

# Layers of Belonging.

## Reflections on belonging and community through the lens of rites of passage.

By Jeremy Thres

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### *Summary:*

*No person is an island and our health in relation to that we belong to, and its health in turn – be it family, community, ancestors and wider environment, profoundly colour our own well being, perspective and experience of life.*

*This article takes a look at some of these different layers of belonging, reflecting on some of the ways these relationships both have changed over time, and also need to change for an individual as we grow older. It considers some of the ways bringing more deliberate consciousness and support to the changes, as occurs in wilderness oriented rites of passage, has the potential to support overall well being.*

### **“It all turns on Affection”** Poet/Farmer Wendell Berry

A few years ago I met a Dr studying over here (in the UK) from Pakistan and working in a hospital in the south west. He reflected that when someone came in who had attempted suicide his unit experienced cultural differences when it came to their release.

If they were of an Asian background not only would family rally round to visit in the immediate instance, but also when the patient was leaving there often would be a number of friends or family come to accompany them, so it felt clear they were leaving to a community of support. In contrast those of a Caucasian background often would have initial visitors that would tail off, and it was not unusual for them to leave the hospital if not alone with just one accompanier. As a consequence the unit often felt concerned about letting them go, unsure they were leaving to any real community of support, and feeling it was not unlikely they would be seeing them again before too long.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell quotes one of the 12th century introductions to the marvellous tale of Parzival as beginning along the lines of: “in every action there is both shadow and light – the best we can do is lean towards the light.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionally there has been a strong current in Britain expecting stiff upper lip, and a strange mix of conformity and self reliance, and part of the shadow of this can be isolation, for both young and old, an uncertainty of if we belong, perhaps even to ourselves.

In Asian culture the tradition of leaning towards family and religious ties remains stronger, and within this there is the possibility of a greater sense of holding and connection, but the shadow can be a lack of autonomy. A bitter sweet look at this conundrum as it stood in the seventies Britain was the film East is East, but in recent years I still meet a number of second generation British Asians very deeply torn between familial tradition and expectation, versus being able to follow more of their own personal passions in life.

In this article I wish to look at this question of belonging, different layers of it, and consider what sort of conditions may support greater health in this, in particular I am going to look through the lens of wilderness rites of passage – a field I have been both a student and guide within for twenty years. I do this, for though there are many ways one can strengthen connection to a particular layer, the wisdom in wilderness oriented rites of passage at their best is that they have the potential to address and strengthen greater health in relationship through a great many layers in one fell swoop.

We are hungry for connection and blessing, and if we just look to our peers as children and teenagers, at that age they can be a fickle lot. Who has not known the pain of ostracism or the threat of it and sometimes conformed in a number of ways to avoid it. The parental field is not always welcoming of us in our differences and the school system has its own agenda and hoops to jump through. Sometimes it feels to have relationship with other we have to give up relationship to ourselves, and if everyone does that you begin to have a community that is living increasingly away from its own truth and centre, and that repercussions ultimately on All.

Marshall Rosenberg distiller of the practice “non violent communication,” suggests many young people feel like “PPP” – pretty poor protoplasm put together<sup>2</sup>! Now if you feel like that are you likely to contribute to society and have self worth? The Samaritans say one the main contributory factors in youth suicide is “leaving school with a poor sense of self worth,” (quoted from Jay Griffiths stirring book on children: Kith<sup>3</sup>) and she goes on to share that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child refers to a “general climate of intolerance” in Britain towards children. Clearly we need some forms that offer our young people something to counter balance this.

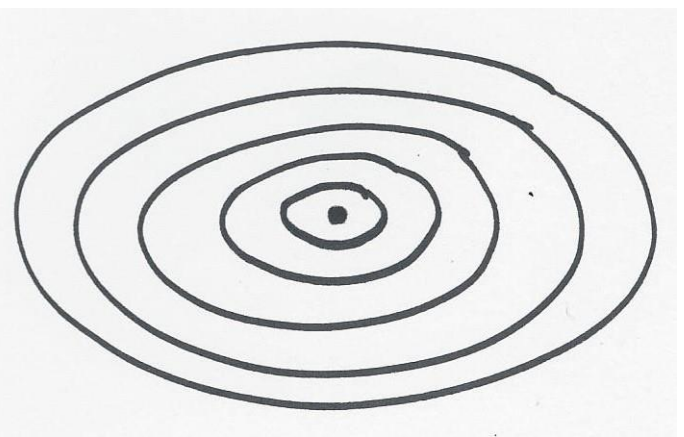
Rites of passage – which I have come to describe as “the Ancients Conscious Approach to Change,” are most commonly known for supporting young people coming of age and welcoming them into young adulthood.

