

"*Educating from the Heart* is a must read for all practicing school administrators and should be incorporated into any leadership development program for educators. Applying many of the principles and beliefs identified in this book challenges established practices and structures in our current 'high stakes' testing environment. It is a compelling book relating to the topic of student well-being that has to be addressed in a more systemic fashion."

—**Dr. Brian O'Regan**, coordinator,

School Leadership Masters in Education Program, Saint Michael's College;
former Vermont Deputy Commissioner of Education

"This book is a beacon of light given the current context of education. It illuminates ideas and practices that can enrich and empower the lives of students. It searches out the varied contexts where wholeness and heart-filled learning can be applied. And it dispenses the dark shadows of conformity and meaningless accountability by its hopeful message and practical content."

—**Dr. Sam Crowell**,

professor of education, California State University, San Bernardino;
coauthor of *The Re-Enchantment of Learning*

"This book brings together some of the renowned voices in the field of education and spirituality so that each chapter offers up-to-date research and insights that inform and enlighten classroom theory and practice. It is a worthwhile resource for pre-service and postgraduate education programs, as well as for classroom teachers."

—**Dr. Marian de Souza**, senior lecturer,

Australian Catholic University; chair, International Association of Children's Spirituality;
coeditor of *Meaning and Connectedness*

"The ideas in this book are presented in such a way that teachers will want to try these approaches themselves. It fills an important gap in the literature on spirituality in education with its classroom-based focus."

—**Dr. Jack Miller**, professor of curriculum, teaching, and learning, University of Toronto;
author of *The Holistic Curriculum*

Educating from the Heart offers theoretical overviews and practical approaches for educators, academics, education students, and parents. The book encourages transformational approaches to learning and teaching that can easily be integrated into public and private K-12 school classrooms, with many ideas also applicable to higher education. It supports the beliefs that heart and spirit are intertwined with mind and intellect, and that inner peace, wisdom, compassion, and conscience can be developed together with academic content and skills.

Contributors

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JOHNSON
AND NEAGLEY

EDUCATING FROM THE HEART

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THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES
TO TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

EDITED BY AOSTRE N. JOHNSON
AND MARILYN WEBB NEAGLEY
FOREWORD BY PAUL D. HOUSTON

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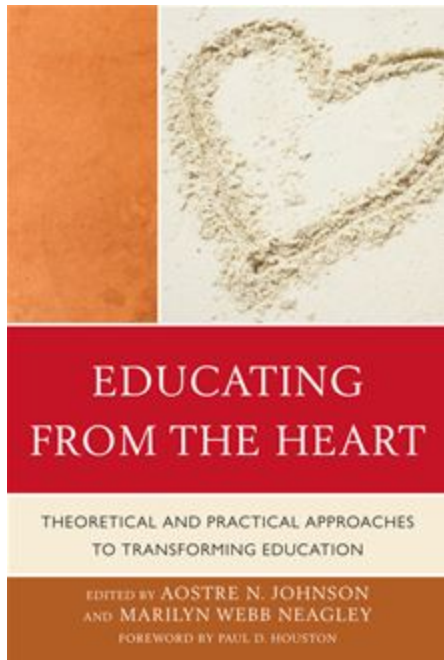
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Educating from the Heart: Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Transforming Education

By Aostre N. Johnson and Marilyn Webb Neagley

Educating from the Heart: Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Transforming Education is based on the questions: "What does it mean to educate from the heart? What does it mean to educate with spirit?" It offers both theoretical overviews and practical approaches for educators, academics, education students and parents who are interested in transforming schools. Well-respected voices in the field of education provide a framework that includes recent findings from the world of neuroscience, as well as fresh perspectives about traditional wisdom. Practicing educators describe methods directly applicable in classrooms. In addition, many chapters emphasize the importance of educators attending to their own inner lives. The book encourages

reinvigorating approaches to learning and teaching that can easily be integrated into both public and private K-12 school classrooms, with many ideas also applicable to higher education. It supports an educational system based on the beliefs that heart and spirit are intertwined with mind and intellect, and that inner peace, wisdom, compassion, and conscience can be developed together with academic content and skills.

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The Six Passages of Childhood: A Model for School-Based Rites of Passage

Rachael Kessler, with Laura Weaver

Two weeks before graduation, twenty-five seniors gather with their parents and teachers for a “senior honoring ceremony” to celebrate the gifts of each of these students—not just the few who have shown outstanding achievement in academics or athletics. This ceremony is a culminating moment in the Senior Passage program—a school-based rites-of-passage course designed to support one of the most vulnerable passages in the life cycle: the transition at the end of high school when childhood truly ends and the freedom and responsibility of adulthood loom, evoking excitement, confusion, and grief in students and their families.

