

RIGHT OF PASSAGE EXPEDITIONS (ROPE)

Al Adams, December, 2018

A friend, Rocky Kimball, recently sent me Maurice Gibbons' 1974 article, *Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School*. He was inspired to do so by the recent death of Nicolas Roeg, who directed the 1971 survival film, "Walkabout." He also reminded me that Gibbons' article was the most-read Kappan Magazine article of all time. I was one of those readers and credit that article with inspiring several experiential programs that my colleagues and I developed at *The Colorado Springs School* in the '70's.

This, in turn, led me to reflect on the *Right of Passage Expeditions (ROPE)* that I created when each of our sons turned 14 – Charley in 1994 and Willie in 1996. I then dug out an article I had written about these expeditions in 1999 for the Canadian journal, *Everyman: A Men's Journal*. I share that article below but realize that, due to the work of an overly-zealous editor, it requires a bit of a "set-up" for it to make complete sense. So, here is the brief outline:

In each instance, I asked our son to choose three friends who they would like to participate, along with their fathers. Hence, there were four pairs of fathers and sons from San Francisco on each trip, along with a friend of mine who was an experienced outdoor guide. In Charley's case (1994), the very same Rocky Kimball (above) agreed to be our leader. We first met in Vail, CO, where we negotiated a high ropes course that Rocky had used with Outward Bound groups many times before. We then camped at the base of Quandry Peak (one of Colorado's 54 14,000' peaks), which we nearly summited (driven down by a lightning storm). The next day found us further south and rafting the white waters of the Arkansas River, near Salida, CO. From there we camped on a ranch among the aspen groves to the west of Salida. On the last day, we drove back to Denver to catch planes, having a celebratory lunch along the way at the Fairplay Hotel.

For Willie's ROPE, we also went to Colorado, but this time to the state's southwest corner. On this occasion, my friend, Ed Young, also a long-time Outward Bound instructor, was our leader on a four-day (very) demanding backpack trip from the Million Dollar Highway (between Durango and Silverton) into the Vestal Basin of the San Juan Mountains. There were many highlights as we explored the pristine wilderness, and one was the two Rocky Mountain goats that hung-out in, and around, our campsite (it turns out they are drawn by human urine....). We also made a peak ascent, but the most essential components were all that it took to get there, to be there and to get back! Our celebration was at a hot springs near Durango and a final meal at Ed's house.

I hope that this outline will successfully set the stage for the (somewhat) more nuanced descriptions in this article:

Rite of Passage Expeditions

A father's gift to his sons

by Albert Adams



The thought of a rite-of-passage event for our sons first occurred to me four years ago as I perused a stack of eighth graders' admissions applications to the school where I work. I had decided to read a sampling of these in order to get a feel for how 13-year-olds approach this daunting, ill-timed hurdle of introspection and self-promotion. Most striking to me were the personal essays submitted by many of the Jewish kids in response to the query: "What has been one of the most meaningful experiences in your life?" Most wrote about their bar/bat mitzvahs with a depth of experience and insight which was riveting and dramatic. Some were nothing less than revelatory. What a powerful coming-of-age ritual—celebrating religious conviction, family, community and tradition, as well as the maturing of a young adult—the Jewish culture has preserved over the centuries! There is nothing comparable in most American teenagers' lives. A driver's license, various graduations and having one's first legal drink, anaemic by comparison, are the closest our modern society has to offer.

At the same time, back in 1992, I learned of a rite of passage model which had been developed by a group of San Francisco School fathers for their eighth grade graduates. Described in Bernard Weiner's small book, *Boy Into Man: A Fathers' Guide to Initiation of Teenage Sons*, it took place in an outdoor setting not far from the city, and drew heavily on theatre, ritual and a prepared script. While it was clear that this approach was very effective for these fathers and sons, I sensed uneasiness among our 1994 group of fathers after they had read about it. Once assured that I had presented *Boy Into Man* only as a springboard to our deliberations, my friends

acknowledged their discomfort with the ritualistic and theatrical elements which were the core of that approach. "It's just not us," seemed to sum it up. However, many aspects did resonate: the all-male make-up of the group, the direct involvement of the moms, the location at a remote natural setting, the inclusion of physical gifts which would be enduringly emblematic of the occasion, recognition that the dads making time to design and participate in the enterprise would ultimately be more important than the actual components of the event.

