

Adulthood Rites of Passage

Introduction

In the past, in many primitive cultures, rituals to initiate adolescents into adult status in the community served as very important rites of passage for young men and women. Only a small minority of young adults in the United States today participate in young adulthood rites of passage. Those of the Jewish faith participate in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration. We currently have no secular rituals to assist young adults in making the transition to full adult citizens in our society. I believe very strongly that we are neglecting some very important needs by not having such rituals.

After doing some reading about what adulthood ceremonies were like historically, and giving some serious thought to what functions they need to serve in the here and now, I have concluded that it would be most workable for emerging young adults to participate in two adulthood rites of passage. The first ceremony would happen at the age of thirteen, and the second one at eighteen.

At thirteen, young people begin the stage of young adulthood; age eighteen is the end of young adulthood, and the beginning of full adulthood. I have thus designed a separate ceremony for each of these passages. The ceremonies are just examples; readers are encouraged to use these ceremonies as food for thought in designing their own rituals.

A 13-Year-Old Rite of Passage

The major purpose of a thirteen-year-old ceremony is to acknowledge that the child has reached or will soon reach physiological maturity. There are two components to this physiological maturity. The first is fairly obvious: the young person at around this age attains reproductive maturity. Thus, issues of emerging sexuality need to be dealt with. Teenage sexuality is, of course, a confusing issue, so I want to address it in some depth.

Most current day parents with teenage children were raised with Victorian-like attitudes about sex. Few of us had parents who openly discussed sexuality with us. Many of us probably had mothers who didn't even know what an orgasm was for most of their lives. Most of us were raised within a Christian framework and taught that sex was not permissible outside the context of marriage.

On the other hand, by the time we were seventeen or eighteen, the scientific community had brought our generation revolutionary birth-control methods and legalized abortion, and many liberal people were proclaiming that a new age of sexual freedom was dawning. Most of us had sex before we were married, though sometimes the old messages in our heads made us feel guilty about it.

As we began raising our own children, we were bombarded with more confusing information about sexuality. We learned that a significant number of Catholic priests were guilty of sexually molesting young boys in their parishes, and that a good many Protestant ministers had been involved in clandestine affairs. It also became apparent that there could be "sex scandals" written about a frightening large number of American families -- more people are stepping forth every year to confess that, as children, they were sexually molested by their parents or relatives. Much to everyone's surprise, AIDS, a fatal sexually transmitted disease, with no cure, surfaced. And, lastly, despite readily available highly effective birth-control and sex education there seems to be more teenage pregnancies now than in past generations. In short, it's been a very mind-boggling couple of decades with regard to sexuality.

So, given all we have experienced and observed about sexuality in our lifetimes, what do we want to tell our teenagers about sex? Does the development of AIDS mean that we must return to celibacy until marriage? Are revolutionary birth-control methods useless for preventing teenage pregnancies because teens are not responsible enough to use it? Despite AIDS, and the current rate of teenage pregnancy, I propose that teenagers be given permission to become sexually active. Let me see if I can back up this admittedly controversial position.

It saddens me greatly that most adults never take the time to examine the reasons for the teenage pregnancy rate, and just assume it stems from irresponsibility. I believe most teenage pregnancies stem from causes other than the teenagers being too irresponsible to use birth control. By my observation, a substantial portion of the teenage pregnancy statistics are economically disadvantaged young women from extremely dysfunctional families. Do these young women get pregnant because they are too irresponsible to use birth-control? No, most of these pregnancies are intentional. For these young women, pregnancy is often a survival tactic. If you grow up in a dysfunctional family in the ghetto, you do not envision graduating from high school, going to college, and getting a good job. Even though financial aid may be available to kids from these kinds of families, few of them take advantage of it. These kids do not get encouragement from their parents in regards to job/career goals because their parents are too incapacitated by alcoholism, drug addiction, poverty or mental illness to direct their kids to a healthy future. Thus, these young women end up deciding that they will be better off having a baby and receiving A.D.C. benefits than the other options they see for themselves: slinging burgers, tacos, or doughnuts or working at K-Mart for \$5.00 hour. At least on A.D.C. they will have medical insurance for themselves and their children. So, poor women often get pregnant, not out of ignorance about birth-control or lack of discipline, but because they see having a baby as the best option for their lives from their tragically dysfunctional vantage point. If people want young poor women to stop having babies, society needs to intervene in their lives at an early age.

There are other deliberate reasons for teenage pregnancy. Adolescents who have serious self-esteem problems get pregnant because they believe a baby will be a source of love. However, the fact that teenagers

who have serious psychological problems get pregnant does not mean that the majority of teenagers who do not suffer these serious self-esteem problems cannot engage in sex without getting pregnant.

I propose that another significant portion of teenage pregnancies is made up of kids whose parents gave them very half-hearted support in regards to their sexuality. The typical way I've seen parents talk to their teenagers about sex is to say something like "I know you're going to have sex; all kids do these days. Just don't tell me about it and don't do it in my house." Or parents tell thirteen-year-olds, "You're not ready for sex yet; wait a few more years." But then they never seem to go back at fifteen or sixteen and say, "I think you're old enough to handle sexuality now, can I help you get some birth-control?" **Most teenagers receive, at best, a grudgingly given tolerance in regards to sexuality.** Few parents give their teenagers whole-hearted permission to become sexually active, along with concrete guidance on how to do it safely.