A vase filled with a variety of long-stemmed flowers sits in the center of a softly lit room. The inner circle of chairs holds twenty-five students and the teachers who will address them. In the outer circle of chairs sit parents and other faculty members. After a welcome by the school principal, teachers walk one at a time to the center of the circle, select a unique flower from the vase, and stand before a surprised and curious student.

One teacher begins: “Scott, I have watched you grow this last year and become strong like the sturdy stalk of this giant iris. When you came into my class, I could tell that you were used to being one of the clowns. Yet, when it came time to share our stories, you took the first risk. You

inspired all of us with the courage of your vulnerability. I want to honor you for the warmth you brought to each of us and the initiative and courage you've shown. I respect you as a leader and value you as a friend."

Scott beams. His father, behind him, looks stunned. This is his younger son—the cutup, the disappointment after the academic achiever who went before him, the one who has brought his father too many times to the disciplinary dean's office. After listening to one of the most respected teachers in the school celebrate the outstanding gifts of character this boy has demonstrated in his final year of high school, the father's face is soft, tears glistening. He places his hands on his son's broad shoulders. One squeeze tells the boy that his father has heard, that he sees him in a new light.

At the juncture between adolescence and adulthood—a time of anticipation, exhilaration, uncertainty, and fear—Scott discovered a chance to transform. In the dissolving of an adolescent identity before an adult identity emerges, many young people experience an opening to spirit. The "big" questions become urgent—questions of meaning and purpose, love and its shadows, integrity, and ultimate beginnings and endings. Without support, this year can be a time of loneliness and regression. Scott flourished in his final year of high school because this secular school had created a place for his soul. Senior Passages provided a forum where students were witnessed and honored by their peers and elders, given tools to navigate their transition, and guided by a curriculum that placed the students' usually unspoken questions and concerns at its center.¹

Another vulnerable transition at the other end of the continuum of schooling is the initiation into kindergarten. After her son participated in a kindergarten rites-of-passage program, one mother noted the growth and change she saw in him:

An extraordinary component of the Kindergarten Rites of Passage program is that it encourages communication and self-awareness through reflection. There are very few opportunities for children to reflect on the past, to look closely at the present, and then to communicate the sense of growth between the two. My son took great pride in realizing the social and emotional growth he has achieved over time: from a tentative experimenter with things new, to a bold and active do-er who now thrives in trying new things. A tremendous conversation erupted from this reflection. Why had he changed? To what does he attribute his growth? My son was then able to define the reason for his progression from tentative to bold, pinpointing his newfound idea of success as the key. In the past, success used to be found only in the winning outcome. Today, my son sees that success is also found in the trying, the effort, the process. (excerpted from parent feedback)

These stories illustrate the impact of school-based rites of passage (SBROP) on two of the six critical transition years in the life cycle of K-12

education. Each year that begins and ends a new level of schooling is a time of enormous change—for students, family, and faculty. While each transition has its unique developmental issues, there are also challenges and opportunities common to all of these years that reflect underlying patterns present in any major life shift.

THE NEED FOR RITES OF PASSAGE ACROSS THE GRADE LEVELS

Anxiety, confusion, and regression, as well as relief, excitement, and new possibilities for transformation, are common for human beings when biology, culture, or social roles demand a developmental leap forward. On the threshold of the unknown, students must say good-bye not only to relationships with others but also to a childhood self. Apprehension and angst are normal during these profound changes. Mood swings are common among both the student and parents experiencing the shock of letting go of the past and the known. Family relationships may become volatile at this time—familiar patterns and parent-child roles often shift, bringing much confusion in their wake. As the child struggles with a new identity, parents are challenged to let go of one way of parenting and discover new ways to be responsible, caring guides for this young person who is ready for more (but not full) responsibility and freedom.

Faculty who teach students in transition often feel undermined by the students' restlessness, loss of interest in school, or general sense of upheaval. Teachers of fifth-grade students worry about the once sweet children who now lord their power over the younger children on the playground. Among high school seniors, even the most disciplined students may lose their capacity for focus. "Senioritis" jeopardizes the quality of learning and the once harmonious climate between student and teacher. These kinds of experiences are common when confidence is shaken as students stand on the brink of the unknown. I believe that the lack of support for transitions and the absence of initiation experiences may directly impact the high dropout rates we are seeing nationally in first-year students in both high school and college.

A growing body of research now acknowledges the challenges of the transition years. Researchers see that "there is consistent student achievement loss associated with the transition from self-contained elementary schools to intermediate-level schools" (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995). In our high schools, "29 of 51 states see their greatest 'leakage' in the education pipeline during the ninth grade" (EPE Research Center, 2006). According to the June 2010 report "Diplomas Count" by the EPE

Research Center, nationally, 1.3 million students will not graduate. That amounts to a loss of 7,200 students from the U.S. graduation pipeline every school day, or one student every 25 seconds (EPE Research Center, 2010). Increasingly, researchers suggest that the stress of unsupported transitions contributes to risky behavior in youth.² Taken together, these studies communicate the critical need for rites of passage and transition support expressed in our young people.

