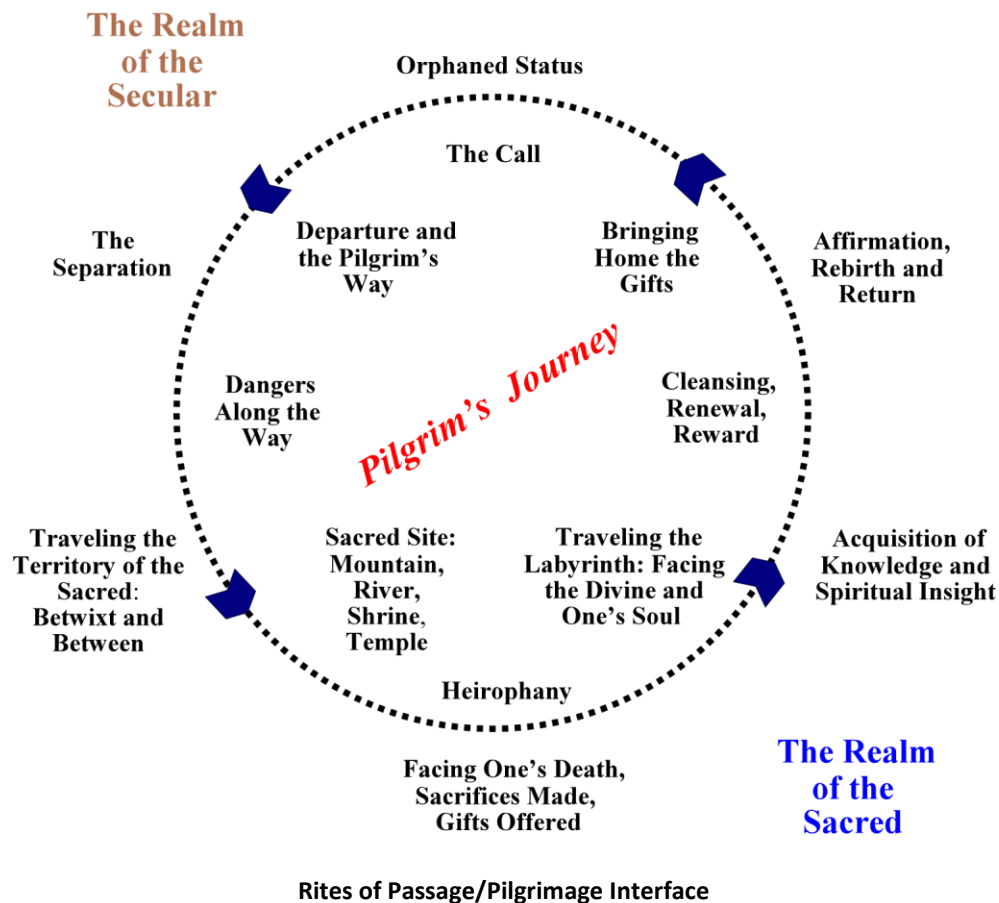


Rites of Passage

Prepared by Frey 10 May 2013
Modified 12 February 2019



Synopsis of a rite of passage, the stages of which are symbolically and/or literally expressed as:

1. Orphan Status and a Void
2. Separation and Journey, Sacrifice and Gift Giving, and Death
3. Liminal Period and Acquisition of Knowledge or Wisdom, with the Void Filled
4. Rebirth, Affirmation and Reintegration

Despite societal variation, rites of passage have been at the core and foundation of virtually every educational, social and spiritual dynamic – pervasively expressed throughout society. This is especially true of Indigenous societies, which represent 99% of human history and today are found world-wide, in total, approximating the population of the United States. The entire life-cycle of an individual, from birth to childhood to old age to death itself, for both men and women, is marked by a series of rites of passage – pervasively expressed throughout the life-cycle of an individual. While our focus is on rites of passage, its structural nature corresponds to that of pilgrimages, such the Christian journey to the Holy Land, the Hindu *Kanwar* or the Muslim *hajj* to Mecca. See diagram, with the typical stages of a pilgrimage identified inside circle, while the corresponding rites of passage stages are marked outside the revolving circle.

