutual Exploration*

The Elders possessed different skills, used varied teaching styles, and had vastly different personalities, yet all managed to get me engaged wholeheartedly in their trades. What they did have in common was passion for their vocations and a joy in sharing it with a younger apprentice. They also shared a common way of interacting with me: they expressed unreserved confidence in me.

The lack of similar teaching styles between The Elders yet their similar impacts on my engagement supports Palmer’s (2007) assertion that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Central to Palmer’s theories, these men “taught who they were.” That is, their identities were engrained in their lessons; their integrity reinforced through their trades and words.

From the onset of our relationships, The Elders trusted me to complete parts of their projects knowing I had no prior experience doing such tasks. They let me learn on the job, despite the quality of that job having great meaning to them. Conscious of the responsibilities I was given, I was careful to keenly observe them when they demonstrated a skill and even more careful when fulfilling the task myself. Kessler (2000) writes students may find meaning in giving to their community. Thus, giving students responsibilities, especially ones that impact the teacher, will open students to learning. The Elder's actions, such as setting daily goals that surpassed their own abilities, contributed to such feelings of usefulness in me.

Palmer (2007) suggests that a community of truth is more likely to develop when teachers acknowledge that just as students rely upon them, they too rely upon students. Similarly, Kessler (2000) states it is important for older generations to share that they learn from the young because hearing that our seniors do not hold every answer can inspire awe. Although The Elders did not explicitly state that I was helping them, they all stirred a sense of discovery in me through their humble mannerisms. The thought of stumbling across a new idea that could enhance our work was extremely motivational because I knew that even a minute discovery would be welcomed as significant.

The Elders and I developed symbiotic relationships. Working as a team, we were accountable to each other and to the common results we produced. United in a goal that belonged to both of us, we could celebrate in the other's contributions. My mentors' approachable and passionate demeanors kept me focused on our tasks and in return, my commitment kept The Elders open and passionate. Thus we fed cyclically off each other's enthusiasm and willingness to share in the experience.

I became keenly aware of the positive impact my presence was having on the Elders. Palmer (2007) says good teaching requires intentionally creating conditions in which students become engaged. Good learning may arise through the same mechanism. I sought to keep The Elders uninhibitedly sharing with me. I made my interest apparent, shared new insights when possible, and gave genuine feedback. The result was both fulfilling and practically beneficial for me; as I learned I felt I was helping the other at the same time. Just as a mentee must find the right mentor, the mentor must also find the right mentee (Palmer, 2007). The needs of the teacher, not solely of the student, directed these learning scenarios.

The action of allowing the identity and needs of a teacher to help dictate a learning scenario contrasts slightly with Kessler's ideas. She encourages focusing mostly on student needs when seeking spiritual nourishment in the classroom. Kessler (2000) writes passionately about the successes of her techniques, but does not consider that these practices may be working *because* they align with her passions, rather than functioning intrinsically. Unknowingly, Kessler herself offers examples of this dilemma when she shares that teachers, unfamiliar with a technique, may shut down student participation instead of inspiring it. Further, she suggests polling parents about what techniques may be tolerated in the classroom, but fails to reflect on the possibility that the results of the poll may contradict or stray from the identity and passions of a teacher.

Miller's ideas stray from my experiences to a lesser extent. He offers an encyclopedia of techniques with little consideration of the identity of the teacher who may use them (2000). He does propose however, that teachers may be more effective when they test a strategy on themselves before employing it in the classroom. In doing



so, teachers may reflect on their own experiences in order to predict the effects that a strategy may have on their students.

### *Connecting with Our Elders*

As The Elders and myself became better acquainted, my pragmatic reasons for joining them slipped into the background and we spent most of our days listening to each other's stories while we worked. They openly shared their regrets, joyful memories, life lessons and humor and I felt free to do the same. Thus, although I was learning new skills from these men, I was also reflecting on my sense of self, building meaningful relationships and absorbing different ways of living in and perceiving the world.

Kessler contends we naturally desire the "precious time and wisdom" of those older than us but adds that the young often confuse this longing for intimacy with a yearning for sexual activity (2000, p. 22). This confusion occurs, Kessler argues, because there is a widespread misconception that the most intimate experiences are found in the realm of the sensual. Guided by this assumption youth spend much of their energy seeking sexual partners rather than building meaningful relationships. She concludes that students be given opportunities to explore without sexual risk; that through deep connection to their teachers and peers they may find their need for intimacy fulfilled.

The most frequently discussed topic in my journal entries is that of finding a female partner. I wrote almost daily about finding a "soul mate," expressing my discontent after traveling most days and meeting few women. Simultaneously, I wrote about my recurrent feelings of guilt when yearning for those interactions. After all, I had concluded, I was on a voyage of self-discovery therefore growth lay within me, not in

relationship. This assumption was strengthened after I found little comfort through the physical relationships I did enter into. However as my desire for intimacy would not dissipate during the times I spent alone either, I spent a significant amount of my time in a dissatisfied and solitary limbo.

Throughout the days spent with The Elders, my journal entries swayed from longing for a partner to reflecting on my mentors' life paths. These men shared with me the hardships that ultimately led them to finding their vocations. Trusted with these intimate details, my desire for connectedness was fulfilled. Additionally, my dissatisfaction over not knowing how best to solve my dissatisfaction was eclipsed by hearing accounts of similar struggles from men that seemed so assured of their places in the world.

Both Kessler (2000) and Palmer (2007) claim good teachers are able to bridge connections between themselves, students and the topics they teach allowing the young to transcend their preoccupation with themselves and find meaning in their connections to others. These connections may be augmented by elders sharing their stories (Miller, 2000), especially their tribulations (Palmer, 2000). Exposing students to hardships may quell feelings of being alone in their struggles to understand themselves as those they admire went through kindred challenges.

