

# WHAT IS NEEDED TO SUPPORT RITES OF PASSAGE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO FLOURISH?

Israh Goodall

This 'Cups of Tea' process involved some 20 exploratory conversations with rites of passage guides based in the following countries; India, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, UK, Spain and North America. This report is a summary of the interviews, and reflects the common themes, experiences and knowledge which emerged through these conversations.

## **What is 'rites of passage work' with young people?**

"Rites of passage is a conscious, deliberate community-based process with ritual and ceremony. The 'rite' of the rite of passage is to help individuals know who they are in themselves and in relation to the community and wider world".

(Darcy Ottey)

"Rites of passage work is about cultural thriving that integrates our youth to understand their role in the community and supports them to step into it. Rites of passage is not a programme, it is a community movement: Supporting young people to find their roles in society and being able to play their part; Marking transitions as a community".

(Miriam, We are Open Circle)

"Those of us who have not had this [rite of passage] – may choose other survival strategies like addiction".

(Arne Rubinstein)

"The process of the adolescent development cycle is to do the deep repair so we can come into better alignment of heart, head and mind, emotion and somatic intelligence- so we can move from there into right action in the world, right action to other humans and the other than human species".

(Melissa Micheals)

Whilst rites of passage have traditionally been embedded within nature-connective and wilderness experiences, they have also included different modalities which are increasingly being used in modern settings such as; arts and soulcrafting practices, for

example authentic movement and dance and other somatic work; Way of Council; shadow work, working with archetypes, myth and storytelling (Ursula Elsa, Melissa Michaels, Balu Ponnusamy); collaboration with indigenous communities (Arne Rubinstein); and engagement with community and elders (Meredith Little, Gabby Hollis)

Traditionally rites of passage would have been deeply embedded within the young person's local community - whereas today largely rites of passage take the form of programmes and mentoring. And where rites of passage are not available it is often the case that young people are not experiencing this level of support and may often only have meaningful connection with their parents / guardians, and if they are fortunate a teacher who has a very different role to play.

These conversations revealed a myriad of challenges and opportunities in regard to what is needed to enable rites of passage work with young people to flourish - as well as clarifying why it is that this work is so deeply needed in these times. Most fundamentally a need to support community-based rites of passage processes was revealed as a core narrative weaving together almost all the other challenges, needs and opportunities that were expressed.

### **Why is rites of passage work with young people needed?**

The extreme and escalating mental health crisis amongst young people worldwide is undeniable and heartbreaking in equal measure: relationship difficulties; addiction (to screens and substances); preoccupation with money (to be able to buy gadgets etc) and most tragically, suicide rates, are all rapidly on the rise amongst our younger generation.

This seems relatively unsurprising when we consider the extent of how we generally live or school; success often measured by material wealth, lack of nature connection, isolation from community and resulting sense of not belonging; rising numbers of gangs and knife crime; dominant cultures of complacency in the face of our climate and other crises; covid lockdowns exacerbating the divide between young people and olders and leading to a rise in mental health concerns. All of this and more creates an often unseen or unappreciated pressure and context for young people to navigate.

An interesting thread revealed in these exploratory conversations was a strong sense that most of these challenges described are not caused by a lack of academic preparedness for adult life but more because there has not been adequate and potent support for young people to really know themselves. In almost all conversations there was a clear awareness that children and young people need to be asked the big questions around who they are and who they want to be in the world. What brings them alive? What do they care about? Indeed, this research discovered a severe lack of held space where these questions are asked and most importantly for young people to feel that their answers are really being listened to.

At the heart of so many of the experiences shared was that rites of passage clearly provide an authentic space and appropriate challenges to help a young person to step into these questions with depth and reverence, and be supported to journey them into their unique answer.

“ I have seen numerous times young people who were physically gifted, lyrically or poetically talented being shut down. And because they don't know what they have inside of them they too easily silence it or forget it. Choices for our youth who do not fit the norm is that they either go silent or get sent to 'othering' organisations like youth detention/probation/special schools. This sends them down an even more draconian attempt to turn their identity into something generalised. This leaves these young people bereft of any sense of who they are, where they are from and what their unique gifts are”.

(Sola Adebisi)

“There is an African proverb that says, if you do not initiate your young men into the tribe, they will come back and burn down the village just to feel the heat. Watching the news of Belfast and watching young people as young as 8 being arrested ... This African proverb keeps percolating for me. I feel like we are seeing that now, in action”.