PROMOTING RESILIENCE, AWAKENING POSSIBILITY

I have primarily explored the risks associated with critical transition times in the life cycle of schooling. There are also gifts that arise during these turning points that can be nurtured or amplified with caring, thoughtfully structured support. Along with turmoil, transitions elicit an exhilarating awakening in young people. In the previous kindergarten parent's observations, we see the awakening to self-awareness that can happen during that vulnerable transition.

Even as early as fifth grade, students begin to glimpse the possibility of larger purpose and deeper meaning in life. They begin to explore their personal mysteries:

- Who am I?
- Do I have a purpose?
- Is there a God?
- How can people who love you hurt you? Why?
- What happens after you die?
- Why is it so hard to forgive?
- Will the Earth survive for my children and grandchildren?
- How come people hate others—black, white, Hispanic?
- Why is the spring so full?
- What makes some people so much more giving and loving than others?

Supported by a community of peers and caring elders during their transitions, students of all ages can develop a capacity for calm and confidence, openness to and compassion for the "Other," wonder and delight about exploring new relationships and beginning a new phase of schooling and personal identity. When students are given tools and experiences for constructively moving through major identity shifts, they are sustained not only in those particular moments of change but for each subsequent transition as well. Guided and validated by caring and creative adults, young people can make decisions that truly serve their own

growth and the health of the community. Offered these opportunities in school, students also become more engaged and motivated to learn.

Recognizing the need to support young people through the challenges of transition, I have worked with colleagues across the country to develop structures and experiences that allow students' gifts to be revealed and celebrated during this time. We have turned for guidance to the ancient frameworks of rites of passage provided to us by cultures around the world.

rites of passage for adolescents: the need and opportunity

Traditional and indigenous cultures teach us that adolescence is a particularly important stage in the spiritual life cycle. Virtually every preindustrial culture provided rites of initiation that helped their youths navigate the dangerous waters between childhood and adulthood. Many experts believe that the need for initiation is an essential one for growing to maturity and is hard-wired into adolescence (Mahdi, Christopher, & Meade, 1996; Mahdi, Foster, & Little, 1987).

Without constructive rites of passage provided by adults, teenagers in our communities create their own badges of adulthood—from the relatively benign driver's licenses, proms, and graduation ceremonies to the more dangerous extremes of binge drinking, first baby, first jail sentence, or even first murder. "If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of community," says poet Michael Meade, "they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth" (1993, p. 19). These same adolescent fires can be cultivated and tended to in ways that revitalize the community, rather than destroy it.

While some American teenagers are blessed with meaningful confirmations—bar and bat mitzvahs in the Jewish community, *quinceañera* ceremonies in the Mexican community, initiation journeys offered by Buddhist or African American communities, fee-for-service wilderness programs based in a rites-of-passage model, and so on—most of our youths today have no opportunity to be guided by responsible adults through the loneliness, confusion, and wonder of the adolescent journey. Without these critical initiations, young people and their communities are diminished. "Because of the unhappy loss of this kind of initiatory experience, the modern world suffers a kind of spiritual poverty and a lack of community," says Malidoma Some (1994). "Young people are feared for their wild and dangerous energy, which is really an unending longing for initiation" (p. 68). SBROP programs can address this need for

the many students who would never receive such guidance and challenge elsewhere. They offer young people a place to authentically express the challenges and transformative power that lies within their adolescent passage.

rites of passage for adolescents: an ancient model

Ancient and indigenous wisdom has provided critical grounding, concepts, and metaphors to build upon: elders take responsibility for creating a carefully sequenced experience that temporarily removes initiates from ordinary life and provides an opportunity for adolescents to be challenged and stretched to let go of childish ways and learn new skills and attitudes for being a more responsible adult. The last phase of the initiation involves some kind of ceremonial acknowledgment by the adult community that the young person has graduated into his or her new role. In such cultures, this welcoming of the new adults reflects a belief that rites of passage not only support the initiates but also revitalize the adult community as they benefit from the gifts these new members bring.

In 1909, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (2004), the first to use the term "rite of passage," discovered that throughout the world there were commonly three phases associated with adolescent initiation experiences: severance, threshold, and reincorporation.³ The following summary of these phases blends ancient principles and modern thinking that were integrated into my own understanding when first writing about rites of passage in my book *The Soul of Education*.

