

# The Journey from Childhood to Adulthood: The Importance and Limitations of Rites of Passage

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Contemporary, Western society fails us during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Too many people reach their physical prime without ever attaining psychological maturity. Put plainly, in today's world, growing up is hard to do.

One part of the problem, well documented and analyzed by now, is the loss of meaningful rites of passage at times such as puberty or high school graduation. But this neglect is not at all the biggest barrier to personal development.

A rite of passage, after all — even the most effective and brilliantly designed ceremony — rarely *causes* a shift from one distinct stage of life to the next. Much more often rites of passage confirm or celebrate a life transition that has already (although recently) been achieved by the individual, accomplished through years of steady developmental progress.

What happens *between* life passages is considerably more important to the process of maturation than are the passages themselves (and their associated rites). The primary work of maturing takes place gradually every day as we apply ourselves to the developmental tasks of our current life stage. Children and adolescents need help with these tasks — help from mature adults. And that's precisely where we are failing our youth.

In order to overcome our society's impediments to maturation, we must first abandon the idea that the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place in one fell swoop. Between these two life stages lies the challenging adventure of adolescence. And although most all thirteen-year-olds have already turned the corner into adolescence, there's no guarantee that a teenager will ever mature further, no matter how long he or she might live. The majority of Americans, for example, never do.

Getting older by itself does not cause us to mature psychologically. Adolescence is not at all confined to our teen years. And adulthood cannot be meaningfully defined as what happens in our twenties or when we fulfill certain responsibilities, such as holding down a job, financial independence, or raising a family. Rather, an adult is someone who understands why he is here on Earth, why he was born, and is offering his unique contribution to the more-than-human world.

Although it's rare for Americans to reach true adulthood in their teen years, or even twenties, it's entirely possible to do so in midlife.

A greatly complicating factor in the journey from childhood to adulthood is that there are two quite distinct stages of adolescence and a major life passage between them. The journey begins with the passage of puberty, continues through the years of early adolescence (which I call the stage of the Thespian at the Oasis), then transits through the passage I name Confirmation and into the very different stage of late adolescence (the Wanderer in the Cocoon). And finally, after several years of

individuation in the Cocoon stage, we arrive at the passage of Soul Initiation, the commencement of early adulthood (the Soul Apprentice at the Wellspring).

What we call “growing up” is nothing like a single or sudden transition. Rather, it encompasses four separate life stages (starting with late childhood) and not just one major life passage, nor even two, but three. Given the complexity and temporal span of this sequence — and the lack of present-day understanding of it — it’s no wonder so many contemporary people never reach true adulthood.

In my new book, *Nature and the Human Soul*, I introduce a nature-based and soul-centered model of human development, portraying in detail the qualities of each of the eight healthy stages through which I believe we are *designed* to progress as humans. Here I want to focus on just two of these life stages — those of adolescence — and briefly describe only one dimension of each of these stages, namely the developmental task.

In the first half of adolescence, the task is to fashion a personality — a way of belonging to the human community — one that is both authentic and socially acceptable. This is much easier said than done, especially in our current egocentric, aggressively competitive, materialistic societies. But this accomplishment lays the foundation for all later maturation. Becoming authentic means to know who you really are — to know where you stand, what you value, what you desire, what you tolerate and what you don’t — and to be able and willing to act accordingly, most of the time, despite the social risks. Under the best circumstances, this takes several years to accomplish. In the contemporary world, many never succeed. But what makes early adolescence even more challenging is the second half of the task in this stage, namely, attaining social acceptability. To be a healthy adolescent, you need to belong to a real community. So the way in which you express your authenticity means everything. You must learn how to be true to yourself in a way that at least some of your peers embrace.

If and when you achieve a personality that is authentic enough and acceptable enough, then the enigma we call by such names as *life*, *the world*, *spirit*, or *soul* shifts your center of gravity from peer group to the mysteries of nature and psyche. This shift marks the passage I call Confirmation. A *rite* of passage at this time publicly confirms the fact that you’ve succeeded at fashioning a social presence that works well enough. It ushers you into late adolescence (the Cocoon), which is the stage when you begin to ask the big, existential and spiritual questions of life: Who am I beneath my social persona? What is life about, beyond learning a skill, getting a job, establishing a primary relationship, or raising a family? What unique, mystical gift do I bring to the more-than-human community? What, for me, is the difference between sex and romance, between survival and living, between a social network and true community, between school and real learning, between a job and soulwork? What is death, poetry, dreaming, honor, consciousness, the universe, soul, spirit? What does it mean to be human?

After many years of *living* these questions, after many expeditions of wandering through the terrible and majestic mysteries of nature and psyche, you, at long last, receive a glimpse or overhear a whisper of the greater, truer story of your individual life or of “the truth at the center of the image you were born with,” as poet David Whyte

says. In many traditional cultures and spiritual paths, such a glimpse is called a vision, a soul calling, or the intuition of destiny — which never arrives in cultural terms, such as a job or social role, but rather embodied in mysterious, usually nature-based symbols, themes, or patterns. Then, if and when you make the unequivocal commitment to embody that vision in your world for the benefit of all beings, then and only then do you traverse through the passage of Soul Initiation (with or without a rite) and into true adulthood (the Wellspring).

As much as anything, the world today needs mature mentors and initiators to support young people to grow into visionary artisans of cultural change, the new leaders who will guide humanity through the transformation that the greater Earth community wholly depends upon. Mentoring our youth to succeed at the developmental tasks of the two stages of adolescence is considerably more important than providing them with rites of passage that confirm their success.

But there's no reason not to offer them both!

**Based on the book *Nature & the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*. © 2008 by Bill Plotkin. Printed with permission of New World Library, Novato, CA. [www.newworldlibrary.com](http://www.newworldlibrary.com) or 800-972-6657 ext. 52.**

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