Rites of Passage

Term: Fall; Year: 2001; Day / Time: Wednesdays 7:00–9:50 p.m.; Place: Woods 4-110

Instructor

Dr. Ron Grimes, Office Location: Woods: 5-115B
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Office hours: Fridays 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. or by appointment. Note: I can also meet with you after class (but not before class). The most efficient way to contact me is by e-mail, since I check it a couple of times a day whether I’m working at home or at the office. Getting and returning phone messages is slower.

Course Description

From the Calendar: “An introduction to ritual theory and to selected rites of passage such as births, weddings, funerals, and initiations.” Rites of passage are ways of marking major transitions, of exiting an old way of life and beginning a new way of life.

This course is an introduction to the study of ritual, concentrating specifically on rites of passage, both traditional and experimental, and largely, but not exclusively, in North America. We will study comparative materials from a variety cultures and a diversity of religious traditions in order to understand cultural and religious ways of negotiating major lifecycle transitions. The 2001 version of the course will be run on an experimental teamwork model focusing on ritual construction.

Course Goals

1. To survey the ways people around the world, particularly in North America, use ritual to negotiate lifecycle transitions.
2. To understand the ritual process by engaging in group construction of a rite of passage.
3. To provide a forum in which to reflect on your own and other people's experience of passage.
4. To introduce controversial issues and persistent problems in ritual theory and practice.

Course Outline (12 sessions)

Codes:
A = Anthology reading to prepare (by selection number) [see below for list]
B = Book reading to prepare: Deeply into the Bone reading (by chapter)
G = time allotted for group meetings
* = assignment due

Sep 12 What kind of course is this?
What is a rite? What do rites do?
What kinds of rites are there?
What is a rite of passage?
A: 2.1 - 2.3, 3.1- 3.2
B: Introduction

19 What are the components of a rite?
What are the dimensions of a rite?
How is ritual related to religion, cosmology, myth, ethics, and institutions?
A: 1.1 - 1.4
16 Where do rites come from?
   How do you construct a rite?
   How do you evaluate a rite?
   A: 1.4 - 1.6
   G: ½ hour
   * Group lists and proposals due

Oct 3 Rites of birth and early childhood
   A: 6.1 - 6.5
   B: 1
   G: ½ hour

10 Initiation and coming of age rites
   A: 4.1 - 4.5
   B: 2
   G: ½ hour
   * Mid-term evaluations

17 Rites of courtship and marriage
   A: 5.1 - 5.4
   B: 3
   G: ½ hour

24 Death rites
   A: 7.1 - 7.6
   B: 4
   G: ½ hour

31 Passages less commonly marked
   B: 5, Conclusion
   G: ½ hour

Nov 7 *Group presentations (Groups 1, 2 & 9)
14 *Group presentations (Groups 3, 4 & 10)
21 *Group presentations (Groups 5, 6 & 11)
28 *Group presentations (Groups 7, 8 & 12)

Dec 5 *Group projects (in binders) and *evaluations due in my office by 10:00 a.m. No class on this day, and no final exam in this course.

Required Readings (available in WLU Bookstore)

1. Course reader: Rites of Passage Anthology [see below for list]
2. Ronald L. Grimes, Deeply into the Bone

Note: Readings are assigned for class sessions to which they pertain, but films, exercises, and discussions may take up the class time. So only a few of the readings will be discussed in class. Nevertheless, you are required to read, digest, and relate them to your project, especially in the discussion / commentary section.

On Reserve in the Library
Some books useful for your projects may be placed on reserve.

Web Resources on Rites of Passage

I have a list of web resources on rites of passage. If you would like a copy, send me an email note requesting it. The list is long and the sites are quite varied in quality. So use with care.

Ritual Studies Lab

The Ritual Studies Lab, located on the first floor of 202 King St. is available to student groups wishing to work on ritual. You should book it ahead of time Ewa Dabrowska, the Religion and Culture Department’s administrative assistant. Keys can be picked up and returned promptly afterward to her.

Course Requirements

There is no final examination in this course. Rather, it operates on a team work model. Your mark for course is based on your contribution to the team’s ritual construction project (see guidelines below). It is your responsibility to help create a group and / or to find your way into one. If you have difficulty, let me know and I’ll help.

Even though you will be working in groups, I must be able to evaluate individual contributions, so the written evaluations are crucial. The thoroughness and honesty of your evaluations can affect your grade considerably. At the end of the course you must submit a report / evaluation consisting of a list of everything you did for the course, including the project; a candid assessment of your own work for the course, including an honest, suggested mark (by % rather than letter grade; in marking, assume that “average” means 70 - 72%); a briefer evaluation of other people’s contribution (or lack of it), including honest, suggested marks for them (also by %); a rank ordering of everyone in your group (including yourself) from “greatest contribution” to “least contribution.” I will ask for evaluations in the middle of the term and at the end. The mid-term evaluations will be briefer and less detailed.