I also benefitted from The Elders sharing their triumphs. Kessler (2000) observes that we usually associate the disclosure of our hard times with intimacy and rarely communicate our proudest moments because we are taught not to stir jealousy in others. My relationships with my mentors were free of these insecurities for two reasons. First, the disparities in our ages resulted in us reflecting on our futures or pasts without

comparing our status or place in life against the other. Second, we were focused on common goals therefore benefitting from a cooperative rather than competitive environment. We did not try to outdo the other's stories, but merely interchanged our ideas and experiences, critically examining each other's claims and challenging ourselves to arrive at joint conclusions. Palmer calls this phenomenon "creative conflict" where we both embrace and critique diverse beliefs "not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices" (2007, p.110).

Although Kessler, Miller and Palmer all emphasize intimacy, Palmer (2007) warns against over-valuing the phenomenon. He claims that when intimacy is defined as a supreme connection, it becomes the only thing worth striving for. And as we cannot be intimate with everything, we therefore end up defensively defining many important people and ideas as 'other.' With these divisions drawn, it becomes harder to find intimacy. Similarly, if we try to force it upon others, this control becomes a source of contention denying the possibility of intimacy developing.

My encounters with The Elders were free of coercion. They were also free from a group dynamic that could have led to boundaries and 'otherness' being defined. The results were healthy, deep relationships that reinforced each other's individuality as well as drawing us together.

### *Autonomy and Community are Not Mutually Exclusive*

The nature of my trip, traveling alone on a self-directed quest, may seem to illustrate pre-established autonomy and little aversion to risk-taking, however my journals suggest otherwise. Some entries voice pride in my undertakings accomplished

far from my childhood support network, whereas others reveal a strong emotional dependence on the family and friends I had left behind; I would unconfidently question the purpose of my trip, wondering if I should have stayed home one day, and lament the fact that I could not break free of my old dependencies the next. These polarities hint that although I sought autonomy, I did not know how to seek it.

I didn't realize it at the time, but my desire for connection was not counter-intuitive to a trip seeking self-discovery. I had predicted that solitude would automatically bestow on me the capacity for self-understanding. When this did not occur, I habitually fell back on my home support network: a failure of the paradigm under which my trip was operating.

I would have benefitted from the insight that my relationships did not necessarily detract from my autonomy. Kessler (2000) argues that when our longing for connection is fulfilled we risk being autonomous. Indeed, as The Elders invited me to join them day-after-day, they provided valuable affirmations of my sense of self: I had shared much of my identity with these men, including my insecurities, and they still continued to keenly and repetitively share their time with me. I was shown that wanting to meet others was not a failure or incapability to listen to my self.

My self-confidence grew as I spent time with The Elders and it was apparent that these men were undergoing similar changes. One man who was quite frail and dependent on traversing even short distances with a golf cart, would spend hours singing and dancing as we worked! He was delighted I enjoyed it, and relished the fact that he could share older songs I was not familiar with. Through such unique, shared experiences our relationships grew concurrent to our individual identities.

Kessler (2000) claims the more we develop our individual boundaries and identity, the easier it is to bond with others. Thus autonomy provides fertile ground for intimacy. Palmer (2007) makes a stronger claim positing that individual development is *essential* for genuine community interactions to arise. People with weakly developed identities, Palmer argues, are likely to sabotage a relationship because they will detract from the other in order to build their own egos. Those with defined identities will be more likely to interact authentically, building connections through differences rather than competing.

I started my journey envisioning seclusion and self-discovery as being cosmically intertwined. My expectations were married to this image and therefore many of my efforts were directed at finding time alone. What I did not consider however is why I had the desire to seek this solitude while bicycling for thousands of miles through areas where I would surely meet new people. Would I not have been more apt to find solitude had I bunkered up for a year somewhere in the middle of a forest where no other person dwelt?

Palmer offers an alternate image of self-discovery to seclusion. He claims there are people who will find meaning and identity through participation and community. He calls this the “active life:”

*“Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle. If one is called to the monastic life, those images can be empowering. But if one is called to the world of action, the same images can disenfranchise the soul, for they tend to devalue the energies of active life rather than encourage us to move with those energies towards wholeness” (1990, p. 2).*

The active life resonates with my experiences on the road. It predicts my confusion and dissatisfaction when forcing myself into solitude; It explains why I was inclined to bicycle; and it embodies my encounters with The Elders. When I embraced participation and relationships I made the most significant discoveries about myself.

### *A Safe Environment*

Kessler (2000) claims that if students are denied guidance they will follow the life paths that are expected of them instead of ones that are healthy and authentic. Despite these stakes, she urges respect for students' privacy and paces of development because she does not think forcing student participation will lead to lasting effects. Instead, she argues that teachers should focus on creating environments that incite student participation and offer opportunities to discover their authenticity.

Spiritually nourishing environments allow students to share what is important to them, make connections to others with similar perspectives and develop understandings of different viewpoints (Kessler, 2000). She suggests teachers produce environments that encourage such sharing with the help of their students by collaboratively establishing "ground rules" in their classrooms (p. 6). She claims that between contexts students and teachers will arrive at similar ground rules that include: Respect, honesty, trust, listening as if you really want to understand, not laughing at or interrupting others, not acting judgmental, keeping an open mind, and respecting others' privacy.

Kessler warns that if these rules are not respected, students may end up damaging rather than nourishing their spirits. Peers laughing at or interrupting a student's story may devalue a deeply personal event or idea and stop that student from sharing or

seeking further connections. Thus an unsafe environment may merely toy with spirituality rather than nourish it.

Miller and Palmer echo Kessler's concern, elaborating on rules that may guide authentic learning. Miller (2000) emphasizes that a spiritually nurturing environment does not coerce or force student participation. Students should therefore have the option to exit an exercise if they feel too uncomfortable. He adds that there should be "transition time" or an opportunity to "debrief" between experiences as well. This helps students organize and reflect on the information they have been exposed to as well as the emotions that may have been aroused. Palmer (2007) agrees, stating communal discoveries can benefit from having space and time to evolve. Spare time allows students to try and resolve their questions outside of the classroom or seek new ones and bring that new knowledge back to the community.