Thus, despite a supposed liberalization about sexuality in this country, most teenagers are left struggling with guilt and confusion about the issue of sexuality. Guilt, confusion and birth control do not go together, plain and simple. If you talk to teenagers who become pregnant about why they ended up pregnant many of them will say things like: "We never intended to have sex," or "We just got carried away," or "It just happened." The majority of teenagers slip into having sex without really acknowledging to themselves that they have become sexually active. They are reluctant to admit their desire/need for sex because, though they are fascinated and curious about sex, they are ashamed about their desires too, especially girls. I maintain that teenagers must receive full approval from their parents to become sexually active in order to explore their sexuality in a conscious and responsible manner.

I hope that some of us will step forth to carry the "sexual revolution" a step further. It is time to overcome the haunting apprehensions we have about sexuality (instilled in us by Christianity) and embrace sexuality as a beautiful, in fact, Divine part of ourselves. If we did that, I think we would be much more able to see that sex should be a part of teenagers' lives too. Teenagers are physiologically mature, and with that maturity comes strong sexual urges. It was not so long ago in the history of the human race that people were considered full-grown adults at the onset of puberty and given their own caves/huts to begin a family. It is absurd to think that human beings can wait until marriage to experience their sexuality when there is now usually a ten year gap between physiological maturity and economic/educational readiness for marriage.

I believe we can allow teenagers the freedom to enjoy sexuality and teach them how to do that without unwanted pregnancies if we introduce them to sexuality in a healthy, affirming manner. I believe the most sensible way that parents can communicate **a whole-hearted permission** to their teenagers in regards to exploring their sexuality is to have a "young adulthood" ceremony in which the issue of sexuality is addressed. Discussing sex in a public ceremony sends a much more powerful endorsement than talking about it behind closed doors in hushed tones. By including other adult members of the community in the process, the young person hears, not only from his/her parents, but also from his/her community that sexuality is a very positive part of human existence, as long as it is practiced in a responsible manner.

I do not intend to be claiming that we can create a society where all teenagers are sexually active and there are zero pregnancies. However, considering how high the teenage pregnancy rate is currently, when we are not giving our teenagers adequate permission to be sexually active, I certainly think we should consider granting them permission, showing them how to engage in sexuality in a healthy and responsible manner, and see if this strategy decreases the pregnancy rate.

Let me now address AIDS briefly. Many parents are more worried about AIDS than they are about pregnancy at this point in history. AIDS is fatal, pregnancy is not. Obviously AIDS is not something to be taken lightly. But the question is: Does the risk of AIDS warrant denying teenagers their sexuality? There is a real hysteria about AIDS in this country right now. Many parents are terrified that if their children become sexually active, they will contract AIDS. I was recently asking an acquaintance of mine how she was going to deal with the emerging sexual maturity of her young teenager. She informed me she was going to take him over to the local hospice and show him all the people dying of AIDS, to make sure he heeded her advice to not become sexually active.

This kind of reactionary behavior is not how we need to be dealing with AIDS, in connection with teenage sexuality or in regards to our own sexuality. If you are a person that is sincerely interested in making healthy, rational decisions about how you or your teenage children should modify your sexual behaviors, in light of

AIDS, you need to sift through all the garbled statistics and rhetoric and get some unbiased information and statistics.

I do not believe that the risk of contracting AIDS for teenagers choosing heterosexual, non-IV-drug-using partners is high enough to warrant denying them their sexuality. In addition, young people can be taught to use condoms, just as adults can, if they have any doubt as to the H.I.V. status of their partners. I am not advocating that teenagers have sex with the same abandon that people did before the advent of AIDS. However, the information I have examined about AIDS does not lead me to conclude that celibacy until marriage is warranted either.

Now let me return to our original topic: young adulthood ceremonies. My sense is that a young adulthood ceremony should happen on a young person's 13th birthday. Few teenagers are sexually active before the age of thirteen, thus this ceremony could help ensure that the young person will have received healthy information about sexuality before becoming sexually active. This ceremony is not meant to imply that all thirteen-year-olds should immediately take a lover. I don't think adults should try to designate a specific age of readiness for sex, because every young adult is different. Some may be ready at fourteen, and some not until eighteen. Fifteen or sixteen will probably be the average. This ceremony simply states "You will soon decide to explore your sexuality," and leaves the choice of when up to the young adult.

There is another aspect to the emerging physical maturity of the young adult, besides sexuality/fertility, that is far too often overlooked. The human brain also reaches full maturity at this age. (It's amazing how God/Goddess plans things so intelligently, isn't it?) At approximately the age of twelve or thirteen, a human being's brain is fully capable of adult reasoning. Developmental psychologists all have their particular theory and nomenclature to describe how children progress from one stage to the next, but all the theories conclude that at about the age of twelve or thirteen, children become capable of analyzing data, utilizing inductive and deductive reasoning, etc. in as complex a manner as adults. This is not to say that people do not continue to get wiser as they mature; they certainly do. Experience and acquired knowledge help people to utilize these intellectual capabilities better. However, this physiological maturity of the brain is an important step in maturity. All a young adult needs from that point forward is the freedom and opportunity to practice using those newly acquired intellectual capacities and that is what an adulthood rite of passage is all about!!!

An adulthood ceremony prompts parents and community members to take note of the fact that this is no longer a child, incapable of dealing with his/her environment without the supervision of an adult. This is a young bird whose wings need to be regularly exercised so that it may learn to fly and fend for itself. Thus, a major function of an adulthood ceremony should be to help the family outline a plan to provide the young person with some space and freedom to continue on his/her journey towards full adulthood. The parents and young adult need to discuss new responsibilities and expectations within the family, and address new freedoms, i.e., curfews, dating privileges, input into family decision making, etc. This ceremony can help them begin this process.

