



Imagery from Awen Gröve, an organization that cultivates human potential early in life with the YouthQuest program.

Rituals to Grow On

Modern day rites of passage ceremonies help create positive markers in people's lives.

BY MARIANA THORN

For me, a rite of passage is like the photo developer in a darkroom. It brings my true colors into focus, helping me realize who I am and who I am becoming.” These are the words of 16-year-old Heather Sills, reflecting on her experience in *Surfing the Creative*, a movement-based rites of passage experience for young people ages 16–28.

“Throughout history, rites of passage have served as a fundamental source of transformation at all stages of the human life cycle,” says program founder Melissa Michaels, who brings the expansive explorations of Gabrielle Roth’s 5Rhythms and Emilie Conrad’s Continuum to self-discovery programs for adventurers of all ages. Young people tend to be familiar with rites of passage like a school graduation or Bar Mitzvah, and they’re also aware of painful teenage rites like a DUI. Unlike any of these experiences, Michaels’ events focus on movement as the central stage for individual discovery within the playhouse of supportive community. Utilizing song, dance, theatre, writing, and drawing, *Surfing the Creative* is designed to access the body’s wisdom, liberate the creative heart, and integrate this

new way of being into everyday life. In the spirit of the adage, “Give what it is that you need most,” Michaels developed her programs from scratch, in response to her own need for such an experience.

Intentional and community-supported ceremonies to honor an individual’s passage from one phase into the next, however, are as ancient as human development. The best-known of these in the U.S. is the vision quest experience. A widespread and central aspect of indigenous culture has long been the quest of a young adolescent boy to sit isolated in nature for several days and nights. He often abstains from food and water, focusing on his purpose and his prayer. Visions may come during this time that forever mark his identity as a man when he returns. Today, the vision quest tradition is making a comeback and is open to people regardless of age or gender.

Twelve-year-old Elijah Baduah asked his mom for a rites of passage experience for his 13th birthday. Through listening to himself and his environment, he had gained awareness about the ancient wisdom of such traditions. “I wanted to fully embody my morals,

beliefs, and motivations,” recalls Elijah. In his 14th year, Elijah and his mother took part in a traditional vision quest led by an indigenous medicine woman from Ecuador. When Elijah, his mom, and the other questers came down from their solitary contemplation on the mountain, they were welcomed by friends and family with songs, water, and warm broth. For Elijah, it was the integration as much as the quest that has developed his clarity and sense of self. “From then till this day, I have been my ‘true’ self, without a mask.”

Whether it is in nature or on the dance floor, whether you are 11 or 88, rites of passage deepen the texture of our lives. The elements are intention, presence, guidance, and community. “The intention,” says Michaels, “is for each person to have right relationship with their body, themselves, each other, and the earth.”

Charlotte Eulette directs the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, which trains and certifies people to facilitate transitions. “Ritual and ceremony can bridge our past and our present elegantly,” she says. “They can help us become human ‘well-beings.’” ●