Phase 1, *severance* (separation and/or cutting away), provides a real or symbolic separation from what is known, familiar, and secure. Initiates are encouraged to experience and express loss as part of this separation, to say good-bye, and to understand that, in loss, they make room for something new to come in. Initiates are also invited to cut away or let go of aspects of the self that no longer serve and to recognize the need to prune away qualities, habits, or old ways of relating that may have been useful in the last stage of life but would hold them back from growing into the next.

Phase 2, the *threshold* or liminal phase, represents the in-between time in which the old identity has been shattered or dissolved, leading to a seemingly interminable period of nothingness, a lack of identity, before the new self begins to form. During this stage, a person can feel disoriented, lost, and confused. The roots of the word *confusion* mean "to pour together," because contradictory aspects of the old and new may intermingle.

Phase 3, *reincorporation*, or reintegration, invites initiates to reenter their worldly lives and communities, bringing the gifts of their visions and newly emerging identities. This may also involve offering a physical gift

to others in the community. Elders create rituals that honor, witness, and incorporate the initiates into the community of adults. And in contemporary models that utilize retreats that evoke a dramatic experience of passage, reentry also prepares youths for the abrupt and often painfully dissonant experience of coming back into ordinary life.⁴

THE SIX PASSAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Before we provide one model of an SBROP that adapts these ancient and modern principles into a phased approach to supporting transitions in school, we will look at the unique issues, challenges, and opportunities associated with each of the six passages of youth. Like the ancient models, we initially began our work with SBROP by developing a curriculum for the passage from adolescence into adulthood. But over the last decade, we have extended this model to support each of the six passages of childhood. In discussing the issues that arise with each developmental transition, we have used the names from the PassageWorks Institute curriculum that specifically address those transitions and have included the voices of teachers, students, and parents who have been impacted by this particular model of SBROP-VIII.

I. First Steps into Elementary School: The Passage into Kindergarten

In kindergarten, students leave behind their first phase of childhood and begin the cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual journey of school life.⁵ Some children are entering school for the first time after being at home with parents or another caretaker, while others have spent time in preschool settings or neighborhood playgroups. Whatever their prior experience, when students enter kindergarten, they must rely on themselves, their peers, and their teachers to keep them safe and provide nurturing support at school. New experiences with academic learning stretch kindergartners' creative and critical thinking capacities as they connect new concepts to prior knowledge and express ideas and questions. This transition benefits from a strong parent component, and SBROP can assist kindergartners and their parents to constructively navigate newly emerging independence.

A teacher in a small, rural, primarily low-income school in Missouri writes about her SBROP: "Whether you came to school from government-funded housing projects or the subdivisions of modern homes with fenced yards, when soul enters the classroom, every heart has equal value." Another teacher notes that, after implementing an SBROP, "students are more connected to one another and more confident as individuals, have

fewer arguments, are adept at resolving conflicts, working in pairs and groups, and have a good basis for knowing and discussing their feelings.”

II. Healthy Transitions out of Elementary School: The Fifth- or Sixth-Grade Passage

Students of this age develop increased self-awareness, become more aware of peer relationships and gender differences, and begin to individuate from their parents and from adults in general. They wonder and worry about how they will deal with the new expectations, routines, responsibilities, and relationships of middle school. In addition to this movement from the known to the unknown, students are rapidly changing physically and physiologically as puberty becomes central to their life experience. Preparing students for this passage involves sharing tools that will help them cope and thrive. By strengthening their sense of who they are and identifying what they personally value, students develop resources to make good choices, say good-bye to what they are leaving behind, become open to the new, and ride the storms of puberty.

“PassageWorks has strengthened our connections to one another while adding a whole new depth to our community,” writes one teacher. Another teacher in a public focus school where students stayed with their class and teacher for the entire elementary school experience comments: “I’ve worked with most of these students for five years now. I thought I knew them so well. But doing PassageWorks with them in their final year, I have come to know them at an entirely new level. As a man and a teacher, this has been a profound experience for me—to come so close to these young people, to be trusted with their hearts, and inspired by their wisdom.”

III. Entering the Culture of Middle School: The Sixth- or Seventh-Grade Transition

As students leave the smaller, more intimate community of elementary schools and enter the larger world of middle school, they are called to develop increased capacities for maturity, responsibility, and self-management. SBROP can support these incoming middle school students to strengthen their individual identities, while fostering meaningful new relationships across social divides. By promoting a culture of kindness and emotional and social competence, schools can mitigate the slide into incivility, insecurity, and peer cruelty common to the middle school years.

A seventh-grade teacher in a Jewish day school in Florida writes: “As the weeks progress, so do the activities. We move into dyads and circles, and the topics become deeper. They reflect the children’s greatest hopes

and fears. Students frequently note that we all share the same things. Students talk to people that they may not usually talk to, and a level of trust has been established."

