

**Aching to Age**

by  
**Betty L. Creamer**

ISBN: 1-58112-058-1

**DISSERTATION.COM**



1999

**Aching to Age: The Adolescent Need for Rites of Passage to Adulthood**

© 1999  
Betty L. Creamer  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ISBN: 1-58112-059-1

Published by  
Dissertation.com  
1999  
USA

[www.dissertation.com/library/1120591a.htm](http://www.dissertation.com/library/1120591a.htm)

*Dedication*

*for Bernie*

*with thankfulness for  
true and faithful friendship*

**Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy,  
like art. . . . It has no survival value; rather  
it is one of those things that give value to  
survival. C.S. Lewis**



## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	7
The Need for Rites of Passage	10
Religious Rites of Passage	32
Traditional Rites of Passage	43
Contemporary Rites of Passage	54
Psychological Orphans	69
Adult/Youth Partnerships	81
Notes	97
Appendix A: Traditional Rites	
Quest for the Burning	
Feather	109
Rites of Passage in Ohafia	115
Ritual Hut	123
Sunrise Ceremonial	128
Appendix B: Contemporary Rites	
Ben's Story	141
Ending the Nightmare Passage to Womanhood	146
First Moon	153
From Child to Adult	158
Initiation Into Womanhood	160
Matt's Rite of Passage	179
Paving the Way to Black Manhood	188
Quinceanera	194
Unyago	197

Appendix C: Resources 206

Works Cited 218

# Introduction

Adolescents seek to be older, to be adults, to take on adult roles, to “feel” like adults. While they are on the road to adulthood, how do they know when they have arrived?

What is “adult”—a chronological age (18 or 21); an event (i.e. high school graduation); or an action (i.e., the first alcoholic drink or losing one’s virginity)? Who decides when a person reaches adulthood? Does the title belong to adults to bestow upon young people, or must young people capture the title for themselves—or does the answer lie some place in between?

This book explores the adolescent quest for adulthood and the need for rites of passage along the way. Any significant journey requires preparation, stops along the way, and a goal at the end. Without a goal, how does the traveler know when he or she has reached the destination?

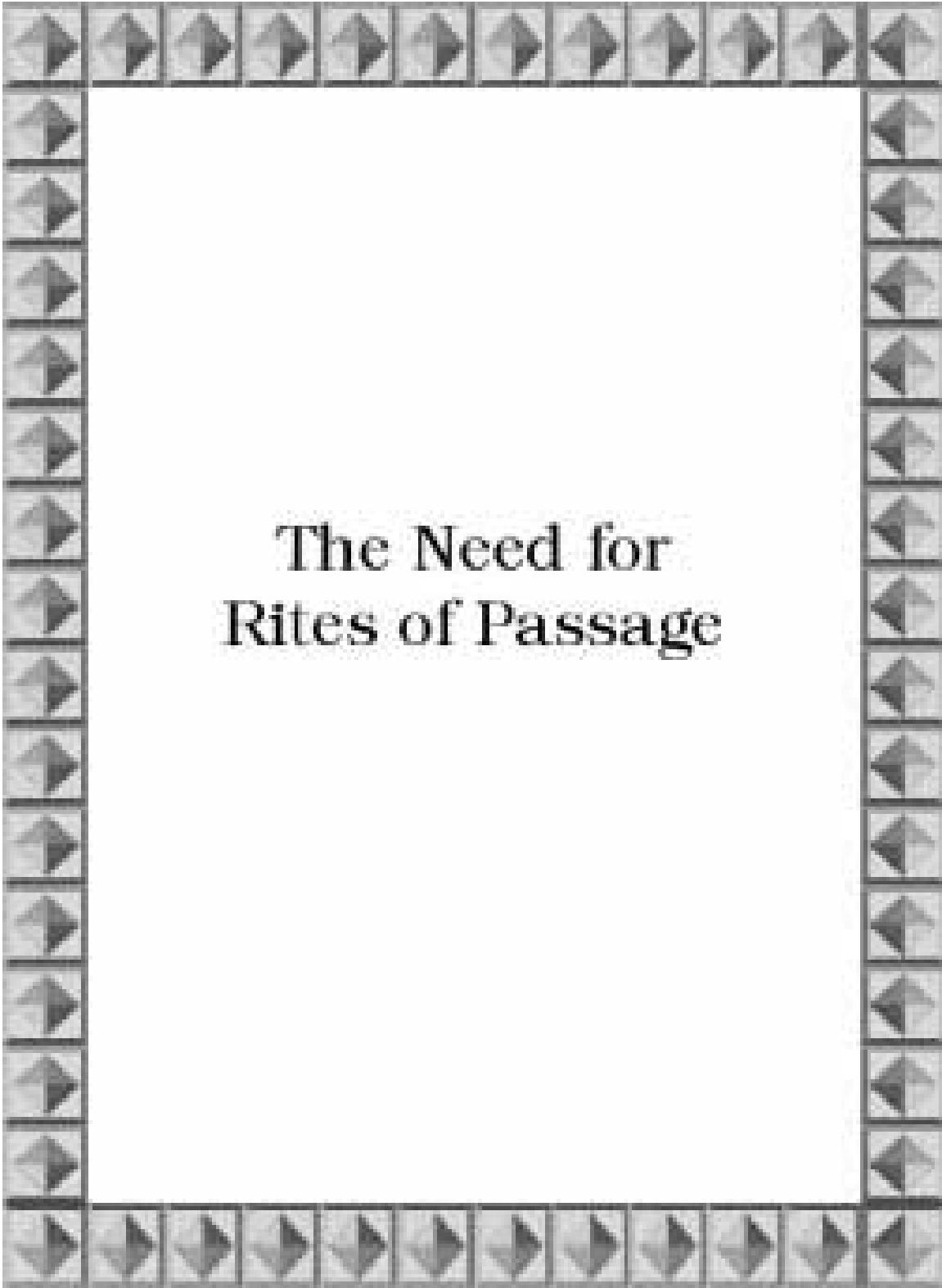
Young people need rites of passage along the pathway to adulthood, and they need caring, supportive adults in their families