Something else that needs to be addressed in an adulthood ceremony is the fact that the process of "separation" of the child from the apron strings is scary, and a little painful for both the child and the parents. I firmly believe that when a family is able to verbalize and acknowledge their fears, frustrations, and confusion about achieving this new, confusing stage in their relationship, they are better able to adjust to the changes without serious emotional trauma.

Let me now address the logistics of the ceremony. I interviewed several liberal families in the process of writing this chapter for their suggestions (thankfully there are at least a few families out there who respect their teenager's needs for sexuality). The kids liked the idea of a public ceremony. However, they also said they would want the opportunity to have some discussion about sexuality on a one-on-one basis before the ceremony with someone other than their parents. That made a lot of sense to me. Therefore, I recommend the following: The young person should pick an elder of his/her community to serve as his/her resource person through this initiation rite (males would pick a male and females a female person.) This resource person could be an older cousin, sibling, uncle/aunt, friend of the family, etc. Neither parent should serve as the elder, because the young person needs to be developing some separation from his/her parents at this point in his/her development, and doing some bonding with other adult members of his/her community.

It would be the elder's responsibility to answer the young person's questions/concerns about sexuality. They would meet together several times before the ceremony. The elder would discuss all of the following subjects with the young person: disease prevention, birth control, appropriate age differences between sexual partners, mutual consent, sexual harassment and treating one's sexual partners with respect and consideration. During the ceremony, the chosen elder would be the person to accept the young person's pledges to his/her community regarding sexuality.

The facilitator of the ceremony would be an adult picked jointly by the young adult and the parents. He/she could be a friend of the family, a relative, or appropriate member of the community.

During the ceremony the young adult and both parents would outline the changes they planned to make in order to accommodate the young person's emerging maturity. The parents would make vows to give the young person more freedom and respect his/her autonomy. The young person would, in return, pledge to work at deserving the new freedoms by acting maturely. In cases of blended families, step-parents would hopefully participate too.

I chose to design this initiation rite to happen on the thirteenth birthday rather than linking it to the actual date of physiological maturation (menstruation in women and ejaculation of sperm in men) for the following reason. My sense is that young people in our culture have a tremendous amount of discomfort about the issue of puberty, and I think it is important that this ceremony does not exacerbate this. It is important that this focus on the young person's evolving maturity does not cause him/her to feel inadequate because he/she has not acquired his/her menses or ejaculatory functions by a certain age. For some young people thirteen may be a little after they have reached puberty, and for some it will be a little bit before, but it's a good average age to use.

On the following pages you will find the issues I have just discussed worked into a sample ceremony. Of course this ritual is only meant as a model, and families can write their own ceremonies which will meet their unique needs.

The experience of being a "teenager" in this country seems to become more difficult with each passing decade. The rates of teenage suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, etc., are increasing astronomically. Obviously our teenagers need help. Perhaps this young adulthood ritual can help to make the experience of growing up a little less painful and confusing. I have also heard many parents say that living through the teenage years is the most difficult stage of being a parent, so hopefully a ceremony such as this can offer help to parents as well.

A Thirteen-Year-Old Adulthood Initiation Ceremony

Young Adult:

Thank you for being with me on this important occasion of my life. I am honored that all of you are here today.

Facilitator:*

Family and friends, we are here today to celebrate _____'s passage into young manhood/womanhood. Many of you have known _____ since birth, and probably feel a sense of awe when you realize that this child has blossomed and unfolded before your eyes, and now stands as a young woman/man before you. The process by which a human being grows from infancy to adulthood is a fascinating one. Being a participant in that process is a wondrous experience.

Facilitator: *(To parents)*

Parenting is one of the most sacred endeavors one engages in in this lifetime. It is also the most difficult. Committing oneself to provide for the needs of a child for eighteen years is a means of connecting oneself with the greater family of humanity and with the evolutionary cycles of the universe. We rejoice today that both of you accepted the challenge of parenthood thirteen years ago, and as a result can proudly present _____ as a new young adult member of this community.

Facilitator: *(To guests)*

In order that this family may better journey together through their next stage of familyhood, we, as extended family, friends, and community, have come together to provide inspiration, support, and guidance to them as they begin that process. Please witness and celebrate with _____ as he/she bids good-bye to childhood and begins her/his path towards adulthood.

Facilitator: *(To young adult)*

_____, your family, friends, and community have come together today to acknowledge that you have become a young woman/man. The first way that you have changed from a child into a young adult is on an intellectual level. We see that you think, reason, and interact with the world, not as a child, but as a grown up individual capable of complex understanding and a mature outlook.

Facilitator: *(To the parents)*

In order for _____ to continue his/her journey towards full adulthood, s/he will need new freedoms and parameters for interacting with you, and with all the people in his/her life, so that he/she can more fully develop his/her intellectual maturity. No doubt the three of you have discussed the changes you hope to make. I would now ask that you share with us, your family and community, the personal changes you each hope to make as you begin this new stage of familyhood, so that we may support you in those goals.

**The facilitator for this ceremony would be an adult agreed upon by the young person and parents, for example a friend of the family, aunt or uncle, etc.*

Mother:

_____, it is so hard to believe that thirteen years have passed since I carried you, as a fragile bundle, home from the hospital (birthing center). It seems like only yesterday that you were learning to ride a bike and surely

it was only last year that you were starting the third grade. Yet, as I gaze at you before me today, I realize that before me stands, not my little girl/boy, but a young woman/man perched and ready to soar on his/her wings.

I come before family and friends today to pledge to do my best to provide you with the freedom and opportunity to use those new wings of yours to partake in the life experiences that will allow you to become the unique "you" you are meant to be.

