

Our Children's Coming of Age

by [Dr. Marianne Rolland](#)

I love children—not just my birth children, but all children of our Mother Earth. I know from a deep source of wisdom residing within my being that our children are our ancestors. They come to this earth through those of us who are physical mothers to share their light and gifts with humanity. We, as parents, have a responsibility to protect, nurture and honor the sacredness of their lives. I cannot think of a more worthy expenditure of our energy as a society than to focus attention on honoring our children—by investing in the ones who will inherit the responsibility to care for the planet. The future state of our Mother Earth depends on the health status of our children—all of our children.

Some years ago I discovered a beautiful, ancient tradition that is one way we can insure our children are properly acknowledged as they transition into adulthood: to honor them with a Coming of Age Ceremony. I first heard of these ceremonies given for young women and men from Athabaskan elders in the Copper River area. If we were to draw purely on their traditional practices, we would provide a series of coming of age ceremonies, teachings, practices and rituals to be performed progressively at each stage of a child's development.

Ancient wisdom tells us that the proper training, teachings and ceremonies are required for children to evolve into responsible, respectful and contributing members of society. This wisdom is embedded in many of the names for our Native peoples, as the words Yupik, Inupiat, Alutiiq, Unangan, Dena' and others literally mean “real human being.” The Coming of Age Ceremony that welcomes young men and women into adulthood is one opportunity to insure that society is entrusted to real human beings—to those who have been properly trained and are capable of carrying out responsible behavior in all aspects of their lives and in service to humanity.

Setting intent and speaking from one's heart is critical to a successful ceremony, as attested to by Arnold Booth, an elder from Metlakatla. When Arnold was a little boy and started to chop wood with an axe, his Bah-eha (grandfather) watched him from their porch. Suddenly, Arnold looked up and found Bah-eha standing before him with a serious look up on his face. Speaking the Tsimshian language so that he could be heard by the alder and cedar trees and any animals within ears reach, Bah-eha said, “This is the one who can chop wood so that his family will stay warm; this is the one who can chop for his community; this is the one who can chop wood...safely.” Arnold's Bah-eha did this simple ceremony each time the boy learned something new, such as sailing his first boat or catching his first fish. Arnold's Bah-eha found a way to continue an ancient ceremony which had been increasingly forgotten as his people became influenced by Western culture. Arnold's Bah-eha knew that this ceremony involved the whole tribe, and that each tribal member felt the anticipation and joy and, finally, the celebration of his nephew's coming of age.

Coming of Age ceremonies serve to acknowledge a young person's transition from adolescence to adulthood and publicly recognize a child for the first time as an adult. In our experience of the Western world, this transition into adulthood normally happens without a formal or public celebration. The “Sweet Sixteen” birthday may be a subtle acknowledgement of this transition, although it lacks the power of a formal ceremony. Historically, among indigenous peoples (including the cultures of Europe), the Coming of Age Ceremony was as significant as a birth, marriage or death ceremony.

In the early 1990s, while working in the community of Yakutat, I was fortunate to become friends with Walter and Maryanne Porter. One evening, while discussing matters of spiritual development over a

cup of tea, Maryanne spoke up on behalf of our two oldest daughters (who at the time were 9 and 11). “It is time we start planning for their ceremony,” Maryanne said. “We will have an Aunties ceremony... a Coming of Age... Welcome into Womanhood ceremony”. Although I had heard about these ceremonies, I had never experienced one and certainly never had one for myself. I was intrigued and excited—fascinated and honored to be a part of a learning process that would allow me to further express the love I have for my daughter and to honor my friend’s daughter as we helped launch them into adulthood.

With serious words spoken and commitments made from the heart, we began planning the ceremony for Carly and Alice. There were many tasks for us to accomplish: aunties and grandmothers to be notified; decisions to be made. Each young woman would be presented with a ceremonial medicine vest created out of the fabric and color of her choice. Carly selected soft white leather, while Alice picked black wool felt. Maryanne and I sewed our daughter’s vests, but the real work came with all of the bead work that needed to be created. We made a list of the aunties and grandmothers that we would invite to participate, and sent out formal invitations. I had never done bead work, so my learning curve was high. As I was living in Metlakatla, some of the ladies there helped me. They were excited and even formed a beading group as several of us devoted our time to making beautiful beaded butterflies and flowers for my daughter’s vest. (The butterfly “adabiish” in Tsimshian is the clan totem given to all visitors of Annette Island who are neither blood or adopted members of one of the four-clan moieties of Eagle, Wolf, Raven or Killer Whale.)