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Rites of passage are *particularly pronounced* in those societies and/or groups whose foundations are built upon three key focuses: – 1. the importance of social solidarity and group cooperation, be it in male or female associations, or society-wide status – on, for example, the importance of *Ashammaléaxia* (Apsáalooke or Crow Indian reference to social cohesion; literally “as driftwood lodges”); 2. an understanding by its members that the spiritual or transcendent reality is primary – for example, an acknowledgment of *Snqhepiwes* (Schitsu’umsh or Coeur d’Alene Indian reference to pervasive spirituality; literally “where the spirit lives, from horizon to horizon”), and the need for its members, in varying degrees, to realize that spiritually in their lives – acquire *baaxpée*, *súumesh*, or *wéyekin* (Apsáalooke, Schitsu’umsh and Niimíipuu or Nez Perce Indian terms for “medicine” or spiritual power), for example; and 3. a reliance on what can be called “traditional wisdom” or “Heart Knowledge,” a way of knowing based in the perennial teachings of the elders, derived from the Creator and Animal-First Peoples (such as Coyote, Salmon, Crane, or Spider Grandmother) at the beginning of time, or an ancient spiritual sage, such as Changing Woman (Diné Indians) or the Buddha. These are teachings that are expressed and brought forth in the great creation narratives and as one walks upon the landscape and encounters its animal, plant, fish and bird peoples. As the Inuit people (of the Canadian Arctic) say, “all true wisdom is revealed far from the dwellings of mankind, in the great solitudes.” This is knowledge found in societies the anthropologist Margaret Mead calls, “postfigurative societies,” where one looks to the living perennial traditions as your guide.

We find rites of passage used among the Aranda of central Australian, who perform a series of circumcision, sub-incision and fire ordeals, to strengthen the cooperation among male hunting groups and gain access to the *Alcheringa*, the Dreamtime. The Diné *Kinaalda* is the rite that celebrates the transition and prepares a girl for the duties, responsibilities and privileges of womanhood. We see it when a young Apsáalooke man goes to the mountains to fast for three days without food and water to gain his *baaxpée*, his medicine. We see it when an Inuit is apprenticed to a powerful *angokoq*, a shaman, and becomes a healer. We see rites of passage among the Kwakiutl Indians when a man emerges from the dark forests, alive, having overcome the *Hamatsa*, a cannibal spirit, his role as a leader now established in the eyes of others. And we see it when a young Ashanti (west Africa) girl is snatched from her mother's arms and taken to “bush school,” to emerge a year later as an adult woman.

Correspondingly, research has found that rites of passage are less important in those societies and/or groups that emphasize – 1. the role of the “individual” as the most pivotal social unit, in contrast to the family, clan or some other association, 2. which are fundamentally secular in nature, and 3. which rely upon forms of knowledge that emphasize empiricism and rationalism. This is knowledge found in societies Margaret Mead calls, “prefigurative societies,” where one looks to his or her peers and the future as the guide, where a premium is placed on the “discovery” of new knowledge and on “innovation.”

Nevertheless, in Euro-American society and groups rites of passage are implicit, operative, and critical. For example, induction into the military or a fraternal organization, or participation in a religious retreat, all entail rites of passage. Indeed, bar mitzvahs, baptisms and confirmations, as well as marriages and funerals in the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism,

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Christianity and Islam, are rites of passage. Confronting a serious illness and the accompanying healing journey can be a rite of passage. The educational processes of Euro-American society, from kindergarten to high school through college are but a series of rites of passage. Every adolescent teen goes through and experiences a rite of passage, albeit, much less structured and ritualized when compared to similar rites of passage for youth in an Indigenous society or as institutionalized in a religious tradition.

Please note, that while many of the Indigenous examples provided here are far out of the norm of most Euro-American experiences, they were selected as particularly illustrative of the depth of meaning embodied in the structural components of rites of passage, and help define the “archetypal rites of passage” through which we all may experience.

