

**Coming Home to Gaia:  
Mentored Earth-based Rites of Passage for Adolescent Girls**

by

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Summary of Research Findings

This was a qualitative blended study, using elements of organic inquiry, participatory research, feminist research, and heuristic research, which explored the process of creating ritual with adolescent girls and their mentors. The research question was, *What is participants' experience of creating and enacting a mentored Earth-based Rite of Passage with adolescent girls who are facing life challenges in a multicultural context?* The study was conducted over a period of seven weeks during the late winter of 2006 at a chartered middle school on the San Francisco Peninsula. It focused on the experience of immersing a culturally diverse group of scholastically challenged girls and their adult female mentors in a process of co-creating a girls' Rite of Passage, modeled after Earth-based or indigenous rituals.

I chose all female co-researchers for two reasons. According to Carol Gilligan (1982, 1991, 1993) and Mary Pipher (1994, 1996), girls are in need of processes that will help them to acknowledge and reclaim their feminine power. In Western society, boys and men are still at the top of the social, political, and financial pyramid. Furthermore, while this is not the place to discuss, in full, the subject of the patriarchy, women are feeling increased urgency to heal the patriarchal wounds—both spiritual and physical—that have been inflicted on the

feminine and on the planet. (Christ, 1979; Adler, 1979; Warren, 2000; Eisler, 2005) I hoped to contribute to this healing work through creating a Rite of Passage with the young participants in this study.

Interestingly, in the process of chronicling a girls' Rite of Passage, the project itself became one. The Rite of Passage in this study—indeed, the entire research project—followed Victor Turner's (1969) stages of initiatory processes: preparation/separation, liminality, initiation, and incorporation.

Results showed that adult co-researchers (5 Wise Elders and 8 Mentors) were motivated to participate in the study by feelings of empathy for adolescent girls in general, and particularly for the 9 girls in this study, who would be undergoing the Rite of Passage. Schools and other organizations, such as church youth groups, proved to be the best sources of adolescent participants; and teachers, youth directors, or program directors of such organizations were the best judges of which adolescents might benefit from the experience. Adolescents who were facing various life challenges, such as difficulty at school or at home, proved to be the most likely candidates for such a project.

Results further showed that building trust between mentors and girls was the first challenge facing us in this project. We eventually established a foundation of mutual trust by finding ways of addressing cultural and generational differences—differences that in themselves constituted the second challenge. Encouraging the girls' freedom of expression through sharing with their mentors and artmaking were the main methods used to overcome this challenge; however, this contributed to a third challenge: maintaining a balance between order and

creative chaos. My preference for creative chaos then brought about the fourth challenge, differences of opinion among mentors on appropriate leadership styles (Mindell, 1992).

Despite these challenges, however, at the end of the study the girls were able to report positive change in three areas: relationships and performance in school, relationships at home, and their sense of themselves. Several of the girls reported improvement in the ability to study effectively. Girls also mentioned feeling happy that, since both their behavioral and academic performance at school had improved, their families would be proud of them. All the girls demonstrated having arrived at a more mature sense of themselves, both in their ability to articulate their experience of the Rite of Passage and other aspects of the study, and in their ability to deal with changes of plan and other disappointments.

These findings suggest that mentored, Earth-based rites of passage *can* be beneficial to some adolescent girls. The Rite of Passage enabled the girls in this study to experience enhanced feelings of self-esteem; a sense of sisterhood (the feeling of belonging to a supportive community of women); greater understanding of themselves and others; expanded ability to learn and benefit from new experiences; and improvement in self-control, motivation, and goal attainment. These findings are commensurate with Monty Roesl's (1993) findings in his study of a young Navajo girl's coming-of-age ceremony, or Kinaalda. It is also validated by the work of Denise Hutter (1999), who found, in her study of young adults participating in a wilderness Rite of Passage, that rites of passage can support young people facing issues of transition into adulthood, as well as help to

change this culture's negative perception of young people to one which encourages them to discover and share their personal and collective wisdom.

Although I did not learn of it until the school's graduation ceremony, two Girls in particular emerged from the study on a positive note: Butterfly was voted the "most improved" female student in the school, and Rain was chosen to be the valedictorian for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. Such intergenerational work may have benefited the adult participants, also. The mentors in this study reported feeling more validation of important life experiences; the satisfaction of fulfilling the innate drive for generativity; and, for some, a sense of sisterhood with other mentors. Mentor Hortense and her mentee, Rain, have chosen to continue their relationship—an outcome that illustrates one of the benefits for both mentors and mentees of such an intensely focused project.

A most interesting (and unexpected) outcome of this study was how the difference in Anglo and Latino cultural viewpoints affected such issues as building trust, gaining cooperation of group members, and arriving at consensus regarding what was to be done and how to do it. ("Culture," as used in this case, refers not simply to race or the heritage of one's country of origin but also to one's religious beliefs and practices; relationships to family and non-family members; sexual beliefs and sex role practices; social customs at home, school, and work; language; career expectations; and a host of other aspects of one's life.) Since each of these aspects of culture arose during our interaction with the girls, I focused the discussion around the difference between Anglo and Latino cultural viewpoints as listed above, and how it played out in this research study.