



rites of passage in a world that is not flat

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We have known for hundreds of years that the world is not flat, and yet linear thinking is still pervasive in Western culture. An example of this linear orientation is the creation of programs for “fixing” societal issues. “Just Say No!” is a grand example of linear thinking as a driving force in our national policy for adolescent drug prevention (“youth are broken by using drugs”). Many other national efforts announced with great fanfare, like the “War on Drugs” and recently “No Child Left Behind” (“children are broken academically”), are evidence of this trend. Our national policy on child development is directed to “closing the achievement gap” and “raising test scores.”

But what if we decided to focus again on “raising children” and not on “raising test scores”? What might be possible if the linear thinking that drives much of our education, youth, and human development efforts could be shifted toward *systems thinking*? What if, right at our doorstep and under our collective noses, there are long-held ways that helped children transition to adulthood, but have been forgotten? What if we revived those ways and, in the process, we helped communities thrive and become learning villages that could support healthy youth development, human relationships, and civic engagement? What if, in order to achieve these goals, we had to rethink and replace many of our existing beliefs? Would we

have the courage, the will, and the human and economic capital to adopt a new systems thinking paradigm for youth and community development?

There is a long-established way to help children come of age. It has been documented to exist for thousands of years across cultures around the world. The name of this successful method for youth and community development is well known, yet its implications for contemporary applications are largely unexplored. It is known as *rites of passage*.

Rites of passage, if enacted correctly, can provide the necessary elements that foster a sense of connection and the special container to support youth who are coming of age. A central purpose of rites of passage has always been to expand a child’s sense of *self*—moving them from the “*Me*” to the “*We*” as they begin to see their role and responsibility as part of a global system. During the process, children become “learners” and “initiates,” teachers become mentors, and the village has “elders” to guide the rites of passage experience.

Separation, Transition, Incorporation

Belgium anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase “rites of passage” in the early twentieth century to describe a three-phase pattern (separation, transition, incorporation) that he observed in a number of cultures during times of major transition. These times included birth, coming of age, marriage, and funerals. In modernity, especially Western society, rites of passage for children transitioning to adulthood have been weak, non-existent, or unhealthy. Youth development specialists offer evidence that in the absence of community-sanctioned rites of passage, young people will create them for themselves. Self-induced rites of pas-

sage include drug and alcohol use, gang membership, hazing, and bullying.

The three-phase pattern that van Gennep observed in traditional rites of passage began when a child exhibited signs that they were ready to *come of age*. These signals included the onset of menstruation, puberty, changes in behavior and psychology, and other social indicators. The children, called *initiates*, were typically secluded from the rest of the tribe, village, or community—the *separation* phase. They were taken to a special or sacred setting and placed in the charge of community elders, who engaged them at a deep emotional level.

This engagement intentionally induced a state of anxiety or “betwixt and between” in the children during the transition. *Transition* is an intermediate position, not wholly one thing or another, a place of uncertainty and discomfort. It is the phase where lessons are learned and the seeds for a change are planted in the individual. In this heightened emotional state, the children were more attentive, receptive, and able to retain lessons in the essential values and ethics of the culture that inform and guide expectations for behavior. As part of the rite of passage experience, children were put through ordeals to test their mettle, which strengthened their commitment to their culture and community. Through the process, a new personal identity was created.

In the final phase of the rite of passage, *incorporation*, children returned to their village, where they were ceremonially celebrated for beginning their transition to adulthood. The newly initiated incorporated the essential lessons learned and began to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities as healthy adults, able to become contributing members of their village and hence

TEAM TIP

What are the “rites of passage” for members of your team or organization? What are the different phases that people experience, and how are they marked?

insuring the continuity and continuation of their culture and community.

Contemporary rites of passage occur in many traditions and a variety of forms, including the Jewish Bar/Bat Mitzvah (at 13-years-old), Quincerañera (for females in Latin American culture to celebrate their 15th birthdays), Africentric forms, and the vision quests of our First Nation people. But in general, in contemporary society, the process of *incorporation* occurs over time; as young adults gain in maturity, knowledge, and skills, they take on more responsible and productive roles in the community.

A Modern Rite of Passage

What would a modern rite of passage look like, one that facilitates the healthy transition of young people through adolescence? One organization in Connecticut, the Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family, & Community Services, Inc., has designed a process focused around helping kids discover the value of “learning well in school.” Rarely do schools focus attention on the complex human systems, both internal and external, that affect a child’s readiness for learning in that context. By exposing adolescents to the prerequisite elements necessary for learning well in school, the “Initiation of Scholars[®]” (part of the Rite Of Passage Experience[®], ROPE[®]) process positively influences their perceptions, behavior, and functionality in that environment and beyond.

