

Slights of Passage

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Last month I bought a new car. I thought it was simply a contract of economics, borne partly of necessity and partly of lust. I *needed* to trade in my aging vehicle; and I really *wanted* that cute red one.

You know, it takes at least two days to buy a car. There is the day you sign the papers of intention; and then there is the day you sign even more papers of possession. In between you worry, “Am I doing the right thing?” All in all, it is an exhausting experience and while you end up with a new car, you also end up with either debt or diminishment of capital. You begin to wonder why would anyone want to buy a new car?

This is exactly what I was feeling that second day of paper signing. After I had ratified the last document, and listened to the last lecture on maintenance, the salesman invited me to walk to the other end of the showroom with him. *More papers?* I wondered. He led me to a large ship’s bell and instructed me to pull the rope four times. At that point I was so used to following his instructions – ‘sign here,’ ‘initial here,’ ‘give me your old keys,’ ‘don’t lose this’ – that I simply did what he said without question. The bell was loud. Immediately everyone in the room – everyone – stopped what they were doing, rose from their seats, applauded and yelled, “Hurrah!” At that moment it was no longer simply a contract of economics. A happy warmth rose from my belly to my chest; a smile exploded on my lips; I raised my hands in celebration and danced a victory dance.

What I had just experienced was a rite of passage. I was reminded that I had done something momentous, life-changing, something worth celebrating. I was among a community of people who like new cars. I had been transformed from an ordinary traveler, to the driver of a queenly carriage, and sent on my way in ritual style.

This year Sharon has been talking to you about rites of passage. She has focused on the more traditional and popular rites: Child Dedications, Marriage, Graduations, Memorial Services. These are the bread and butter of rituals. These are the big Kahoonas that define our lives. This morning, I would like to look at the ‘Slights’ of Passage – those events we don’t usually celebrate with ritual and ceremony. I want to know why not. Do we simply lack the imagination to keep large bells in handy locations; or is there something more going on (or should say, ‘not going on’)?

What makes an event a ritual? What constitutes a passage? We’ve been listening to some of the music of our most popular rituals. The big ones all have their own music. Who doesn’t know *Happy Birthday to You*? Who doesn’t recognize *Pomp and Circumstances* and its connection to graduations? Who hasn’t sung *The Wedding March* from Lohengrin, using perhaps the more popular words ‘Here comes the bride, big fat and wide’? Apparently music sustains a good ritual, even if the music is just a bell.

Of course, one of the most critical elements of these rites is the community in which they are performed and celebrated. As our reading said, it takes a community to realize a ritual celebration. If none of you had shown up this morning, I would not have lit the chalice or had music played and sung. Community is important. The bride and groom would still get married if their guests didn’t show, but it wouldn’t have been the same. There wouldn’t have been gifts and feasting. It wouldn’t really have been a celebration, for there would have been no witnesses.

So, these then are some of the elements of Rituals of Passage – community, celebration, song, witnessing, perhaps dancing, gifts, blessings, feasting. And what does the inclusion of these elements

say, in whatever combination they exist? They say, “This is really important.” “This is a transforming experience.” “This act bears paying careful attention to and remembering.”

We all know this, intuitively and from our experiences. But I wanted to lay it out for you in order for you to better comprehend my next question. What does it say about the life passages we do not celebrate? What of the Sights of Passage?

I want start by examining a ritual that used to be more important and in some places still is, and which we as Unitarian Universalists are trying to lift up again – the ritual of “coming of age.” In the Jewish community the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs still hold a place of significant ritual, demanding a family gathering, gifts and religious celebration. We have heard of the Native America Spirit Quest, or the Australian Walk About, which are comparable. But these belong to indigenous people, not modern people like ourselves, and are therefore discounted.