(Lucy O'Hagan)

“There is so much trauma, intergenerational trauma which is as a result of hundreds of years of colonisation and ongoing colonisation. The young people are being left to navigate this really toxic cultural landscape that forgets about them. I really feel with rites of passage, it's providing the initiatory experience and witnessing that the youth need. Letting them know that they are not forgotten and that they are needed in their communities”.

(Lucy O Hagan)

## Challenges and needs

### 1. Evidence and research

There is a lack of evidence around what young people actually need right now, as opposed to projections about this, as well as a lack of evidence around the effectiveness and impact of rites of passage. Good research and evidence is needed to engage in conversation with schools, councils, policy makers, government and indeed young people and their guardians.

Support is needed to develop:

- Better knowledge of young people's needs in these times
- Evidence of impact of rites of passage (whilst there are some such as Band of Brothers, this is very rare and often evidence remains anecdotal).

Since writing this report a new collaboration between Youth Passageways and researchers at the University of San Francisco and Dominican University ([Rite of Passage Research Collaboration](#)) have started conducting research to build an evidence base on

rites of passage for adolescents and young adults. The intention of this partnership is twofold:

1. To assess evidence about the impacts of rites of passage on long term health and wellbeing
2. To support rites of passage during adolescence as a vehicle for health equity, social justice, and cultural and ecological change.

This is a very exciting development which we are supporting and we would encourage anyone who has evidence of how rites of passage may have had a positive social impact to contact them via the link above.

## **2. Making it relevant, honest and consensual**

Cultural appropriation of rites of passage both in terms of terminology and practices has historically been very common - not least because much of what we in the global north understand as rites of passage has come through the colonial lens of white, middle class, western man. From the interviews it was apparent that facilitators and organisations are becoming much more conscious of this and in some cases have changed their practices completely in honour of those peoples and traditions in which these practices have been taken.

It has also raised important questions about what holds a rite of passage? What stories, themes, images, practices are appropriate, relevant and inspiring to a young person, and how do we find that out? How can we weave the ancient and the modern to offer young people and their community a relevant but deeply reverent rite of passage?

“My own rite of passage experience helped me to give form to my spiritual seeing of the world. And there were real limitations to that. In particular a clear limitation was the ritual and ceremony aspect of the programme were largely grounded in indigenous Northern American spiritual traditions and practices. Now my understanding is I was initiated through cultural appropriation. So how do I make sense of them as a white settler?”

(Darcy Ottey)

For the future, we need to consider the difference between cross-pollination and cultural appropriation. How do we support each other to learn what is deeply impactful for young people from cultures and practises around the world, without abusing the trust or sacred traditions of indigenous cultures?

“In youth passageways we have been doing a lot of radical cross cultural work to look at the impacts of patriarchy, colonisation, sys hetero patriarchy, capitalism and all the ways those interrelate to keep people apart and prevent us from learning and working with each other. We have had to ask ourselves time and time again - what’s really needed to ensure all voices are at the table? What really is possible when we turn up in ceremony together on behalf of this larger prayer. What can be transformed through that.”

(Darcy Ottey)

Support is needed to engage a collaborative approach to:

- Create relevant, local rites of passage rather than one-size-fits all approach.
- Explore the creative tension between “what is a relevant ceremony for the community at this time?” and, “what is the essential human experience in a rite of passage?”
- Develop our muscles in working emergently, so that we are able to draw on and learn from different cultural lineages, while also responding to the specific needs and truth arising for the specific community engaging the rite of passage - as a way of avoiding cultural appropriation.
- Finding ways to be fully honest and gain informed consent for what we are doing; as well as finding a way of making it relevant and not too intimidating and therefore accessible for young people and their families. And, something to strongly consider is how to balance this with keeping the integral mystery and unfolding anticipation at the heart of what is offered.

### **3. Funding**

One of the greatest barriers to this rites of passage work flourishing is that the cost of good quality work is prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of potential participants and communities. Consequently, the sector suffers from a lack of investment to be able to deliver good quality rites of passage programmes in collaborative, community-based ways that are relevant and accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial situation and cultural background.

