



THE CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF YOUTH, FAMILY & COMMUNITY SERVICES



Rites of Passage: Pathways to Spirituality for Adolescents

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ALL INFANTS ARE BORN with a natural curiosity that makes them budding theologians or philosophers. In their wailing cries at birth, "Whhaaaaaa...", we can hear the formative sounds of wonderment - "Whhhaaaaat am I doing here?!"

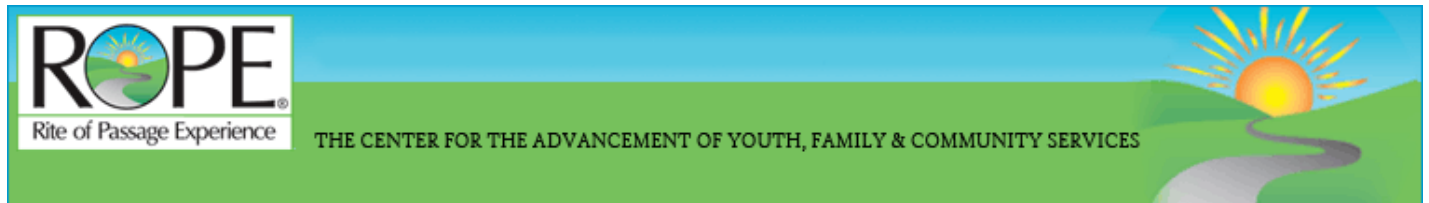
From a very young age, children - even toddlers and preschoolers - are enchanted with wondering about the universe and their place in it. Indeed, this wonderment and a yearning to make sense of and connections with the universe are part of the essential human nature. This nature is the foundation of our spirituality, which I define as having a deep, joy-filled sense of connection with and wonder about the world and universe.

My favorite story to illustrate an early experience of awakening, wonderment, and its potential results is about Albert Einstein. When he was a child of about four or five his father showed him a compass. He was excited and spontaneously began to wonder about why and how the needle moved in such a peculiar way, which did not conform to his experience of the world where you had to touch something to make it move. He recalled years later that that experience made a lasting impression and awakened him to wonder that there must be something hidden behind everything. Einstein frequently spoke about that moment and his first sense of wonderment and as a result he wanted to know what God was thinking ("Einstein's God").

Adolescent Awakening to Spirituality

WITH A RELATED VIEW of childhood and adolescence, an old Yiddish story, with roots in the teachings from Talmud, relates that while we are in the womb, we know everything there is to know about the universe, but that we forget it all at birth. After a number of years of wondering about it, at the time of puberty there is a special opportunity - and a need - for an awakening to that original knowledge. Rabbi Steinsaltz (p. 25) says:

There is a point - you might call it a theological point - as follows: every child is born with a soul. The time of bar mitzvah is not just an occasion for celebration; celebrating is completely irrelevant. It is the



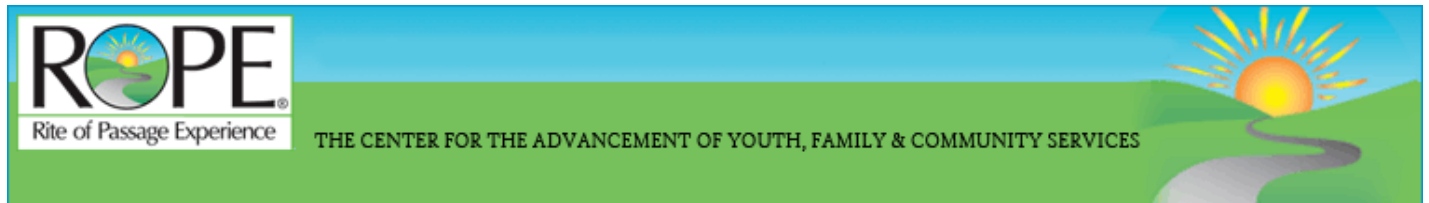
time of the awakening of the soul. A sage in Jewish tradition has written that there are periods of life when an awakening occurs, and one such is the bar mitzvah age, basically the onset of puberty. Awakening at that time is both physical and spiritual.

