



*Meaningful Rituals for Men:
Alternatives to the Common
Bachelor Party*

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In most of our world's indigenous cultures, when a man is called to the next phase of development (adolescence, marriage, becoming a father), he is required to undergo an initiation. The initiation is a test that will confirm that he possesses the necessary skills to step successfully into his next role in life. Specifically, initiation rites test a man's strength, courage, self-trust, and self-reliance. When he passes the tests he and his community know that he is ready to step fully into his next phase of manhood. And in each initiation rite, there is an implicit acknowledgment of the phase of life he is leaving behind and that which he is moving toward.

When it comes time to marrying, a man prepares to leave behind the phase of life and identity of bachelor and embrace the identity of husband. This is a monumental transformation of identity and it generally requires that the man prepare emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually so that he is ready to make this leap. Yet how do we help men prepare in our culture? We send them to Las Vegas, or an equally vapid city, and surround him with as much alcohol, wild parties, and strippers as he can handle (and usually quite a bit more than he can handle). Not only does the traditional Las Vegas bachelor party do nothing to help the groom prepare for his new role, it actually reinforces his bachelor identity by immersing him in the behaviors that he should be leaving behind.

If you've found yourself in this section of the e-course, most likely I am preaching to the choir! While most men will hold steadfast to their traditional alcohol-and-stripper bachelor party, there are a growing number who long for another way, or perhaps an additional way, to honor their transition. Many men, feeling bereft of meaningful rituals, sadly forego having a bachelor party altogether. They simply have not been guided or exposed to alternative ways to celebrate. This section is for you, and if you proceed with organizing a meaningful bachelor party I applaud you for already displaying the traits that are tested in initiation rites: courage, strength, self-trust, and independence.

As you will see below, the rituals have been divided into four categories, which reflect the four elements: fire, water, air, earth. Most, if not all, sacred ceremonies involve at least one, if not all four, of the elements. When you engage in ceremony you are aligning yourself with the earth's rhythms and wisdom, so it follows that you would call on the earth's elements to assist you in your transition. The final ritual is Council, which is a way to encourage your participants to speak from the heart.

However, as many men feel more comfortable expressing themselves through action instead of word, most of the rituals are activity-based and the use of Council may or may not be incorporated into your particular day or weekend. I encourage you to read through all of the rituals and pick one, two, or an amalgamation of several that

reflect your intention for your experience. Remember, the ritual can be simple or elaborate, it can last an hour or three days. What's important is that you trust your instincts, ask for help, share this article with your friends, be creative, and most of all, have fun! And let me know how it goes. I would love to hear your conscious bachelor party stories.

*Fire:
Sweat Lodge, Bonfire, Burning*



Fire is a symbol of destruction and creation and, as such, is one of the most potent symbols of transformation. When we utilize fire in our rituals we literally burn away what is no longer needed so that we can make space for the new identity to take hold. Whether you have a bonfire on the beach with your friends or burn a letter to your bachelor self, it's important to create a ritual that acknowledges that the old life is ending and that you'll be making a leap of faith, a leap into the unknown, a leap into fire where you will emerge transformed, your current identity purged and your new identity on the way to being born.

Elizabeth Lesser explains the symbol of fire and the Phoenix beautifully in her book, *Broken Open*:

“The transformational journey is a voyage with a hundred different names: the Odyssey, the Grail quest, the great initiation, the death and rebirth process, the supreme battle, the dark night of the soul, the hero’s journey. All of these names describe the process of surrendering to a time of great difficulty, and then being reborn – stronger, wiser, and kinder...

“I have my own name for the quest. I call it the Phoenix Process – in honor of the mythic bird with golden plumage whose story has been told throughout the ages. The Egyptians called the bird the Phoenix and believed that every five hundred years he renewed his quest for his true self. Knowing that a new way could be found only with the death of his worn-out habits, defenses, and beliefs, the Phoenix built a pyre of cinnamon and myrrh, sat in the flames, and burned to death. Then he rose from the ashes as a new being – a fusion of who he had been before and who he had become.” (p. 55)

Sweat lodge is one of the most powerful rituals that utilizes fire – as well as the elements of earth and water – that we can engage in. The sweat lodge is a Native American tradition where individuals enter a dome-shaped dwelling to experience a heated environment. The lodge itself is usually a wood structure made from tree branches. Hot rocks are placed inside an earthen-dug pit located in the center of the enclosure. Water is poured over the heated rocks at intervals to

create a hot and steamy room.

The lodge leader guides the group through Council (see below), and as the space heats up so does the intensity of the conversation. It's not unusual to reach deep layers of emotion while in the lodge. As you sweat out your physical toxins, so you sweat out the emotional layers and old habits that are ready to die. It's a powerful ritual that honors the depth of this transition and can facilitate the process of leaving behind the old life and embracing the new.