The high personal and social impact of rites of passage work for young people supports a case for higher levels of charitable funding to support the sector. Funding is needed to support the slower and vital process of building relationships in a community to thrive and ultimately ensure the ownership and sustainability remain in the community; and to work with communities that need rites of passage most rather than those that can afford them.

Support is needed to:

- Build the evidence base for rites of passage, to help make more funding for this work available
- Diversify funding (for example in the case of Bala, a rites of passage guide in India, funding is needed to enable rites of passage guides and organisations to move away from government dependency. To this end Bala is hoping to set up a social enterprise to fund the programmes he offers the youth in his community so he is not reliant on government funding and the conditionalities this brings with it).
- Understand what are the appropriate elements (such as stories, images, archetypes, dance, creativity, role models, ‘stretch’ challenges etc) which would meet the needs of particular local communities in creating a rite of passage relevant to them; which would include speaking with youth and elders of the community as well as reaching out to national and translocal collaboration for support.

- Build collaborative relationships with youth organisations and possible mentoring/work opportunities for youth to access following their rite of passage experience, to ensure ongoing support and input back into community.

#### **4. Raising awareness**

There is a lack of understanding within our culture of what rites of passage is and its importance in supporting young people, communities and the other-than-human world. We humans tend to not know our own place-based archetypal stories so it is inevitably hard for adults to be supporting young people around this.

Support is needed to:

- Raise awareness of what a supported rite of passage involves and intends to support.
- Demonstrate the positive impact of rites of passage on the individual, community and other-than-human world - and the reciprocal relationships between all of these.
- Help rites of passage guides and organisations develop appropriate and effective ways to publicise and raise awareness around their work. This may include using different channels such as media, social media, talking with/in schools and youth organisations as well as speaking with councillors and MP's around raising awareness such as in government policy about rites of passage being inherent to youth wellbeing.

#### **5. Language**

We currently lack language to describe rites of passage that is both accessible and which honours what needs reverence. It can seem very 'woo woo'/ hippy – or lack authenticity and appear to be selling a 'wellbeing package'. In several of the interviews the need for language to be clear on what you are doing and clear on what you are not doing was made.

"This is not about therapy or trying to diagnose and treat problems. It's important to demystify it. It is about asking questions and listening to the answers"

(David Listeneberger)

Support is needed to explore how to develop the language of rites of passage work, in order to:

- Make it more accessible to different communities.
- Make it relevant, inspiring and attractive to modern teenagers from a diverse society.
- To identify language and roots that can link this work with current wellbeing policy and youth mental health services.
- Identify what the "bare bones" of rites of passage are; what is essential to the experience, beyond the language ... what needs to survive if the term dies?

## **6. Support for collaboration and cross-pollination**

Lack of a network, especially in the UK, to support collaboration, learning and cross-pollination. Youth Passageways, based in the USA, is a global rites of passage network, who are also working to bring together the work of rites of passage and social justice.

Support is needed to:

- Create collaborative whole system approaches
- Improve publicity
- Enable facilitators to do the inner work themselves, create personal resilience and to engage with CPD – this tends to be challenging in light of how hard it is to meet financial needs through this work.
- Central resource hub that shares advice and templates for things like child protection policies, insurance etc And for the types of things that need to be in place to enable projects/organisations to work well, including and beyond legalities etc
- Spaces to share issues as in developing a stronger network of rites of passage organisations and guides in the UK – need for capacity to create a space to collaborate.

## **7. Policy change - making rites of passage a priority**

Because this type of support for young people is not recognised within government policy, schools, parents, youth organisations and other government initiatives do not prioritise it, leading to a lack of time and funding for this type of work.

Instead young people's time is overly pressured, due to the intensity of their school experience where they are occupied all day at school, then have homework, sports activities, and weekends are often also full of sports, screens, shopping etc - all indicative of a culture addicted to being busy and distracting ourselves from feeling what lies beneath the addiction to busy-ness.

Several organisations in different countries are creating platforms to try to bring rites of passage to wider audiences and to address their needs:

- We Are Open Circle, a North America based organisation, are bringing rites of passage into corporations and community organisations, using the 'damns' offered, such as lack of time, as part of what rites of passage work addresses. By seeing these 'damns' as creative tensions, they explore how rites of passage can address the difficulties that organisations are facing.
- The Visionaries, a new rites of passage organisation in the UK, have approached schools to explore bringing teachers on board. But schools are in such overwhelm that they are needing to keep everything in house.

