

THE 2020

GRADUATION

CHALLENGE



ONLINE, ON TIME, AND MEANINGFUL

A project of

STELLADLER
STUDIO OF ACTING®

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Made possible with funding from



May 2020



Dear friends,

I write with hope! Hope, first of all, that this letter finds you and your families well. I hasten to add that we at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, though by no means untouched by coronavirus, are well. And thanks to online technology, educationally and theatrically speaking, very much alive and moving forward.

We have moved all our programs, our NYU BFA program and Full-time Professional Conservatory programs in NY and LA, online. We've built online versions of our many summer programs. Adler Youth, a free actor training program for high school students, is online. We find ourselves so excited and indeed hopeful about online learning that we've built a whole new platform, the Stella Adler Studio of Acting Online, and are offering a plethora of programs including a brand-new series of classes, Actor Training for Curious Humans.

Like so many of our friends and colleagues here in New York, across the country, and around the world, we began to ask what we could do or share that might offer support to people struggling through the Covid-19 crisis in so many different ways.

The Stella Adler Studio of Acting was founded by my grandmother in 1949 but our roots are considerably older than that. They extend all the way back to 1853 with the birth of my great grandfather Jacob Adler. From Odessa, Russia, Jacob fell in love with theater as a young man and joined a then burgeoning Yiddish Theater. When the Tsar outlawed Jewish theater, he fled in search of artistic freedom, first to London and then, in 1889, to New York City where he became a preeminent actor manager and trailblazer of the Yiddish Theater. His life was governed by and devoted to a single question, one we continue to ask to this day: *How can theater be used to truly uplift, educate, and edify humanity?* Behind our mission—based on the insight that growth as an actor and growth as a human being are synonymous, to create an environment that nurtures theater artists and audiences so that they value humanity their own and others, as their first and most precious priority—stands this question.

It was with all of this in my mind and heart that I met Dr. Kevin Bott in 2018. I found myself amazed to learn about his program, [Ritual4Return](#), a rites of passage program that supports people making the social, emotional, and psychological transition from prison back into the wider community. Ritual4Return is grounded in the understanding that rites of passage are a powerful and ancient human tool for helping people navigate the major transitions of life, and theater in its deepest roots is built upon the pattern of rites of passage (as will be explained in the project toolkit).

When we realized in April that the schools in our city weren't going to open again before the end of the school year, Kevin, now on staff as our director of our Arts Justice Division, floated an idea. He proposed that we apply our insights about rites of passage to high school graduation. In NYC alone, between 55,000 - 60,000 graduating seniors are going to miss out on—or have a long-delayed and/or compromised version of—their high school graduation, one of the most significant rites of passage of their lives.

With support from the David Rockefeller Fund, we've spent just the past two and half weeks, under Kevin's leadership—and in partnership with our friends at The New Victory Theater and Ping Chong + Company—figuring out and putting together this set of resources. We hope it might be supportive to school administrators trying to figure out how to create a meaningful online graduation. We hope it will be useful to teachers who want to engage their students in a creative process about this significant moment in their lives. But more than anything, we hope it will support all graduating seniors and their families to acknowledge, honor, and celebrate this important transition from one major chapter of life to the next.

May you use these tools well! Many congratulations to the Class of 2020!

Tom Oppenheim
Artistic Director
Stella Adler Studio of Acting

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Q & A with the Project Director, Kevin Bott



(AKA “the project director having an imaginary conversation with himself as a way to try to explain what this project is all about.”)

What is *The 2020 Graduation Challenge*?

It’s an online toolkit to support students, teachers, and schools imagine, invent, plan, build, and undertake activities to mark and celebrate this year’s high school graduation—one of the most significant rites of passage of many people’s lives. The toolkit includes the guidebook you’re reading now, and a series of short supporting videos, which are hosted on the Stella Adler Studio of Acting website, and on our YouTube channel.

What’s up with “Challenge”? Is this a competition or something?

Nope. It’s not a competition. What we mean is we are confronting a graduation challenge. Namely, the challenge of: how do we pull this off under such unprecedented circumstances? We developed this resource to encourage and support school communities create a graduation ceremony for the Class of 2020 that is—as the tagline says—online, on time, and meaningful.

Yes, the tagline. Please explain.

