

Rites of Passage

As it is in nature, our lives are characterised by seasonal change. We seemingly drift through cycles of growth and hibernation marked by milestone 'firsts': kiss, job, marriage, child, depression, disease... Yet in the frenetic pace of our goal-driven urban society, we seldom pause to reflect on the significance of these events upon which our lives pivot.

In ancient cultures, the importance of marking the movement from one season (social role) to another was recognised and celebrated – the Xhosa Inkwenkwe goes to the bush to contemplate the coming of manhood; the dying Native American goes to the Death Lodge to prepare for his/her final task of the life journey. Without devoting a special time to take cognisance of what we have passed and what lies before us, we run the risk of overlooking the opportunities for inner growth, and consequently fail to achieve our highest potential. Without marking these important thresholds in meaningful ways, they fade into the fabric of our lives.

In the natural world we find mirrored the seasons and cycles of life – the beginning and end and beginning again. A journey up a mountain may form a metaphor for life's passage, the wide clear horizons allowing the heart to open, winter followed by the buds of spring. Going out into nature is also going in. When this journey inward is taken at a time of transition in a person's life it is often useful to recognise the steps of change to enhance and clarify growth. The wilderness 'rites of passage experience', guided by Elder role models, uses this context of the wilderness to shed light on internal issues and transformation.

A Rites of Passage process traditionally contains 4 distinct phases: a time of severance, to acknowledge the movement away from the past and preparation for the changes ahead; a threshold ritual; an incorporation process in which one is mentored and guided; and, with one's new insight, a return back to one's community.

In a country so abundant with wild places, few South Africans have access to them. Growing up in a violent society such as ours, with adulthood often representing little to hope for, is an immense challenge for young people. Gangs – which provide belonging and recognition, status and power - offer their own kind of passage rites. Our youth desperately need alternative opportunities to help them make sense of the transition out of childhood and guide them into a responsible future.

Elements of the ancient rites of passage are key ingredients of Educo Africa programmes. The challenge to discover and recognise one's strengths and weaknesses, the time for solitude and reflection to contemplate one's life path, the mirroring back of one's growth and learnings, and assistance to transfer that in meaningful ways to lives back home, are all integral to our work and the health of our society.

Source: Coleridge Daniels, and Steven Foster & Meredith Little (School of Lost Borders, USA)