

Rites of passage include the intentional design of opportunities for children to experience wonder and awe.

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Coming of age and awakening to spiritual consciousness through rites of passage

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ALL CHILDREN HAVE an innate need to engage in experiences that precipitate a spiritual awakening. Parents and community institutions (school, youth and family agencies, civic and faith organizations, government, and others) need to take on roles and responsibilities that support this awakening.

Pathways to spirit

Rites of passage have been a human pathway to such spiritual consciousness for more than ten thousand years. Yet in contemporary American communities, few socially sanctioned, community-based rites of passage exist with enough breadth and depth to have an impact on an individual's identity and sense of community. The void created by this lack of guidance toward deeper meaning during

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coming of age can contribute to such problems as cynicism, materialism, substance use, and violence.

The Rite of Passage Experience

The Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE) is a three-phase, six-year youth and community development process that integrates ancient symbols and contemporary youth and community development strategies to create a powerful coming-of-age process for children within the entire community.

Although ROPE has prescribed elements, the elements work together more as a structure for fostering a collaborative process within a community. Thus, its most distinguishing feature is not its program elements but its ability to mobilize a community, within a common language and shared emotional experience, to create and sustain a community-focused rite-of-passage initiative.

There are three phases to a ROPE. Phase I (the transition from primary to secondary school) focuses community, parent, student, and school attention on children's separation from elementary school, the beginning of their separation from parents, and the importance of these transitions. A core curriculum of life skills prepares students for the complex challenges ahead. An initial orientation fosters the opportunity for awakening to spirit.

Phase II (middle school) intentionally creates ways of connecting youth to the concepts of transformation and transcendence through play by systematically guiding youth into positive leisure-time activities. When children find their bliss, their spark, this experience can serve as a powerful protective factor and promote health for their entire lifetime.

Phase III (high school) systematically guides youth into community service. High school students serve as ROPE facilitators in phase I and mentors for younger students, guiding middle school students into positive leisure-time activities and helping them make a safe transition to high school.

A sense of awe and wonder

A key ingredient in ROPE is the design of intentional opportunities for children to experience a sense of wonder, awe, and connection to things perceived to be greater than themselves in ways that contribute to their spiritual development.

In phase I, an initiation event is central. Parents and students are “summoned” to an important evening meeting by the principal of their school, the town’s mayor, or another identified community leader. The children are separated from their parents and join in an emotionally engaging experience that awakens them to their impending transition to adulthood, promotes a sense of connection and wonder, and introduces the expectations of their community. Parents are engaged in a presentation about the challenges of this coming-of-age transition, the function of the Rite of Passage Experience, and their roles and responsibilities within the process.

In one dramatic initiation event, a faith community awakened their eleven- and twelve-year-old children from their beds on a Saturday night. Community elders accompanied them to a forest, where they sat around a campfire talking about coming of age, the ROPE process, and the community’s expectation for their transformation and transition to adulthood. The children began a process of reflection and dialogue and engaged in individual and group problem-solving challenges. At sunrise the initiates and elders returned to their faith community’s house of worship, where their parents and the congregation greeted them, acknowledged the beginning of their transformation to adulthood, and conducted a sunrise worship service.

In this way, the transformation and transcendence of the children begins and is honored and celebrated by the children’s community. A quotation from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry indicates something of the way the process works: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.¹”

Note

1. de Saint-Exupéry, A. http://thinkexist.com/quotation/if_you_want_to_build_a_ship-don-t_drum_up_people/170927.html.

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