After his first year of implementing PassageWorks, a sixth-grade teacher wrote: "I have never had kids who treated each other with such kindness. One girl who conveyed in early Councils that she had always been excluded was actually taken under the wings of a group of the 'popular' girls who were determined to protect her and give her an entirely different experience." This kind of behavior in the classroom builds trust and belonging among students, supports a new ground for relationships, and cultivates confidence and resilience.

IV. Completing Middle School: The Eighth- or Ninth-Grade Transition

Students at this age live on a razor's edge between early and late adolescence. As reflected in national dropout statistics, the transition between middle school and high school is one of the most vulnerable times in a student's career, and we lose far too many students to this transition. SBROP programs can mitigate this trend by preparing middle school students for the new environments they will encounter in high school, supporting them in saying good-bye to relationships that aren't working or may no longer be available, cultivating their ability to deal with stress and meet increased academic demands, and providing opportunities for them to adjust to larger, more diverse school populations.

At a time when youths are becoming increasingly aware of differences, they are often unsure how to appreciate or even tolerate these aspects of other students' identities. End-of-middle-school programs can help students understand that differences don't have to be feared and, to the contrary, can add vibrancy and depth to a community in a way that is deeply satisfying.

Finally, SBROP can moderate the tendency for students to "check out" and disengage from school, supporting students to make essential connections between academic content and their personal lives. "PassageWorks allows me to know my students as individual human beings with fears, insecurities, hopes, and dreams," writes an eighth-grade language arts teacher. "In the classroom I can challenge them more, push them further, and move them through the content more easily because I know them and they feel safe with me. They trust me and try harder because they know that I care about them. The best parts of PassageWorks are the moments when I am surprised by the depth of thought, maturity, and selflessness demonstrated in these weekly lessons that I don't always see on a day to day basis."

V. Journey into High School

The transition to high school is fraught with complexity. This phase of adolescence often brings mood swings, antiauthoritarianism, cynicism, divisive clique formation, and intense emotions. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are common as friendships shift, transform, and fall away. Students of this age are caught in a paradox: they seek to know and assert themselves in more depth and uniqueness, while wanting and needing to belong and fit in. And because students at this age frequently lack the strong sense of self required to stand up to a variety of pressures, they are more vulnerable to the allure of risky and self-destructive behaviors.

As freshmen and sophomores differentiate from parents and teachers, they may assume the appearance and posture of young adulthood, though inside they are often emotionally young and extremely vulnerable. A sophomore teacher notes, "These students are a lot younger than they look." Because of their earnest need to look mature, some are reluctant to engage in play, movement, or other creative expression they fear might make them look childish.

At the same time, high school students often begin their quest for deeper meaning and purpose, and they experience a desire to take on more personal and social responsibility. Students come to know their personal passions and long for a way to express these in the world, making this a ripe time for including activities that connect the inner life with the outer world. This is also a time when students yearn for guidance from mature adults and mentors and for safe environments where they can take risks, drop their social masks, and discover and reveal glimpses of their authentic selves.

An advisory teacher speaks to the beauty of these moments she has had with her students: "The whole class, every single student, was really present. They are beginning to really care about each other, even with their differences. They are respecting each other. A group of twenty-five students from such different social groups sitting together at 8:20 in the morning really being present and listening to each other—that is powerful."

VI. Senior Passages

As students prepare to move into college or the world at large, they must cope with the pressure of crucial decisions and anticipate the emotional shock of leaving behind nurturing relationships that have supported them for their entire life of K-12 schooling—parents, siblings, teachers, and friends. On the threshold of the unknown, seniors must let go of relationships not only with others but also with a childhood self and an adolescent identity that will no longer serve them in the adult life that

awaits them. Learning about grief, closure, and healthy good-byes is vital to entering their next phase with resilience and openness.

Seniors often show a longing for wholeness and authenticity—they are fascinated by honest explorations of the hidden realms of consciousness and the unconscious. And, in contrast with earlier adolescence, seniors are often ready to let go of pretense and reclaim the playfulness and creativity of childhood. To thrive, seniors must learn to cope with stress and to make decisions that reflect their authentic values, priorities, and goals.

"This class has provided me with an environment that allows me to clear my head, slow down, and make healthy choices for me," wrote one student about Senior Passages. "It makes me realize just how unique each individual's experience is, and the importance of listening. A senior in high school must make colossal decisions whether he or she is ready or not. The more people can be honest about and aware of their own needs when making these decisions, the healthier the decisions will be."

After experiencing the impact of an SBROP on her family, a mother commented: "We have always been such a tight family. But we just didn't know how to do this good-bye thing. I don't know what we would have done without the course. It really helped us see that we could let go and still remain loving. And for my daughter, the most amazing thing was the way she got so close to students she had judged so harshly those first weeks of the course. She started college with such an open mind, and so much more resilience."

