How to Help Young People Transition Into Adulthood

Modern "rites of passage" can help teens prepare for an uncertain future.

BY **BETTY RAY** | OCTOBER 21, 2019

With so much rapid-fire change in the world, the job of preparing our young people for the future has become increasingly daunting. The Institute of the Future issued a report in 2017 that declared that 85 percent of the jobs in 2030—when today's second-graders will graduate high school—have not been invented yet. On top of that, we're facing an unfolding crisis in the environment; rampant racial, ethnic, and gender inequities; the impending confluence of bioengineering and artificial intelligence; and escalating craziness on the geopolitical stage.

Over the past decade, I talked to thousands of educators grappling with the question of how to best prepare young people for the uncertain future. The vast majority agree that skills like critical thinking, resilience, creativity, systems thinking, and empathy are crucial and must be prioritized over compliance and standardized test scores. But, more recently, there's a sense that young people need to gain real-world experience in navigating the unknown through some kind of authentic rite of passage—and more and more research is exploring what that might look like.

For millennia, elders have led youth through scaffolded rites of passage. French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep analyzed rites of passage across cultures in history and found that they have a universal three-part structure—separation, liminality, and reincorporation—to help people make sense of great transition.

A young person undergoing a coming-of-age rite of passage must leave her "normal world" (separation) and enter into a situation where she experiences the free-fall of being no longer a child but not yet an adult (liminality). Once the initiate has successfully mastered the liminal phase, she returns to the normal world as an adult (reincorporation), having "levelled up" with skills that are needed to function as a healthy member of the community.

But meaningful rites of passage are not as common today. In fact, 75 percent of people between the ages of 12 and 25 lack a clear sense of purpose and many young adults are intimidated by "adulting." This led me to wonder: How might we combine what we know from psychology and education research with traditional rite-of-passage rituals to help youth practice dwelling in the unknown, while building up critical skills for the future?

Over the past two years, I have worked with individuals and small groups of graduate students and educators to prototype a more contemporary approach to rites of passage. The updated three steps we designed—now *preparation*, *threshold*, and *reflection*—revolve around a student-centered project that allows youth to deepen their self-knowledge while learning to be comfortable in the unknown. Dozens of young people have gone through this process, and I hope teachers, community leaders, and others can use this model to facilitate meaningful and impactful rites of passage to support the development of the youth in their communities.

1. Preparation: Student-centered project design

Rites of passage provide a safe and structured container for young people to undergo a metamorphic shift in identity from youth to adult. The goal of the first phase is for you (as a teacher, leader, or parent) and the initiates to develop a deeper understanding of themselves: their character strengths, interests, skills, and passions.

Student inventory. Ask students the following questions (inspired by Project Wayfinder and Angela Maiers):

- **What are your strengths?** This can be skills such as math, drawing, or swimming, or dispositions such as patience, leadership, or the ability to focus. You can also have them take the free VIA Character Strengths Survey for Youth.

- **What do you love to do?** Note that many teens' first answer will be something to do with video games or social media. Capture these ideas, but dig a little deeper to see what else is under there. Do they enjoy strategizing with friends in *Fortnite*? Or creating beautiful images for Instagram? Once you've captured the digital stuff, be sure to find out what else they love in the "offline" world, just for balance.

- **Is there anything that you wish you knew how to do?** A skill or disposition that you want to develop? Again, see if you can find both digital and offline answers here.

- **What issue or cause out in the world do you care about the most?** Climate? Gun violence? Homelessness? Animal welfare? Government corruption? Talk to them about a few specific issues.

Brainstorm projects.

Using the student's answers to each question, begin to brainstorm project ideas that would be meaningful. Projects should be designed to use the initiate's skills to help solve a community problem that he deeply cares about.

For instance, say you are working with a 19-year-old named Sam who loves to draw, write fiction, and make short videos with her friends. The VIA Character Strengths Survey shows she's strong in social intelligence (which she knew) but also in bravery (which she didn't!). She wants to learn business skills and how to make better videos. The daughter of immigrants, Sam is deeply troubled by the racist attacks to which she and her friends are increasingly subjected.

Sam and her mentor brainstorm some ideas for projects. For instance, she might make a short video interviewing three immigrants in her community about their experiences with racism. Or maybe she could illustrate t-shirts with messages of equity and inclusion and set up a pop-up shop. A third idea might be to write, illustrate, self-publish, and sell a book of short stories about a teenage immigrant.

Discuss viability of project.

Have your student review the projects and select a couple of favorites to evaluate what it will take to pull each off successfully. Will it require a lot of money or volunteers? What about location? What is the scope? Are there a lot of interdependencies? Involve the initiate in brainstorming solutions. Ultimately, as in the real world, the final project scope will be determined by a combination of will and resources.