His idea, which I share, is that as they grow, young adolescents will, consciously or unconsciously, begin searching for opportunities for "awakening." They'll feel during puberty and early adolescence an inner yearning, a "call." A young person may hear the "call" during a time of solitude, perhaps laying in bed at night, and wonder, with great intensity and anxiety, about how they will fit into the world. "The universe is so big and I am so small - what does this all mean? How do I fit into this world? What will I do when I grow up? Who am I?"

This is the opening to an awareness of a larger order of magnitude of the world than first imagined, an opening that can lead a young person toward career and vocation, toward contribution and purpose as he or she moves into adulthood. In Einstein's case, from his initial awakening and wonderment, he went on a quest that began as a search for what "God was thinking" that resulted in some of the most astounding discoveries that impact how we have come to understand the world and universe today. An awakening can have a profound impact on the individual and entire world.

As they grow, children pursue hobbies, sports, and academic knowledge to gain a sense of competency and mastery, both developmental hallmarks of early adolescence. But, in most cases, these sorts of activities will not respond to the inner call for deeper awareness that relates to the questions that center on the child's search for connections and knowledge about their place in the Universe. These questions are at the foundation of their search for meaning, purpose, identity, and a sense of self. And this identity and sense of self must be forged in relationship to the larger community of people, the natural world, and the greater Universe.

I believe that as adults, it is incumbent upon us to help young people create a relationship with Spirit, however that is defined and known, and with those adults and peers who can help open a door for them to make connections with their spiritual side, the side that opens to the possibilities of theology and spirituality. The wonderment and pursuit of a joy-filled sense of connection with the Universe and all within it is the foundation for a fuller and whole sense of self. Coming to terms with this is one of the developmental challenges of adolescence.



Fostering the Awakening

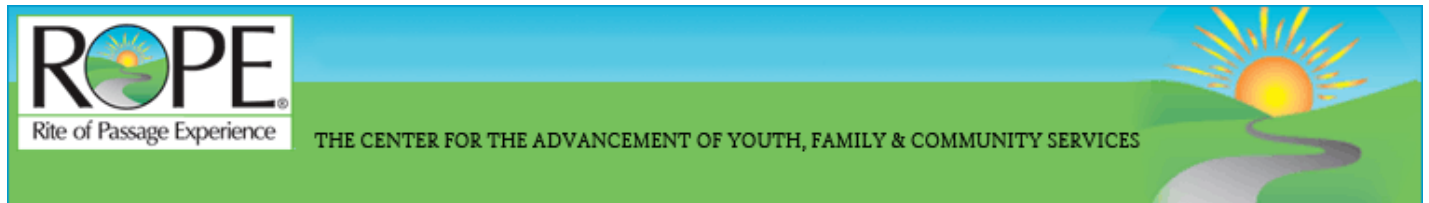
HUMAN BEINGS CREATE RITUALS as a way to understand the world and their place in it. The rituals we create - from baptisms and brisses, to birthdays, to marriages, to wakes and funerals - help us make our lives more meaningful. They allow us to welcome new members to our families, celebrate the milestones in our lives, and remember loved ones who are no longer with us. It facilitates a rebalancing and homeostasis in both the individual and community when change and transition occur.

Among the most important rituals in any society are those that acknowledge and celebrate transitions, including the passage from childhood to adulthood. Known as rites of passage, these rituals are what a community, culture, and/or faith community uses to respond to the children's call for an "awakening" during adolescence.

The French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep popularized the term rites of passage in the early part of the twentieth century, but such rituals have been in existence for at least 30,000 years. Evidence of this is found in burial caves in northern Iraq where traces of pollen have been found indicating that Neanderthal communities put flowers on the graves of their dead (Cohen, p. 223).

Van Gennep observed that comparable activities had developed in diverse cultures throughout the world for use during times of an individual's transition through stages of life (birth, puberty/coming of age, marriage, death). He proposed that rites of passage have a three-part structure that aids those transitions: first, to separate the individual from his or her former place, role, or identity (separation); second, to create a middle ground, a kind of threshold to cross to the new place, role, or identity - this is where teaching and change occurs (liminality); and finally to incorporate the new lessons and roles into the individual's life and for the changed individual to be integrated into the life of the community in a different way (incorporation).