They offer a remarkable opportunity to bring support to a necessary but sometimes painful separation, to reconfigure our relationship to our parents and childhood. They support this separation in a way that helps not only a wider circle meet deeply, learn of and welcome the young participants and vice versa, so strengthening intergenerational community, but also considerably helps the participants learn more of themselves and their relationship with the wider field of life.

Initiation means beginning, so it is worth flagging that this is what such a rite is, a significant enough passageway to count and firmly support the beginning of young adulthood. There is always further maturation to undergo, and stages that may or may not be taken, apprenticeships, marriage, parenthood etcetera, but still these first rites have the potential to lay foundations that support each individually more in relationship to community and forward in life.

Let’s first visit some layers of community and belonging – and for that we need somewhere to do so, and that is Space...there has to be space for us to be conceived and born into, and the following layers all emerge from this first one (though like fish in the water it is easy to be forgetful of that which we swim in). Carl Jung said “everything we think know and understand rests upon a deeper mystery that we do not,” - and that is the enigma of creation and being in the first place! I love this term Mystery, for though we may put various ideas upon it, so far as I understand, we are yet to see beyond the so called “big bang” and into the source that continues to impel Creation...

From our very first cell the body becomes for us the most common locus of our **experience** –



and that single cell becomes a community of cells to which we belong, with feelings and experience sensing both ways - to inner and outer – **this first community** is represented by the dot in the centre of the image figure 1, (right). I speak of the body as community for there are many parts to ourselves and the journey of learning about and relating to these is a huge part of life. I am not alone in my experience and belief that from the off the cell and being has sentience, and as well as its intrinsic being and life thrust, its perception of self is bound to be coloured by its reception. “Theorists in pre- and perinatal psychology have postulated that cellular memory begins with the single cell at conception, is held holistically as a field state, and is passed on to every subsequent cell (Emerson 19996,, Lake 1979, Laing, 1976). Research supports that cells are extremely sensitive to their environment, respond to conditions present, and learn from that experience (Stone, 1989).” (Being and Becoming, Franklyn Sills 2009 pg 17)

Most important in this will be the parents, without whom, or at least their sperm and egg we could not be conceived (at least at this time). So in figure one this is the first inner circle; representing the womb, parents and **the family nest**.

Now our parents could not be here without their parents, and the welcome they offer us has in turn been influenced by the welcome and support they have had and receive. So this is the next circle, a circle **of extended family** consisting of siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, family friends, midwives etcetera...(behind this layer is another important layer to find right relationship to that is the ancestors who have passed over), within which the others can exist.

Now as modern humans we tend to specialise and are very dependent on each other. It is only a very rare individual, yet alone family, that could live for any time without the significant support of others, not to speak of aeons of ancestral practical lore, so **the next circle is for the essential wider human community**, be it village or city in association with which we live.

And this in turn is in a particular place on **the Earth**, and depends totally upon this planet, its diversity and systems...for air, for water, for food, fibre and shelter etcetera, **so the Earth is represented by the next circle**.

And this sits within **space** – where our story began, a place, in this case the Universe and Galaxy within which our planet turns and without which conditions would not be here to live....

Figure one is a v simple map of these layers each contained within and resting upon the next.

Now in the ideal, each layer is whole, conditions are such you are born with all your fingers and toes, you have two loving welcoming parents who are supported by extended family and community, which is not in a state of war, and so are able to give fuller attention to a nourishing and welcoming environment for you to be raised in.

In relation to place and the Earth layer, for the greater part of human history you would have been familiar with your source of water, be it spring, well or river and sources of food, plants and animals, heat and shelter and the greater majority of people have been directly involved in the seasonal rounds that enable harvest and storage each year. In relation to the greater circle of space and mystery, there would be story and mythology that offered a sense of how your people had come to be and spoke to its relationship to source in a way that was less likely to be in conflict with the scientific understandings of the time.

