

A REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF AUNTS AND UNCLES IN A SYSTEM OF FAMILY GOVERNANCE

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As I look deeply into the multiple relationships family members have with each other, as they attempt to successfully govern themselves, I increasingly observe how important the roles of aunts and uncles are in the development of their nieces and nephews into successful family members. This reflection contains my thoughts on why this aunt/uncle developmental process turns out to be so important in the lives of these young people. It also discusses how vital it is to a family's success that the critical roles played by aunts and uncles be acknowledged.

Anthropology reveals that in tribal societies when a boy or girl is passing through puberty and entering adulthood often the boy's uncles and the girl's aunts take custody of their respective nieces and nephews and prepare them for their adult roles in the tribe. These societies, as well as our modern societies, recognize that normal healthy conflicts exist between parents and children as children individuate and naturally grow away to achieve adulthood and independence. These conflicts make it very unlikely that the preparation children need to fulfill adult roles in society will be effectively accomplished by their parents. Tribal society intuitively understands that the blood relationships we share with our aunts and uncles (after all they share equally the original source of our respective parents' DNA) will offer a strong bond that will permit them to successfully mentor us. To take this idea a step further some biologists and some psychologists believe that the emotion we call altruism is almost as strong between aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces as between parents and children because, as mentioned above, we share a substantial part of each other's gene pools. These scientists believe that nature builds into each of us an incredibly strong instinct to want to pass our genes on to later generations as the means by which life, and its various species, continue to thrive. With this strong biological, and its assorted psychological realities, it is not surprising that aunts and uncles can be successful mentors to their nieces and nephews. It is also a remarkable insight into why our tribal forefathers, without modern scientific methods, came to this conclusion.

In actual process of nieces and nephews becoming adult members of the tribe, we encounter the role of ritual in effecting successful passages from childhood to adulthood. In all tribal societies the passage of a girl to a woman and of a boy to a man is accompanied by rites of passage that acknowledge to the girl or boy the importance of this passage and that assure that as adults they will be fully ready to assume their duties and responsibilities in tribal life and governance. As mentioned above, their mentors through this critical passage to successful adulthood, are frequently their aunts and uncles.

In our modern times it is my experience that rarely are these important events of change in the lives of boys and girls recognized as other than purely physical events. I do believe, although as a man I can't know for certain, that the women of a family do give certain advice and some ritual and ceremony to girls as they grow into women. It is also my impression from much reading on the subject in books on developmental psychology that girls seem to become women in the full psychological sense of adulthood more easily and more rapidly than boys become men. Perhaps it is because women's ways of knowing and teaching serve the female development process better. What I do know from my own practice, and anecdotally from many colleagues, is that all of us share many 40 and 50 year old boys as clients. I assure you I am not being jocular about this subject in the way society discusses this problem by laughingly saying all men are really little boys inside. Unfortunately, it is my direct experience that our society is producing many males who never become men except in the biological sense. What you may ask is my definition of a man. It is quite simply an adult male who is absolutely prepared to take responsibility for his actions. No ifs or buts, simply "I am responsible for my actions no matter what". He is a person who does not blame others for his actions and who does not play the victim. Why, you may ask, should our society, with all we know about the process of human development and its many phases, be failing to produce men and instead be producing eternal boys? I believe much of this problem grows out of our modern society's lack of ritual and even more from the disappearance of the critical roles in maturation uncles traditionally played. To offer evidence for my view let's see what, if any, rituals older societies offered to this process. At one time a boy's first ritual kill as a hunter served this process, as did required vision quests. There were also periods of formal segregation from the tribe while being schooled in adult roles and responsibilities by uncles and equivalents. In certain tribal societies, the boys were buried

overnight. The boy's re-entrance and re-birthing the next morning as a man with a new name was an outward sign of his passage to adulthood. In our modern society participation in the military, going off to college, sporting activities, and particularly men-only activities under the direction of uncles served this purpose. Today in the lives of most boys none of these events occur. In those rare instances when they do occur, they are not seen as important rituals to carry a boy through the passage to adulthood, but rather events for light play and heavy self-gratification. Even more rarely are such events conducted by uncles or their equivalents for the purpose of assisting boys through the rights of passage to manhood. I am deeply concerned that as our societies become more modern they seem to be de-emphasizing the importance of ritual in the human developmental process. Please understand that I am not saying that we should bring back trite, out-dated symbols or that we should re-initiate the draft, or even earlier militia service. I am simply suggesting that life without ritual does not suit our species. Specifically, it leaves individual members of society without the tools necessary to understand the process of becoming an adult. I believe many individuals would be assisted in moving into adulthood if our modern society offered, through modern rituals, the defining exclamation points we need to understand the critical points in the journey. I particularly believe this to be true at this point in our society's evolution as it applies to the process of boys becoming men.

Huizinga, a noted Dutch historian and philosopher, wrote a book called *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*^[1]. It is Huizinga's thesis that the single characteristic which distinguishes our species from all others is that we creatively play. While Huizinga does not make the use of ritual I suggest, I agree with him that through play, and the consequences of it, we learn and mature. Please understand that Huizinga's view of play covers all the activities we enter into in which our curiosity and creativity are engaged. Rest assured he is not speaking of the leisure activities we associate with play but rather with a deep philosophical view of how and why we, as a species, thrive. It interests me that in many families in earlier times, including mine, some of the best moments of play came with my aunts and uncles; particularly my Aunts Dorothy, Dorothea and Margretha. In these moments of play I believe I learned more about life than at most other times. Certainly the rewards, both pluses and minuses, I received from these moments remain strongly in my memory. Perhaps it is these special experiences which have peaked my curiosity and have lead to this Reflection.

I would be delighted at this point in this Reflection if I could now list the two or three rituals assisted by aunts and uncles which would guarantee that all boys and girls would successfully pass from childhood to adulthood. Unfortunately, from my perspective both as a caring parent and grand-parent and as a helping professional, I wish I knew. I can suggest, as I mentioned above, that girls seem to be achieving greater success in this process than boys and perhaps it will be through studying their process that answers will emerge. I do believe that if aunts and uncles would resume their traditional roles in this process using modern rituals based on Huizinga's remarkable insight on the role of play in our species' success, that good results will appear. At a time in our species' history when we must face the extraordinary new questions posed by our exploding global populations, we need all members of the species homo-sapiens to pass successfully to adulthood in order for our species to assume its responsibilities to our planet; responsibilities that only true adults can undertake.

Whether you agree with any of these ideas, I hope that through this Reflection you will reacquaint yourself with the significant roles aunts and uncles play in the critical passages of our journeys from childhood to adulthood. I particularly hope you will consider the situation of boys and young men in our society and in your own way help them become men. Our society has done extraordinary things in the last thirty years for women, although it has a great deal further to go, now let's see if we can do the same for men and in the process offer to all members of the human family the gift of becoming individuals fully capable of living the lives of lifelong learning which only true adults enjoy!

Meanwhile, thanks to each of you who is an aunt or uncle for the rituals you perform and will perform in the process of your nephews and nieces becoming adults.

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¹Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, 1986.