As I said, we have coming of age ceremonies in many of our Unitarian Universalist churches, but they’re received with lukewarm enthusiasm by some, and often do not extend beyond our walls. The first ones were done in Kansas City in the mid 70s and they didn’t really catch on until, at most, twenty years ago. I recall a recent coming of age ceremony where the parents lamented that their parents wouldn’t come to town for the granddaughter’s ceremony, although they made a big deal of her baby sister’s dedication. Coming of age doesn’t have the same power, the same scale of celebration in our society. Why do you think that is?

I think it’s because in our culture today, our children don’t come of age until many years after the original passage into puberty. We keep children as dependents much longer than in the past. We educate them for a longer period of time. They live at home longer. They do not consider marriage until much later in life than they used to. When they really come of age, they are already fully grown. We let graduations or weddings, take the place of welcoming them into this adult stage of their lives. But it diminishes the importance of leaving childhood and taking on larger responsibilities. When we complain that our children don’t ‘grow up,’ we might have to acknowledge that we have slighted their passage into adulthood.

There is another age-related passage I think of often. I have a painting that hangs in my meditation room. It shows in the background a line of older women looking toward a young woman in the foreground. When I bought it, the artist told me the story of the painting. She said, “When I was a young girl and received my first menses, it coincided inconveniently with the coming of my mother’s sister from the old country. I was eager to meet my aunt, for whom I was named, but I was feeling a little sorry for myself, hoping she wouldn’t notice that I was in discomfort and running to the bathroom more often than usual. Imagine my surprise and embarrassment when my mother, on introducing us, said, ‘Today our Ruthie became a woman.’ And then, imagine my shock when my aunt reached out and slapped me. Before I could react, before I could cry, she hugged me to her breast and said, ‘Congratulations, Ruthie. May you know no more pain as a woman than my slap on your face. Welcome.’

It was a big deal for her and later in her life she painted the welcoming of a young girl into the community of adult women. It is a big deal, a life-changing deal for a child-become-woman. And we ignore it. Is it because it’s about sex? Is it because it’s about women’s power? I don’t know. But I think we should be celebrating it, for our daughters’ self esteem and for the recognition of them in the communities in which they grow up.

At the end of life’s ritual spectrum, after weddings and babies all we really have to look forward to is our death. What does it say to all of us that we do not celebrate the saging – not the aging – of an individual, the coming of the age of wisdom? Others societies either do it, or have done such a celebration. In the Hindu community it is the third age of adulthood, after coming of age and being a householder, and it is ritually recognized and celebrated. When your duties as a progenitor, a householder

and wage earner are ended, you become a person of wisdom and spirit, someone whose life work becomes deepening and sharing. You are venerated. You are celebrated. You have a reason for living in this advanced age. But not in this society that worships youth. Not in this society that often makes an elder feel invisible, muted, and shamed.

Some women are beginning to take back the honor of saging with rituals of crowning, becoming wise women. In the book *Celebrating Ourselves*, Edna Ward writes, “As such rituals become institutionalized, their authority develops and gradually reaches out to challenge the rituals or lack of rituals in the wider society. As they continue to speak to a very real and felt need, their power to challenge ageism will increase.” But not yet. And not without a parallel ritual for the saging of our wise men.

If the wedding day is the most popular, most expensively celebrated, most universal rite of passage, why the ritual silence around divorce? We don’t like the statistics, half of all marriages ending in divorce. Intellectually we accept it; we know that some marriages should be ended. We no longer shun the divorcee. But we don’t acknowledge this transforming and very real time of passage.

I would like to see a healing rite of passage when two people in our community determine it is time to end their union. I see too many people falling out of community because of their divorce. One or the other of them gets custody of the friends, gets the church, or gets the blame. What if we were to develop a ritual of acceptance for divorce? What if we could support in community, two people coming together to accept the decision equally? What if we demanded of them some promises, as we demanded vows in their marriage? What if we held them to these: *We promise to share the care of our children. We promise to be responsible about our shared assets. We promise that we will respect one another. We promise that we will share our communities of love and support.*

Perhaps there would be less pain, less acrimony, less guilt, fewer misunderstandings, fewer abandoned or emotionally damaged children. If we, as a community of friends and witnesses, supported this decision and took it out of the realm of shame, perhaps the experience might be more positively transforming, more worthy of celebration.