1. The toolkit is intended primarily for people who know their school’s only option for a June graduation is **online**.
2. What we know about rites of passage tells us how important it is to celebrate and honor major life transitions like this one, and that it should occur at the time the *transition is actually happening*. Graduation not only marks the end of mandatory education. It marks, at least symbolically, the end of childhood and the first steps into adulthood and independence. This year, with the pandemic likely to keep many social/ familial/emotional dynamics in a state of stasis, it feels particularly important for students, families, and the community to both celebrate and bring formal closure to this chapter. Without these, many graduates are likely to exist in a state of purgatory for a time, never feeling the sense that they can move into the next stage of their lives. It’s important that, somehow, graduation is **on time**.
3. Rites of passage are **rich with meaning**...and emotion. American culture isn’t the best at elevating the deeper, symbolic aspects of our public rituals but even at a cookie-cutter graduation ceremony, there remains deep meaning and emotion.

For graduates, of course, it is filled with pride, accomplishment, excitement, and relief. A time to reflect on the fact that you and close friends are about to go separate ways...For the community it is also pride and joy and maybe relief. But it is also an event that marks time and gives meaning and structure to our lives. Families and loved ones may even experience what’s happening more deeply than the graduates: the pride and joy of watching a person grow up is always mingled with the pain of passing time.

In a moment when for many if not most people an online graduation will feel like a disappointment, we must come up with other ways to soak this moment with **meaning and emotion**. This will support everyone in feeling the sense of connection, community, and closure that we’re losing by being apart physically.

So what is this toolkit exactly? How do I use it?

What’s contained here are ideas for you to consider. Exercises for you to try. These are lesson plans for you to implement. We want to be your creative, problem-solving thought partners on this project. Think of us as the extra assistant principal you need right now—someone to work on some graduation ideas!

That’s what this toolkit is. We’ve taken a couple of weeks to sketch out some ideas for administration, teachers, students, and their families. Maybe you’ll use something, or maybe something will spark an idea in you. Listen, if one student finds their way to it and it causes them to think more deeply about the moment, we’ll be happy.

Sounds great. But it’s already past mid-May. Are you saying it’s possible, starting now, to pull off a meaningful online graduation this June?

Yes. We’re saying it’s possible. And one big resource is the student body, who will get more out of this if they are co-creators of and active participants in the event. More about that in the pages that follow...

But really, I’m the superintendent of schools in *blah blah blah*...And my obstacles are *yadda yadda yadda*. I’m telling you, we can’t do it. *Blah blah yadda ya*...

We believe you! And that’s why we also made resources for students, teachers, and families. The **most important thing** is that every graduating senior takes a weekend...or a day...or an hour... or honestly a few *conscious moments*...to mark and honor the achievement as well as the journey, to reflect on what it means to

graduate from high school, and to recognize the significance of moving from one stage of life into another. And the **other most important thing** is that there is **some** community—the school, individual teachers, a family, a group of trusted friends—who can bear witness to the transition. The witnessing helps make it real.

What if we're still stuck after we read this?

Email me at kevin@stellaadler.com. I'll help you figure it out—maybe by thinking with you or maybe by tapping someone who can help you figure it out.

I notice that after this section, you're jumping right into the models. But I'm not sure I totally get the whole connection with rites of passage...How about a quick overview?

What a fine question. In virtually every human culture throughout time, the transition from "youth" to "adult" has been treated as one of the most significant moments in a person's life. A high school graduation ceremony is a kind of coming of age ritual, and one of the only society-wide coming of age rituals we perform in our culture. The point of a rite of passage is to facilitate these major transitional moments in our lives.

But more than that, a rite of passage is the tool we use to assist—and even create—the transition.

Rites of passage provide emotional, psychic, and often spiritual support to people who are passing from one state of maturity and social responsibility to another. The **theatricality** of it all—the costumes, the blocking, the scripts, the audience, the decorations and lighting, the full aesthetic experience—produces an effect that actually **helps make the transition and transformation real on a level deeper than the rational and intellectual**. (There's a whole body of research on "neurological overload" in rites of passage and how it short-circuits the rational parts of the brain and allows people to experience the event somatically and emotionally...)

Clearly, we're losing so much of what not only makes rites of passage meaningful but also what makes them *work*! It sounds a bit melodramatic but without figuring out some ways to bring the theatricality, and with it the meaning, into these online events, we risk condemning this year's graduates to a short- or long-term existence in limbo. So let's elevate what is possible rather than cry about what can't be! It's important!

Give me three things you're proposing we consider or do?