When students share questions, Palmer (2007) advises that teachers and peers resist the urge to hastily give answers. If an individual shares intimate information, being offered quick fixes or blasé feedback may make them feel unheard or dismissed. Our personal stories are often complicated and sources of vulnerability, therefore Palmer suggests that listening intently and responding with silence is often more helpful than offering off-the-cuff advice. He adds that honest questioning is also favorable to offering solutions.

A safe environment does not preclude having one's beliefs challenged. Palmer (2007) acknowledges that intellect, emotion and spirit are all interconnected, thus environments that challenge our emotions and intellect will be more effective at augmenting spirituality than those that do not take these factors into consideration. As

challenge comes from being placed in uncomfortable situations, authentic learning requires that safety be paradoxically balanced with risk-taking.

Kessler (2000) concedes that if the rules in a classroom are too rigidly followed, spontaneity and creativity will suffer because surprise and discomfort can free us from our habituated and conditioned responses. It therefore behooves us to stroll out of our safety zones knowing we may venture back into a secure space if necessary. Similarly, Palmer (2007) states classrooms should challenge our assumptions and beliefs while paradoxically providing space for reflection and shelter from critique.

Ideally, educational terrains should produce a creative tension requiring both students and teachers resolve it communally by crafting robust ideas that encompass a class' diverse viewpoints. In seeking a joint resolution individuals must call upon their intellect and emotions, a process that augments the spirit. Contributors must communicate their feelings and experiences through rational argument. They must also consider contradictory experiences while drawing connections to the individuals expressing those divergent views. Palmer (2007) argues spirituality matures at the intersection of these events. Authentic learning is therefore more of a process than a product.

The process through which spirituality is nurtured can be undermined by fear. Although conflict may be educative for all parties when it is resolved collaboratively, it can also preclude personal growth when it takes the form of competition (Palmer, 2007). Competing parties will be afraid to enter into a truthful investigation of a subject because they will not want to share their ideas for fear they are exposed as false. Moreover, they



will be less likely to give thoughtful consideration to others' ideas because if they do, and find validity there, they must concede to others' conclusions.

Palmer (2007) offers several stages of fear that arise from competition and detract from connectedness. Firstly, we fear diversity. We do not want to give consideration to other ways of life or those who have had divergent experiences because we may be forced to admit there are truths in the world other than our own. In turn, such admission may lead to us fearing that alternative truths may conflict with our worldview. This is problematic because we operate under a win-lose paradigm, thus we fear emerging from a conflict over our viewpoints as the 'loser.' Finally, we fear losing our identity. Subscribing to 'losing' viewpoints may lead us to lose self-respect and a sense of purpose.

Palmer (2007) says a new paradigm, like creative conflict, is useful because no loser emerges in this interaction. Subsequently we need not fear losing our identity through conflict and can participate more honestly. Not guided by fear, we may breach the familiar and the comfortable and embrace otherness without trepidation. Creative conflict allows us to act authentically meaning our words, while consistent with our convictions, do not try to eliminate otherness but share in it.

Palmer stresses that we cannot simply eliminate our fears, but we can choose not to be ruled by them. Understanding the source of our fears leads to self-knowledge. This knowledge can make us more at home with whom we are, and therefore less afraid of otherness conflicting with our identity. Unafraid, we will be more apt to act with integrity instead of living a "divided life" whereby our actions do not align with our convictions (2007, p. 73).

Teachers overcome with fear will not be effective. Rather than reflecting on their limitations, they will distance themselves from people, activities and environments that may expose these fears (Palmer, 2007). Afraid of exposing to their students that they do not know everything about a subject, they will limit classroom discussions to what they know, closing down alternate pathways students wish to venture. These teachers will also be less likely to make deep connections with their students for fear their insecurities will be revealed. Fearful teachers cannot therefore create a community of truth in their classrooms.

Teachers who are comfortable with themselves, and aware of their own fears, can create a safer and more productive learning environment. They can openly share their limitations and insecurities and therefore have nothing to hide. Thus, they will be free to connect with students openly. Additionally, free from the entanglements of competition, these teachers may celebrate when their students provide new insights (Kessler, 2000). These teachers create classrooms where “love takes away fear and co-creation replaces control” (Palmer, 2007, p. 57).

Students may benefit in several ways from teachers who do not instruct from their fears but from their honest, inner selves. First, integrity is best learned through role-modeling (Palmer, 2007). Students can sense when a teacher is sharing intimately with them. Connecting to that intimacy, students find respect and honor in their teacher’s demeanor and may wish to project themselves in similar manners. Second, learning how to control their fears can be a transcendent moment for students (Kessler, 2000). It may open up new possibilities for them intellectually and socially and can also lead to greater understanding of the self. Finally, since contribution is a greater motivator than

competition, students will find themselves in an environment where they are free to share their talents with peers, have new ideas and techniques shared with them, and find fulfillment by helping attain a common objective (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2007).

Without knowing it, The Elders had created similar environments to those described by Kessler, Palmer and Miller. Six factors contributed to this phenomenon. First, I was not intimidated by The Elders, but I did respect them. There was a large discrepancy between our ages and this made it easy to enter into a non-competitive relationship; they posed no threat to whom I was or what I had accomplished to date. The men were also unassuming; they dressed and talked casually and carried no superfluous traditions. Each man was at peace with himself, neither conceited nor unconfident. Indeed their slow-paced lives, set in the American countryside, were relaxing and easy to share in.

Second, The Elders, each in his own way, demonstrated how I could deal with discomfort in fruitful ways. We came from very different backgrounds and as I was minted from a fast-paced and extremely verbal university experience, the crossing of our paths provided many opportunities to shake up the other's beliefs. More often I was the guilty party for making the other uncomfortable, but the men reassured me that they were not insulted by my comments and could actually learn from them. They demonstrated how we could embrace our differences instead of letting them distance us from one another.

Third, the structure of our conversations matched the creative tension upheld by Palmer. Despite our differences, we talked throughout our working days. As we listened to each other's stories, wildly different from one another, we came to respect those

differences. If I said something that was clearly incongruent with The Elders' experiences, they would silently ruminate on the idea while continuing their work. After thoughtful consideration they would re-enter the conversation, not by changing the subject, but by sharing how our divergent experiences could be seen as akin in a broader light.

