

***Coming of Age the RITE Way:  
Youth & Community Development through Rites of Passage***<sup>©1</sup>

Reflections on The Next Best Story That May Never Happen

By David G. Blumenkrantz

*We occasionally stumble over the truth but  
most of us pick ourselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.*

Winston Churchill

There is one word that characterizes community-oriented rites of passage. *Reciprocity*. It recognizes and responds to the ongoing debate between evolutionary biologists over their differing views on the single most important entity of our species. Is it the individual or the community?

One idea holds that the single most important entity in the human species is the individual. The other idea is that the community is the single most important entity of our species. Each side presents reasonable arguments, which inform and guide important decisions that impact all of our lives. For example, if one believes that the individual is the most important unit in our species then our educational system and youth development programs would be designed to focus on individual development and achievement, which it does. Within the individual all things are possible. If, on the other hand, community is the most important unit in our species our educational system and youth development approaches would be oriented to building individual capacity to collaborate and function well within a group, where all things are possible (Wilson 2013). Hence, we call our work “youth and community development through rites of passage.”

**“Kasserian Ingera?”**

This is the greeting exchanged between members of the famed Masai tribe of East Africa. It means, “And, how are the children?” This reflects a consciousness of connection. How others are doing, especially children, is directly related to how an individual is doing. It points to the difference between a cultural consciousness where the community is the most important and one where the individual is the most important. Members of an individual-oriented culture greet each other by saying “How are you

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<sup>1</sup> © D.G. Blumenkrantz. The majority of content was extracted from “Coming of Age the *RITE* Way: Youth & Community Development through Rites of Passage,” Oxford University Press (2016) and *The Rite Of Passage Experience* © ROPE® *Guide for Promoting Youth & Community Maturation & Health, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, Hummingbird Press (2016).

doing?” as if the individual is the only one that matters and in relationship with no one except themselves.  
(p. 51).

Community oriented rites of passage is distinguished from community-based rites of passage in its intention to impact both the individual and the community. It also recognizes and puts into practice reciprocity, not only between the individual and community, but the individual’s family, ancestors/culture, Spirit, nature and the Universe in what I’ve referred to as the “initiatory constellation.” Recently rites of passage programs have adopted the moniker “community-based” to connote the creation of a cohesive group as a temporary container for the initiatory process to occur. They are not based in the community in which the child lives and comes of age. They do not attend to a child’s own “life-ways” – the natural setting in which the child lives, and they do not attend to the health and adaption of a community as was the case with traditional authentic rites of passage. They are not a community’s story for helping children come of age.

### **A Story is Remembered**

“As the new story emerges, it incorporates individual and community resources, cultural symbols, and practices and assimilates the spirit of their place with design features that are present in (but do not disrespect or appropriate) other culture’s ancestors or traditions. This new story becomes their story. It is their *initiatory constellation*. There are powerful distinctions between adopting someone else’s story, like those told as “evidence-based” programs and remembering one’s own story. When you gaze up to the heavens and see your own constellation you are connected with the Universe in ways that can be transforming. It all begins by sharing a story and a conversation. When we get our story *rite* we get our future right.” (p. 236).

Some say that: “When we get our story wrong, we get our future wrong” (Korten 2015). If children are indeed our future, then the stories about how we educate and help them come of age are the most important stories we need to get right. When we get that story wrong our future will certainly be wrong. Our present reality is the future produced by yesterday’s story of how we educated and helped our children come of age.

Youth & community development through rites of passage is a unifying story for a whole system’s approach that recognizes the interconnectedness between all things. Transmitting a consciousness of interdependency to our children is not an intellectual exercise but one that is manifested in practice. One of our central beliefs has always been: “It takes a whole child to raise a village.”