However, without the policy level recognition of the impact of rites of passage, these innovations remain hard to fund, without strategic, joined up support, and have less

impact: while the current structures of programmes offering rites of passage are important and needed, they often do not spend enough time building relationships in communities. Consequently, programmes may lack the depth and potency in supporting youth through the preparation, severance, transition and return of the rite of passage experience.

Support is needed to:

- Understand how to influence decision makers, demonstrate the impact and importance of this work and achieve national policy support for rites of passage.
- Understand how rites of passage work might link into existing national policy, such as New Zealand's wellbeing policy and Work that Reconnects in Wales.

## **8. Support to enable a community-based approach**

Generally most rites of passage work these days is programme based. This means the focus tends to be on the 'crossing the threshold' phase and there is a lack of emphasis on the preparation and incorporation/reintegration phases.

A clear finding of the Cups of Tea process was that for rites of passage work (and any work with young people) to be truly effective and fit for these times of increasing and deepening crises, rites of passage work needs to be embedded within long-standing communities. This is a relatively big leap from running one off programmes as it involves building relationships with key community leaders, groups, youth, organisations, schools and other institutions - and developing a whole systems approach together that explores how to best support young people to find their place of belonging, purpose and service within their community.

Additionally, there is a lack of 'elders', emotionally mature adults who have been through their own rites of passage and are able to hold this space for youth. Our culture is not abundant in those who can offer this work. This highlights the need for work supporting adults too (Band of Brothers is an interesting example of this - a community of male adults go through a rites of passage process themselves, then continue to meet regularly for 2 years until they then start to take young people from probation service on this journey). Is there some linking work to be done around connecting adults doing inner / rites of passage work, with young people?

### **Core narrative: community-based rites of passage**

These conversations presented a clear core narrative that offers somewhat of a skeletal structure for all the emergent threads to inter-weave within.

We would like to secure funding to run a three year pilot project across various levels of scale (local, regional, national and trans-local) to explore how to create community-based rites of passage initiatives that bring together all those groups, organisations, schools and other community institutions interested in this long term approach that supports young people to find their place and purpose in their community.

"Rites of passage must be integrated into the systems that exist and not be an extra ... there is not 'a way' to do this but instead must be responsive and born from the need and culture it exists in... This also requires addressing power dynamics and

opening up the conversation around power in a community or organisation - in service of whole systems health.

This requires understanding tension as a creative tool. Not stopping or blocking but turning to difficulty as an opportunity. Integrating divergent points of view as a way to bring this into a deeply relevant place. How do we let a rite of passage process evolve by listening to divergent voices? Divergent voices are often those not seen. In a whole system approach, we would ask what are we missing by not including that point of view? Rather than we need to do this for them...

Rites of passage is about cultural thriving - that integrates our youth to understand their role in the community and supports them to step into it. Rites of passage is not a programme, it is a community movement - so the process of co-creation is part of the rite of passage. It is a state of awareness that helps prepare us to hold the young."

(Miriam, We are Open Circle)

Key elements of a community-based approach include:

- Building place-based relationships with those already engaged with young people. This would include finding people/organisations who are already involved and passionate about youth wellbeing in their local area. It would include those who may not yet have experience of 'traditional' rites of passage as well as those who do. The aim would be to create a strong container and support system in which to venture out into local communities as below.
- Creating 'councils' and 'cups of tea' processes at all three levels to explore what a community-based rites of passage would look like and what would it take to achieve it (phase one) - which would then inform the emergent strategy for the rest of the pilot.
- After key collaborators have been identified, an initial local council has formed and relationships have been strengthened, others in the community who are both interested and relevant will be invited to join the council to together begin exploring what a community-based rite of passage for their particular community might look like - for example, this could include working with youth organisations already existing such as Schools, Duke of Edinburgh, youth organisations, expedition companies, as well as faith-based groups and leaders, local businesses and local politicians. It would certainly hope to include the voices of youth and elders and be a diverse representation of the community itself.
- Cross-pollinating experiences from local, national and trans-local perspectives to support this as a collaborative whole systems process that has the potential to be shared far and wide through a variety of training and mentoring approaches. This cross pollinating approach would ensure that the project remains open and receptive to support from the ground and also from those who have experience of developing community based rites of passage and in navigating and learning more about cultural apprites of passageriation and social justice issues to name a few. It also became apparent that as this is a possibly challenging and intensive venture it would be beneficial to have support in terms of experienced facilitators (We are Open Circle) to support the three councils to cultivate the learning and work with what is emerging.

