

## Coming of Age Ceremonies for Followers of Hellenic Reconstructionism

By Melissa Gold, based on an assignment for clergy education. April 24, 2023

While researching coming-of-age rituals from ancient Greece for my clergy education program, I reached two obvious conclusions. One is that the rituals are sex specific, designed around rigid sex roles. The other is that the rituals are designed to incorporate a young person into the community rather than for the young person to declare their uniqueness or to express individuality. It is through the lens of these two conclusions that I address the question of coming of age ceremonies for modern followers of Hellenic Reconstructionism.

What the role of coming-of-age rituals in Hellenic Reconstruction today should be is the “\$64,000 question.” Certainly, families in Hellenion are unlikely to want to impose either rigid sex roles or a stifling of self expression on their teenage children. It may help to recall what usually brings people to the Hellenic Recon movement and other Pagan pathways. As I wrote another assignment:

“Often what initially interests people is a desire for spiritual expression not governed and restricted by the rigid tenets of monotheistic religions, especially toward people with “non-traditional” sexuality, aboriginal cultures, and women (Gruben; Wigington), among other concerns. Further, a curiosity about history of religion may turn people away from the contrived “truths” and “mysteries” of the big three religions; even a little research shows that Christianity, in particular, but also Judaism and Islam, have all proclaimed themselves to be “not Pagan” while at the same time incorporating pre-existing Pagan practices which they have given a different spiritual interpretation (Krell; Silas; and Mankey). Also, many Pagans feel that the earth is sacred and see what is happening to the environment and observe that conservative Christian leaders deny or misrepresent what is clearly happening (Conti; Vox). Finally, many Pagans have had mysterious experiences that they recognize as being non-Christian (or not monotheistic) and which lead them to one or more ancient pantheons (Gruben; Beckett).”

In her excellent article on coming-of-age rituals in ancient Greece, Lesley Madytinou writes: “The ancient Hellenes seemed to understand that maturity is not a natural consequence of either physiological puberty or the culmination of one’s education [as is the ideology of the modern world]. Maturity arises from the acceptance of structure and the inherent responsibilities and duties that are a part of preserving, continuing and advancing such a structure.” She also notes that “The death of the child and the birth of the new adult is a gradual process that is accomplished by the acceptance of certain roles, duties and responsibilities given at specific ages that were not determined by the needs or desires of the individual adolescent but rather by familial expectations and social customs and reinforced by civic law.”

She summarizes the function of coming-of-age rituals in the following way: “The generational passage takes place on five different yet interconnected levels:

- The continuation of the human species
- The continuation of an Oikos (familial lineage, home and wealth)
- The continuation of the tribe
- The continuation of the state (and civic identity)
- The continuation of the psyche (soul).”

We cannot effectively argue against any of these points. Some may object that the continuation of the human species is arguable because of overpopulation. Let’s set that aside as a worthwhile issue separate from meaningful coming-of-age ceremonies. The ancients upon whose thinking and practice we establish Hellenic Reconstruction considered that the human species ought to continue until such time as Zeus decides to end the Age of Iron (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 175 ff).

Similarly, most parents have to admit that they want to have grandchildren and great grandchildren and we want to hand down to them lore, resources, and pride in family roots.

Continuation of the “tribe” is harder to find a modern parallel for, but we can consider that to be the same as the Hellenic Reconstruction community or the broader Pagan community or both. For some, this many actually mean an extended family.

While we don’t have a “Hellenic” state, most of Hellenion’s members live in a democracy. We want that democracy to continue, and that lately requires its own particular form of effort. Hellenic virtue and principles lead to strong democracies, so we see no conflict in supporting what is just and most democratic in our states (cities, states, regions, etc.).

Regarding continuation of the psyche (soul), Madytinou is a follower of Orphic tradition, which emphasises this particular belief. Many Hellenion members have similar beliefs. A few believe that all awareness ceases at death. The apparent conflict evaporates if we equate Continuation of the psyche (soul) to the continuation of Hellenic virtues, art, and spirituality, in whatever form that spirituality may take. We stand for the freedom to worship how we choose to worship.

With this awareness, what should be the role of coming-of-age rituals in Hellenion? Should they follow the example of separation, liminality and re-incorporation that Arnold van Gennep describes in his book, *The Rites of Passage* (11)? The first process, separation, is difficult to accomplish today, given that the society outside our front doors provides us with little to no structures for doing this. Separation requires the support of other people who understand what we’re doing and, likely, do or have done this themselves and will expect the same in return. Additionally, our children go to school, after-school activities and then camp, which limits the window of opportunity for separation from ordinary life. This step may not be needed, as the main purpose of it seems to be to create a structure or venue for the following step of liminality, which we can accomplish in other ways.

