A Modern Rite of Passage: Understanding the Process of Becoming A Teenager.

Ask children where the line is, across which they will pass into adulthood and they generally tell you one of two things: getting their driver’s licence or being able to drink! What are they actually telling us?

Young teenagers feel more and more separated from their parents and want to define that independence. They want to make choices over what they increasingly see as their domain – their own lives.

Contrasting feelings of insecurity and loneliness conflict with the urge to be free of the constraints of authority. One moment seeking reassurance from parents while in the next rejecting them for their concern, the adolescent rides a very unsteady ship in a turbulent sea. Unsure of which port to choose when so many promise tantalisingly new and challenging experiences, the possibility of a return journey home hangs over the adventure, a safe harbour tinged with the inevitable sense of a failed quest.

Children reaching adolescence stand on a boundary, a threshold. Behind them is their childhood past, while beyond and stretching into the future, they can clearly see the grown-up world before them. Traditionally, this has been a time for initiations, rites of passage, journeys into the wilderness, all marking the ritual handling of a crossing into adulthood.

This threshold period between child and adult is now identified by cultural anthropologists as the liminal phase\(^1\) when the individual is no longer a member of his or her past group nor yet of any future group to which he or she will soon belong. It is a psychological state which arises naturally for all children as part of their normal maturation. The difference is that for most of our children this hugely important time is not formally recognised. An opportunity to support and guide has been lost and forgotten with the pace and secular nature of our modern lives.

A new self is trying to emerge. It is a time when a deep sense for identity\(^2\) arises. The feeling of “who am I?” permeates the young teenager’s world, often without clear articulation. A kind of cocoon period begins - the liminal phase - in which we see

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1 Coined by the folklorist Arnold van Gennep, but now most closely associated with Victor Turner.

2 Eight Stages of Development, Erik Erikson (1956)
them begin to turn away from parents and family, embracing friends and peers as brothers and sisters.

Rites of Passage are rituals which cultures around the world have developed to teach us that change is to be expected, welcomed and embraced. We are all affected by it and the crises we experience in the development of the self are not simply an individual's problems but opportunities for growth. Many of us, as parents are aware that periods of change can bring about positive transformation and there is a great deal of interest in the way rites of passage can support our children.

A simple pattern has emerged over time and through the wisdom of our cultural elders in the initiation process for young adolescents. It recognizes the naturally occurring liminal phase and enhances its power through ritual. Typically the three stages are separation, transition and incorporation. Differences in the specific handling for boys and girls do not change the underlying pattern. The adolescents are removed from the security of their families to the wilderness and placed under the care of an older man or woman, never their own parent. Strict training and testing guided by their mentor in the ways of the community follow. They are then ritually re-integrated, often “reborn” as young adults into the society for which they are responsible as full members.

How does this square with the experience of our children in a modern, western, largely urban society? Although the challenges of puberty arise naturally, our adolescents do not pass immediately into adulthood as they would have done traditionally. We have introduced the “teenager,” stretching the liminal phase to include compulsory secondary school and post 16 education.

For up to 10 years or more our teenagers are left in a kind of limbo, which contributes to the pressures of transition. They participate in the behaviours they see as the privileges of adulthood but without having to take on the corresponding responsibilities. Anti-adultism and peer bonding are promoted by savvy marketers to release the growing proportion of household income over which children have increasing control. The downward pressure on young teens to adopt adult behaviours has increased with the commercialisation of childhood where “tween” and “teen” identities have been manipulated as market targets.
It is no wonder that in the absence of anything else, children see attaining a driving licence as a key to freedom and being able to legally drink in a pub as access to adulthood.

In fact children and teenagers have far more control over aspects of family life than ever before. Children are so much in the habit of making choices that by the time they reach adolescence they may well be making major life decisions. Traditional societies never expected parents to discipline girls of child bearing age or boys physically stronger than their fathers. By that age they passed through into adulthood and mentors dealt with such issues. Modern parents, struggling with their sense of authority find the early teenage period can be very challenging for family life.

As the young person leaves childhood behind, the following teenage years make huge demands on the character of the individual. A modern rite of passage needs to help young teenagers gain a perspective for the next few years and begin to understand the important role that particular experiences and relationships will have in their own development. The character will be forged, challenged, tested and a real sense of identity established.

Goleman notes, “There is an old fashioned word for the body of skills that emotional intelligence represents: character.” He distinguishes four complementary areas - self awareness, self management, social awareness and relationship management. Of course, there is an abundance of awareness in our young people. Schooling and the media overload us with information. The real work however, is to do with the honest handling of ourselves and our relationships - essentially conscience and empathy combined with the will to act accordingly.

In addition to the three stages of separation, transition and reintegration another extremely important aspect needs to be mentioned, belonging to a rites of passage. Throughout our childhood we incorporate narrative patterns and images which become deeply part of the way we understand our world - stories of life, change, death and resurrection, of the new forming from the old. They help us to interpret challenge, overcoming obstacles, confrontation and struggle as constructive, positive gifts for our growth.

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3 Daniel Goleman *Working With Emotional Intelligence* 1999
One of the central motifs in our cultural heritage is the journey, the hero's journey which I have used as the basis for expeditions with young adolescents. When these narrative symbols are a part of their background, often nothing needs to be explained. The children respond naturally in their own ways. The journey can become one of real personal transition.

Being away from home, the family and in unusual circumstances is a part of the separation process. It is deeply calming travelling on foot, by bike, canoe or horseback, under one's own steam. To be in the wilderness and be a part of Nature encourages a simplicity of being. As Richard Louv says, “…a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion.” It opens the youngster, helps reflection and enables sincere conversation to flow, creating the setting for a transition process to begin.

If one does not already belong to a religious community, for example, which offers its traditional rite of passage, there are many ways it can be constructed. It is best created to draw out experiences the child already knows however, and for which he or she has already prepared. It needs to make sense of the past and set out an understanding for the future as a life phase that will lead towards adulthood. But in essence, it is the intention that carries the power.

Copying elements closely from traditional cultures means that the process may not match present life styles well. It is important for the young person to feel that it has all made some sense in a modern context and that the whole thing is not alienating. The peer group has become increasingly important to the teenager, so if others are likely to experience something similar it can be helpful.

Above all, the reintegration process is the real challenge. Welcoming the young adolescent into a new phase of life means that family members and especially supporting adults need to mark the expected change by relating to him or her differently. The manner in which we interact, understand and help the teenager through difficulties is a critical part of the process. We need to provide them with opportunities to earn their independence while they, in turn learn how to manage that independence correctly. We, as adults enable our teenagers to learn a sense of responsibility which we come to trust.

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4 Richard Louv: Last Child In The Woods Algonquin Books 2006
The modern form of taking on adulthood is to build character. It needs guidance but is worked by the individual through free will. Responsibility, honesty, caring, fairness, trustworthiness and courage are not skills. They are character traits. They are expressions of our inner nature. Rites of passage direct our intentions towards this end – that our children begin to understand their upcoming teenage years as a period of real transformation needing their work and will feel encouraged to embrace the process confidently.

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