Your final mark is decided by me, and it is the outcome of several factors such as the mark for your group’s project, your self-evaluation, others’ evaluation of your contribution to the project, my evaluation of both of these evaluations, and class and group participation. Your mark is not the outcome of a formula but of my considered judgment informed by feedback from you and your group.

Format for Self-Evaluation

Self-Evaluation For ___________________________ (your name, legibly, last name first)
Mark I think I earned: ______ %
How I would rank order participants in my group, including myself. (a list, from highest to lowest): (1), (2), etc.

1. What I did. (a list)
2. How well I believe I did—my strengths and weakness in the course (a few paragraphs).

THE FINE PRINT: 1. Assignments are due at the beginning of class. Papers arriving at the end of, or after, class are considered one day late. 2. Except in case of emergencies, you should notify me before rather than after a late assignment is due. Late papers unaccompanied by a letter from a doctor, counselor, or funeral director will be docked 10% per day. And even with such a letter, extension times must be reasonable. 3. Do not leave papers in my mailbox or put them under my door without having the department secretary to date and sign them. Otherwise, they are due by me when I have them in hand. 4. Papers occasionally get lost, so you are required to retain a copy of your paper. Do not hand in your only copy. 5. Attendance in the course is required; poor attendance can result in a lowering of your final grade. 6. Plagiarism can result in failure of this course. It is your responsibility to know what constitutes plagiarism, so you should read the Calendar statement on academic and research misconduct (p. 71-72) and read this statement: http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwwc/handouts/sources.htm. 7. Students with disabilities or special needs are advised to contact Laurier’s Special Needs Office for information regarding its services and resources. You should review the Calendar for information regarding services available on campus. 8. After class call 886-FOOT for a walk or drive home; no walk is too short or too long.
Format for Evaluating Others in Your Group

Evaluation of __________________ (name of group member, legibly, last name first; one page for each member)
Mark I believe this person earned: ______
How I would rank order this person (1st, 2nd, etc.): ______

1. What this person did (or did not do), insofar as you can remember.
2. Strengths
3. Weaknesses

Ritual Construction Projects

All rites are constructed by someone, but traditionally the “builders” have been anonymous, collective, and in the distant past. The traditional version of the construction process was slow but integral. Today in North America people are beginning to construct, invent, reinvent or create rites. This version of the ritual construction process is sometimes creative, but it can also be self-conscious, hurried, or mechanical. Each way has its virtues and vices.

The most basic decisions you must make are (1) what group to create or join and (2) what occasion or rite you wish to work on.

These are some of the more conventional rites of passage familiar to us in North America:

5 Birth and early childhood
   5.1 baby shower
   5.2 birth rite
   5.3 naming, blessing, presentation
   5.4 circumcision
   5.5 starting school

6 Coming of age: middle childhood to adulthood
   6.1 graduating from school(s)
   6.2 initiation as a teenager
   6.3 coming out (e.g., debutante balls)
   6.4 initiation as an adult
   6.5 initiation into group membership; joining an organization; entering a profession (e.g., clergy, monk, doctor, etc.), ordination

7 Courtship / marriage
   7.1 engagement
   7.2 wedding

8 Death
   8.1 funeral
   8.2 cremation, burial
   8.3 memorials, commemorations

These are examples of less conventional occasions that might receive ritual attention:

9 conception (love-making for the purpose of conceiving)
10 adoption
11 entering school
12 same-sex commitment
13 coming out (as gay or lesbian)
14 becoming friends or partners
15 a silent wedding
16 a coming-of-age rite for mentally challenged people
passage commemorations or renewals (e.g., anniversaries, renewals of wedding vows)
entering the work force; leaving the work force; taking a new job; leaving an old job
taking office
marking a big success or failure
giving up a child for adoption
divorce, end of relationship
severe illness
healing, recovery from illness
becoming recognized an elder
reaching a certain age (e.g., 30, 40, 50, 65)
retirement
un-ordination
leaving home
coming home, returning home (e.g., from war, from university)
emigration (or immigration)
moving
empty nest (last child leaving home)

And these are examples of ritual occasions that are perhaps less familiar to North Americans:
an alternative to current female “circumcision” rites
a repatriation rite for First Nations’ remains
a reburial rite for First Nations’ remains
disaster rites, e.g., funeral for children killed in a playground massacre or teens killed in an auto accident
interfaith or inter-ethnic weddings, e.g., for a (e.g, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.) bride and a (e.g., Muslim, Christian, etc.) groom

Submitting Ritual Construction Projects

These are the components of a project (with their approximate worth in parentheses):

