

# The Life Cycle: Folk Customs of Passage

by Steve Zeitlin, PhD

In our journey through life, traditional customs and rituals mark important milestones and transitions. Each stage of life, from birth to death, has its own folklore. Ideas about the life cycle are embedded in the folklore of each stage, revealing attitudes toward youth and old age. Young children's fascination with the life cycle is evident in their games, imaginative play, and rhymes, such as the rhyme, "When I was a baby, a baby, a baby/When I was a baby, this is what I did," then, "When I was a teenager, a teenager, a teenager..." until their circle game spans the life cycle to adulthood and death. In another children's rhyme, "Solomon Grundy is born on Monday, christened on Tuesday, married on Wednesday," and died as early as Sunday, with the simple postscript, "This is the end of Solomon Grundy."

As Adults, we continue to comment on the life cycle: "If a man is 20 and not a revolutionary, he has no heart. If he is 40 and a revolutionary, he has no mind." The ancient riddle of the Sphinx asks what walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening. The answer is humans, who crawl on four legs as babies, walk on two until, toward the end of life, we may require a cane.

Rites of passage are the mileposts that guide us through the life cycle. Western scholars have organized rites of passage *The Life and Age of Woman*. Lithograph published by James Baillie, New York City, 1848. Courtesy of Library of Congress into three distinct phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. The anthropologist Victor Turner deeply researched the transitional or "liminal" stage in initiation rituals, analyzing the momentous reordering of the neophytes' world that occurs as they are

in limbo between childhood and their adult selves.

Although we frequently use the term rites of passage and often employ it metaphorically to describe traditions associated with life cycle transitions in contemporary American society, more often these traditions are customs rather than rites of passage. Rarely do we find elaborate three-part rituals, and the symbol-laden liminal phase is probably least developed today. Life transitions may be marked by an office retirement gathering, an occupational initiation prank, or a birthday party, and the custom may be as simple as dining at a favorite restaurant, opening a bottle of champagne, or blowing out candles on a cake.

Thinking about the life cycle helps us appreciate the subtle rhythms that are a part of our own and our students' lives. "What happens once in a minute, twice in a moment, but not once in a thousand years?" my daughter asked me. The answer to this children's riddle was not nearly as philosophical as the question—it was simply the letter m. Because riddling is associated with childhood and proverbs with the wiser mind of age, the movement from telling riddles as children to using proverbs as we grow older parallels the rhythms of the life cycle. At the Jewish Senior Center in Venice, California, where proverbs functioned as part of the standard social currency, the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff recorded this exchange: "My grandfather used to tell me, 'If you are ignorant, old age is a famine. If you are learned, it is a harvest.'"

"In their material culture," write Mary Hufford and Marjorie Hunt in *The Grand Generation* (see Books and Resources, on p. 19), "children often produce ephemeral

models of the adult world that surrounds them. They transform the material of everyday life into paper airplanes, clothespin pistols and darts, grass blade whistles, and daisy-chain necklaces. Their playhouses and townscapes of sand are not meant to last, built as they are of scraps borrowed from the world of older people. Thus their play might be seen, in part, as a rehearsal for roles they will assume in later life." In contrast, the folklore of older adults is often characterized not by rehearsal but by review, as reminiscences and life stories interpret and frame past experiences. We progress through the life cycle individually, but we are bound into communities by sharing in the life cycles of others. By attending christenings, *bar mitzvahs*, weddings, and funerals, we rehearse our own roles and scripts.

Because life cycle customs and rites are interwoven and celebrated in ethnic, family, religious, and community contexts, rites of passage involve choices that define a person's relationship to a particular family or group. Thus individuals often have available to them multiple life cycle customs and rites of passage. Although the life cycle pattern of each group is rooted in its history, the patterns that bind contemporaries are not those shared by their predecessors. Folklore is inherently dynamic and ever-changing. "Carmen Neris was given the choice," writes folklorist Joan Gross for the Philadelphia Folklore Project. "She could have a thousand dollars to use for a car or she could have a Sweet Sixteen Party (or *quinceañera*) for her birthday, but as the date approached she began to think that a car might be a better idea." Buying a first car is also an important custom of passage in American society, and Carmen Neris chose the car. After her family talked with her, however, she changed her mind and decided on the *quinceañera*. When two different life cycle patterns presented themselves to her, she ultimately chose the one offered by her ethnic community, in which a *quinceañera* is a custom of status and transformation.

Ultimately, one of the measures of our society is to foster and nurture each stage of life and to assure the continuance of diverse possible life cycle patterns. As we participate in our own culture, we have a

stake in assuring that we clearly mark different phases with customs of passage. Not only folklorists, but psychologists and educators working with children and parents, social workers advising the elderly, and even funeral directors shaping rituals of death, need to be aware of how the nuances of the life cycle influence each of life's phases for our communities and ourselves as individuals.

An awareness of the customs associated with different stages of the life cycle can help students of different ages to better understand the arc of their own lives—from the vantage point of youth. Understanding how their own lives fit into life cycle patterns, they can begin to discover how their lives may be similar to or different from those of people in other eras and places. In an age when it is easy to live vicariously through t.v. shows and other popular media, attention to the life cycle returns the focus

to ourselves and our families, the arenas in which the real work of life takes place.

As teachers and those who work with children at different phases of their life cycles, we are often involved in planning transition customs such as graduations and yearbooks. We can encourage students to appreciate the accompanying humor, traditions, and lore, to which they contribute as they pass through. If we can create a society in which our apocryphal Solomon Grundy can play his heart out on Monday, raise a ruckus on Tuesday, get a job on Wednesday, court all day Thursday, parent Friday, then retire, travel, and reminisce about it all on Saturday—and if he finds traditional expressive material that is vital at every stage of his life—that really is not such a bad life for Solomon Grundy.

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