Fourth, The Elders seemed pillars of integrity. The ground rules that Kessler suggests employing were present without prompting. Never did I feel hurried to finish a story so the other man could offer his take on my narrative. Nor did I feel coerced into sharing anything I was not comfortable with. In fact, although it did not cross my mind until I was ready to move on from each setting, nothing was binding me to our work or our intimate conversations other than my commitment to our developing relationships; relationships pursued out of recognition of their trueness to self.

The Elders had a way of offering advice that made it clear they wished me to accept it only on my own terms. Each man encouraged me to stick out the journey, openly regretful that they had not done something similar when they were younger, but this advice never verged on coerciveness. They finely balanced suggestion with casualness, so that I never got the impression they were being insincere, nor placing expectations upon me. This contrasts with many of my other interactions along the road. I would strike up conversation with strangers, just wanting to be heard after many hours of isolation, but would end up with either dismissive advice or be seen as needy. With The Elders it felt good to share and not be judged in either manner.

Fifth, The Elders support the claim that integrity is contagious. Kessler (2000) defines joy as the moments you can be happy for someone without comparing them to

your situation. Each Elder exemplified this definition and I was drawn into the same spirit. The consistency in these men's mannerisms and words, and their genuinely expressed appreciation for my presence was impossible not to reciprocate. The Elders were and remain role models for me in this light.

Finally, The Elders helped me unearth authentic goals. Those men uninhibitedly shared knowledge of their trades and lives without letting their egos or expertise distance me from a raw, hands-on experience. This provided me the space and substrate to unearth more about myself, including how to reconcile the type of person I wanted to *be* with the person I *am*. My journals reveal that within the first few days of my journey I had somehow come across many life-changing insights. Retrospectively these conclusions were prefabricated, consisting mostly of what I expected others to want me to find. The Elders provided me with the means to escape those expectations, and make true discoveries.

### *The Elders were Not Enough*

The Elders tapped into many methods that nurtured my spirituality. They allowed the subjects of our work and conversations to take center stage rather than themselves; they humbly shared their explorations with me; they allowed me to find fulfillment in our mutual efforts; they were approachable, opening themselves up for deep connections; they showed me how creating and participating in community can serve autonomy and vice versa; and they created environments that safely roused my engagement.

In spite of these lessons, the lasting effects were less than desirable. After each encounter the lessons learned seemed to get buried in the pages of my journal and I failed

to internalize and engrain them into my daily life. This resulted in my journals expounding the same epiphanies ‘discovered’ with each successive Elder, instead of growing upon my previous experiences. This pattern continued throughout the trip, therefore by its conclusion, I was not conscious of the insights The Elders had evoked in me. I arrived back home with my anticipated conclusions instead, ones that mimicked the design of my journey; that self-awareness was best sought through solitude, rather than in community.

Revisiting the poem from the introduction of this paper underscores my failure to internalize what I learned with The Elders. The poem was written after all three encounters:

*What started as a journey of one,  
Became an adventure amongst many,  
Ended in the arms of a few,  
Now opens up to the whole world.*

When I arrived back home I was quick to conclude that the poem provided evidence of maturity, acknowledging that my future accomplishments could not be done alone. Deciphering the poem differently however, points to an alternate conclusion. When I penned the poem I was still clearly under the impression that I started the journey alone, as “one,” failing to give credence to my connections at home and to the group of friends that saw me off. I then use the word “amongst” to describe my relationships during the journey. This usage highlights how I continued to see myself as a transient and unattached entity. Had I used the words “with” or “beside” to describe my relationships it could more easily be interpreted as recognizing the need for mutual connections. By ending “in the arms of a few,” I was only acknowledging those who were in my immediate presence, rather than noting the relationships I made along the way. Finally,

by stating that my journey was “ended,” I was signaling that I felt my development was over. I had finished a tough accomplishment and now “the whole world” was mine to conquer, rather than to continue discovering and share with others.

Something was missing from my experiences that would have helped internalize the lessons learned from The Elders. I failed to give credence to, or even recognize, how I was drawn to an active, communal life rather than a monastic one. In the next chapter I argue that defining clear objectives and using tested and communal methods of preparing for and undergoing a rite of passage could have led to more desirable, lasting results.

### III. RITES OF PASSAGE

#### COMPARING KESSLER'S THEORY TO MY EXPERIENCES

The Elders exposed me to, and inspired in me, many novel and authentic ideas, thus uncovering the reasons I did not hold onto those lessons is of vital importance. I have argued above that the identity and integrity of those men and the environments they created were factors that led to my discoveries. Although my mentors' techniques were less integral to my education, I would have benefitted from arriving at those encounters prepared with techniques to internalize what I learned.

Kessler (2000) writes almost exclusively about a rite of passage course for graduating high school seniors that she had honed over several decades of teaching. Her course is structured into four phases including preparation, severance, threshold and ordeal, and reincorporation. I contextualize my journey within Kessler's ideas below, discuss her four phases of a rite of passages, and conclude by arguing that had I prepared using her techniques to structure my trip and my re-entry back home, I would have been more capable of internalizing the lessons learned along the way.

#### *My Journey in Context: Missing Key Elements*

I graduated from university with little connection to my school. I had not relocated from my hometown, living with my parents for my freshman year. I maintained many of my childhood friendships established outside of school instead of seeking new ones during my four years spent there. Thus, I knew only a small fraction of my graduating class despite sitting in crowded and enormous lecture halls on a daily basis. My feelings of anonymity were strengthened in my final year when I visited my



favorite professor, with whom I had taken several courses and had even done an independent research project with, and he could not recall me. Finally, I had tried out for the school's hockey team four years in a row, frustratingly cut each time; I was rejected from the community I most desperately wished to be part of. Choosing not to attend the school's rite of passage, convocation, was an automatic response.