To find a sweat lodge in your area, simply Google "sweat lodge + your city".

Water: Ocean, Rivers, Mikveh

Water is the symbol for cleansing and renewal. It's a powerful element to utilize when embarking on change as it allows you to cleanse yourself from past experiences, identities, habits, or ideas so that you can approach the new stage of your life with fresh eyes. Water is also a purifier and carries strong spiritual cleansing properties, which is why it used in churches, synagogues, and native cultures worldwide to mark transitions.

When using water in your ritual, consider the following suggestions:

1. Together with a group of close friends, have a bonfire on the beach followed by a moonlight swim in the ocean with the intention of cleansing yourself of your identity as a bachelor.
2. Organize a river rafting trip with a group of friends as a way to symbolize that marriage is a journey which includes some risk and, hopefully, a lot of fun along the way! If you avoid the risk, you avoid the fun as well. At some point on the trip, set some time aside to immerse yourself in the river, again with the intention of cleansing yourself of your identity as a bachelor and any experiences from that way of life that you would like shed.

3. Mikveh: A traditional mikvah is usually connected to a synagogue and has several requirements, but in recent years, mikveh has been enjoying a resurgence among both Jewish and non-Jewish men and women who have redefined the immersion to reflect their values and as a beautiful way to honor life transitions. As long as the immersion is in a body of “living” water—such as an ocean or river—it is considered a mikveh.

Rabbi Daniel Brenner shares the pre-wedding mikveh experience he had before his wedding eighteen years ago:

Three Dips Before the Wedding: Men and Mikveh

At a conference on a ridiculously sunny spring day at New York University, I met a Jewish guy in his thirties who was planning on getting hitched this summer. When he heard that I was the director of a project focused on the lives of boys and men in the Jewish community, he expressed his frustration that he could not find anything out there on men and pre-nuptial mikveh. I remember having the same experience – Eighteen years ago, when I was getting ready for my own wedding, I couldn’t find anything to guide me. I think I found a section in an out-of-print Aryeh Kaplan (a well-known Jewish author) book about it, and since I had studied the basic laws of mikveh in rabbinical school, I started to wonder: How might the mikveh play a role in the spiritual preparation for marriage?

Before my wedding, I got together a group of my closest guy friends and one night, after we shared a few drinks and played cards, we headed out into the woods by the Wissahikon Creek in Philadelphia. The paths and the creek were lit by a nearly full moon.

While I didn't say this aloud at the time, what I really wanted to do with the mikveh ritual was to symbolically cleanse myself of various sexual encounters that I had in the years before I had met my beloved. Not that I saw these encounters as inherently impure, but I wanted to start anew. I had read the teaching in *Mishneh Berurah* (606:21) related to mikvah on the High Holidays that "Some say that the reason for immersion is for *teshuvah* (repentance), according to which one should immerse three times" and I wanted my skin to be cleansed, and in some way I wanted whatever it is that I saw at the time as my spirit or soul or inner being to feel that the cleanse was authentic, life-changing, and holy.

I wasn't really sure how the ritual would go, so one of my friends suggested that I go down to the bank of the creek and that guys would come down, one at a time, to give me some wisdom or blessing.

I sat on a large rock, and, one by one, my guy friends (some of whom had already been under a *chuppah* (Jewish wedding canopy, some not) sat beside me and gave me the gifts of their words. I wish I could say that I still remember the words they said, but they long slipped out of my memory. What I do recall is the emotional connection – the sense that I was supported as I took on the awesome responsibility of being someone's life partner.

I took off my clothes and walked out into the water. The water was pretty cold, which somehow seemed like the right thing for the ritual. I closed my eyes, squatted down, dipped fully into the water three times, stood up, said the *bracha* "*al t'vilah*" (blessing for immersion), and looked up towards the sky.

Eighteen years later I can say that it still feels like that pre-wedding triple dip worked. It re-oriented me, cleansed me, and readied me. These days, when I officiate a wedding, I highly recommend mikveh. Sometimes the couples I work with choose an actual mikveh built for

the purpose of collecting rainwater to soak in and sometimes they jump in oceans, lakes, or creeks. Either way, I hope that they experience the chills that I got on that moonlit night by the Wissahikon.

<http://mayyimhayyimblog.com/2012/03/21/three-dips-before-the-wedding-men-and-mikveh/>

Rabbi Daniel Brenner is leading a national effort through Moving Traditions (www.movingtraditions.org) to train a cadre of educators and mentors who can connect the ethical insights of Jewish life to the challenges facing today's teen boys. Brenner's commentaries have been featured in the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Jerusalem Post, Forward, Jewish Week and on the NPR show The Infinite Mind. In 2009, he was named by Newsweek Magazine as one of America's most influential rabbis.