We, as a family, are entering a new stage today, and that will require changes from all of us. I've given some thought to some of the changes I think I need to make. I know I must learn to give you more privacy. Not just physical privacy but the privacy to your own thoughts. I'm going to have to get used to hearing "I don't want to talk about it right now, Mom." I must accept the fact that sometimes you will not want my input. Yet, I also reserve the right to give my opinion, and enforce my opinion when I think you are jeopardizing your welfare in a serious way.

On the other hand, I know I need to also learn how to stand out of the way and let you make little mistakes which will leave you with a few bruises, but also some important lessons. The only way you will learn how to figure things out for yourself is by trial and error.

I also want to pledge today that I am open to the idea of granting you more freedoms in terms of staying out later and going more places by yourself. However, you need to demonstrate you can handle more freedom by keeping your grades up in school and coming home on time.

I know we are going to have to develop healthy ways to settle disagreements. I never want you to feel that you are not allowed to express differences of opinion. I doubt you will change my mind in every instance, but I do promise to be open to reasonable compromises.

Father:

_____, like your mother I look at you today and ask myself in disbelief "Can this really be the boy/girl who just yesterday I was teaching to tell time and giving horsy-back rides to?" The years melt into one another. Realizing you are turning thirteen today, I am so thankful that your mother and I took the time to enjoy and experience you at each fascinating age.

I stand here today to pledge my commitment to continue to support you in the next stages of your growth and development. I realize that the things you look to me for are becoming different year by year. In fact, I know that our entire relationship as father/son/daughter has begun a transformation that is very exciting but at the same time confusing and frightening. I am learning to come to grips with the fact that my "fatherly advice" is at times welcome, and at times not welcome. One of the most joyous parts of being a father has been to answer your endless "why?s" all these years. But now I must realize that you want and need to answer some "why?s" through your own life experiences.

I must struggle to accept, and learn to rejoice in, your separateness from me. You are your own person. Though you are a reflection of me to some degree, you are a unique and autonomous person in your own right.

In order for you to become stronger in this new "you" I know that you will need to seek new experiences. Some of those experiences may be painful, but I have to remember that pain is part of your maturation process. Perhaps I can help you to make sense of the pain sometimes.

As we have discussed, your mother and I are going to give you the opportunity to earn money each semester for maintaining a "B" average in school. I think the process of deciding how to spend this money will be a good learning experience for you. We are also increasing your allowance and giving you more responsibility around the house.

Facilitator:

_____, will you speak about the commitments you will offer your family and community in exchange for these new freedoms?

Young Adult:

I am very happy that my parents are willing to be supportive of me and recognize that I need some space at this time in my life. What I have to offer in exchange for the new freedoms I will be given, is a pledge to do the

best I can to be trustworthy and responsible in how I run my life. I am ready to be recognized as a adult and therefore I am willing to try and act in ways that show I am not a child any longer. I would be dishonest if I stood up here and told you all that I'm going to be perfect all the time. For sure I'm going to make some mistakes sometimes. But I'll definitely try to not to make the same mistakes twice! Also, if we disagree about things in the future, I think we all have to try hard not to cop an attitude, so that we can talk things out.

Facilitator:

We have witnessed the commitments you have made to one another to facilitate this transition time in your lives together as a family. We hear that you begin this process with love and positive intention.

Yet, we must remind you that carrying out these commitments, day in and day out, will at times be fraught with frustration, pain, and confusion. The stage of familyhood which you are about to embark upon is a difficult one. Knowing this, we, your family and community, want to take this opportunity to give you our blessings, and share some wisdom and advice that we hope will help you in the coming years. Will you stand together so that we may form a circle around you as a symbol of our love and support?

NOTE:

At this point chairs are moved out of the way and everyone joins in a large circle around the young adult and parents.

Facilitator:

_____, will you lead us in a prayer/blessing/chant for this family? (Whoever has been selected ahead of time by the family will say a "prayer" or blessing to help this family in carrying out their goals).

Facilitator:

Would anyone like to share wisdom/advice with this family?

Guest #1:

Having raised two children, let me emphasize to you that this is not going to be easy. And I guess my advice to you is to remember that fact. If you get to a point, and I'm sure you will, where it's so hard that you wish you never had to lay eyes on one another again, remember to say to yourself "Oh yeah, I remember people telling me it's supposed to be this hard." If you remember this, it will be much easier to forgive yourself and one another, and to keep faith that there is a light at the end of the tunnel--and let me assure you it is a wonderful light. So, basically what I want to say to you is--all parents hate their teenagers sometimes, and all teenagers likewise despise their parents at times. But if you just live with that anger--accept it, express it, and move on from it--you will return to a state of love.

Guest #2:

I second what _____ has said. Plain and simple, it is not easy for teenagers to get along with their parents or vice versa. The generation gap has existed for centuries and I suspect it always will. I would like to offer something that has worked for our family to get you through the rough spots. I suggest, when you're feeling alienated from one another, that you go on a fishing trip, or canoeing. Or take a short trip to visit relatives in another city. Take a break from your normal routine. It can help you rediscover some things you like about one another.

Guest #3:

The most important thing parents and kids can do to build a healthy family is to maintain an atmosphere of openness. This means no subject is defined as "closed". This journey you're embarking on is about re-hashing and re-hashing and re-hashing. Maybe you don't want to have that discussion about later curfews, or doing homework for the fifteenth time, but unfortunately you need to. And even though it's aggravating beyond belief to discuss the same frustrating subjects over and over and over again, if you keep at it, you will slowly come to understand the other person's perspective. As a result of your openness, you will all learn to see the issues a

little clearer. The more you can let go of the "I'm right, you're wrong" approach to discussions, the more you will teach one another, and the richer your experience as a growing family will be. Good communication is the most important thing you will need to get through the ups and downs that lie ahead.

