

# **Rites of Passage**

**An ethnographic  
exploration**

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## *INTRODUCTION*

When I was twelve, I was fortunate enough to participate in a month long rite of initiation which, for me and my community, marked the end of my childhood and the beginning of my adolescence. The impact this formalized transition had on my life was remarkable. It not only affected the choices I made in junior high, but altered my conception of self and self-responsibility in such a dramatic way as to stay with me far beyond junior high. Ten years later I returned as a leader to guide others through a similar experience. Like the reformed alcoholic, the born again Christian, the aerobics teacher with an obese past, I have been moved enough by my experiences and the deep change that resulted from them to be enthusiastic about their use for others. This paper, then, does not claim to present an objective look at rites of passages in American society. Rather, it is an impassioned argument for their necessity.

I plan to support this passion in several ways. As a student of anthropology, I have been surprised to see how these trips parallel the structure and theories set out the anthropologist Victor Turner. His insights about liminality and *communitas* serve us well in this discussion about rites of initiation, and they will be referred to throughout the paper. I will give a detailed ethnographic account of both trips I was involved in, and in doing so will attempt to show the ways in which a group of strangers, born and bred on Western logic, were able to transform a hiking trip into a meaning-filled, life-changing event. I will conclude with some reflections on what I believe to be the necessary components of such a trip, hoping this will allow some insight on the creation of others like it.

## *rites of passage*

Arnold van Gennep was the first in the published world to begin a dialogue about rites of passage. These, he said, were rituals and ceremonies, usually held in a communal context, which served to mark for the individual and their community important transitions in life. He found that they "...accompanied every change of place, state, social position, and age."<sup>1</sup> The individual, having completed the rite, was usually perceived to be a changed individual, or perhaps a different individual all together. This change in perception was often mirrored in the change in treatment and expectations of the individuals.

The widespread use of such rites leads to some reflection over their purpose or need in societies. Human life, as miraculous as it can be, is more often a string of days and events that run into each other. Dinner follows work, sleep follows dinner, breakfast follows sleep, work follows breakfast, and life continues. People often get so caught up in the life cycle they become blind to the changes occurring around them. Babies become children; young parents lose their hair; older parents turn grey. As Turner put it, the social world "is a world in becoming, not in being."<sup>2</sup> To put it in less original terms, life is a journey. There is a constant growth process, a constant stretching as the individual moves through their life, accepting - and leaving behind - parts of themselves.

If life is a journey, rites of passage are the rivers that cross the path. The terrain being traversed changes so gradually that one barely notices. Rivers cause one to pause and look around. They offer a definitive marker on the journey. Rites of passage help individuals and their communities sit up and take stock of the changes that have taken place in individuals, allowing

them to release outdated expectations and engage in more appropriate ones.

Van Gennep identified three major components that are shared by almost all rites of passage. They are the Break; the Liminal Phase; and Re-Incorporation. As they are central to our discussion of the two rites of passage I will explore here, we will discuss them in detail.

It is necessary before beginning, however, to clarify some terms. As Turner and Van Gennep have shown, rites of passage can be (and are) used for many of the meaningful transitions in life. In this paper I shall limit myself to those dealing with age, specifically the rite of passage from childhood to adolescence. Following the lead of Stan Crow (who will be introduced later), I will use the term rites of initiation. However, since they are also rites of passage - a term which is more descriptive of the change taking place - I will also use the term rites of passage.

### *The Break*

The break, or separation, is the first part of a rite of passage. It serves to separate the individual from their society, routine, schedule. This separation can happen physically or emotionally. Often initiates, at this point in the rite of initiation, are physically removed from their villages or mothers homes. This separation heightens the awareness of everyone involved. It separates the rite of passage from the experience of the Everyday, signaling it as distinct and special. When the initiate leaves or is taken away, it is understood that they will come back a changed individual, or even a different individual altogether.

### *The Liminal phase*

The next phase of a rite of passage is liminality. Here, the initiate is in between socially



recognized states. These states are consciously recognized roles or statuses in a society.<sup>3</sup> For our society, those states would include ones such as retirement/working, married/not married, grandparent/parent. Because the initiate is not a part of everyday life, everyday rules no longer apply, and the initiates in a liminal stage often experience 'otherworldly' encounters. It is in this stage that most of the rites of passages I was in took place.

### *Reincorporation*

The is the last phase in a rite of passage. It occurs on the initiate's return from the liminal phase. This return is considered essential, for without it, the initiate would be stuck forever in a place between the two stages they were moving between. Reincorporation is a period in which the initiate 'comes down' from their experiences in the liminal stage, which are often intense and dramatic. It allows the individual to readjust to daily life before being thrown back into the Everyday. During reincorporation, the initiate is also welcomed back into their community as a changed individual. Often a change in social status marks their return, signaling to all that they have entered a new stage in life.

### *Liminality in These Rites*

One more point needs to be made before launching into the ethnographic account. Van Gennep's three stages of rites of passages and Turner's contribution to those thoughts are highly relevant to this account. Van Gennep's three periods are seen in both rites of passage I will discuss here. However, there is a twist in the simple threesome. A focal point of the rite of initiation was the vigil. This was a twenty four hour solo spent by the initiate in the wilderness,

fasting, tending a fire, and reflecting on their life. This solo fits the classic Turner definition of a liminal phase, which he describes as, “represents the midpoint of transition...between two positions.”<sup>4</sup> However, the entire trip, of which the vigil is a part, also fits this definition. The vigil acts as a liminal phase within the larger liminal phase of the trip. This complicates discussion, as I must try to distinguish between the varying degrees of liminality that are ‘present’ as we move through the camp. In order to simplify things, I attempt to attach ‘degrees of liminality’ on each of the experiences during the trip, hence a seemingly endless discussion of liminality throughout the essay.

## **Background**

My parents, as newlyweds, joined an organization called the Institute of Cultural Affairs. What began as a radical Christian attempt at responding to the gospel through simple communal living and activism in civil rights spread to an international not-for-profit organization. Based on the belief that villagers know best what is best for their village, they sought to help the villagers develop and implement a few carefully chosen low-input, high-return projects. Their mission statement became, “Concerned with the Human Factor in Development.”

The rite of initiation I participated in was called The Sixth Grade Trip, and was originally developed for the children of those involved in the ICA. It was primarily a response to much of the alcohol and drug abuse that was prevalent during the sixties and seventies. It was also a precursor to living in the Student House, a group living environment composed of other ICA youth and several adult guardians. Both the Sixth Grade Trip and the Student House were

experiments in human living, seeking to give youth the separation from their parents they so seemed to crave. Since then, the ICA has undergone a great deal of change. The Student House, as it was called, ended with my generation, as less and less youth chose to participate. The Sixth Grade Trip, however, was continued almost single-handedly by Stan Crow, a man whose passion about ritual in life surpasses my own.

## The Essentials

Over the period of a month, our group traveled from camping site to camping site around the Colorado Rockies, out from Denver and back again. There were eighteen of us: fourteen youth and four staff. During the day, our activities consisted of housekeeping necessary for camp life, several day trips, and some tourist-type activities. At night we were given a context for the activities in which we participated during the day. This context was a story which we used to deepen the meaning of the rather mundane things we were doing. Engaging a context allowed us to create a 'myth' around the trip. Believing in the myth allowed us to believe that a camping/touring trip was indeed going to be a rite of initiation which would transform us into new and different individuals.