Entering a mikveh is like returning to the womb and coming out reborn. Water is feminine in nature, and if you enter the mikveh with the intention of separation and renewal, you will feel held by the arms of the Great Mother as you tumble your way through the birth canal of your rite of passage.

Air:

Ropes Course, Bungee Jumping, Rock Climbing, or Skydiving



Air is a symbol of adventure, change, and freedom. We say we're riding on the "winds of change" when we're going through a transition, and that's exactly the energy we hope to harness when choosing the element of air for rituals.

In terms of the marriage transition, the element of air symbolizes the fact that marriage is a leap of faith: when you leap into the air you must first find your courage and take a risk while trusting that there will be something there to catch you. It's the element of risk that often appeals to men, as they intuitively sense that when they take this risk

they're "taking a bite out of fear", as Adam shares below. All rituals from indigenous cultures involve risk, for it's only when we gather our courage and face the fears head on do we realize that we can successfully leap into the next stage of our lives.

For those who balk at the idea of an emotionally vulnerable ritual that involves intimate sharing, a Ropes Course is a powerful and meaningful way to ritualize the transition into marriage while bonding with one's friends.

A Ropes Course is an adventuresome way to challenge one's fear through participating in a series of activities that involve heights. Each Ropes Course is different, but they all consist of a number of separate challenges varying in height and difficulty. High Ropes Courses range from balance beams to cable crossings to complex climbing structures. As you climb the high challenges, you are attached to a safety rope and belayed similarly to rock climbing. If at any time you fall or decide to come down, the belayer will safely lower you back to the ground.

A Ropes Course is an apt metaphor for entering into marriage. Like marriage, this adventure will challenge you to overcome your perceived boundaries, expand your comfort zone and accomplish more than you've imagined possible, for this experience has the potential of stripping you bare and allowing you to see that which is essential. Through challenging one's fears in a supportive

environment, each person has an opportunity to come up against their growing edge and see how far beyond their edge they're willing to go.

Adam describes the experience and what it meant to him:

"I've always been scared of heights. I don't share that with many people, but my fiancé knows and a few of my closest friends know. I'll take an airplane flight but I'm scared the whole time. I won't work in tall buildings, either. So when I started to have some marriage jitters, I thought, 'Maybe this is the time to confront my fear of heights,' and I decided to have a Ropes Course bachelor party.

I had also been reading and learning about ways to combat fear, from meditation to taking action. I had been practicing some mindfulness techniques of simply focusing on my breath when I felt scared, and noticed that it helped a lot. So in preparation for the Ropes Course adventure I would imagine myself up on the ropes and practice breathing into the fear. I would also imagine my fears about marriage – everything from ending up like my parents to having a boring marriage to the fear of it not working out – and I would breathe into that, too. I thought that if I could challenge my fear of heights, it might take a bite out of the marriage fear, too.

I was scared out of my mind before I jumped. I almost backed out. But my friends were there supporting me and I knew that I would be okay. It's so much like marriage: taking the leap of faith and trusting

in your friends and family to support you along the way. I breathed and then took that first leap, and screamed all the way along the course. It was a scream of terror and a scream of joy all wrapped into one.

My fear of marriage did dissipate after that ritual. It didn't vanish altogether, but I know that in sending fear the message that I wasn't going to let it rule my life I was taking a positive action toward living my life with more freedom. It was one of the best things I've ever done: both the Ropes Course and the marriage."

Bungee jumping, rock climbing, parachuting, and skydiving are other adventurous initiations that utilize the principle of air. They can be effective alternatives to the traditional (and meaningless) bachelor party.

Earth:

Camping, Hiking, Bouldering

Earth is a symbol for grounding, connection and the Great Feminine. When we need to recharge and find nourishment, we head out into nature and find ground and clarity in Earth's sacred paths. Most people have had the experience of feeling overwhelmed by the stresses of life, then going for a hike and finding perspective at the top of a mountain. During transitions, when we commonly experience a sense of groundlessness as the familiar world is crumbling to make way for the new life, spending time in nature can provide effective medicine and antidote.

For your bachelor party, you may choose to plan a hike with friends, go camping, or spend time bouldering along your local creek. Being in nature can be sufficient ritual, but if you're longing for something deeper, consider planning a Council as well (see below).

Psychotherapist Ben Ringler offers a model for a conscious bachelor party that draws on the element of earth:

Model for A Conscious Bachelor Party

We all know the stories of bachelor parties we find so common in this culture: drunken gatherings among men to celebrate (savor, enjoy, hold onto?) the last moments of bachelorhood, perhaps with a

stripper in the mix. Like gangs and fraternities, this form is our culture's attempt to create a ritual-like experience to mark the transition from one life to another, stepping into the unknown away from a familiar identity. However, there are other options that more effectively mark this powerful and exciting transition of marriage, that honor the meaning of giving up singlehood so that you can commit and grow with another.