VII. A Seventh Passage: Newcomer Students

In the midst of a life-altering transition, recently immigrated students—or newcomers—often enter the U.S. school system filled with grief, intense yearning for their homeland, confusion about the multiple identities and alliances they are now juggling, and excitement about new opportunities and potentials. Many newcomer students arrive after having experienced significant traumas—from geographic dislocation and family breakups to physical duress, harassment, and violence. And because much of immigration is driven by an economic imperative, adolescent immigrants often feel the dual pressure of performing in school while holding down one or more jobs to help support the family.

When newcomer students are offered the opportunity to honor the people, lands, cultures, and personal identities they have left behind and to reclaim and integrate aspects of their past, they become empowered to move forward with strength and confidence. As one teacher of newcomers wrote about her SBROP: "Students are able to let down their academic guards and assume their authentic personalities. With Transitions

Programs in place, students are more likely to embrace learning and language acquisition for themselves."

SBROP: ONE MODEL THAT SUPPORTS EACH OF THE K-12 TRANSITIONS

In *The Soul of Education*, I mapped a set of spiritual yearnings called the "seven gateways," based on what students described about their experiences, whether or not they have a religious or spiritual tradition. Each of the seven gateways to the inner life of students articulates a different way young people experience deep connection with themselves, others, and the world. Together, these gateways offer both a language and a framework, providing useful guidance about how to structure rites-of-passage work to meet the needs, yearnings, and passions of young people (see figure 5.1). The seventh gateway, Initiation, describes the need for young people to have adults in their lives who can provide a conscious, deliberate and structured process for initiating them into the next phase of their development" (Kessler, 2000).

Building on the principles and practices that are common to initiation in many cultures, I defined a rite of passage as a *structured process, guided by adults*, in which young people are:

- helped to become *conscious about the irrevocable transition* they're in,
- *given tools* for making transitions and separations,
- *initiated* into the new *capacities* required for their next step, and
- *acknowledged* by the community of adults, as well as their peers, for their courage and strength in taking that step.

This definition was originally derived from work with adolescents and formed the basis of the Senior Passage curriculum (see Kessler, 2006).

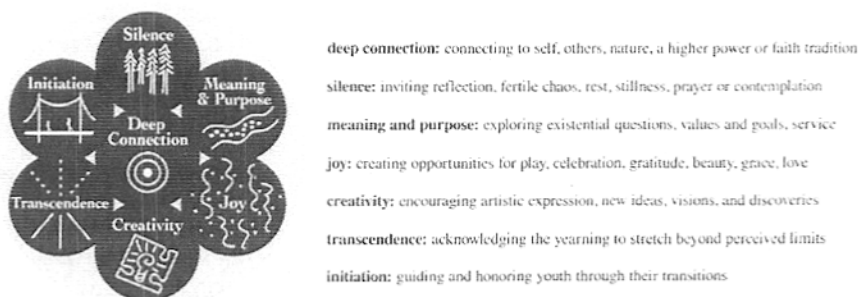


Figure 5.1. The Seven Gateways

Since the formation of the PassageWorks Institute in 2001,⁶ our school-based approach to rites of passage evolved to provide professional development for teachers and a transition curriculum specific to each transition year. We adapted the Senior Passage model to develop the tools, frameworks, and experiences that appropriately support younger children as they enter and leave each phase in the life cycle of schooling.

Here, I want to describe how we have built on and adapted the traditional three-phase rites-of-passage model to serve this need for transition support in each of the six passages in schools. The following outline underlies each of our curricula and describes the themes of each phase and the flow from one phase to another. With appropriate adaptations to developmental needs and capacities, these phases inform our PassageWorks programs at each grade level.

Phase 1: Building Community and Preparing for the Journey

PassageWorks often begins with the metaphor of the *journey* and describes this phase as “building the boat” that will keep us safe as we leave the shore of what has been familiar and comfortable to enter a new phase of our lives and our identities. Students build community with one another, begin to risk the waters of self-knowledge, and connect to people whom they have previously judged as too different from themselves.

Phase 2: Severance or Letting Go

In the words of William Bridges (1980):

Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it. Far from rejecting it, you are likely to do better with the ending if you honor the old life for all that it did for you. It got you this far. It brought you everything you have. But now, although it may be some time before you are comfortable actually doing so, it is time for you to let go of it. (p. 16)⁷

Like Bridges, I have seen throughout my work with youths in transition that it is easier to let go of a phase of life or aspect of our identity if we first give it attention and honor. In this phase, our programs provide time for students to look back at childhood before we invite them to release their childish ways and identities. They reflect on who they were in the past, sift and sort what they cherished about their childhood, and decide what no longer serves them as they go forward. We make the distinction between the “childish”—habits and beliefs that students have outgrown—and “childlike” qualities such as playfulness, creativity, and wonder that may need to be reclaimed after a period of cynicism or trying to act

mature. This phase allows students to move on more consciously and with greater authenticity to the responsibilities and decisions that lie just beyond their current stage of schooling and psychosocial development.