I was so pleased when my birth mother and biological sister in faraway Idaho agreed to make beaded pieces for my daughter’s vest—this was also their first venture into the art of beading. Many close female friends of the family who had a special relationship with Carly were invited as adopted “aunties” to participate. Beaded artwork arrived from around Alaska, New Mexico, Arizona, Washington and Oregon. From Oregon, I learned that my close friend Susan Friedman was at the same time preparing for her daughter’s Bat Mitzvah, which is a part of the coming of age ritual for a Jewish girl. With each beaded piece came important messages, teachings, stories and words of wisdom that the maker wanted to impart to the girls. All of these would be shared at the time of the ceremony. In addition to the vests, we made each girl a medicine bag, beaded eagle feather and leather slippers or moccasins.

During this time, while attending a conference in Arizona, an Apache elder approached me and inquired about the beading I was working on. As I shared with her about the upcoming ceremony, a big smile came across her face. She told me how the women from her tribe were preparing for the coming of age ceremony in honor of her twin granddaughters, and that this ceremony would last for four days. A sacred fire would burn continuously for the entire time and ancient dances would be performed. In Apache tradition, this ceremony was known as a puberty ceremony. Today it is referred to as the Sunrise Dance and consists of eight phases of ritual.

I shared that we would be taking our girls into the woods for four days in final preparation before the actual ceremony. The girls would be asked to remain silent and prayerful during this time, as they focused on making gifts to thank each of the women who would be attending their ceremony and each of the aunties and grandmothers (adopted and birth) who contributed from a distance.

It took us close to four years to prepare for the ceremony. When the time finally arrived in July of 1996, Walter Porter and his boys drove Maryanne and me, our two daughters, the family dogs, and all of our gear to a remote location. After helping pack in our supplies to an old forest service cabin a mile off the dirt road, we were left to the elements to make final preparations for the ceremony. The girls filled their

days making bone and beaded leather chokers and necklaces for our guests that were scheduled to arrive on the fourth day. Maryanne and I continued our task of sewing beaded pieces on the vests as we spoke to the girls about the many challenges, joys and responsibilities of becoming women. We also selected and prepared the perfect site for the ceremony. We offered tobacco and prayed to the Great Spirit and Ancestors for blessings, support, protection and guidance.

The day of the ceremony was joyful. All of the gifts and medicine items were complete. The clouds parted for us to enjoy the warmth of the radiant sun as one of the elders from the village began to drum and sing in her traditional way. The air filled with happiness as the women from town arrived at our camp site and gathered in circle. The instant the ceremony began, we spotted a pair of eagles circling overhead; and, as the drumming continued, we could feel the animals of the forest gathering to watch us. Ravens chattered in the trees and bear watched respectfully from a distance. Each girl was escorted from the cabin wearing her new medicine items and was introduced to the group of woman who, in turn, welcomed her into the circle of women. An opening prayer signified our acknowledgment of the spirit world and provided words of thanks and humility for this sacred gathering.

Stories from each of the girl's childhoods were shared, and each woman offered her thoughts about womanhood, advice for life and words of wisdom. Each beaded piece represented a message imparted by its maker and all of these were voiced. After the ceremony ended, everyone enjoyed a wonderful feast of organic vegetables and fresh seafood caught, gathered and prepared by the women of the village.

Later, as I reflected back on the process, I realized that the period of time preparing for the ceremony was as meaningful to the girls as the ceremony itself. Each bead that we sewed was a prayer from the heart for our daughters; each item prepared and the sharing and discussions that ensued were all significant aspects of the ceremony. We were showing the girls throughout the process what treasures they are to us, as we taught and modeled to the best of our ability how to live as real human beings. In a way, we did the same thing that Arnold Booth's grandfather did for him.

Approximately one year after Carly's ceremony, I knew it was time to begin preparing for the ceremony of my second birth daughter, Christina. The first was quite an adventure—yet it was a lot of work. I wondered: Do I have the energy to do this again? In the instant I asked the question, I realized I already knew the answer. My commitment to honoring Christina was a given. We were in the midst of moving, however, so it would have to wait until we settled in Anchorage.

The planning and preparation for Christina's ceremony was similar to the one for Carly and Alice, only this time I was on my own—for Maryanne and Walter had moved to Kotzebue. I struggled with where to hold the ceremony and wondered how Christina and I would be able to take four days away from our busy lives in Anchorage. As soon as I gave myself permission to stop worrying about the details, however, everything fell into place.

Christina selected black felt for her medicine vest. An Athabascan elder friend living in Anchorage offered to help me with the beading. Christina's aunt, grandmother and many adopted aunties also began work on beaded pieces. My new friend, Christy Prairie Chicken, agreed to lead the ceremony incorporating her traditional Lakota songs and a pipe ceremony. My teacher, grandmother and elder friend, Berniece Falling Leaves, offered to prepare Christina's medicine bag. I gave up the idea that we needed to go to the woods and followed my intuition that we could create a beautiful honoring ceremony right here in Anchorage, in our spacious and sacred healing room.