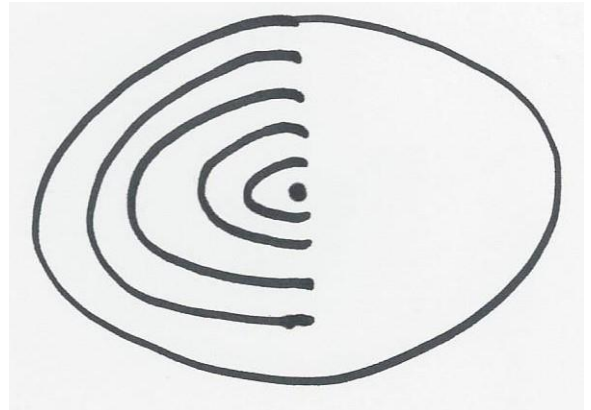
Let us compare how this same map may look for many today (**figure 2**) ...hopefully nutritionally conditions are more likely for you to be born physically whole (though pollutant wise on a global level, with the natural circulation of water and air we likely have more chemicals and radiation in us

than ever before. Despite its staying power, the banning of persistent pesticides such as DDT, which famously showed up in high percentages in Inuit women's breast milk, has not been universal.)

In terms of the parental layer a quarter of children today are likely to be born into single parent families, and forty percent of marriages end in divorce. \* Office of National Statistics. Families and households 2011.

People move around a lot more these days, so one is less likely to be geographically close to one's extended family, and ideas of nuclear family, self reliance and the growth of televisions as entertainment versus fires to be gathered round, has led to greater isolation on a local level even if greater knowledge on a global one.

The greater majority of us now will get our water from a tap versus Spring, and our food from a supermarket trolley versus directly – there are more middle men one might say, so living has extra costs and it is easy to be less conscious and appreciative of the actual original source of what one is receiving, so our relationship to earth is in some ways diminished.



In terms of Space, and Mystery, its presence may not have changed, yet in terms of perception there have been considerable shifts in the last hundred years. Science has led to new discoveries and even to declarations such as “the Gods are dead” (diminished to inner constructs now). So a demystification of the world has to some extent occurred under the bright glare of the rational mind. Yet Mystery as reflected earlier remains. Mythology and creation wise perhaps we have wider access to stories that could offer some sense of our origins and place in the world and Universe than ever before, however new scientific thinking can colour how we perceive myth, taken literally much of it can be exposed as false, yet through the eyes of metaphor, sometimes science can reveal it to contain deeper Truths.

#### **Through the Rites of Passage Lens:**

Now in terms of rites of passage it is recognised that the parental circle/nest one is born into can become too tight or too weak (too controlling or too lax), and that though fledging from it to greater self responsibility is an innate healthy impulse, however nurturing or unpleasant the family nest has been, there is still pain and guilt in separating from it, and so without help this may not healthily take place.

This beautiful quote from Frank Water's “The Man who killed the Deer”<sup>4</sup> illustrates the poignancy of this time:

“Father, oh father! I hear weeping. Is it my mother I leave in grief?”

“Have Courage, my son...In your mother's womb you were conceived. From an individual human womb you were born into an individual human life. It was necessary it was good. But individual human life is not sufficient to itself. It depends on and is a part of all life. So now another umbilical must be broken, that which binds you to your mother affections, that which binds you to the individual human life she gave you. For twelve years you have belonged to your lesser mother. Now you belong to your Greater Mother. And you return to her womb to emerge once again, as a man who knows himself not as an individual but as a unit of his tribe and a part of life which ever surrounds him.”

This quote points to a number of important factors....on the one hand is the clear deliberate separation from the opposite sex parent – indeed in most rites to a certain degree from both parents, for it is suggested the parents know the child too well and if holding a rite might wish to make the rite too hot (macho) or too cool (ineffective). This supported separation is importantly not to nothing, it is firstly to the wider community – strengthening ties particularly with the elders who are about to support the rite. Also though separating from the parents, it is to a new relationship to them, not no relationship with them. It may well entail a return to the family compound (in West Africa, at least Burkano Faso the key is that the initiate will return to the “compound,” but never sleep in their mother’s huts again), and because of the clearer marked separation, and conscious work done within that ideally by both parties, a new relationship on different terms can be formed (the parents also are going through a change with a child fledging so supportive consciousness can also be brought to that and the pain and gift of the time completing and new time for them).

