

Adult Passage: Three Practices For Any of Us Finding Our Way

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Thirty years ago, when I was growing up in Edmonton, Alberta, turning eighteen meant you were an adult. It was passage. From a kind of frivolity of teen years to real responsibility of adult life. It was not just any birthday. It was added celebration. You could now vote in political elections. Go to a bar. Live on your own. Join the military. Follow university studies. Begin careers. Travel abroad. Sign legal documents. Adult stuff.

I won't pretend to have been particularly thoughtful about this shift in my own life. I remember people talking about added freedom and added responsibility. But, then, as it is now for many living in the western world, it was a transition made largely without conscious initiation. For most, no group of elders to send us on vision quests or to help us receive spirit totems. It was mostly sideways, wobbly self-initiation. Like buying stuff. A car or a stereo.

Over thirty years, I've learned much more about being an adult. First and foremost, that becoming an adult is not a singular moment. It is of course, an ongoing process to revisit often regardless of age. And lately, my revisiting, my thinking, has been from my perspective as a father. I wonder to myself, what I can share with my kids that helps them as participants in more deliberate passage? What are a few simple markers that can help them as they nibble at the front edges adult life?

This past summer, my daughter and I took a dream trip together to Greece. She had turned 18 six weeks prior. Graduated from high school three weeks before that. She was signed up to begin university studies a month after we would return. She would be living on campus, in a dorm with a friend. My daughter and I shared four days in old Athens. Eight days on the Pelion Peninsula in and around the Kastrí Beach. And two days on the airplane. We were both anticipating many things on this trip. Fun. Food. Friends -- we stayed at a friend's family flat in Athens and near her home on the Pelion. New language. Culture. Visiting sites. History. Olive trees. Beach. The Aegean Sea. Singing songs from Mamma Mia -- some of the filming for the movie took place at the islands of Skiathos and Skopelos, near the Pelion.



Fun, right?

For me, fun becomes super fun, and super important, when integrated with deliberate conversation and sharing. The real stuff in our lives. Just as much as I welcomed the joy of

swimming in the Aegean, I relished prolonged time with my daughter. Just as much as I wanted to explore the Acropolis, I wanted to share and explore with my daughter learnings about passage that would endure and might guide her life or ours together. Like the Acropolis, the city on the hill, learnings that could be easily seen from many vantage points in future life.



Below are the three practices I shared with my daughter. Practices. To do items. They aren't formula. That are start-here points. I trust that in her, in me, and in others, the next steps that come from these practices will make themselves clear.

1. Take Responsibility for Your Learning -- Stop Blaming

As a kid, I remember feeling that the world was run by adults. They were the smart ones. They were the ones that knew what was going on. It was for them to do. And, well, to provide for me. I was a reasonably responsible kid and young adult. I took pride in being a good helper and a tenacious worker. But still, the adults were supposed to take care of things in the end, right? Even when I screamed for my independence, underneath, I think I still wanted them to provide. To make it easy.

Adult passage involves taking more responsibility. For learning. For emotions. It's less about passive participation. It is more about owning up to being a contributor. A contributor in relation to others. Less about blaming others for varied problems or deficiencies. More about seeing interconnectedness and one's place within that.

I was once driving with a friend and his teenaged daughter. He was teaching her how to drive a car. I sat in the back seat. He in the passenger front seat. She driving, one of her first times behind the wheel. My friend was so calm, guiding her. In such a soothing voice, telling her in advance, what was coming, what lane she would need to be in, where to turn. His daughter drove. Hands on the wheel. Looking intently in front of her. Nervous. But, I believe quite thrilled to be driving. Feeling the power of it. At one point, the four-laned road curved. Rather than holding her lane to follow the curve, my friend's daughter drove a straight line, crossing into another traffic lane. She didn't think to check to see if anyone was behind her. If there would have been, she would have cut that person off, or possibly hit them. My friend jumped on this one. He told her, with tension and relief, that she had to look before she changed lanes. She had to know where she was and what was around her. It was simple. Something that his daughter will likely get very easily in the future. Something that all of us who learn to drive may have experienced. I remember her response to her dad as a mixture of apology and defensiveness. "You should have told me. I didn't know I

was supposed to check.” It was a kind of externalizing of responsibility. A subtle way of blaming. Blaming another. Blaming her dad. She will learn. And hopefully be safe.

