

## ...UTILIZE LIMINALITY

### rites of passage

Rites of passage have long been associated with adventurous experiential learning. Sometimes, the rituals are deliberately integrated into the program and, at other times, hidden ritualism is accidentally discovered by clients.

Rites of passage are ceremonies conducted for a member of society who transitions from one past state to another future state. Examples from modern society include: decadal birthdays (20<sup>th</sup> through 60<sup>th</sup>), school/college graduations, the transition from last year of school to first year of university, first job, weddings, baby showers, retirements, and funerals.

These rituals may involve celebrations to mark a change in societal roles such as passage of status (single to married), passage of time (birthdays), passage of place (high school to university), and passage of circumstances (starting or finishing employment).

Early anthropological research on rites of passage identified a (nearly) universal tripartite sequence from **separation**, through **liminality**, to **incorporation**. The individual, who belongs to the population (which could be a society, neighborhood, work group or family), leaves it in one state and returns in another. **Separation** is detachment from the population in the old state. **Liminality** is transition across the “threshold” inter-state. **Incorporation** is return or re-entry to the population in a new state.

The use of rituals in all three stages strengthens the transition between states. However, liminality is the influential stage in adventures.

### liminality

Liminality is the middle stage of the three-stage rite of passage sequence between separation (leaving) and incorporation (returning). Located in the transition threshold between the old and new states of being, liminality is characterized by ambiguity, where the transitioning individual may be disoriented, full of doubt, and/or confused about past and future roles. Liminality allows experimentation with new role commitments.

Often, the individual is dislocated from familiar people, locales, occasions, or situations, and becomes enlightened and more certain in liminal space by overcoming personal tests in the form of challenge, conflict, hardship, and pain. Note an obvious connection to adventure.

### communitas

**Communitas** is an intense spirit of community that forms, often in the liminal space, where individual status roles are equalized. Clients in transition come together as a substitute social group, temporarily replacing the family or home community. During this shared experience, feelings of group camaraderie are intensified.

Programs may unknowingly use liminal spaces. Commonalities may include separation from previous social roles, vigorous learning environments, formation of group identities, and reports of hyper-bonding. This model of transition from the rites of passage provides a useful lens to view liminality and communitas in adventure programs like university orientations and wilderness therapy expeditions.

*Brent Bell & Simon Priest*

[aee.org](http://aee.org)

Brent Bell  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE  
bbell@unh.edu

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## READING

Andrews, K. (1999). The Wilderness Expedition as a Rite of Passage: Meaning and Process in Experiential Education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 22(1), 35–43.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/105382599902200107>

Ashworth, D. (2017). Can communitas explain how young people achieve identity development in outdoor adventure in light of contemporary individualised life? *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 17(3), 216-226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2017.1294489>

Bell, B. (2003). The Rites of Passage and Outdoor Education: Critical Concerns for Effective Programming. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 26(1), 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590302600107>

Bell, B., Beames, S. & Carlson, W. (2010). The Expedition and Rites of Passage. In *Understanding Educational Expeditions* (pp. 33-44). Brill Sense. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911255\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911255_005)

Larson, S. & Martin, L. (2012). Risk Taking and Rites of Passage. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 20(4), 37-40.

May, D. (1996). Adventure education as a process of initiation: Aspects of tradition and possible relationships to present-day Western society. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership*, 13(2), 30–33.

Norris, J. (2011). Crossing the threshold mindfully: exploring rites of passage models in adventure therapy. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 11(2), 109-126.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2011.633380>

Sharpe, E. K. (2005). Delivering communitas: Wilderness adventure and the making of community. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 37(3), 255-280.

Turner, V.W. (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Kegan Paul Ltd.

van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. (M.B. Vizedom & G.L. Caffee, trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1909, les rites de passage).

Venable, S. F. (1997). Adolescent Rites of Passage: An Experiential Model. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 20(1), 6–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382599702000102>