

Rites of Passage: Portals to Conscious Elderhood

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Ten mature adults and two guides, each engaged in silent prayer accompanied by a gentle drumbeat, stand on the edge of a mesa at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico. The chill of a late-springtime dawn at 7000 feet is being dispelled as the sun rises over sandstone monoliths and pinnacles to the east and sunlight gradually envelops the mesa, making luminous the new tender green of the scrub oak and cottonwoods just emerging from a long, cold winter. The raven soaring overhead pierces the silence as it calls the world to come to life and revel in this new day. To the west, the stunning walls that enclose this enchanted natural amphitheater are emerging from darkness to reveal a stunning palette of layered color ranging from white-gray to beige to vermillion. A new day has begun in the season of new beginnings for a group of people enacting rites of passage to inform and empower their journeys into conscious elderhood.

These people in and approaching their elder years, ranging in age from 50 to 85, are following in the footsteps of countless others since the beginnings of humankind. At critical turning points in life people have retreated to wilderness places to enact rites of passage, and then returned to their communities spiritually and emotionally renewed and with new insight about how best to live and contribute as the next stages of their lives unfolded.

Anthropologists tell us that throughout most of known human history, cultures marked significant changes in life status by rites of passage or initiation into the next stage of life. Extensive preparation at all levels—physical, psychological and spiritual—was followed by an intense, spiritually charged ceremonial rite of passage, most commonly enacted in wilderness away from the village. The intent was to both mark the fact that major life transition was occurring and to empower the initiate to fully and consciously move into his/her next life role.

Through such powerful processes, people were assisted in letting go of attitudes, behaviors and self concepts from previous life stages that would not serve them or their communities in their new life roles. Concurrently they were guided in identifying and strengthening the skills, wisdom, psychological resources and spiritual connection necessary for claiming their new statuses and effectively fulfilling their new roles. Upon their return to community, they and their communities knew that in some essential way who they had been—both personally and in terms of their role in society—had died and a new self with new wisdom and gifts to contribute to the community, had been born.

Our secular, contemporary world is characterized by a dearth of meaningful, emotionally and spiritually empowering rites of passage to help people realize the potential fullness of

each of life's stages. As they move through life, people are expected to move from one ill-defined stage to another largely on their own, with little psychological and spiritual preparation. I believe that the two areas where this lack is most detrimental to personal and societal well-being are the ambiguous passage from adolescence into adulthood and the equally amorphous passage from career-focused adulthood into the senior years. While several organizations are devoted to creating meaningful passage rites into adulthood (but reaching so very few young people), there is little awareness of the value of such ceremonies for those seeking as they age to become elder and not merely older.

A Call for Meaningful Rites of Passage

This article and entire issue of *Itineraries* is a call for meaningful rites of passage for the ever-increasing number of people, in and approaching their elder years, who are feeling a call to claim the role of elder in a society where that role is largely non-existent. It is a call to the leaders of the many spiritual traditions in our country, as well as those others who, through various means have stepped into and owned the wisdom of their own eldering, to develop inspiring programs of preparation for elderhood **that culminate in empowering rites of passage**. The balance of this article will look at perspectives, dynamics and elements that are critical in constructing such rites.

Traditionally, rites of passage drew their power from multiple sources: cultural understanding of how the human psyche develops throughout life and what it needs to flourish in each life stage; reverence for and connection with the spiritual dimension of life; and the power of the natural world to open hearts and minds.

Indigenous peoples recognized, as do many contemporary lifecycle development theorists, that optimal human development occurs in discrete stages. The inner and outer dynamics of each stage must be supported by the community for the person to flourish and make his/her full contribution. If the psychological tasks and potentials of each stage are not recognized and supported, development may well be hindered or aborted. Lack of cultural recognition and support for this process is why many people in adult bodies and with adult roles never grow out of emotional childhood or adolescence. And why many people with aging bodies continue to try to live as though they are 40 or 50, as parodies of their mid-life selves, never actualizing or even being aware of the rich possibilities of aging and of the necessary inner work that prepares one for a conscious elderhood.

The Dynamics of Human Development

Rites of passage exist due to the recognition that people do not fulfill the potential of life's developmental stages by just gradually drifting through their lifespans. At certain key times the human psyche needs, and either waits for or catalyzes, something significant in our lives with the potential to catapult us from the relative security of the

current stage into the powerful unknowns of the next chapter. Serious illness can be that catalyst, as can loss of employment, death of a dream, ending of a relationship, or inner crisis of loss of purpose and meaning. Some people are able to use such catalysts, whether consciously or not, to serve as rites of passage in their inner development. Many others are not.

Rites of passage are *structured* ways of catalyzing human development. They impress upon those undertaking them the significance of the inner and outer transitions they are undergoing. They help to dismantle those elements of previous life stages that will not promote growth and wholeness in the next. They force a descent into the depths of oneself to courageously encounter both shadow and unrecognized potential. And such rites provide the opportunity for a life transforming experience of one's spiritual resources and for the vision and empowerment that come with embracing these.

The Power of Nature to Support These Rites

Traditionally, most rites of passage have taken place away from the village in wild places. Indigenous people had the same understanding of the psyche that led Jesus, the Buddha and so many other great teachers of humanity to retreat to the desert or forest to enact their own rites of passage before moving forth into the new chapters that defined their contributions to the world.

