

The Rites of Coming of Age

By Dennis Payton Knight

Concepts about coming of age are largely cultural rites consecrating a boy or girl's passage from childhood to adult. What that actually means is as vague as defining what an adult is, and when it happens is just as nebulous, but observed rites of passage occur somewhere between the ages of ten and twenty. There are many ways societies around the world perpetuate the myth that we actually do grow up.

I feel fortunate not to have been a Brazilian boy in the Amazon jungle made to wear a glove made of bullet ants with inward pointing stingers as I danced for ten minutes without flinching. Bullet ants may have the most painful sting of any insect and it can cause throbbing pain and paralysis for up to twenty-four hours.

And I am lucky my parents were not Mandan, a native American tribe in North Dakota, or I would have been made to fast for four days, then have a wooden skewer forced through my chest, hang from the ceiling until I passed out, and when I awoke have my little finger cut off. All to be welcomed into manhood. To be honest, I probably never was "welcomed into manhood" by anybody but the Army and the Internal Revenue Service.

I've related two of the nastier rites of passage, and I'll not report even worse things done to boys and girls in the name of growing up. Thankfully, there are cultures in which becoming an adult is not so bad, and maybe a lot more fun.

For instance, the Amish, after a childhood of being drilled in their faith, upon reaching the age of sixteen and before they become church members, enter a period known as Rumspringa, or "running around." They are able to leave and enjoy whatever pleasures they like, including modern clothing and dancing, alcohol and drugs. When they are finally done with it and return to join the church, it is with the knowledge of what they are sacrificing to be part of the community. Even if they don't come back, their family ties are still intact because they have not broken an oath.

In Japan, the second Monday in January is a day in which twenty year olds dress in kimonos and go to city hall for a ceremony celebrating the time when they get to vote and drink. They receive gifts and may party all they like. How wise it seems of the Japanese hold the kid off for two full decades.

For most of us however, the most important symbols of adulthood are things like the rights to hold a job, vote and drink. And of course in modern American we fete our sweet little sixteens by finally letting the kid drive a car, even if it's under adult supervision. The bestowing of a driver's license is a nice rite of passage indeed, although it inevitably coincides with the rite of the fainting father.