The process includes an experience of navigating through unknown terrain—quite literally. Students are given instruction in how to use a compass and find their way on an orienteering course in the woods. (Orienteering uses a series of compass bearings to provide direction to participants, who travel distances measured in “paces,” which are calibrated footsteps.) This activity serves as a metaphor and provides many “teachable moments.” The students work in groups of three with a parent, but not their own parent. Once they go into the woods, the parent chaperone is not permitted to say anything. The children have to find their way using the lessons learned and practiced immediately

before. They could get lost. They could fall or run into brambles and branches.

Lessons are learned. Parents learn of the challenges of letting go—giving children the opportunity to accomplish challenges on their own, even in dangerous situations. Children learn the key attitudes, skills, and experiences that will help them to learn anything. They find that if they employ these skills effectively, they will experience satisfaction, feelings of confidence and competence, have fun, and be successful. These skills are transferable to anything else they have to learn in the multiple environments they are coming of age within.

The celebration of a rite of passage is renewing for the entire community. A child’s public expression of and commitment to a community’s values, attitudes, and beliefs reinforces those important elements for the entire community.

The students then participate in conversations (using methodologies such as the World Café and Appreciative Inquiry) related to essential questions for learning well in school, such as, “What if we all directed ourselves to becoming ‘scholars’—what could be possible? What are the key ingredients that helped us to learn how to use the compass to not get lost and be successful at finding our way in the woods? Which of these key ingredients do we need to pay attention to learn well in school?” Student groups typically come up with and discuss 40 to 60 different ingredients, such as doing homework, paying attention in class, not fooling around, asking questions, etc.

Once the students have engaged in these conversations about important questions and have identified the key ingredients for learning well in school, they complete a “Scholars Work Plan” (SWP). The SWP is one of several tools created to continually foster key connections and a systems thinking orien-

tation. From the large list of ingredients, each student selects five or six items he or she judges to be in need of improvement and designs a plan for taking corrective action. In small groups, the students work together creating and sharing their plans. The plans are reviewed with mentors and adults in their lives. The student and each of these people sign the Scholars Work Plan, making a commitment to support the student in learning well in school.

The entire process culminates in a “Ceremony of Commitment,” a rite of passage. The school community comes together to hear what the initiates learned in the program. The students make a presentation on what they experienced, what they learned, why the lessons learned are important, and how they will put these lessons into action in the service of their social and academic development and for the benefit of the community. The principal or other adult dignitary leads students in a pledge committing them to becoming good students.

The celebration of a rite of passage is renewing for the entire community. A child’s public expression of and commitment to a community’s values, attitudes, and beliefs reinforces those important elements for the entire community. A child’s coming of age presents an opportunity for adults to examine and recommit themselves to their social and cultural heritage. In this light we say, “*it takes a whole child to raise a village.*”

Plans are put into action. Communication feedback methods are established for each individual student. The student groups continue daily conversations throughout the year that focus on advancing skills for living and learning well in school. By reviewing feedback from multiple sources (teachers, parents, high school mentors, other students, etc.) that guides ongoing corrective action within a supportive and caring environment, students are able to achieve academically and function effectively within a variety of environments.

Ancient Systems Thinking Methods

Rituals, by their very nature, are ancient systems thinking methods.

They acknowledge and invite connections between forces seen and unseen, which are brought to bear on circumstances that impact individuals and their village. They compel all of one's senses to collectively awaken and attend to resources within one's self and the Universe. Rituals are a call for connection. They are frequently the enactment of a story or myth that links the present with the past in the service of the future.

The rite of passage framework accepts that although children are naturally curious, they need to be connected with multiple resources and environments in order for them to achieve academic success. A systems thinking orientation, such as the Initiation of Scholars strategy, provides a foundation for learning well in an environment that is often reductionist in nature. It conveys lessons in the essential values and ethics of the culture that inform and guide life-affirming and sustaining behavior for

the health of the individual and survival of the tribe.

The world is not flat. What if we were bold enough to shift to systems thinking in our youth development efforts? What could be possible now if we focused on raising children through rites of passage? ■

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For Further Reading

For further information and citations for this article, please contact David at thecenter@rope.org, and visit www.rope.org.

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