**Fish Guts and Pig Intestines: Rites of Passage for Adolescent Girls**

By *Ginny Olson*

In May 2003, in a wealthy suburb north of Chicago, a mass of almost 100 high schoolers assembled in a forest preserve to observe a rite of passage that had been going on since the late ’70s—the junior vs. senior girls’ touch football game. During this annual ceremony, the senior girls initiate the junior girls into their final year of high school. However, this year, rather than tossing a football around, it was pig intestines, fish guts, paint, and animal feces that were tossed all over the juniors. A home video of the event caught some spectators hoisting cups of beer while watching the girls get punched, kicked, and choked. At the end of the day, five young women were hospitalized—one with a broken ankle and one receiving 10 stitches.

**Rite of What?**

As this story surged around the world via CNN, the BBC, and Oprah, what shocked people wasn’t that there was high school hazing going on, but that young women initiated it and were calling it a rite of passage. All of a sudden, a term usually used only in reference to tribal ceremonies was a headline phrase.

What is a rite of passage? In the broadest definition, it’s anything—a ceremony, decision, action—that moves someone from one stage in life to another. In the United States, we have many informal rites of passage for adolescents, such as getting a driver’s license, turning 21, going to prom, graduating, or entering the military.

Ethnologist and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep coined the term “rites of passage” in 1909. He saw a rite of passage as anything from birth to marriage to death, including the on-set of puberty. He identified three stages that make up a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.

**Separation**

Examining those stages through the lens of girls entering puberty, we see them portrayed in this way: the first stage of separation is when a girl moves away from her previous role in a family or community. This is where she begins to put away her Barbies and her stuffed animals. She realizes that her Strawberry Shortcake décor might be considered childish for a girl her age. Nylons or pantyhose become preferable to tights. Getting to wear her hair down, rather than up in pigtails and barrettes, is a big deal. She’ll protest if she’s called “Daddy’s little girl” and may even change her name—say from Chrissy to Christina.

**Transition**
At this point, she’s readying herself to move into the second stage, transition. In this stage, a girl stands on the razor’s edge between childhood and adulthood. There’s excitement and anticipation as she prepares to enter this new stage, but also a certain degree of anxiety. Her body is indicating to her that she’s moving towards womanhood, but part of her may still want to remain cocooned in her childhood world. In Western culture, this is when she begins to shave her legs, try on make-up, and buy her first bra.

The biggest indicator of the transition stage is when she has her first period. This physical sign of the journey is sometimes greeted with anticipation and sometimes with fear. Some girls see it as the entrance into womanhood, and their families have “period parties” to celebrate. Others hide in shame and hope that no one notices that suddenly they have to carry purses and run to the bathroom in the middle of class.

In some cultures, at the onset of a girl’s period, she’s removed from her parents’ home and placed in the company of the elders in order to prepare her for her future. The belief is that it’s important to separate her from her family so that she can learn about the identity and responsibilities her community requires of her. In this space of separation, she’s taught the traditions and values of the community and spends time absorbing the wisdom of the older women.

In this second stage, a girl is being initiated into the larger community (vs. just her family unit). She understands that she’s becoming a part of something greater than herself, and that in doing so, some of her old ways, old identity, and old roles must die. This initiation phase is often marked by difficulty and hurdles she must overcome. It’s designed to be a test of her courage and endurance whereby she proves her capacity to be an adult in the community. Through this endurance she develops a bond to the community, and her status is established.

This stage might include fasting, long periods of solitude, conversations with elders or mentors, a mastery of facts and skills (e.g., the Jewish tradition of bat mitzvah), or even pain. Thankfully, the tradition of female circumcision, long seen as a rite of passage among some peoples, is being outlawed in many countries, though not as quickly as many women’s rights activists would like.

Incorporation

Once a young woman has successfully completed this transition phase, she enters stage three, incorporation. She’s reintroduced into the community in her new role as a participating member. In some cultures, a young woman receives a new name, a different form of clothing, jewelry, or even markings that indicate her revised status in the group.