Research has shown that there are at least **three distinct functions** rites of passage provide. Rites of passage serve not only to publicly acknowledge the transition from one educational, social or spiritual status to another, but more fundamentally, facilitate within the individual and his or her bring such a transformation in the first place. In so doing, the individual acquires knowledge and wisdom, which can be religious, social, political and economic in nature. Such knowledge can relate to the spiritual power of a shaman, or to a woman's role and status in her family. The individual can also acquire a stronger sense of self-identity relative to other social entities, and consequently, gains enhanced self-esteem and self-worth. Correspondingly, issues relating to psychological insecurity and low self-esteem, and to poor social adjustment are more apparent when rites of passage tend to be de-valued. As such, rites of passage facilitate: 1. educational, social, psychological and/or spiritual transformations of all types, 2. the acquisition of new knowledge, status, and identity, and 3. the public acknowledgment of the transition.

Four universal components, reflected in their symbolic structuring, are evident in any rite of passage. These structural components can be found expressed not only in ritual behavior, such as initiation ceremonies, but also in the literary motifs of oral and written literature. In the instance of American Indian oral narratives, next in prevalence to the trickster motif, is the “orphan quest” motif. Let me simply outline the four stages, that are much more elaborate and complex processes, expressed in a variety of nuances, than are commented on here. While my reference point is Indigenous societies, rites of passage pervade the entirety of the human experience and are found close to home. As an example, illustrative of these four stages, consider the Apsáalooke oral tradition of Burnt Face, and its corresponding ritual extensions expressed in the Sundance and Vision Quest, and even the guiding of a healing journey.¹

¹ A narrative of a young boy, badly scarred, ridiculed and ostracized. He journeys alone to a mountain top to humble himself, fasting from food and water, building and offering a Rock Medicine Wheel, and seeking the help of whomever might respond. After a period of prayer and sacrifice, he is adopted by the Little People and is transformed. He returns home anew, and retells his story, so others might be guided and he himself now honored. This narrative helped guide the healing journeys with cancer for the author. See Frey's *Carry Forth the Stories: An Ethnographer's Journey into Native Oral Literature*, Washington State University Press 2017:22-25 and 230-45.

First, a rite of passage presupposes *an orphaned status*. The individual neophyte is symbolically understood as an "orphan," somehow incomplete. In oral literature themes, the individual is represented as alone and often abused and bullied by an adversary, in need of help. Whether it be in ritual or literature, the individual is as an impoverished child, either without parents or lacking in some significant attribute, such as the knowledge and skills of an adult, or the spiritual insights and power of a shaman. For the adolescent teen in Euro-American society, it the classic feeling of being lost and confused, all alone, without friends, rebellion from one's parents, "no one understands me." In all cases, something vital is missing. A void is in need of being filled.

Second, a rite of passage typically involves *a separation, a journey and a sacrifice*. The neophyte may be physically removed by the elders from his or her village and taken to a "bush school" for a period lasting several weeks or even months. The neophyte himself may venture on a vision quest to a far mountain site, the quest lasting up to several days. An apprenticeship may occur, initiated by the neophyte with an established sage, teacher or healer and lasting for many years. It could also be the case that an individual, often while ill and close to death, is involuntarily visited by a spirit guardian. Black Elk, a Lakota Indian, recounts the journey he took at the age of nine, after becoming seriously ill, traveling through the sky, where he was accompanied by 48 horses, 12 from each direction, and is given a great vision. In all instances, a symbolic "journey," full of challenges of all kinds, transpires. It is a journey to a world distinct from the ordinary. "All true wisdom is revealed far from the dwellings of mankind." The "symbolic" or literal journey facilitates: 1. a removal from one socially and spiritually defined space and relationships, 2. entry into a new realm, the "liminal," and 3. a receptivity to the sacred, to traditional knowledge, to the wisdom of family traditions.

The neophyte enters a "liminal state," what Victor Turner (1967) calls "betwixt and between," removed from the mundane and the ordinary. The neophyte is physically and socially cut off from the only world he or she has known. In the "bush school," the neophyte goes nameless and unwashed, without social definition and status, guided and instructed now by the elders and other previous initiates of the community. In the instance of a vision quest, the neophyte will undergo several purification procedures. A sweat bath may be taken, rubbing the self with sweet sage or incensing with sweet cedar, for instance. The site of the vision quest may be a distant butte or hill, far away from the human community. At the site, a bed of sage will be prepared to keep away unwelcome visitors and ghosts. A rock wall to shield fire from curious onlookers is built. The individual humbles himself, showing total humility, of "no greater worth than that ant who shares this hill with him." "Crying for a vision," as the Lakota say.

