

# YOUR OWN DAMN LIFE

## Michael Meade On The Story We're Born With

JOHN MALKIN

**W**hen author, mythologist, and storyteller Michael Meade was a young teen, he was in a gang that ran on the streets of New York City. One day he was cornered by older, rival gang members with knives. Knowing he might be cut if he didn't act, Meade spontaneously told his attackers a story. His tale was compelling enough that the mood shifted and the threat of violence dissolved. While trying to save his skin, young Michael had found his voice.

Today Meade uses story, song, and mythology to help others discover their inner wisdom and inherent gifts. He believes that each of us is born with a "seeded soul" and a "story within us that's waiting to be lived." For forty years Meade has delivered this message to young men and women, prisoners, war veterans, gang members, native peoples, and elders. When he teaches, his aim is always to draw out the inner genius in others. Every person, he says, is the author of his or her own life.

Meade was tested again when he was twenty years old and drafted into the army during the Vietnam War. During training he refused to perform many of his duties. ("I don't take orders well," he reflects.) As punishment for his noncooperation, he was placed in solitary confinement in a military prison for almost six months. He began fasting in protest and went from 159 pounds down to 87. Officers from the battalion came to convince him to eat, but their demands were met by the same steely resolve Meade had shown at thirteen. Giving up on changing his mind, some of the majors and colonels eventually began to speak about themselves. The emaciated prisoner offered compassion to his captors and even gave advice. He thinks they unburdened themselves to him because "I was the only person who would listen."

Meade has written many books, the latest of which is *Fate and Destiny: The Two Agreements of the Soul*. He is the founding director of the nonprofit Mosaic Multicultural Foundation ([www.mosaicvoices.org](http://www.mosaicvoices.org)), based in Seattle, Washington. In the 1980s Meade was a leader in the mythopoetic branch of the men's movement, in which he attempted to bring a new approach to the personal and cultural issues in men's lives.

Awakening the unique potential in all people is especially important in the United States today, Meade says, to combat the conformity that mass culture increasingly demands. True culture, he claims, "arises from the creative depths of one's self and one's life situation."

*In person Meade is relaxed and confident. His shoulders are broad, and his eyes are clear and engaging as he offers up mythological, psychological, and spiritual maps of the human experience. He brought to our conversation a blend of street smarts and deep learning about where humans have been and where we're headed. At the age of sixty-six he projects the air of an elder, expressing concern that so many older people these days are "forgetting themselves" (a reference to Alzheimer's) because they have been forgotten by their culture and their families. "The role of a fully realized human being," Meade says, "is to arrive at the door of death having become oneself."*

**Malkin:** Your book *Fate and Destiny* opens with the story of your thirteenth birthday. You received a book from your aunt that she'd bought by mistake.

**Meade:** Fate is the mistake that was meant to happen. It's the accident that was no accident. I was a studious kid but also a troublemaker. My aunt asked what I was interested in, and I said, "History." So she went to a bookstore — she may have been the first person in my family ever to go to a bookstore — and bought me a history book. As I was tearing off the wrapping paper, she said, "Oh, I got the wrong book. It's a mistake. I'll take it back."

But I saw Pegasus, the winged horse, flying across the cover and said, "No! I want this book." It was *Mythology*, by Edith Hamilton, the first book I ever owned and the beginning of my understanding of the world through a mythological point of view. There it was by mistake, by accident, by fate, on my thirteenth birthday: the book I needed to have.

**Malkin:** You write that "we can't run from fate, but can only run into it."

**Meade:** There are some things that constrain our lives, that limit us somehow, whether it be a family history, a genetic predisposition, a specific fault, or an omission that wounds us. I know a lot of young people who are older than their years because they've been trapped inside old family stories or attitudes. I call these limits that we did not choose, but that we must live with, "fate." When we face our fate, we find our destiny, which is our soul's destination in life. That which limits us has within it the seeds of that which can help us transcend our limitations. Through the exact twists of fate we find our own unique soul.

**Malkin:** You say that rather than wondering about the meaning of life, we might instead wonder, "What is the meaning of *my* life?"

**Meade:** When I was growing up, I liked big questions: What is life all about? Why are we here? Eventually I learned that the key question involves the meaning seeded within each individual life.