Because it will be a ton of work to fill up an entire shop, and then organize a pop-up, Sam settles on the video project, which seems very doable within her three-month summer break.

Write a project plan.

Written as much as possible by the student with support as needed from their mentor, a project plan should include real-world skills like calling venues, organizing volunteers, setting up a Kickstarter campaign, writing a basic budget, using social media for promotion, gathering sponsors, writing, and performing speeches.

Sam's project plan outlines in detail the content, production process, budget, and timeline for her documentary short. Using her mentor's connections, Sam reaches out to a local nonprofit that has a video editing suite and asks if she can use it after-hours.

Prepare for departure.

Integral to the design of a rite of passage is that the initiate must leave the comfort of home and venture out into a new realm. This separation is baked into the experience of going away to college or summer sleepaway camp, but it can also be engineered in other ways: a summer or gap-year project, or over a holiday break.

The night before Sam is to shoot her first interview, her mentor and parents invite eight adults—family members, former teachers, and friends who know and love Sam—to an opening circle to witness her at the beginning of her journey. The room is illuminated with candles. Each adult speaks to Sam of her strengths and their belief in her, offering one piece of advice and one thing they appreciate about her. The adults have also made a short video of each of them repeating their wishes for her. Sam speaks of her intentions to learn more about filmmaking and to speak out against racism.

2. Threshold: Tasks must be hard (and relevant)

The ordeal will be a challenge. Students need to feel frustrated—pushed as close to the point of giving up as possible—or it won't have the impact.

This is the time when we as facilitators have to step out of the way and let the student work on her own, grapple with setbacks, and, yes, fail. If they show signs of withering, you can support independent problem solving wherever possible. There are several research-based practices you can share that will help build resilience and well-being during the ordeal and well into adulthood, as well.

Growth mindset.

If she is not already skilled at learning from mistakes, remind your student that every failure is a learning opportunity. If she starts to internalize negative self-talk, such as "I will never be able to do this!" Remind her of the power of "yet"—as in, "You don't know how to do this, yet. But you will get it."

Three Good Things.

This is a super simple and proven practice of writing down three good things that happened at the end of each day. Research shows that this can help us sustain a sense of happiness and fend off depressive symptoms for up to three months—an excellent practice to build while amid an ordeal.

Cultivate awareness.

Have the initiate reflect on how he's doing and identify any challenges with self-compassion. Bring any negative self-talk to awareness. Help the initiate become aware of what he does when he starts to experience the frustration of obstacles. Keeping a regular project journal can help facilitate this reflection.

Ethics.

In the real world, we come up against ethical challenges all the time. Especially now with the ever-shifting sands of ethical standards in our public discourse, it is important that adults model respect, morality, and ethical decision making during an ordeal. It will be tempting for your student to make some unethical choices. You will want to make it safe and supportive to make the right choice.

Awe. Awe, "numinosity," or the sense that there is a larger force at work in the world is key to meaningful rites of passage, as research shows it is a positive way to catalyze the identity shift necessary to leave childhood and become fully adult. This can be designed into the experience by taking young people out into awe-inspiring nature for several days, creating a deck of personally meaningful cards as in Soul Collage, or reading the poetry of Rumi, Lucille Clifton, or Mary Oliver.

3. Reflection: Completion of project

Once the ordeal has concluded, it is time to celebrate the accomplishments of the initiate! Like the departure, this return is a time of celebration and welcoming back to the "normal world." Many traditions have the initiate stand up in front of his peers and community and speak about the experience. This celebration can be big and formal, or small and intimate. The key is that the initiate should be able to answer the following questions:

- Why did you do this project?

- What did you hope to learn?

- What did you learn?

- What will you take with you?

- What is one of your best memories?

Ideally, there is time to help the initiate integrate the experience and set about planning for another self-designed goal. In Sam's case, her family and mentor will invite the same adults to come over for a special screening of her video, and she will give a short introduction to the video offering her reflections.

In traditional rites of passage, the initiate returns home as an adult, having been prepared for adult responsibilities—mind, body, and soul—through the ordeal. We don't really have a similar expectation in our contemporary communities, and of course there are myriad reasons why young people are taking longer to find their footing as adults.

But we can certainly help young people deepen their self-knowledge and strengthen their sense of identity, develop real-world skills, and (most importantly) experience the state-change that comes with accomplishing a major stretch goal. We can provide a model for navigating the unknown as a means of strengthening their identity and engaging community support.

Indeed, I would like to live in a world where each child is initiated into adulthood—not to fit them into a prescribed societal box, but to help them understand who they are, why they're here, and how they can share their gifts with the world.