

# COUVADE

## The rite of passage into fatherhood

by Nick Clements

I have been working with men and boys since 1975, and in the last 15 or so years creating teenage rites of passage. In order to understand such a concept I have been very privileged to be able to spend time with indigenous people from around the world. Using their knowledge and wisdom as a foundation I have been creating new rites of passage relevant to today's society. A casual comment from one teacher 5 years ago led me on a fascinating journey. We were discussing how boys need guidance from elders, and he casually said "...they need them then, and they need them during all their rites of passages in later life." The discussion moved onto the idea of there being different stages (or ages) through which men pass, and men need mentoring at these times in order to pass through the appropriate rite of passage. This made me want to find what the appropriate rite of passage for each age was and still can be. I've been on a journey ever since, travelling and researching, but I think I've now found them all.

In terms of parenting and our present understanding, we are familiar with the teenage or 'warrior' age and its rite of passage, defined by three stages. These are firstly, an increase in testosterone; this fuels the ascent away from the family home; and ends with the process of individuation, the finding of oneself. This process needs to be held by the whole community, organised by 'elders', and is a very complex and multi-layered event lasting many years. Once the boy has been through such a process, he faces the next rite of passage. The next age is 'fatherhood', and in order to be ready to become one he needs to pass through the rite of passage called 'couvade'.

Couvade is not a very useful word, but it is the only one out there at the moment. It can mean "*cowardly incapacity*", so I need to explain it more fully. It was first used in anthropological studies of indigenous people during the early 1800's. These early (all male) anthropologists encountered different types and forms of couvades on every continent of the planet. The early anthropologists almost exclusively studied books, artefacts and frequented museums, very few undertook fieldwork, and fewer still actually met indigenous people. Through the course of such flawed research they uncovered various (to them) baffling rituals. These offended their sense of masculinity and so they were all called 'couvade'. Examples came from the Aboriginal people of Australia, from India, from the Americas, and, particularly, from the Celtic and Basque countries of Europe. Very few rituals were documented correctly or explained in depth. Reading between the lines the overriding principles were as follows:-

*The prospective father would be mentored prior to birth, an elder would tutor him in the ways of appropriate 'couvade' for his culture. This mentor was the male equivalent of the midwife.*

*The prospective father would incapacitate himself by lying down during the last days of his partner's pregnancy.*

*He would forsake violence, put down all weapons, wear loose clothing, no knots, he would 'feminize' himself.*

*During the birth he would either be encouraged to, or threatened with, (depending on which continent you lived) the sharing of his partners pain.*

*Immediately after birth he would accept the baby and lie with it in his bed. In many traditions he is fed and showered with gifts during the next days.*

These many rituals were so foreign and ridiculous to Victorian sensibilities, they have been all but removed from our cultural heritage, and the practice of couvade is now extinct as far as I can tell.

At the same time as discovering these gems I came across references to couvade, but using the term in a very different context. Scientists are now piecing together a very interesting picture in terms of how the prospective father is affected mentally, physically and psychologically by his partner's pregnancy, and they are calling this 'couvade'. The research is worldwide and the conclusions are beginning to take shape:-

*Up to 60% of men are affected either psychologically or physically by their partner's pregnancy.*

*In the man, there can be a rise in estrogen and a decline in testosterone particularly during the third trimester.*

*Some have morning sickness, nose bleeds, bloating, enlarged nipples.*

*Some know their partner is pregnant before they do.*

*The majority of men talk of their partner's pregnancy and the sharing of birth and early childhood as being a 'wake-up call'. They change their lifestyle, friends, job and attitudes towards life.*

*The likelihood of 'fatherly bonding' with the baby is greatly increased if he has experienced these physical and psychological phenomena, and if he is active and present during the birth.*

For me as someone who undertakes ritual and ceremonies, these two linked but separate descriptions of couvades, inspires and excites me. Just as with the teenage rites of passage we are describing a three-stage rite of passage. An increase in estrogen; the contacting of the inner female; and the development of responsibility. These are the foundations for a rite of passage, and they are sorely needed in these times of absent and disinterested fathers. A man who has been assisted by a mentor through such a rite is no longer in the process of individuation, he is linking with the female and by doing so he is jointly creating something, a new baby.

This year I will be running, together with midwives, retreats for expectant couples, during which we will be enabling the men to explore the concept of couvade, develop their own relationship to it, and help them understand how they can be active and engaged in a masculine way with the pregnancy, birth and early childhood cycle. We'll be reclaiming couvade as a rite of passage, and maybe coming up with a far better name for it. It is the opportunity to create and develop again a rite for men in terms of their passage into fatherhood- now there's a challenge worth taking!

Nick Clements is a parenting and masculinity expert.

He runs "Fathers and Sons Weekends" and "Men's Lodges" which can be found on the website: [www.thesunlodge.co.uk](http://www.thesunlodge.co.uk)

His latest book "Using The Ugly Duckling to find The Missing Link between Boys and Men" is now available from all bookshops. He is undertaking a lecture tour with a

show called “The Missing Links”. Details of the book and tour are to be found on [www.soundoftheheart.com](http://www.soundoftheheart.com)  
The retreat mentioned is on the website: [www.heavenandbirth.com](http://www.heavenandbirth.com)