

Trying to Come of Age in America

How do we know when we are grown-up?

by RALPH KEYES



ARTHUR TRESS/WOODFIN CAMP

I recently asked friends in different parts of the country about their puberty rites: the moment when they most clearly felt on the way to adulthood.

Leaving home was the "rite" mentioned most often. For one man, this converged with an important recognition of his manhood—being solicited to buy cigarettes, razor blades, and subscriptions to men's magazines on the cafeteria line at college. Getting a driver's license also felt important to most (*not* getting a license for a year after eligibility was recalled in one case as a devastating anti-rite), and working at a first "real" job. Other people mentioned having their braces removed, stepping up from a .22-caliber rifle to a .30-.30, and nearly getting expelled from high school ("It gets you thinking").

Then there's sex. "If there's any doubt left in your mind that you're no longer five years old," explained a 30-year-old mother about losing her virginity at 19, "that takes care of it." One woman ritualized this moment further by later treating

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herself to a patty melt at Denny's. To this day, she says, the flavor of medium-rare hamburger with melted cheese on rye always mingles deliciously with sex in her mind.

Several things stood out in my informal poll. There were nearly as many rites remembered as there were memories. American puberty rites are not commonly shared. Also, such official rites as graduation from high school or religious confirmation were notable for their absence. Finally, the ages at which people said they felt the transition to adulthood varied from six to infinity. "I don't think I ever had one," said a middle-aged minister of his puberty ritual. "I'm still an adolescent."

This sentiment was surprisingly common. It's one I've felt myself. Just when *does* one stop being a child in America? And how do you know?

A 35-year-old psychiatrist told me he daily confronts his young clients' struggles to become adult—their clinging to one another, their use of sex as ritual, their fear of leaving home even into their thirties. And he sympathizes, because this psychiatrist isn't sure himself if he's

turned the corner to adulthood. On one hand, he felt the beginnings at age six, when he realized that he would have to provide for himself emotionally what his family couldn't. There was a bar mitzvah at 13, but that felt empty. And leaving home for college didn't feel transitional because he'd already left in spirit. Marriage at 26 felt more important, and then becoming a doctor. But none of these occasions seemed basically adult-inducing. The worst part, he told me, is continuing to feel stuck on a childish rejection of his family. The psychiatrist would like to balance this relationship with more positive feelings, but isn't sure how to do it. "I wonder how you could ritualize that?" was his parting thought.

Other cultures do. An important part of puberty rites among "primitive" peoples is the ceremonial acceptance, rejection, and reconciliation with symbolic parents. Tribal elders may be assigned as surrogate parents to those being initiated. After sharing a feast with these "fathers," Hopi boys tear off the men's clothes, then roll them about on the ground contemptuously. Later both groups join with tribal priests over a communal pipe of reconciliation.

In addition to creating a bond between young and old, such rituals let initiates know without ambiguity that they've become adult. Not all the rituals are benign. Body-scarring, isolation during first menstruation, and running gauntlets of club-swinging men are common rites of passage. Such ceremonies may be painful. Most rites of passage are traumatic. But what the ritualization of manhood or womanhood does is provide a clear breaking point. Those who enter the occasion as children leave it as adults. By definition. Their culture has told them without a doubt.

Our own culture never does anything of the kind. At best, bureaucratic rites such as passing a driver's test or buying a first legal drink *infer* that one has left childhood behind. But one's actual status is still rather vague. You can vote long before you can buy a drink in most states. And there's always the danger of sliding back—entering the army after college, say, and feeling back in high school.

But simply because we provide no clear, universal rites of passage doesn't mean we provide none at all. To the contrary, adolescence in America is filled with rites. As anthropologist George Spindler points out, high school itself has become "an extended puberty rite." More precisely, what high school has become is a series of endless micro-rites, from learning secret locker combinations through initiation into clubs of all kinds and the

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daily endurance of the hallway gauntlet.

But there are fundamental differences between such rites and the classic ones. In the first place, American rites of high school are created, administered, and sustained by peers. As a result, the roles modeled for us as teenagers are not adult roles but those of fellow children. And forever after, deep inside a private heart, one may yearn to be not a warrior or dancer but a quarterback or cheerleader.

Another important difference between American rites and actual rites of passage is the absence of moments of controlled risk, even danger, created by isolation, fasting, the hunt. Such risks are central to the experience because a sense of being tested is so important at this time of life. Adulthood should be earned. In America we're left to create our own risks with the help of drugs, or goods to be shoplifted and cars to be raced. Usually it takes years to realize what we were up to, the testing.

The worst part of our do-it-yourself rites is that they rarely feel passed.

Though traumatizing, the reward for endurance of formal rites of passage is admission into the culture. Our informal rites tend more to exclusion. It's the rare high school graduate who recalls feeling included after taking part in trials by peer. Painfully more common is the memory of rejection.

Valuable as it might be to formally ritualize adulthood in America, we won't. Our culture is simply too diverse. But we can improve the rites we have. More tests should be provided for adolescents in desperate need of some; one father takes his kids on harrowing wilderness trips for just this purpose. We can enhance rather than diminish the pomp of graduation or religious ceremonies. And most important, we can elevate, not lower, the level of involvement adults have with teenagers. One form of wisdom says kids need to be left alone as they endure adolescence. Often they say this themselves. Don't believe it. The involvement of secure adults who haven't forgotten their own adolescence and who can take a little abuse is the single element most lacking in our muddled attempts to help children become adults.