The primary context for our trip was based on the Native American Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel symbolizes a great many things in the Native American cosmology. It is a circle with four points. Each of the four points symbolizes each of the four directions: North, South, East, West. Each of these directions represent different elements of the world, different colors, different emotions. All four directions, along with the things they represent and the circle they



rest on, are considered sacred.<sup>5</sup>

The focal point of the trip was the vigil, a twenty-four hour solo spent in the wilderness. Fasting and tending a fire were additional challenges as we reflected upon the upcoming shift in our life from childhood to adolescence. Upon our successful return from the vigil, held roughly in the middle of the trip, we were considered by ourselves and all that knew us within the ICA context as youth. Having listened for years in awe at the tales of older siblings and house mates as they returned from this transformative trip, we were all somewhat prepared for the structure and logic driving the vigil.

## ***THE SIXTH GRADE TRIP***

### **The Break**

Participants arrived in Denver from all over the world, having said goodbye to their parents and their communities. As all participants came from ICA houses aware of the journey we'd be undertaking, we had been celebrated and affirmed before our departures. After the trip, some would return to those communities to be welcomed as youth, and would be granted new responsibilities and privileges. Others would travel to Seattle, Washington, to participate in the Student House for three years. Their goodbyes to their parents marked the beginning of a three year span of living fairly independently from them. For these individuals the trip took on a greater sense of status differentiation. I traveled to Denver as an unaccompanied minor from Cote d'Ivoire, a good fifteen hours and several layovers away. It was the first time I had traveled such a long distance alone. This, coupled with the fact that I would not see my parents again until Christmas (six months away), effectively marked my departure as a severance with my Everyday.

### **Building Context and Community**

At this point in the journey we were still very much a part of the structured world. Our locations and activities reflected this. Campgrounds were of the fairly standard variety, with toilet facilities and potable water. We stayed in popular locations such as Estes Park and Steamboat

Springs and as a result were surrounded by people doing ordinary camping and tourist activities. However, we were removed from our regular location and routine - the break with structured life had clearly been made.

The first few days were spent weaving a web of community and context that we would depend upon to carry us through the trip. We played steal the bacon; hiked up and slid down St. Mary's Glacier; worked together on assigned teams to prepare meals and set up camp; shared with a tent mate the living space and responsibilities of one small tent. We also began the preparation for our vigil in mythical and technical aspects.

The staff told us stories of rites of initiation in other societies. One such story was Rite of Passage, a science fiction novel about a 14 year old girl who is sent out, along with her peers, to survive a year on a harsh barren planet before being accepted back on the spaceship for full membership as an adult. We heard tales of vision quests completed by Native American youth. Together, these stories contributed to our belief that what we were participating in was larger than ourselves and our own little group. By participating in this rite of initiation, we were joining millions of other youth around the planet and throughout history. This broadened our scope and perspective.

We learned basic survival skills such as reading a compass and map and building a fire. We built physical strength through several day hikes to surrounding areas. A few of these skills were necessary to successfully complete the vigil. For the most part, however, these survival and independence skills were taught to give us our first taste of self-reliance more than to keep us alive.

## The Turn to Liminality

Rainbow Lakes was an isolated campground at the top of a very long uphill road. It was, in camp speak, a “primitive facility”. Amenities such as potable water and outhouses were not to be found, nor were very many other people. It was the closest to wilderness we had gotten yet. This shift in location paralleled the growing intensity of our activities.

One afternoon was spent in silence and solitude. We were instructed to wander, listening to our hearts and the natural guides around us. If something ‘spoke’ to us, we were to collect it, or some symbol of it. After several hours, we met with one of the staff to discuss what we had collected. Using the Medicine Wheel, we determined together which elements were most represented in our collection. These became ‘our’ directions, upon which we were told to base a spirit name for ourselves. My direction was southwest, representing the elements and characteristics of water and fire. The name I chose for myself (reflecting the romanticism of a 12 year-old girl), was Rippling Sunrise. Other names were Grass Water, Fire Thinker, Wind Wave.

Two things are important about this afternoon. Spending an entire afternoon in silence while listening to flower spirits and non-human entities was most certainly out of the ordinary for us all. It brought our activities and the trip into clear relief as something distinctly different from our Everyday. It set us squarely into liminal space.

Though neither the staff nor the kids came from a Native American tradition, all of us treated this exercise with utmost respect. Even the most cynical, jaded kids who were openly derisive about other activities honored the sacredness of these names. It was a conscious decision from all of us. While the staff had built a context involving the Medicine Wheel and its directions, in choosing to honor these ‘make believe’ names we chose to believe the ‘make believe’. They

were an important part of becoming youth for us. My name made me felt strong, courageous, competent. This has important implications when seeking to create a viable trip using no tradition as framework.

Other activities, many of them more mundane, were used to help create our context. Purifying our own water lent a feeling of being truly self-sufficient. We felt the weight of responsibility for our health and the health of those in our group, and savored the burden. It added to our story of being on a rite of passage. (Ironically enough) several people got sick on top of this mountain. One got so ill the staff began to finger appendicitis and plan the logistics of the rescue. Junior high kids thrive on this kind of drama. In this case, the drama was put to good use as it continued to fill out our myth. On our way out, we found that our van would not start: the battery was dead. We had finished our food supplies and as we had not seen a car for days we began to eagerly entertain fantasies of foraging for our nourishment in the wilderness. For all our excitement, I'm sure the staff were greatly relieved when a half hour later one of the only cars we saw over the entire three day period happened to drive by.

All these experiences led to the feeling that we were truly on an adventure, that our survival depended upon our collective ability. This feeling of self-sufficiency was not only one of the key lessons of the trip, but was important to feeling like we had really undergone a trial, that we were deserving of the new title of youth. It helped build for us the myth of the rite of initiation and gave us stories to match the ones heard by returning brothers and sisters.



# The Vigil: Betwixt and Between

## *The Journey There*

Amphitheater, where the vigil was to be held, was a large mountain with a meadow at the top. It was the closest we had been to complete wilderness. The staff account of the decision to use Amphitheater includes desire for such seclusion. "Few people ever hike there, as there are no trails once you get to the high meadow." There were no people, no campsites; the only water source, once at the top, was a stagnant lake ½ mile from our base camp.

Our hike to the top was our first overnight backpack trip. In retrospect this bespeaks poor planning and unsafe hiking practice. At the time, however, it was felt as the symbolic act for which it was intended. Only people who made it to the top were worthy of participation in the challenging vigil. The hike up I recall as difficult. At one point my foot slipped off the dusty trail and I grabbed a bush to catch myself. While I was never in any real danger, I believed myself to be. I wanted that danger, that element of challenge, as did my fellow campers. They made a great hullabaloo 'rescuing' me, and later savored the telling and retelling of the time Amara almost fell down the mountain on the hike up to the vigil. I cannot emphasize enough that all of this was a part of the story we told. It created a reality for us that we chose to engage and believe. This, in a nutshell, is the creation of culture. We were simply imitating societies on a microcosmic scale. Turner agrees: "...ritual action is akin to a sublimation process, and one would not be stretching language unduly to say that its symbolic behavior actually 'creates' society for pragmatic purposes."<sup>6</sup>

The vigil was what would mark the change in our status from childhood to youth. While

all of us had spent months at a time away from our parents, none of us had spent a night alone ‘out there.’ There was considerable trepidation about the whole affair, as can be seen in some of the statements we made about our vigil experience. “Before the vigil night, I felt kind of scared because I didn’t know what would happen.” “Before the vigil I kept thinking about what it would be like.” “Hiking up Amphitheater was hard, but I wasn’t really thinking about how hard it was. I was mostly thinking about how my vigil night was going to be...I couldn’t help being really scared...[before we left] everybody to me seemed like they were dopey. I guess they were just thinking.”