In Guatemala the timing of this separation is guided by elders who, out the corner of their eyes as they go about their business, may closely observe the growing young ones. Young people first falling in love and getting more serious around sexuality are part of the queue for it being time for initiation, and there are some beautiful teachings relating to this. Part of it is that they feel that before a person can marry another, one first must marry one’s own Soul, a theme echoed in European folk tales and the idea deep in our mythology that the King and Queen are married to the Land. Another hugely important image is that given to Malidome Some by an elder during his initiation Burkano Faso, west Africa that the purpose of initiation is to support you to return to “your own centre,”<sup>5</sup> not your father’s, brother’s or mothers, but to your own. Does our culture support us and encourage us to find our own centre, knowing that will be good for community, or does it mistrust creation? I feel it is an important question to ask. I also feel a climate of get ahead, nuclear family and competition has the potential to subtly undermine the ability for us to really get behind and support the wider community’s children.

In Guatemala, those who go to collect the young men carry staffs, and this is in part to protect themselves from the mothers who though they have agreed to the initiation, also play their part in challenging those coming physically and verbally for taking “their child.” The last image the boy sees of his mother in that role is her crying and standing for him....until he returns a man with a new place in the village. This supported separation can be contrasted with a more drawn out adolescence in which the parents may become quite negative and offer an ambivalent energy around a phase prolonged beyond its time, leaving a tainted legacy on the budding adult and parents.

The separation, as the quote says, is from the “lesser mother,” but includes now being welcomed as a part of the tribe (next level of community), and also now an overtly stated “belonging” to the Greater Mother (next level), and returning to her womb to be reborn (which implies death to the previous life) as a part of his people (the tribe) “and a part of life which ever surrounds him.”

This theme can be found also reflected in some Russian Fairy tales where the blood parents are referred to as the “little mother and father,” and the Earth and Cosmos the Greater Ones. So it is to them that initiates are taken, for as stories throughout the world suggest, the healing elixir tends to be found out **beyond the castle and town gates**, in the wilder land where people usually do not live, East of the Sun and West of the Moon.

Once there in the Wilds, the most common taboos are periods of fasting, alone time, and vigil (long periods encouraged to stay awake or in prayer). In South African tradition vigil is a big part of such rites, staying upright, awake and open for long periods of time – deliberately making oneself vulnerable to the wider intelligence that we are a part of – for we are fruit of the Tree of Life yet

arrogantly many of us often behave as if there is no intelligence in the tree or its other branches. The myth and stories that act as such great guides to such rites (and which in Europe through their pattern are indicators of such rites existence here) encourage one to let get of such hubris and the older brothers and sisters who do not do so tend to come sticky ends, for instance in the classic questing story Men and the Water of Life both older brothers having rudely dismissed the possibility of a dwarf helping them and so end up in narrow canyons unable to move forward or back. So stuck they “might as well have been in prison.”<sup>6</sup>

The various taboos play a part in evoking what can be called an initiatory state. This for many can be a fearful state, one is entering the unknown and are doing so open to being changed by it! This may entertain fear not just for us but for also those who know us, however in this case, unlike self initiations, one is not entering a form which is unsupported or tested, passages of this nature with common taboos have been guided by elders in communities around the world for thousands of years and the change is to support us to become more of who we are at heart – the image comes of a transformation and expansion that emerges from one’s centre and a restrictive skin that no longer serves dropping away. It is worth being aware of the potential for such rites to become distorted and no longer be serving the participants well being, more the hierarchy and its agendas (as could be the case in a culture discouraging such rites), and in the past in cultures where fasting and alone time were not unusual or inter tribal war fare more common, the taboos and ordeals became, perhaps by necessity, more intense, and not all initiates when that happens did return. But if looking to judge this, it is good to be conscious of the alternative where in the vacuum of no support to honour this transition, youth are left to find their own often immature and dangerous ways to prove their adulthood to themselves and each other. Before initiation you can be goaded in all sorts of ways by the taunt of if you don’t do this “You are not a man,” after it, you know yourself a man and so can take a much more spacious look at the childish taunts before you. To really feel the other side of that does take certain ingredients: An elder of a particular Lakota lineage I recently shared some time with, Sal Glencarelle, distilled these to three: the wilds, significant enough alone time, and elders to guide and affirm the rite. This quote below from Gentry in Richard Frankel’s insightful book “the Adolescent psyche” sums up something of what can happen without such rites:

