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RITES OF PASSAGE

THE QUEST FOR MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

Ritual knowledge is nothing if not sensual. A rite is an activity that engages the hand and pricks the ear; it catches the eye and lifts the heart.

—Ronald Grimes¹

I SPENT MY ADOLESCENCE IN OREGON, where the state issued me a driver's permit at fifteen years of age and a license at sixteen. At eighteen, I entered a voter's booth for the first time, casting my ballot in the presidential race between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. At twenty-one, I could legally go to a bar and order a drink.

Modern societies tend to grant privileges according to years lived rather than rites of passage per se—ritual ceremonies that determine one is responsible, tied into a larger community, and ready for the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. With the exception of obtaining a driver's license, the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of adulthood are usually achieved by reaching certain birthdays rather than by successfully making one's way through a series of training, preparing, and testing rituals.

Historically, societies have provided rites of passage to ensure that people negotiate social and relational changes associated with growing up and aging. Arriving at puberty, parenthood, and menopause alters our view of ourselves, our longings, our relationships to others, and our rights and responsibilities. In the absence of tribal rites of passage, we have relied

on the institutions of our culture—education, religion, civic life—to pass on the proper skills, values, and beliefs to manage sexuality, adulthood, and aging.

In the absence of recognized rites of passage, boys and girls (and to a lesser degree men and women) create their own rituals to validate who they are becoming as men and women and how they are to relate to each other. Those of us in Christian communities can channel the desire for the validation of maturity and for a clarification of identity and place in a community by constructing rites that draw everyone toward healthy relationships and commitment to community.

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described and classified various rituals that traditional cultures (those unaffected by the Industrial Revolution) used to mark significant transition points throughout life. Among the most important were initiation rites conducted around the time of puberty. Van Gennep's work was translated into English in 1960, about the time the angst of adolescence was taking Europe and America by storm. In the last couple of decades, others have built on van Gennep's work to resurrect ritual and re-create rites of passage in the hopes of bringing children through the confusion of adolescence to adulthood.

Rites of passage depend on markers that identify physical changes requiring a shift in roles, rights, and responsibilities. Transitions related to one's status as a sexual person are particularly significant. Children do not suddenly become sexual in adolescence, though their sexual status changes. Boys and girls have powerful longings for attachment from birth that are directed toward their primary caregivers. They also experience sexual feeling very early in life, generally discovering the pleasant sensation that comes from stimulating their genitals by the time they enter preschool. Most children then enter a phase of sexual hibernation about the time they head for first grade; they stop stimulating themselves (and forget they ever did), and their sexuality is put on hold until puberty. At puberty, everything changes for girls and boys, including their sexual status. Longings for attachment begin to shift toward peers—a desire to belong, to be counted worthy, to be accepted, loved. Although the underlying longing is universal, its expression and experience in embodied (physical changes) and embedded (cultural expectations) aspects of being male or female is different.

Physical Markers of Womanhood

Puberty marks the beginning of a girl's reproductive life. Her sexuality is embodied in changes that move her into puberty, through a long time of potential fertility, followed by menopause. Traditional cultures marked these transitions with an assortment of menstrual rites, prewedding rituals, birth

rituals, and menopausal rituals. A girl's self-concept is defined and shaped through her interactions with others—parents, siblings, relatives, those in authority, and peers. How females and males understand and embrace their physical bodies, as well as the subsequent roles they adopt, is shaped through their interactions with others.

When traditional cultures celebrated the beginning of menstruation, other women surrounded young pubescent girls, instructing them in the skills and knowledge of womanhood, nurturing them, and initiating them into the circle of women. “Menstrual sanctuaries,” which were the tents, cabins, or special places set apart for menstruating women, gave women the opportunity to deepen connections and ties with other females, thus becoming part of their larger community.² Affirming traditions was a way to celebrate being female, and rites of passage connected women meaningfully to other women, transferring the blessing of being women from one generation to the next.

Redeeming Menstruation

The absence of affirming menstruation rituals today is evident in women's disdain for their periods. Early on, girls learn to be embarrassed by menstruation, to use products that help hide it from the boys around them, from each other, and, as much as possible, from themselves. Nineteen-year-old Nicole said, “I hated it when I started my period. No one should have to start in fifth grade. I felt like I was looking into a future that was going to be horrible, like, wow, my life is over. Now I try to ignore my period. I don't think about it. If you put a tampon in, you don't have to think much about it.”

Nicole's perspective is common among the women I've talked with. The possibility that menstruation is something positive was sometimes acknowledged but only in the context of being the process that allows women to make babies. The possibility that this monthly cycle—one that in some cases would never produce a child and, on average, in industrialized countries would only do so twice—could offer something potentially enriching and enhancing for women seemed remote.

Cultures that treated menstruation as important demonstrated the significance of it with menstruation taboos and rituals. In some cases, the rituals emerged out of fear, and taboos kept menstruating women secluded to protect people who could be damaged by her menstrual power. In other cases, the rituals emerged out of respect for the sacred, and seclusion was intended to bring renewal and blessing.³

In her best-selling novel *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant imagines how early Jewish women might have experienced life and the monthly ritual

of menstruation. Only menstruating women entered the red tent, and as their cycles were synchronized with each other⁴ they spent three days together inside the tent every month. They rested from the tasks of daily living, retold their stories, and reflected about life. Older women passed on traditions and wisdom to younger women.

Since the summer after sixth grade when my own journey into womanhood began, I have been alternately fascinated and annoyed by this thing female bodies do every month. My friends and I experienced menstruation as a nuisance at best and a dreaded nightmare at worst during years when our cramps were so painful they kept us home from school or work. Yet I also knew something amazing happened every month, reminding me that my body could create and sustain new life. That it happened regularly suggested a rhythm to life, a pattern of marking my days not unlike the seasons of the year.