Almost all cultures have the notion that there is a judgment when we die. Some kind of accounting has to be made of one's life. I believe God — and to me "God" is just shorthand for the ineffable divine presence — has only one question for us at the end: "Did you become *yourself*?" We have a seeded self that begins to germinate at birth. Our true goal in life is to become that self.

There's an African proverb: "When death finds you, may it find you alive." *Alive* means living your own damn life, not the life that your parents wanted, or the life some cultural group or political party wanted, but the life that your own soul wants to live. That's the way to evaluate whether you are an authentic person or not.

**Malkin:** Why did you write *Fate and Destiny* now?

**Meade:** People draw some sense of self from the story told in the world around them. As poet Muriel Rukeyser said, "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms." Right now, with culture unraveling and nature being rattled to its core, there is little security to be found in existing institutions, and coherent stories are increasingly hard to find. The other place to find a coherent story is inside. That means going to the core of your own life and finding the story seeded within.

**Malkin:** And this is important right now because things are falling apart culturally, economically, politically, and environmentally?

**Meade:** Yes, it is rare that a culture would be so thoroughly troubled at the same time that nature is so deeply disturbed. A culture falls apart when its sense of youthful imagination disappears at the same time that the wisdom of the elders is forgotten. Young people are growing up in a world of tragedy. They may appear to be ignoring it, but they are actually feeling it strongly. You're not supposed to be worrying about the end of the world as a teenager; you're supposed to be bringing your dream to it. The world seems old and troubled now, and the young are no longer allowed to be as young as they should be.

On the other side of the road of life you have the elders, who are often just "olders." They could become elders in the collective story if they could awaken from the fear that they are over the hill and going downhill. They don't understand that elders awaken through a descent into the depths, where life renews itself. Going downhill involves a process of going deeper into oneself and realizing, *Aha! My life has meaning if I see it from the angle of fate revealing a sense of inner meaning and destiny.*



MICHAEL MEADE

Many traditional cultures believe that the true elders stay young at heart because they remain close to the dreams they had when they were young. In modern culture people try to change their outer appearance to look younger, but the role of the elder is to go deep inside, to stay in touch with the eternal as well as the sage in one's heart. Aging is a biological process that happens to everyone. Everybody gets older, but not everybody gets to be an elder. Becoming an elder involves a lifelong awakening to and reflection upon the story embedded in one's soul.

The revolutions in the Middle East, which will hopefully lead to democratic outcomes, are partly driven by the fact that the majority of people in the Middle East are under thirty.

In American culture the aging baby boomers and increasing longevity are creating the opposite: an aging population. That means we have a different kind of cultural imagination than the Middle East has right now. One downside to an aging population is that fears and anxieties can easily grow as we become older. You can see that in conservative politics and when people vote out of fear or hold too tightly to their wealth because they are afraid of the end of life.

When older people become elders, they act not out of fear but out of wisdom and understanding. They're not sitting at death's door still trying to check their portfolios online. Elders feel inspired to give back the wisdom they've extracted from life and not simply be receiving material benefits. If there were to be a genuine revolution in this culture — which claims to be free but increasingly lacks freedom — it's more likely to come from older folks who give up the fears associated with aging and dying and become elders instead.

One of the biggest surprises in the last ten years was when Warren Buffett made the decision to begin giving away most of his money. Perhaps Buffett awakened to the fact that, when you get to a certain age, the material wealth you have accumulated isn't really as valuable to you. Your portfolio is not worth much on the other side. So why not do some good with it now? Buffett is a model for the older people of our culture, who happen to have the majority of the wealth. Donald Trump seems to be the opposite. He's still trying to trump everybody.

The next stage of growth in America would be for the elders who can afford it to begin giving away what they've accumulated rather than worrying too much about retirement security. As an Irish poet once said, a false sense of security is the only kind there is. The true elders know that.

**Malkin:** What about the importance of youthful imagination in a free, creative people and culture?

**Meade:** Young people are always using their imagination. That's why they tend to create the fashions. They're fashioning what comes next from whatever they can find in their environment.