It is in this process of raising a *whole child* within a community-organizing story of rites of passage characterized by a consciousness that all things are connected that groups of people within a variety of settings, i.e. schools, communities, cultural and civic organizations, etc, can come together to raise their children. It is virtually impossible to convey a sense of interconnectedness when isolated programs, organized as independent *silos* offer youth development and educational programs to raise children. More and more this has led to the burgeoning growth of the “child industrial complex” where *commerce* has replaced *caring* for each other in authentic relationships. The ways people had normally responded to friends and family in need have been made into a *commodity* to sell a service rather than an opportunity to strengthen community. I’ve articulated this in [The Busyness of Raising Children](#) (March 2014).

### **We Don't Lead We Listen**

For years we’ve been asked: “How do you get an entire community to do rites of passage? Back in the early 1980s and ‘90s when we began the answer was: “We almost never lead with rites of passage unless asked.” Remember, back then very few people were talking about rites of passage, it was rarely seen in the literature or as a part of community practice.

We asked; “What’s the story?” What are you concerned about? What are you presently doing to educate and help children come of age? We listened. Our work has always been framed as a dance between art and science. In conversation we discovered together with people, youth and adults, what was going on in their lives that concerned them. In response to the question: “What’s the story?” people revealed their greatest fears, concerns, hopes and dreams for their children and community. We listened very carefully to the content of their caring, sensed deeply their emotions, physical expressions and language to describe their world. Respect for people and possibilities were central conditions manifest in having very little preconceived conditions about what their story would reveal or what we were going to be doing together.

Given that our only “tool” **was not** just rites of passage, but an entire smorgasbord of options to respond to their reply to the questions we were open to the possibilities. In many cases we helped communities engage in developmental assets or character education, social-emotional learning or building resiliency. We co-created alternative schools and treatment centers. In all of these we still were able to deploy strategies aligned with our conception of initiation and community-oriented rites of passage but without specific language or reference to rites of passage.

Leading with only one approach or program is akin to a therapist saying: “Hi I’m Dr. So & So and we’re going to be engaged in *psychodynamic psychotherapy* to treat your condition. Now, what did you say your name was and what brings you in today?” Typically, a therapist knows dozens of different therapeutic techniques, but seldom talks about the strategies to be deployed in their caring supportive relationships. They listen and carefully combine different techniques that meet the unique story of the individual. There is generally no one-way to be in a genuine caring relationship that is exclusively for the benefit of someone else. There are an over abundance of one-way approaches that are of benefit to commerce and the purveyor’s self-interest.

### **The Story Put Into Action<sup>2</sup>**

*Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*

Arthur C. Clarke (1917- 2008)

Author: 2001 A Space Odyssey

Thus far we’ve been talking about rites of passage as a story. Theories are stories, too. They are enacted through technologies in programs, experiments or procedures that seek a desired outcome within the theme of the story. Alcoholics Anonymous - AA is a story that is enacted through a group process and supports that help individuals in recovery. It recognizes the potency of the group as an agent of change. The term “social capital” has been used to name the value placed on a group of people’s capacity to solve problems and nourish life.

Youth & community development through rites of passage is also a theory that has a technology. It is a dynamic integrative design process that has the potential to weave together all existing educational pedagogies and youth development designs. Through the common language and experience of initiation and rites of passage youth and adults have an ability to communicate at deeper levels and engage in more authentic ways of being human together.

One of the first “technologies” we introduce is called the *Trinity of Inquiry*. It uses the first three elements of the 20 elements in the architectural structure for youth & community development through rites of passage. Along with traditional community organizing technologies of “asset mapping (for Rites of Passage) and force field analysis the *Trinity* is also used to explore if and how all of the other 17 elements are present. If

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<sup>2</sup> From *The Rite Of Passage Experience*® ROPE® *Guide for Promoting Youth & Community Maturation & Health 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (2016)*.

they are present, then what is their relationship to each other and relative strength (force field analysis)? If they don't exist where might something similar already be present and available to use in the process of building a community's rite of passage experience process (asset mapping)? Use of the *Trinity of Inquiry* is designed to stimulate conversations among groups of people in communities about questions that matter related to educating and helping children come of age. More recently large group conversation methods like World Café and Appreciative Inquiry have informed and guided community conversations. In the past people hosted a party where food, music and festivities strengthened the bonds between people and stimulated new ideas that were harvested to benefit the health of a community and their children. The *Trinity* method is also able to help people navigate conversations that occur following some kind of local, national or world- wide situation or tragedy.

