The background of the entire page is a dark, moody photograph of a person wearing a light-colored face mask and working on a laptop. The person's face is partially obscured by the mask, and their hands are visible on the keyboard. Overlaid on this image is a large, glowing, 3D-rendered virus particle with numerous spike-like protrusions. The virus is rendered in shades of blue and purple, giving it a digital or ethereal appearance. The overall lighting is dim, with the primary light sources being the laptop screen and the glowing virus particle.

Returning from the Nowhere Stage

The Corona-19 Virus Pandemic
as a Cultural Rite of Passage

Eddy Elsey

Covid-19 arrived on our shores little more than a year ago, and it already seems as though life prior to the mania, that sprouted from its appearance, is a fading memory. A good lesson in how fast things can change, and the fragility of life

There are many ways to look at the situation that is now unfolding, but one thing that has kept coming back to me - a lens through which I have chosen look at the upheaval caused - is through the process of initiation.

There seems to be an almost romantic idea that initiation only exists in traditional cultures, and I won't deny the truth to this. Ancient rituals of initiation do feature much more prominently in these cultures than in ours - at least in terms of shamanistic and animistic beliefs. But what we have to untangle from that projection, is that initiation is not just a ritual; Initiation is, at its core, a natural force.

An initiatory ritual exists when a container is built around this natural force, which allows it to be magnified and wielded in a way that will - hopefully - allow the initiate to be reborn safely on the other side.

Traditionally, these rituals are incredibly challenging rites, and they have to be; it takes an incredible amount of pressure to bend, mould and reshape the human psyche. In communities that still place a high importance on - and often have a non-negotiable participation rule in these rituals - the pain and hardship experienced is worth the risk that the rite entails.

In cultures highly concerned with literal survival, dropping childhood fantasies and becoming - as they say - a 'useful' member of your community is essential. The initiatory ritual provides each initiate with the tools and knowledge that they need to become part of something larger than themselves, and to put the culture's needs before their own. They become absorbed into the collective organism of their community and therefore invested in its ability to thrive.

In Western culture, these compulsory rites of passage are a distant memory; especially within a pagan and spiritual context. But the human need for initiation is still very present within us as people. I would go as far to say that it is in our bones.

So, although we may lack the traditional containers and symbols that allow a community to build a somewhat dependable ritual space, the natural forces of initiation will find us - one way or another. And that is exactly what I feel is happening with Covid-19. We have been sprung into a shared cultural initiation.

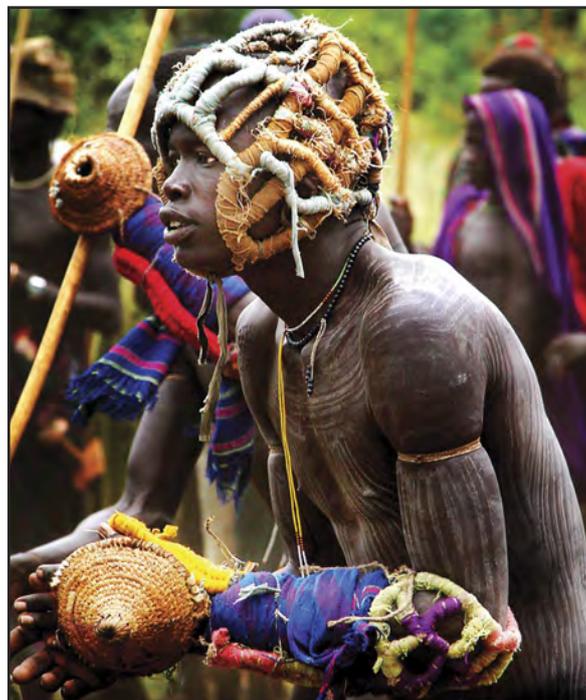
At the beginning of any initiation comes severance.

This is a split from 'ordinary' consciousness, which tears us away from the world as we know it. The familiarity of our surroundings seems to vanish into thin air - and

Photos: a young man during a brutal initiation ceremony in South West Ethiopia. During the initiation process the young men, wearing simple forms of head and body protection, inflict bloody wounds upon each other in a violent fight with sticks



There seems to be a romantic idea about initiation in traditional cultures. These rituals are incredibly challenging. In communities that still place high importance on - and often have a non-negotiable participation rule in these rituals - the pain and hardship experienced is worth the risk that the rite entails



For perhaps the first time in our lives, it is not just us who are powerless, but also those we looked to for support - our parents, our elders, the government, the doctors - they can't do a thing either

pretty quickly - and what we previously leant on for support and comfort is nowhere to be seen.

In a traditional initiation this could look like the youth of a culture floating down the river in hollowed out canoes to the sound of the Grandmothers singing. It could smell like the sweet aroma of copal as its smoke whispers through the ceremonial square. It could be the ritual elder pacing in a trance, painting the initiates faces with wet clay to protect them for the journey into the underworld that they are about to undertake.

