

Crossing the threshold

Gabby Hollis

Managing director of Tides Rites of Passage (for teenage girls), Golden Bay, New Zealand

I have been involved with Tides since 2005. I work with up to 27 new teenage girls and their families every year. I also work with the same number of returning young women, some of which have grown through the programme, and their teens, becoming strong adult facilitators themselves. It is a privilege to see young people open their eyes to their own longing and watch whole families embrace each other within the honesty of their own imperfections. It's from this place that I see empowered young women, healthy families and supportive communities emerge.

Young people today face one of the most exciting and challenging times of their life – building an independent identity, while moving into the wider world of possible risk and danger. Their physical and mental health depends on the availability of a community that is willing to help navigate the inner and outer changes of the adolescent terrain. Rites of passage can help young people build the confidence they need to make positive life choices. They can also contribute to adolescents finding a sense of belonging, forming strong bonds with multiple generations along the way.

Tides has been running since 2004 and is a 'sister' programme to Tracks (Rites of Passage for teenage boys). The early programmes evolved out of men's and women's gatherings that had been happening regularly at Tui Community (an intentional residential community at Golden Bay, South Island) for 18 years. Those gatherings had provided a forum for men and women to share stories about their lives and address issues that had been holding them back, from making positive life choices, as adults. It came to the attention of Jim Horton (a longstanding Tui resident), that if young people had access to a similar forum then perhaps the path to adulthood would be happier, healthier and more clearly marked. From those beginnings the Rites of Passage Foundation emerged – a charitable trust, based in Golden Bay, New Zealand. The trust now supports and governs the running for six rites for teens and their families, and four trainings for men and women, yearly. I became involved in 2005 and soon recognised the influence that a rite of passage can have towards the overall health and wellbeing of young people.

From ancient times and to this day, young people (12 to 24 years) or adolescents have been and still are, biologically driven towards metamorphosis. Aside from the zero to three years, there is no other time in

the life of the human body and brain where transformation occurs to the degree that teenagers experience. For millennia, cultures have given priority to acknowledging and celebrating this important transition by means of a rite of passage. In doing so they supported their young people to be strong, confident and mindful members of society. The future depended on it.

For the young person of today, a different level of courage and strength is required to former times. The same drive, hunger and sometimes desperation to evolve is there, but so is the near constant presence of the media and social networks suggesting how to think, act and even feel. The instinct of the young is to seek wildness, be bold, explore and access the longing that sits in the furthest reaches of their being. This is met with a culture that is mostly void of spirituality or generally too busy to notice. It's a culture that is more comfortable and familiar with 'an initiation into the addictions of consumerism' than the teachings of elders, high priests and wise women.

In his book *Nature and the Human Soul*, Bill Plotkin states that: 'The main task of an adolescent is to create an identity that is both authentic and accepted by their community'. In a world that is full of superheroes, fast food, porn, pop

stars, drugs and video games, identity formation becomes an elusive undertaking. The concept of community is also far less tangible, and difficult to access, in a world that is rapidly expanding.

The need for a young person to feel like a valued member of society is paramount. If achieved they are much less likely to suffer from a wide range of mental health issues that affect 10% of youth. Anxiety, depression, phobias, eating disorders and panic attacks are among the most common, and can seriously affect how a young person thinks, acts, feels and handles life, on a day-to-day basis. Current studies into the youth suicide rates of developed nations show an alarming increase in the last 50 years. Looking at cultural trends, researchers suggest that this rise reflects the loss, in western societies, of appropriate sources of connection and social identity. Those trends also show an increase in the promotion of inappropriate expectations of autonomy.

“Young people need inner tools and resources to develop a strong sense of self and certainty”

In this age of information, it's hard for young people to make meaningful choices. If you have the means, you can buy pretty much any lifestyle or commodity you want. Whether or not it brings you alive and feeds your spirit is another question. In the absence of a community that can notice and encourage the contributions of their young people, the path to adulthood becomes a long, drawn out and sometimes dangerous trail. Suicide is an obvious extreme but there is a wide range of concerns that go under the radar before that. Loneliness, alienation and addiction to name a few.

So how do we initiate our young, when the adults around us have no idea what that looks like or are still trying to figure out what it means to be an adult themselves? In most cases we don't have the luxury of a clearly defined path to adulthood and if we do it often fails to satiate the hunger of the adolescent psyche. Young people need inner tools and resources to develop a strong sense of self and certainty. They need to recognise what their positive contributions to the world are. They need to feel worthy, beyond the ideals of being special, exceptional or having the ability to surpass others. They need to discover a sense of pride in who they are and in their own identity. They also need to know when they are expected to behave like an adult.

Traditionally a rite involves ceremonies, rituals and activities designed to prepare individuals for a new role in society. The focus of the rite is on the successful transition of the young people but it calls forth whole tribes, villages and communities. As a young person moves towards adulthood, all members of their community step toward their next phase of life. In doing

so, whole societies recognise and understand what their role and importance in the world is, in relation to their life phase. They also recognise the value of contributing to the lives of others in a positive way.

A rite itself usually involves three main phases:

1 Separation

The aim here is to help the young person leave behind patterns, attachments and ideas that were part of their childhood. On some level most adolescents don't want to leave the safety of their childhood despite the craving for freedom. For the adolescent to move forward the 'child self' must in some ways die. This phase of a rite helps adolescents move through resistance and connect with the yearning within.