For example, traditionally, when a young Delaware Indian boy's voice begins to change, at about age 10 to 13, he begins a process of preparation to make him ready to undergo a series of ordeals, including a vision quest in the wilderness and fasting from food for a number of days. When he returns from his quest, he sits down with the elder men of his tribe, who help him interpret the dreams and visions he had while facing his fears alone in the wilderness. The elders also tell the young



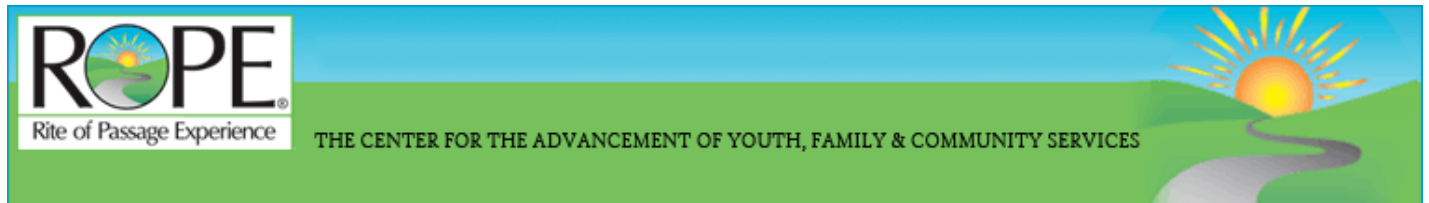
boy what values, skills, behaviors, and responsibilities he has to accept as an adult man of the tribe. Through the preparation and the actual ritual, the youth is awakened to the time of transformation from a child to an adult.

When boys and girls who practice the Jewish faith turn 13, they may (it is not required to become a Jewish adult) take part in a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ritual (for the boy and girl respectively) with the community of their temple. This ritual requires them to study for several years beforehand various aspects of their faith, the history of their ancestors, and their language, Hebrew, to understand the sacred texts and teaching. Following the arduous preparation, they are responsible for leading part of a Shabbat service as an acknowledgement and demonstration that they are now ready to take on the responsibilities of an adult. In a sense, they become the ambassador for the traditions of their ancestors and keep the continuity of the ways of the Jewish people alive from generation to generation. Following this ritual they can be counted as part of a minyan of ten adults needed in order to conduct a religious ritual.

In each of these examples, while the ritual itself is very important, perhaps even more important are the intentions of the individuals and their preparation, which is necessary prior to the ritual celebration. And through the preparation and the actual ritual, the youth is awakened to the time of transformation from a child to an adult. The community elders intentionally provide experiences designed to direct the youth's attention to the skills, attitudes, and beliefs essential to his or her new and growing role in the community as well as his or her deepening and essential spiritual nature. The ceremonial rite of passage is the community-sanctioned event that acknowledges the changes and expectations for the young people and welcomes them into the adult sphere in their community.

The Modern Need for Rites of Passage

TODAY, HOWEVER, in contemporary American communities, few socially sanctioned, community-based rites of passage exist that align with van Genep's seminal model or that have the breadth and depth of this construct's power to have an impact on an individual's identity and a sense of community. And there is danger to our society and to our young people in allowing this situation to continue.

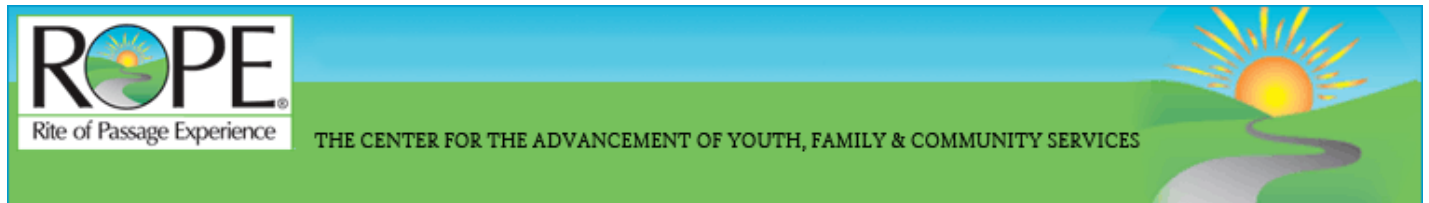


For if young people have no occasion to become awakened during their coming of age, then a void of missing wisdom and associated feelings of disconnection (one may say from their spiritual side) begins, becomes increasingly painful, and must be filled. Rabbi Steinsaltz talks about this void as a powerful feeling deep within us of something being missing, a feeling that is first experienced around the onset of puberty. When young people come of age and experience this, they need to be guided to begin seeking relationships and activities that have deeper meaning. If that guidance is not provided, particularly through preparation and rites of passage, young people may seek to fill the void with violence, with cynicism or materialism, or with substances like nicotine, drugs, and alcohol.