But it can also look like the 'powers that be' telling you to isolate from family and friends. It can be the uncertainty of an invisible pathogen ripping through the elderly of a community. It could be the end of the job which brought your family security; placing you on a redundancy package, whilst industry collapses around you.

These things may lack the spiritual artistry and enchantment



of an exotic ritual, but to the soul, it is all the same. It is a power greater than ourselves that shocks the way that we viewed the world.

For perhaps the first time in our lives, it is not just us who are powerless, but also those we looked to for support - our parents, our elders, the government, the doctors - they can't do a thing either. The outside circumstances begin to fracture our inner circumstances, and this causes a type of break.

It is through this split in our consciousness that we enter an initiation. As we move from severance to liminality, we enter through the wound of the fear and uncertainty that this break has opened.

Liminality is often called the nowhere stage. It is a mysterious, previously hidden space that we arrive in after crossing a threshold.

It is more comfortably done ceremoniously, as there is an expectation that things will change; and spontaneous arrivals into liminality are more challenging: which is what we are experiencing at the moment.

We float here, untethered, disconnected from our previous lives, but connected to the immense powers of the world, which break us down, then reform and rebirth us on the other side.

I feel we are now, culturally in a shared space of liminality. The unease and need to find meaning in this situation is clear for all to see.

There is a documented grief that comes with the realisation of this severance and the descent into liminality, and we all, I believe, at the moment, feel that grief.

We feel it if not for ourselves, then for others. It is fundamentally a loss of the naivety of the past; a shattering of the innocence and comfort we felt about the world. In short - it is a complete loss of meaning. Traditionally, it would be at this

Below: boys with clay painted faces undergoing their initiation process Kipsigis people Kenya



point within an initiation that the importance of a binding mythology would see us through; the cosmologies of traditional societies are the foundation for their beliefs. From the creation story - which is often recited during initiations as a way to build power in a person and help them to be reborn - to the traditional songs, dances, clothes and medicines that are unique to each community - these binding mythologies centre the initiate and root them to something strong, strong enough that the wild waves of liminality do not push them off course.

THE RISE OF CONSPIRACIES

Without the benefit of a traditional mythology - and an encompassing belief system that binds an entire community together - for those of us in the West, it is normal that we would split off into our sub-cultures and anchor to pseudo-myths which would support us in feeling some form of security during the great unknown. What we are seeing at the moment with all the conspiracies is exactly that.

We split off into our sub-cultures and anchor to pseudo-myths which support us in feeling some form of security during the great unknown. This worries me deeply. Every genocide in history had its roots in social upheaval and an orator skilful enough to whip the discordant energies... we have a recipe for disaster.

A myth does not have to be true for it to carry a truth. Similarly, these conspiracies do not have to be factual in order to act as vehicles for the energies that they carry. Sadly, this is often not taken into account when we hear them, and many people mistake the feelings that these conspiracies invoke, for the content of the conspiracy itself.

In traditional myth the 'dark enemy' would often be a certain spirit, and this information would be given alongside the ways to court this spirit, since there are no ways to destroy it.

The myth would also include information about the usefulness of



Above: photo

darkness - the way in which it can be integrated and worked with - and also the essential nature of its existence.

In this way the darkness outside is honoured, along with the



A desire to have an enemy to blame for the hardship in the world can be seen in the support for Q-Anon. Shamanic beliefs have become entwined with New-Age practices, born out of a society focused on capitalism, and surrounded it with light, which has led to an obsession with ascension - now being called 5D

darkness inside; and a relationship with it is formed, based on acceptance. Therefore it has far less chance of creeping up into a person or a community.

Instead of utilising the mythical element of the conspiracies we hear and read about, and finding a way to honour the feelings of darkness that we may be experiencing, what the Covid-19 conspiracies are doing is giving us a human enemy to hate.

This worries me deeply. Every genocide in history had its roots in social upheaval and an orator skilful enough to whip the discordant energies of a culture. Give that culture a target to aim at and we have a recipe for disaster.

There are many skilled orators around, but this article is not a chance to name drop any of them. However, I feel I should say that many teachers I once admired have sadly fallen into this category.

This is part of my own initiation, no doubt, as the grounded wisdom of those who I previously turned to has seemingly vanished into the thin air.

When the world that we knew begins to fall apart around us, it is too easy to project the feelings of discomfort which arise onto other people. When we do this, we lose an opportunity to converse with a deeper wisdom, which only arrives once we allow these feelings of fear and helplessness to run through, and out of us, without attaching them to ideas and other people. That way, just like in a traditional initiation, these natural forces become transforming instead of consuming.

This desire to have an enemy to blame for the hardship in the world can be seen in the upsurge of support for movements like Q-Anon.