When I work with youth, I try to assist them in discovering their own unique essence. The sad fact is that everything

in this culture is working *against* that essence. Mass culture is opposed to the uniqueness of individuals. Young people, whose job it is to become themselves, are walking into a culture whose goal is to turn them into everybody else. What I try to do is help young people realize who they already are inside. American culture says that you must make something of yourself, but the mythological understanding is that everybody already *is* someone. They have a seeded self at birth. As soon as young people are aware of the uniqueness inside them, they can begin to manifest the stories they're carrying.

Once, I was working with this inner-city street gang in Chicago. The boys had all grown up in a neighborhood where violence was prevalent, so they'd joined gangs, as many youth do in such environments. I told them myths from different cultures about finding one's dream in life. We were having a deep discussion when there was a drive-by shooting, and bullets came into the house. We had to duck as the troubles of the culture penetrated the room. Then we got back up and

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continued talking.

I've been learning to spot and encourage the genius in a young person, which helps awaken that genius. I noticed that the leader of the gang used very exact and creative language. This was a dangerous person and not someone you would want to meet on a dark, empty street, but he had a certain charm and good language skills. I decided to try to bring more of that talent out in him. He wound up going back to school and studying English literature. Eventually he took a job with a mentoring organization; he did some writing and became a storyteller. It doesn't mean all his troubles are over. It means that now his troubles are related to the story that he was born with, rather than simply arising from the neighborhood drama of violence and drugs.

**Malkin:** One myth we have in the U.S. is that we have perfected democracy, so much so that we feel compelled to export it all over the world, even demanding that others do it the way we do it, which isn't very democratic.

**Meade:** You could say that there are two levels of myth. The first level is the local, the myth of the environment one

is born and raised in. The local myth of America is freedom, which translates into democracy as a method of governance. It's a good story and includes the promise of something greater. The problem is that the local myth is never true enough. It's never deep enough. And when it remains shallow, it's easily converted into its opposite.

You're not free to do whatever you want in America at all. Try traveling nowadays. It's not a demonstration of individual freedom; it's a demonstration of collective fear and insecurity. There's always the shadow story, which can easily become the main story. You could say that we're living on the shadow side of democracy. You can see that shadow in the rise of fundamentalism, where narrowly constructed beliefs and ideas take the place of genuine imagination. And without imagination, there is no real freedom.

Today in the U.S. we have a diminishment of freedom and a serious disruption of democracy because the two political parties are divided along ideological lines and committed to demonizing each other. There is a collapse of imagination, leaving simple ideological oppositions. So where does freedom pop up? In the Middle East, where no one expected it to appear. It pops up through the imagination of young people who would rather die than live under oppressive regimes.

The second level of myth involves the underlying story that ties all the other stories together. The deeper myth of democracy originated in the Greek city of Athens, which was named after Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Democracy requires a constant search for the wisdom that underlies the oppositions of life.

At this point, if we're going to rediscover the deeper myth of America, I think it may have to come from the older people. And it's not the freedom of an oversized house and a stock portfolio. That's simple aggregation. It's the freedom to live a passionate, imaginative, meaningful life right up to the last moment. In order to do that, people cannot be hindered by too many possessions and too many small, narrow-minded ideas. Ideologies are, by my definition, always small, one-sided, and mean-spirited ideas. Freedom is a powerful force, but also very delicate. It becomes lost when those who are closest to it lose the courage to live with it.

The role of the elders includes acting from ideals such as beauty and truth, knowing that these ideals will not be realized, but also knowing that life needs beauty in order to continue. Elders know that younger people need to see truth being championed by those "old enough to know better" in order to have courage and avoid cynicism, which is an increasing problem in this culture. Cynicism is a detour from the road of life, a sidetrack that opens onto the highway of nihilism. In order to avoid it, we must act through the ideals that are the core of our life. The championing of meaningful ideals is what the U.S., at its best, represents to the rest of the world.

So when the U.S. begins torturing people to get information, it is damaging the collective dream of freedom. It is also the dream of life that is being tortured. We seem to have lost the courage to live closer to the ideal. And at this point in history the ones who must begin to demonstrate that courage again are the older folks.

