

Rites of Passage: a personal view

By Pauline Kennedy Allan

What is a Rite of Passage?

In my view a Rite of Passage is simply a special ceremony to mark a change in your life. It needn't be a big ritual and could be as simple as taking a moment to appreciate that you have changed.

The most common rites of passage are the naming of a new child, the handfasting or marriage of a couple and the passing or funeral rite. Others could include the marking of conception and the stages of pregnancy, marking the birth of a child, becoming parents, getting your first set of house keys, passing a driving test, getting drunk for the first time, first sex, becoming grandparents and many others.

Why have a Rite of Passage: Life Changes

As we move through our lives we grow and change. The physical aspects of growth are marked by visible things like needing new clothing and shoes. The mental changes are often marked by tests and exams or by simply being able to do something that you couldn't do before. The emotional and spiritual changes we undergo are not always marked in any way and sometimes as pagans we feel the need to redress this imbalance. Often that means a ritual of some kind.

A ritual to mark a life change need not be complicated or involve several people. It could be just you taking a moment out of your day to day life to reflect on what has happened and how it has changed you and to mark that moment as a time of change and of beginning a new phase of your life. In one sense everyday becomes a rite of passage because everyday is different to the one before but some are even more so and it's those extra special changes that we often feel the need to actively do something in the way of a ritual. In some cases we plan these rituals carefully, especially where they involve changes in others as well as, or instead of, ourselves. In other cases we let our inspiration flow with the moment. There is no right or wrong way of doing any kind of ritual, including rites of passage!

Trials and Ordeals

In various cultures certain rites of passage, especially man or woman-hood were preceded by some level of trial or ordeal. To some extent I feel this is merely a reflection of what life itself does to you before any rite of passage. For example pregnancy, while a wonderful experience, is also the ordeal that prepares you to some extent for the exhaustion levels of new motherhood. Labour or even waiting to go into labour can be the trial that precedes the final birth into your new life as a mother. I speak here as one who has recently undergone these experiences. I can't speak for fathers and what ordeals they might feel during this process although I'm sure trying to deal with increasing mood swings of your partner is likely to be one of them. Any trial or ordeal is of necessity a highly individual experience what feels like a trial for one person will not be for another.

In my opinion even joyous events like a handfasting are preceded by a series of trials and ordeals – most often surrounding the families and trying to do something that is meaningful to you but that doesn't cause offence to your closest family members! In some cases ordeals can be taken on by those who have a special role to play in your ritual, for a handfasting this might be the chief bridesmaid or maid of honour and the best man. In the case of a handfasting some of the events leading up to the big day can themselves be rites of passage which some choose to leave out like the "stag" or "hen" night. These events can be seen as either preparatory trials to the main event or as rites of passage themselves depending on what happens at them.

So what do these trials and ordeals do? They prepare and test you for the changes you are about to undergo. In some cases they are also part of the change as not all major life changes are voluntary ones. Some are thrust upon us and these are often very traumatic experiences. An example of a life change that most would not choose is the break up of a relationship leading perhaps to separation or divorce. We are tested and tempered in the fires of life and when we come out of the other side of this testing we often feel we have changed more profoundly than we thought we would be before or during the testing. In some cases these ordeals can also be ones that span a considerable number of months, or stages each one of which you may wish to mark with a ritual.

Initiations and New Beginnings

Once the testing is complete we have a choice, acknowledge the change or reject it. Rejecting it could lead to another set of trials or it might not. We might try to carry on as if nothing has changed but in our deepest hearts we usually know that is not true. If we choose to acknowledge the change then we are acknowledging a rebirth, an initiation into a new phase of our lives. We have a gateway to step through and that step may only take a moment but it is in taking that step that we open ourselves up to a new life or a new role in life. To me taking that step is as much an initiation as any formal initiation ceremony within a path such as Wicca or Druidry and an initiation should be marked in some way even if it just a quiet moment of reflection.

Sometimes you will want to share this change with as many people as you can gather together and at other times you will want to mark the change quietly, privately and personally. When our son was born my husband and I wanted to share with everyone we knew the joy and wonder of having a new life join our family. After we returned from hospital and had begun to get to grips with life as new parents we had a family gathering with a simple naming and welcoming ceremony for our son. On a more personal and private level I needed to take a few moments to give thanks for the safe birth of my son and to acknowledge the changes that were beginning in my life. This was something I did as soon as I physically could after the birth. It was an intensely emotional experience but one that I needed to do and needed to do on my own.

Moving On

Once you have acknowledged the change, in whatever way you have seen fit to, you need to move on. The time has come to start living this new part of your life whatever that may be. In some cases this is easy to do, for example you can't do anything but continue with your new life as parents once the baby is born. You do

begin to wonder what you did that made life seem so busy before becoming parents but essentially you move on because you can't turn the clock back even if you wanted to. In other cases moving on is hard and possibly the hardest time of all is following the death and rite of passing of someone close to you. I have been told that each day brings it's own ordeals, so each day could bring another rite of passage in the process of grieving. But moving on and taking on that new role or aspect to your life is very much a part of the overall process.

The Rite of Passage, whatever it may be, marks the key turning point in the process of change. In many cases it does not mean that the changes are completed or that you are suddenly able to effortlessly cope with your new phase of life. The rite is a marker for change but as with rituals that mark the changing seasons the changes do not stop, the cycle continues and in time we come to the next turning point in our lives.

Some practical concerns

To finish I would like to offer a list of questions that may help you prepare for a rite of passage if it is one you feel you need to carefully prepare for rather than one that just happens. This list is only meant as a starting point not as a definitive guide.

What is the rite of passage marking?

Who is it for?

What has led to this point?

When do you want to hold the ritual?

Will things change afterwards, if so how?

Do you want help to prepare your ritual, if so who?

Do you want to be inside or outside?

Do you want to do this on your own or with others?

Do you have any ideas for what steps you want to include (e.g. casting a circle, calling the quarters, calling on any particular deities)?

Who do you want or need to include?

Do you need or want any tools or items for the ritual?

Do you need or want music of any kind?

Remember that for a rite of passage to fill the kind of emotional and spiritual need we would like it to it should be put together or written (in the case of more complex rituals) either by or for the person going through the rite. This means that it is not going to be the same as any other rite of the same kind although it may be similar to others. It should be unique to the person or people it is developed for.

References/Further Reading

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Farrar, J & S (1996) *The Witches Bible*

Harvey, G (1996) *Handfastings, Funerals and Other Druid Rites of Passage* in *The Druid Renaissance* edited by Philip Carr-Gomm

LifeRites

<http://www.LifeRites.org/>

or write to them at: Gwndwn Mawr, Trelech, Carmarthenshire, SA33 6SA

Restall Orr, E (2000) *Ritual: A Guide to Life, Love and Inspiration*