### *The Send Out*

The send out for the vigil was an important part of the event. As we had been brought up in the ICA, we were comfortable with ritual and its place in marking important times. It was a fairly simple ceremony. Standing in a circle, we sang a few “Native American” songs, including the one with lyrics about flying with long-winged feathers. This song, through its use over the period of the camp, had come to hold a great deal of meaning for us. One by one, we stepped into the circle and spoke our spirit name. One of the staff, also in the circle, asked,

“Have you decided to participate in the night-long vigil?

“Have you decide to watch the first sunrise of your youth?

“Then go and wear your long-winged feather proudly.

The child then stepped out of the circle. Their vigil had begun.

We split up into four groups to be led to our sites. As we said goodbye, we truly had the feeling of seeing each other for the last time. In my journal I wrote, “I went to Naomi with my arms outstretched. We hugged hard, and I gave her a kiss. Then I hugged Annette and Greg. I

tried to hug Frank but he wouldn't let me." Our leader first led us all to the stone cairn, where we were to go if we needed help, then led us one by one to our site.

### *The Vigil*

Our vigil sites were chosen according to the directions that we had been drawn to and based our spirit name upon. All were on the edge of Amphitheater, looking over the valley below. As I peered over the edge, I felt powerful. The cliff legitimized the vigil: it added an element of perceived danger that I needed. If I wasn't careful, or if I fell asleep and sleepwalked, I could fall right off the mountain! This was no ordinary camp-out I was on! Other participants' comments reflect this feeling of danger. "Right next to [my vigil site] there was a steep cliff. I was sort of scared."; "During my vigil, I was scared, lonely, and tired."; "And then the tree snapped and I got scared. So I ran out onto the field without looking back and that was when I thought about if I really wanted to go on the vigil." One swore the next day that a bear had payed a visit to his campsite. We all seemed to want this fear, and built up stories of how much there was to be afraid of upon our return. This makes sense. How can you be proud of accomplishing something if it isn't difficult?

This craving for danger and challenge was not ours alone. "Many youth actively search for a test of courage", Edith Sullwold writes. Because they have no authentic 'test' given by their elders which will give them a place as a man or woman, "these adolescents thus turn to their own peer group to create acts of daring, such as car-racing, drugs, sexual promiscuity, and the acts of violence now common in urban areas."<sup>7</sup>.

I set to work collecting firewood. Lighting and keeping a fire going was another challenge of the vigil. We had been given only fifteen matches with which to light our fire (along with a



good deal of training on fire starting!). Of the fire challenge, we said, "I got 15 matches and used 14 of them. I didn't get it lit. I took apart my fire ring and put it back together only smaller. I lit my fire with the one match I had left. I was glad."; "It was not easy making a fire. There was wind blowing too, so the fire was real hard to light, but I lit it."; "I lit my first fire with two matches. I felt proud.". These accomplishments were proof to ourselves that we were capable; we were deserving of becoming a youth.

We had been given several questions to reflect upon, and were encouraged to write our reflections in our journals. Some of the questions were,

"What are ten things your family has done for you that you must now do to care for yourself?"

"What are ten things you are looking forward to in the next three years?"

"What gifts, talents, and skills do you have to contribute to the next three years?"

"What are the five things that you will find hardest for you in the next three years?"

This reflection on life and one's place in it is characteristic of rites of passages. Turner said that many rites dealing with life crisis or transitions "portray and symbolically resolve archetypal conflicts in abstraction from the milling teeming social life which periodically throws up such conflicts. Society is, therefore better equipped to deal with them concretely, having portrayed them abstractly." <sup>8</sup>

This is particularly useful for youth in this culture who seem to be drawn to conflict. Power struggles with parents are the least of it. They are coming to grips with the reality of the world and its injustices, and struggling to reconcile that with the myths of justice they have been brought up on. The reports of participants show these reflections. "I stayed up all night thinking. I thought about my parents a lot. I thought about other things."; "The next morning at sunrise, I just sat on the rocks near the cliff and thought a lot about different things."; "As soon as I got to

my vigil site, I built my fire pit, sat down, and started thinking about all of the changes my family has gone through.” Giving youth an environment to encounter that mental struggle, with adult support and a context which legitimizes it is an important part of a rite of initiation.

Near the end of the day, two staff showed up at my site. “Do you, in your heart, feel that you have completed the vigil to the best of your ability?” After an emphatic yes, they told me to make my campsite as if I were never there. They did not stay to ensure that I complied. As it was hailing and freezing cold, I was tempted to walk away. This, however, would have been my first action as a youth. My campsite was left in pristine condition.

“As a child we led you to this place. As a youth you will find your own path back.” This was the last symbolic and practical act of the vigil. My memory, created by my 12 year-old self, supplies me with the story that, after hiking back the (endless) mile, my fingers had to be pried of my tarp, which I had dragged behind me after piling my belongings on top. Again, we all chose to participate in this myth of the difficult and challenging vigil. What intrigues me the most, as an anthropologist, is that I so thoroughly believed the myth that I continue to believe it today. While I am somewhat able to objectively reflect on my experience, my first impulse is to recount great tales of hardship and challenge, which we collectively overcame due our competence as youth.

## Role Reversal

After the vigil, many of the responsibilities for running camp were transferred from the staff to the youth. Our work teams made the shift from staff as ‘team chiefs’ to the youth as rotating ‘team chiefs’. This did nothing to ensure that breakfast was on time (or even remembered), or that dinner was not burnt. It did a great deal, though, to ensure that becoming a youth was more



than an adventure in the woods. Concrete differences in the way we lived our lives, the jobs we were assigned, the freedoms we were given, reinforced the myths that we had been telling ourselves and turned them into reality.

## Incorporation

Activities after the vigil involved the pursuit of 'fun'. This was a relief and a reward from the activities which dominated the trip previous to the vigil. We participated in leisurely tourist-like pursuits; rafting down a river, staying in campgrounds with swimming pools, even sleeping in on some mornings. These activities gradually brought us out of the wilderness and introduced us back into society, mirroring our retreat from society at the beginning of the trip. However, like the beginning of the trip, we were not fully incorporated; our routines, company, and location still created displacement. This allowed us to stretch our 'long feathers' in a different, and therefore safe, environment before returning home with our fledgling youth status. Completing the trip, we finally returned to Denver and celebrated with a pizza party.