I finished college in the state Kessler suggests a graduating high school student is in: "no longer a child but not mature enough to be on his own" (2000, p. 137). For her, the transition from high school to university includes making new friends and experiencing new settings, things I had barely accomplished. She also states that the "cry for initiation [into adulthood] from the adolescent soul surfaces with striking universality" (p. 136). She maintains that if this cry is not fulfilled, and no community or meaningful connection is made, youth will seek their own means of doing so.

I created my own rite of passage because it provided a means of moving on from university. Regardless of my disillusionment with my school, I hung around it after graduation. I continued to work for the school's summer camp like I had the previous two years and attended events on campus organized for returning students, not alumni. Having failed to experience initiation through the university, yet feeling I should move on, I conceived a ritual that would undoubtedly whisk me away from that setting, a bicycle trip.

Although I considered my journey a transition into adulthood it was missing many key elements that define a rite of passage according to Kessler (2000). First, she claims these rites should be structured processes broken down into distinct phases with clear objectives for each phase. A rite of passage is also structured socially such that after one

goes through it, he or she joins the ranks of many that came before. I had no plan other than to ‘do’ the trip and thus set no concrete objectives other than physically bicycling the prescribed distance. In addition, as I was the only person I knew or heard of taking on such a challenge, I arrived back home feeling not initiated into a group, but into my own isolated category.

Second, Kessler says these rituals require adult guidance. I had no official supervision in this respect and was confused as to whether I wanted it in the first place. While I yearned to break free from dependence on my parents, I still sought connections with them. Thus when my parents offered assistance during my trip I was unsure whether to accept it, torn between classifying it as invasive and counterproductive, or genuine and helpful.

Third, Kessler says rites of passage should make students conscious of the “irrevocable transition” they are in (p. 140). I did not sense myself going through such a dramatic shift because my journey was to finish in the place I had started. After traveling for eleven months I was to re-enter the same situation I had been living in for 20 years. By the end of the trip, I became very conscious that I was ending up at home, but did not know what direction to go from there. Upon my return, it was easy to slip back into my old ways of living.

Fourth, Kessler says students should be given tools for separating from their old ways and transitioning into new ones. This advice is akin to Palmer’s (2007) who shares that in addition to creating space for the unknown, teachers should leave time and space for students to acquire the predictable facts. In my case these facts could have consisted of strategies to decipher between old, unhealthy habits and new beneficial ones. Wary of

adult guidance, I shied away from these “tools” and community knowledge fearing it would interfere with my authentic discoveries.

Finally, Kessler writes that students should be formally initiated into the capacities needed for adulthood and acknowledged for the courage it takes to transcend childhood. She adds that this recognition should come from both the adults and peers in students’ communities. My parents threw a party for me inviting friends and family over to their house upon my arrival back home, thus it would appear that I attained such recognition. Examining what was celebrated however reveals that we were honoring my accomplishment, a much-appreciated gesture, but not initiating me into new capacities nor recognizing a commitment to adulthood or any new directions I would be pursuing.

Up to this point, I have listed many ways Kessler’s rites of passage theory differs from my own experiences. I now turn to the four phases of her rites of passage course to guide a more detailed investigation. Integrating the ideas of Palmer and Miller into this framework, I discuss how each phase could have affected my journey.

### *Preparation*

Kessler begins her senior passage course by preparing students for their transition from high school to college or life beyond the classroom. Preparation is the longest phase, providing students with techniques for self-reflection that can be employed throughout their initiation and re-entry into ordinary life afterwards. This phase has three main objectives.

First, the preparation phase provides grounding for students’ transitions. They are given information from an anthropological perspective about the archetypes of coming of

age rituals around the world. Kessler argues that students may find comfort in the universality of such events and come to recognize patterns of these phenomena in their own lives.

Miller (2000) agrees with Kessler's practice of explaining the rationale of an experience before students enter into it. He argues this may encourage student authenticity because it relieves students from wondering if an exercise is worth undertaking and prevents them from wasting energy pondering what a teacher is expecting of them. Grounded by a particular objective, students may focus on their individual explorations and contribute more readily to the communal findings in a classroom.

The second objective in Kessler's preparation phase is to provide students with the time to set goals for themselves as they transition into adulthood. Students are asked to reflect on their past and present, looking for clues that hint at when they are most comfortable with themselves, what unhealthy or childish habits they possess, how they manage their yearning for intimacy, if they have a purpose or destiny, what environments they find nourishing, and how they define spirituality. Students are given solitary time to reflect on these topics, then they discuss their ideas in group settings hashing out collective ideas. Listening to their peers' insights, and drawing connections to others strengthens their convictions.

Palmer agrees with this type of reflection. He urges us to dig deep into our memories and find clues that may be pointing us towards certain lifestyles or vocations (2000). He also agrees that sharing ideas with others who are genuinely interested can help one figure out what is authentic in their lives (2007).

Third, after focusing on the past and present for many weeks Kessler has students define who they wish to be in the future. She has them construct a list of traits, beliefs, and behaviors they will leave behind with childhood. They then list the life goals, qualities, or perspectives they will carry with them into adulthood.

Finally, Kessler has students practice skills that will help them stay true to their objectives. These skills include coping with disappointment and finding positive aspects of negative situations. She suggests nourishing these skills by exposing students to safe disappointments. Under these conditions students may reflect on why they feel disappointed and how they may come to see their undesirable circumstances in a positive light. Exercises like these, Kessler argues, allow students to acknowledge that attaining their goals can be hard before they get easy or fun and that just because something is not easy, it should not stop them from pursuing life-giving, authentic activities.

### *Severance*

Kessler defines the severance phase as the formal ritual where students proclaim, in front of their peers and mentors, that they are letting go of their old, unfruitful habits and breaking away from their dependence on secure and familiar childhood supports. Integral to this phase, Kessler encourages students to recognize the fears that arise when making such bold proclamations. Similar to Palmer (2007), she invites students to identify and understand these fears rather than try to overcome or ignore them. “The acknowledgment and experience of fear is the door that opens us to heightened presence and perception through which we learn to live in the world as it is” (Laura Simms as cited in Kessler, 2000). To “live in the world as it is” evokes a central tenant of spirituality:

The individual must negotiate authenticity within a collective reality. Kessler concludes that when we enter into a cordial relationship with our fears it becomes a source of courage rather than confusion or hesitation when interacting with the external world.

