

David Hatfield: The UBC rape chant and a call for rites of passage eldership

by [David Hatfield](#) on Sep 16, 2013 at 12:43 pm



The Chinese symbol for *crisis*, as many know, is composed of two individual characters, one for *danger* and one for *crucial point* or *opportunity*. I strive to remember this when life presents me with rough waters, or in this case, when I witness a disturbance happening nearby.

The "rape-chant" incidents at the University of British Columbia and St. Mary's University in Halifax have gone viral, producing big emotional responses from students, administrators and the general public. I was deeply affected by both incidents and found myself eagerly following the emerging news reports. Quickly I realized that my deepest interest was in the response that university leadership would make. What I've seen so far prompted me to write.

The danger aspects of the rape chant are layered, some obvious and some less so. At

the top of heap lies the overt promotion of rape culture. Young men and women joining together in chant to promote non-consensual sex with underage girls is a deeply disturbing expression. I agree that those involved should receive sensitivity and awareness education about sexual violence. I am glad to see both universities declaring this as part of their response.

However, I was sorry and angry to see the Sauder School of Business officially cut their support for FROSH week activities of the commerce undergraduate society. This move demonstrates limited thinking, shames a whole sub-community, and its lineage ensures diminished resources for future students entering UBC. According to CBC, the students who led the chant could face expulsion.

My biggest disappointment about Sauder's move to distance itself from its own students was its predictability and lack of what I call *eldership*. A beautiful definition I heard for eldership said that an elder is one who treats everyone like their own child or best friend, always acts to find the best possible outcomes for the whole community and acts like they have seen human problems for hundreds of years. Insufficient eldership in any community is a grave danger.

Authentic eldership is so rare in modern culture that I believe we don't even notice its absence anymore, and that to me is the gravest danger of all. An elderless society is by definition adolescent: fiery, impatient, impulsive, and unable to contain itself.

From media reports and some conversations with a member of UBC student government, this direction of response will likely continue. This is the common and typical institutional response style I see whenever people identified with an organization are found displaying behaviours seen as morally questionable or reprehensible: identify who did it, create distance from them (in effect, "other" them), then punish and/or expel them from the said institution/community.

While certain elements of this response sequence may be intelligent and wise moves for certain incidents, the pervasion enactment of it has become conspicuous to me because it lacks eldership.

Though the rape chant happened during a FROSH week event, I haven't heard anyone connected to the event mention rites of passage. Rites of passage can be described as a process of rituals of learning and expression that mark the passage of a person through the life cycle, from one stage to another over time, from one social identity to another. Aside from birth and death, the life stage transition that is considered by many rite of passage practitioners and scholars to be the most difficult and important is that of youth to young adult.

Formal, grounded, intentional, and community-based rites of passage led by skilled elders and guides are virtually non-existent in Canada at this time. Yet the innate and age-old human need for such rites are ever-present, as are the dangers of not providing them.

Modern western society has forgotten how to mentor and holistically support its youth into a health young adulthood. When adults abdicate the role of mentors and elders, they normalized the separation of youth from adults in the community, leaving the youth to initiate one another into the adult world.

This is highly dangerous, something our ancestors were all too aware of. As well known

mythologist Michael Meade has famously stated: “If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.”

Of particular concern is the potent fiery sexual energy of youth, and in particular of male youth. In my work as a masculinity educator and rites of passage practitioner I see that fire in boys and young men, and they have taught me so much about how much energy, care and commitment is required to build a safe container for that fire to burn with meaning, insight and growth.

Even a quick glance at anthropological literature about rites of passage for youth in traditional societies quickly underscores the foundational importance traditional societies placed on the development of grounded, motivated, skillful and community minded adults. The severity of the lessons matched the life and death importance to the community of renewing itself by turning self-centered children into community- minded, responsible adults. A favorite example is the Xervante rainforest people in Brazil, who have eight stages of manhood and spend 40 years learning them.

