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Initiation—Saying Good-Bye to Childhood

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Positive rites of passage for young people are sorely lacking in today's society—with negative consequences for all of us. Two programs show how educators can address this need and guide students along the road from adolescence to responsible adulthood.



It is the school's first "senior honoring ceremony," designed to celebrate each graduating senior—not just the few who have shown outstanding achievement in academics and athletics. Twenty-five students sit in a circle. Parents and faculty sit nearby. After a welcoming address by the high school principal, the ceremony begins. Each student has been chosen by a particular faculty member for special praise. Now a teacher selects a flower from a vase in the center of the circle and stands in front of a surprised student.

Jimmy, I have watched you grow this last year and become strong like the sturdy stalk of this giant iris. When you came into my class, I could tell that you were used to being one of the clowns. Yet when it came time to share our stories, you took the first risk. You led the way. And throughout our class, I saw you as a leader—someone who would dare to do things, say things in a new way.

I know you have been appreciated at this school for the great things you've done on the baseball field and for the humor you've brought to leaven deadly moments. But I also want to honor you for your warmth, and the initiative and courage you've shown—like when you offered to carry your classmate on your shoulders when she was too weak from cancer to walk to our ceremony at the end of the retreat. I respect you as a leader and value you as a friend.

Jimmy is beaming. Behind him, his father looks stunned. This is the younger son—the cut-up; a disappointment after the academic achiever who went before him. This one has had too many disciplinary problems to allow the father to see much promise in him. Now the father has listened to a respected teacher describe the outstanding character that his boy has demonstrated. Obviously touched, the father places his hands on his son's shoulders—one squeeze tells Jimmy that his father has heard, is willing to see him in a new light.

The context that allowed Jimmy to find his own courage and generosity at this pivotal time in his life—and to be seen in a new way by his teacher, peers, and father—came about through a course designed to be a rite of passage for high school seniors as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Increasingly, educators are recognizing the value of such programs.

The Importance of Rites of Passage

Traditional cultures taught us that adolescence is a particularly important point in the

spiritual life cycle. Virtually every preindustrial culture provided rites of initiation, led by adults, that helped young people navigate the dangerous waters between childhood and adulthood. Without such rites, today's teenagers have created their own badges of adulthood—from driver's licenses, proms, and graduation ceremonies to the dangerous rituals of binge drinking, first baby, or first jail sentence.

As youth violence spreads across lines of geography, class, and race, and as we witness each devastating school yard massacre, educators are asking urgent questions about what forces undermine the development of conscience in our students. "The bonds that transmit basic human values from elders to the young are unravelling and rending," write three educators who have devoted their lives to "reclaiming youth at risk." When children are not bonded to caring adults, "conscience fails to develop . . . and the transmission of values is distorted or aborted" (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Clementson, 1995, p. 36).

Although some American teenagers are blessed with meaningful rituals, such as confirmations, bar and bat mitzvahs, quinceañera ceremonies in the Mexican community, or initiation journeys offered by Buddhist and African American communities, most of our youth today have no opportunity to be guided by responsible adults through the adolescent journey. The consequences are significant:

Because of the unhappy loss of this kind of initiatory experience, the modern world suffers a kind of spiritual poverty and a lack of community. Young people are feared for their wild and dangerous energy, which is really an unending longing for initiation. (Some, 1994, p. 68)

Working with teenagers during the last 20 years has led me to conclude that in our culture, teenagers experience not one but several passages: the major transformation at puberty; a challenging transition as they leave middle school and enter high school; and the completion of high school. Each is a time of enormous change—for students, families, and faculties. Students must say good-bye not only to relationships with others, but also to a childhood self. Parents must discover new ways to be responsible, caring guides for young people who are no longer children but are not yet mature enough to be on their own. Faculty often feel undermined by students' restlessness, loss of interest in school, or general sense of upheaval.

But along with turmoil comes an exciting awakening to the possibility of larger purpose and deeper meaning in life. Adolescents ask the big questions: Who am I? Do I have a purpose? Is there a God? How can people who love you hurt you? What happens after you die? Many experience the energy, yearning, and wonderings that accompany spiritual awakening.

Often dismissed as "hormones," these powerful feelings need to be channeled so that they can be expressed in relatively safe ways. Without appropriate support, potentially creative energies may be diverted into depression or violence. Guided by caring, responsible adults, young people can blossom with character, compassion, and the capacity to make decisions that serve their own growth and the health of the community.

School-Based Rites of Passage

Looking at the principles and practices that are common to initiation in many cultures, we

see that a rite of passage is a structured process, guided by adults, in which young people

- become conscious about the irrevocable transition that they're undergoing;
- are given tools for making transitions and separations;
- are initiated into the new capacities required for their next step; and
- are acknowledged by the community of adults, as well as by their peers, for their courage and strength in taking that step.

Two school programs illustrate these principles in action: the Senior Passage course, a one-semester curriculum for high school seniors that has been implemented for more than 15 years in settings ranging from big-city private schools to inner-city and small-town public schools, and ROPE (Rites of Passage Experience), a yearlong program for 8th grade students implemented in public schools around the country.

The Senior Passage course provides a structure in which to address the many concerns of graduating seniors, allowing them to see the commonality and normality of these concerns. The curriculum guides them to recognize and honor the change that is taking place. Students prepare consciously for the loss of childhood and of friends, mentors, family, and hometown if they are moving away. They learn skills for coping with stress and for making decisions that can minimize stress. Skills, experiences, and attitudes fostered in this course build a foundation for creating satisfying relationships in the new environments that they will enter upon graduation.