“Adolescence as we’ve come to know it is a modern phenomenon. In previous societies and tribal cultures, the adult usually merges quickly out of childhood through participation in puberty rites. Now however for ten years or more, modern adolescents must make attempts to say farewell to childhood without the benefit of socially sanctioned rites of passage. Puberty rites of passage have not disappeared. They’ve taken on newer and disguised forms of expression. Today our youth reach out to grasp adulthood in rather dangerous ways. By participating in religious cults, by the abuse of increasingly more harmful substances, by running away from home, by their symptoms of self-starvation, self-mutilation, self destructive suicidal attempts. The affirmation of self, once the aim of the so called search for identity, has become a search for self-negation.”<sup>7</sup>

A further consequence of not feeling welcomed or seen in extremis is young people make extreme gestures so they are: The young german pilot who crashed a plane into the alps killing its passengers, told his ex girl friend “one day everyone will know my name,” (march 28<sup>th</sup> Bild German Daily Newspaper) and similar sentiments along the lines of “soon they’ll see me,” have been expressed by those committing shootings in American schools, individuals who often have been the victim of bullying and ostracism. Young people need to be seen, and interestingly elders generally suggest that it’s not so much the job of the parents as the children get older, but of others in community to pick up this responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

If interested in sourcing a rite of passage for one's own children or community perhaps the very best place to start would be by seeking the experienced support to go through such a rite oneself, after all we tend not to have had conscious ones ourselves. And whatever our age no doubt there are other stages we are approaching or passed through or problems we'd like a way to bring insight and vision in relation to. If you do so, then you'll have the experiential understanding of what you are considering encouraging the young people to go through, of the elders who offer such work, how they hold it and a personal taste of some of its fruit. The Wisdom in Nature Network is a network for guides to work of this nature and has an initial listing of some uk guides on its website: [www.wisdominnaturenetwork.com](http://www.wisdominnaturenetwork.com) and the [www.wildernessguidescouncil.com](http://www.wildernessguidescouncil.com), offers an international listing.

I undertook a transpersonal psychotherapy training to support me in relation to the rites of passage work I had trained in, and one of many gems offered on it by Franklyn Sills, one of its cofounders and respected author<sup>9</sup> and elder in a number of fields, was a suggestion that we do not know what it is that ultimately heals, but what we can do is "our best to create the conditions in which healing is most likely to occur," (nb For healing please read "Wholeness" for wholeness also embraces, the "noble truth" that some degree of illness and ultimately death are part of life, even important informers of it, so are somehow to be found right relationship with and learned from as opposed to completely eliminated.)

In therapeutic terms, Carl Rogers in his seminal work on humanistic counselling had already identified certain qualities that if present were conducive to healing (his suggestion was it mattered less which school of therapy a practitioner had trained in, if these were there, (in essence a sense of unconditional positive regard, congruence (a sense of authenticity in communication) and empathy to name just three), there would be a movement towards healing, and if they were not, such a move was less likely).

I applaud and celebrate his findings, to which a very good introduction can be found in the Carl Rogers Reader (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1989) and it was my experience of rites of passage training, that not just those holding the container but the wider field one enters in such rites also have these qualities. On a Wilderness Quest the Wild Land solo element offers "an opportunity both to learn from Nature and meet ourselves supported, yet undistracted by our normal circumstance." As the Jungian elder Marion Woodman says of the wilderness, "it supports us, particularly in relation to changes we are going through, guides and challenges us. Facing the challenges it becomes a place where we can experience our own strengths, our own resources, and our own truth." So these experiences strengthen our self worth and this can be affirmed by the Elders.

Another important element is that the taboos and various exercises and tools involved can evoke what Steven Foster calls "initiatory states of being," and these interwoven with one's own intent and process have the potential to induce profound visionary states, insight and healing.

Obviously there are many stages of life we go through and the quality of the early one's and transitions between them – conception, womb, birth, and initial care, colour profoundly our world view and relationship to future transitions for at them, earlier material is evoked, however *this also offers an opportunity, for in the present a different experience can be had and the combination of community and alone time gives space for the organism to move towards that.*

Stanislav Grof formerly chief of psychiatric research at the Maryland Psychiatric research centre has written extensively in relation to healing of this nature through what he came to call Holotropic states (from the latin Holos meaning Whole). He feels when people get involved in work of this

nature, it becomes “no longer necessary to teach them ecology or ethics, for, when they have transpersonal experiences, their systems of values changes automatically and they develop deep ecological awareness, tolerance and compassion.”<sup>10</sup>

I finish with a quote from a mother (an ex intensive care nurse) whose teenage son worked with us over a period of years:

“Having a son who has done this individuation work of initiating himself through working with Jeremy on a number of occasions has given us Gold.