NOTE:

If the discussion gets too lengthy, the facilitator needs to break off the discussion with a comment such as "We need to move along with the ceremony. If there are people who wish to speak who didn't get the opportunity please take time during the reception to share your thoughts with _____, _____, and _____."

Facilitator: (To the young adult)

We will end this ceremony by addressing the other important aspect of your maturity into young adulthood. You are, or will soon be, an adult physiologically, and with this maturity will come a desire to explore your sexuality. This is a very serious matter and thus we want to take this time to address the issue of sexuality with you. Sexual relationships will, without a doubt, be one of the richest experiences of your life. However, they are not something to be taken lightly.

No one can tell you when you are ready to become sexually active, for that is different for every person and only you, by searching within yourself, can know when you are ready to explore your sexuality more fully. However, there are aspects of that decision which can affect your family and community. Thus, as part of this initiation rite to young adulthood, we want to ask you to make a pledge that you will deal with your sexuality in a responsible manner.

You have chosen an elder of this community to discuss the many facets of sexuality with you. Will you ask _____(the chosen elder) to step forward to receive your adulthood pledges?

Young Adult:

_____ will you step forward to help me recite my vows?

Chosen Elder:

You and I have had the opportunity to meet together to discuss your emerging maturity into adulthood. Sexuality is a very important part of adult life, and thus we all want to help you to prepare for this new dimension in your interpersonal relationships.

There are many expressions of sexuality. However, when you participate in sex, which holds the possibility of procreation, there are serious responsibilities involved which it is imperative that you address.

Within your culture, it is extremely difficult to meet the financial obligations of raising a child before you have reached the age of full adulthood, and have attained enough skills to find secure employment. Therefore, until you are able to assume the financial responsibilities of parenthood, we entreat you, as you explore your sexuality, to take whatever precautionary measures are necessary to prevent pregnancy. We also ask you to recognize that most birth-control measures are not 100% reliable, and that therefore you acknowledge that ultimately intercourse holds the possibility of procreation. Do you pledge before your family and community that you will take reliable precautions against pregnancies until you are ready to become a parent, and that you will enter into every sexual relationship with a willingness to deal with an unwanted pregnancy in a mature and responsible manner?

Young Adult:

I do.

Elder:

In addition, sexuality, if not dealt with in a physically healthy manner, can bring about serious life threatening diseases. It is therefore imperative that you take precautionary measures to safeguard against diseases. Will your assure us that you will be responsible about this matter?

Young Adult:

I promise I will be responsible about this.

Elder:

Sexuality is also a very serious endeavor on an emotional level. To be sexually intimate with another human being creates a special closeness, and with that closeness a mutual emotional vulnerability. We would therefore stress to you the importance of dealing with your sexual partners with gentleness, honesty, respect, and caring. We also want to know that you will pick sexual partners who will treat you with due respect. Do you pledge, in the presence of your community, that you will engage in sexuality honestly and respectfully?

Young Adult:

Yes, I do.¹

Elder:

Lastly, we want to say to you that we are available for guidance and support as you enter into this exciting but sometimes frightening state of adulthood.

Elder:

Will the parents please step forward to conclude this ceremony?

[Ceremony ends with some kind of symbolic demonstration of the young adult's new status. For example:]

Facilitator:

[Pours a glass of wine into a brass goblet² Turns towards parents and addresses them.]

"Five years from this day, the three of you will become equals. In a few years _____ will be a full adult member of this community. To symbolize the beginning of that process, will you now take a drink from the same cup?"

[Facilitator passes the goblet to one parent, who passes it to the other, who then passes it to the child, who then gives it back to facilitator.]

Facilitator: *(Turning to guests)*

Let us all now feast and dance together to celebrate this joyous occasion of this family and of this community.³

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

¹ I don't have the teenager saying much during the ceremony because, my sense is, most thirteen-year-olds are pretty shy and quiet, especially in front of a group of people. However, I think there is tremendous power in this ceremony, despite the brevity of the statements.

² I gave a lot of thought about whether I wanted to include the use of alcohol in the rituals in this book. I, as a counselor, am deeply concerned with the very serious abuse of alcohol within our culture. Many peoples' lives are destroyed or diminished because of the ravages of alcoholism. On a personal level, I do not consume

alcohol, even socially, simply because I feel no need to alter my normal thoughts and feelings, I enjoy experiencing them! However, I do accept a drink to celebrate an occasion i.e. champagne etc..

I have chosen to include alcohol in this ritual because I have come to realize that alcohol, in a variety of forms, has been used in ceremony for thousands of years. Thus, it has a joyous history which precedes its pervasive abuse over the past several decades. Those readers who find alcohol unacceptable philosophically, can of course substitute some other kind of non-alcoholic festive beverage i.e. sparkling fruit juice.

³ Since this ceremony is designed to fall on the young adult's thirteenth birthday, birthday gifts are in order. I think presents add a bit of lightness to this rite. The young person may experience some anxiety about standing up in front of family and community and dealing with such serious issues. I suspect the knowledge that one will be rewarded with some extra special birthday presents will make it seem much more worth bearing!

An Eighteen-Year-Old Rite of Passage

Introduction

For centuries, across cultures, an adulthood rite of passage was a major milestone in a young person's life. In primitive cultures, this transition was very clear-cut. There were many obvious changes that happened as a result of being granted adult status into your community. A person often took on a new name, moved into their

own hut, began attending tribal councils, wore dramatically different clothing, etc. The transition to adulthood in a technologically advanced, twentieth century culture is, by comparison, blurred and under-acknowledged.