In the last few years, I have begun attending more carefully to the rhythm of my cycle and reading and listening to other women's attempts to reconnect something of who they are to the menstruating bodies they inhabit. In accepting this thing as good, I have come to embrace the amazing gift God gave women by making us God's partner in creating and sustaining human life. Apart from producing children, my menstrual cycle connects me to a rhythm of life that is a grounding of sorts—a point of reflection on where I have been and where I am headed. When there is pain, it prepares and reminds me that I can endure the pain I will experience as a member of a broken and suffering world.

The collective shame and hate of menstruation that women share has emerged partly out of a long-running history of considering femaleness inferior to maleness. Many cultures considered female sexuality not only as being dangerous but as causing women to be frail, irrational, and illogical. By the time humanity reached the Victorian era, Western women had long accepted femaleness as a curse to be borne but not celebrated. They saw themselves as fragile and weak. Middle-class women of the time took on the "half-life of the parlor women,"⁵ who lounged on couches all day, too frail (and constrained by corsets that made it difficult to breathe and exert oneself at the same time) to do much else. Women of means gave the task of breast-feeding over to wet nurses and that of childrearing to nannies.

Hysterectomies became the solution to hysteria in women and a host of other female ailments. At the turn of the twentieth century, some medical journals suggested that hysterectomies were the cure-all for female problems. Because the uterus caused women an assortment of illnesses like nervousness, irritability, moodiness, and depression, once she emptied her womb of the babies she intended to have, it was better for everyone if she

had the now unnecessary organ removed. Being in therapy would help, too. She would be more pleasant to live with and could thus better fulfill her role as nurturer and keeper of the peace. Ultimately, a woman was doomed for what she did not have (a penis) and damned for what she did (a uterus).

As the mid-twentieth-century women's movement gained momentum, equality became the goal, ensuring that women had the same opportunities as men and received the same pay for the same work. Inequality had been justified on the basis of differences between men and women, so some argued that, except for a few reproductive organs, women were just like men. If women were just like men except that they were taught to feel inferior and weak, then a woman could be resocialized to do anything a man could do.

Shulamith Firestone, a radical feminist of the sixties and seventies, supported the development of technology that would allow women to be free of the task of baby-making. She thought a woman's inferior status was linked to her reproductive system and called for a revolution that would free women from the constraints of that system. Women would not have equal status with men and be truly free until they were released from the chore of making babies.⁶

Most people rejected Firestone's ideas and continued to have babies, but the curse of femaleness was so deeply embedded in culture that many women disdained the reproductive process. The uterus was deemed necessary for producing babies but bad in every other way; the number of hysterectomies hit an all-time high in the 1970s. Physicians counseled women to have their uteruses removed for a variety of reasons, including eliminating the discomfort of menstruation or the possibility of uterine cancer *at some point later in life*.⁷ Hysterectomies were the fourth most commonly performed operation among fifteen- to forty-four-year-old women in the 1970s, following abortions, diagnostic dilation and curettage (D&Cs), and tubal sterilizations.⁸

Although women have learned that it is detrimental to so lightly regard their uterus, and they no longer remove them at the alarming rates they did thirty-five years ago, at the dawn of the twenty-first century the medical community is still trying to mitigate the curse of menstruation. Some medical researchers argue that "incessant menstruation" comes as a liability, along with benefits of modernity that allowed women to live (and thus menstruate) longer and yet give birth to fewer children. They claim the benefits of helping women to menstruate less outweigh the potential risks of messing with their menstrual cycles.⁹ Late in 2003, the drug Seasonale will become available—a birth control pill prescribed so that it manipulates a woman's menstrual cycle, enabling her to suppress her periods so that she only has them once every three months.

Our culture stretches toward solutions that allow women to do away with the mess of menstruation without doing away with the uterus. Soon women will be able to take another step toward becoming more like men; they will no longer be required to bear the monthly curse of menstruation.

I don't know how Eve experienced menstruation prior to the introduction of sin in the fall. Probably it was pain- and trouble-free. But sin has now permeated everything. When I experience menstrual cramping and bloating, I consider it evidence of the fall, but I cringe when I hear women name their femaleness as a curse and work hard to escape an experience that is fundamental to being female. Instead of accepting menstruation as a curse, women can try to understand how having bodies that menstruate and are able to bear and nourish children can affect how they see themselves and how they live in relation to God, to others, and to the world. They can see the reproductive process as a significant part of sexuality. Women-affirming voices reject definitions that have emerged from cultures in which females and all things female were regarded inferior and cursed and were held in suspicion. We are embodied souls.

A menstruation ritual imparts blessings to girls and opens the possibility of thinking redemptively about all aspects of being female. Every month a girl is reminded of her uniqueness as a woman. She can attend to this rhythmic cycle that allows her to mark her days. She can look for ways to honor her menstruating body, such as allowing herself to pull inward a couple of days every month to review where she has been and to think intentionally about where she is headed. Some women notice that dreams intensify prior to, during, or immediately following menstruation. Others recognize a desire to be in a calm and quiet place during the heavier part of their bleeding. Some experience menstruation as a time of increased awareness and creativity, or sensitivity and insight.

My daughter Sarah recognizes a heightened sensitivity a few days before her period. She is more keenly aware of and troubled by the brokenness and suffering she sees around her and is easily moved to tears. We have discussed this as a gift that could be embraced rather than a nuisance and a pain of menstruation. In her heightened sensitivity, she can weep with God and share in God's suffering over a world that is not as it should be. During these days, she is awakened to her longing for heaven. Every month, she has the potential to connect with God in this way.

A twenty-nine-year-old married woman named Grant expressed something similar. She said, "I feel increased sensitivity and heightened emotions which are sometimes helpful. I'm forced to confront emotions I ignore the rest of the month. So I pray a lot, meditate, and am drawn to God through the emotional discomfort. I'm thankful for that."