There is a participative process methodology that I use often when working with groups. It is called Open Space Technology. It helps participants to claim the kind of responsibility I’m talking about here. In short, it is a self-organizing process with just enough structure to help people form working groups and learning groups. It is a way to help a group of people create their own agenda. My friend and colleague Peggy Holman talks about these self-created agendas as “taking responsibility for what you love.” You get to choose what you are going to learn rather than it being assigned to you. If it interests you, you get to create it or invite it with others. It is up to the participant to take the minimal step of naming the topic and then working with whoever decides to come join that group.

As I see it, whether as an open space participant, or as a student driver, a key practice in adult passage is taking responsibility for one’s learning. It is an attitude. A disposition to cultivate. An invitation to commit to doing something with one’s curiosity.

Mamma Mia!

2. Practice Generosity -- Offer Something

My friend Chris Corrigan is one of the best examples I know of of a person who practices this kind of generosity. Practices. Does it repeatedly. Such that it becomes a natural way of being. Yes, Chris sometimes offers resources. But here I’m talking more about offering skill, perspective, talent. Kindness. Offering things he is good at or that he loves to do. I’ve worked with Chris in many settings when we have been leading multi-day workshops together. Chris comes with teachings and with process design. We both do. And the others we work with. That is our job. But Chris has taught me something more as I’ve watched him over the years. He offers himself to the group. Generously. Quite fully.

When night time rolls around, the introverted side of me is usually ready for quiet or private space. I need it. Chris, on the other hand, is rather extroverted. I’ve seen him sing songs with participants deep into the night. He plays his guitar. Sometimes his Irish flute. He sings songs. Asks people what they like to sing. Shares the guitar. It is awesome to be a part of. It took me a while to realize that it wasn’t just about the fun or the extroversion of it. I began to see Chris as practicing generosity. He was bringing something to the group that he loved, that he could do, and that he could invite others too.

Adult passage is served well by adopting this practice. If it were a potluck meal, practicing generosity is the shift from just eating what others bring, to bringing some food to the party. And,

perhaps, not just any food, but a special recipe. Grandma's famous recipe for potato salad, prepared in beautiful dish.

Back to my daughter. I watched her feel initially quiet with the people in Greece that we ate many of our meals with. There were ten of us together around my friends outdoor kitchen table on the Pelion Peninsula. I could see my daughter wondering who these people were and what they were about. Feeling shy. Feeling her uncertainty or insecurity of being in a new country, her first outside of North America, and with these people from five different European countries. I would have been shy also at that age. Still am a bit. I loved watching her open during the week. From reserved to becoming a more natural part of the group. Offering to do dishes. To help cook. To tell stories.



It can be family. It can be a circle of friends. It can be neighborhood, municipality, nation, global community, or circle of life. Offering is an essential practice that bonds us as adults in all of them.

Bring a dish.

3. Practice Differentiation -- Find Your Note (in relationship with others)

It is no secret that a key part of child development is for kids to differentiate from their parents. Particularly in the teen years. Some of this is about claiming difference. Some is stubbornness. Reactiveness. Some of it is messy. In the healthiest differentiation, underneath, I believe it is about creating enough distance to begin to birth one's own self. A bit like finding a quiet space in which to strike a tuning fork, free of interfering noises. Physical distance. Emotional distance. Intellectual distance. It's all part of it. The irony is that though this appears on the surface as separation, I believe it is more about finding one's note that can then be offered to the musical score that is integrated adult life.



Some people relate to finding this note as listening for inner guidance or spiritual clarity. I relate to it as a gut feeling. It was my Mom who taught me most about this.

As a younger boy, I would agonize over decisions. Whether the blue pants were better or the brown pants. Whether to ask this girl out or not. My Mom, quite patiently, would eventually ask me, "What do you feel in your gut?" I wouldn't have known it back

then, but I think my Mom was steering me towards a kind of early differentiation and an early expectation to look within, to hear my own tuning fork.

As I write this, my daughter is now nearing the end of her first semester of university classes. She started with an undeclared major, but with leanings to Journalism and English. She can decide that later. I love the ways that she is beginning to look beyond the familiar. Taking responsibility to notice what interests her. Humanities. Greek Mythology. Psychology. Offering herself to those she is learning with. And in her differentiation, finding things that she couldn't have known earlier. Perhaps starting to feel the vibration of her own note.

Clear choice always serves well.

A Last Thought

Well, I loved the trip with my daughter. Truly. I loved the conversations with her. The laughing. The exploring. The memories that have immense shelf life. I loved feeling a kind of contribution to a shift in her attention, and mine, to these practices. Adult passage is a becoming. It has far less certainty and finality than what I would have imagined when I lived in Edmonton thirty years ago. It is so much more of a stepping further, in practice, into the complex and evolving human family that needs each of us as a community of contributors.

Adult stuff. Adult practice to help us find our way.

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