and communities who work with them in the rite-of- passage process and who receive them and honor them as adults once they have passed through rites-of-passage.

This book begins with a look at characteristics of adolescence and the need for rites-of-passage and then moves to an exploration of various rites-of-passages. Some formal rites are those steeped in tradition, and others represent contemporary communities at work with young people in the rite-of-passage process.

Since many young people lack the community resources and support for rites-of-passage, they form their own rites which often include destructive behavior and risk-taking. After an exploration of these behaviors, there follows a look at what adults and young people working in partnership can do to provide young people with positive rite-of-passage experiences and support along the journey into adulthood.





## The Need for Rites of Passage

What does every adolescent want to be? Older!! After spending the childhood years hearing parents, teachers, coaches and other adults say, “When you are old enough. . .; or when you are older. . .,” young people reach the teen years and strive to reach that magical state of “older”—that state of being able to engage in those activities reserved for those who are “old enough.”

“Old enough” often takes on a fluidity and looms like white water rapids—exciting, a bit dangerous, and just up ahead. The waiting and anticipation of being “old enough” leaves the adolescent aching to age.

As childhood ends and the teen years begin, young people begin to seek adult roles. However, the same 13-year-old who seeks admission to an “R” rated movie will in the next breath ask to pay the “twelve and under” ticket price!! The adolescent years prove to be years of seeking a personal and group identity while at the same time delighting in and being frightened by new privileges and responsibilities.

Tamara Hareven writes:

[Americans] discovered childhood in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and “invented” adolescence toward the end of it. . . . However, despite the growing awareness of childhood, adolescence, and youth as pre-adult stages, no clear boundaries for adulthood in America emerged until much later. . . . (1)

Because so few clear boundaries exist between adolescence and adulthood, young people experience an enormous amount of ambiguity during the teen years. While they seek to be older and strive to enter the adult world, they often do not find clearly marked doors for entering that world. Lacking those doors, teens make their own doors which may include a variety of risk-taking behaviors.

Peter Scales, in A Portrait of Young Adolescents in the 1990s, says , “If infancy has its ‘terrible two’s, then early adolescence has its ‘terrible too’s’: too much, too little, too slow, too fast.” (2)

Adolescence provides young people with “too much” at once:

- The onset of puberty with physical and cognitive changes
- More responsibilities at home in terms of increased chores; baby-sitting younger siblings; care of pets

- Increased school responsibilities: more classes; class changes; more teachers per day who each have expectations; more homework which requires critical thinking skills; extra-curricular activities; decisions about classes to take; college and career decisions
- Increased civic responsibilities: church involvement; youth group (i.e., 4-H, Scouting) involvement and commitment; service learning activities
- Peer group involvement: more time to spend unsupervised with peers
- Jobs: part-time jobs; time and money management

During this time of “too much”, adolescents also struggle with “too little”:

- Time
- Adult partnerships
- Skills for coping with change
- Ways to celebrate the transition from childhood to adulthood
- Personal values
- Opportunities for challenge/skill-building

For the adolescent, time moves too slowly while, at the same time, events move too quickly! For example, a young person may long for the time to come when he or she begins dating. However, once that time arrives, he or she may feel woefully inadequate in terms of social and emotional skills. While the age for dating arrives slowly, the social and emotional pressures take on the frenetic pace of video arcade games.