To begin, our laws create confusion as to when a young person is an adult. You can vote, sign contracts, be drafted into the military, and marry at eighteen, but you can't consume alcohol until several years later. The age at which a young person is capable of being financially independent keeps creeping upward as the educational requirements for jobs continue to increase. Add to all this a failing economy, which is causing more and more young people to remain in their parents' homes while attending college, and it becomes more and more difficult to answer the question "When is a young person considered an adult in this culture?" Conversely, it has become difficult to answer the question "When do parents' responsibilities to economically support their children end?" I believe this blurring of the transition to adulthood is extremely confusing to both the young person and the parents.

Though we, as individuals, cannot control all the sociological factors that make becoming an adult in our culture difficult, there is something we can do to make the transition. **The most important thing that we, as individual families, can do is to acknowledge the fact that the transition is happening, and recognize its importance.** I believe a formalized adulthood rite of passage is the best vehicle for accomplishing this.

The transition to adulthood is a time of tremendous emotional stress within a family. It is a time when everyone within the family must make adjustments, and cope with changes that can be painful and confusing. Everyone is struggling to "let go" of something. The parents must let go of control, and the young person must let go of the security of childhood dependence. This letting go process is never easy.

Both the women's movement and the men's movement have begun to address the need for adulthood initiation ceremonies for both young women and young men. In small numbers, families have begun to reclaim this ancient practice, and adapt it to their modern-day lives. I would like to see this happen on a much broader scale. I hope this chapter will help turn more people on to the idea of initiation rites for young adults, and present some valuable suggestions about how to create meaningful adulthood rituals.

Guideline for Designing an Adulthood Rite of Passage

General Suggestions:

The first question that needs consideration in designing an initiation rite is, who should be present? I strongly recommend that the ceremony include the extended family of the young person, as well as any significant adults/children in his/her community who would be interested in attending. Close friends of the young person, as well as the friends' parents, any adult friends of the family with whom they have a close bond, neighbors, etc. should all be incorporated if possible. The reason it is important for all these people to be there

is that part of the power of an adulthood initiation rite is for the young adult to go away knowing that everyone around him/her has taken note of the fact that he/she is no longer a child. Involving the community is also, sometimes, the only way to push reluctant parents into seeing their son/daughter in this new light. When they see other adults addressing their son/daughter as an adult, it helps prompt them to begin doing the same.

Another consideration is when to have the ceremony. There are several logical times to hold the ceremony. The obvious possibility is on the young person's eighteenth birthday. However, since this often coincides very closely with the time of high school graduation, several families have suggested to me that the ceremony be incorporated into the graduation/open-house party. Otherwise, you would be calling family and friends together twice in a very short period of time, which can present scheduling problems, as well as doubling the expense and planning necessary. This seems like a good idea to me.

Thus, the typical graduation party could simply be redesigned to incorporate a short "adulthood" ceremony within it. It is important to redesign the invitations so that the broader issue of reaching adulthood, rather than just high-school graduation is apparent. For instance:

*Cheryl Moon
invites you to share
in a celebration
of
her graduation to adulthood.*

*Please join her and her family for
feasting, dancing and ceremony.*

Specific How-to's:

In designing a celebration, you are only limited by your imagination. I interviewed several families for ideas. Here are some of their suggestions:

1) Display photographs of the young adult, from age birth to present. Incorporate athletic trophies and ribbons, awards, art work, crafts etc. as well. This will serve as a salute to the young person.

2) One family suggested a very playful and creative way to help celebrate the passage: a "snake dance", to symbolize the passage into adulthood. The eldest person of the party would be first in line. Then all the guests would make a snake line (hands on hips of the person front of you) in order of age. The group would then parade around the yard or hall a few times. (Make sure the music is sedate enough not to wear out the grandmothers and grandfathers). The line of dancers would then pick up the young person on the end of the line to symbolize their entry into adult status in the community. This would be a neat thing for younger children to see. It would be a visual picture of the concept of attaining adulthood: "Someday I will grow up and get to join the dance."

3) Another fun idea suggested is an adaptation of the game "Red Rover". All the adult guests would gather on one side of the yard, and all the children/teenagers on the other side. Then the adult group would yell out "Red Rover, Red Rover do you have a new adult to send over?" The kids would chant the young person's name. Then the young person would dance his/her way over to join the adults, who would engage in some appropriate greeting, such as lifting the young person over their heads and marching around a little. With a little creativity, you could come up with a whole lot of fun ideas.

Specific Issues to Address in an Eighteen-Year-Old Adulthood Ceremony:

Besides all the fun and games, and feasting, I believe there needs to be some serious aspect to the celebration. I think it makes sense to have some short, formalized ceremony, facilitated by an older sibling, aunt or uncle, or friend of the family. Let me outline the issues that need to be addressed.

Issues the Young Person Should Address:

1) It would seem a logical and appropriate time for the young person to give thanks to his/her parents and extended family for the sustenance and support he/she has received growing up. The young person may want to talk about some particular gifts of wisdom that he/she received from the parents that he/she is particularly thankful for. If the parents have given a large graduation gift or a pledge for partial college expenses, appreciation for this could be expressed.

2) Some expression of commitment to both the parents and the broader community to exercise his/her adult freedoms in a responsible manner.

3) Perhaps some announcement of his/her plans, i.e. college, travel, job. What new adventures is he/she off to? If the young person is moving out of the house, this could be announced.

Issues the Parents Should Address:

1) This is a good time to give the young person some "public strokes." It is important for the young adult to hear his/her parents verbalize that they are proud of their son/daughter's accomplishments.

2) The parents should express a commitment to begin treating the young person as an adult, and giving him/her "space" to become his/her own person, sort out his/her own values, and make his/her own goals and plans.