Believe me, ritual has a power to it – a political power, a healing power, a social power, a personal power. The ritual recognition of community and witnesses can be a potent force for good, for support, for affirmation, for healing, for celebration. That is why it is such a travesty that certain populations are denied the ritual of commitment and holy union. It isn’t just that gays and lesbians can’t get a legal contract for their commitments to one another – although that is important in itself. It is this denial of community support and affirmation and celebration. It is a travesty of much deeper proportion than is visible on the surface. It is more about the denial of a rite of passage than it is a denial of legal standing. As we understand rites of passage that becomes more and more clear.

I can think of many other rites of passage, some large, some small, that might improve our I rather like the daily yogic and monastic rituals of greeting the dawn and the dusk, separating and celebrating each day of our lives. Sometimes I think I would like to live where a community of people publicly greets each day with the movements of Tai Chi.

I am available to do house blessings, but I don’t get asked very often. We should know that a house becomes a home through ritual practices; through learning its idiosyncrasies, uniting our selves with its uniqueness. What keeps us from speeding up and acknowledging that process with a community rite of passage? Housewarmings are in the right arena, but consist mostly of gifting and not of ritual celebration and blessing.

I have a friend who is planning a house blessing for her new home, but on her own she developed a rite of passage to say good-bye to her old house of decades. She went through each room and recalled some important event that happened there. Then she thanked each room for holding her family in it so generously, so lovingly. She hated leaving her old home, but the leaving was healed by this ritual of

passage.

If you put your mind to it, you might come up with your own list of slights of passage. Promotions, awards, recognitions, all deserve their own celebration. Decisions not to have any more children deserve their own acknowledgment. Bands should play while new drivers receive their first licenses and maybe these drivers would remember the importance of this passage and have fewer accidents. Songs should be sung when we lower our cholesterol or blood pressure, when we come through surgery a changed person. We shouldn't live our lives in secret. We should meditate more and celebrate more.

I have one more suggestion for redeeming a slight of passage; one you probably haven't yet considered. A grief counselor gave it to me during a minister's retreat. She called it "A Ritual For a Happy Death." I have practiced this ritual for at least fifteen years. Each month I set aside one day to be alone in contemplation about my life and my death. I consider the things I may have put off too long. I write to friends; I make calls. I evaluate my possessions and try to accumulate less. I use this day as an opportunity to perform my monthly breast exam, because it is a life or death ritual in my family where so many women have had breast cancer. I meditate and, in the Buddhist tradition, try to contemplate my non-existence so that I am prepared for it. Wu-wei meditation – no mind meditation – is a tradition of stripping the soul of all that isn't essential – meaning all that we will lose at life's end. It puts life into perspective. It isn't a morbid ritual.

It isn't really a rite of passage in that there are no witnesses, no songs, only a modicum of celebration and an anticipation of transformation. It is a preparation for the final rite of passage. We have wedding rehearsals, which to my mind are not very productive. But a rehearsal for that final ritual has come to mean a more positive life to me.

We human beings create rituals because life events are important to us. I hope I have made you conscious of the process and have encouraged you to create your own. We make the events of our lives more important in the way we recognize them. After I celebrated the possession of my new car, I returned to the old one to make sure I had cleaned everything out of it. I suddenly felt bad about leaving it after all the miles it had carried me along for business and for pleasure, for all the things it had hauled, all the meals I had eaten in it, all the stories and songs that had come to me through its radio. So I shut myself in and said 'Thank you. You've been a friend.' There was no music. I cried little and then I said, 'Good-bye.'

That's what life's passages are all about. One door opens; another closes. We should be present in every passage of our lives. As St.-Exupéry said, "We live not by things but by the meanings of things." Slight of passage rob us of such meaning.