Liminality imposes an experience that shakes up the young person’s world in some way. Another way of phrasing this is that it creates that “Aha!” moment for them or, to use modern vernacular, an “OMG” moment that many converts to Hellenic Reconstructionism or Paganism

likely experienced. I assert that putting a toy on an altar or reciting an oath during a brief ritual will not accomplish that. What might work is a period of study followed by an initiation ritual away from the house and, ideally, conducted by people outside the family. The study prepares the young person for what the Hellenic movement is about, beyond what they may (or may not) have learned around their family's altar. Having the ritual led by non-family emphasizes to the young person the concept that being an adult, contrary to popular teen opinion, does *not* mean you get to do whatever you want from now on. It means that whatever you do contributes to or harms far more than yourself or even your family. It means more responsibility. It stresses that each one of us is responsible for the state of the world around us. Liminality should also ideally include an action the teen takes on doing, something that requires self-discipline. The teen can decide what that is, but it could include additional study (say, learning Ancient Greek), participating in a charity, jogging or journaling, or some other *agon* (personal struggle) every day for several months to a year before the initiation ceremony.

The final step of re-incorporation is as important as liminality. First, the young person should, before proceeding to re-incorporation, have an opportunity to publicly choose to be part of the Hellenic Reconstruction community. They may well decide that they don't want to being a Hellenic Pagan but some other kind or might even decide that they wish to belong to a mainstream, monotheistic religion. They can return to our community at any time, but we want them to know that they are *choosing*, and what is expected of them going forward will be consistent with that choice. If the young person chooses to embrace Hellenic Reconstructionism and go through the coming-of-age ritual, they should know and receive the privileges that come with being an adult inside the Hellenic Reconstruction community and should know and acknowledge the responsibilities that are now expected, as well as any consequences that follow from abandoning the responsibility in future.

Unfortunately, Hellenion, at this point in its development, does not have a clear concept of privileges and responsibilities that come with being an adult. We barely have such a list for converts. The clearest requirements we have is for those who become members of the Clergy or Prutaneis. Without knowing what these are, young people may decide that they have little reason to go through the coming-of-age ritual process, other than bragging rights for their study and *agon* during the liminality phase of their process. Of course, that might be enough for some. This is still an area where Hellenion (and Hellenic Reconstructionism) could grow.

Are coming-of-age rituals even necessary? In a way, no, because most of us have not experienced such a ritual and yet we are committed to Hellenic Reconstruction without it. In other words, our spiritual development has not required it. One of the purposes of a coming-of-age ritual, however, is Madytinou's point about "the continuation of the tribe." If we want this "tribe" (movement) to continue, we need the next generation to take over. Conversion alone may not accomplish this. An effective coming-of-age ritual may inspire young people to become involved or maintain their involvement.

More challenging is the question of whether coming-of-age rituals should be gender specific. In ancient Greece, the sex roles were dramatically different and separate: women were

prepared for marriage and a role inside the house; men were prepared for military duty and a role outside the house. However, for today's women, as Campbell notes in *Old Stones, New Temples*, "marriage is no longer the dividing point between girlhood and womanhood. As our current social structure encourages young women to continue their educations and to pursue careers, many will be adults long before they ever choose to marry. We also acknowledge that many people live in committed relationships without wanting—or in some cases, having full access to—legal marriage. Finally, we know that some women will remain unattached, and we do not see this as the source of shame that it would have been in ancient times, but simply as a matter of personal choice" (171). For today's young men, Campbell writes "Perhaps the most meaningful way to reconstruct rites of passage for boys, then, is to add a religious element to these existing secular rites" (169), by which he means entering the military or signing up for the draft, registering to vote or making a transition from high school to college or employment. Campbell conceives of separate rituals for modern girls and boys, even though he admits that modern women do not fit the traditional ancient roles and, by the same consideration, we recognize that not all modern men enter the draft. In fact, young women are as likely to enter the military as young men. Clearly, we have significantly less separation of sex roles today and more "blurring of the lines."

Moreover, as I state above, many people who are drawn to the various denominations of Paganism do so because of a recognition of and an acceptance of "non-traditional" sexuality within Pagan movements. To impose gender specific rituals would create conflict for some young people. Gender fluid youth may find rituals designed for girls or boys unsatisfactory because of the implication of two rigid role models of sexuality in modern life, or they may prefer a ritual that does not match their biological sex. On the other hand, some young people may quite enjoy a ritual that is gender specific. How to accommodate all?

We want to provide a ritual that allows some choice at the same time it stresses the adult privileges and responsibilities that the young person is about to assume. To build upon my thoughts above about the role of coming-of-age rites, I recommend a non-gendered approach to such rituals. This non-gendered ritual process would include a period of study and a personally chosen agon, followed by a choice to officially become a member of the Hellenic adult community, concluding with prayers and offerings to the gods that the young person has decided are their patron/matron gods going forward. (The young person can express their individuality by their choice of agon.) The ritual can (and we might even say, ought to) include thanksgiving to Artemis and/or Apollo by offering of a lock of hair and a toy and thanksgiving by the parents or family for the protection and nurture of the Kourotrophic gods (typically, Artemis, Dēmētēr, Gē, Hekatē, Hestia, Lēto and Heraklēs—as well as the *kouretes*—but especially Artemis and Hekate). As the final step in the ritual, the young person recites an oath to provide service to the community and the country. In his "Rituals of Adolescence" chapter, Campbell provides a modernized version of a young man's oath from ancient Athens (170). Campbell's oath should be changed for any young person, male or female, customizing which deities will be especially honored. To recap, a modern, non-gendered ritual would include the following steps:

Elements of a Modern Coming-of-Age Process and Ritual
---

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Period of study (lasting a few months to a year)</li> <li>• Personally chosen <i>agon</i> (lasting a few months to a year)</li> <li>• Public declaration of their choice to become an adult member of the Hellenic Religious Community (at beginning of ritual)</li> <li>• Dedication of a lock of hair and toy to Artemis and/or Apollo along with prayers of thanksgiving to them and the Kourotrophic deities</li> <li>• Thanksgiving by parents to Artemis and/or Apollo and the Kourotrophic deities</li> <li>• Oath to provide service (customized)</li> <li>• Offerings and prayers to the young person's matron/patron and other deities as appropriate</li> </ul> |
|---|

I have already partially answered the question: In what ways might our modern circumstances change the focus or meaning of coming-of-age rites for our young people and for the community? However, I think a summary is in order. First, we want to prepare young Hellenic Pagans to be adults in our era. Adults need to execute their responsibilities with integrity and to handle privileges with decorum. Second, we do not want to impose anachronistic sex or gender roles. And finally, we want the coming-of-age ritual to enable the young person to make a choice to be part of the Hellenic Community and do all that is necessary to continue its existence, development, and well-being. Coming-of age is no longer about being molded into narrow pre-existing models but about being prepared to take on unexpected challenges in bringing ancient wisdom and spiritual virtue into an ever-changing modern lifestyle and culture.

## Works Cited

Beckett, John. "Foundations: The Origins of Religion." *The Path of Paganism; An Experience-Based Guide to Modern Pagan Practice*. Llewellyn Worldwide, 2017. Accessed via Google Books 29 January 2018.

Campbell, Andrew. *Old Stones, New Temples: Ancient Greek Paganism Reborn*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000. Print.

Conti, Allie. "The Fundamentalists Holding Us Back from a Climate Change Solution." *Vice*. Vice Media LLC, 20 August 2017, [www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qv4w8b/christian-fundamentalists-are-fueling-climate-change-denialism](http://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qv4w8b/christian-fundamentalists-are-fueling-climate-change-denialism). Accessed 29 January 2018

Gruben, Michelle, "Why Do People Become Pagan? The Top Ten Reasons." *Grove and Grotto*. Grove and Grotto Magickal Supplies and Faery Fancies, 2 March 2017, [groveandgrotto.com/blogs/articles/why-do-people-become-pagan-top-ten-reasons](http://groveandgrotto.com/blogs/articles/why-do-people-become-pagan-top-ten-reasons). Accessed 29 January 2018.

Hesiod. "Works and Days" in *Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homerica*. Edited by Jeffrey Henderson. Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. 1936 ed., vol. 57, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002. Print.

Krell, Marc A. "Religion Library: Judaism." *Influences; Religion Library*, Patheos, n.d., [www.patheos.com/Library/Judaism/Origins/Influences.html](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Judaism/Origins/Influences.html). Accessed 13 July 2015.

Madytinou, Lesley. "Catalysing Maturity; Coming of Age in Ancient Hellenes". Labrys Polytheistic Community. [hellenismos.org/2015/11/10/catalysing-maturity-labrys-community](http://hellenismos.org/2015/11/10/catalysing-maturity-labrys-community). 10 November 2015; accessed 26 June 2018.

Mankey, Jason. "Intertwined: Paganism & Christianity." *Raise the Horns*. Patheos, 13 Nov. 2014, [patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2014/11/intertwined-paganism-christianity](http://patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2014/11/intertwined-paganism-christianity). Accessed 31 Oct. 2015.

Silas. "The Pagan Religious Sources of Islam." *The Pagan Religious Sources of Islam*. Answering Islam, 5 Jan. 1997, [www.answering-islam.org/Silas/pagansources.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Silas/pagansources.htm). Accessed 20 July 2015

van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, trans. Routledge, London. 2004 (1909).

Vox, Lisa. "Why don't Christian conservatives worry about climate change? God." *The Washington Post*, 2 June 2017, [washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/06/02/why-dont-christian-conservatives-worry-about-climate-change-god/?utm\\_term=.58cc0e47453c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/06/02/why-dont-christian-conservatives-worry-about-climate-change-god/?utm_term=.58cc0e47453c). Accessed 29 January 2018.

Wigington, Patti. "Question: Why Do People Become Pagan or Wiccan?" *Thoughtco*. Thoughtco Lifelong Learning, 18 March 2017, [thoughtco.com/why-do-people-become-pagan-or-wiccan-2561849](https://www.thoughtco.com/why-do-people-become-pagan-or-wiccan-2561849). Accessed 29 January 2018.