Annie, a twenty-two-year-old artist, said, “Menstruation mirrors the creative process for me. It is a time of gathering, incubating, releasing, and then creating. Its rhythm is a metaphor, if not more, of the creative process. At the midway point in my cycle, I seem more articulate and have clearer thinking. During my period, I dream more intensely and create my best art.”

A few women are reconsidering the ancient patterns of separating menstruating women from others. Although we have long assumed that the separation was perceived as necessary for the sake of sanitation, for some cultures it appears to have been a time for women to draw away alone or with other menstruating women in a silent or near-silent retreat to reflect on the wisdom of life, the passage of time, and what was to come. One student responded to the bonding possibilities of women supporting each other in menstruation by telling this story:

I really appreciated the ideas in the text on the “menstrual sanctuaries” and how in some cultures menstruation is treated as a time for rest and retreat and to be with other women. I had just finished reading that part and decided to go to the store to get my shopping done for the day. On my way home from the store, I was suddenly overcome by the most excruciating cramps I have ever experienced. I literally had to roll out of my car and stumble through the door of my apartment and collapse on my bed, groaning and sobbing at the amount of pain I was in. My roommates immediately jumped into action, one going for the hot water bottle, another one making me some tea and fetching the Advil, and the other one taking off my shoes, covering me in a blanket, and giving me her stuffed elephant to squeeze. I was whimpering and grimacing at the pain I was in, and I looked up to see my roommates’ sad, concerned faces but also looks of knowing all too well what I was going through. When I was finally able to move again a few hours later, we all laughed together and shared the “worst time ever” stories. It was a very bonding time, and we connected in a way that is so special, a way to connect with women through the one thing that makes us uniquely women. . . . Being women themselves my roommates knew exactly what I needed, and the whole incident became a way for them to care for me as a woman. I think I underestimate the power of having other women around to share these experiences that are a part of being women. Women everywhere are bonded by this dreaded “curse,” which actually turns out to be a blessing when it becomes a way to connect with other women.



Suffering and grace reside together. Allowing other women to be familiar with our menstrual cycle invites women to receive blessing and to bestow blessing on each other.

Women who believe menstruation is good give themselves an opportunity for growth and blessing. Women bleed for some time before they bear children and long after they are done bearing children and whether or not they *ever* bear children. One postmenopausal woman who had never married or had children said, “I used to laugh and say, ‘I had all those periods for nothing.’ I think menstruation was about more than having babies. We don’t understand the mystery of our bodies very well.”

Women inhabit physical bodies that menstruate every month, and their personhood cannot be separated from their bodies. Attending to a cycle that is fundamental to women’s physical nature opens the door for potential insight and unexpected blessing.

Redeeming Menopause

In many industrialized cultures, not only is the onset of menstruation perceived as a curse, so is the cessation of menstruation. Girls are cursed when menstruation comes, cursed as the ones to go through the pain and suffering of childbearing, and cursed with the irrelevance of old age when they stop menstruating. In 1969, psychiatrist David Reuben wrote:

As estrogen is shut off, a woman comes as close as she can to being a man. Increased facial hair, deepened voice, obesity, and decline of breasts and female genitalia all contribute to a masculine appearance. Not really a man but no longer a functional woman, these individuals live in a world of *intersex*. Having outlived their ovaries, they have outlived their usefulness as human being.¹⁰

The results of these changes, according to psychoanalytic theories, were increased problems coping with life after menopause. Women were in a crisis of loss and identity; they were no longer able to bear children—the essential marker of female identity. Menopause came to be accepted as an illness needing medical and psychological intervention.

Researchers questioning the assumptions of this model of female reproduction have been exploring the connection between mental and physical health and menopause. In a five-year study of 541 women, researchers from the University of Pittsburgh concluded that menopause did not lead to detectable changes in women’s well-being. It did not make them more anxious, angry, depressed, self-conscious, stressed, or nervous and did not

make it more difficult to sleep or increase the number of neck- and headaches. In fact, the only reliable effect of menopause was that women who did not use hormone replacement felt less self-consciousness and reported more often that they experienced hot flashes.¹¹

Theories that menopause makes women physically and psychologically ill and unstable have been proven false over the last ten to fifteen years,¹² but the fear and curse of aging lingers, negatively affecting women's self-perceptions. In many traditional cultures, women gained social status as they aged. As their responsibility for children lessened, they became the administrators of households and clans, as well as leaders in politics, religion, and medicine. A woman was now worthy of the respect she had given older women in her younger years.¹³

Today, much of a woman's felt worth is in her physical appearance, and aging represents declining social value. Our culture markets to this fear, selling products or procedures promising to stay the horrors of aging and help women maintain a youthful appearance. This culture of youthful beauty has created a general perception that to look postmenopausal is to be unattractive, nonsexual, and undesirable. But consider this alternative view of aging by Naomi Wolf:

You could see the signs of female aging as diseased, especially if you had a vested interest in making women too, see them your way. Or you could see that if a woman is healthy she lives to grow old. As she thrives, she reacts and speaks and shows emotion, and grows into her face. Lines trace her thought and radiate from the corners of her eyes after decades of laughter, closing together like fans as she smiles. You could call the lines a network of "serious lesions," or you could see that in a precise calligraphy, thought has etched marks of concentration between her brows, and drawn across her forehead the horizontal creases of surprise, delight, compassion and good talk. A lifetime of kissing, of speaking and weeping shows expressively around a mouth scored like a leaf in motion. The skin loosens on her face and throat, giving her features a setting of sensual dignity, her features grow stronger as she does. She has looked around in her life, and it shows when gray and white reflect in her hair, you could call it a dirty secret or you could call it silver or moonlight. Her body fills into itself, taking on gravity like a bather breasting water, growing generous with the rest of her. The darkening under her eyes, the weight of her lids, their minute cross hatching reveal that what she has been part of has left in her its complexity and richness. She is darker, stronger, looser, tougher, sexier. The maturing of a woman who has continued to grow is a beautiful thing to behold.¹⁴

