

Rites of Passage by Louise Racine

Rites of passage have been celebrated by many cultures throughout history. They are generally held to mark the transition from one life stage to another — birth, adulthood, death and the various phases in between. The way that these events are recognized differs from culture to culture. Certain traditions have religious origins, such as baptisms and bar mitzvah's, while others are more secular in nature. In some societies, rites of passage may be intense and prolonged, and can include a period of seclusion from the community with personal challenges to overcome. However, rites do not have to be dramatic or severe to be effective.

The doorstep to adolescence

While we do celebrate many events in today's society, we don't commonly refer to them as rites of passage. Nor do we acknowledge certain milestones as our ancestors may have done. For instance, rites of passage for young boys and girls who are entering puberty are not commonly celebrated. And yet, as the doorstep to adolescence -- the beginning of many tumultuous years of insecurity, freedom, self-expression and personal responsibility -- it's an opportunity to embrace traditions that might help smooth this transition.

A rites of passage celebration to mark this milestone can have lasting and positive effects on young adults. For girls, puberty is usually defined by their first moon cycle or menstruation, which nowadays does not necessarily coincide with becoming a teenager because more girls mature at a younger age. Though it is difficult to predict when first menstruation will actually happen, moms may want to take steps to prepare for the changes that are about to occur. Time together away from day-to-day demands and other distractions is key.

As with most celebrations, the occasion may include wearing special clothing, a ceremony or ritual of some sort -- perhaps decorating a talking stick to be used to share feelings and concerns, a creative activity like making each other a piece of jewelry, a feast of favourite foods, or even lighting a candle, having lunch together, and or giving a commemorative gift. The key is that moms acknowledge that their little girls are growing up while daughters come to understand that mothers want to share and honour this experience.

Another way to celebrate is a planned getaway for mom and daughter to allow them to focus on what this transition means for both of them. A rites of passage retreat is great opportunity to explore in greater depth what this next life phase is all about. Being together in a safe and comfortable space and sharing this time with other mothers and daughters further affirms the significance of this event.

Significance of ritual

A rites of passage ceremony should be a celebration that both mothers and daughters will remember for the rest of their lives. The idea is to make this an event that honours the gift and beauty of womanhood and all that entails.

A girl's experience leading up to, and on the occasion of, her first moontime will set the stage for every month for as long as her cycle continues and will also have an impact on her own daughter(s) experience. A young girl may choose to celebrate her big day in some special way with friends and other important adult women in her life. She may want to keep it fairly private with just her mom or other family members or she may wish to have a party with a few close girlfriends.

Transition for mom and daughter

Most women with daughters want to mark their child's transition to womanhood in a meaningful way. Many of us remember our own experience as one cloaked in secrecy, shame and embarrassment and want something different for the next generation.

A young mom who has participated in a rites of passage retreat here recently described it as "a powerful experience – full of love and sharing". For her, it fostered openness and a more mature and respectful dialogue in her relationship with her daughter. It also marked her transition from mom of a child to mom of a teen.

Fortunately, there are many resources available for moms and girls that offer support and ideas on how to make this important event a very meaningful and empowering one.

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