### **The Key is to Just Know!**

One cannot enter into the *field* of youth and community development without fluency in the language of rites of passage. Even more important is a thorough understanding of psychology, especially community psychology, organizational leadership, public health, education, human and community development. With understanding in diverse disciplines it is usually not difficult to link a strand from one story about a situation in question or of concern, i.e. gangs, teen pregnancy, incivility, bullying, substance abuse, etc. to the absence of initiation and community-oriented rites of passage or youth creating their own inadequate and health compromising rites of passage. One would not go into the "field" without a thorough understanding of the terrain and clear navigational aids.

In the field of community psychology one can cultivate and harvest a language that links experiences to meaning for understanding about a psychological sense of community. The *psychological sense of community* (PSOC) is a central element in a community psychology. One of its founders, [Seymour Sarason](#), also a founding board member of the Center for Youth & Community, long time mentor and friend defined it as:

"...the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully a part of a larger collectivity; the sense that although there may be conflict between the needs of the individual and the collectivity, or among different groups in the collectivity, these conflicts must be resolved in a way that does not destroy the psychological sense of community; the sense that there is a network of and structure to relationships that strengthens rather than dilutes feelings of belonging," (Sarason 1974, p. 41).

Understanding the central elements in a psychological sense of community guide our efforts in a community-oriented rites of passage. Here's a brief glimpse into the

PSOC territory. A sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together underscore four distinct components in their definition of a psychological sense of community: *membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional experience or connection*. It is through a rite of passage that an individual becomes a member of a group. Transmitting values and knowledge that inform individuals about their responsibility and rights as members of a group is essential.

### **Getting the Lay of the Land** **A Trinity of Inquiry**

One of the beauties and many blessing in my 28-year relationship with Seymour Sarason was his frank clear and no nonsense language. He always used to say to me: “Now look David: You can’t possibly know what the hell is going on in any setting unless you case the joint. You’ve got to get the lay of the land before opening your mouth.”

Thus, was born the “Trinity of Inquiry.” The “Trinity of Inquiry” is used primarily to systematically focus attention on the current conditions in a setting, people’s concerns and each of the other 17 elements in the architectural structure for youth & community development through rites of passage<sup>3</sup>.

Here’s a bit more of the story about the *Trinity of Inquiry* put into practice in the first section of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Rite Of Passage Experience*® *ROPE*® *Guide for Promoting Youth & Community Maturation & Health* – that focuses on the process and technology of community-organizing through a unifying story of rites of passage. More questions and detail are found in the Guide.

**#1. What’s the story?** This is the first element in our narrative on change.

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<sup>3</sup> More information on the 20 elements can be found in *Coming of Age the RITE Way*. By themselves they are perhaps interesting and by many accounts the accurate cataloguing of essential elements in rites of passage. However, they are by no means a formula, or can stand alone without substantial orientation and experience with the confluence of the art & science in the practice of community-oriented rites of passage.

All change is local – it begins in the hearts and minds of those who ask a question. And, a question almost always invites a story.

When we get our story wrong we get our future wrong.

When we get the story of educating and helping our children come of age wrong we indeed get our future wrong. Look at what is going on in the world today. Might that be a result of getting the story of educating and helping our children come of age wrong over the past generation(s)?

Thinking about the best questions that matter related to a particular issue always result from conversations within a community. The questions refine the issues in ways that are respectful of and integrate the nuances of culture, community and place.

Here are some areas of questioning:

1. What is our story related to education of our children and helping them come of age? What are we doing?
2. What is our philosophy and approach?
3. What are the different programs and opportunities available to all our children?
4. Do all our children have access to these opportunities?
5. What are the roadblocks and challenges that keep our children from engaging in the opportunities they need to come of age well?
6. What would it look like when all our children have come of age well?