Somehow it has meant we haven’t had to experience the painful struggle of a young person needing to push away the parent in order to find who they are.

It’s been a natural soft separating which enabled him to go off into the world to clearly define who he is. Having done that he has been able to return to relationship with me with a full heart, as an adult in his own right able to embrace whatever life we choose to share in our new roles....”

Parent of a participant.

Jeremy Thres.

When I first heard the term Visionquest, I knew I had to follow it, undertaking my first fast in Russia before going on to more formally train over several years with Steven Foster and Meredith Little, founders of the School of Lost Borders and authors of the Roaring of the Sacred River. With their encouragement and blessing in the twenty years since I have both offered this work, trained others and have been developing new forms to meet contemporary needs. My work has been enriched by connection with a number of different elders, Jungian, Indigenous, Buddhist, both of this Land and beyond, Martin Prechtel and Thich Naht Hahn important among them. I have a great love of myth and story and how they also can support us at this time, and to support the wilderness work, have also trained in mountain and moorland leadership, psychotherapy with the Karuna Institute, family constellation work, and wilderness first aid. [www.regenco.info](http://www.regenco.info)

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[www.wisdominnaturenetwork.com](http://www.wisdominnaturenetwork.com) An initial listing of UK guides who offer work of this nature.

[www.wildernessguidescouncil.com](http://www.wildernessguidescouncil.com) offers an international listing.

[www.lostborders.org](http://www.lostborders.org) the organisation whose founders Jeremy trained with

Lost Borders Coming of Age in the Wilderness. A documentary film following half a dozen young adults as they go through a wilderness oriented rites of passage. [www.Lostborderspress.com](http://www.Lostborderspress.com)

The Roaring of the Sacred River, Steven Foster & Meredith Little Lost Borders Press 1996 (as above)

Care of the Soul in Medicine: Thomas Moore. “healing guidance for patients, families and the People who care for them.” Audio cd, Hay House 2010 Fascinating book/audio which includes some reference to perceiving illness as a rite of passage.

Betwixt and Between and its follow up: Crossroads two anthologies drawing together rites of passage experience. (Mahdi, Meade, Foster and Little).

The Carl Rogers reader – an introduction to humanistic counselling

Psychotherapy and Process James Bugental McGraw Hill 1978 – a book drawn to my attention on the Karuna institute core process training [www.karunainstitute.co.uk](http://www.karunainstitute.co.uk), and I felt a valuable elaboration on the humanistic approach – the term process speaks of change rather than being fixed things as those who have raised us can begin to box us - like a river it may look the same where as in fact it is fresh and constantly changing.



[www.lifebeat.co.uk](http://www.lifebeat.co.uk) organisation offering creative community camps for 14-18 year olds.

#### References:

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- <sup>2</sup>Marshall Rosenberg, Speaking Peace Audio cd. May 2003 Sounds True.
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- <sup>4</sup>Frank Water's "The Man who killed the Deer" 1942
- <sup>5</sup>Malidome Some, Of Water and Spirit. Penguin Books 1995
- <sup>6</sup>Michael Meade, Men and the Water of Life, Initiation and the Tempering of Men Harper San Francisco 1993 pg290
- <sup>7</sup>Richard Frankel's "the Adolescent psyche" Routledge 1998 pg59
- <sup>8</sup>Images of initiation, Meade, Hilman and Some. Audio, Oral Tradition Archives 1992
- <sup>9</sup>Franklyn Sills, Being & Becoming, North Atlantic Books 2009
- <sup>10</sup>The Consciousness Revolution, A transatlantic dialogue between Ervin Lazlo, Stanislav Grof and Peter Russell. Elf Rock Productions 199 Pg 130

<http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture>



Part of a mixed group of adults and young adults at journey's end following one of our WalkAbout nomadic forms (as seen on BBC's Heaven on Earth), Dartmoor Devon. Photo © J.Thres

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