Kessler has her students collaboratively design a ritual that metaphorically separates them from the safety of their childhoods and represents them embracing the fears and opportunities associated with adult life. This ritual, deeply symbolic and intense, accelerates the severance from childhood and offers students additional metaphors with which to reflect on the imminent changes in their lives. Additionally, it also allows students to witness others facing similar challenges as they pass through the ritual together.

### *Threshold and Ordeal*

Once Kessler's students have declared severance from childhood, they enter the threshold phase. Threshold refers to them being on the doorstep of adulthood. Thus they are in an indeterminate state, neither child nor adult. Here they are encouraged to test, consolidate and make changes to the characteristics they wished to carry with them into the next stage of their lives. Students may also experiment with the tools they learned in the preparation phase. Threshold contains three interconnecting concepts: Adventure and ordeal, choice and responsibility, and exposure to new perspectives and personal meaning.

Kessler puts students into situations that replicate the loneliness, responsibilities and fears they will face as adults. She charges that the best way to do so is by having students participate in an initiation ritual or "ordeal" (2000, p. 151). Ordeals remove

students from their familiar settings and place them in alien environments that offer both communal and solitary challenges. These challenges can be physical or mental, seeking to push students beyond their perceived limits while building self-confidence. The effects of these challenges are enhanced “by a dramatic shift of getting away from ordinary life” (2000, p. 54), thus Kessler suggests that ordeals take the form of nature trips, solo journeys, and outdoor education.

Palmer and Miller support Kessler’s decision to expose students to ordeals. Palmer (2007) writes that surprise is essential for authentic learning because it forces us to operate out of our comfort zones. Truths that remain hidden in our routine, ordinary lives are forced into sight as we struggle to understand unfamiliar phenomena or ideas. Similarly, Miller (2000) posits that when our lives are ordered by routine, it is harder to be mindful and fully present. Thus, students positioned in foreign and engaging environments will be able to interact more authentically with others

Kessler cites many reasons for creating group challenges within an ordeal. First, they offer students the opportunity to prove that they merit trust and respect within their community. Second, students get the opportunity to display the strength, knowledge and morals that are upheld as adult virtues in their community, gaining confidence that they are ready to move on. Finally, because students engage in ordeals by choice they not only prove they are willing to accept responsibilities that others rely on, but that they are competent at them as well.

Self-sacrifice is key to initiation. Kessler establishes ordeals that require giving of one’s self because all “worthwhile accomplishments” in the future will require similar action (2000, p. 139). Additionally, as Palmer (2007) points out, we learn more about the

world and ourselves through our moments of struggle. Suffering is therefore essential to transcending into new life stages.

After completing their ordeals, Kessler has students reflect on their recent triumphs. She argues that overcoming struggle enables students to view the world through new perspectives, thus students will often discover novel internal and external truths at this stage. Calling upon and augmenting the tools and ideas they formulated in the preparation phase, students prepare to pass through the threshold into adulthood conscious of growth, accomplishments, and insights that are indispensable in their new lives.

### *Reincorporation*

Kessler (2000) follows up an ordeal with a minimum of three weeks of class work to help students consolidate the lessons they learned through their ordeals. She maintains three objectives in this stage. First, Kessler gives students opportunities to integrate the discoveries they made in the ordeal phase into their own lives. Students are encouraged to discuss what their experiences were and express why they were important to them. Through sharing what they learned with peers and teachers, students may consolidate their findings and uncover deeper understandings. They are also asked again to reflect further on what traits they wish to leave behind and which they intend to take with them into adulthood, incorporating any new ideas they learned during their ordeals. Students finally practice honest ways to break off relationships that contribute to them holding onto childhood traits. Thus while students are encouraged to reflect on their pasts, it is always in the context of moving forward authentically and proactively into the future.



Teachers may offer guidance or comfort to students who feel uneasy after their ordeals. Kessler says many youth do not possess the ability to foresee pitfalls – doubts that damage rather than nourish the spirit – thus adults sharing about these traps can help. Pitfalls include not being able to describe the changes and deep emotions students may be feeling, sliding back into old habits even though they resolved to change them, and developing cynicism regarding whether a new identity or sense of community had actually been evoked through their ordeal. Kessler maintains that students will be less likely to succumb to a pitfall if they know of them in advance and recognize that others face the same challenges.

The second objective of reincorporation is to share with students that living with integrity is not easy. She suggests they need to be reassured that an undivided life is a lifelong “struggle” (2000, p. 83). Armed with the knowledge that living this way is not easy, students are encouraged to stay positive about themselves, resisting shame if their authentic actions and ideas differ from others’.

Third, Kessler says giving formal closure allows students to say goodbye to their experience, and offers a sense of completion. She ends the right of passage course where they started: in a school community. Student accomplishment, but more importantly, observable maturation, is acknowledged in front of peers, teachers and parents. Individuals are honored for who they are presently, not who they were throughout their high school careers, displaying that it is okay to see people in a new light.

Parents are encouraged to publically share their pride in their children in this phase, welcoming the adolescents into adulthood. Parents are also encouraged to share how the youth have changed and surprised them. Through this process students may gain

additional respect and connections to their parents as they realize their seniors are still learning about life as well. Having parents involved in the ritual also allows students to quell their confusion about whether maintaining strong relationships with these adults precludes maturation and moving on into the next stages of life.

Finally, Kessler warns that if the reincorporation phase is not present, the ordeals students went through may be damaging rather than nurturing. Guidance is needed for students to cope with their new insights and ways of seeing the world. Without this guidance they may slip back into old habits, disheartened because the strong feelings they had during their ordeals dissipated upon their return. Toying with spirituality and not nurturing it can therefore be more damaging than doing nothing at all because it can devalue students' experiences and stop them from prying further into their authenticity, afraid of getting hurt again.