Miscellaneous Details to Include:

1) Providing an opportunity for the friends and extended family present to stand up and say a few words to the parents and/or young adult is a great way to tap into the wisdom/support of the community. However, if it is a large party, the facilitator may have to tactfully direct some of the guests to talk to the family after the ceremony, as this "audience participation" part could get too lengthy. It is also always nice to provide some kind of scrapbook for people to write a short note or letter to the guest of honor. This has the advantage of the young person being able to reread them at a later date.

2) The facilitator should close the ceremony with some kind of statement that this transition is not a "cold turkey" cut-off of support. The facilitator should make reference to the fact the young person should still feel free to turn to his/her family for help at times. It should be made clear that all adults in a community count on help and support from one another for in times of need.

Private Aspects of an Adulthood Initiation Rite:

There are certain aspects of the transition to adulthood that the parents and young person should deal with in private among themselves, and some things the young person may need to do alone.

1) The parents and young person should have a very in-depth discussion about finances. The parents need to define the ways in which they are willing to continue to financially support the young person. For example, they should delineate what part of college/trade school tuition or living expenses they will meet. The parents should also be upfront about whether any support is dependent on any academic performance standards or choice of educational plan. For example, whether they are willing to pay art school tuition, or only for medical school?

Ideally, even things like whether the parents intend to someday help with a down payment of a house. This helps the young person plan a course for his/her life.

2) If the young person is going to continue to live at home (especially if they will not be attending college), "room and board" expenses should be negotiated, as well as curfews, etc. The clearer everyone is about what they expect/want, the easier this transition will be.

3) Some kind of physical act to symbolize the transition that is transpiring between the parents and the young adult may be helpful, too. For example, the young person could treat the parents to dinner as a symbolic first step towards financial independence or partial independence.

4) I have heard a number of people say that they think it is useful for the young person to spend a night or weekend completely alone as part of the initiation rite. Of course, in primitive cultures, this was a common practice. The young person spent a night out in the woods as a test of their adult survival skills and exercise in overcoming fears. You could accomplish this in our modern day culture by having the young person spend a night in a cabin or tent in a rustic campground. The young person could swear off telephones, televisions, stereos, etc. for the evening/weekend and do some serious introspection. Another possibility is some kind of group "Vision Quest" in the wilderness. A variety of organizations offer these kinds of experiences. As people begin to develop this concept, I think a lot of amazing ideas will be generated.

On the following pages is a sample ceremony.

An Eighteen-Year-Old Rite of Passage

Author's Note:

This ceremony is written for an intact "traditional" family. Obviously, this is not the only kind of family that exists in our culture. It is beyond the scope of this book to present sample ceremonies for all possible family constellations. Blended, single parent, gay, and other non-traditional families will know much better than I how best to adapt such a ceremony to meet their unique needs.

Facilitator:

This family has gathered all of us together today to celebrate a very big milestone in their lives. (*Turns to young adult and parents.*)

Facilitator:

For each of you, this day represents both endings and beginnings. For you _____ and _____, it is the end to a responsibility you have shouldered for a very long time. You have protected, nurtured, and guided this

young adult who stands before us through diapers, the alphabet, junior high prom, and a million other life experiences. It is a day to feel a great sense of pride about having brought to completion one of the most sacred jobs a person can undertake. And, though you never stop being a parent, a certain part of your job as parents does in fact end today. You are no longer responsible for this young person. He/she is responsible for his/her own actions and life from now on. And, with this ending, you are also presented with a beginning, a new chapter in your lives. All the time and energy you have devoted to raising this child is now freed up, and you can direct that creative energy into any other endeavor you might choose.

_____, you, as well, are faced today with both an ending and a beginning. Today you say good-bye to the warm, protective security of childhood. You have new responsibilities to shoulder. However, as you leave childhood behind, you also claim new freedoms. You stand ready to explore new horizons. Before you stretches an infinite number of paths, and you are free to decide which one you will walk down. Deciding is a little scary, but it's also very exhilarating.

Facilitator:

With your extended family and friends present as witness, would you like to say a few words to one another on this important occasion of your lives?

Young Adult:

I would like to start by thanking you, Mom and Dad, for all you've done for me. I could never have bought my car without your help. I'd like to also thank you for little things, like coming to my basketball games, letting me have parties, and allowing me to decorate my room in ways you thought were gross. Despite our disagreements, I've always felt that you care a lot about me, and want me to be happy. You've also always been really cool about the parental respect thing. I've seen a lot of families where the parents were constantly demanding respect. But all they were really getting from their kids was obedience. You always allowed me to express my opinions and disagree, and because of the respect you gave me, I respected you. You didn't demand my respect, you earned it by being fair.

You've also taught me a lot about giving and taking. You always challenged me to not just think about what the world has to offer me, but also what I have to offer the world. Of course, I don't know yet exactly what I want to give to the world, but I do know how important it is that I make a contribution. You've also taught me how to face up to my mistakes, and learn from them and go on.

Of course, like any family, we've yelled and slammed doors, and went through days when we didn't like each other too much. But we've always pulled through those bad days, and I think, all in all, we've got a pretty tight family.

There's plenty of things we disagree on, and hopefully we will get better and better at giving each other space to be who we are. I know that we will probably still get in a few fights in the years to come, because we just don't see eye-to-eye on some issues. But I hope and believe that we we'll work out these differences and be able to be friends, despite them. I hope we can always respect one another and work around the disagreements, and appreciate the good stuff underneath.

Mother:

Watching you grow has been an amazing experience. Though, of course, there are difficult aspects to every stage of parenthood, I've loved every "you" that I've come to know over the past eighteen years. I loved the fragile, precious one day old _____, the mischievous three year-old _____, and the wild and crazy fifteen year old you. Living with you has kept me young. Your enthusiasm and energy is contagious.

