Notes on Contemporary Signs of Initiation*

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Initiatory episodes have certain fundamental features in common. Symbols such as the door are commonly found and emphasise the fact of transition: transition from one state of consciousness to another; the death of the old and the birth/emergence of something new – new states, new energies, new capacities, new challenges.

In an earlier paradigm, initiation was seen primarily as a point of achievement and the completion of a cycle of development. Today the emphasis is on the new beginnings and points of departure for the next stage of life’s journey.

Thus, initiation is characterised by crisis, tension (as old and new tendencies do battle) and emergence. Change is the order of the day. Testing is intrinsic. Also, initiation is not “an event”. It is a “process” and can continue over long periods of time. Jung’s term, “individuation”, and his concept of the individuation process is in these senses identical to the term “initiation” used here.

And the result: the new person, the one who can initiate new steps and venture along the way. There are numerous signs that large numbers of individuals, and indeed collectives, perhaps the human race as a whole, and the planet even, are undergoing an initiation process, at various levels and stages. Here, it seems to me, are a few signs:

1. The rising of yin and the rebalancing of yin and yang, of the feminine and masculine energies and consciousness. This is a worldwide phenomenon, though par-

particularly marked in some countries — it seems to me, for example, a key to what is happening in the United Kingdom. It confronts us all, to a greater or lesser degree, when we enter the time of the mid-life crisis.

2. In historical terms, a new stage in the meeting of Orient and Occident. In the twentieth century, and accelerating since the end of the Second World War, successive waves representing the spiritual teachings of the East have literally saturated Western consciousness. More recently we have seen the suppressed and ignored religious and spiritual traditions of primary peoples and cultures emerging and taking part in this process. In the same way, and at the same time, Western science and technology, economic, cultural religions and values have progressively saturated the Orient. Unesco's East/West project was an early collective recognition of this two-way process.

3. A move from an age of authority to an age of experience. This is another dimension of the change as described by an esoteric teacher. It can be seen as a kind of collective growing up — the human race collectively kicking out its parent figures. Even "God is dead".

4. Choosing one's path. Consequently, and in terms of the spiritual search and ferment of our time, those who hear the call have to decide for themselves what is their own path. There have always been rebels against the traditions of homeland and culture, and others who have felt born into an alien land. But rebellion and/or a sense of alienation seem now to be universal. It creates difficulties both for those who search and for those who take on or carry the mantle of authority, be it individual and self-chosen, or a function within and on behalf of the collective.

5. Another change has to do with the intuition. The traditional image of intuition is that it comes unbidden, in unexpected flashes. Few of us feel we have the same facility of steady contact with intuition as we do with
body, feelings, and mind. But today a growing number of people are developing a reliable and *consciously functioning* intuition, and learning to create a state of consciousness which allows for a constant intuitive flow. Accepting that there are different types of intuition, I wonder whether humanity is now beginning to create an "intuitive body" — a vehicle for the conscious functioning of *Buddhi* — which eventually will allow us to live as consciously in the world of intuition as many now live in the world of body, mind, and feelings.

6. *Interest in symbol and myth.* A related emerging trend is the explosion of interest in things symbolic and mythical, in everything (to use current jargon) related to right brain functioning and the non-rational in contrast to the rational functions of consciousness. Fifteen years ago the world of myth and symbol was to most people a closed book. Today dreamwork, the use of guided imaging in therapy, and public demand for books on symbols and myths, reflect a significant shift in collective awareness. Myths are no longer seen as "flights of fancy and untruth", as many dictionaries define them, but as symbolic statements of deep mysteries within the psyche.

7. *Mid-life crisis.* Perhaps the major "sign of initiation" in our time is concern with the mid-life crisis and the striking fact that so many people see it not as a disaster, but as an opportunity to grow toward the Self and wholeness. Jung pointed to the bipolar structure of the psyche — the "pairs of opposites" in mystical and esoteric traditions — and emphasised that most of us live out of only one side of our natures in the first half of life. We are lopsided, and in mid-life the unconscious opposites in us press for attention. If we are to grow, they must be made conscious, or we may be torn apart by the struggle. Marrying the opposites involves discovering the transcendent function. We have to move to another level of depth — towards the Self, where opposites no longer do battle but "play" as complements of a single reality in the game of life. For the individual,
this means awareness of the transcendent within, transpersonal consciousness. I wonder whether the emergence of the transpersonal movement in our time may not be an indication – along, of course, with other manifestations – of an emerging collective transcendent function.

8. *Becoming aware of the shadow.* A final point. Becoming conscious means becoming aware of the shadow side of our natures: "that which is not in the light of consciousness". The path of initiation is essentially about the relationship of the conscious and unconscious poles of our being. But there comes a stage where this is not enough. Collective conscious and unconscious forces become factors in our situation – collective soul and shadow become existential realities. If we are not to be overwhelmed, we must first learn to differentiate "our stuff" from what "belongs to the collective". And then, we can join the growing numbers of those who are learning to work consciously at the task of planetary redemption.