**Malkin:** How do you relate to fear personally?

**Meade:** Fear tends to drive me *toward* imagination. The scariest thing for me is when imagination becomes locked down and everything becomes predetermined. That's when I feel concerned that life will be choked off. Fear is there to generate motion; it becomes a problem when we are paralyzed by it. Healthy fear actually triggers instinct and intuition.

**Malkin:** You take issue with the idea that the Internet is joining us together.

**Meade:** My complaint is that the World Wide Web, with all its horizontal strands, lacks a *vertical* dimension. People used to think the world was flat. Well, they think that again in believing that a flat web connects us. The real web of the world has vertical extension as well as horizontal dimension.

Take social networking. The problem is that it's not really social enough. "Social" suggests being together, being companions in life. The story comes not just from horizontal experience. The dramatic part appears when it goes vertical. A person rises above others or falls down below everybody else. The realms above and below used to be called "spirit" and "soul." Spirit lifts the person up, whereas soul pulls a person deeper into life. We're not supposed to live a horizontal life on the surface of things. We are supposed to live the entire gamut, from the heights of thought and imagination all the way down to the depths of woundedness and the deeper capacity to love. We live in a world of many dimensions, and the human soul is equal to the world. After all the exploration of the earth, the world is being made smaller again. When I work with young people, I tell them they have the capacity and need to participate in the larger world.

One reason for the seemingly intractable problems in this culture — this mindless battle between stimulus and cutting taxes, for example — is a collapse of imagination. Life, with all its dreams and surprises, has collapsed into economics. When the economy rose to the top of the conversation in the culture, I knew we were headed for financial disaster, because wherever people put their attention, that's where the drama will go. So the drama must be acted out financially. What's lacking is *imagination*. There isn't enough imagination to change the debate. And there is so much fear. People are afraid to let go of the little bit they have. When everything collapses into economics, younger people can't use their vertical imagination to set their life on a course with meaning, and older people begin to forget who they really are.

**Malkin:** Could you tell me more about the difference between soul and spirit?

**Meade:** Spirit in mythology and traditional cosmology is connected to fire and air, and it rises. Soul is connected to water and earth, and it descends. When we rise with spirit, we get peak experiences and those overviews of life that include moments of freedom. Soul goes the opposite way. Water runs down. The earth has gravity and pulls us to it. The soul wants us to grow down and become deep like a river. When people talk about "connection," they're really talking about soul. The real connections are not surface connections. You can have many friends on Facebook, but your real friends are those who know and support your deep self and will remind you when you're

losing touch with your own soul.

What is often missing in modern mass culture is this depth of connection. When you see a culture dividing into simplistic polarities — which is all of our politics nowadays and most of our religion — what's going on is a loss of soul. People who are in touch with their soul know what they're supposed to be doing in the world and what their way of contributing to life is, in the same way that people know what music they love and what food they enjoy — not just life-sustaining food, but food that has flavor, that makes you feel nourished, even inspired.

The U.S. has become mired in spiritual materialism. People are substituting material accomplishments or possessions for the things the soul loves, such as music and meaningful speech. The soul even loves suffering when the suffering produces realization. In a mass effort to find superficial comforts and avoid suffering, the whole culture has lost soul.

**Malkin:** Music and rhythm have played a large role in cultivating your soul, haven't they?

**Meade:** Yes, I've found that I'm happier and closer to the

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rhythm of my own life when I play drums and sing. When I can't, I start to have a broken step and fall out of rhythm with myself.

Of course, playing music is not simply about how well you do it. I watched *American Idol* because I was curious what Americans were idolizing. I love the fact that it's about song and voice, but that gets turned into a contest to determine who's got the *best* voice. Meanwhile every voice is unique. The best voice is the one you have. Not that you don't improve it, but you improve it by learning what it is and what it has to contribute to the symphony of life.

I'm thinking of a great story that James Hillman included in his book *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. At the Apollo Theater in Harlem, every Wednesday night is amateur night. At an amateur night in 1934 a seventeen-year-old girl took the stage planning to dance, but the act before her was a dance duo that was so good that she felt she couldn't follow it. So, while standing onstage, she decided to sing instead. That girl was jazz great Ella Fitzgerald. She had never sung in public. She didn't know that she *could* sing! But as soon as she stepped onstage, the core story of her life awakened, and she began to sing. I happened to hear her in person when I was growing up in New York, and anybody who has ever listened to her understands that hers is a natural gift coming from the depth of her soul.