## ***MY TURN AS LEADER***

### **The Essentials**

A decade later I returned to participate in the journey again, this time as staff. The trip had, at its essence, remained the same. It was still a challenging several week trip for youth, which marked their transition from childhood to adolescence; the vigil had retained its status as the primary transformative event of the trip. Today it was a three week long backpacking trip which closely followed the Hero's Journey by Joseph Cambell. It was structured around one six day hike and two three day hikes. There were twelve kids and four staff. Of the 16 of us, only 2 had any ICA connection. The trip had been open to non-ICA participants for some time. Participation, then was chosen rather than being imposed. The action of choice emerged throughout the camp in a variety of ways. Most importantly, the kids had decided to do this for their own reasons, and hence were more invested in it. Participation by non-ICA kids also meant that initiates had not been brought up with the same understanding of this trip that we had on my trip. To counteract this, we realized that we would need to concentrate even more on creating a viable and tangible context in which these kids could engage.

### **The Break**

The base camp was Songaia, a cooperative living center just outside of Seattle, situated on ten acres. Families arrived with the participants of Sunday afternoon. The grounds quickly filled

with people. Their presence gave weight to the sendoff. Like a wedding or baptism, which signify change in the life of the family and the individual, their presence served to witness and affirm that growth. After sharing dinner, all gathered in a circle on the ceremonial grounds of Songaia. Staff stood at a distance: we were not to be a part of the ceremony until we arrived to lead the children away.

After several speeches reflecting on the importance of this transition, Stan gave each child a long ribbon. The children held it in the middle and gave the two ends to their parents. The children, repeating after Stan, said

Mother, Father: Thank you for carrying me on the journey thus far. I am stretching now, and seek to carry myself. I must ask you to release me, setting me free to become who I must.

The parents, also repeating after Stan, replied

Daughter/Son, we have loved you as a child. We know you as our child. It is difficult to let you go. But we know that you need to be released. We set you free to become the person you must.

Their ribbons were cut. We, the staff, were introduced as the midwives of their journey,. Stan asked the children to say their last goodbyes, and reminded the parents that this would be the last they would see of their child. Upon their return, they would be new individuals.

There was nothing quite as formal on my Break. There are several important reasons for this. Pure logistics, of course, would have prevented it: our families lived too far to make the trek for one afternoon. More importantly, such a ritual of separation was not as crucial in our case. Most of us were coming from communities intimately associated with the trip and its meaning in our lives. Before leaving for Denver, we had all shared in some ritual of separation with that community.

As most of these participants had no such community, part of the aim of this ritual was to

provide a ritual of separation for them. Another reason for the extensiveness of the ritual this time was to begin to paint the story of the trip, to build the myth that surrounded 'objective reality.' This myth turned a three week hiking trip into a meaningful rite of passage which would have a transformative effect on its participants. This myth informed the parents that their children were leaving, to return only as different individuals.

As on my trip, the Break occurred in a place unknown to all the initiates, separating them geographically from their everyday. They would all be away from those they knew, some for the first time ever. The fact that none of them knew each other lent equity to their first interactions. They were all in the same scary boat together.

## **Building Context and Community**

The next few days were spent building relationships and setting the tone of the trip. While the kids were busy establishing junior high myths about themselves, we staff were busy establishing our authority. There were several instances of this authority being tested, if not outright challenged. For a successful rite of initiation (to say nothing of a safe trip) it was essential that adult authority be clearly understood and accepted. These strict roles, even in a liminal space, are important when working with youth. While it is important to provide freedom to allow them to grow, it is equally important to place boundaries on that freedom. They need a safe zone where they can push themselves to their limits with the knowledge that they will be caught if they push beyond those limits.

Our first destination was a Ropes Course, and outdoor learning center where the youth,

moving from site to site, must work together in order to 'win' at each site. It was a painful struggle for them, as they worked to dominate over each other rather than cooperate together. Accustomed to obeying adult authority, they refused to accept each other's, and lost countless minutes and energy on power struggles. They seldom achieved success; if they did it was only after many tries and much shouting.

The last site was a particularly difficult one for them. The facilitator, tired of their hour's worth of bickering and false starts, sat them down. They emerged out of this conversation with new energy and one more chance to put it to use. Miraculously, they completed the exercise, cheering each other on and depending on each other's physical and psychological support. It was a magical moment. Turner's description of *communitas* is the best I have seen to describe this feeling. "As sense of harmony with the universe is made evident and the whole planet is felt to be in *communitas*. This shiver has to be won, achieved...after working through a tangle of conflicts and disharmonies."<sup>9</sup>

Triumphant, we moved over to the power pole, the last activity of the day. This was a twenty foot tall pole about the height and width of a telephone pole, the object of which is to climb. Once at the top you try to stand up on the diameter of the pole. If you manage to stand, the challenge continues: you leap off the pole, diving for a trapeze hanging several feet in front of you. After catching it (or missing it) your teammates lower you down by your harnesses. It's a challenging and thrilling experience, and the kids were ecstatic as they one by one made it.

Their successes at this first event were story builders for the rest of the trip. "Brandon, you can make it up this mountain. You did the power pole, remember?" The facilitator, at the beginning of the day, had read us a story about a girl who is stopped by two dragons on a path.



After defeating them, she discovers they were extensions of her own fears and emotions. This too became a central story to the trip. “C’mon, you can do it — kiss that dragon on the nose”, we heard as the kids encouraged each other along the way. The day gave them a vital challenge and they succeeded. We built those successes into a context that was meaningful and real enough to reference later.

## **The Challenge**

While Songaia was certainly a step toward liminality involving separation by location and people, it still offered the amenities of regular life: showers, flush toilets, candy bars, meals cooked in a kitchen. The kids clung to these as they were familiar and therefore a source of comfort and stability. We sought to strip them of all such familiar things, seeking to throw them as much as possible into the unfamiliar, pushing them into unknown territory (both around them and within themselves). We made the final move into liminal space, spending the next six days and nights in the wilderness of the Cascades.

We hiked about six miles a day with packs weighing roughly one third of our body weight, and divided housekeeping chores such as cooking and packing up camp by teams. Stripped of their normal buffers, the initiates were forced to encounter themselves and each other. Our role as midwives was to allow, within safe boundaries, natural consequences to occur as a direct and tangible result of their decisions. Good decisions were theirs to exalt in; bad decisions were theirs to deal with. We encouraged when we could, stood back when we needed to, and were there to help them reflect on the aftermath of both.

### *Kissing the dragon on the nose*

In the Joseph Campbell context, this was the portion of the trip when the initiates, through physical and mental hardships, were to “encounter their demons.” For some, it was the physical arena where they would encounter their demons: climbing mountains with packs pushed them to their limits. Some faced demons in dealing with each other day in and day out, as there was no solitude in which to retreat. Some seemed to be incapable of doing their share of the work, encountering their demons in laziness (and in the wrath of their teammates!) Some faced enough demons simply making it through the trip without going home. All were forced to deal with themselves and others in ways and situations that were distinctly different from their normal routines. This forced them into seeing new possibilities and patterns of behavior; being away from people who knew them freed them to change those behaviors.

There were times when you could clearly see this learning taking place. It would be visible not only to the staff, but also to the initiates themselves, who would verbalize it. For example, for the first few days we pulled out of camp at eleven or twelve in the morning due to the kids horsing around. Rather than continuing in the surrogate parent role of nagging them in to work, and hiking during the hottest part of the day only to set up camp in the dark, Bruce and I decided to remove ourselves from the equation.