Phase 3: Threshold or Stretching

In this phase, students are encouraged to stretch inwardly and outwardly. They name their personal mysteries; explore larger issues of personal and social responsibility in light of social and global conditions; look forward to the future; set goals that emerge from their authentic values, priorities, and dreams; and identify inner and outer obstacles to and resources for meeting those goals and realizing their dreams.

Phase 4: Reintegration and Completion

This phase fosters consciousness about negative patterns of endings and offers a model for saying good-bye in ways that leave us whole. We live in a culture that tends to avoid good-byes, which often remind us of the “big good-bye”—death. Small losses remind us of big losses. And because adults in this culture have had little support or education in dealing with the grief dimension of closure, they often feel awkward about good-byes. Consequently, students have seen few models for constructive closure. Conscious closure, on the other hand, brings a sense of completion. While there may still be feelings of loss or sadness, the student also feels the fullness and satisfaction of having been part of meaningful relationships. Then, when the time is right, these young people will be able to approach a new situation or relationship with an open heart and mind.

CEREMONIES TO ENHANCE RITES OF PASSAGE

Our curricula often culminate in a ceremony involving parents, faculty, and students, in which the community of elders acknowledge each student personally for his or her growth to new levels of maturity. The faculty version of that ceremony was described in the opening story of this chapter. The following describes our parent model.

Parents are engaged early in the year through lessons from the curriculum in which students are encouraged to interview their parents, guardians, or mentors about their heritage, the origin of their name, early impressions of their child, and so forth. Beyond this, teachers host two evenings for parents in which they follow outlines that define a process for both introduction and closure.

The first is for parents only and provides information and experiential practice with the new tools their children are experiencing during the weekly PassageWorks hour. After a brief introduction, a playful focusing activity, and a dyad for practicing deep listening and authentic speaking, parents are led in a sharing circle or council in which they can share with the group (if they choose) what's working well and what's challenging about parenting their child, who is starting or leaving elementary school, entering middle school or high school, or making the leap to leave school and, often, home behind for college, work, or the military. Parents are delighted to have a forum to express these feelings and learn from each other's wisdom.

The second evening, which comes at the end of the semester, is the ceremony that marks the completion of one stage and the student's passage into the next step of development. During the culminating ceremony, we hold a Witness Council. Students, witnessed by parents, sit in an inside circle with their teacher and speak about how they feel about taking this next step. After the students finish sharing, a few parents are asked to speak about what they just witnessed. From fifth-grade parents, we often hear statements like: "I can't believe these kids are so articulate" or "I can't believe that my son is ready—he's really ready. He couldn't sleep at the beginning of fifth grade."

Two parents of seniors captured what so many parents feel at this moment: "I feel hope for the future for the first time," said one father jumping up to speak. "I'm a coach, I work with young people all the time, but I never get to hear their innermost thoughts. I can't believe how articulate and wise these kids are!" "I knew my son was dealing with these feelings, even though he's reluctant to tell us sometimes," said a mother. "But listening to the same feelings coming from so many students, it helps me understand and appreciate my own son so much better."

At this point in the ceremony, we ask the parents to close their eyes and remember a precious moment when their son or daughter was two or three years old, focusing intently on that image in their minds. Next they open their eyes and look at their son or daughter and then publicly, in front of the whole community, acknowledge the growth that they have seen.

"You make me so proud," said one fifth grader's father to his son as the circles of students and parents looked on. "What I'm remembering is, you're two years old, maybe one and a half. You're in my arms and you're drawing on the condensation on the window, and I said, 'What are you making?' You said, 'I'm making an anaconda which is evaporating into a bird.'" The son and the whole group erupted into warm laughter as the father made big flapping gestures with his arms. "I could picture these little bits of water evaporating up into birds. You're so creative and so articulate, and you have such a beautiful heart."

In the senior-parent ceremonies, the tears flow from the mothers and often from the daughters, with many parents and students moved by the depth of feeling and healing as parents seize this rare opportunity to publicly honor their own child. When the seniors themselves are asked to speak about what it is like to witness this, they share the new respect they feel for adults as they witness their honesty, their caring, and the struggle to be a good parent and to let go.

In many of the fifth-grade ceremonies I have witnessed, tears flow from fathers and sons, as well. Fathers and sons embrace. And the eleven-year-olds, when asked to witness what they have just seen, make comments like, "It is so interesting to see adults become so emotional!" or "I have been with these friends for five years and I thought I really knew them, but I have learned so much more when I listen to the people who live with them twenty-four hours a day."