ROBERT ALEXANDER

The soul can appear like that. Under certain circumstances something already waiting in us can appear. We call our youth program "Voices of Youth," because we try to get young people to find the voice of their own soul. For some it may be a loud singing voice. For others it's a quiet speaking voice, because their core activity is sympathy and empathy. Finding the inner voice allows the soul to begin to sing. In traditional cultures all the young men would learn to sing, because singing opens your soul a bit. I have worked with Native American groups in the Northwest and Canada. Singing remains a major tradition with them. I've been in a courtroom where the Native American judge, before pounding the gavel, stands up and sings his

family's traditional songs in order to become truly present, so that he can act with wisdom and justice and mercy. I would like the Supreme Court to sing before they rule on things! When you sing, you realize that you are human, and that the people you are passing judgment upon are also human souls trying to find their voice and way to proceed in life.

Ella Fitzgerald was one of the greatest singers of modern times, but she has passed on. As the older generation of singers dies out, a new generation takes its place. There is not supposed to be an end to it. The music has to be re-created through the living bodies and souls. It's up to those who are alive right now to find their gifts and allow them to come out. And we have to do it in the face of a mass culture that wants to obliterate uniqueness in favor of a bland sameness.

**Malkin:** What are some examples of how mass culture obliterates freedom and imagination?

**Meade:** Rather than hear what individuals have to say, we prefer to take a poll and find out what the majority might believe. We have reduced people to percentage points.

Then you have the idea of constantly dividing people into age groups. It's one of the most simplistic ways of categorizing people. When we put people in large groups, the unique soul is being exiled, rejected. I wrote *Fate and Destiny* to say that there's a story in everybody's soul, and we have to live it out in order to find out how it's going to end. Then, at the end of life, you can say, "I became myself," which is a lot better than saying, "I rose to the top of the economic ladder," or, "I became one of the many people who are sixty-five and older." [Laughs.]

Our mass education system also destroys the imagination. Teachers have told me that they have to teach a certain part of the curriculum at a certain week of the year. This is insane! Any real teacher knows that the job of the teacher is to draw out the genius that already resides in each student.

**Malkin:** Our schools seem designed to teach obedience through bells, tests, and centralized control.

**Meade:** It's a problem, I agree, but we have to look at it on different levels. The local myth of public schooling is that everybody should receive the same education. That's not all bad. It helps people break out of the socioeconomic class system. Another good thing about school is you get away from

home! [Laughs.] It gets you out there, and you make friends who eat different food than you and have different ideas and practices. There is a value to that. But the local level of myth is also limiting.

At the deeper level *education* means to “lead it out,” and real education happens when the uniqueness of the student comes out. It’s not just about achieving good grades. Most real teaching occurs when young people get into trouble, because it’s a chance to guide them toward the purpose of their life. Everyone needs some help learning who they already are. That’s the root of genuine education and the task of real culture.

It goes back to the old argument of the child as a blank slate versus the child as a unique soul. Most modern education is based on the blank-slate model, in which children enter the world empty and whatever you teach them — whatever you write upon them — determines who they become. Every parent knows this is wrong. I have four children, and even as infants each one of them was completely different. Two of mine are twins, and even they were completely different from each other. I could tell from the moment I first held them. The deeper, older idea is that each soul is already unique, and each has a story that he or she came to earth to live. Real education starts when that unique story and innermost part is engaged.

One reason I’m so interested in young people is because youth is the time of life when you can’t stop that soul from acting. If you try to stop it, you’re going to precipitate either a collapse into depression or an outward explosion into violence.

**Malkin:** Tell me about some young people you’ve worked with who are grappling with mass culture.

**Meade:** I was invited to give a talk in Portland, Oregon, where young people had gathered from all across the country to participate in a community-building project. For nine days they volunteered to feed the homeless or clean up public parks or paint houses in low-income neighborhoods. There were about 1,500 of these kids working together. At the end of each day they came back to a big warehouse and ate dinner. Some older people were also involved, even some elders. Then each night there was a lecture or talk, and after that there was live music, and everybody danced. This was starting to look like culture to me!