1. Proposal / introduction: At first your group writes a proposal a page or so long. Then, as you get near the end of the project, you revise it, turning it into a longer introduction in which you describe the project, saying what the rite is and what task(s) it is designed to accomplish (there may be secondary as well as primary tasks). Describe the participants, specifying why and/or how each person (or each group) is going to participate. Lay out where and when the rite will take place (or when it took place if you choose to set it in the past). If the rite draws on a specific tradition, say what it is and how this rite is related to that tradition. The more specific you are, the better you will be able to construct a relevant rite. (responded to but not marked)

2. Ritual script(s): This is the scenario, the bare-bones description of things to be done and said. There may be one or more scripts, for instance, one for participants and another one for leaders that lays out the behind-the-scenes actions. I strongly suggest that you walk through the scenario as if rehearsing it. By doing so, you will likely discover problems you’ve overlooked. (25%)

3. Discussion, commentary: Provide a running commentary on the meanings and effects of the words, actions, objects, etc., of the rite. Then provide a discussion of the construction process, problems encountered, ideas rejected, reasons for choices made, sources read, events observed, and topics discussed. In the discussion you must relate your reading and research to the rite you constructed. The commentary demonstrates that your script is researched, well informed, and thoughtful. Use whatever format you consider most effective. One way is to use footnotes for brief commentary, endnotes to document sources, and an essay format for the general discussion. (25%)
4. **Appendices:** Anything else that enhances a reader’s comprehension of the event / rite you are presenting, e.g., passage narratives, annotated bibliography, annotated web site list, video tape (e.g., clips of interviews, your class presentation, feature film clips), photos, audio tapes of discussions in your group, transcripts of interviews, handouts for the class presentation, a critical evaluation of your ritual script, dissenting reports, etc. The appendices should be carefully chosen and well edited. Do not use them to provide quick padding for your script or discussion. (25%)

5. **Group presentation.** Here you present your rite, or some central aspect of it, in a brief form designed to engage the class’s interest. Your job is to *interest* us and to *educate* us about some of the issues and problems surrounding the rite you worked on. You can talk, use media, dramatize, put on demonstrations, provide hand-outs, conduct exercises, etc. The presentation will be evaluated by students *not* in your group and by me. Note: these presentations may be video taped for instructional purposes. Length: 45 minutes maximum, including discussion (if any) and a brief written evaluation. (25%)

**The binder:** The first four of the above items must be in a well organized binder that can be left as an archive for future students of rites of passage. Tapes should be in large envelopes that have been punched and incorporated into the binder. The binder should contain a complete list of credits (who did what), e.g., “Commentary: first draft by Jane Doe, edited by John Green, critique and second draft by Jackie White.” This list, however, is for my benefit. It will not be left with the binder. Only the list of group members will remain with the binder.

**Group Work**

Group work can be exciting or frustrating. It is exciting when the labor is divided up equitably, saving you time, and when somebody else’s strengths compensate for your weaknesses. It is frustrating when one or two people do the lion’s share of the work while others coast, or when someone else’s neuroses and insecurities trigger your own.

Assumptions about this class: 50 class members. 12 groups of 4-5 persons each. There will be the following kinds of groups, allotted on a first-come-first-serve basis:

- 2 birth groups (Groups 1 & 2)
- 2 initiation groups (Groups 3 & 4)
- 2 wedding groups (Groups 5 & 6)
- 2 death groups (Groups 7 & 8)
- 4 “other” groups (Groups 9, 10, 11, 12). Topics to be negotiated on the basis of the list above. I might also consider a proposal to work on a script for a film / video series on rites of passage (or some specific passage).

For some purposes two groups working on the same topic, e.g., birth, may wish to meet together occasionally or share resources.

40 **The task.** Pick an interesting or challenging task and situation. If you define one that is too conventional, you’ll find that you have no room to maneuver. Some of you may prefer to push off existing rites, proposing, for example, an “alternative” wedding or funeral. Some of you may prefer to work on situations seldom ritualized such as the birth of a mentally defective child. I strongly suggest that you read ahead in *Deeply into the Bone* to explore one of the passages that interests you; doing so will help you find the right group for you.

41 **Group members.** Groups usually function best if people get along and if the pool of skills and backgrounds is varied. For instance, you might want to ensure that at least one anthropology and one religion students is in your group. You don’t want enemies, of course, but best friends can be a problem too.

42 **Meeting times and places.** Try to find a place that is quiet and not distracting. Meeting in dorms or homes may be relaxing but lots of time can be wasted in cleaning, chatting, etc. It is essential to figure out a day and a time when everyone can meet. You have a few half-hour meeting times in class, but this will not be enough. I suggest that you meet weekly. The Ritual Studies Lab, 202 King St., can be booked and used for this purpose.
Division of labor. It’s a good idea to sort out jobs quickly and clearly, and then to modify job descriptions as the tasks proliferate or become more obvious. These are some of tasks that may need doing: finding books and articles; writing annotated bibliographies; attending ceremonies and reporting on them; telling stories about rites; writing commentary; summarizing arguments; identifying and debating issues; interviewing; searching the Internet; public speaking; audio or video taping and editing.