Back to the Chinese symbol for crisis, this time the opportunity part. The incident at UBC was a FROSH week event. What our lack of eldership misses is that the entrance to a university is a rite of passage, straight up. FROSH is an initiation, recognition of new students and a new year. It's a set of activities, (think ceremonies), that welcome young people into a new community (village) and new day-to-day duties (role expectation). Few attending the FROSH events would see student's painted faces, UBC logoed clothing, or even the rape chant as examples of the very same process as the body marking processes and the passing down of songs in a traditional rite of passage for, let's say, adolescent Australian aboriginals.

And yet the ancient indelible desire for entrance into the world of adults doesn't care about nationality or era. It does care, and cares fiercely, about identity and belonging, about being recognized for taking more adult roles and having a meaningful place in a community. I don't doubt that some of the chanting students had mixed feelings during the experience. I also don't doubt that in that absence of a better offering, the human instinct to find belonging in a new community or perish was simply stronger in the moment.

That eldership was missing in the vision and offering of UBC FROSH events is clear and needs to be addressed. But having student leaders step down, likely in shame, and a search for “those responsible” is too easy, and lacks wisdom. I can't help feeling there are some lost opportunities being enacted. From ecology, quantum science, and life experiences too, we know that when a system is disturbed, the disturbance itself contains the potential for a level of re-organization and growth *that is equal to the magnitude of the disturbance*. Eldership accepts the challenge of trying to enable that potential, difficult as it may be.

If the students and leaders involved in the rape chant were skillfully supported to harvest the deepest learnings possible from the massive community wounding they've created, I believe some exceptional and profoundly mature, community-minded young leaders would emerge. Restorative justice practice comes to mind as an option. I worry that the Sauder school has created a distant/disapproving parent' psychology: please us and we'll support you, disappoint us and we'll disown you. The gap in thinking between these two types of responses represents the difference between elders and simply *olders*.

The dean of Sauder has asked, “who is responsible”, but has not also asked what level of responsibility is shared by himself, the Sauder school and UBC as a community. How am I as a man responsible, how are women responsible for this incident in our greater community? Yes, the male and female students involved in the chant made choices they have to live with. Yet so does everyone. How are we, the greater community, producing university-aged students and student leaders on both coasts who couldn’t figure out that this behaviour was unacceptable? How are we absent as elders and how can we better clarify and role model the values we want to be upheld in our communities?

Metaphorically and literally, what chants are we offering?

I think we would be wise to acknowledge that on the psyche level, colleges and universities constitute villages, and that their faculty and administrators represent parent/elder figures. And that the whole post-secondary experience for students is a long rite of passage, a journey to discover and hone their unique gifts and purpose so that they can build an adult life of service in offering them to the community in return for acknowledgement and meaning. The village needs elders because it has always needed elders and those in positions of authority need to embrace this. This is hard to enact in a society where those now in leadership were not given intentional rites of passage themselves as young people. I sympathize with the challenges facing UBC leadership, and I welcome the opportunities the situation has created.

Maybe post-graduate and doctoral programs need to start acknowledging that as knowledge holders in the community there is more to academia than teaching and research; there is eldership. It is not lost on me that the rape chant focused on youth. The terms were sexual but the core message was saying that young is better than old. This take on age is the refrain of the un-initiated, one echoed in our celebration of youth culture and awkwardness about aging and death.

This event is a potent opportunity for UBC faculty and administrators to ask deep questions of themselves and one another: How did this happen in our community? Where were we? How can we help young people here constructively meet their needs for recognition and identity as they learn from us? My broadest hope is not just for UBC but for our whole human family and global village. True and deep eldership is needed *now* and increasingly so for our increasingly uncertain future.

Perhaps this process at UBC has already begun in some measure. I applaud UBC for its Names Not Numbers program that offers guidance and support for new students. Now that this mentoring intention has been heard, perhaps the fates have responded through the ripples of the rape chant, its echo whispering that the task of growth and accountability now falls most mightily upon the elders, so that they might become the elders that are so clearly needed.

David Hatfield is a leadership consultant and educational facilitator specializing in rites of passage, masculinity, and conflict transformation. He holds an M.Ed. in social ecology and lives in Vancouver.

Source URL: <http://www.straight.com/news/424796/david-hatfield-ubc-rape-chant-and-call-rites-passage-eldership>