Once Bruce and I were packed we would disappear off the site until the initiates, ready to go, called us back. However, from the hour of our departure we subtracted our scheduled departure time at eight o'clock. This time was subtracted from our sleep time the next morning. If we left at 9:30, we'd get up an hour and a half earlier the following morning, for example. Some mornings we got up as early as 4:15. This was not an exercise in cruelty, but rather intended (and

served) to help the initiates alter their expectations of themselves and of adults close to them. As children they were accustomed to 'micro management' from adults. By making the departure time (and wake up time) completely initiate-dependent, we led them to see they could depend on themselves.

Another example of the initiates actively encountering demons on the trip was a girl who brought with her a high maintenance image of femininity. She came decked out in full gear, armed with brand name jeans and mascara tube. Squealing at bugs, grimacing at dirt, she quickly threatened our patience within the first few days. Her image of dainty femininity also included, to our chagrin, being a 'chicken'. She adamantly refused to do anything remotely scary, watching from the side instead.

Over the course of this six day trip, dirt replaced her shampoo; bug bites replaced her make-up; comfort replaced style. The self-image of coward remained. She began to recognize this as her personal demon, and actively sought to conquer it. One day we camped next to a river with a fast current. There were a few eddies to dunk in, but soon some of the kids were clamoring for more action. Bruce led a group of them out to a rock in the middle, but to get back one had to dive just right so as to land in the flow headed for the bank. Diane took a deep breath and went along. She stayed out on the rock with Bruce for almost a half hour, making a dozen false starts. Finally she went, and as she reached the bank she screamed, "Take THAT you stupid dragon!" This experience of triumph stayed with her, and was one of the highlights she recounted at the end of the trip.

The initiates truly formed a community during this time. The cliques that we had seen emerging at the beginning of the trip dissolved as they were forced to work and live together. It

was beautiful to watch them support one another, to witness and nurture the compassion they all expressed. This was not the case 24/7, of course. We insisted on consensus for many of our decisions and it could be horrifying to watch them attempt to convince each other, through extremes of screaming or silence, that their way was The Way.

On our return from the six day hike, the pride and success felt by all of the kids was evident. We had split into two groups for the length of the wilderness hike, and the two groups regaled each other with tales, trying to one up each other, over our celebration dinner of pizza. This was similar to the desire for danger that I had felt, along with fellow initiates, on my trip. Like us, these initiates seemed to crave danger, adventure, challenge. In their telling and retelling of the tremendous feats they had performed, it became clear that their stories were to convince themselves of their prowess as much as their peers.

## Turn to Liminality

In order to ritually cleanse ourselves, and prepare for the vigil, we participated in a sweat lodge, “one of the most widespread traditions in Native North America.”<sup>10</sup> Participating in a sweat holds very different significance for each individual, but there are some common purposes: creation or rebirth, testing, and healing. The sweat consists of several rituals, the primary one being sitting in a very small hut for an extended period of time at very high temperatures.

First we built a ceremonial fire, laying the logs in layers, each layer facing and honoring a different direction. Within this fire, lava rocks, considered ancestors contributing to the sweat, are buried to heat. While the fire burned, we draped layer after layer of blankets over a structure made

of poles lashed together. This made a small hut that was perhaps three feet high and fifteen feet in diameter. It was covered so thickly with blankets that no light entered. This dark space is meant to emulate the womb inside Mother Earth. Next we sat silently, making prayer ties. These were little bundles of corn and tobacco which we tied and strung together, saying a prayer over each.

When the rocks were hot enough one by one we got on all fours and crawled into the lodge to sit in a circle. Over the period of four sessions, the red hot rocks were brought into the lodge and placed into a depression in the center, over which the guide would throw water. This environment was meant to be physically and mentally testing. "Anyone who has ever been in a sweat understands that aspect of the lodge - those moments when you feel that you cannot stand it any longer and you must get out."<sup>11</sup>

Peter was a participant who had not yet been physically challenged. He was always first in the hiking line and still had energy to explore once we arrived. As staff, we were constantly on the lookout for ways to challenge him. During the sweat the guide explained to us that if we were having a hard time making it through the sweat, we could lie down on the ground where it was cooler, and Mother Earth would help us through the sweat. I spent most of the sweat with my face pressed as close to the earth as possible and barely made it through. Peter spent the entire sweat sitting up. He did not mention this during our communal conversation after the sweat. He told me later in a private conversation that he wanted to make it as hard as possible for himself. This to me indicates that he was aware of needing a greater challenge than others in the group, and sought to attain it. He was an active agent in his own rite of initiation, not a passive participant. He chose to engage in the story and make it his.

The sweat lodge, in addition to being a place of testing, served as cleansing and purification



for the sacred vigil. Anybody who has spent some time in a sauna can perhaps appreciate the sense of cleanliness felt after a good sweat, but in addition, the sweat lodge "...is often described as a womb and...the experience of leaving the lodge is often equated with being reborn..."<sup>12</sup> We encouraged the initiates to symbolically leave behind all that was undesirable and impure with the sweat. This left us, for the most part, centered and ready for the upcoming vigil.

## **The Vigil: Betwixt and Between**

### *The Journey There*

We left for the vigil site along a busy beach. As we hiked along the beach toward seclusion, we saw fewer and fewer people. It felt, as it had on my trip, that we were leaving the known world: anything could happen in this mysterious place to which we were going. Our hike was over sand until the tide crept up, forcing us to clamber over the boulders above the water line. In addition to this difficult hiking we were carrying our entire water supply, as the closest outlet was deemed unsafe. This difficulty, like the difficult trek up to Amphitheater by my group, contributed to the solemnity and authenticity of the challenge ahead.

Our base camp was at the beginning of a two mile cove. The initiates' sites were strung out at intervals with topographical separation between each, so they could not see or hear each other. Gathering in a circle, we stressed that the vigil was their vigil. They could sleep, talk, eat smuggled food, and they would be the only ones to know. As the vigil was for them, it would be only be their failure. The challenge of the vigil was theirs to accept and theirs alone.

At this circle we also gave out reflection materials for the vigil. Like the questions on my vigil, these were to help the initiates reflect on their transition and stay focused during their vigil. Plaster masks and casts of their faces made earlier were handed out. The negative mold was representative of their childhood. They could draw, paint, cut out, mark up the mask in any way they felt symbolized their childhood and what they were leaving behind. When they were ready, they were to burn that mold, along with the childhood it represented, in the fire of their youth. The positive cast was the mask of their youth. This, too, they were to decorate however they felt was right. They would bring this back from their passage as a celebration of what they had decided to accept as a new youth.

### *The Send Out*

One of the staff stayed with the group, while the rest of us moved around the corner and out of sight of the group. "When all were ready, the guide walked over to the group and called the first one, saying only, "Adam, please put on your pack and come with me." The youth did not know who would be called next. This added an element of suspense to an event replete with it. As their names were called, they were given hugs and said goodbye to their friends. Some cried. All took the departure seriously.

Once around the corner, the initiate was instructed to drop their pack. Their guide blindfolded them and guided them to the foot of a shallow grave we had dug. One of the staff was standing to one side of the grave, with a bandanna covering his or her face, drumming a rhythm like a heartbeat: pom POM. pom POM. pom POM pom POM. pom POM. The child, relieved of their blindfold, opened their eyes to see a grave at their feet. Over the drumbeats the guide asked

“Are you, in your heart, committed to completing this vigil to youthhood?  
‘Are you committed to the vows of silence, of solitude, of fasting, and of keeping your fire  
going for the duration of the vigil?  
“Do you have any last things you would like to say to anyone as a child? If so, you may  
address them to the drummer, who acts here as a surrogate for those individuals.  
“Adam, are you prepared to die to your childhood?  
“Then please step into the grave.

