



Between Exile and Home

An Interview with Michael Meade

*Francis recently had the opportunity of speaking with Michael Meade about the issue of exile and belonging. His responses were insightful regarding what he perceives as a necessary tension between these two powerful forces in the psyche. Michael is the founder of **Mosaic**, an organization dedicated to working with troubled youth and multicultural issues.*

FW One of the things we have noticed is that every place we go, no matter what it is that we are there to teach, the people who come are basically there to end their exile. They are looking for a village. One of the things I wanted to talk with you about is the topic of exile and belonging and what you have noticed in your work.

MM We are living in a time of exile, of multiple exiles. Not just spiritual exile, which is fairly rampant, but also people go through these bodily exiles. Their bodies are not fully welcomed into the world from birth but also as life goes on. The aging body is basically exiled from view.

On the other hand though, exile is necessary so I wouldn't want to imply that there is a way that people can avoid exile. It seems to me that a lot of life is, you go back and forth, and that is why they call it a journey.

As we are speaking a mature bald eagle is flying over my head above my deck. Not a totally unusual experience but it is rare. Even this eagle has its exiles too. You could say that part of its home is in the sky and yet to fly as high as it flies it may experience a little exile from earth. So I think there is a dynamic between exile and being welcomed. I know that in Malidoma's village, but also in other traditional settings, people receive a tremendous welcome when they come back. People are so aware of being outside the home space and yet when you

look at it you realize that if you don't leave you don't get the big welcome. So I think there is this kind of wandering out that is a healthy part of exile. That is different from the feeling of being exiled or not being able to find one's way.

FW It seems we have a more chronic state of exile and there are no gateways into a feeling of belonging. Is that your sense?

MM Well, I think that is the modern lament and I think that part of it for me is that it's often angled in the wrong direction. In other words, the feeling of exile gets tangled up with a kind of victim state, which I have a little discomfort about. And so, it is more chronic but I think the solution to it, or the solutions may be a little surprising. For instance, and this comes from working with youth, at a core level it's the genius of people that is not welcome. I have been doing a project called Being Welcomed in the World and I have been doing it with disabled people. It arose because here in the state of Washington there is a group of people who have been very successful at getting people with disabilities access to all public buildings and many private spaces too. They just really pushed and were very successful. So in a matter of 15 years or so it has completely revolved so that people in wheelchairs and other disabilities can get into almost every building. It was a great accomplishment and a very important thing. And then they

found out that they still didn't feel welcome. They got their access, but they didn't get a welcome. And so that's when I got involved. They were saying, "What do we do about this? We can't build ramps to feel welcome" and I think that maybe that's a good metaphor for what we are talking about. People can get rid of some of the chronic feeling by getting to some of the places they need to get to but to actually be welcome turns out to be another level. In working with them we began to consider that it wasn't just that they needed to be accepted, but that they needed to be recognized for the genius that was natural to them.

FW I like what you are saying because one of the ways we speak to this same thought is by addressing the fact that the medicine we carry lies right next to the wounds we suffer from and which we attempt to hide our entire lives. It is astonishing to keep shifting the imagery that we carry to see that this is pure gold.

MM Well I think it continues to be both. What I suggest to people is that as you develop the gift you also increase the wound to some degree. So there's this kind of dual growth going on that requires an increase in medicinal understanding of oneself at the same time there is a greater capacity to draw on one's gifts. And I think the exile and welcome work that way also.

FW What do you see is the value of exile?

MM One of the things about it is the involvement with the "Other." In other words, when I am not home or in a state of feeling settled, then the only other place to be is in the great "other." For instance, any creative work requires some kind of exile. There is a period before the creative act occurs, of the coming together of the creative project, a person begins to feel what I would call exile.

FW That exile seems to have a purpose attached to it. A lot of the exile I see, both as a therapist and in the programs we offer contains so much shame for being in exile, for feeling banished, that even the "other" seem out of reach.

MM I kind of agree with that, then I get worried about two big problems. One is the western existential exile, you know, no exit, Sartre, and so on. The idea that you cannot come home because there is no home, because we are in an accidental universe. I think that is the short course.

The other problem is you can find home if you can suddenly make yourself indigenous. I don't buy either one. For instance, Malidoma's own village is self-exiled. It is unavoidable. I get uneasy if there is any promise that people are going to find a homecoming other than learning to dwell with their gifts and learning to dwell with their wounds. I think those two things become almost inter-changeable. Another way to say it might be that if a person isn't at home dwelling near their gifts then they are probably dwelling near their wounds. That is a major shift and I think that those of us in the west have a real responsibility on a psychological level to have some grasp for how a person moves from this chronic state of exile to understanding this move.

FW I think that speaks to a failure of imagination. So much of our belonging is focused solely on the human. One of the things that I appreciate about traditional people is that belonging was multifaceted. You belonged to the sky, the stars, the hills, the trees and animals. I remember coming across a passage of Paul Shepard's which said, "The grief and sense of loss that we often attribute to a failure in our personality is actually an emptiness where a beautiful and strange otherness should have been encountered."