The following is a model for creating a meaningful bachelor party ritual that prepares a groom for enjoying and being present for the wedding ceremony:

Gather a group of men you trust and set aside a weekend (ideally at least 6-10 men), perhaps at a retreat center or in the woods. The ritual should last 2-5 hours, with time for celebration and reflection to occur afterward. A full weekend or overnight is ideal as it provides the integration and celebration time necessary.

Choose men that are open to such a ritual. Ideally you choose a lead person (best man?) to organize the ritual so you can just show up and participate. Have the lead ask the following questions for you to answer to create the ritual:

1. What do you see as your major obstacles to enjoying the wedding ceremony?

2. What do you see as your biggest fears for marriage?
3. What/who are your greatest supports (people, objects)?

The lead person then should create a character for each fear and obstacle for the participants to play. The lead person may be the best person to act as guide/support for the groom. The lead person should review each character with the participants, and create a journey script that the groom must follow in order to be prepared for the wedding and marriage. It's best for each character to dress up in the character and to be situated in a natural surrounding. Forest is ideal.

Like any myth (you can actually base the ritual on a story such as The Odyssey if you like and replace the characters in the myth for fears/obstacles). The groom must go through a series of tests (face each fear/obstacle) in order to move on to the next one. In order for the groom to move on, he must resolve the issue/fear and the fear/obstacle character must be satisfied/eased in order for the groom to move on. The fear/obstacle characters each reveal themselves and test the groom in either a riddle, discussion questions or some physical test, for instance. The lead person can help the groom (hints, physical support) in each station. After all of the tasks are complete, and fears/obstacles conquered, there needs to be a final test. (For example, the groom must battle the dark knight in order to take the crown from the king/father).

Once this is complete, it's good to eat some food and then reflect on each person's experience in character. Finally, allow some time for the lessons of the ritual to be discussed and what the groom learned from this ritual. Then, let it all go and feast and celebrate! A fire is a great way to unwind from the intensity of this ritual.



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Council

Council is an ancient tradition of storytelling and emotional sharing that facilitates conflict resolution, community building, and rites of passage. At its core, it is a practice of deep listening and sharing from the heart. Its roots can be traced to the League of the Iroquois and to the Native Americans of the Plains and Southwestern Pueblos. Modern Quaker meetings also employ the principles of council. Due to the pioneering work of Jack Zimmerman and the Ojai Foundation, the practice has been implemented in schools across the country to help guide children through the rite of passage of adolescence. Zimmerman has been instrumental in opening this practice to a wider public while preserving the integrity and simplicity of the process. As he writes in *The Way of Council* (1996, p. 5):

Our aim has always been to practice a form of council that honors the spirit of the ancient ceremonies without the pretense of being traditional. We believe that the many forms of council belong to all people who gather in the circle to embrace the challenge of listening and speaking of the heart.

There are four intentions of council:

1. Speak from the heart.
2. Listen from the heart.

3. Be of “lean expression,” or distill your story to its essence (especially if you are in a large group).

4. Be spontaneous (don’t rehearse what you are going to say while someone else is speaking).

In terms of utilizing council as part of bachelor party, the possibilities are endless. The basic format is to sit in a circle with a simple altar in the center. You can place candles and meaningful objects on the altar. You then select an object to use as a talking piece, state a topic or question, and place the talking piece in the center to be picked up by the first who feels called to begin. The talking piece is passed clockwise, and each person then speaks on the topic, telling a story or sharing a thought or prayer. If you’re not ready to speak when you receive the talking stick, you always have the option to pass. When the piece has traveled once around the circle, those who passed are given an opportunity to speak. (While the basics are simple, the practice is an art. I encourage anyone who is interesting in deepening their understanding of the implications of council to read Zimmerman’s book.)

For those who have never practiced council, it can be helpful to use some sample questions as a starting point from which you can craft your own questions that make sense for you:

1. What are your thoughts and views on marriage?
2. Does anyone have any fears about how their relationship with me might change after the wedding?
3. What does a successful marriage mean to you? Do you have any example of a successful marriage that you would like to share?

Much of the beauty in the practice of council is that through telling one's own story we can help others gain comfort and clarity along their life path. As men prepare for marriage, they often talk about feeling alone with their feelings. Creating a circle of council can help alleviate this loneliness as men gather together to speak a circle of honesty and compassion around the groom. Council serves all in a gentle, honest way, and helps prepare the groom for his transition from bachelorhood to marriage.