There’s some sort of community-wide celebration or ceremony that marks her new chapter of life. No longer a girl, she’s now considered a woman, with the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with that new identity.

Formal Rites
Many different cultures have developed rites of passage to help their girls move into womanhood. Some rites are ancient; others have been developed in the past few decades out of a concern that the young women in a society or group were floundering as they tried to transition into adulthood.

The Hispanic tradition of the *Quinceanera* celebrates a girl’s 15th birthday with an elaborate celebration, complete with a ball gown, an escort, and an entourage of attendants. After meeting with a priest to talk about what it means to be a woman, she celebrates with family and friends at a banquet in her honor. She might receive a tiara, which symbolizes that she is a princess before God, or earrings, which encourage her to always listen to God.

Filipino culture has cotillions to celebrate their young women coming of age. The Apache Nation has the Sunrise Ceremony where young women are painted and then enter into days of prayer, dancing, and instruction. In Christianity, confirmation is often seen as a rite of passage, guiding our children from their parents’ faith to owning their own faith and becoming responsible members of the church community.

Rites of Their Own

When a community doesn’t have a formalized rite of passage into womanhood, girls will find a way to create their own. Peer initiation rites sometimes include girls piercing each other’s ears at a slumber party, drinking a toast to a friend who loses her virginity, or getting a tattoo on their first spring break away from their family.

In girl gang initiations, girls might be asked to commit a drive-by or other crime, or they’re “jumped in” (having to take a beating without retaliation) or “sexed in” (where potential members are forced to have sex with male gang members, one or sometimes a group) in order to prove their commitment to the gang.

The danger with these self-created initiation rites is that they’re done without elders present. The elders’ role is to oversee the initiation process, making sure that the initiate is challenged but not harmed. With no elder present, too often these rites seek to humiliate a girl rather than humble and instruct her (e.g., the touch football incident). It’s not an initiation rite, but a hazing.

Youth Ministry Rites

Youth ministry has a checkered past when it comes to rites of passage. Some of us in youth ministry have done our share of humiliating kids in the name of initiation—in order to join the youth group, we have games where students eat strange things (garlic, dog food, raw eggs) or perform odd acts (sitting on a plate of shaving cream, having a relay race involving a squid and bare feet, pouring water on kids so it looks like they wet themselves). Sometimes our youth ministries look more like *Fear Factor* or *Survivor*. No wonder our girls are lost when it comes to their role in the larger church and in society.

What can we youth workers do to help our girls transition into women? One step is to be more deliberate in designing rites of passage for them. Luis J. Rodriguez, author of *Hearts and Hands:*
Creating Community in Violent Times, writes, “…for initiation to be deep and transformative, it should be deliberate and integral to the community.” So rather than just shuffling our students from the children’s ministry to the youth ministry to the college ministry, let’s develop three-stage rituals which are embraced by the larger church community.

We could plan a series of evenings where sixth-grade girls can identify what they’ll miss about their girlhood. They can also spend time learning the ropes of adolescence with a high school woman who’s in a mentoring role. At the end, there can be a ceremonial “passing of the baton.” We could organize a series of service projects, each becoming more challenging, with the girls having to earn the right to participate in the next level. We might plan a retreat where the girls get to spend focused time with the wise elder-women of the church and learn the history and values of the community as well as what’s expected of them as members of the church.

Another step is to create an atmosphere of connection with the larger church community. Too often we isolate the youth ministry from the rest of the church. While that’s a good idea in moderation, in light of adolescent development (remember the second stage), we need to create spaces where our girls can connect with older same-gender members of the church family so they can learn from someone besides their own mothers and sisters. And we need to make sure the church celebrates these young women as they grow up and incorporates them into the life of the church.

Rather than leaving it up to our girls to self-create their own rites of passage marked by fish guts, pig intestines, and humiliation, let’s develop opportunities for them to learn how to let go of their childhood while celebrating their emerging womanhood. Let us create places where they can learn from the wisdom of those who have journeyed before them in order that they might proceed confidently into their own futures, understanding what it means to be part of a larger community of faith.

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