Shamanic beliefs have become entwined with idealistic New-Age practices, and it can be difficult to pick them apart. This is a problem.

Spirituality has always evolved alongside culture, and the New

Age practices, born out of a society focused heavily on growth have internalised capitalism, and surrounded it with light, which has led to an obsession with ascension - now being called 5D

However innocent these ideas seem, they run on the same fuel as Social Darwinism, in that 'those who ascend' (evolve) will be the ones who take humanity forward. This is a dangerous line to tread.

MYTH OF THE LOVING EARTH

The pandemic has also, in the more idealistic New Age spiritual types, promoted the idea that the earth is inherently healing and loving to humanity.

Whilst the earth can be incredibly healing, there is no evidence to suggest that it is inherently loving to its inhabitants - especially those with a track record for causing harm. Cultures who live very close to earth know all too well of its inherent danger, and much of the honouring of the earth comes from the fear of what would happen if the people did not honour it.

Perhaps in our cities, where we have been vaccinated against all known disease, and live far from the dangers of the raw earth, we have forgotten this, and instead adapted our versions of spirituality to our rather sterilised lives.

Right:
the so called 'Q-Anon shaman' Jacob Chansley ascending a ladder in order to reach a higher state of consciousness



This pandemic has shown us the complete inadequacy of many modern spiritual practices in the face of a true threat - symbolic or literal. I saw this play out on Facebook, where a well known elder, from a well known South American tribe, posted a picture explaining that he had received the Covid-19 vaccine.

The comments were full of well meaning Westerners explaining that the vaccine was far more dangerous than the disease, and that it was part of a larger conspiracy of darkness, and that Covid-19 was a hoax.

If this isn't a poster for blind White privilege, I don't know what is; as we must understand, to even have the time for grandiose fantasies about conspiracy theories is a huge privilege.

Why does the liminal stage of initiation leave us vulnerable to conspiratorial thinking?

Well, without the proper container for initiation, a binding mythology and a skilled ritual elder - who would decide when the initiates have spent enough time brewing in the fierce energetics of the liminal stage - we tend to get stuck here, because we have no expectation of what is meant to happen.

Most people are not fortunate enough to meet an elder figure who has been through and mapped the liminal space, and with no knowledge that we can anchor to - which would allow feelings of chaos, fear and hopelessness to move through us and transform us - two things tend to happen.

The first thing is that we identify completely with these feelings of chaos, fear and hopelessness, and begin to act out sabotaging behaviours, or find objects to project all of these emotions onto, so we don't have to feel them ourselves.

Having somebody to blame may not be the most comfortable thing in the world, but at least you know where the danger is. It also doesn't need to be reconciled within you if the fault lies with somebody else.

The second thing is that we actually quite like being amongst the energies of initiation.

In liminality we are plugged into very powerful transformational energies. This is the 'energy of the Gods' and that can be addictive.



The pandemic has promoted the idea that the earth is inherently healing and loving to humanity; but there is no evidence to suggest that it is - especially to those causing harm. Cultures who live close to earth know all too well its inherent danger, and much of the honouring of the earth comes from the fear of what happens if the people don't

Many people in this stage can form a very strong messiah, or god complex. This can look very much like thinking we have all the answers and that only us, and our inner circle know exactly what is going on in the world.

If we put both of these two factors together, we can see how some of the radical ideas of conspiratoriality have formed; the desire to 'save' others from a fate that we are sure lies in wait for those who don't share the same views as we do.

And so we approach, with hope in our hearts, the rising sun in this situation, and the third and final part of any initiation - which is the return to ordinary consciousness, having been reborn and remade in the liminal. The vaccine is being rolled out, the hospitals are becoming less overwhelmed, while sectors of industry have begun to re-open, or show signs of re-opening, their doors.

It is my prayer that we arrive back into our ordinary reality transformed by the energies of initiation, rather than consumed by them. This will be evident if we find ourselves in a more cohesive,

down-to-earth and grounded culture than we were part of when this all began, a year ago, instead of one which is divided, and broken down the middle.

There is no need to blame anyone for this situation. As the traditional cultures we all look up to know, sometimes the world is a harsh and unwelcoming place. It is how we react to that, as a culture, that will define our future.

This will be not by waving a finger at those we feel wish to do us harm; but by accepting and forming a relationship with the darkness in the world; and by leaving our childish and grandiose fantasies where they belong - in the mythical and sacred space of the liminal, where they can transform us, and lead to beauty.

Time will tell which way we go.

Eddy Elsey is a shamanic practitioner who offers one-to-one healing sessions and group workshops, with the aim of removing the taboo from authentic shamanic practice. His organisation 'Street Spirituality' holds ceremonies around the UK. He lives in the West Midlands, England. www.streetspirituality.com

Above:
Rannoch Moor,
an expanse of
boggy moorland
to the west of
Loch Rannoch
in Scotland

Above: photo

Above: photo