2 Transition or initiation

The aim here is about transformation. The initiate is seen as 'standing between worlds' as they struggle to break free from what was and become what will be. It includes carefully designed hazards that invite the initiates to engage with an element of risk and challenge. In that, they became conscious of their own mortality and the crucial shift from being protected to self-managing occurs. It is not traditionally designed as a transition of ease or beauty. The young people are required to stretch their capacity and find the deep recesses of their strength. This assists in their understanding of how to meet the trials of life without shutting down. Some of the challenges also allow a young person to reach non-ordinary states of consciousness. From there, new perspectives and understandings emerge.

3 Return or re-integration

At this point the young person-becoming-adult has gained entrance into the next phase of their life. They carry new freedoms and responsibilities and are treated differently by the members of their tribe. They also have new insights they can gift back to their community. And so the young person feels worthy, valued and knows what is expected of them.

What worked 1,000 or even 100 years ago is unlikely to fit the bill or have relevance for a teenager today. Culture has and needs to evolve to support the wellbeing of young people now and in the future. The details shaping a rite of passage vary, depending on the peoples performing them and the land from which they originate. Despite that, there are some essential threads that run through them all; a tangible relationship with the intangible; a recognition of what is sacred; a knowing that in order to achieve initiation, a degree of self-sacrifice is required, as is an openness to learning. Initiations that are pursued without such fibre only serve as entertainment and can contribute to the equally crushing idealism or disillusionment that young people experience.

Whole families are under the pressures of modern society. The 'child genius' is separated out and the

teenager faces the pressure to be perfect. As adults we are expected to be able to do it all, and flawlessly, only to find that as elders we are expected to be quiet and not take up younger people's time. This all amounts to whole generations of people becoming more and more separate from each other.

Being nature-based, Tracks' and Tides' rites bring together communities of up to 40 people, over 7 days. We create a high adult-to-young-person ratio with adults ranging in age from 18 to 65+. They bring a wide range of skills and life experience. From that, the teens bear witness to the huge diversity of what it means to be a man or woman. The rites also call in 'young leaders', teens who have been through their rite of passage and return in service to the new people coming through. Being closest in age and experience to the initiates, the young leaders offer a unique and essential role of support. They also have the opportunity to delve deeper into their own exploration of self-discovery.

The rite itself is open to 13 to 16-year-olds and their mothers, fathers or caregivers. The importance of the latter being present is that even though the rite is primarily about the young person, everyone around them is affected. The shift that is taking place for a teen has direct and indirect influences on the people they are closest to. A young person might want to make changes in their life but if no one is there to see, hear, understand or support that, they have a much harder task ahead. The way we parent our children needs to grow and change as they do. Mothers and fathers at Tides and Tracks have the opportunity to reflect on their life as a parent or guardian and to see their young people as they stand today. They meet other parents who have the same concerns and challenges and are able to share and hear, real life stories.

For a mother at Tides, one of the hardest things can be coming to terms with the fact that she needs to give her daughter more space and allow the relationship to shift somewhat, from mothering to mentoring. It's a natural instinct to protect our children from the potential dangers, challenges and heartbreak they might encounter in the world, but there comes a time that in continuing to do so, young people become frustrated and start to rebel. It's not that they are trying to push their parents away, they are trying to push themselves away. Those parents that can stand strong, while understanding their child's needs, give a young person something firm from which to launch off. Providing opportunities that allow young people to go their edge and take risks in a safe, supported way encourages self-discovery. It also helps them find confidence to overcome the day-to-day challenges of life.

An old African proverb states: 'If we don't initiate our young, they will burn down the village to feel the heat'. In a phase of life that often presents itself as a series of extremes, young people can appear warrior-like in the

face of the things they care about. They have the power to fall deeply in love, to fight for the worthiest cause or surrender to the deepest of sleeps. They see and feel the need to make positive change in the world and are faced with the various cycles of destruction performed by the 'adults' who have gone before. It's a powerful and vital energy and it has an important role to play in society. It needs recognition. It also needs guidance. Without the former, it becomes suppression. Without the latter the village is burning.

The transforming adolescent self aches to be tested, challenged and expressed. To shed the old and travel beyond what is known. When not guided by elders and mentors to channel this energy, adolescents are exposed inadvertently to risk. They need deep soul recognition by peers and mentors and a vision of a future filled with inspiration and purpose. They need good men and women around them, who are prepared to share the deepest truth about their lives. Without that they run the risk of building an identity based on guess work from peers, borrowed images, fantastical heroes and the collective stereotypes of popular culture. Now more than ever, they need real men and women present in their lives.

A conscious rite of passage can help a young person grow true to themselves, move beyond childhood, build self-confidence and discover their potential. It can encourage them to recognise and trust their intuition, find their own voice and make healthy choices. From there, they can stand on their own two feet with a sense of belonging and confidence. Not only that, but they are more likely to enjoy life along the way!

*This being human is a guest-house
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor:*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture, still,
treat every guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Jelalludin Rumi, The Guest House

Plotkin B (2008) Nature and the human soul. Novato, CA: New World Library