Rites of Passage: From Here to There, from Now to Then, Along These Roads and Paths

The previous issue of Child and Youth Care Forum was devoted to the “clinical” use of the idea of rites of passage. It got me musing about that phenomenon, about the notion of “transitions,” about “age” as time, about “youth” and “adult” as social statuses and social roles, and about the larger contexts of this topic. Thus, these reflections are in conversation with that work, but obliquely so, like a jazz riff that fits, sort of!

My comments come after a four-year study of the vocational in youths’ lives, i.e., how divine “call” or world-address is a compelling moral claim to which each young person may respond and, in so doing, may craft himself by how his act shows responsibility, authenticity, and self-transcendence. This study led me to a reconsideration of the place and use of birth-age in our conceptions of youth, to study the role of the state in ordering the life-course (wherein “transitions” are located) and to the possibility that “growing up” in age-graded and age-segregated social roles, social institutions, and social settings may not be most efficacious of human development. For me these are all related to the theme of rites of passage and, indeed, are some of its contexts in society and culture. It is to these that I attend, but with a deep awareness of the power of rituals and to a nagging wish, unfulfilled, that I too could have had a ceremonial “coming of age,” especially now when I write every day with a fountain pen! [In the 1950s, a Jewish boy in New York City was to have a bar mitzvah at age 13 and be given a fountain pen (or money) as his “coming of age” gift.]
The Large Context

In late Modernity, the State in post-industrial Western society is ever more involved in giving structure and order to—institutionalizing—the “life course” (e.g., Mayer & Schoepflin, 1989). Thus, human biophysiological maturation is joined to a social schedule using body age as the universal unit. This is seen in a vast array of social, political, and economic age practices, from the infant who must get certain health immunizations to when one can enter school to when one is allowed to hold a part-time job, when one must be at home to meet “curfew,” to when one can get a car license, and all the rest. As Chudacoff (1989) shows for the US, the question, “How old are you?” tells a lot in our “age-conscious” society. The “disciplining” (Katz, 1996) of chronological age follows social practices of age-segregation on the job, in schools, and in youth groups, religious and secular. It fits with the science of life-stage development, which is taken as the “truth” about “adolescence,” one such age/stage. Let’s look at how societal age practices lead us to age/stage “transitions” and to these as social problems.

Life-Course Transitions

Once there is a life-course or life-stage continuum of human life with major divisions by age (or competence or whatever), there are created distinctions in time and space, such as “here and now” vs. “there, later,” early and later, before and after, and the like. Once there are such distinctions, there must be “transitions” between them. One form of these is rites of passage. Thus, the social construction of a “life course” as a sequence of life-stages highly correlated to chronological age can lead to the social construction of a social problem—transitions across age-groupings—and to problems on the social institutional level and on the level of personal troubles in how individuals negotiate these more or less clear transitions. The special issue focused on this level and in the clinical domain, rightly so. All of my points are well known, even trite, to those in child and youth care. Let’s play with the elements and see what emerges.

Youth: Biology and The Social

Biophysiological maturation does not give us “childhood,” “youth,” or “adult,” which of course are the social ordering and naming of body development, the dividing of these changes into life-periods, and the