
The Keys to Healthy Masculinity

Master teacher Shems Heartwell explores what it means to be a conscious man in the modern world and how one goes about it in a way that honors their uniqueness.

By Shems Heartwell

Over the past 20 years, I have been fortunate to participate in multiple initiation processes with men. I sincerely believe in the power of ritual and intention to heal and transform men's lives. I also know from experience, and a bit of maturity, that initiation and inner work are just the first steps along a never-ending path of evolution and discovery.

Many men are becoming aware of a growing hunger within, a fire that burns with the desire for authentic power and deeper meaning. We know, beyond our minds, that something new needs to emerge for the future of our children.

As I describe below, tending a fire requires consistency and commitment. Meditation retreats and events like Burning Man can be fabulous catalysts of inspiration and renewal, but even after the most impactful and trans-



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formative events of my life, I still come home to my daily responsibilities, work, and relationship.

In this article, I am going to share about an initiation journey with a friend and some valuable ways that you can tend the fire of healthy masculinity within you.

Around the Fire

The stones had been in the fire for an hour or so now. It is cold and drizzly as we prepare to enter the sweat lodge. Our brother Rion is on his way down the mountain after four days of vision questing. I am here with Lino, a native elder who has been watching over and praying for Rion, along with a dozen friends and family members. We represent his community and are preparing to welcome him back to the world with a sweat and ceremony.

As soon as I see Rion walking toward the fire with his head hanging low, tears come to my eyes. He looks weathered, pale and beaten down. I am watching his gaze as he sees his

girlfriend and father next to me by the fire. His eyes are narrowed and tears are pouring down his face. I imagine that Rion is feeling relief and gratitude to see us waiting for him. That he is moved to have loved ones here who truly care about him after some long days alone on the ridge above us.

My heart is beating faster as a wave of emotion is rising from my belly to my throat. I feel a mixture of excitement, fear and pain. For a moment, I vision myself alone up on the mountain in the cold winds and rain storms we have had over the past few days. I wonder about my own strength and courage to face my fears and inner demons as my stomach tightens up.

My brief emotional wave fades to the background as I continue to observe my friend walking toward our silent circle around this blazing fire. At first, he looks raw in his vulnerability and thin from fasting. As I tune deeper into him, I feel his unwavering strength and commitment beneath his weathered features.

I see wildness in how he is moving and intensity to his gaze that has me stand up straighter and connect with a more primal energy within me.

In this moment, Rion represents the quality of man that I respect. He has chosen to push his edge in a profound and empowering way, while being witnessed by some of the most important people in his life. He has humbled himself enough to work with a mentor that can guide him beyond his false limitations and love him through the journey in a profound way. An elder like Lino is like an anchor to a wandering mind, keeping the focus and encouraging a deeper journey.

Most indigenous cultures have some form of ritual or Rite of Passage that helps boys step into their manhood. There were a few representations of this in my childhood, like Boy Scouts and summer camp, but they lacked something that I cannot explain. I probably received more initiation through after school rebel rousing and playing basketball than any

organized group. The men who led the organized events usually lacked the potency of an initiated man. They had good intent and care, but it was obvious to me that they lacked something in themselves. Like my father, they had not been initiated into their power and, as a result, had nothing strong to pass on to us.

Our busy-minded, face-paced, consumer culture generally raises men to be physically, emotionally and spiritually weak. Even though there is no shortage of male bravado and conditioning, ultimately, men are taught to avoid pain and maximize pleasure. We've become soft and dependent on modern comforts, polluted by industrialized foods and distracted by overly stimulating screens.

Like me, most men do not know how to tend a fire, sit with their discomfort or face the raw challenges of long-term relationship. There are few maps for the most important aspects of our lives. What men learn in school and through movies and television does not

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model what is needed to truly thrive in our lives.

Fire as a Teacher

Rion's vision quest began with a solo sweat lodge ceremony four mornings ago, and tonight we are ending the journey together as the sun goes down. Rion has not eaten since the opening sweat, which seems like a day or so ago to me and probably a lifetime to Rion.

I have been asked to be the fire tender for the night. Building the fire, taking care of the ancestor stones and ushering them into the lodge with deer antlers during the four rounds of the sweat. I showed up for this role with confidence and enthusiasm that has been cooked down throughout the process.

