



The Rite Journey: From disengaged teens to responsible young adults

Andrew Lines

Over the last decade of teaching it became more and more clear to me that I was working with middle years students who were grappling with a world that was significantly different from the one in which I had grown up.

One of the most significant issues was technology related: the massive amount of information these young people had exposure to; students spending far more time in front of screens than in front of teachers; the shift from a 'question rich, answer poor' society to one that is 'question poor, answer rich'; the plethora of young men playing video games awash with 'virtual violence'; relationships being conducted via a screen rather than in person and the subsequent lack of human connection.

The boys I taught displayed a number of problem areas based on issues such as bullying, sexism, racism, homophobia and anger management. It also seemed that their lives were becoming 'bubble-wrapped' and they were missing out on challenge and risk in preference for safety and

predictability. The opportunities for building resilience were passing them by.

Many had family problems and perhaps the most striking of these was under-fathering. Many lacked an adult male in their lives who they trusted and who was able to provide a good, strong, gentle and positive model of manhood. The sports stars and musicians these young men admired often exhibited an inappropriate treatment of women, excessive drug use and other socially destructive actions.

The girls were struggling with issues of their own. An increase in the prevalence in eating disorders amongst middle years students reflected the increased pressure these girls were feeling regarding their appearance. Non-uniform days presented staff with challenges regarding the nature of girls' skimpy and sexually-oriented attire. This deep concern was being supported by alarming statistics regarding increased high risk behaviours, including drug use and sexual activity. Steve Biddulph (2 June, 2007) hit the nail on the head in a Sydney Morning Herald article and whilst speaking about girls his comment rang true for the experience of boys too:

A successful and happy adolescence entails hundreds of conversations about what matters, who you are and what you stand for. Yet many girls are basically abandoned by

distracted parents and the impersonal melee of large secondary schools.

It became clear to me that I had the opportunity, as a teacher, to create a 'subject' which was all about having these absent conversations with male students. It could specifically explore issues around boys developing into what Steve Biddulph (2010) calls a 'good strong man', one with both 'heart and backbone', and with topics about being a respectful, responsible and resilient adult male. My aim was to develop a low cost program which would have minimal impact on school curriculum but maximum impact on the students. I targeted Year 9, that traditional year of disengagement.

Initially the program ran for one term but I became aware of the lack of time available.

The best (school-wide boys' development) programs are integrated into the school curriculum and involve substantial and weekly contact over a year or two. Shorter programs than this appear to have little effect. (Currie, 2008, p. 215).

I chose to create a curriculum, using three lessons a week, which was a journey for the student, representing their unfolding adulthood:

Term 1 Relationship with self: Who am I, really?

Term 2 Relationship with others: How do I get along with others?

Term 3 Relationship with spirit: Is there something more?

Term 4 Relationship with the world: What do I have to give?





The final step in the process, and potentially the most unique and important, came from the acknowledgment that there could be a deepening of a student's experience of this program by incorporating some form of ceremony and celebration within it, and hence 'The Rite Journey' was born.

The importance of providing a form of rite of passage / initiation for young people in our society is being strongly recognised by many experts in education and psychology. Peter Ellyard, Leonard Sax, Ian Grant, Michael Ungar and Steve Biddulph all clearly extol the virtues of rediscovering such a process in contemporary society.

Based on work by Joseph Campbell (1949), the use of seven steps of the hero's journey was initiated as a template for forming the rites of passage. These seven steps (Calling, Departure, Following, Challenges, Getting Lost, Return and Homecoming) include a variety of celebrations, some of which involve only students and teachers and others that include parents/ caregivers and mentors. The students are taken on a powerful journey throughout the year which not only nurtures, guides and affirms, but also extends and challenges.

In its final form, The Rite Journey appears in the school setting as a 'subject' and typically consists of three lessons per week (approximately 120—150 mins) for the duration of the year. Along with this curriculum time there are seven 'ceremonies' which occur at various points throughout the year to celebrate the young person's passage on this journey.

The success of 'The Rite Journey' in schools has been overwhelming with students, parents, teachers and principals, all noting the changes in students' attitudes and behaviour. Perhaps the most important learning has come in realising that such a program can lead to cultural change in schools and families. The Rite Journey is used as a punctuation point between childhood and beginning adulthood. Students can progress from Year 9 into Year 10 with an expectation from the school and parents that attitudes will change, that the young adult will step up in responsibility.

It has been important to ensure that staff who are passionate about such a process are the ones who are guiding students through the program, and that there is strong support from the leadership of the school.

As the number of schools implementing the Rite Journey increases, we hope to create a community of teachers who share their ideas. A positive outcome would be to reverse the societal trend of the phase of adolescence extending (some suggest the current range to be from 9 to 30 years of age) and begin to transform young people into responsible, resilient and respectful adulthood at an earlier age.

References

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2005). *Statistics on Drug Use in Australia 2004*. Canberra: AIHW.
- Biddulph, S. (2007). Teenage girls under attack. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/teenage-girls-under-attack/2007/06/01/1180205509747.html>
- Biddulph, S. (2011). *The New Manhood*. Sydney: Finch Publishers.
- Biddulph, S. (2010). *The New Manhood: The handbook for a new kind of man*. Sydney: Finch Publishers.
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. USA: Pantheon Books.
- Currie, M. (2008). *Doing anger differently: Helping adolescent boys*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Ellyard, P. (2008). *Designing 2050 Pathways to Sustainable Prosperity on Spaceship Earth*. Melbourne: TPN TXT.
- Grant, I. (2008). *Growing Great Boys*. London: Ebury Publishing.
- Sax, L. (2006). *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Ungar, M. (2007). *Too Safe for Their Own Good*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Sauers, J. (2007). *Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers*. Sydney: Random House.

About the author:

Andrew Lines is the co-creator and director of The Rite Journey and is also a teacher in a K-12 Independent School south of Adelaide.

andrew@theritejourney.com.au