Being in nature broadens our perspective, and helps us see beyond the narrow self-definitions and limited sense of possibility that life in society imposes. Embracing that which is wild and untamed, both outside ourselves and within, frees the mind of conditioned small-world thinking and provides a big-picture view of our place and potential in a larger picture. In nature it is much easier than in the human-created world to experience connection and relationship with all of life, with life's rhythms and cycles (which are also our own), with the Source that is alive in all of nature's beings, including ourselves. These are the experiences that provide vision for the next stages of our lives, empowerment to live that vision, and courage to let go of or transform those elements in ourselves that are not in alignment with the potential that calls to us.

The Three Stages of Rites of Passage

Anthropologists who have studied the many forms rites of passage have taken around the world tell us that they are all characterized by a three-stage process that ritualizes and supports the three stages that characterize all significant life transition. * **See endnote**

The first phase is usually called *severance*. Initiates (those undergoing a rite of passage) leave behind (sever from) the community and their former roles. With the guidance of elders who know these dynamics, they take stock of their lives, who they have become,

what strengths they have developed, what weakness need to be recognized and overcome. They become aware of attitudes, fears, beliefs, behaviors and self-identifications that tend to deaden aliveness and disconnect them from the wisdom and passion of their hearts. Then they symbolically let these go, as a snake sheds its old skin so that it can grow into a new one. They allow themselves to experience grief that has been blocked, to forgive others and themselves for that which has not been forgiven, to review and learn from significant life experiences. With gratitude, they celebrate who they have been, sever from it, and embrace the unknown of the future.

The second phase is usually called either the “*threshold*” phase, indicating a crossing of a threshold into the Sacred World, or the “*liminal*” phase (from a Latin word for “limit”), reflective of the fact that during this process, the initiate encounters the limit of his/her former self and formally steps beyond. In this phase, the initiate is alone, facing the wilderness without and within. Fasting is employed to cleanse body and mind and help open one to spirit. They enter a timeless space of day and night, light and dark, alone with earth and sky, suspended between an old life chapter and a new beginning. It is a time of calling out with all one’s heart to the Great Mystery (however one conceives of It) for guidance and strength for the next chapter.

This is truly what Joseph Campbell called a hero’s journey. Precious treasures are usually guarded by fearsome dragons. Initiates must face and conquer old and deep fears before they are allowed to glimpse the shining jewel of their true beauty and potential. There are times of emotional pain and physical discomfort, as many old scales must be scraped off before the new self that is seeking to be born can emerge. Yet, the experience of purpose, passion and spiritual connection that emerges, often punctuated by striking experiences of synchronicity, powerful dreams, or tear-laden heart openings, is one that is not soon forgotten. Indeed, it becomes the foundation for an entirely new life chapter.

Upon re-crossing the threshold, the phase of *reincorporation* begins. The stories of the time in the liminal world are told to the elders. Having deep experience of these dynamics, the elders provide witness, affirmation and clarification of experiences that may seem ephemeral on this side of the threshold, and must be grounded back in daily life to inform the growth of the new sense of self that is in it’s delicate infancy. In this phase, with the support of elders and the larger community, the initiate declares ownership of the gifts of the time in the liminal world and makes concrete commitments for how he/she will use the new insights and emerging inner qualities to serve the local community as well as the larger community of life.

This is the basic framework of such rites as enacted in indigenous societies. However, living in a world in which the role of elder is not defined and revered, it falls to each of us to envisage a way of embracing that role that aligns with our unique personalities, callings and gifts. And whatever form they take, effective rites of passage into elderhood in our society will be as diverse as the world we live in. There is one constant. To be

truly effective, contemporary rites of passage will be designed to reflect the age-old wisdom about the three-phase inner dynamic of human growth from one life stage into another.

Without truly empowering rites of passage, our world is impoverished. So much human potential is lost. Who better to reawaken society to the importance of this process than those of us who recognize (or at least sense) the power and responsibility of initiated elders. For, as has been the case for millennia, it is the elders who mentor and initiate the young, champion enduring life-sustaining values, shine as beacons of hope illuminating the darkness of fear, and use their wisdom and compassionate hearts to heal a wounded world.

As this group of newly initiated elders packs up to return to the city, they know the task won't be easy. There are few societal structures in place to support their visions for growing older. The dominant culture's obsession with youth and newness will continue. Computers will generate ever more information, but wisdom will remain in short supply. The environment of our earth home will continue to be degraded. The media will continue to sell messages of fear.

*Yet, the sun will continue to rise over those pinnacles to the east and shed its warmth on the mesa. The raven will continue to soar overhead, seeing the big picture and calling all below to awaken. And ten more people will add their visions and voices to the emerging new understanding of the gifts that **conscious** elders can bring to a world desperately in need of elder wisdom and passion rooted in soul. Looking one final time from this mesa to the horizon, this group offer their fervent prayers that this enchanted mesa and places like it will long be there to nourish the human spirit when the canyons of the city become too stifling, the noise too loud, and the view too narrow.*

* **Note:** To learn more about rites of passage, I recommend this comprehensive exploration of rites of passage, traditional and modern, around the world: *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* edited by Louise Mahdi, Steven Foster and Meredith Little (Open Court Publishing, 1987)

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