We age, and aging represents bodies that are breaking down and wearing out. But aging also represents a life lived. We can choose to see how living long yields great potential for inner wisdom and knowledge; only with aging can wisdom fully develop. The role of an old woman or grandmother in some cultures is still highly valued because she is granted the status of sage, or wise one. Her work changes from that of directly nurturing the young to one of teaching, mentoring, healing, and tending other men and women less far along in the journey. Her contribution changes as she transitions through life; it does not diminish in importance or magnitude. We grant honor to aging women when we refuse to allow women's social worth to be determined by a youthful appearance. Communities of faith that invite older women to teach, mentor, arbitrate, discern, and lead validate God's work in those who have gained wisdom through a lifetime of living—observing, learning, absorbing, and growing ever older.

Rites of passage can become powerful means by which women identify positively with the physical changes of their bodies. Rather than feel cursed by female bodies that menstruate or betrayed by female bodies that age, they find richness and a centering calmness in their embodied state as women. Women comfortable in their bodies are less encumbered by resentment and doubts about being female; they live and work with greater confidence, validated and celebrated for who they are and are becoming as women transitioning through life.

Male Markers of Manhood

With the exception of puberty, boys' and men's lives are not marked as clearly by reproductive changes that occur throughout their lives. At puberty, boys develop more muscle and deeper voices, as well as pubic and facial hair. But deeper voices, bigger muscles, and more hair do not turn a boy into a man. Boys prove manhood by showing they are skilled and competent like their fathers. As they develop skills and muscle, boys desire to test their competency and strength. They want to be capable, assured that they can make it in the world that awaits them. In the absence of clear rituals or markers that prepare and test them for manhood, many create their own initiation rites. Some of these occur in the context of life-affirming friendships through recreational and organized sports, outdoor adventures, theater, music, student council, and social activism. Boys test their strength, courage, intellect, and skill against themselves and other boys as they move through adolescence.

My extended family gets together every few years for a reunion. Wrestling is and has been a big sport in my mother's family. Uncle Art wrestled, as did my brother Dan, as do some of the nephews. One summer, Dan

and one of our nephews decided to have an exhibition match. Everyone watched sixteen-year-old Zach take on his thirty-four-year-old uncle. Uncle Art officiated. The intensity of the match equaled those I'd watched at other meets. Neither wanted to lose. Zach was proving he had acquired the strength of a man; Dan was proving he could still hold his own. Dan and Zach were stretched to the max, testing their strength and skill against each other. I don't remember who won, but that's not the point. The match, held in the yard of the farm where my mother was born, with an audience of fifty-some family members from four generations, was an initiation rite of sorts, a testing of strength and skill, a welcoming of Zach into the family as a man.

There comes a point in every boy's life where he stands up to and challenges his father, proving his manhood.¹⁵ Some of these are positive efforts to prove strength and skill, like Zach's wrestling match with Dan. The desire for boys to be competent and affirm their manhood through the testing of skills is life-affirming. But in the absence of strong male role models or effective rites of passage that guide how boys think about themselves and the communities to which they belong, boys turn elsewhere for guidance. In their desire to belong and be accepted, it is often their peers they turn to for guidance.

Sometimes this skill-testing takes a detrimental turn and involves taking risks to cheat the system and rebel against parents, school, or legal authority. This may mean striking back at a father who hits his adolescent son. Or it may be an indirect attack on authority: stealing cigarettes from the neighborhood convenience store, bashing in mail boxes in the next suburb over, driving recklessly, skipping school, or binge drinking. These risk-taking behaviors prove a boy's manhood to himself and his peers. In their power to affirm manhood, they become valuable initiation rites.

Having sex also makes a man out of a boy, as described in numerous coming-of-age classics such as *The Summer of 1942* and *The Graduate*. So deeply ingrained is the idea that boys must have sex to become men that to be twenty, male, and still a virgin means one needs therapy to explore the problem. In the movie *Antwone Fisher*, we discover that the reason Antwone had not yet had sex, even though he was a virile, attractive man enlisted in the navy, was because an older woman had molested him as a boy.

Yet adolescent boys receive conflicting, simultaneous messages: girls and women deserve respect, but things feminine are undesirable; girls should be treated well, but females are inferior; to have sex with a girl only for personal gratification is to exploit her; but prematurely committing to monogamy is both old-fashioned and unreasonable.

Psychologist and researcher William Pollack has interviewed, studied, and written about boys over the last two decades. He talks about the

double message boys get regarding their sexuality: "Here again is the double standard of masculinity that pushes boys to feel they need to 'prove themselves' sexually and then castigates them when they do so."¹⁶ Boys are not encouraged to talk about their questions, anxieties, and fears as they move from boyhood to manhood. They long for meaningful relationships, but the longing is considered effeminate, a sign of weakness. Pollack sees boys who are often depressed, lonely, and confused internally, though they learn to put on a tough, hard exterior.