Even though I had been planning, thinking and talking with Christina about her ceremony for the past four years, it only took four months to pull all the details together. In August of 2002, just four days before her 16th birthday, fifteen women gathered (in physical & in spirit) to honor and welcome Christina Rose into womanhood. It was one of the most beautiful ceremonies I have ever participated in and I know it touched Christina deeply. The gathering awakened places in all the women who were present. None of the participants had experienced their own ceremony, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room as we progressed through the different phases of the ritual. The final piece of the ceremony was a "Thank You" in which Christina honored each guest with a beautiful beaded necklace; each one she had made herself and had special meaning to the woman it was created for. As with all gatherings of this type, we had a wonderful feast afterward, which was prepared by some of the men in our lives!

I felt a lovely sense of relief when my daughters' ceremonies were complete... Until one day when my son asked me, "Mom, you will hold a ceremony for me too, right? You will make me a vest, right? Won't you, mom?" I explained to my son that it was my understanding that it would be up to his father, his uncles, and the men in the family to create an appropriate Coming of Age ceremony for him. I did assure him, however, that he would have one. And so I began helping my husband with the planning at once.

In October of 2005, once again in the healing room of our home and center, we conducted a ceremony for Kayin, who had recently turned 14 years old. This gathering was the most emotional and powerful ceremony I have ever witnessed. Fourteen incredibly healthy men who know and love Kayin took eight hours on a Sunday afternoon and evening to participate in focused ceremony and celebration to honor my son. All of these loving, spiritual and gifted men my son had attracted into his life were, in this formal way, acknowledging what his life meant to them as they welcomed him into manhood.

The night before the ceremony, my husband had a dream. Uncle Walter Porter (a Tlingit Elder who was to lead the ceremony) interpreted the dream and used it as a guide for the ceremony. While the men spent two hours in the healing room preparing, Kayin spent time alone in his downstairs room, resting in silence, waiting and waiting. Finally, at 6 pm, Uncle Walter descended into Kayin's room to "wake him up." The drumming, which symbolized the beating of the heart, had started and Kayin was told, "It is time."

Kayin was blindfolded and guided up three sets of stairs. The blindfolding represented walking alone in the wilderness, which symbolizes that as human beings we are essentially alone as we go through life.

Men were stationed at intervals from downstairs to the healing room on the third level. As Kayin was guided, each man stopped him and spoke to him softly in his ear with words from the heart. These whisperings represented messages from the Spirit world.

Arriving in the ceremonial room, Kayin remained blindfolded and was placed in the center of the circle. He listened to a bear calling song, sung by one of the participants. The song was intended to clear the room and provide protection. Kayin and all of the participants were then smudged with an eagle feather, sweet grass, sage and cedar. An honoring song was sung and each man sat before Kayin and shared with him personal viewpoints, life experiences and words of encouragement. It was pointed out to Kayin that even though his childhood was coming to a close, he would know when to allow the child within him to come out.

When the blindfold was taken off, the elder relative told Kayin a story of how the people of the Copper River migrated a thousand years ago to the community now known as Yakutat. They intermarried and

became known as Tlingit people. The Elder told Kayin, “This is now part of your history.” He then presented Kayin with a deer skin vest with the Raven/Moon crest that was made, designed and painted by his father. He was also given an ivory necklace with an image of a hunter with a spear and a seal, to signify his Yupik ancestry. The hunter represents a man’s responsibility to provide for his family. The seal reminds us that animals give their lives to us only if we treat them with respect. When the Elder completed his part of the ceremony, all of the men came and hugged Kayin and welcomed him into manhood.

Kayin gave each man a handmade necklace, individually created with a symbol that had personal meaning, which he took time to share with the recipients. Kayin cried as he presented his gifts to the men and told each man how grateful he was for their presence in his life and for the ceremony.

To close the ceremony, all of the women who were busily preparing the feast of Kayin’s favorite foods were called to the healing room for the presentation of the Blue Moon Medicine Necklace. This gift, which was made in the late 1800s, came from Berniece Falling Leaves, a Lakota/Danish medicine woman and Kayin’s adopted grandmother. The original owner of the necklace was a Choctaw chief who wore a ceremonial white eagle feather head piece which touched the ground as he rode his horse. Kayin accepted this gift with gratitude as he listened to the instructions of how to wear and care for the necklace. We had a wonderful dinner with lots of visiting after the ceremony.

Now I really felt an incredible sense of relief! It had been over ten years of preparing and planning and hosting Coming of Age ceremonies, one for each of my three birth children. I had fulfilled my obligation and my heartfelt commitment to my children; it truly was a blessing for us all.

As my beloved teacher Berniece Falling Leaves, who had shared many ceremonies with me, once said: “You know, Marianne, we can’t rely solely on the traditional ceremonies of the past. We must have the courage to create new ceremonies in the present so there will be traditions for our children, grandchildren and our great grand children to follow.”

My hope is that I have followed this advice well. My vision is that we will increasingly manifest ways to honor our young people by drawing from the vast and rich multicultural traditions in our histories, the power of our own spirits, and the pure intent to honor every young person on the planet with a Coming of Age Ceremony. Ah Ho!

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