More specific inquiry might be focused on:

- a. What should we do about violence in our society?
- b. What can we do about teenage drug and alcohol use?
- c. What can we do about bullying?
- d. How can we protect our children?
- e. How are all problems confronting our children and us related?
- f. What are the really important question(s) that can help us frame our inquiry?
- g. What would we be doing when institutions mattered in the lives of children were reframed as places of initiation and rites of passage?

Whatever the circumstance or inquiry there is always an invitation to tell a story. We love to tell and hear stories. Every time we think about change we are inviting a story. We've found that under these designs everyone's story eventually touches on themes, patterns, symbols or issues that can be linked to initiation and rites of passage. When seen through the lens of the 20 elements, several central questions emerge:

*What would we be doing when we adopt the framework of youth & community development through rites of passage in our community?*

*And, What would we be doing when institutions that mattered in the lives of our children were reframed as places of initiation and rites of passage?*

The second question asks about the values and ethics that underlie the story. It also addressed the values and ethics that result from the enactment of the story in programs.

**#2. What are the values and ethics** in the story as enacted in our programs, interventions, design strategies and services? How have they shaped our attitudes?

What are the values and ethics that result from the enactment of the story in programs, interventions, design strategies, and services?

Stories provide descriptions of events. Embedded in the story are our values and ethics. Our attitudes color the story with character and give it life. Stories frequently convey guidepost for how to understand reality and live in accordance with customs and in service to others and the planet.

Think of the Golden Rule story:

*One should treat others, as one would like others to treat oneself.*

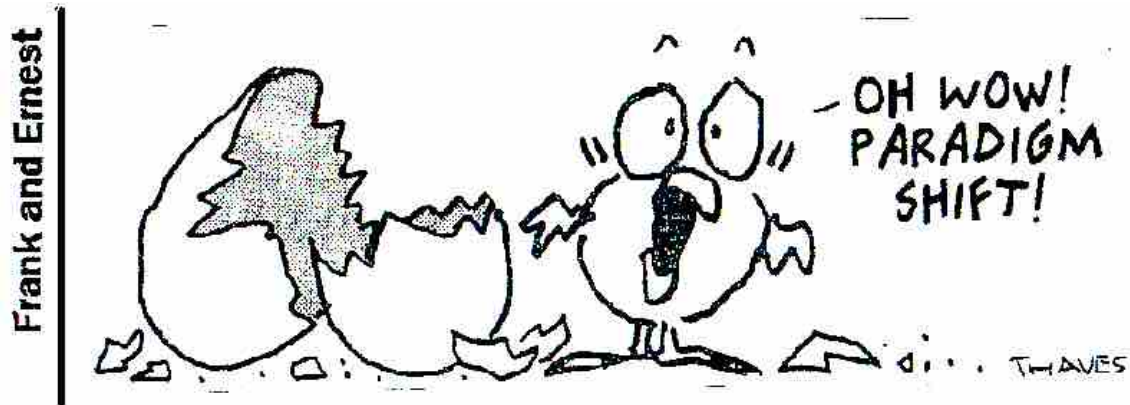
Values of altruism & empathy are embedded in this story. The outcomes expected are kindness & compassion that nourishes all life.

1. What are the values and ethics that underlie our present policies on education and child development?
2. What do we think is important? Is this the right story for us?
3. Whose values and ethics are the central force behind these policies and programs?
4. What are the outcomes of our values and ethics in our policies and practices in education and helping our children come of age?
5. How are these values manifested in the behavior of our children in ways that nourish life in communities, nature and our world?
6. What would our children be doing to deepen their sense of altruism, empathy and other values that nourish life?



Now we get to the juicy part. The place where we come to decide. Is this the right story for us? How has the story been working to help us achieve our desired outcomes?