Skill training and instruction in how to think about being male has existed in clubs sponsored by various communities, most notably the Boy Scouts. These clubs foster a sense of belonging, solidarity, and obligation. The Boy Scout movement emerged in response to an increasing anxiety during the years between 1880 and World War I that boys were not being adequately socialized in becoming men. Changes in fathers' occupation meant mothers were spending more time with their sons, and promoters of Boy Scouts feared boys would not become masculine without adequate time and training led by other men. The 1914 Boy Scout manual read, in part:

The wilderness is gone, the Buckskin Man is gone, the painted Indian has hit the trail over the Great Divide, the hardships and privations of pioneer life which did so much to develop sterling manhood are now but a legend in history, and we must depend upon the Boy Scout Movement to produce the men of the future.¹⁷

The training, awards, and rituals were well defined, prescribing what it meant to be male. Boys were taught the skills needed to be men and instructed in the responsibilities of manhood. The description of the 1912 Boy Scout shows the founders' fear that boys were becoming soft:

The REAL Boy Scout is not a "sissy." There is nothing "milk and water" about him; he is not afraid of the dark. Instead of being a puny, dull, or bookish lad, who dreams and does nothing, he is full of life, energy, enthusiasm, bubbling over with fun, full of ideas as to what he wants to do and knows how he wants to do it. He is not hitched to his mother's apron strings. While he adores his mother, and would do anything to save her from suffering or discomfort, he is self-reliant, sturdy and full of vim.¹⁸

Balance is hard to achieve in a fallen world, but, in fact, men do not now have to choose between the sensitive New Man and Iron John. They

can be emotionally vulnerable, desire intimacy, admit weakness, and also strive to acquire skill and competence and be “sturdy and full of vim.” The difficulty that creates so much confusion for boys is the lack of consensus about what ought to define manhood. This lack of consensus also means that the rituals that were effective in shaping boys in the past do not carry the same power they once did. In some places, belonging to the Boy Scouts is a sissy thing to do.

For boys headed to a college or university, fraternities become a place to find identity and belonging. Unfortunately, the initiation rituals for some fraternities require that pledges prove their manhood by drinking vast quantities of alcohol. A string of alcohol-related deaths from 1997 through 1999 (many of them tied to fraternity initiations) brought this ritual into the limelight of national news. One freshman pledge described his experience on the television show *20/20*, a segment of ABC News titled “A Sea of Alcohol.”¹⁹ Pledges were taken to a bar where five plastic-lined garbage cans were clustered in the center of the room. The purpose of the night, he said, was to get all the pledges drunk and sick. “Be a man,” they were told. “If you want to belong to this fraternity, you’ve got to do this. You wouldn’t want to get kicked out now.” Even after vomiting blood along with alcohol, he was pressured to keep drinking. When asked why he would do that to himself, he said, “I just wanted to fit in; that’s all I ever wanted. I just wanted to fit in and meet people and stuff.”

Incoming freshmen often face the uncertainty of a new environment. Their identity, roles, rights, and obligations are shifting. In their longing to belong, many are willing to endure hazing ordeals that humiliate, are sometimes violent, and in a few cases have led to death. “They had to do it, so they were going to make us do it. . . . It’s kinda like a ritual to them ’cause they do it the same way every year.”

Boys find another kind of community and brotherhood in street gangs. In the absence of strong relationships in family or community, boys will seek relationship elsewhere. Once they pass through initiation rites that can include violence and illegal activities, they are welcomed into the gang as brothers, becoming loyal members of a family they love passionately and would die to protect. Sometimes gang membership is more about survival than replacing family connections, but it is always about belonging. The longing to belong is fundamental to human nature—a good longing that corresponds to being made for relationship. The desire to be competent and capable and to test one’s skills against another is also good. In a broken, sinful world, good desires sometimes turn to destructive ends.

Men mark other transitions with rituals as well. Because they are one-time events and not connected to training and preparation, they have less

impact than gangs, fraternities, and Boy Scouts. Nevertheless, they are statements of what it means to transition through life as a male. Men sometimes have a stag party before they get married; such a party can be a meaningful gathering of male friends or one last fling with the boys. In either case, the party is not intended to prepare men for marriage. Neither are retirement parties intended to prepare men for the transition at hand; they are to celebrate the ending of work and the beginning of a long vacation. In general, men are not encouraged to reflect on what it means to transition from one phase of life to another, whether it be the end of boyhood, of living as a single man, of fatherhood, or of work.

But men still gather, encourage one another, and support each other. They find community and affirmation on the football field and in the locker room, watching a basketball game and coaching their children in little league. Churches host Men's Retreats and Men's Breakfasts, encouraging men to come together to support, learn from, and bless each other. Men gather for informal rituals, too, like the one my brother Dan prepared for his son Taylor, before sending him across the country to college. Dan invited men who knew Taylor to come together one evening, bringing an appropriate verse, thought, or a few words of advice. They shared these with Taylor, gave him their words on a CD, and gathered around him to pray.

The desire for relationship emerges out of our embodied aloneness, drawing men into relationship with other men, with women, and with God. We witness grace in the midst of brokenness in our longing for connection, even if that connection sometimes leads down detrimental paths. Even though boys will craft and seek out their own rituals and rites, whether we want them to or not, a better way is for communities of faith to create ritual that takes the desire for validation and clarity of identity and helps males be reflective during the transitions of life. Rites of passage can connect changing identity, sexuality, longings, and the passage of time in ways that strengthen relationship with others, with community, and with God.

Crafting Rites of Passage

With the onset of puberty comes the desire to loosen the strong ties children feel toward their parents and to expand and create new bonds between peers in intimate and sometimes sexual ways. The longing reflects an appropriate shift in desire, as the possibility for sexual intimacy awakens.

Traditional cultures did not assume children would exchange their connection with parents (and the corresponding norms of behavior) for other appropriate connections and norms of behavior without assistance. Rites of passage offered training that passed on core values, beliefs, and skills. The rituals solidified the new identity, helping individuals figure out how

to function and fit into the community as adults. They also evoked a sense of awe and created a lasting and powerful image.