The class begins with building a safe classroom community. Then students ground themselves in the present as they speak about what is most important to them right now. Next they learn about their own parents and ancestry and recall important memories, honoring childhood as part of letting it go. The class encourages students to sift through their past, choosing what they want to sustain and what "childish ways" they can begin to release or transform. Then students look toward the future. Themes for discussion councils and dialogues explore issues of body, mind, spirit, emotions, and relationships:

- What does it feel like to know that you will soon be leaving so much behind, to be making decisions about your next step?
- However you define the word *spirit*, tell a story about a time when your spirit was nourished.
- To the extent that you know something about your life purpose or destiny, what do you know? What have been the clues? If you don't know, how does that feel?
- How can we understand intimacy—with friends, family, romantic relationships? How do we set goals and boundaries to create what will really nourish us?
- What is it like to come into manhood or into womanhood at this moment in our culture and in your life? What do women want men to understand about their experience? What do men want women to know?

A retreat is held at least three weeks before the end of the class. An evening gathering just before or after the retreat brings parents and students together. Some programs also

host a ceremony at which faculty and parents honor their graduating seniors. These ceremonies give elders the opportunity to bear witness to the growth of these young people and to welcome them into the adult community. The last three weeks of the course are devoted to helping students integrate what they have learned during the retreat into their ordinary lives, including practicing with one another a variety of ways to say positive, constructive good-byes.

In contrast to the social and emotional focus of most Senior Passage courses, the Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE) follows an academic design. Students are coached and prepared for a 15-minute ceremony at the end of 8th grade, witnessed by their parents, teachers, peers, and community representatives. At this time, they present a brief portfolio and address a critical-thinking problem to demonstrate their progress both academically and socially. Students learn to evaluate and refine their own work and gather feedback from parents, peers, and faculty so that their portfolio will ultimately reflect their best efforts. The portfolio process highlights presentation, communication, and decision-making skills that will serve students not only in high school, but also in the future.

English teacher Colleen Conrad at Lincoln Junior High School in Fort Collins, Colorado, focuses the entire 8th grade English curriculum around the ROPE question: What am I now prepared to contribute to society? Each student responds to the core question in a unique way:

If I could take something from Elie Wiesel in *Night* and put it into my life so I could make a difference, I would take his strength and his hope. He never gave up. I could use those qualities. Then I could believe that a change can happen. I can believe that one person can make a difference.

If I could take something from George in *Of Mice and Men*, I would take his absolute loyalty and love. Then I could make a difference in the lives of people that matter to me and be as fierce and protective of them as he was of his friend.

Colleen guides the exploration of the question through four major units:

1. An autobiography enables students to identify their own qualities and abilities. After reading stories from ethnic literature, they research the country of their ancestors and write about their family, friends, and important personal memories. They describe what they think they'll be like 10 years from now and what they need to do to reach that goal.
2. A unit on bias and discrimination involves reading, writing, presenting, and discussing. Later, students design a "personal belief statement" that publicly declares how they intend to view and treat others.
3. A poetry unit asks students to explore who they are, how they relate to their world, and from where they get their sense of identity. After reading poems from many cultures, they write one of each type, dealing with such themes as ethnic pride, childhood lessons, influential elders, fear, disappointment, anger, and celebration.
4. In the final unit, "man's inhumanity to man," literature and videos take students through historical examples and then situations in their own

town in which inhumanity was practiced. Their last major composition before their rite of passage asks them to discuss why such abuses have taken place and whether they feel that they have a personal responsibility to stand up and oppose inhumanity.

Fulfilling a Need

The last decade has seen a growth of interest in creating healthy rites of passage. Rich resources—anthologies, videos, curriculums—are available to guide educators and parents in creating a safe and healthy rites of passage program that is appropriate for their school community (Kessler, forthcoming). It might be an additional course such as Senior Passages or a 9th grade "Transitions" course. Some schools integrate the theme and the process of initiation into the entire curriculum; others make such a program a requirement for the completion of middle school.

An English class might use the unifying theme of "coming of age" for a literature unit. Science teacher Doug Eaton at West Albany High School in Albany, Oregon, has created a course, "Society and Nature," that integrates the senior passage curriculum with the study of geology. This elective also meets district character education standards. Schools that are not ready to commit the time and resources involved in an entire course can incorporate the elements and the principles of rites of passage into a retreat.

Young people are yearning for adults to care for their hearts and souls as much as they care about their academic success and athletic prowess. Although it is not always easy to incorporate such courses into schools, to do so is deeply rewarding. Rites of passage meet a need in our young people, and they renew the community as a whole. Initiation may transform a girl into a woman and a boy into a man, but it also strengthens the community by adding new adults who have much to contribute, who are responsible carriers of the culture.

I believe that the health of future generations, and of our democracy, depends on a new commitment to our young as they strive to join us as adults—a commitment to listen, to learn, and to teach what we have learned about the journey to personal wholeness and about the creation of a caring community.

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Author's note: Originally called the senior "Mysteries" course, Senior Passage was created by Jack Zimmerman and later refined for the Crossroads School in Santa Monica, California, by teams of educators in Colorado and New York. ROPE was originally developed by the Walden III school of Racine, Wisconsin, and has been used in middle schools in New Mexico and Colorado as well.

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