The third part of the Trinity of Inquiry is: Paradigm Shift



**#3. Paradigm shift** – We explore the present situation – by asking: What’s the Story? After assessing the values and ethics underlying the story and those resulting in behaviors and actions from enacting the story in our policies and programs we need to make a decision.

“Is what we are doing working? Is our story working?”

“Are the outcomes for our children’s behavior and our community the best we can do?”

Now we are compelled to accept the possibility that changing views –a paradigm shift – might be necessary.

This is challenging. Paradigms are harder than you think to change. Remember that; “Just say NO!” was the paradigm for preventing teenage drug and alcohol use in the early ‘80’s. How did that work? Did we need a change? Yes! What about a paradigm shift to “Just say KNOW!”

Here are some points for inquiry:

1. Given the values, ethics & attitudes revealed in our story what is our view – our paradigm of the way we educate and help our children come of age?
2. How has this informed and guided our actions?

3. What are our present paradigms, our beliefs, theories, approaches? (Make lists & prioritize)
4. What are our desired outcomes? (List – academic achievement, altruism, compassion, etc. – prioritize).
5. What is the proof that our present paradigm(s) and programs are working for us?
6. Are we achieving the outcomes we desire that nourish life for all?
7. What would convince us that our paradigm is not working for us?
8. What conditions exist that would keep us locked into the present paradigm?
9. What are the risks in changing our paradigm and trying something new?
10. What could happen if we try (insert new idea)?”
11. What could happen if we keep doing the same things?

What is your story? What brings you into this conversation at this time? And, how can we weave our stories together, especially related to rites of passage, in ways that create a beautiful and strong foundation for the emergence of our collective rite of passage experience story?

Here is where we introduce the *technologies nestled in tradition* – TNT of asset mapping for rites of passage and force field analysis to begin identifying what is already in the field that can be integrated into rites of passage. And, what are the barriers and opportunities to integrating existing resources and challenges and pathways to develop designs for integrating the essential elements in their community-oriented rites of passage?

### **Rites of Passage within Contemporary Youth Development**

A true paradigm shift presents considerable challenges and is very disorienting. One typically responded to with confusion, anxiety and anger and great reluctance to stretch their imagination to consider the possibilities of a dramatically different way of thinking and perceiving the world. It can really shake an individual to their core and they are likely to grasp tightly to what is familiar and they've accepted as truth. Keeping in mind Churchill's opening remarks about: *stumble over the truth but and most of the time pick ourselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.*

Gradually immersing people in the language and orientation of rites of passage through strong links to contemporary science and practices presents a safe passageway with familiar navigational aids and language. We introduce community members to a concept of youth development that involves connecting and enhancing environments and building competencies, which promotes the positive development of children and youth

# THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL<sup>♥</sup>

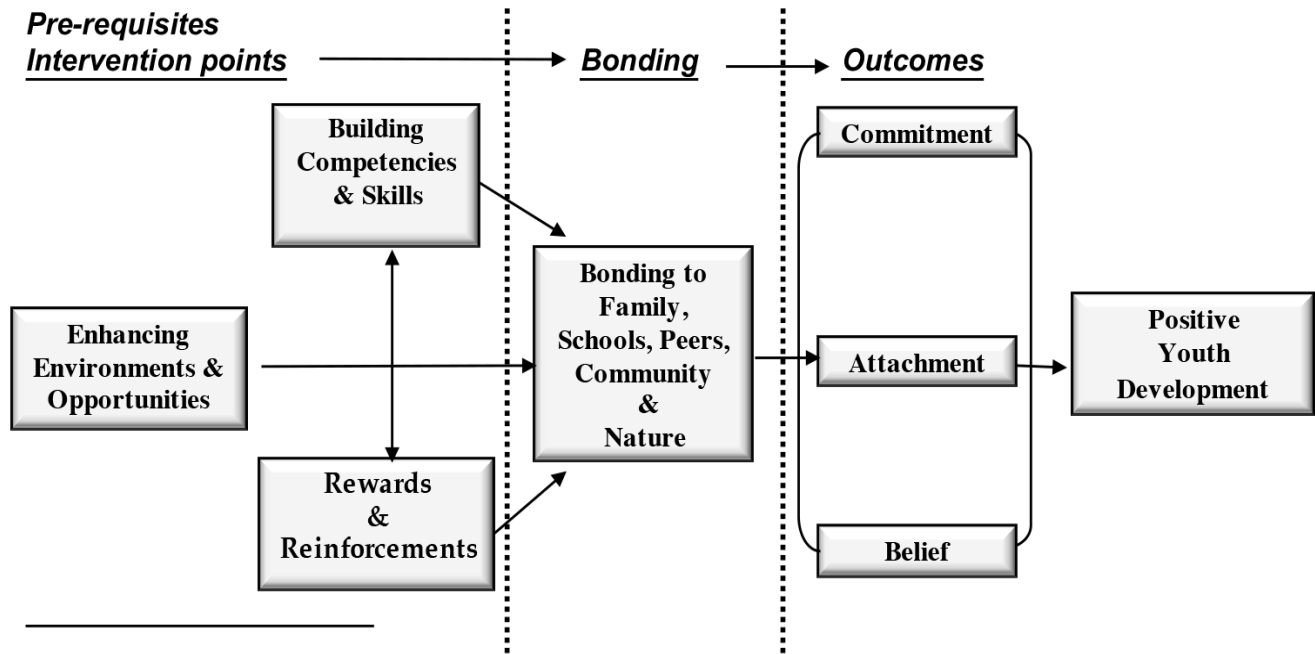
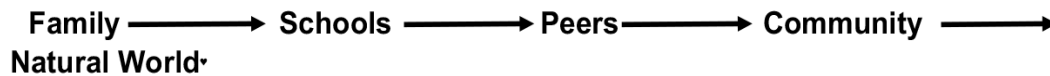
Drs. J. David Hawkins and Richard Catalano at the University of Washington

Youth development involves **connecting** and **enhancing** environments and building competencies, which promote the positive development of children and youth in their families, in their schools, among their peers in their community and with a strong connection to the natural world. Youth come of age through initiation into these environments, which are connected, non-sequentially, within a systems framework that promotes whole human beings and strong, resilient and adaptive communities.

Guided by the 20 elements in the architectural structure for youth & community development through rites of passage and within an “emergent design” process activities intensify focus on particular values, attitudes and competencies expected within each environment. Demonstrations of competencies, family and community celebrations periodically mark special times in a child’s development.

Designs include: Initiation of Scholars<sup>®</sup> - Initiation into Play – Parent/Child change of status - Giving back & Community Service – Therapy as Initiation and more.

**Impact of major systems/environments on child development = *Initiation opportunities.***



<sup>♥</sup> Adapted and modified for Youth & Community Development through Rites-of Passage by: D.G.Blumenkrantz, Ph.D.,1986

in their families, in their schools, among their peers, and in their community and with a strong connection to the natural world. Youth come of age through initiation into these environments, which are connected, non-sequentially, within a systems framework that promotes whole human beings and strong, resilient, and adaptive communities. Just as in youth development there is no single point or experience where a child miraculously becomes an adult, no matter what parents/guardians and their community wish. Rather, it is a gradual process over many years and within different environments.

Demonstrations of competencies within each environment, family and community celebrations periodically mark special times in a child's development. Welcoming a child into another stage of development within each environment provides incentive for continued positive youth development. This is articulated in a well-documented and accepted approach called the "Social Development Model of Youth Development (see chart). We also achieved great support from the widely accepted approach of [developmental assets](#). These two stories, along with recent emphasis on social-emotional learning, character education, resiliency, compassion and school climate offered approaches that were aligned with a community-oriented rite of passage. This strengthens a community-oriented rite of passage to become a [unifying story](#) that ties all a community's assets and resources together in a whole system's approach to education and youth development.