*My Journey: An Ordeal, and Little Else?*

My journey contrasts greatly with Kessler's rite of passage course: I spent relatively no time preparing for it; It was consumed by ordeal, a vast majority of my time spent on the road; I gave little thought about what the journey symbolized, and therefore failed to see it as an irrevocable transition into adulthood; and upon its conclusion I was thrust back into my old ways in lieu of a thoughtful re-entry to ordinary life. The findings I made on my journey were not supported by preparation, severance and reincorporation, all phases Kessler considers integral to transcendence.

Many of the conditions of Kessler's threshold phase were present in my journey: I was thrust into unfamiliar environments that exposed me to new levels of loneliness and

fear; I escaped from routine, ending up in varied and challenging environments; I gained the respect and trust of others along the way; I was made aware of the self-sacrifice it takes to follow-through in a fulfilling venture; and I was exposed to and came up with many new ideas.

Although many aspects of Kessler's threshold phase were present, I did not accomplish the phase's main objective: An ordeal is "a sifting and sorting action (threshing) that separates the valuable from the worthless, the *wheat from the chaff*" (2000, p. 150). I came across many new ideas and truths about myself, but stayed connected to my old ways. I did not consolidate nor integrate into my life many of the discoveries made during my ordeal. Between encounters, like those with The Elders, I often sought environments that were similar to home. In these places I behaved and acted much like I had through university. Even upon my return, I celebrated my achievement in ways that conflicted with who I wished to be.

I was incapable of "threshing" my traits because I was ill-prepared, with neither the tools nor the confidence to do so. I maintained attachments to people and places from my youth that supported undesirable habits versus those that drew me towards authenticity. Kessler hopes that when students exit their ordeals they are rid of shame or feelings of inadequacy. Ridding oneself of these insecurities makes it easier to choose healthy relationships and act with integrity. I had difficulty managing this, and the more I participated in unauthentic activities, the more insecure I became.

My experience suggests that each objective Kessler puts forward for the severance phase be heeded. Kessler has students create a ritual that physically separates them from their familiar settings and metaphorically allows them to say goodbye to their

youth and embrace adulthood. Undoubtedly my trip separated me from home and exposed me to unfamiliar settings, however this was done unrewardingly because I did not undergo a ceremonial and irrevocable transition beforehand. I arrived back home unsure of the changes I had undergone, whereas Kessler's students return from their ordeals officially changed through a communal ritual, allowing them to confidently carry forward only their desirable and adult traits.

A formal severance ritual would have allowed me to more readily make the changes I sought in myself. I often pondered how my identity was changing throughout my journey, but never thought of manifestly dropping my old ways. Instead, I had concluded that my old habits and mannerisms were naturally occurring and not negotiable. Thus, in lieu of growing into a new self, I sought to justify and learn more about my existing traits. This perspective precluded new insights from taking over long-engrained and unauthentic ones. I returned home modified, not transcended.

Kessler warns that ordeals are experienced in vain if they do not prepare students for re-entry. I stumbled into every pitfall she cites as a sign of this unpreparedness. I did not find other people that related to my journey, thus failed to develop a vocabulary that fully expressed what I was feeling. This had the effect of making my experiences feel isolating, rather than as an initiation into community. Additionally, as I slipped back into my old ways I questioned if my experiences on the trip were authentic. Finally I became cynical of my journey asking myself if the trip was worth the effort in the end.

Reincorporating into ordinary life using Kessler's recommendations would have been beneficial. I came back into an unstructured environment, not reflecting on the clues I uncovered about my authentic directions, mannerisms or purposes in life. Kessler

gives her students a minimum of three weeks to do so, whereas I got back and was instantly plunged into directionless job searches, associating adulthood simply with self-reliance, casting aside the many other discoveries I had come across on the road.

Kessler (2000) argues that the skills and gifts unearthed in a rite of passage and learning how to apply them, may provide purpose for some students, even help identify authentic vocations. She says that these discoveries may be washed away as superficial, however, if the greater questions in life are not answered. She shares many of the universal questions:

*“Does everything have a place in a huge sort of organization where they each play a part or is life random and meaningless? And where is my place?”*

*“Why are jobs, titles, mainstream success so important?”*

*“If people/animals die and there isn’t heaven, or another place, then what is the point of life and dying and living and the world” (p. 63)?*

*“Am I really doing the things that are going to make me happy, or are they for my mother or for the values of society” (p. 60)?*

*“Why am I so anxious to leave, but I’m afraid to start anew” (p. 135)?*

The questions above sum up many of the insecurities I possessed at the end of my journey. I felt alone with these questions, assuming others did not care about them or did not even ponder them. I became lost in them and unsure of my purpose or direction in life.

I could have benefitted from sharing in these questions with others. Kessler (2000) and Palmer (2007) state that just sharing questions like these in a forum can help mitigate one’s insecurities. Answers are not needed, but the questions do need to be listened to and taken seriously. She addresses these questions in the reincorporation

phase, but only after spending several weeks discussing them in the preparation phase first.

As I began my journey I saw my lack of preparedness as an advantage. I shunned any advice suggesting I read popular accounts of similar journeys, avoided conversation about the purpose of my trip, and refrained from researching tools to help guide self-discovery. I sought an adventure unbiased by the experiences of others, trusting this commitment would lead to authentic discoveries.

Surmising that preparedness and self-discovery were mutually exclusive did not aid my quest. I left without honing my skills for self-assessment, which Kessler shows can enhance students' abilities to learn through ordeal. Additionally, I lost out on the opportunity to openly share and reflect on my past and future in a collective manner. Kessler says genuinely conversing with others makes one more likely to consolidate what they learned.

I would have benefitted from preparing specific objectives before beginning my trip. Although I left with the general idea of "discovering myself," I had no distinct goals other than bicycling my prescribed route. Kessler has her students define clear goals that go beyond just overcoming an ordeal. They use their refined skills and conversations with peers to decide what life-giving traits they wish to hold onto and which detrimental ones they wish to leave behind. Undergoing this type of preparation could have helped me better understand my experiences, as it would have put them in the context of my own developmental goals.