You are bright and creative, and I know you can be anything you want to be. And I am going to do my best to stay out of the way while you figure out what that is. I'm sure that won't be easy. One of the things I know I'm going to have to keep reminding myself is that when you tell me you don't need me, it doesn't mean you don't love me. You can love me without needing me. In fact that's exactly what's supposed to be happening! It will just take some getting used to.

Of course, as you have continued to become your own person over the past few years, we have come to disagree on a variety of things. We grew up in a very different world than you are growing up in. We were

molded by our experiences, just as you are molded by your experiences. We see the world through very different eyes, and that will always be true. Hopefully, we can each continue to learn from one another's perspectives. If we are both willing to do a lot of listening, I believe we have much to learn from one another year after year.

We are very proud of you, and hope the next few years bring all the exciting and rewarding adventures you could hope for.

Father:

It's a pretty amazing thing to stand eye-to-eye with somebody that I could once hold in one arm! The years sure have flown by! I guess I'll start by saying that I love you, and want, more than anything, for you to be happy. I wish you luck in discovering what you want out of your life. And we will try hard not to hinder you in that process by giving you too much unsolicited advice. Every person you meet will offer you advice about what kind of person they think you should be or what they think you should do with your life. But ultimately, it's your life, and therefore your decision. We hope, and believe, that you will put a lot of thought into the decisions you make.

We hope that you'll come home to visit often, because, though we won't miss your music, we will certainly miss you! The other thing I hope, as I stand here today, is that your mother and I have passed on some of what we have learned in our lives to you, so that you can learn from our mistakes. I've always thought that the age-old dream of being able to take all the knowledge you gather in a lifetime, and go back again and be young, is manifested through what a person is able to pass on to his children. So I hope that you can take some of our wisdom, and combine it with the boundless energy and strength of youth, which you possess, and do great things -- both for yourself and for the world.

Your mother and I have talked with you about the trust fund money now available to you for education/training purposes. We are open to any reasonable proposal for the use of that money, as long as you can demonstrate your plan will lead to some marketable career skills.

Lastly, let me say that a big change has happened as of today. You are no longer accountable to us, and we are no longer responsible for you, but we will always be connected together by our love for one another, and our bonds with one another as family.

Facilitator:

Today we have witnessed the human version of the baby bird leaving the nest, to learn to fly on his own, and find his own worms. And like all young healthy birds, this young bird is plenty anxious to soar on his own wings.

However, it's important that we remember that we are humans, not birds, and it is our nature to continue to be interdependent with one another throughout our lives. Thus, today will not be the last day that ____ receives "parenting." Because even as adults, we continue to need from one another the things that parents provide: nurturing, guidance, support, constructive feedback, sustenance in times of need.

So _____, as you leave the nest of your parents today, we, your extended family and community of friends, want you to know that we are all here for you when you need a shoulder to cry on, or some advice when you're confused. And you likewise, as you mature, will become an integral part of this interdependent community of human beings committed to helping one another to grow and evolve.

Facilitator: *(Turning to guests)*

_____, _____, and _____ would now like to open the floor to any of you who feel moved to address them.

Guest #1:

_____, I can remember when I was eighteen, and everybody kept asking me "So what are you going to do now that you're eighteen?" People were asking me that so often that I finally wanted to say: "I'm just gonna sit here and stare at my navel until it tells me what I want to do, because I sure in the hell don't know what I want to do!" So, don't be afraid to take some time out to figure out what it is you want to do. There are certain things

in life you can't rush, and making big decisions about the direction of your life is one of them. Just try to pick up the clues that life is giving you every day, and put them together, and a course will become clear to you in time.

Guest #2:

The best thing I can tell you is, don't be alarmed if you don't like one another very much for a few years. Don't be surprised if you can't get through an evening's discussion without disagreeing about most every subject that comes up. You'll all like and appreciate one another more in about seven years. Trust me.

Guest # 3:

I'd basically like to support what you've already said to one another. Having lived through this milestone with several of my children, I would reinforce your intentions to give one another some space right now. _____ has, for the last eighteen years, been given invaluable guidance from both of you, as well as from his/her teachers and other people in his/her life. Now it is time for her/him to test out all he/she has learned against the reality of his/her own experiences. If I remember anything about being eighteen, I remember being pretty tired of people telling me things, even if the advice was well intentioned. So, _____ and _____, it's time to practice those hobbies you never had time for, and pursue those goals that you've had on the back burner for awhile. When your services are needed again (and don't worry, they will be), _____ will give a yell. You're a great family. I love you all.

Facilitator:

Well, we're going to wrap this up now. For those of you who didn't get a chance to speak, you'll have plenty of time during the rest of this lovely party to share your thoughts with _____, _____, and _____. We're going to close this ceremony with a toast.

[Toast glasses of wine are passed out to all the guests.]

Facilitator:

[Pours three glasses of wine into the ceremonial brass goblets.]

As all of you can see, I have three identical goblets here. I hereby offer each of you your own glass of wine, because each of you is now a full adult member of this community. Let me toast this moment with some words told to me by a friend's grandmother:

Having children is like being the caretaker of a mystery garden. The garden has been planted with bulbs and seeds of unknown variety. God whispers in your ear to water the plants and give them your tender loving care, so that they will blossom into beautiful, wondrous flowers. It's always a secret as to what kind of flower each bulb will become. But when they bloom, they all have a unique beauty, color and fragrance to add to the garden.

Let's give thanks to the gardeners for helping this flower to bloom, and celebrate this young flower's unfolding!