In one eighth-grade parent ceremony, I was most struck by a young girl who said, "I always thought my parents would think of me like I do when I think of the worst of me. But I was amazed today to see all the gifts they see in me and the continuity they see in who I really am ever since I was little." I learned that this girl went on to become a leader during her high school years.

Each time I have led or witnessed a parent-honoring ceremony at the different transitions, I have felt that these students have just been surrounded by the strongest shield of protection possible for this next phase of their journey. I believe that beginning a new school, a new phase of life, a new social group, or a new identity with the explicit knowledge that your parents love, respect, know, and believe in who you are brings a quality of resilience, a willingness to resist the lure of risk and to listen to and heed the emerging guidance of your authentic self.

There is much to be gained in the experience and learning that comes just from a journey with students and teachers in school through a rites-of-passage curriculum. But when we can truly heed the wisdom of reincorporation by including parents, guardians, and other key adult mentors in honoring the young as they take these courageous steps, we protect our children so much more fully, and we inspire hope, renewal, and a new kind of responsibility as elders in the adult community.

CONCLUSION

Change can happen at any time, but transition comes along when one chapter of your life is over and another is waiting in the wings to make its entrance. . . . You simply cannot imagine a new chapter, but the fact is that letting go of one chapter in your life initiates the transition that concludes by beginning another chapter. (Bridges, 1980, p. 91)

Passages—major transitions—come at many points in the life cycle. Puberty, high school and college graduations, marriage, parenthood, midlife, old age, and death are what usually come to mind. I have been called at various times in my life to work with all of these turning points; I have taught workshops on the initiation into mothering and on the midlife quest and have written about the marriage journey. I have navigated my own separation, divorce, and renewal, am undergoing a rite of passage through cancer, and am now in the midst of a personal initiation into elderhood. I have raised three sons to adulthood and supported the birth of two grandsons and the journey of two daughters-in-law who transitioned from cultures that are vastly different from that of our family.

The opportunity to work with SBROP felt like a divine calling when it came in the mid-1980s. Since then, I have watched parents, students, and faculty impacted by simple but transformative rites-of-passage experiences. Through the collaboration and wisdom of thousands of teachers, students, and colleagues throughout the country, an SBROP model has emerged that can serve students across the spectrum of grades and schools. This rich learning led me and a group of dedicated colleagues to found the PassageWorks Institute—an organization dedicated to supporting students through critical life transitions and to reigniting the passion for teaching and mentoring within faculty.

It is my greatest intention that all students have access to the deep wisdom and transformative experiences embedded in rites-of-passage models. I believe that such work will serve not only to transform the lives of individuals but also to support the birth of a sustainable global culture at a time when our planet so desperately needs the wisdom, fire, insight, and responsibility of awakened youth and of empowered elders.

NOTES

I am deeply grateful for the collaboration of Laura Weaver, my partner in curriculum writing and implementation, and in extending the school-based rites of passage model from a program for high school seniors to a set of programs that support each transition in the “six passages of childhood.” While the narrative voice is usually singular because of my engagement for over twenty years in the development of the core model that is the foundation of this story, Laura’s contribution has been vital to reaching the scope and refinement of this chapter.

1. The Mysteries Program and the Senior Passages program at the Crossroads School in Santa Monica, California, was originally created by Jack Zimmerman, then president of the Ojai Foundation, in partnership with Maureen Murdock and Ruthann Saphier. I am deeply grateful for their genius in framing a model that I was privileged to grow, with the input of many other colleagues over the years, into an approach to SBROP that could serve other transitions as well.

2. "Stressful events, such as school transition, different stages of acculturation, and problems at home, may make students more vulnerable to experiment with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs" (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005, p. 31).
3. Others have demonstrated that this universal model is derived primarily from initiation practices for boys. The work of Carol Gilligan has certainly sensitized us to the need to look at developmental models with an eye toward gender differences. I have given much thought to this complex task in regard to rites of passage, but it goes beyond the scope of this chapter.
4. It is a common pattern for schools that hold a senior retreat to save the retreat for the last week of school. Students may have a powerful experience, but then are left on their own with no support to integrate the experience and the shock of return. Similarly, wilderness rites of passage often provide no support for reincorporation once the student returns home.
5. "Just as the body of the child will not grow if it is not fed, and the mind will not grow if it is not stimulated, a child's inner life must be nourished to develop" (Kessler, 2000, p. x). By "inner life" or "spiritual development," PassageWorks refers to that essential aspect of human nature that yearns for deep connection, grapples with questions of awe and wonder, and seeks a sense of genuine self-expression.
6. The PassageWorks Institute was founded in 2001 by myself and my colleagues to nourish the inner life of students through school-based rites of passage programs. See www.passageworks.org for more information.
7. William Bridges, listed by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the top ten executive development presenters in America, has specialized in writing about transitions.

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