



Celebrating Rites of Passage Intergenerationally

By Monica Romig

Rites of passage are cultural occasions that involve a change in status for an individual. Many of these rites involve ceremonies, celebrations, and generations in families and communities coming together. They are a means of ensuring cultural continuity. As Andrea Weaver, Bridges Together's founder and executive director, explained in a recent reflection, cultural continuity "refers to the passing on and ensuring the continuation of a culture – all that is held important by the people and makes the people unique." How can you make the next rite of passage event in your family or community more intergenerational?



Some rites of passage commonly found in the U.S.

- *Family*: Birthday, Wedding, New baby, Anniversary, Funeral/Memorial service
- *School*: Prom, Graduation, Moving on ceremonies
- *Cultural*: Boy Scout Eagle Scout/ Girl Scout Gold Award, Quinceañera, First Moon
- *Religious*: Bris, Baptism, First communion, Confirmation, Bar Mitzvah/ Bat Mitzvah
- *Professional*: First job, Promotion, Retirement

Notice how rites of passage happen at every age. Celebrating individuals moving from one stage of life to another is important whether the individual is a child or an older adult! Each stage of life brings new excitements and challenges—bringing a community together to recognize this transition respects the person being celebrated and also gives a chance for others who have gone through similar occasions to reflect and share their wisdom as they support the individual.

The 9 components of cultural continuity

Bridges Together proposes 9 different components of passing on a culture from one generation to the next: (1) Value (2) Knowledge (3) Language (4) Techniques (5) Traditions (6) Tools or instruments (7) Music (8) Food and (9) Connection to a greater community.

Examples of these components of culture as they relate to weddings:

- **Value** – Bringing two families together to commit to a new life together as one unit.
- **Knowledge** – Wisdom from elders on how to enjoy marriage to the fullest.
- **Language** – Special words like best man, maid of honor, matrimony, officiant, etc.
- **Techniques** – To have a long marriage forgive, have a date night, cultivate friendship.
- **Traditions** – Ring ceremony, exchanging vows, special readings.
- **Tools or instruments** – Veils, dresses, flowers, rings, and holy books.
- **Music** – Processions, special songs sung by everyone/sung by performers,
- **Food** – A meal or dessert, cake, and special drinks for toasts like champagne.
- **Connection to a greater community** – The families are joined together through marriage.



How to make a rite of passage intentionally intergenerational (Listed according to the Multiple Intelligences Theory)

SELF SMART:

- Encourage elders to write down questions or advice that they believe are important for the individual going through the rite to think about and on which to reflect.
- Ask questions about what is/was the most challenging part of this experience and who supported them along the way.

NATURE SMART

- Plant a tree or a perennial plant to commemorate the event.
- Choose flowers together for center pieces/ decorations/ corsages.



WORD SMART

- Buy a book about the specific rite and write a dedication on the first page. Dr. Seuss' *Oh the Places You'll Go* is a classic for these types of occasions. For a retirement party, have younger people pick out a book about a hobby the retiree enjoys and will now be able to invest in more fully.
- Make crossword puzzles/word scrambles with special words from the rite of passage. Work on the puzzles together and talk about any words that are unfamiliar to either generation.



PEOPLE SMART

- Have experienced people tell stories about their own memories of the rite of passage.
- Make time to celebrate with others.
- Use the Bridges Together conversation cards at your family gatherings and celebrations to learn more about each other in a fun new way.

BODY SMART

- Play games that are accessible for all ages related to the event. For example, for a graduation, have participants hold a paper plate over their head and draw a picture of the graduate's future on the plate. Show the drawings to the group.
- Learn dances or dance together at the event (prom, wedding, birthday).



LOGIC SMART

- Make a traditional recipe based on the event.
- In small groups, make a list of key points of the rite of passage in terms of "cultural continuity."

MUSIC SMART

- Learn the special music for the occasion, ex. *Pomp and Circumstance*, *The Wedding March*.
- Make a playlist of special music from celebrations or to honor the individual.
- Record the generations singing together.



PICTURE SMART

- Create cards for the individual with advice and hopes for them.
- Find photos of the older adults going through similar experiences, or of the age they were when they went through a similar rite of passage—
 - Retouch them online or make a craft of them side by side, or a slide show.
 - Make a photo album of every member of the family going through certain rites of passage.