

Money Can't Buy Me Love

*“The best teachers are those who show you where to look,
but don't tell you what to see.”*

—Alexandra K. Trenfor

What would we be doing when institutions that matter in the lives of children were reframed as places of initiation? Institutions like schools, civic and government organizations and services along with recreation, cultural and faith centers would all be connected as a whole village to raise their children. The bottom line is saving money, saving our children and strengthening a community that nourishes life for all.

Historical evidence of rites of passage goes back 30,000 years. No species will maintain a behavior for that long unless it served survival. Evolution is the best evidence-based approach to educating and helping children come of age. Teaching children values, ethics and behaviors that inform and guide expectations for their behaviors strengthens a community's resiliency and adaptability, hence survival. We've known that for millennium. We need a real paradigm shift. We know how. But, do we have the will?

They Really are Custodians

The necessary paradigm shift reframes the story and all the characters within the story. For example: when institutions are seen as places of initiation roles and titles change. Those formerly called “janitors” would be renamed as *custodians*. Most schools may already employ “custodians” whose job it is to maintain school cleanliness and related tasks. In the new story their role, as “custodian” would truly be to “be responsible for something valuable and upholding the values of the school.”

All students within a school would have different roles and increased responsibility for taking care of all aspects of the physical structure. The custodian would be more like the traditional role of guidance counselor or social worker. Yes, there would need to be people who really do know how to take care of the school facility, but students would perform the majority of the work.

One of the best ways to change the climate of a place to one of caring, respect and civility is to change the nature of people's relationship to the place—both the physical structure and environment. It has been said that; “children must learn to love the Earth and consider it sacred before we expect them to pick up trash, recycle and care for nature.” The same holds true for schools and other public places where both children and adults go. Engaging people in the design of public buildings and spaces strengthens their relationships to these places. This helps to create meaningful connections between people

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and the places they live and work, and to each other. Public places, especially schools, should be designed, built and cared for by the public in measures that are appropriate and within practical consideration of safety and technical knowledge necessary. The structure we presently have in place to design public spaces may unwittingly alienate people from these public spaces rather than connect them in ways that can nourish life.

Lessons from Swimming

Many people who have taken swimming lessons whether from the American Red Cross or any organized institution will know the term “Buddy.” The “Buddy System” is widely accepted as essential to safeguard against drowning. The American Red Cross says: “Always swim with a buddy; do not allow anyone to swim alone. Even at a public pool or a lifeguarded beach, use the buddy system!”

The story of community-oriented rites of passage is to install and practice the principles of the “Buddy System.” Everyone today, not just children are experiencing significant challenges in living. Today life is difficult and coming of age is fraught with danger for more and more children. Danger not only in the sense of physical safety, but emotional and psychological safety as well. Coming of age, becoming an adult is like moving into deeper and deeper water.

Just as with swimming if we institute systems where everyone has at least one other person who can look out for them, be there during good times and bad, be a “buddy” the dangers of drowning would be greatly reduced. And, I’m not just talking about a buddy system for children and youth, but one where adults and parents within a community also have a buddy. This is an essential characteristic of a community-oriented rite of passage.

Feelings of loneliness, alienation and disconnection are an insidious and subtle consequence of contemporary society. Community-oriented rites of passage strengthen the bonds between people in community through reciprocity between the individual and community that serves survival. Although the above *lessons from swimming* might appear trite and simple wouldn’t this modest change in consciousness and practice promote the kind of compassion and caring that could contribute to communities that nourish life?

The solution of adult problems tomorrow depends upon the way we raise our children today. There is no greater insight into the future than recognizing when we save our children, we save ourselves.

Margaret Mead
Culture and Commitment, 1978