

# Facing Life's Difficult Questions

We have greatly benefited from the scientific method. However, it cannot guide an inquiry into what truly matters. That calls for a relationship with mystery.

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We appear to be facing a crisis of isolation and [loneliness](#). Many neighborhoods suffer under the weight of estrangement. Children don't know who lives next door or across the street. We might not know who's sitting across from us at the dinner table. I watch a family of four in a restaurant, each fixated on their favorite device. Have we lost the ability to raise questions concerning what truly matters?

We must know how to raise essential questions to address a crisis effectively.

\*How can I best express kindness?

\*How do I best build rapport with others?

\*What makes me more trusting and more trustworthy?

\*How do I go about renewing my faith in life?

Questions call for an initiation into such an inquiry.

## What is an Initiation?

Initiations are inevitable whenever a group gathers in the name of co-existing and collaborating in support of creating a meaningful life. The initiation has traditionally been performed by elders, representing the values and beliefs of the tribe or society. *Initiate* means “to begin;” as with all beginnings, it marks the end of something. The traditional indigenous developmental initiations indicated the beginning of adulthood and the end of [childhood](#). Of course, the process does not happen in one fell swoop but over time. Our institutions teach us when it's time to stop viewing life in one way and begin with another. We are taught to release the worlds of [fantasy](#), magic, and [superstition](#) and adopt the thinking generated by the scientific method.

## Initiations Should Explain How to Understand Life

Although it is not likely announced, your family, school, religion, and other social groups—such as fraternities and sororities—do initiate you. As recommended ways of knowing, these initiations include bits and pieces of the scientific method. Make an observation, ask a question, form a hypothesis, gather data, analyze the data, conclude, and share the conclusion with friends and colleagues. It is an excellent way to create an inquiry into whatever is observable, measurable, and easily reproducible. With it, we build skyscrapers, nuclear reactors, and electric automobiles and find our way to the grocery store. It can be easy to forget that the scientific method does not generate truth, but rather the probability of certain events occurring based on our prior conclusions. As we bake a cake or fix a flat tire repeatedly with some success, we generate recipes or formulas for these everyday tasks and the belief that they accurately describe what should happen. Of course, they do most of the time, and it is easy to believe that they should always work. It's this *should* that gets us attached to our formulas.

## Our Inadequate Initiations

With the truth about the actual nature of life on hold, we believe that, like baking a cake, fixing a flat tire, and designing nuclear reactors, we can formularize life.

Our social institutions are more than happy to help us create a formula that allows us to ignore how mysterious life is and convince us that we can get life right. The most popular formula sounds like this: "The proper [education](#), the right job, the right financial investments, the right spouse, and the right neighborhood and life will be understandable, secure, and predictable." I have treated many people who come to my office after a [divorce](#), a teenage child overdosing and dying, the premature death of a friend, a job falling through after an alleged guarantee of promotion, and a personal trial with a catastrophic illness that traumatized. The [trauma](#) is not only because they faced such a challenging ordeal but also because the ordeal violated the formula about how to live successfully.

## A Good Initiation

The first step for modern people is to let go of the inadequate initiation and pos-

sibly grieve the impact that our “right everything” initiation may have had upon you. An effective initiation introduces a mature vision of life and how to live it. Such an initiation was offered to the Aboriginal people of New Guinea and the Pigmy of the Kalahari Desert. Anthropologists call this initiation the ritual of the *Mysterium Tremendum* or the ritual of the Great Mystery. This ritual teaches that life is essentially mysterious, unpredictable, and insecure. Of course, these original people neither benefited from the scientific method nor were prejudiced by it, forgetting about life's essential mystery.

## Approaching a Good Initiation

*\* The first step for us is to grieve the unfavorable impact of the inadequate initiation.*

\* [Anthropomorphize](#) life. This means treating life as a living entity, no different than what native folks did with trees, rivers, and rocks. This allows you to remain relational with life, asking what you want from it and being curious about what it asks of you.

\* *Remain curious.* An ancient meaning of *curiosity* is “to care a great deal.” Live your care by noticing what gets your [at-tention](#). How do you feel about any lack of understanding regarding what gets your attention? What are the available resources that might support furthering your knowledge? What do you hope to gain by fostering your inquiry?

\* *Grow a comfort with ambiguity.* Avoid being “tranquilized by trivia” (Kierkegaard) or settling for “contrived certainty” (James Hollis).

\* *Be still and move slowly.* This helps to regulate your [nervous system](#), allowing you to be more receptive to being informed.

\* *Accept the presence of paradox.* Make a place for what you believe and its opposite - such as interested and disinterested, kind and unkind, expanding and contracting, accepting and unaccepting, and happy and unhappy. Paradox allows for a larger story.

\* *Create rituals to support the new initiation.* Attend workshops, seminars, trainings, retreats, vision quests, or choose

mentorship by an elder, which can help in a relationship with life's mystery. The Mankind Project is an international organization dedicated to initiating men and offering support following the Initiation. You can do simple things like create a place in your home to meditate or exercise, incorporate a contemplative practice, and light a candle to honor life's mystery and your role.