The transformative components of rites of passage experiences allow young people to develop and exhibit a sense of personal responsibility and control for their present and future well-being and establish their place within the community. Rites of passage create for a child sanctioned and affirmed pathways to adulthood. They foster a sense of connection with a universe and spiritual force that is greater than the individual and respond to her/his need for awakening and a way to integrate with the great mysteries that define life.

A number of occasions present opportunities for the creation of more powerful and intentional preparation and ritualized ceremonies for transitional times, such as onset of puberty, graduation from middle school or high school, obtaining a driver's license, and voting for the first time. For younger children, getting a first library card can be reframed as the special/sacred time of crossing the threshold to the house of knowledge - a library - and the importance of the acquisition of knowledge. This could become one of the first community celebrations for children and the creation of opportunities for their awakening on many levels.

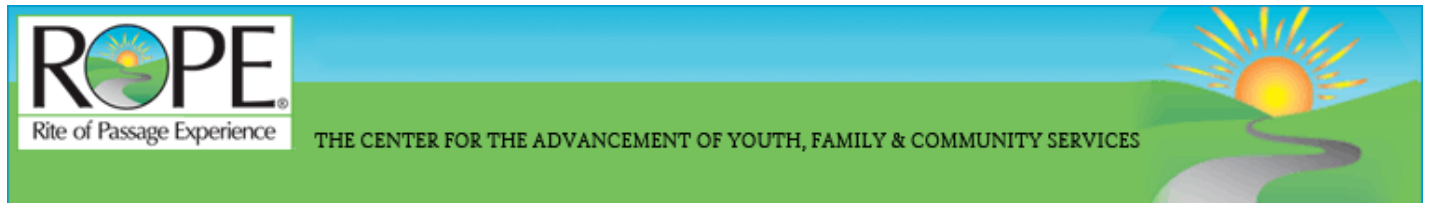
In addition, a number of people and organizations are creating more comprehensive rites of passage that are a framework for youth and community development. They intentionally create opportunities for youth to have a transformative experience that stimulates in them an "awakening" to spirit and builds a community's ability to come together to transmit their essential attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors to their children.



More comprehensive rites of passage intentionally provide opportunities for youth to have an awakening in two very important ways. First, they have highly trained and skilled “elders” who have undergone and thoroughly understand the rite of passage process. These elders understand the transformative power of initiation activities and are skilled at providing them. Second, a series of sequenced events are provided by a community, or subset of one, within a “rite of passage” framework that actively engages groups of youth in skill building, whereby they collaboratively confront and accomplish challenges in order to learn more about themselves and others. They spend periods of time alone in guided self-reflection, in individual and group “ordeals” or challenges, and participate in community celebrations of their accomplishments. At this time of celebration, individual youth publicly state the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors they will commit and the community makes opportunities available for youth to engage in more responsibilities, making meaningful contributions to their community and others. This community celebration helps to affirm the youth’s change of status from dependent child to caring and contributing adult. Comprehensive community rites of passage can foster a sense of community and contribute to young people’s experience of the Developmental Assets essential for healthy youth development.

The Rite Of Passage Experience, ROPE®, is one dynamic and comprehensive youth and community development strategy, originally created by Becce Reslock and me in 1981. It engages parents, their children, and the community in a multi-year effort that begins when children are in the transitional grade between primary and secondary school. At that time parents and their children begin with an educational experience that “awakens” both to the impending change of life they will experience and the responsibilities and activities with which the community expects them to become involved over the coming years. This includes exposure to skilled elders who facilitate an intensive, experiential training. Young people are connected with mentors and a host of other necessary ingredients to help them grow up well.

The creation and use of such rites of passage can help teachers, clergy, youth workers, and parents in their task of raising healthy children. It can be the connecting framework and language that harnesses the energy, resources and talents of a community to promote all of the Developmental Assets needed to raise healthy children. In addition, its integration of a spiritual dimension supports the development of a sense of connection and wholeness in young people that leads to inner peace and confidence.



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