Multiple times over the last few hours Lino has schooled me on keeping each of the stones covered with wood and fire, not to let any of the grandfathers be exposed and left uncovered. It seems like an easy thing to do; and, like all true skills, it requires undivided attention and commitment. Every time my

mind wanders or someone comes to talk to me, I miss something that is needed to honor the fire and stay true to my task. Lino has been firm with me, and I simultaneously appreciate his direction and feel humbled by my inability to do this job perfectly well.

This whole experience highlights what I am lacking and also feeds a deep longing within me to tend the fire of healthy masculinity. This is not my first sweat lodge ceremony, and yet I am experiencing the depth of this tradition in a new and more profound way.

Throughout my whole life, I have longed for deeper meaning. I am not a man who gets excited to sit around watching the Super Bowl; I would rather play ball, surf ocean swells or bask in the serenity of nature. I crave connection and participation and feel it is usually lacking in modern-day male rituals like watching sports or hanging out around the BBQ. Being in a circle around the fire with prayerful intent and reverence feeds me in a way that I can only describe as timeless and mesmerizing.



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Going Beyond What We Know

“Few among men are they who cross to the further shore. The others merely run up and down the bank on this side.”

— **Gautama Buddha**

Too many of us have lost, or never known, our passion for facing and overcoming our limits, or how to brave the intensity of our woman’s disappointment without defending ourselves, or what it takes to sit through a ten-day silent retreat.

There are men who are stretching the norm by meditating, learning about Tantra Yoga and leaping off mountains in flying squirrel suits. Yet the majority of men are caught in the hustle and insanity of living a life without reverence and meaning—motivated more by fear than by the mysterious pulse of the universe.

Connecting with Rion after his vision quest has reminded me of the value of going through a passage into the unknown and then returning to worldly life again. He knows and trusts

himself more now and has a fresh energy to bring to his life as a result.

Like Rion, I have gone through a few initiation processes and realize that I need to continually cultivate this energy, or the current of modern life will rob me of my instinct to stay close to the fire. If I don’t keep challenging my edges and confronting my fears or resistance, something in me goes to sleep. I lose connection to what I value most. I lose trust in my strength and capacity. When I don’t trust myself, I show up less in my work and relationship. I hold back.

Fuel for the Fire

“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.”

— **Kahlil Gibran**

No matter where each of us men is on our path, our pain, our suffering and our purpose are the fires we must tend. The heat of discomfort or relational frustration is the fuel

for healing and expanding our capacity to fully live and love. So many men bypass this beckoning to go deeper by playing with fire rather than burning through the resistance and cooking in the transformational flames of presence.

We play with fire by using alcohol or smoking herb to escape at the end of the day. By watching porn rather than cultivating a thriving relationship. By holding back our feelings or blaming others for the hardship in our lives.

We go deeper into transformation by harnessing and utilizing our anger in a healthy way, rather than misdirecting it as aggression toward others or ourselves. By facing our fears and avoidance tendencies with commitment and curiosity. By grieving what is lost with our hearts wide open.

The biggest fuel most men either repress or misuse is anger. I avoided feeling anger for many years. My father struggles with anger, and I received some of the worst of it from him and never wanted to do that to others. So I either held it in or turned it on myself. I

was like a raging lion inside and a weak kitten on the outside until I built up enough tension and lashed out in some aggressive way.

With guidance and modeling of appropriate expression of anger, I have learned how to run and roar like a lion. Now anger is a positive and motivating force that serves me more than it hurts others or me.

When anger appears, it is alerting us to something. It is feedback that we are being mistreated, that we may need to approach things differently, or that something in our life is not working. Anger is an awareness tool, which shines a light on injustice and provides us with the insight and charge to act, to make changes.

Ultimately, how we express ourselves and move with the pulse of life is how we fuel the fire. My invitation to you and commitment to myself is to stay close that fire. I encourage you to continually seek out opportunities to face your shadows and lean into the hardships of your life. Not all men need to go on a vision quest, but I believe that men thrive when they commit to daily practices that ground



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them deeper into their core and stay involved in some form of conscious men’s work.

Ways to Tend Your Fire

1. Every day, breathe deeply into your belly for five minutes. Few things are more physiologically impactful than deep breathing. Oxygenating your body reduces stress, increases energy and calms the mind. It is your best weapon against stress and mundane frustrations. When you feel more centered and alive, your creativity and optimism become guiding forces rather than fear and frustration.