As the initiate stepped in to the grave and lay down, the drummer stopped his drumming.  
The child lay in the grave to silence surrounding. This symbolic enactment of death can be found  
in many rites of passages. Victor Turner, in On the Edge of the Bush, tells us that in many  
severance / rite of passage rituals, “the symbols represent both birth and death, womb and tomb.”<sup>13</sup>  
Symbolically dying to their childhood freed the initiates from what they understood of themselves  
as children. Released from who they were, they were given room for who they wanted to become.

In addition to symbolic death and rebirth, this ritual served as the final break with everyday  
and entrance into complete liminality. It couples images that in ‘regular’ life are mutually  
exclusive; breathing/not breathing, heavenly/earthly, afterworld/this world. This coupling throws  
wide open the doors of unlimited possibilities that mark the liminal. If you can lay in a grave and  
yet be alive, who knows what else can happen? This thought certainly seemed to be present in the  
minds of the initiates as they lay there. Many lay rigidly, their arms stiff beside them. I remember  
vividly watching the t-shirt of one initiate as it jumped rhythmically from the heart beating beneath.

We spoke again.

This place you have entered does not exist. It is a place between two worlds. It is  
a place without time, without location, without a name. It is a liminal state.  
Possibilities are endless; the constructs and boundaries that you are familiar with in  
your life do not exist. Anything can happen. Be open to possibilities, and to your  
own intuition, for that is what guides you here. In this place you too are nameless.

You shall be called simply, initiate.

After telling the initiate to rise, we led them over to their packs, where they sat until four of them had been through the whole process. This group was then led to their sites.

I was later to read, with astonishment, the following: "Liminality can be perhaps described as a fructile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities..."<sup>14</sup> This description by Victor Turner, life long student of initiation rites, was almost verbatim what we said to the initiates. I had not read Turner in depth, and my fellow staff members were not in professions or hobbies that would have exposed them to his work. Yet we had managed to, in a brainstorm the day before, come up with death/rebirth symbolism, as well as the chaos and openness of liminality, which matched his.

The other thing that is worth mentioning here is the decision to include a death ritual for an age group that is oft times fascinated with death. "The problem of death is a favorite theme of adolescents because in that theme all the fundamental questions may be found: Who am I? Where am I going? What can I do?"<sup>15</sup> Turner's theory is important to remember here. Liminal stages, he believes, help individuals deal with their life in the abstract; hence, they are better able to deal with it concretely in 'real life.' Perhaps liminality also helps these youth deal with their death abstractly, helping them avoid such a fascination with death in life. This would be comforting, especially in light of the high teenage suicide rates. In fact, in "Suicides Unanswerable Logic", Sandra Reeves and Alina Tugend ponder if suicide "might be viewed as a kind of negative rite of passage, as a rite of passage 'gone wrong.'<sup>16</sup> Hopefully these rites of initiation help the youth transition to adolescence in a far less violent manner.

## *The Vigil*

That night, we staff watched eagerly as their dots of fire appeared along the cove. We only hoped that they could also see the fires, and that the sight would encourage and fortify them. As midwives of their passage, we kept the drums going all night, sleeping in shifts. Not only was it a show of support for them; it served to keep our energy focused on them and their journeys.

We made walking checks of the initiates four times during their vigil. These checks usually found them sitting and staring out across the ocean. They had taken our words about liminal time to heart, and each in their own way sought inspiration.

Many returned with stories of encounters with animals and felt that this was their sign. Three had been visited by deer - they sat quietly and watched until the deer departed. Diane, one of the girls I mentored, told me, "They came down from the woods and I just sat there and couldn't believe it. I tried to stay really still so I wouldn't scare them away but in my head I talked to them. I just thanked them for being so beautiful and for blessing me with their presence on my vigil. They stayed a really long time." Elizabeth, while sitting on some boulders out on the water, noticed porpoises swimming out in front of her. They stayed for about an hour, she said - she too felt moved by their presence and understood it as a sign.

Others found meaning elsewhere, many in their masks. Adam said he was sort of sad to leave his childhood behind and wasn't really sure if he wanted to. When he tried to burn the rest of his mask, which symbolized his childhood he found that it would not burn. After turning it this way and that and then applying direct flame to it, he finally took it out. In the early morning, he felt more comfortable with the idea of leaving his childhood and decided to try again. This time the mask burst into flames. Chris felt compelled to use the paints included in the kit on his body. I am



not sure who was more startled when we quietly checked on his site, only to see a half naked figure squatting by the fire covered in red, yellow and black. He told us later that he felt like he was in a dream, that his mind wasn't consciously present. Some other force, he felt, had directed his actions.

The feasibility of these mystical occurrences are completely irrelevant; indeed, a discussion of such would obscure the more important and relevant issue at hand. All of these individuals chose to accept the myth of the vigil. They decided to engage the story we offered to them and make it their own. In so doing, they saw their surroundings with new eyes. This heightened perception led many of them to decide they had indeed encountered that which was "other-worldly". Again, a discussion of whether it was or not is a moot point. The importance is in their finding symbolism and mysticism in the liminal stage on their journey. With it came a real sense of sacredness, of specialness that indelibly marked their vigil as a transforming event in their lives. Hence they were indeed transformed.

In the early afternoon, we set out with undecorated stoles, or scarfs. In individual conversations with particular youth to whom we were mentors, we reflected on the vigil and decisions they had come to. We served to witness what they had decided to leave behind and what new responsibilities they had chosen to accept. We also affirmed for many of them that, even though the initiate's fire had gone out or they had fallen asleep for a bit or had even talked to someone, in our minds they had succeeded on their vigil. At the end, we handed them the stole with instructions to decorate each half as representative of the decisions they had come to. Lastly, we informed them that we had led them to their sites as children; as youth they were to return on their own. Upon hearing our drums, they were to begin the journey back to base camp.

A few hours later, as the sun neared the place where we had sent them out, we began our drumming. The enthusiasm and pride we felt as we saw the figures move slowly toward camp was reflected on some, but not all their faces. We noticed a strong positive correlation between the amount of water left in their gallon containers and the degree of discomfort they felt. Our oft spoken advice to finish their gallons had been ignored or forgotten. The natural consequences would be a far better teacher than we.

### *Reincorporation*

Once all were present the youth stood in front of the eleven stones which we had set in a circle. One by one we stepped in front of them and asked,

“Have you completed your vigil to the best of your ability?

“What out of your childhood have you decided to leave behind?

“What new responsibility have you decided to take on as a youth ?

“Congratulations on completing your vigil. We celebrate your transition to youth with you.

“Initiate, please kneel.

“With this ash, I anoint you a youth (here we smudged ash from our fire on their foreheads)

“Do you accept the rights and responsibilities of this new status?

“Then rise, and announce yourself a youth.

“Please rise and step over the threshold and become the Master of Two Worlds.

At this point, she or he joined the four of us in the circle. After all the youth were incorporated into the circle, we announced very solemnly that their first responsibility was youth was to make as much noise as possible for as long as possible!