MM I agree. And that otherness has some of the smell of exile. I agree with that, but then again in the various native traditions and tribal cosmologies, there still exists doubt and also mythologically there is always the great void or whatever, that's going to be close also. In other words, my uneasiness begins when people start to imagine that there is an exact home. I think it was Machado who said "Our job is to make roads over the sea." So we have this whole business of arriving at places that can be so healing and satisfying that also has this temporary note in it because to arrive home and to be fully welcome is very similar to coming back from an initiatory journey. Of course what that does is qualify you for another initiation. So there are pockets of home is one way I think about it, and moments of wholeness, but the chronic state of modern exile thinks there is a chronic state of being home and it doesn't turn out to be that way. You get to visit.

One of the things I have learned is that at first you find home by being welcomed, but after that you may find it only by welcoming others. And that is what we went through with the disability groups. It became quite surprising but it became very clear that the next welcome they were going to find was one wherein they were going to welcome others.

And so we had to work at moving them from thinking of themselves at the periphery to thinking of themselves at the center. All of a sudden they were quite at home in welcoming others. It was really a wonderful change.

So that is a move and there is another interesting thing in that; if a person gets a little taste of being home and welcome in the world it comes with a responsibility to somehow welcome others. So one of the aspects of the chronic is not knowing how to act when we actually get to where we want to go. Then shame and other things get into it, but there is one of those moves. I only learned that from working with the young people.

FW How so?

MM Well I'm working with them because I feel so saddened and so outraged at times about how they are exiled. You know as a group almost this whole generation is increasingly exiled by technology and by lack of interest by the rest of the culture. And then exiled by exploitation. People see the young people coming up as the next consumer group and they just want to exploit them. All this builds into the feeling of exile. I notice if I couldn't keep a fairly consistent thread to my own ways of being welcomed in the world, that I really couldn't help at all. I had to learn how to keep reminding myself that there are ways that I have learned that I am welcome in the world and that I have to keep operating from there. You get to the point where it is only through offering a welcome to others that you get to keep your own.

FW That's beautiful. I think that's also what I've heard you talk about in terms of elder training. You can't continue to be the person in need of being managed by the community. At some point you must turn and offer the same kind of blessing back.

MM And that breaks the chronic pattern in all directions. You just have to stay awake to do that. The unfortunate thing about chronic stuff is that it develops habits and patterns that keep putting people back to sleep.

FW It also tends to reinforce a certain diminished story and you begin to inhabit that story that has no out, no exit.

MM Exactly. This is my story and I am trapped in it and it doesn't lead anywhere except back into exile. There is a certain point in life where often I won't believe that about someone. I will look at them and say, "You're 33 years old, even worse you're 34, Christ left at 33. You missed the crucifixion so you must have found some way to put at least one of your toes in and that's the toe I'm interested in now. How can we get a better toehold because you did find some way to get your toe into the earth.

FW Do you find that when you are working with the youth that they resist welcoming?

MM They resist welcoming in the sense that they have been mistreated often enough by people who appeared to be able to welcome them and by authorities. So they have a sharp capacity for recognizing bullshit. You have to work with, and this goes back to the idea of genius or what some people call the indwelling spirit, the part that has to find a welcome first. I mean, they can live on the street as long as they know that their spirit is somehow anchored in this world. That's the only one you can go after quickly I think. In other words you can get them jobs, you can get them a place to live but that is not the welcome they want. Sometimes the ability or the luck for whatever happens, they feel recognized at the level of their genius and their spirit.

That's the first welcome. I think it is the critical one. I think it was that issue around which people began to imagine initiatory events. It's still possible to focus on that and often necessary to focus on that. The rest of it you do the best you can with. At least for myself, if that inner genius hasn't been welcome, then the rest of it isn't going to work. Again I go back to people who say "I've been exiled my whole life." And my ear says wait a minute, you are already saying "my whole life." You've already had this whole life. Where is the wholeness of that life and what part of it isn't exiled that we have a place to begin with? It is a psychological move to break the spell of a chronic self-image.

FW It's also the way in which we privatize everything. It becomes your private story, your private pain, your private exile and we don't see that it is part of cultural conditioning that requires a response by all of us.

MM Yeah, and it requires some kind of waking up that isn't particularly comfortable. I just thought of another one. I was working with a group who in their turn were working with a group of severely mentally disabled folk. I was working with them on this idea of recognizing genius and they found that they get almost everybody somehow to recognize, or identify or communicate in the strange ways these people have to communicate that they did find some flicker of acknowledgment of the genius that they might have. That's was very interesting to me to say that that's the level at which people really want to be seen. If it doesn't happen, we actually don't get to live out our exile, we die. That's how I have come to see it.

FW How do you see ritual and village in that context?

MM I see it as ramifications in cosmologies. In other words

traditional villages and tribal groups operated within a often coherent cosmology. A full tribal imagination involves the cosmos. Let's say a person was away from home for a long time and comes back to the village. The threads of imagination are connected. They would arrive home on a particular day on the ritual calendar so that besides being a specific homecoming for them, there would already be ritual imagining around that day. So their arrival back in the village is also their arrival back in the ritual calendar which is also their arrival back in the cosmos. When we say that we are missing something, what we are missing is enormous.

FW To have that kind of wrapping surrounding your life gives you the sense of being cosmically significant which is something we are deeply longing for.

MM Absolutely. This is part of the gift of tribal culture.

FW Thank you Michael.

MM You're welcome.