"Listen to the ecosystem - what is it now? Where are the ceremonies? Where is the money? Where is there energy and where is there scarcity? What feels blocked and what needs support?"

(Miriam, We are Open Circle)

### **Trans-local level of scale: potential collaborators**

- Miriam Jones and Adam Rumack: Co-founders of We are Open Circle.
- Darcy Ottey, Youth Passageways
- David Listenberger: USA School and Way of Council
- Gabby Hollis: Tides, New Zealand
- Arne Rubenstein: Rites of Passage Institute, Australia
- Balu Ponnusamy: Rites of Passage guide India, Mohanam centre in Oroville
- Melissa Michaels: Founder and Director of Soma Source Educational Programs Golden Girls Global and Golden Bridge, writer
- David Blumenkrantz, Ph.D., Ed.M.,LADC

### **National level of scale: potential UK collaborators:**

- Hugh Newton: A Band of Brothers UK
- Khonsu Co founder of the Manhood Academy:  
<https://manhoodacademyofficial.com/about-2/>
- Chris Salisbury: Wild Wise UK
- Peter Hawkins: International thought leader, Professor, Coach, Writer and researcher.
- Richard Mayon-White : Founder of Wilderness Expertise
- Jamie's Farm
- Olusola Adebisi: Rites of Passage guide, UK (Narrative Mindfulness Ltd, The Visionaries, Life Beat)
- Liz Terry: Has been running girls support groups in Stroud  
<https://www.pathwaystoventures.org/-group-mentoring-for-young-women.html>
- Rupert Marques: Rites of Passage guide (Ecodharma, WildWise, Way of Nature)
- Rosie Backhouse: Social worker and team leader at Off the Record (Bristol Youth Charity)
- Manu Maunganidze Equality, Nature-based education, Environmental justice, Community Art. Bristol based youth worker.
- Israh Goodall, WildWise, Way of Nature, Wilderness Expertise,  
[www.israhgoodall.com](http://www.israhgoodall.com)

### **Local level of scale:**

Areas to be revealed soon!

### **Additional possible next steps**

- Resource a UK network sister to US-based youth passageways.
- Collating evidence around the current state of play of young people's mental health.

## **Intended outcomes**

- Cultural shift embracing rites of passage as a normal and necessary part of growing up into adulthood
- Cultures that recognise young people for the gifts they offer their community and our collective future which is not focused solely on academic success.
- Adults and elders ready to support the inner journey of young people's experience of growing up into adulthood.
- Government funding and policy recognises the essential need for rites of passage for the overall wellbeing of the individual, community and the natural world
- Funders thinking systemically rather than just one off programmes.

## **More information**

For a wealth of more detail and quotes from the various Cups of Tea conversations please contact [israhgoodall@gmail.com](mailto:israhgoodall@gmail.com) to access the full report.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Darcy Ottey: Youth Passageways USA

Gabby Hollis: Tides, New Zealand

Miriam Jones and Adam Rumack: Co-founders of We are Open Circle.

Meredith Little: Co-founder of School of Lost Borders

Olusola Adebisi: Rites of Passage guide, UK (Narrative Mindfulness Ltd, The Visionaries, Life Beat)

Ed Thatcher: Delivery Coordinator at Endeavour UK

Melissa Michaels: Founder and Director of Soma Source Educational Programs Golden Girls Global and Golden Bridge, writer.

Ursula Elsa: Gaia Passages USA

David Listenberger: USA School and Way of Council

Hugh Newton: A Band of Brothers UK

Balu Ponnusamy: Rites of Passage guide India, Mohanam centre in Oroville

Lucy O' Hagan: Rites of Passage guide Ireland, Wild Awake

Chris Salisbury; Founder of WildWise UK

Joe Gabeff: Rites of Passage guide for Illuman USA

Peter Hawkins: International thought leader, Professor, Coach, Writer and researcher.

Khonsu Sankofa: Co founder of the Manhood Academy

Tish Feilden: Jaime's Farm