

Rites of Passage

by Brenda Seefeldt

Another prom and graduation season has been survived (with as few lives lost as possible, I hope).

There was a time when these were significant rites of passages signaling a teen's entrance into adulthood. Prom was a chance to dress up in adult clothes and *promenade* with a date. Graduation was a ceremony to honor the completion of the child part of one's education. These were rites of passages given by adults to recognize the emerging adult.

However, we have somehow turned over these rites to the peer culture. Prom has turned into all kinds of other "adult" behaviors away from the presence of adults such as drinking, reckless use of vehicles and sex. While graduation still involves the family, right after the actual ceremony the new graduate takes off with his/her fellow new graduates to celebrate minus the adults again in the same reckless "adult" ways. Then they take off for beach week or whatever week is in your area to live like they see on MTV's Spring Break, only they have to live with the results.

We have teens growing up cocooned in their own peer group. Teens already have a natural aversion to adults due to normal adolescent development. But in no way was it intended that they be left alone in this process. However with the "celebration of youth" hitting us from everywhere (felt personally as I pass yet another birthday) and the cultural power we have endowed on those who are young, adults have slowly let go of their part of a teen's development turning them over to the peer group as they relive their lost adolescence.

The peer group may be supportive and accepting for adolescent growth bumps, but they clearly lack the wisdom that only comes with age. And with that lack of wisdom and lack of adult recognition from those who have "made it," we have teens growing up and not knowing what growing up is or when they have grown up. Add to that, they have made their own rites of passage by joining a gang or fraternity or having sex. To which they find out later on (and too soon) that sex doesn't necessarily lead to love which doesn't necessarily lead to marriage or even commitment. So the question is left hanging, how do I grow beyond the "same old, same old?" Is there anything else? When am I an adult because what I am doing is still all childish and I am now 25 years old?

As part of youth ministry, we need to celebrate such rites of passage and create new ones. Give our teens markers, including spiritual markers, to guide them to adulthood. Simply, part of what we need to do to grow our teens is to let them know when they have taken a step towards growth. We need to do this ourselves, do them with parents, and set the parents up to do them. After all, we have the creativity, we can organize and all teens need a significant other adult to survive through adolescence. You fill that role nicely.

The following are some rites of passage that we can incorporate and celebrate:

first puberty,
Confirmation,
entry to high school,
driver's license,
first adult responsibility (such as teaching Sunday School, regular volunteer anywhere, opening a savings account),
prom/first date,
high school graduation,
moving out of the family home

The following are some ideas which can be stolen to celebrate these rites of passage:

First puberty-- Remember this is an awkward moment as well.) You arrange a dinner out for the youth and parent(s). Make it a special adult-type restaurant. If need to, slip the parent the money to pay for dinner. At the restaurant, leave a card from you with words saying something about your excitement of them becoming a teen and becoming a part of the youth group.

Confirmation-- Confirmation is already the church recognizing the child on a new level. They are being *confirmed* into the church. Some denominations have done away with such an important recognition so you can create your own kind of Confirmation. Some churches who do have Confirmation may need to do something different so that this rite of passage stands out more. I'm sure that 8th or 9th grader does not feel treated like an adult in your church even though that is what was supposed to happen.

Entry to high school-- You take the rising freshman (or sophomore) on a tour of the high school. They will already get a tour with their 8th or 9th grade class but on this tour they will remember more (less distraction and closer to the beginning of the new school year) and you can personally share some of your stories as well as how to be a Christian in high school. This will ease their first day jitters and they will associate that to your church.

Driver's license-- Let the youth drive your car as you take him/her to dinner. This works really well if you have a "cool" car.

First adult responsibility (or any one of them)-- Send a simple card with specific words identifying this rite of passage. Also you can encourage the parents to make a big deal over this new responsibility.

Prom-- Make prom a family event again (at least until they go through the dance doors). You are creative and you can organize something special. One church let me know that the parents of prom-goers found a pre-Victorian home and decorated up the dining room and served dinner. The youth pastor dressed in period costume to serve dinner.

Graduation-- Plan a seniors only weekend that includes talking about making an adult-decision about their faith. Make it secretive and something other students will look forward to in years to come as they become the mighty seniors.

Last year the majority of my group graduated from high school (or at least finished their time in high school). We took them on a surprise "adult" weekend. Through events and words we let them know that they are now adults in our eyes and that they now need to make adult decisions (with lots of guidance) including an adult decision about their faith. We particularly hit finances because that discretionary spending they are so used to is over in adulthood. We also hit on credit card interest, a marketing trap they are heading into. And I told them that they no longer need to call me Ms. Seefeldt, which is the fondest name anyone could ever call me. But they have moved beyond knowing me through the school of their childhood and onto an adult relationship. It was a defining weekend for them at a time when they definitely need definition (still).

As a side benefit for me, I could release them into adulthood where new priorities and busyness doesn't always leave time for them to have time with me. Sometimes called "empty nest." I have great peace knowing that I released them with every word I ever wanted to leave with them.

Moving out of the family home-- This could happen anytime after graduation and sometimes happens too many years later after too much strife. Black Light Fellowship publishes a great little book entitled *The Self-Help Adult Maturity Handbook*, which contains a great test for this age to take to see if they are doing what it takes to be grown and live on their own. After one of those awkward family moments when the teen is treated like a child but thinks he/she deserves to be treated like an adult, present them this book and have them take the test. Areas of discussion will pop up between that youth and you as that significant other adult and long-time spiritual guide.

(Black Light Fellowship, 773-826-7790).

We all know that for a youth to survive through adolescence that they need to have a significant other adult in their lives. That is the role you are gladly playing. Please steal these ideas to give your role a better definition.



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* www.wildfrontier.org