While at the site, which may last from two to five days, a "sacrifice" is given, going without food and water. You "die" a little as you watch your life leave your body under the hot sun. As the Inuit say, when you go out and seek a vision, you must have an "intimacy with death." And a

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shaman is even more "soft to die" than ordinary people. Lame Deer, a Lakota holy man, once said, "you go up that hill to die."

During a Hopi Indian *Katchina* initiation, the young and very frightened initiates are taken to a kiva chamber, located below the surface of the earth, close to the underworld where the *Katchina* spirits reside, spirits with the power of life and death. The initiates had already lost their names, their identities, and are unwashed, un-kept. There in the middle of the room is the *sipapu* (a small hole in the floor), its opening now exposed, a passage way to the underworld. You hear the songs of the Emergence time, the creation time, as the *Yei*, the Holy Ones bring forth the world. Then in the darkness, and coming down the ladder, steps *Masau'u*, spirit of the corn fields and of death itself. His touch means instant death. To add to the sense of death, the man who has become *Masau'u* had only a short time before gone to the burial area and dug up a recently departed. Now wearing the partially decayed cloths and smelly of death itself, the initiates are brought to the threshold.

Kinalik was a very intelligent and kind-hearted Inuit woman. Her initiation to become an *angokoq* (shaman) was very severe. She was hung-up to several tent poles planted in the snow and left for five days, during midwinter, in the intense cold and harsh conditions. After the five days she was taken down and carried to the village. An *angokoq* then shot her, in order for her to attain an "intimacy with death." Instead of a lead bullet she was shot with a stone, so she would have a "kinship with the earth." She became a very powerful *angokoq*.

Rites of passage typically involve some form of a "ritual death." The symbolism of "death" can have multiple meanings.

1. **To "die" is to validate the process.** One seldom elects to give up one's life, as death is that stage in one's life that comes from the gods. To "die" symbolizes that you've been "chosen" by powers greater than yourself.
2. **To "die" is also to be brought to the threshold of the sacred,** to journey to the "other side camp," to follow the road all those now deceased have traveled, to the abode of the ancestors and spirits. An Inuit hunter walking along the ice was suddenly attacked by a walrus who hooked him with his tusk. He is brought by the walrus down below the ice and swims off, as his hunting partners could only watch helplessly. They try breaking the ice, but fail. After a great length of time, the man was "given back." He lay there on the ice with a gaping wound over his collarbone and breathing through it. His ribs were broken and lungs gashed. He is taken to a small snow hut and left without food and water for three days. When the hut is approached by his family, there stands an *angokoq*, with the Walrus as his "medicine."
3. **To "die" is to sacrifice and give up something.** If a quest is to be successful, if one is to receive a vision, the neophyte must offer up what is most cherished. Reciprocity and a gift exchange between the self and the spirit world must occur. While on the mountain top, the vision quester offers up his or her food and water, perhaps his own flesh as small pieces are

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cut from the arm, and most importantly, the gift given his or her own sincerity – *díakaashik* – "doing it with determination" (Apsáalooke). The Sun Dancer watches as his or her water, life, drips from the end of his/her eagle bone whistle. During the "bush school," the sacrifice may be expressed as a circumcision, sub-incision, tooth-knocking out or some other form of scarification ritual. The circumcision and sub-incision "cutting" vividly symbolizes not only an offering up of flesh but a severing from one gender identity to an affiliation with another, i.e., the boys have been taken from their mothers' arms and brought into the world of men. In all instances, the offering of oneself assumes two active agents: a giver and a receiver.