A modern version of an effective ritual is the one Sarah Kilmer experienced. Sarah was a young foreigner living in Switzerland when she started her period. She felt awkward, terrified, and very much alone except for her mother and her mother's friends. These women prepared her for the onset of menstruation and arranged for her to go on a vision quest. On the day of her first period, she eagerly went home after school to tell her mother. They gave her a chocolate party first, celebrating and congratulating her as the new woman in the group. In preparation for her quest, Sarah fasted for four days. On the fourth day, they left her on the porch of a deserted cottage where she spent the night. It was winter, and snow covered the surrounding area. She wrote:

My company that night were the trees and the stars. I was even told to take off my watch and to tell time by the stars. Alone and wide-eyed, I scoped out my terrain and watched the stars appear, one by one. The crisp night air and the clarity of my sharpened mind added to my feeling of alertness. This, plus the slight edge of fear, made it impossible for me to sleep, impossible to do anything but stay awake and wonder. Why am I doing this? What do they expect me to discover about myself? It was all a mystery, but I was completely in the element of my solitude. Many, many nights hence have I longed to be whisked away, back in to that element, back on that mountain. . . .

My life was transformed that night. . . . I consider myself very fortunate for having the opportunity to experience that night of my vision quest. I was holding a vigil and making a truce with myself. I decided to be reborn as a more dignified woman, and that is exactly what happened.²⁰

Sarah's experience gave her a sense of awe and left a lasting impression on her.

Van Gennep identifies three elements of rites of passage that were present in Sarah's ritual: (1) separation, (2) transition rites, and (3) rites of incorporation.²¹ Many modern-day rituals have been modeled after these three elements.

Avoiding Mistakes

People can err by responding in one of two ways to traditional practices. We can embrace them unquestionably and idealize them or reject them out of hand and consider them barbaric. Both are mistakes. We need to avoid

the noble savage syndrome by not romanticizing and idealizing traditional rituals. To embrace them unquestionably is to forget that sin permeates everything, including rituals that belonged to African or Indian tribal people or medieval knights. Some rituals reinforced the consequences of the fall—legitimizing aggression and oppression, teaching boys that winning mattered most, that winners could name and claim their prize, even if it exploited or oppressed others. Some rituals taught boys to suppress and deny emotion, pain, and fear. Some rituals taught girls that menstruation was a curse, that they were unclean, that they needed to have their clitoris cut off so their passions would not control them. Some rituals reinforced and reproduced gender roles for boys and girls that reflected a broken culture rather than godly community. We want rituals that ensure a transition into adulthood that connects children to others with a strong sense of belonging, identity, and obligation for others.

We also err if we reject traditional rituals out of hand. We can, in fact, look reflectively at the underlying values of particular elements of rituals that may have something to say to us. For example, traditional rituals were held in the context of community; children were initiated together by the community. In contrast, contemporary rituals are focused on the individual and have very little connection to a broader community. Traditional rituals took time and involved training, preparing, and taking a test or facing a challenge. Contemporary rituals are often one-time events that take place over the course of a day, an evening, or an hour. Traditional rituals involved real tasks to be mastered and a quest to complete. Contemporary quests are “virtual journeys,” that is, mythical or imagined connections to a knight or warrior or priestess or adventurer.

Effective rites of passage evoke awe and leave a lasting impression. Those most likely to do so happen within the context of a supporting community; they incorporate training, preparation, and real challenge or testing, and include a clear vision for adulthood that outlines rights and responsibilities.

A final caution is about the pursuit of a spiritual, personal experience. Spirituality is a popular pursuit, and so is personal growth; rites of passage promise both, as they are deeply spiritual and personal events. Contemporary rites of passage tend to focus on individual growth and reflection, seldom on obligation or connection to a larger community.

David Oldfield, director of the Center for Creative Imagination in Washington, D.C., developed “The Journey,” a program for adolescent boys and girls.²² The Journey takes adolescents on a five-stage imaginative adventure to help them overcome crises of adolescence. Spiritual quest is combined with personal reflection and symbolic storytelling. Participants craft a story, relying on the power of imagination to transform,

shape, and change them as they reflect on what it means to come into adulthood. Participants discover themselves and figure out their own path, direction, and way.

The Journey has been helpful for many of its participants, yet it deviates from traditional rituals in a number of significant ways. Most important, The Journey focuses on the individual, without emphasizing or strengthening the bond that adolescents have to their parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles—to some community outside themselves and their peer group with whom they share a heritage.

Most white, middle-class North Americans are not, in fact, looking for an initiation ritual that requires them to connect with their heritage or a community of people, nor are they looking to increase their obligation and social responsibility. However, connecting with community has always been important for people of color in North America, providing positive models of manhood and womanhood that are culturally sensitive and self-affirming—models not typically available through media or other social institutions. One African American woman said she asked her daughter where she gets information about how to be a woman, and all her examples were of black women and black institutions.

For most white, middle-class North Americans, rites of passage lead to personal growth and self-enhancement; they promise adult identity and spiritual competence. Yet connecting to a larger community and recognizing increased obligation and social responsibility were also central components of traditional initiation rites, giving them staying power and effectiveness.

Individualism, however, encourages the pursuit of self-fulfillment. If community obligation becomes onerous, we are told that our psychological health depends on our ability to disregard that community and pursue our dreams. Rites of passage can become narcissistic efforts to find oneself, to assert and legitimate one's chosen path. In contrast, the wisdom of traditional rites of passage bonded children to the community, creating a strong sense of belonging and a place where longings could be sanctioned and satisfied. God made us for relationship, for community; God made us to serve and be served. In finding a place in community rather than pursuing a life of self-fulfillment, loneliness and alienation are assuaged.

The Ritual-Crafting Process

What then, is necessary for ritual rites of passage to effectively provide boys and girls a transition through the physical, sexual, spiritual, and psychological confusion of adolescence? Ronald Grimes, a professor who researches rituals, suggests that rituals should be rooted in language, region, time, and culture, not adaptations of bygone eras that are irrelevant to

today's culture.²³ Much of the stuff of rites of passage is ordinary—things we already do that are so embedded in our culture we don't think of them as ritual. When Rae and Sarah wanted to learn how to knit, teaching them passed something of my heritage along. Mark taught Megan some basketball skills and has gone with several offspring to buy their first car, instructing them in negotiation and discernment. When parents and churches teach children the value of loyalty and respect for authority, and when they encourage the development of friendship and introduce them to the God who pursues them, they are strengthening connections children have to others. Teaching children to take responsibility for their education and to become involved in civil and religious communities reinforces the importance of functioning in community.