Later in the evening, they broke their fast with an Italian feast prepared in their honor by their midwives. The meal of spaghetti, complete with garlic bread and pudding paks was a beautiful, beautiful celebration that surely encompassed what Turner referred to when he spoke of *communitas*. They were so very proud of themselves, and the self-assuredness that this gave them

allowed them to forget themselves. They gave themselves over completely to the group and the celebration of themselves. Being cool was not even a thought as they goofed around competing for the most laughs, comparing horror stories of their vigil. The previous night's lack of sleep was completely forgotten as the new youth stayed up to celebrate themselves.

### *Post Vigil Reflections*

The fact that we were in a liminal state and that we were doing everything we could to make the trip different from their lives did not mean that the trip was an isolated event in their lives, a symbolic enactment that operated in a vacuum. In fact, many of the youth consciously used the vigils to come to a satisfactory answer to dilemmas they faced in their lives. The initiates integrated the context we were using on the trip with their lives back home. They used the language of the trip to speak about the crisis many of them faced upon their return.

When I tried to leave one of the girls at her site, she broke down and began to sob. She told me she was scared, that she was afraid of being alone for an entire night and afraid of failing. I held her while she talked it out, but as the frantic tone began to smooth out, I told her I was going to leave her, that I knew she could do it, but in order for her to succeed I had to let her do it on her own.

As another staff member made rounds of all the sites during the night, she found Elizabeth in a collapsed mess. Through comforting her, it came out that she was not just dealing with fears of solitude but with memories left from her mother's abusive boyfriend. Susan talked her through it and gave her some ideas for some purification exercises she could perform to help herself conquer these dragons of memories. After Elizabeth's successful completion of her vigil, she announced that she had made the decision to stop living with her mother and that she would go to live with

her father. This entailed a life change for her. She would not only be moving from one parent's care to another, but also changing schools and states.

## **Role Reversal**

The last and final leg of the trip was a three day hike through the Hoh Rainforest. This hike was radically different than the two other hikes. The youth were to camp alone, with staff at another site close enough to be in shouting distance. This trip was to allow the new youth to explore the ways in which they could apply the changes they had chosen to make in their lives. It was also an activity of trust and affirmation. It let the youth know, in no uncertain terms, that we believed in them and thought they were responsible enough to run a camp on their own.

It went fairly well, all things considered. We held our breath the night before departure as they debated what to bring and who should carry it, hoping they remembered to bring the pots. They didn't forget the pots, but they did forget their water purification tablets. After letting them sweat it out for a while ("Extra tablets? No, we just brought enough for ourselves."), we 'found' some in our packs. We were pleased to see that some of the structures we used being continued. They had circle conversation, where one person at a time spoke, and teams to do the work - although we heard reports of mutiny.

The relationship during these three days was marked by a decidedly different feel. We served as advisors, there for consultation, and when asked, impartial mediators over disputes. We laughed often together, as staff had been freed from the role of disciplinarian and child had been freed from the (subordinate) role of child. At one point the youth attacked the staff camp looking like characters right out of Lord of the Flies. Half naked, brandishing spears, whooping and hollering, they made off with some equipment of ours. While we were mightily surprised by the

assault, I think they were more surprised when we gave chase and ended up making off with more loot than they!

### *Council of Elders*

In between battles between the camps, the staff held what was called Councils of Elders. These were hour long conversations that three of us at a time would hold with individual youth. During the conversations, we went around the circle several times, offering positive affirmations of the youth. These were particular gifts or talents we thought the individual had contributed to the group. Then we went around with a few "challenges". These were places where we saw the youth could benefit to focus some energy. These were experienced as positive and affirming conversations which validated the youth in both their struggles and their triumphs.

Their purpose was twofold. One was to offer the youth feedback in a constructive manner, acting as a caring mirror of sorts to reflect them to themselves. This reflection, by allowing a clear view, would hopefully enable them to make the changes they had decided on during their vigil. The other purpose was simple validation of who they were. It is a rare thing for a youth to have three respected adults in conversation with them alone, about them alone. This is not only a symbol of their importance, but also a concrete way of showing it to them.



## Reincorporation

### *Back at Songaia*

Upon our return to Songaia, the base camp where they had last seen their parents, we witnessed a dramatic change. Youth who had been respectful, responsible, aware that duties needed to be taken care of, youth who had spent the last four days taking care of themselves, suddenly reverted to obtusely obnoxious behavior that was far too reminiscent of the mob we encountered the first night of the trip. We were appalled. Our feelings of success, of self-congratulations over getting through to this group, rapidly dissolved. We witnessed stealing, infighting, physical fighting (which was THE no-no of camp), bickering, a complete disrespect for staff, and massive revolt when it came to getting work done.

In looking back from the comfort of solitude and my own home, I have better insight into the dynamics of our return. The youth were incredibly nervous about seeing their parents and their old friends. A lifetime of change had happened to them in the last three weeks. Would this be understood, or at least respected, by those that surrounded them at home? Would their accomplishments be acknowledged by people who had not been present to witness them?

The other factor involved in this poor behavior was simple laziness. Songaia represented home to them. Home meant old ways and patterns of behavior. This did not bode well for a successful incorporation of a changed individual, worthy of new status, into the homes they had left. After a series of circle conversations reflecting with them the difficulty of returning to an old environment as a new person, and reminding them that the responsibility to make such a change was theirs, we could only welcome the parents and hope for the best.

## *Encountering families*

As families were going to be the primary communities to which the youth would return, and would have a major influence on whether the youth did in fact *stay* a youth, the camp ended with a weekend of activities in which the families and new youth interacted for the first time. This gave Stan Crow a chance to fill the family in on some of the changes they could expect from their youth, and to reinforce the 'myth' of the trip. This reinforcing was critical, for the family had to engage the myth if the rite of initiation was to be truly recognized once the youth returned home. The weekend was also an opportunity for the youth to 'show' their parents who they had become in a safe environment, surrounded by people who would help affirm for the youth that she or he was a changed individual.

The youth and the parents were re-united by being formally introduced to each other. This reminded each, upon seeing the other, to treat it as a new encounter. After the youth had presented a skit about their experiences, families were given the opportunity to catch up.

Lunch was the first real activity. With the reflection that parents once fed their helpless babies, parents were told to sit at the tables while staff tied their hands behind their backs. The youth were instructed to feed their parents lunch before they could themselves eat. This very concrete role reversal was quite effective in helping both parties imagine their new roles, and begin a new relationship. One father, who had a jokester son, commented after, "I kept waiting for the sandwich to smash into my face or the soup to go down my shirt or to discover a jalapeno pepper in my mouth, but that never happened. He just fed me, simply and beautifully."

A later activity was called minefield. The youth had to verbally guide their blindfolded parents through a course rife with 'mines' which, if touched, would send the parents back to start

over. In addition to being blindfolded, the parents were not allowed to speak. This activity was a challenge for many of the parents. Having directed the child all their life, they struggled with being blind and mute, dependent on their child's care. Especially frustrating to many was the inability to *tell* their youth what to do or how to do it. It was a learning experience for many. Said one mother, "I was highly irritated at not being able to tell him what he wasn't doing right, or how I wanted him to direct me. But then I started listening to his voice, and it dawned on me that I really could trust him to get me through the maze. He would do it just fine his own way and didn't need my instructions to do that."