4. **To "die" is to render the neophyte void, as nothing, emptied, and thus very receptive.** He or she has been torn from the living, separated and stripped from one's mundane existence and identity, without a name and social conventions. Stripping away the mundane reveals and exposes what is most essential to the neophyte, his or her soul, the inner spiritual territory. During the initiation, "you watch as your flesh is ripped from your body and you see your own bones, you get down to your bones." A Siberian Yakut remembers how he witnessed his own dismemberment by spirit beings. His head was placed on a plank in the *yurta* (lodge) and he watched his body as it was chopped up. His limbs were then cleaned to the bone and the flesh scattered in all directions, to the spirits that cause sickness, who then eat of his flesh. His bones and body was then reformed and he became a powerful shaman who could cure those illnesses that had eaten of his body. As the Inuit say, an *angokoq* (shaman) must be able to "see his own skeleton," go beyond his flesh and blood – see his soul. And he must be able to name all the parts of his skeleton, every single bone by name aloud. In so doing, the *angokoq* consecrates himself, rendering his being sacred. In being emptied, in a void, you are now receptive to the imprint of the sacred, to the knowledge of healing or of adulthood, or the secrets of the fraternal order.

5. **To "die" is to get down to the bones.** When you "get down to the bones," you are symbolically getting down to what is most elemental, that which is most permanent, that which gives life to the body – the soul and seed. We can see this represented in all sorts of Indigenous art, known as "skeleton art." In addition, when you get down to the bones you are preparing the way for a resurrection, for a rebirth. In traditional hunting societies, the bones of animals and fish are seldom desecrated, e.g., by not allowing the dogs to gnaw on them, and the bones are always ritually returned to the forests and rivers to perpetuate the rebirth and continuation of the animal or fish in question. When you "get down to the bones," you reveal what is most essential and are readied for a rebirth.

While certainly not explicitly exhibiting such elements as *separation*, *journey* and *sacrifice*, and the symbolism of "death," the rite of passage experiences of Euro-American adolescents can nevertheless be implicitly important when experienced within certain types of families. The nature of the dyadic relationships of a mother and her daughter, and a father and his son are particularly important during adolescents. There can be a marked difference in the transition of youth into young adulthood when comparing differences in the nature of these dyadic relationships. Youth tend to transition into adulthood more "successfully" in those dyads

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where the mother and daughter or the father and son relate in such a fashion that combines a caring and nurturing paternal role, with clearly established rules for and limits on appropriate adolescent behavior, with an acknowledgment by the adolescent of the importance of the knowledge and wisdom of the parent. "Success" is measured in such behavioral expressions as doing better in school, psychologically and socially better adjusted, a stronger sense of self-identity, greater self-reliance, and less engaged in what is considered deviant behavior. The parent has created within the family a sort of "bush school," within which the daughter or son enters a "liminal period," is cut off from many of the influences of peers and media, and in which the daughter or son is now most receptive to the knowledge disseminated by a primary elder, the parent. In certain Euro-American families, an implicit and very structured form of rite of passage thus occurs, with important implications for health of both the community and the individual.

Third, a rite of passage involves some sort of *acquisition of power and knowledge, and the void is filled*. Having been rendered receptive, as "warmed wax," the neophyte can now be molded in the imprint of the sacred. The soul or inner being is exposed to the spiritual teachings and sacred archetypes.

It is during the "liminal state" that the neophyte may witness the creation time as the spirit beings are brought forth in a performance of a great ceremonial and in the telling of the rich body of oral narratives. In the "bush school," the previously initiated elders dance and tell of the sacred truths during the night and disseminate the social and economic knowledge required of an adult during the day. The wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors can be gained as the great mysteries are revealed. This knowledge is communicated via: exhibitions – showing of sacred *Churinga* boards, drums, medicine bundles, masks, figurines, ground paintings; most certainly storytelling of the great oral literature, the creations stories; dancing the stories to life in symbolic fashion and in richly adorned costumes and masks; and in direct instruction by the elders and already initiated adults.

The neophyte is offered the opportunity to "remember what has been forgotten," reflective of the "doctrine of anamnesis" developed by Plato. All true knowledge and wisdom are already established – set, handed down from the creation time by the ancestors and Animal-First Peoples; it is knowledge of the *mi'yp* (Schitsu'umsh, literally "teachings from all things"), of the "bones" (Schitsu'umsh for the enduring and underlying ontological principles that define reality). These are teachings that are not expanded, to be invented anew. They simply are. But as humans we can forget and lose our way, and thus must be reminded. Rites of passage allow us to remember what we have forgotten, to re-align ourselves with these perennial "bones."