To recognize these ordinary aspects of parenting as “training” and to become intentional about what we are teaching our children are *a priori* steps toward developing a rite of passage. Using times when transitions occur to punctuate the training allows children to demonstrate their acquisition of new skills and their ability to incorporate physical changes into their identity. Rather than setting an age as the criterion for moving to some new status, Robert Eckert, a holistic therapist, says parents must set evidence of appropriate emotional maturity, ethical behavior choices, and problem-solving skills as standards.²⁴ Ceremonies marking transitions then rise above the ordinary to set it off as significant. In rising above the ordinary, the ceremony should connect the individual to some larger history, community, and obligation. For Christians, the community of faith is a natural choice.

Contemporary Rites of Passage for Females

Parents create rituals for their daughters, though we may not recognize them as such. Rites of passage do not have to be exotic to be real. When we told our daughters they could pierce their ears at age eleven, we marked their growing up with a ritual of sorts. At sixteen, they could double the number of holes in their head. At eighteen, they were on their own—our acknowledgment that with greater responsibility came more rights. (During the height of the piercing craze, Mark tallied the hole count among his three daughters and wife and came up with a total of twenty-nine. I think he was exaggerating. At any rate, we're back down to something more reasonable now.)

We also gave each of our daughters a ring on their thirteenth birthday, symbolizing a shifting of their primary focus from our relationship with them to their relationship with God and peers. With it, we recognized their ability to develop solid and healthy friendships, and they expressed

an ongoing desire to make God-honoring decisions in relationships and life choices. We are not without ritual in our culture, but our focus, intentions, and goals are sometimes fuzzy as we find ourselves making up rituals linked neither to heritage nor a larger community.

A woman at our church, Gina LaRusso, wanted to offer her daughter something poignant that would also connect her to a larger community. For Adrianna's thirteenth birthday, Gina wrote a letter to twenty women who had known Adrianna and asked them to write letters that celebrated her as a young Christian woman and encouraged her to continue to pursue God and to develop her gifts. She encouraged them to share from their own experiences and to include their memories of Adrianna, listing things that set her apart from others. Gina compiled these in a book that included pictures of Adrianna, a page filled with words, phrases, and pictures depicting fifty traits of Adrianna's character, lyrics from a song her father wrote for her birthday, a poem from her mother, a letter from her younger sister, a page of quotes, and a final family photo.

Adrianna was quite moved by this gift and read it carefully. Gina says it has caused her to reflect on who she wants to be as she reads the carefully crafted words of women who are encouraging and surrounding her with their letters.

The goal of female-affirming rituals is to name the blessing and responsibility of being women, to assert the right to guide how girls think about themselves as women, and to draw girls into a larger community. The female connection to others is a literal one. She gives life, nurtures the young, nurtures new mothers, and offers guidance and counsel to mothers of adolescent daughters. And she is a wellspring of wisdom in her old age, as one who has lived with the suffering of the world and seen a gracious God who is always working to draw people to God and to others. By surrounding each other in intentionally supportive ceremonies, women encourage the collective wisdom of walking with God to benefit each new generation. The task for women is to think creatively about how to facilitate these kinds of interactions in extended families, in churches, and in friendship groups.

Rituals that affirm sexuality by thanking God for and celebrating the gift of the female body reclaim menstruation as a blessing rather than a curse. I wear my grandmother's original wedding ring, which has a red stone, when I menstruate. The ring reminds me of and connects me to the lineage of women through whom I came and am a part and pass on through my daughters. I try to keep my schedule light during my period, to allow more time for reflection and rest. I honor my body and the way God made it in these simple rituals. Rituals that honor a body capable of giving birth,

acknowledge a cycle that embodies our living, and welcome the wisdom associated with aging serve to rename a curse and call it blessing.

Contemporary Rites of Passage for Males

If menstruation is the curse in need of redemption for women, the definition of manhood as tough, invulnerable, and sexually uncontrollable is the curse in need of redemption for men. Traditional rituals addressed questions like these: What skills do I need to learn? What stories should I know? How am I to think about who I am? How do I fit into the larger community? Helping boys answer these questions in ways that affirm their desire to gain competence and to test their skills against others while drawing them into authentic relationships with others renames the curse a blessing.

Parents of all religious backgrounds create rites of passage for their sons. In most cases, they are unfamiliar with traditional rituals or programs such as Oldfield's Journey. We intrinsically know there are stories to tell, skills to pass on, and preparation for change and transition. Some relinquish the task to other cultural institutions; others desire to share their aptitudes and interests in athletics, history, mechanics, logic, or music with their sons, passing on a heritage their fathers gave to them.

Robert Lewis, author of *Raising a Modern-Day Knight*, dealt with the ambiguity surrounding raising his sons to be men by developing a contemporary rite of passage he adopted from medieval times.²⁵ He developed a code of conduct—a counterpart to the medieval code of knights—and identified three values he wanted to instill in his sons that he believed moved a boy toward authentic manhood: (1) a will to obey (God's will), (2) a work to do (according to his own unique design), and (3) a woman to love. Lewis uses a rite of passage ceremony, only after a period of instruction, to mark the completion of training and the readiness for a new set of responsibilities and rights. They are the exclamation point of training; he says they are the culmination.