One of the last and most important activities we had the families do was create a covenant with each other of how they would plan to integrate this new relationship into their lives. Each person created a time line of the next three years, plotting out where they thought it would be appropriate to give new responsibilities and freedoms to the youth. The families then worked to integrate their time lines together. This created an open dialogue between parents and youth about the youth's life.

The youth (for probably the first time) had some say over their lives. This let them take ownership over the decisions made, reducing some of the probable friction in the future over what was allowed when. The parents were able to point out some of the responsibilities they would expect to a youth who had just come from an initiation emphasizing personal responsibility. Both had to work together in new ways to come to decisions they all agreed on.

The closing ceremony found us gathered once more around the May pole. Stan, after congratulating the youth on their accomplishments, asked them to hold up their ends of the ribbons that had been cut when they left their parents for the trip. After celebrating with the parents the

addition of this new individual into their family, he asked the parents to hold up their ends of the ribbons. As staff walked around the circle tying the ribbons together, Stan pointed that once the ribbons were joined together seamlessly. They had been cut, and were now choosing to come together again. Once joined, the knot would be the strongest part.

Hopefully on their return home, this symbolic view of their relationship will continue to hold true. It is a difficult thing to make a transition in a relationship. New bonds have to be created; old habits need to be broken. "However, when a ritual does work...the exchange between the semantic poles seems, to my observation, to achieve genuinely cathartic effects, causing in some cases real transformations of character and of social relationships."<sup>17</sup>

## *INGREDIENTS*

These two trips, along with other rites of passage events I have come across in my research, convince me that authentic transitory events are possible even in this society. My research and experience have also led me to conclude that there are a few key 'ingredients' necessary for a successful rite of initiation. These are the creation of a meaningful context; providing some break with the Everyday Experience; reflection about the trip; and a community that supports the change that has taken place. These elements are found in many societies' rites of passage, but are especially important to include when creating rites of passages within this society.

The most important ingredient is creating a context. As the participants – both initiates and staff – come from a highly rational and secular society, there must be a context which draws them into seeing possibilities rather than limitations. The context *content* is fairly irrelevant. As long as the context is plausible (or can become so with familiarity) to the group it is intended for, it is valid. What *is* important is using the context consistently so that it blossoms from story into reality.

It is important to acknowledge that context does not have to consist of a rigid plan decided on five months ahead of time. It *is* important to deeply reflect on the participants involved and on a context that would be meaningful for them beforehand. This often results in the creation of at least a rudimentary plan. However, it is important to be open to the context that develops over the course of the trip and to use what emerges. This can be more powerful to the participants, for they have had a hand in its creation. On the most recent trip I participated in, the official context was The Hero's Journey. After the Ropes Course, however, it became clear that the initiates had really latched on to the image of defeating one's dragons. We shifted course, referring less and less to



The Hero's Journey and more and more to the defeating of one's dragons. The fact that they had chosen the context gave them some ownership over the 'story' that was told about the trip, and made the believing of the story a little easier.

Another important ingredient is providing some separation from day to day life. It can be a geographical separation, a community separation, an emotional separation, whatever works. The purpose of this trip is to include new possibilities in life, and it is difficult, in the course of daily life, to even see that other possibilities exist. A break pushes the initiates off kilter a little and shakes them off their comfort blankets. Being off balance in such a way offers some breathing room for new insights to occur, and new insights to turn into new life possibilities.

Reflection is an important ingredient in rite of initiations if the trip is to become more than a fun jaunt in the woods (or wherever else it takes place). It is not enough just to *do*. Doing is only there to give the initiates something to think about. It is the reflection that creates the impetus for change, and allows the trip to become one of transition.

Reflection is especially important for youth. They, for the most part, have not yet developed the skills necessary to do such a reflection internally, and having an older mentor navigate the field of reactions and implications with them is essential. Having an adult reflect with the youth on their life, their emotions, their thoughts, is a loving and validating kind of attention. This positive attention is the kind that we must provide to youth if they are to go on to effect positive change.

The last key ingredient is to provide a community for the youth who will support the life changes she or he has made. Human beings are social creatures. While it may be meaningful for an individual to experience a moving rite of passage in solitude, if the change in status is not

recognized by the community, in effect there has been no rite of passage. This 'ingredient' is a difficult one to negotiate in this society, as there is no broad experience or understanding of rites of passages. Families, a crucial community of the youth, become then even more important, as they will likely be the only community to recognize the change. In addition, because families are so close to the individual, they will be the ones who help the youth remember or encourage them to forget the changes they had decided to make. It was for this reason that Stan had decided, by my second trip, to provide an extensive reincorporation time. This allowed the youth, while still surrounded by a community that understood the nature of the trip (the other participants), to dialogue safely with their parents, who were still fledglings in understanding the changes that their youth had undergone.

However, affirmation by key communities be found in other groups. One such group on our trip was the other trip participants, initiates and staff. Together they kept the story going, with each reflection affirming the existence of this initiation. Another resource is the religious group to which the family belongs. If the community is informed of the nature of the trip and given some understanding of what it means for the child, the members can participate in affirming the change through verbal congratulations to new status in the religious community.

## *CONCLUSION*

I have participated in two rites of passage, one at the age of twelve and again when I was twenty-two. I experienced them as life enriching events, and felt fortunate that I was able to participate in such a program. This feeling has led to the belief that more people ought to know about rites of passages, about the possibilities that exist for themselves or for their children, and I have felt it was in part my responsibility to tell them.

As an anthropologist, I was curious about what made the trips work. How did a rite of initiation trip *work* without a commonly shared religion or community? How was it that summer after summer, groups of children went on this trip and returned feeling like they had actually *changed* into a youth? In addition, I knew that there was a fairly large void on the literature about rites of passage in Western societies, and wished to help fill that.

Through this chronicle I hope to have provided a detailed look at the inner workings of a rite of passage journey in this society. Over the course of the work I attempted to highlight the elements of the trip which I believe to have substantially contributed to the success of this program. Perhaps this will help people to see that meaningful and authentic rites of passage can happen in this society.

1. Arnold van Gennep *The Rites of Passage*
2. Victor Turner *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* p.24
3. Turner, *ibid.* p.237
4. Turner, *ibid* p.237
5. Black Elk *Black Elk Speaks*
6. Victor Turner *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* p.57
7. Edith Sullwold *The Ritual Maker Within* p.117
8. Victor Turner *On the Edge of the Bush* p.294
9. Turner, *ibid.* p.293
10. Bruchac Joseph *The Native American Sweat Lodge.* p.2
11. Bruchac *ibid.* p.60
12. Bruchac *ibid* p.46
13. Victor Turner *The Edge of the Bush* p.295
14. Turner *ibid.* p.295
15. Jean Baechler as cited in Reeves and Tugend *Suicide's Unanswerable Logic* p.44
16. Reeves and Tugend *ibid.* p.44
17. Victor Turner *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* p.56

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### Web Sites

- <http://www.riteofpassage.com/index.html>
- <http://www.aawot.com/rites.html#girls>
- <http://www.publicnews.com/issues/739/books/html>
- <http://www.tiac.net/users/weavers/uuandover/rites.htm>
- <http://www.dimensional.com/~jaz/pparent/life.htm>
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