I was delighted to be invited to give the last talk as the project was coming to its conclusion. Everybody was waiting for the big dance, and I didn’t blame them, but first I told stories from ten thousand years ago about young people experiencing initiation and finding their souls.

Finally it was getting late, and I said, “OK, I know everybody is eager to dance. I am too. And that’s the point: to be in the dance of life. When the band starts, and you go out there and dance, I want you to do one thing, which is to understand who you are in the midst of the dance. No one else is dancing the same way that you are. So be in the big dance of life, but also be yourself in the big dance.”

Then the band came on, and there was spirited dancing, and it was just beautiful. I was sitting on the side of the stage, watching, and the young people started coming over and lining up in front of me. They were dancing and saying to me, “I’m

showing you who I am.” They’d gotten the message. Hundreds of kids lined up to say, “This is *my* dance!” We are in the dance of life together, which includes famines and natural disasters; which includes pointless wars and human cruelties. And we’re each dancing our own steps in the midst of all of that. That is what school is supposed to be: learning to enter the dance of life and to be oneself in it.

**Malkin:** In our culture we’re often taught that someone else’s dance is going to impinge on our dance. What about the apparent problem of freedom: that we all want something different?

**Meade:** As long as a project remains small, we can be fearful and try to exclude people who aren’t like us. So find a project big enough to make everyone’s help necessary. That’s what natural disasters provide. After the recent terrible tornadoes that ripped through Oklahoma and Alabama and other places, people have tended to come together. The walls have been knocked down, and nature has made a new playing field, littered with the lives that people thought they were going to have. Some people have died, and others have realized that we’re all going to die. All of a sudden those issues that divide us are gone, because nature has created the big project of survival through mutual assistance.

Culture is supposed to do the same — create projects as big and as dramatic as life. I work with veterans coming back from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am personally against war, but I also understand the sense of exile and the alienation felt by people returning from all of the battlefields of life. I’ve been working with veterans for years and watching the struggles of souls trying to find a way home. In a sense they are some of the most exiled people in modern culture. There is a burden of tragedy that they’re carrying for all of us.

One way for them to come home is to find their core story again. The terror and destruction of war can sever the connection to that story. I’m thinking of a Vietnam veteran who came to a retreat attended by vets from Afghanistan and Iraq. All were wounded, because no one returns from a war unwounded, whether physically, emotionally, or mentally. Vets from the Vietnam era have had to live with their trauma for almost forty years and often feel like broken people. But put them among young veterans, and all of a sudden everything they learned in those forty years of surviving trauma becomes valuable, and they become mentors on the way back to life.

This particular Vietnam veteran had a big soul and couldn’t hide it or the wounds that affected it. Before being drafted, he’d wanted to be a singer-songwriter. When he was sent to Vietnam, he saw and did things that changed him. On one occasion he was ordered to pick up body parts and put them in bags. He was eighteen years old. You can imagine the smell, and the raw emotions, and how that can break a person down pretty quickly. He had to pick up the shredded body parts of the enemy, the people who, hours before, were killing his friends. Afterward he lost his sense of smell, and he hasn’t smelled anything since.

He was so traumatized that he couldn’t play music for thirty-odd years. Finally he started playing the guitar and writing songs. At this event, for the first time ever in public, he played

a song about how the war kept "coming back on him." He had a hard time doing it, but he was blessed with a deep, Johnny Cash voice and a soul that wouldn't give up its youthful dream. It was fantastic. Since then he's been recognized for his talent, and he sings at veterans' gatherings and in coffeehouses.

Out of the experiences that scarred him so deeply he made songs that help others with similar traumas in their lives. Trauma can become a kind of alchemical vessel through which the next stage of life is born. Where fate is concerned, there is no rejecting it, no getting rid of it. You have to go through it and find what is hidden in it. Hidden behind all his suffering were his singing voice and his innate capacity to help other people.

**Malkin:** My father was in the marines during World War II. He had wanted to be an actor. He was in the Pacific when a kamikaze plane hit his ship, and he fell on the railing and knocked out many of his teeth. Only recently did he reveal to me this story of how he'd lost his teeth.