Chester Higgins Jr. incorporated aspects of a traditional ritual in one he crafted for his twenty-year-old son. They went on a three-week trip to Egypt and Ethiopia, exploring the past and present of their heritage. While there, he thought about and developed a ritual he hoped would connect his son with his African roots. Inside one of the tombs of an Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaoh, he performed the ceremony. He faced his son and did the following:

I poured the sand he had collected into the palm of my left hand, and with my right I anointed the top of his head with this sand. Looking into his eyes, I said:

“I, your father, anoint the crown of your head with the soil of Africa. This piece of earth is a symbol of the lives of your ancestors. It is a bonding of their lives to yours. Like your father, you too are African. We are Africans not because we are born in Africa, but because Africa is born in us. Look around you and behold us in our greatness. Greatness is an African possibility; you can make it yours. Just as the great ones before you have by their deeds placed their names on history, so can you by your deeds, place your name on tomorrow. You now have the rest of your life to benefit from this new awareness.”²⁶

An example of a community-based program for African American males is the National Rites of Passage Institute in Cleveland, Ohio. The founder, Paul Hill Jr., incorporates African-centered worldviews into extensive training of moral principles.²⁷ Unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, faith, and respect are instilled during the training process. Boys are instructed two to four hours per week for one to three years. They are separated from other routines, taught by elders, connected with nature, taught peer cooperation, and given instruction in personal, sexual, spiritual, and political matters. An extensive African-centric ceremony marks their completion of the training. Jefferson Jones, who completed the program said, “Rites of Passage is a 101 Course. It gives us a reminder, a taste of what it is to be a part of a real community.”²⁸

In the absence of officially sanctioned rites, these emerge as efforts to pass on heritage, to strengthen boys for the challenge ahead, and to discover and make a claim on one’s place and contribution in a broader, adult community. As boys shift away from a primary connection with their parents, these rituals give purpose and meaning, encouraging a thoughtful reflection on the connections and choices they make as they seek to become men.

A Personal Rite

My two sisters, my sister-in-law, and I are planning a backpacking trip for the women of the family: four aunts, six nieces, and our mother—a spry sixty-nine-year-old woman who is up for an adventure. We want to mark the transition of our daughters as they move out of our homes and into lives of their own. I envision something like the following.

The first night, we will have Grammy tell the story of our family and the women in our family. She will tell about strengths she admired in her mother and aunts and sisters. The morning hike will include pairing up an aunt to a niece, where the aunt listens to the niece, asks questions that allow her to get to know her better, to draw out her heart and her passions.

The afternoon hike also includes pairing up aunts and nieces, this time the aunt talking about how God has moved through life with her, through challenges, joys, and lessons learned along the way.

One day, we will send the nieces out on a twenty-four-hour solo trip; they will fast and pray and open their hearts to God as they reflect on who they are, who they are becoming, and how they are being called to fit in the context of this extended family and the bigger world that is also theirs. When the nieces return, we will celebrate and feast around a fire and listen to them talk about their solo time. We will prayerfully dedicate them in this next part of their journey to God. Grammy will name some strength she has observed in each granddaughter and offer a spiritual challenge or verse to each one that she, along with the aunts and mothers, have considered during their solo time. As she speaks to each granddaughter, the mother of that daughter will present a token reminder of this event, which will have been prepared ahead of time or perhaps picked up along the way—a ring, a stone, a carving from sticks, or a braid of grass and flowers.

Communities of faith could also organize such events for girls and boys at particular junctions—points of physical change corresponding to changing roles and identities. We are embodied souls and cannot separate our personhood from our body. God created us with longings. In the midst of physical change, we are not always sure how we are to belong and behave with the new possibilities maturing brings. Maturing also brings suffering and hard challenges, but even these can draw us to others, inviting us into a community bigger than ourselves. In that extended family, or church, or small group of committed friends, we can extend and receive grace and companionship for the journey. Although much of this occurs in the everydayness of life, occasionally we punctuate these transitions with ceremony.

Conclusion

The following five principles summarize what constitutes useful rites of passage:

1. Rituals are rooted in one's tradition, faith, and heritage, emerging out of values held by a community and being taught through the ordinariness of life.
2. Skills consistent with those values are taught and tested. Evidence of their being acquired is a necessary part of gaining the rights and responsibilities marking the transition to come.

3. Passages are punctuated with significant ceremonies that name the transition, clearly identifying what one is leaving and what one is moving toward.
4. Ceremonies have a before and after, that is, something has changed, some new right is bestowed that corresponds to skills acquired and responsibilities taken up.
5. Rituals occur in the context of a community, recognizing that individuals are connected to something bigger than they are and obligated to someone besides him- or herself. This connection brings both blessing and responsibility.

How adolescents imagine themselves as women and men will be reflected in the confidence they have about being and becoming adult females or males. How men and women transition through adulthood will also be reflected in the vision of manhood or womanhood crafted for them by the communities in which they live, worship, and work. Punctuating transitions with rituals helps us reaffirm our longings for connection and belonging and find our place in community, where we can pacify longings in ways that reflect our rights and responsibilities, as well as our obligations and blessings.

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QUERIES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

- What skills and stories were taught to me? What informal rituals do I remember? Are they the same skills and stories I want my children to learn?
- How did I seek out affirmation or create ritual in the absence of formal rites of passage in my transition from childhood to adolescence, from young adulthood to middle age, and from middle age to mature adulthood?
- If a ritual in the context of a community is more powerful than one focused on individual achievement, how can we take our celebrations of achievement and craft them into rituals connecting individuals to family or our community of faith?
- Am I participating in a life-affirming and enriching community?
- What is the balance between my rights as an individual and my obligations to others, to a community? Do I feel uncomfortable thinking I have obligations to others? If so, why?



- What could a meaningful rite of passage ceremony look like for a daughter entering puberty? For the group of boys at church who start high school next year? For sisters and sisters-in-law who are entering menopause about the same time? For aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers who are about to retire?
- If God made us for relationship and gave us longings to keep us striving for relationship, then how have my longings changed over the course of life thus far? To what am I drawn besides relationships? Are these life-affirming or hurtful?

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