An early realization, in our case, was that this rite of passage was for us dads as much as for our sons. Just as our teenagers were about to pass into adulthood, so were we about to become fathers of young men. An early, seminal decision was to solicit letters on the topic of adulthood (advice, reflections, anecdotes, words of wisdom) from several of our sons' adult relatives and friends, to be compiled as an Adult Reflection Journal for presentation during the expedition. Eager to avoid images of male warriors reverting to the woods (no drums on this trip), we agreed to highlight "adulthood" rather than "manhood." This inclusion of letters from adult friends was, as much as anything, our way of asking for help in giving ballast to this rite of passage endeavour and of connecting our sons' passage to the lives and thoughts of real people who were trusted elders in their lives.

In retrospect, it was the Adult Reflection Journals which provided the philosophical anchor for both Charley's and Willie's R.O.P.E. In each case, having been presented with the journals on the first night, the sons retreated to a solitary place and were drawn,

for over an hour, into the thoughtful and personal words of their elders. When they returned to the group, each shared highlights from what they had read; some poignant, some humorous, some reflective, some challenging. As promised beforehand, the dads then shared thoughts about their relationships with their own fathers and the coming-of-age rituals which they had, or had not, experienced in their teenage years.

This element of our R.O.P.E.s brings to mind Robert Bly's observations in *The Sibling Society* about the tragedy of people today being isolated from those in other generations. His insights echo Margaret Mead's belief that any culture is sustained when three generations are vitally interacting with each other—a 'vertical culture' in which the different age groups are connected." The Adult Reflection Journals may not succeed in sustaining our culture, but they did (and do) dramatically connect three generations in our families.

Beyond these adult reflections, however, we decided early-on that the experience we were to have with our sons needed to stand largely on its own. In the words of my brother-in-law, an experienced Outward Bound instructor, "Damn it, Albert, if there is one thing privileged, urban, teenage boys don't need in the 1990s, it is more cerebral gymnastics. What they need is authentic experience!" Having myself been a twenty-five year proponent of experiential education, I was embarrassed to need such an unsubtle reminder of the power of direct experience. How many times over the years had I quoted educational researcher, James Coleman, who noted that schools must change because they were originally designed for turn-of-the-

century kids who were 'experience-rich and information-poor'? By contrast, modern kids are just the opposite: 'information-rich (e.g., the World Wide Web) and experience-poor.'

When I shared this alternative paradigm with our 1994 group of dads, there was an audible, collective "Aha!" We felt inspired by the open-ended prospects now lying before us and relieved that we were no longer under pressure to compose an extensive rite of passage script. Outward Bound's formula—letting experience be born of challenge, adventure and attention to group dynamics—has worked magic for decades. We did not need to re-invent the wheel this time around.

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In retrospect, it was the enterprise itself, rather than particulars, which conferred significance on our expeditions. Within the modified Outward Bound model we chose, Charley's and Willie's R.O.P.E.s shared several

attributes: 'neutral turf' in the wilderness, a seasoned leader who kept the trips safe, helped to set the tone and allowed the dads to be full participants, the Adult Reflection Journals, multiple physical and psychological challenges (including initiative games and ropes courses at which the boys generally excelled), inspirational readings (from the Pacific Crest Outward Bound manual), and a good deal of father/son tent time (especially during afternoon rains).

There were also significant differences. Because our '94 guide was recovering from a knee operation, the backpacking trip we had designed evolved into a car camping endeavour at the last moment. 1994 also saw us begin and end our trip at a friend's home at 9,500' rather than being totally wilderness-based. The '94 ropes course was designed to be approached in pairs, thus forcing and enabling dads and sons to depend intimately on one another. '94 was a smorgasbord—ropes course, peak ascent, river rafting—while '96 was an intensive backpacking expedition with challenges integrated throughout. All of the 1994 sons were first-born children while three of the four in 1996 were second-born. Our 1996 hike out of the wilderness was in father/son pairs (a very special time for Will and me). And the '94 final meal was steak and potatoes at the Fairplay Hotel with sons at one table and dads at another, while the last dinner in '96 was fajitas in Farmington, New Mexico with the eight of us sitting together.

Both rite of passage expeditions—Charley's in '94 and Willie's in '96—proved to be significant for them and for me. They also stand as memorable benchmarks for their mothers and the other adults who wrote for their Adult Reflection Journals. The young men's 'coming of age' has been duly marked, notable experiences shared and deep thoughts and feelings exchanged. I write this article with the hope that other fathers will decide to design some form of rite-of-passage experience for their sons, and that mothers will do the same for their daughters. The wilderness happened to be our preference, but I believe that many different venues and 'program designs' can be effective.

For those parents who enjoy satisfying relationships with their teenagers, a rite of passage experience can serve to enrich and extend those relationships; for those who are less fortunate, such a venture might be a last chance to build a bridge to your child. In the best of all worlds, it might even be the beginning of a lifelong conversation.

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