These “terrible too’s” during adolescence thrust teens into alliance with their peers whose emotional flashlights peer down the same dark path in the search for markers pointing the way to adulthood.

During these teen years, young people seek an identity of their own, but they also need and desire the social and emotional support which comes from their peer group. “The desire to do away with the ‘terrible too’s’ and fade into group conformity and peer acceptance emerges strongly in this period.” (3)

The teen years represent a time of tremendous change for young people. The onset of puberty brings outward and visible changes. Young men and women develop body hair. The young man's voice deepens; and the young woman develops breasts and begins her menses. At a recent gathering of university faculty, one mother spoke of initiating a conversation with her son as he entered the teen years. She began to talk to him about the bodily changes during puberty when he stopped her and said, "Mom, there's just one thing I want to know. Where else am I going to grow hair in the next two years!" Another mom overhead her young son replying to an adult's friendly, "How are you?" question at a church coffee hour. He said, "I'm all right, but I'm going through puberty right now and having lots of bodily changes."

Not all young people feel confident enough to speak openly about puberty among adults and even their peers. Steven Zeitlin writes: "Adolescence ushers in a new body of folklore. Puberty, menstruation, and losing one's virginity may be celebrated secretly, and informally among friends as there are few cultural rites." (4)

The outward and visible bodily changes occur in concert with inward, physical, cognitive, and emotional changes which are not as readily visible. The young person entering puberty also begins a new phase of cognitive development in which he or she begins to think abstractly.

The 14- and 15- year-old is characterized by more abstract thinking, the ability to consider possibilities and not just realities, to see things from another person's point of view, to allow perceived consequences of behavior to temper the desire for immediate gratification of wants, and to consider exceptions to the rules. (5)

Myths concerning Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy fade into reality as young people move toward the teen years. Young people during this age also cease to see parents or other significant adults as super-heroes—that is, the Super Man or Wonder Woman who can do anything! Young people now understand a sense of time, planning for events, and working toward a goal where attainment lies in the future.

During the adolescent years,

. . .hierarchical arrangement of ego functions appear, modeled after the emerging drive organization. Cognitive processes become more objective and analytical; the realm of the reality principle increases. The hierarchical innovation in itself brings into prominence distinct interests, capacities, skills, and

talents, which are experimentally tested for their usefulness and reliability in the maintenance of self-esteem; thus a vocational choice solidifies or at least makes its voice heard. Late adolescent brings an entirely new quality into this realm of strivings toward possible selves. (6)

These are the years when young people look at themselves, their wants, needs, skills and talents. In the childhood years, a young person may idolize a professional sports hero and seek to play professional sports. During the adolescent years, this young person now develops the ability to assess skills and talents and make a decision about realistic goals. Interests and skills the young person developed during childhood now might become simply a hobby or may move into a serious part of professional, vocational planning.

Erik Erikson describes this process:

Adolescence is the last stage of childhood. The adolescent process, however, is conclusively complete only when the individual has subordinated his childhood identifications to a new kind of identification, achieved in absorbing sociability and in competitive apprenticeships with and among his age mates. (7)

Identification emerges as an important issue during adolescence. While young people continue to be a part of their biological families,

they also seek an identity as part of other, wider groups. School provides one anchor place for many young people. They belong to the school as students, and many young people enjoy a sense of school spirit which they display at various school functions—most noticeably at sporting events.

Being a part of an athletic team, the band, debate team, chess team, drama club or a variety of other clubs and organizations within the school provides a young person with a sense of identity. Young people display their identification with the school, team or club in a variety of ways, but the wearing of team or club t-shirts, sweatshirts, jackets, caps and a variety of other items remains one of the most common.

Many young people who do not feel an identity with their schools show their search for group identity by wearing a variety of logo apparel which include those displaying college names, professional sports team names, or even clothing designer logos. Wearing the “in” sneakers, jeans, shirts, jackets, or hats provides the young person with a psychological feeling of belonging and of saying, “I belong.”

In A Portrait of Young Adolescents in the 1990s, Peter Scales addresses this need:

In fits and starts, young adolescents are forming identities, first with groups, and ultimately, personal senses of self in relation to the world. They are learning where they fit in and how they are or are not accepted in the wider society; how their gender, race, religion, disabilities and other characteristics affect how they see themselves, and how others see them. (8)

Religious and community youth organizations provide young people with a sense of belonging, a physically and psychologically safe place for exploration of skills and talents and belief systems, and both peer group and adult support. “Group formation is strengthened by the very fact that the greatest source of security lies in the shared code of what constitutes adequate behavior and in the dependency on mutual recognition of sameness.” (9) These youth organizations most often afford teens a chance to interact with peers while in partnership with adults who work toward positive youth development.