Perhaps most significant in the design and community organizing process were frequent "rite of passage experiences" as part of people's exposure to rites of passage for learning key concepts and processes. One of the 20 elements is: "you can only bring someone as far as you've been yourself." Adults in a community, serving as elders in the initiatory process must experience similar initiatory designs as their children. These shared emotional initiatory experiences were also intended to usher participants across the threshold of a changing paradigm, helping them to separate from past beliefs about education, youth development, and a single-solution silo orientation. There were intentionally initiated into new ways of thinking about education and youth development and fortified their capacity to put these new ways into practice.

It also was designed to accelerate and strengthen relationships in ways that would serve to unify and mobilize participants—within their own setting and respectful of each other's culture in learning community. We referred to these as -"laboratories of grace" - a safe place to share lessons learned, helping to adapt and enhance the process of initiation and prepare and engage their community in their rite of passage story. This is perhaps the most distinguishing and potent part of the design strategy. While many professionals

believe that community engagement, mobilization and collaboration are important (Wolff 2010) few designs actual focus on impacting the conditions in which authentic collaboration is possible through strengthening genuine relationships. This is also the case with the current belief in the importance in spirituality as a key element in community interventions.

### **From Policy to Practice A Call to Action**

All change is local. It begins in the heart and is adapted at the level of the mind. The communion of heart, mind, and spirit manifests change out in the world. I have been discussing initiation and rites of passage as a framework for organizing change. It focuses on and fosters change within individuals, who can become agents for change and galvanize committed actions within groups and large systems. Initiating individuals to a consciousness of connection and interrelatedness in a living system is prerequisite to large- order, continually adapting change. Community- oriented rites of passage like the Rite Of Passage Experience are intentionally designed to stimulate large- order change. It does this by initiating more and more citizens within a setting to the new story of rites of passage as a framework for education and youth and community development. Only when people understand and accept change at the level of the heart will they be able to help the necessary conditions for change to emerge in their setting. Contemporary approaches to change are more mechanistic and intellectual, which distances individuals from becoming intimately engaged with and committed to putting into action the fundamental principles in the new story.

*Unless you are welcomed back to the village and honored  
for completing an ordeal you become sick.*

Malidoma Somé

A central and sensitive part of our job is to open inquiries into people's stories and engage them in conversation. Questions that matter related to our children, their education, and youth and community development are key. We invite people to explore: How are the children? What is in the "field" of inquiry related to initiation and rites of passage that already exists and can be brought together, in authentic and meaningful ways, that has heart and can be of service to children, community, our sacred Earth, and the future of all our relations?

Across America and the world, many valuable resources exist in the form of rite of passage– related programs. Rather than exclusively being places we take our children for transformation, might they also be places of initiation for helping members of a

community consider changing the story of how they educate and raise their children? There are those who are presently talking about “building a field” of rites of passage. The field has existed for almost thirty thousand years. What are we in fact **now** fielding that can make the most powerful impact on the future of our sacred Earth and all our relations? We must notice what has not worked well, but instead of trying to design a program and fix it, we need to hospice the old and midwife the new. That transition in our culture would have the greatest effect. Of course, there is so much wrong and we have spent decades trying to fix things.

When stories are shared, something powerful happens. Each person’s story holds threads of gold. When these are woven together with the threads of stories from other times, places, and cultures, a new story emerges. Our role as partners and guides in community-oriented rites of passage is to share stories that illuminate the golden threads of symbols, patterns, and processes of initiation. Individuals own stories of initiation are then triggered, and that, in turn, ignites their creative imagination. Design principles serve as navigational aids to inform and organize new ways of thinking that lead to innovative actions. This has been a small part of the story of youth and community development through rites of passage. It has been humbly offered to nourish life.

In the tradition of my ancestors I leave you with a quote and a question.

“A mystic is anyone who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions, and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity.”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner.

*What would we be doing as rites of passage practitioners when we acted as if community was the single most important entity of our species and all children were mystics?*