While there is variation in the specific nature of the knowledge and wisdom that is remembered, or revealed and disseminated, given the type of rite of passage, be it for a female

coming of age rite such as the Diné *Kinaalda* or an initiation into a secret Hopi *Katchina* society, implicit in any rite of passage is the instilling and/or reinforcing in the neophyte the capacity and value of empathy, in what the Schitsu'umsh term *snukwnkhwtskhwts'mi'ls*, literally, "fellow suffer" (Frey 2017:47). Above all other qualities, the cohesion and solidarity of the group or society depend upon the ability of its members to actively listen and deeply appreciate the situation or condition of their counterparts, have empathy, if they are to act accordingly.

A rite of passage may impart more than knowledge itself. While on a lonely butte, a vision and adoption by a spirit guardian can occur. If the gift of oneself is judged worthy and accepted, a vision is rendered. The previous state of two active agents is transcended, becoming as one, in union, where ordinary time and space are dissolved. The bones are aligned, and you can "talk with and swirl with the Coyote," with an Animal-First Peoples, a guardian spirit. It is what the scholar of world religions, Mercia Eliade (1954), calls a "hierophany," a shining through of the sacred into our lives. The neophyte communicates with and learns directly of the spiritual truths. Appearing in the vision, he or she is instructed and guided by an animal spirit, in the ways to respect and honor the gift. The spirit animal becomes an *axxekaate*, a "Medicine Father" (Apsáalooke). The vision establishes an "adoption" relation, a parent-child dyad, as the neophyte is adopted by a spirit guardian. The Buffalo or Eagle might now as a father, a parent to the neophyte. The adoption solidifies a spiritual kinship, a father who is close by to guide throughout one's life. Rules of respect and taboos to honor the spirit guardian are revealed. A medicine, *baaxpée*, is received. It will continue to guide and direct. It will continue to offer growth and healing. A bundle might be opened when the first thunder of spring is heard, when a child or grandmother needs care and healing, when answer is sought to a family challenge. But one is never to vainly consider the medicine "owned," as if he or she possesses it as theirs. As Black Elk once said, "I'm the hole, the channel through which the medicine comes. If I thought that I was the owner, the hole would close up and I'd die."

Fourth, any rite of passage involves some sort of *affirmation* and *rebirth*. With the knowledge of the ancestors re-gained or the vision of a spiritual guardian received, the individual returns to the ordinary world, his or her self re-defined, with a new status. He or she returns triumphant, overcoming what had been an "orphaned status." And upon returning, the individual re-tells his or her great experience before family and friends, he or she *baaéechichiwaau* – "retells one's own" (Apsáalooke). As the insights and gifts received during the journey are now re-told they are thus shared and given to the entire community, so others to also be guided and helped, and healed. In re-telling his or her story, the individual is identified and linkage with this new status and knowledge. And it is knowledge and wisdom that might be overtly symbolized and maintained through the possession of a medicine bundle and/or medicine song. Having come down from the mountain top or out of the bush, the wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors is applied, wounds are healed, and the power to fly or cure is affected. From the "death" and the "bones" is resurrected and "reborn" a new human being and the entire community is a benefactor.

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In passing through a rite of passage, the various educational, social and spiritual transitions through which an individual moves are thus not only publicly acknowledged, but the transitions themselves are accomplished. The ascendancy to a new status is socially validated. A child becomes an adult, redefined in the eyes of others. The individual is also offered a means to shed one identity and orientation for another, thus acquiring and re-orienting his or her entire world view, socially, economically and spiritually. New knowledge and skills, new responsibilities and obligations, new awareness and sensitivities are effectively imparted and assimilated. Rites of passage can transform the very being of an individual, providing a mechanism for meaningful life-cycle transitions.

As a starting point for additional research on rites of passage, consider the following studies:

Mircea Eliade. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. 1954.

Margaret Mead. *Culture and Commitment*. 1970.

Victor Turner. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. 1967.

Arnold van Gennep. *The Rites of Passage*. 1906.