**Meade:** I work with many people who were severely traumatized in childhood, including gang members and people in prison. Most of them were abused, but they keep that story hidden deep within, just like your dad's story.

World War II veterans are generally considered heroes, but most of them never did tell their stories, which often are *not* heroic. They are stories about the loss of their sense of self, the loss of their courage, the loss of their love. The deepest, most painful stories get buried, often for fear of how they will be received, and that worsens the trauma. That is the place where the rest of the person's life is waiting to be lived. I'm picturing your father as this young guy going to war with the dream of glory, and then he is crushed, and to him it feels like such a loss that he can't talk about it. It's sad that our fathers and mothers are unable to tell their stories.

One good thing is that veterans coming back now are talking more than the Vietnam veterans did and *way* more than World War II veterans.

**Malkin:** If I were doing this interview with you twenty-five years ago, we'd probably be discussing the men's movement. What came out of that movement for you?

**Meade:** I find it odd that I am still identified with the so-called men's movement. It wasn't a real political or social movement. It was an attempt to provide opportunities for men to engage their souls in a deeper way through poetry, stories, songs, and rhythm. It was about imagination and depth of feeling, things that are often missing for men and increasingly for everyone in the culture.

The other focus of men's work was initiation. In the old cultures you didn't simply grow into a man; you were initiated into manhood. The idea was to create conditions in which men could experience true awakenings and revelations about themselves.

What we were doing twenty-five years ago was trying to engage men — and eventually younger men, because they were in more desperate straits — in ways that would bring the soul into awareness, awaken it, and begin to nourish it. Because ours is such an extroverted, politicized culture, a lot of people thought this should become a social movement, but I didn't

think it needed to be restricted to that.

I was using poetry and song and stories to say to men that we need to be in touch with these things in order to be in touch with ourselves. Only then can we properly be in touch with everyone else. It was not about men's empowerment or gender battles. It became that, because it went out into the social arena. But the core of it was soul work. It's the same work that I'm doing now with young people, both girls and boys, and veterans, both women and men. There are more and more women coming back from battlefields whose stories need to be heard as well. Life is the battle to become ourselves while healing our wounds and giving our gifts.

**Malkin:** Do you know any young people who are designing their own initiation rituals?

**Meade:** Here's the dilemma: people can't initiate themselves. The only way I can reveal myself to myself is if someone else is protecting, supporting, and challenging me. The person

We're not supposed to live a horizontal life on the surface of things. We are supposed to live the entire gamut, from the heights of thought and imagination all the way down to the depths of woundedness and the deeper capacity to love.

who's undergoing the initiation has to feel safe enough to let go and challenged enough not to stay still. When the function of the ego, which is to protect the self, is taken over by others, we can go into a deep descent and find elements of our own soul. If I try to initiate myself, I'm either going to make the temperature too hot, so to speak, or too cold. Initiation needs caring others who know what temperature is right for me. This is a real problem in a culture that thinks, *I'm going to do it all myself*.

Something else you need is nature. In traditional cultures initiations don't happen in the village. They happen in wilderness. Initiation is going to bring out your nature, which is connected to greater nature. But you also have to be connected to a living, meaningful community. It all has to come together. Mass culture often sets the individual against the community, because the community doesn't acknowledge the uniqueness of each person's soul. Instead of the community versus the individual, the goal of initiation is to get individuals involved in the community in a way that's meaningful to them and inspiring to others.

**Malkin:** My concern is that, when authority figures con-

trol initiation, wars or other violent events might be presented to us as an initiation. Isn't it important for the initiate to have *some* choice in what the initiation will look like?

**Meade:** What happens in mass culture is that we have substitutes for the elements of real culture. We have substitutes for everything. We have a substitute *world* almost! [Laughs.] Everybody's carrying inside them an archetypal or mythological sense of what the world is supposed to be, but our culture offers only substitutes for all of it. Pornography is a substitute for the actual, lived experience of love and pleasure. Battles over possessions and power substitute for the real battle to awaken the dream of the human soul.