The adolescents involved in religious and community youth organizations such as 4-H Clubs, Scouting and Boys and Girls Clubs

of America find increased opportunities for risk-taking in a supportive setting. Young people engage in athletic competition in many of these community settings both as players and as mentors for younger children. In addition, young people find training in and outlets for their skills in music, art, and drama in community-based organizations.

Scouting and 4-H Clubs also provide challenges for young people as they work toward merit badges and recognition awards in addition to engaging in age-appropriate competition with other young people.

[Psychologist Erik Erikson]. . .believed that people have to resolve particular psychological crises at each life stage in order to move on developmentally. He believed that from late childhood through young adulthood. . .a person needed to achieve competence at something, a personal identity, and the ability to engage in the giving and receiving of intimacy. (10)

Participation in school and community activities allows young people to achieve those competencies and that personal identity which then enables them to move more smoothly into adulthood.

Adolescence and the onset of puberty also heralds the beginning of sexual development. “Young adolescents are moving into puberty with its heightened sense of sexuality and, for many, the confusion that comes with that awareness.” (11) As teens seek to take on adult roles, they also deal with budding hormones and peer expectations in regards to sexual maturity. The mark of being a man or woman often comes among peers with the loss of virginity. Early sexual activity carries emotional risks and the very present danger of physical risks in the form of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

As young people begin to think abstractly and develop the ability to consider consequences and plan for the future, they also have the ability to form a system of faith and moral values of their own. Inhelder and Piaget assert that “the adolescent differs from the child above all in that he thinks beyond the present; (and) he commits himself to possibilities.” (12) Thus, the young people have the ability to consider not just their own wants and needs but the effects of their actions on others as well as their personal responsibilities for their own actions.

As young people seek adult roles, current society in the United States lacks significant methods of celebrating the transition from childhood to adulthood. Both young people and adults need ways to mark that transition with ceremonies which bestow upon the adolescents the rites and responsibilities of adulthood as adults receive the young people into the adult community with dignity and respect.

Peter Benson writes in All Kids Are Our Kids:

Today's adolescents have to navigate through a long period of ambiguity in which modern society provides few if any rites of passage marking the transition out of childhood and offers few if any roles that give adolescents a stake in community life. (13)

As young people grow into bodies which take the form of adult bodies, adults around them expect them to act as adults. Younger children look up to them as adults. However, at the same time, many young people find themselves without clear expectations by those around them. Adults expect teens to act as adults in many circumstances—especially social situations; however, these same adults continue to make decisions for young people in the same way they have done during childhood. In On Adolescence, Peter Blos addresses this situation:

The withdrawal of object cathexis and the widening gap between ego and superego result in an impoverishment of the ego; this is experienced by the adolescent as a feeling of void, an inner turmoil which can be directed, in the search for relief, toward any mitigating opportunity which the environment may offer. (14)

Erik Erikson says that adolescents “need to be on the move.” (15)

Young people move inexorably toward adulthood. However, adults who have traveled that road have not always kept the road in good repair, and teens must often pay the tolls along the way. Erikson also says:

The adolescent's leaning out over any number of precipices is normally an experimentation with experiences which are thus becoming more amenable to ego control, provided they are not prematurely responded to with fatal seriousness by overeager or neurotic adults. (16)

While teens travel the road to adulthood, parents and adult mentors have the opportunity to erect some guard rails around those precipices! While many people view teens through the eye of television news stories or even popular television programming, adults who know teens well know that they are, on the whole, a delightful group! While the ambiguity of adolescence exists, the precipices loom, and the “terrible too’s” persist, most young people move through adolescence without life-shattering experiences.

Peter Scales' research shows

. . . many of our popular depictions of young adolescents leave the impression that the majority is at serious risk of school failure, juvenile delinquency, adolescent pregnancy, and other woes. This is not the case. Developmentally, about 80% do not experience a turbulent adolescence. . . .(17)

However, the need for more concrete ways to mark the passage through various stages of adolescence emphatically exists. While the majority of young people are not school failures, gang members, drug addicts or delinquents, “all the trends point to a growing number and proportion of young adolescents who are in fact at high risk of being underprepared and unsuccessful in the modern social and economic world.” (18)

Young people urgently need ways to explore their identity and to mark the passages along the way to adulthood.

Identity formation is one of the critical tasks of adolescence, as young people ask: “Who am I? What can I do? Who do I want to become?” . . . Without these assets, young people can become powerless victims without a sense of initiative, direction, and purpose. (19)