I failed to give credence to my discoveries, having not reflected beforehand on what findings would be important. As evidenced with *The Elders*, epiphanies surfaced,

were recorded excitedly, and then were forgotten until my next encounter. Had I demarcated these ideas as focal points on my trip beforehand, I may have reflected on them between my encounters unearthing why they were important to me and how I wished to incorporate them into my life. Staying conscious of these insights would have enriched my experiences because each new encounter would have built upon the one that came before, instead of leading me to merely ‘rediscover’ the same things multiple times.

## CONCLUSION

### *Summary of Results*

I have heretofore argued that The Elders provided opportunities to learn about myself, form connections to others and broaden my perspectives, all aspects integral to spirituality. These men were not trained teachers employing some technical pedagogical method. Instead they were humble, approachable individuals who were confident enough in their identities and trades to provide me with hands-on experiences and meaningful, collegial conversations. The department of these men is akin to five themes in the educational theory on spirituality.

First, The Elders placed the search for truth above themselves. Not driven by ego, they allowed me to experiment with their trades, grounding me with the necessary knowledge to do so. We would then discuss what I had found and see if it could be incorporated into our work together. We created a communal truth, the epitome of Palmer’s subject-centered education. This also supports Kessler’s notion that through the act of creation one can nourish the soul.

Second, the conversations I had with The Elders took the form of mutual exploration. We were conscious of and nourished each other's needs. Palmer insists that both the needs of the teacher and of the student should guide the atmosphere in a classroom. Kessler does not emphasize the needs of the teacher, however we may infer that Miller does as he urges teachers to try the exercises they will be doing with students on themselves first, reflecting on the benefits. Surely he expects teachers to employ the exercises they are most comfortable and happy with.

Third, The Elders fulfilled my yearning for connection. They shared candid stories, both of their failures and triumphs, allowing me to find similarities between our experiences. I was also encouraged to share my own stories as well, but we did not do so to one-up the other. We relished the similarities between us despite our extremely divergent life histories. Palmer, Kessler and Miller all cite the importance of such connections for spiritual development.

Fourth, I learned that community and autonomy are interdependent. As I made connections to The Elders, I felt my own identity strengthening. As I became more assured of myself, I was more apt to share honestly and freely, building a more robust relationship in return. Palmer emphasizes that self-identity is a prerequisite for community. He also states that through engagement, challenge and connection, identity may be found. Kessler concurs with this latter statement, emphasizing that our community connections help us become more autonomous.

Fifth, The Elders provided environments within which I could safely challenge my existing beliefs and discover more about the external world and myself. This is the most underscored theme that Palmer, Kessler and Miller touch upon. Palmer highlights



the need for collaborative, rather than competitive environments, which he argues is best done by setting up creative conflict. This helps minimize the impact of fear that both he and Kessler argue is detrimental to student and community development.

I also maintained that my experiences with The Elders did not have a lasting effect and suggested my failure to consolidate my lessons could have been prevented with the guidance offered by Kessler's rite of passage course. Undergoing Kessler's extensive preparation for my journey would have ensured that I started with clear objectives that could have impacted my ability to contextualize my encounters within my personal developmental goals. I also could have profited from reflecting on the traits I wished to carry forward and those I wished to leave behind that were childish and unnecessary.

Kessler has her students publically state their commitment to carrying forward adult traits and leaving behind their childish ones in a formal severance ritual. While students go through this ritual, Kessler prepares them for the inevitable: that striving for integrity is a lifelong and challenging task. Kessler also provides students with the tools for proactively seeking out the settings and people that nourish one's spirituality and break off relationships that do not. Such guidance could have provided me with the confidence to struggle for authenticity rather than accepting my childhood and adolescent habits as nonnegotiable.

I could have benefitted from finding connections to others going through journeys kindred to mine. The communal aspect of Kessler's rite of passage course allows students to find strength in the fact they are not alone in their quest for transcendence and that others have similar insecurities.

Finally, a structured reincorporation, like Kessler suggests, would have given me time to reflect upon my findings, allowed me to consolidate behaviors and ideas I found worthwhile, and provided closure, allowing for a more complete transcendence into adult life. Having fallen short of these goals during an unstructured re-entry is in accord with previous findings (Cushing, 1998).

### *Moving Forward*

I had originally concluded that because my life felt more complicated after the trip, that the voyage may have been done in vain, but the current study indicates this feeling may be interpreted in a more positive light. My confusion may not have been the indication of a fruitless journey, but rather a sign that I had been exposed to diverse ideas, had a more informed understanding of myself, and thus held myself more accountable for my behaviors. Seeking authenticity is a life long goal after all, thus navigating new ideas may be seen as an indicator that I continued to critically reflect on myself.

Through the writing of this paper, I discovered many flaws in the execution and interpretation of my journey. I also stumbled upon another more reassuring finding: Despite it being seven years from the initiation of my bicycle trip, the iterative and structured act of writing this thesis has served as a means for integrating the lessons I should have embodied soon after my journey's end. This is of course encouraging for me, but also offers insight for teachers lacking the opportunity to teach a rite of passage in Kessler's prescribed manner. There will surely be instances when an ordeal has already occurred—planned or spontaneously—but not properly bookended by preparation, severance and reincorporation. Whether the time elapsed is short or long,

there is still an opportunity for students to re-create the ordeal through memory, to reflect, interpret, and act upon the lessons of the ordeal; and to create anew conditions for reintegration and revelation.

I conclude with a new poem to replace the outdated one written during my journey. It represents my continued growth and acknowledges that our individual existences are interwoven with community.

### Bi Cycle

*Spokes  
spin together  
united  
at the hub  
reaching  
distinct positions  
around the rim.*

*Tell me how you've travelled this road before  
It seems to go on forever.*

*together  
at the rim  
distinct Spokes spin  
reaching positions  
around  
the united  
hub*

*rolling  
forward*

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