Mass culture distorts our instincts and inclinations. Some people are natural fighters, so they become soldiers. But soldiers are the opposite of warriors: soldiers do what they're told; warriors do what they feel is best for everybody. When I work with veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, I try to help them make the distinction between the soldier and the warrior. The warrior isn't looking for war. A warrior looks to be of service to something beyond him- or herself. What's happened is that the culture uses that willingness to serve its own narrow ends. Warriors would, under necessary circumstances, sacrifice their own health, comfort, and even their lives for the freedom of others, but that's not what is happening. Most of the soldiers coming back know this. Most people who have been in *any* war know it.

When you take the willingness to sacrifice and aim it in the wrong direction for the wrong reasons, you get damage, and not just to the individual. That damage is inherited by future generations. For healing to occur, the truth has to come out, and by "truth" I don't mean which side was right. That's the small argument. The truth is that souls were hurt, and healing is required for the individuals as well as the collective. I have tremendous respect for those who go into battle, because it is a courageous thing to do. And it is not mindless. Politics aside, when people commit themselves to any kind of meaningful struggle, it's something to be respected. I feel the same about anybody who loves. To love is to face fear and to be wounded. It takes courage to fight for anything, even a misguided cause.

The big story isn't history. That's just another substitute for the life of the human soul, which is the real story. In the long run it's the poets, not the newspapers, who have the news. The news is a superficial exchange of information that can never tell the whole story. The poets tell us we're in this great, ongoing dance that includes opportunities to fight and love and fall down and get back up. Hopefully we have the occasional chance to do our particular dance in the middle of all that.

**Malkin:** Do you think people are attracted to the substitute world because they don't have to be vulnerable there?

**Meade:** It's possible. You don't have to be as vulnerable, and you get the pretense of success and social achievement. Yet to experience life fully is to experience more pain and more beauty than anybody signed up for. To go into the world as one's true self is an act of courage. That's why I say that if younger people observed more older people who had the courage to be

themselves and stand for ideals that are meaningful instead of standing for the small, mean arguments that are taking over the culture, then young people would find it easier to awaken to their own dreams.

Young people need authentic experiences. We are authentic when we're living the story we came here to live. This is true of everybody, but with young people it is critical, especially in our substitute, technological, materialistic culture. The people who are most valuable in a culture aren't those who avoid all trouble, those who never slip up or fall down. The most valuable people are those who fall down and become deeper and figure out how to grow from their descended place. Many would-be leaders never admit mistakes, but real leadership comes from people who did it wrong, made a mess, but then came back. When times get hard, you don't want leaders who have never taken risks. You want leaders who have survived mistakes and then figured out where the beauty is, where the meaning is, and what real courage is.

**Malkin:** You've pointed out the difference between following authority — subscribing to ideas and beliefs presented by teachers, parents, and religious or political leaders — and finding an *internal* authority of experience and wisdom.

**Meade:** I call it "authentic authority." If people can figure out who they are, at their essence, then they can act out of inner authority. The root of the word *authority* is *author*. So genuine authority is creative, not abusive or overly dominant. It is alive in the moment. Most people's experience of authority is of false authority: dominating, collectivized authority; legalized authority; doctrinaire authority. Genuine authority actually arises from one's creative depths.

**Malkin:** What are some ways for people of your generation to act authentically?

**Meade:** There are more ways for older people to be authentic today than we had in the sixties. That might be the most promising thing in the whole culture.

I got an invitation recently to work with a group of people who do hospice singing. They are mostly women over forty-five, and they gather in groups of two and three and sit with people who are dying and sing beautifully to them. I sat in a chair and listened to them and imagined I was dying, and it was like hearing angels. So here they are, many of them over sixty, and they have found their voices. Even more, they have found a way to use their voices. Several of them described how they had loved to sing when they were young but had never really done anything with it. Now they're singing to people at the door of death. They're called "threshold choirs." From my point of view they are no longer elders; they have become elders.

**Malkin:** Do you think of yourself as an elder?

**Meade:** I don't know. I would say that sometimes I act like an elder, and sometimes I act like a youth. Sometimes I just fall asleep, which both the young and the old tend to do a lot. [Laughs.] To me being an elder isn't a continuous state. It's an eruptive condition, an imaginal state. They say being young is a state of mind. So is being an elder. I hope that occasionally I do act like one. But I am also holding out for intermittent outbursts of youthful dreams. ■