2. Do something that enlivens your whole body. Whether it is a yoga practice or a gym workout, move your body in creative ways that get you out of your mind and into the totality of your experience. We burn up so much vital energy by over thinking and using only our eyes. When you move every joint of your body, your blood becomes enlivened, and your awareness spreads throughout your entire body. This is powerfully nourishing,

healing and rejuvenating. It only takes about 10 minutes of deliberate movement to profoundly impact your state of being in a positive way. The secret is to diversify your movement to maximize your experience.

3. Participate in some form of regular men’s group. Getting together with men with the intention of supporting and challenging one another, in healthy ways, feeds us in a way that work, friends and family life doesn’t. Many times I have resisted going to my men’s group and then find that when I am there it simply feels really good to be in a circle with other men who are speaking their truth and listening to one another without trying to help, fix or change anyone.

4. Show up for your relationship more fully. Listen to your partner and take the time to be together without watching TV or going out to dinner. Share quality time without an agenda. Practice feeling into your partner from your core and genitals. Appreciate and value them in ways that melt their heart open

to you. Surprise them with a blindfolded date night where you take them to a new place and feed them. Don’t remove the blindfold until dinner is over.

5. Bring your sexual energy to your partner and away from any screen. Avoid spilling your life force into the overstimulating and wasteful porn hole. If you don’t have a partner, then stimulate and pleasure yourself without all the visual and audio. Learn to be aroused by breathing and touch rather than visual stimulation.

6. Regularly check in with another man to share your challenges, victories and intentions. Cultivate a few male relationships that are centered on being allies and support for one another. Ask a man to hold you accountable to what you are focusing on in your life. This may be a work-related project, personal goal or relationship struggle. Share what you are committed to with another man and ask him to check in with you about how you are doing around your commitment.

7. Take a solo or spiritual journey once a year. Do something that focuses on your inner and outer well-being. Even if it is simply one day that you go into the forest or spend on a secluded beach. Give yourself a break from responsibility and outer stimulus to go internal and listen more deeply to your inner voice. Set a strong intention that will guide and deepen the experience.

8. Participate in your community locally and globally. Be a part of something bigger than your own family life. Find ways to contribute to a cause or movement that you feel strongly about. It may be a financial contribution, group meeting or taking action in some way. Whatever it is, think of it as a way to be involved in the larger community of life. To give back to future generations. To have a positive impact on the world around you.

*Do not look outside yourself for a leader.
There is a river flowing now very fast,
It is so great and swift.
That there are those who will be afraid,*

“Give yourself a break from responsibility and outer stimulus to go internal and listen more deeply to your inner voice.

*They will try to hold onto the shore.
They will feel they are being pulled apart,
And will suffer greatly.
Understand that the river knows its destination,
The elders say we must let go of the shore.
Push off into the middle of the river,
Keep our eyes open and our heads above water.
And I say; see who is in there with you,
Hold fast to them and celebrate!
At this time in history,
We are to take nothing personally.
Least of all, ourselves!
For the moment we do,
Our spiritual growth and journey comes to an end.
The time of the Lone Wolf is over!
Gather yourselves!
Banish the word ‘struggle’ from your attitude and vocabulary.
All that we do now must be done,*

*In a sacred manner and in celebration.
We are all about to go on a journey,
We are the ones we have been waiting for!*

— **Thomas Banyacya Sr.**
Coyote Clan Elder of
the Hopi Nation

If you or your loved one is feeling called to tend the fire of healthy masculinity and manhood, check out Shems’ upcoming course called The Men’s Passage—a three-month powerhouse program that will guide you into a new frontier of healthy masculinity. Participants will learn how to transform anger into usable energy, increase sexual pleasure and vitality and break free of repeating relationship struggles by learning the three essential skills that will improve every relationship in your life. Find out more and register for the upcoming program at: shemsheartwell.com/themenspassage

Shems Heartwell is a highly experienced couples coach and men’s empowerment facilitator. Shems guides couples into new territories of deeper connection, intimacy and fulfillment together and supports men to harness their authentic wisdom and power in every area of their life. His work goes to the core of what is needed for embodied transformation by integrating the physical, mental, sexual, emotional and spiritual. shemsheartwell.com