43.1 If you feel that the work in your group is not fair or has become imbalanced, please communicate that to me—the sooner the better.

Documentation. Since the project is process oriented, it is a good idea to keep a journal documenting your own and your group’s process. At the very least, keep notes on the meetings and discussions. Consider audio or video taping them. When it comes time for the class presentation, you might find it useful to play a clip from a discussion or walk-through.

Integration. Group projects need lots of integration; otherwise, you’ll produce a mere collection of things. So be sure that one or two people are responsible for editing, synthesizing, and, thinking about the overall direction and the final product.

Imagination. It’s important to organize and divide up the work, but it’s just as important to brainstorm, play, contemplate, and imagine. Work on your rite, but play with it too. Try being the mamma. Then try playing baby. And be the pop too.

Conflict. Where there are humans (or other animals) there is competition and conflict. Use the mediation skills you learned in elementary school. Minimize the gossip. Speak directly to people who are dominating or loafing. Call me into the fray if the scrapes get wearing, intractable, or contentious.
Rites of Passage: Key Words for Searching

GENERAL THEORETICAL WORKS ON RITES OF PASSAGE OR THE LIFE CYCLE

Key words: ritual, passage, life cycle (or lifecycle), rites of passage, rites de passage, Turner, Victor, van Gennep (or Gennep), human development, liminality, communitas

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD RITES

Key words: birth, childbirth, parturition, couvade (simulated or sympathetic pregnancy symptoms acted out by the father), parenting, mothering, fathering, parenting, abortion, midwifery, stillbirth, naming, bonding, menarche, menstruation, menopause, lactation, puerperium (post-partum adjustment period), churching (reincorporation of mothers into a church after birth), lithotomy position (lying on the back to give birth), paternity, maternity, kinship, descent, caesarean section, godparents, sponsors

INITIATION RITES: Puberty, Becoming an Adult

Key words: initiation, secrecy, puberty rites, circumcision, transition rites, clitoridectomy, manhood, womanhood, baptism, education, religious education, education, sponsors, teachers, teachers and students, upanayana (initiation in Brahmanical Hinduism)

INITIATION RITES: Ordination, Succession, Secret Societies

Key words: ordination, succession, status, office, priest, priestess, priesthood, secret societies, sororities, fraternities, sodalities, cults

MARRIAGE RITES

Key words: marriage, weddings, bride, groom, in-laws, etiquette, meals, matchmakers, arranged marriage, shivaree, kinship, exchange, gifts, gift-giving, bride price, mock weddings, clothing, dress, sexuality, gender, honeymoons, wedding poetry, wedding music, sealing (Mormon wedding practice)

DEATH RITES

Key words: death, funerals, mortuary customs, mortuary law, mourning, grief, death lore, burial, interment, embalming, cryonic suspension, cremation, crematorium, aging, illness, suicide, cemeteries, specific cemeteries (e.g., Flanders Field, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), tombs, morgues, tombstones, gravestones, ossuaries (bone repositories), commemorative plaques or monuments (e.g., Vietnam War Memorial), death certificates, obituaries (death notices), eulogies (funeral orations), autopsy, death benefits (e.g., inheritance, insurance money), funeral homes (or funeral parlors), funeral directors, caskets, ancestors, ancestor cults, veneration of the dead, burial remains, the archaeology of death, relics, sati (or sutee) [the burning of a spouse on a funeral pyre--a now-illegal practice in India], state funerals, baptism for the dead (a Mormon practice), funerals of famous people (e.g., Pope John XXIII, Abraham Lincoln), military funerals, lynching, execution, war, celebrations of death or the dead (e.g., Halloween, All Souls Day, All Saints Day, Memorial Day, Remembrance Day, Day of the Dead), viaticum (food for the dying--Roman Catholic), obsequies (synonym for funeral rites), effigies

EXPERIMENTAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL RITES OF PASSAGE

Key words: women in ritual; theatre, ritual in; self-generated rites; the occult; wicca; performing ethnography; performance studies

Notes on using 202 King St., 1-01, the Ritual Studies Lab
Either you must pay a deposit on the keys or you must return them to the R&C office immediately after use.

Both the front door and the door to 1-01 must be locked after use.

Because we sit on the floor and the room is seldom vacuumed, please remove your shoes and leave them in the hall.

You are welcome to use the kitchen for tea, etc., provided you clean up afterward. It is best to keep food out of the lab, but if you do take food in, clean up thoroughly; otherwise, the mice arrive in droves.

An Anthology
selected for classroom use by Ron Grimes

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