

LIFE CYCLE CELEBRATIONS OF HUMANISM

Puberty-Between Birth and Marriage

by Carol Wintermute

As I mentioned earlier, we have an end of the year celebration in May at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis that we call "Rites of Passage day." We did it for the first time last year and intend to keep it as an annual celebration. We had written a Humanist curriculum with developmental goals for each year, but had not incorporated in our program a way to acknowledge those special times of maturing and significant points in the growth cycle. The Rites of Passage celebration was designed to fulfill this purpose.

We are of course concerned with the typical events that our culture honors such as birth, graduations, marriages, and death. But that does leave out a lot of life's transitions and passages that go unheralded. We are interested in focusing on some of these lesser marked events in this Rites of Passage ceremony.

Traditionally we have child dedication ceremonies included in a winter assembly and also in the spring. This year we included it as part of the May Rites of Passage program. We are fortunate to have among our members a very active young couple. They feel such a strong commitment to the Society that they chose the annual fund drive dinner as an occasion to announce their impending parenthood. The future father spoke eloquently about his intended financial support of the Society because he viewed it as a larger family in which his smaller one would be nurtured. From this clue we asked him to talk about the transition for our celebration.

After we dedicated our children, both newborns and children not previously recognized at the Society, we called forth all the children who would be entering public school in the fall to receive a special chalice lighter's badge, symbol of Unitarian values such as hope, truth, freedom, love, justice, reason etc.

Next we recognized the group of children who were leaving elementary school to attend either a middle school or junior high. We call this recognition, the growing up year. The kids are asked to talk briefly about an experience they had during the year that was a maturing one for them. In this day and age, the kids that leave elementary school face the situation that the innocent days of childhood are over and the toughening world of junior high is ahead. We are anxious to show them support and to help them feel capable that they have learned much about relating to the world and are fully equipped to continue the maturing process. They are awarded our commemorative medal necklace, honoring 500 years of Unitarianism. During this year they supposedly have learned something of the heroes and heroines of our tradition.

The next stage we celebrate is entering high school, whether that is 9th or 10th grade. We call this recognition the coming of age year. Again this transition is one in which the young people are anticipating entering a setting

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where more sophisticated behaviors and more responsibility are expected. Many adolescents handle the task of developing a separate identity from parents and the peer group pressures by relating more closely with non-family members. They are coming into their own, and this awareness of children in the process of becoming adults is recognized in just about all cultures.

It is a time of poignant physical changes which we tend to by offering a course that is immensely well attended called "About Your Sexuality." If only the parents would believe that the rest of our curriculum-like learning about our Humanist philosophical tradition was as important as sex. The curriculum plan for this year includes the linking of youth to an adult friend.

We call this our "link program" because many of the kids and adults felt the word "mentor" to be cold, too instructional and limiting. The purpose of it is to be with an adult who is not a family member, with whom the young person feels comfortable and can talk to. We are working on the details of how it will work this fall, hoping to put it into action by late Winter. Issues of selection of pairs, kinds of activities, expectations of each have to be discussed. Our hope is for the young people to have a Society friend who will give them support with things that concern them as well as to work with them in learning about our movement. For the Rites of Passage celebration we ask them to work with their adult friend to prepare a short talk about a person, alive, dead, or even fictional who best represents some qualities that they feel are important to develop. At the ceremony they are given a small book with biographies of some of our heroes and heroines which contains some commemorative stamps of these people.

The other group of adolescents we honor are graduating seniors in high school. They too have had a version of the "About Your Sexuality" course. The younger group spends more of its time on learning the facts and dispelling the myths, while high schoolers deal more with the relational aspects of sexuality, due to their increased experience and approaching partnerships.

They are also part of the link program. They may still have their friend from junior high or may have chosen another person to help them with their contribution to Rites of Passage Day. We ask them to work on a summary of their philosophical views. It seems that after 18 years of leaving it to hope that their kids get something out of Sunday School, parents suddenly become nervous that they're going to leave home without being able to speak about Humanism. In fairness, I have also talked with some of our young adults who are in college or starting their working lives, and found that they felt that they had not been prepared to discuss or defend their tradition. In working with an adult friend on writing their philosophy, we intend that they gain some practice in articulating their beliefs and views. For Rites of Passage Day they receive a book on U-U history and the history of Humanism.

Also during the year with the junior and senior highers we ask them on occasion to usher, assist with a program such as the child dedication ceremony, to attend a board meeting, check out Society activities, and give of their time and energy where needed. We intend these activities to be fun, help them feel

useful and competent, and to give them an idea what commitment to a religious or philosophical community is all about.

After all the children and young people are given their chance to speak and receive their gifts, we go on to celebrate transitions for adults. We feel it's important for the whole membership, young and old, to see the life cycle in totality. This year we spoke of the empty nest, which was my contribution to the day. Someone spoke of turning 30 and facing a decision to marry or have children. Khoren Arisian spoke for the transitions of the middle years, and one of our senior members talked of the glories of older age.

To go back to adolescents, I want to add a few more thoughts about their point in the life cycle and celebrating their transitions. Our culture emphasizes one's coming to adulthood in some very unhelpful ways. No matter how we protest, we do glamorize alcohol, drugs, fast cars, and fun sex. They are the prized things you get to do when growing up. We need more rituals and recognitions that focus on the responsibilities of freedom within our society. We do too little to welcome them into the experiences that constitute mature citizenship. When we take seriously their forming values and views, then they may begin to take their place as responsible adults more seriously. A religious education director who had my job many years ago told me of their family celebration of their daughter's initial menstruation. When she came home from school a bouquet of roses awaited her along with a note from family members welcoming her to approaching womanhood. I wasn't sure how my daughter would respond to such an event recognized in this fashion, but we tried it anyway. She was anything but embarrassed. She was delighted and felt very special, as she told her grandparents over the phone of our recognition of her womanhood. She tells us now that it had something to do with her gaining respect for herself as a female and the motivation to see that others respected her as a woman who would make choices about such matters as sexual intimacy on terms that were affirming to her self-esteem. The point of this illustration is that life-cycle celebrations are not only important as recognitions of passages, but can actually help with transitions.

We need to brainstorm some more ways we can positively celebrate adolescent stages. Life cycle celebrations can recognize achievement and also point the way for adolescents and younger kids. Less sophisticated cultures than ours knew that special rites for puberty had a way of insuring that their young people knew of the expectations and obligations of the adult community.

We respond, for instance, to the right to drive only when it is abused. One sign that you're a wild and crazy fun guy is a few speeding tickets. We make nothing of the youth who accept this right with a sense of responsibility. We do little to support the kids who would like to remain drug free. Our Humanist communities can at least support our own youth by making the choice for responsible transitions to adulthood a very desirable image. We can say to them in our celebrations that we believe in behaviors that affirm one's sense of worth and the dignity and rights of others. We need to find effective ways to say that you are not a nerd if you don't follow the cool crowd; what is cool is to follow the dictates of your own conscience. That kind of independence is what we need to help adolescents celebrate.