1. As community-based artists and arts educators, we know that *everything* is more meaningful when the people create it themselves! A rite of passage requires active participation from those undergoing a life transition, so let's use the moment to move away from creating an event for the participants and figure out ways to create events that are simultaneously *for, with, and by them*. If any generation knows and demonstrates every day that it's much more interesting and meaningful to be a creator than a consumer, it's this one!
2. A rite of passage requires community witnessing, so let's figure out the best way to use the technology at hand to bring the community together.
3. A rite of passage invokes metaphors like death and rebirth, crossroads, shedding skins, etc. It's about moving into a new, more mature social role. Let's encourage students to consciously reflect on what these kinds of things mean for them. What specifically, is being left behind and what is being acquired in this transition? Also, let's talk about what it means to be in that new role, what are the obligations of the new role, and how can families work together to create new expectations for how to be together post-rite of passage.

Your answers are all incredible, Dr. Bott! Please drop some more wisdom on me!

I'll leave you with this...It's from Ronald L. Grimes' book, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage*. This is about what happens when we don't attend to these transitions through rites of passage? (By "passage" he's talking about major life transitions.)

*Passages can be negotiated without the benefit of rites, but in their absence, there is a greater risk of speeding through the intersections of the human life course. Having skipped over a major passage without being devastated by a major upset, we may prematurely congratulate ourselves on passing through unscathed. In the long haul, however, people often regret their failure to contemplate birth, celebrate a marriage, mark the arrival of maturity, or enter into the throes of a death. **The primary work of a rite of passage is to ensure that we attend to such events fully, which is to say, spiritually, psychologically, and socially.** Unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it. Unattended passages become spiritual sinkholes around which hungry ghosts, those greedy personifications of **unfinished business**, hover.*

Support for Schools

Creating a Schoolwide Online Graduation



The Basic Template

Since the start of the Covid-19 quarantine, *The 2020 Graduation Challenge* team has become as much an “expert” on how to live, connect, and celebrate online as anyone else. Which is to say, like everyone, we’re still figuring it out!

What we present in this online toolkit are thought experiments—a basic template for an online graduation, and variations within that template that we dreamed up. They may (or may not) work for you and your school... Ultimately, we hope to help you imagine what’s possible and get engaged with your own creative energies!

We’ve tried to think through some of the potential challenges and opportunities that each of these ideas may present. But of course, you’re going to have things come up within your community that we can’t know. We welcome you to be in touch through email or social media if you would like additional support working through specific challenges.

The **Basic Template** starts with the premise that the least complicated way to conduct an online graduation is through pre-recorded, or mostly pre-recorded, material. From what we’ve all learned these past several weeks, platforms like Zoom and Google Hangout can be alright but the danger of screen freeze, concerns about security and hacking, and limited participation capacity are all things that can hijack a live event. There’s just too much that can go wrong.

We propose that the best and most accessible platform for the event is **Facebook Live**. Why? The technology works, there’s no participation limit but there are controls for who can join the group, and people can “react” in real time so that there is at least the feeling of a community participating in something together. People can participate through their phones or computer, with or without Wi-Fi. Also, you can move between live and screen share modes (by stopping and starting the feed), and up to four people can act as live hosts.

Part One: Invention & Creation

1. Invite senior class leaders to be part of the graduation creative team. Typically, graduation is a party for seniors thrown by the school. Which is great when it can happen. After all, the seniors have worked hard and now we want them to relax and celebrate. But when the party being thrown feels like it’s inevitably going to be a letdown, and when a lot of seniors feel like they haven’t done much that’s meaningful for two months, bringing seniors in as active and creative participants can restore some of what makes graduation memorable and meaningful. And it is likely to make it more interesting for everyone.

(We actually have some proof. From April 17 to May 16, we piloted a participatory online model with NYU college seniors who train at our studio. The students, who started the project feeling dejected and even a little disassociated from graduation, reported that their participation in creating the graduation got them reconnected to their excitement. It gave them a sense of power over the moment, rather than being hijacked by it, and made graduation feel even *more* special than it might have.)

- Make sure to pull in leaders from different social sectors of the student body, not just the usual suspects. It’s important that this feels meaningful to as many students as possible. Also, this is going to be something different and you may need to make the case to the student body for why this is all the way to go. If so, you’ll want to be able to have the students reach and engage with as many of their peers as possible. If the class president doesn’t have a relationship, say, with the athletes or with the students in auto shop, they may not be the best person to do the outreach to those folks...
- Once the team is assembled, discuss what would feel meaningful to students and their peers. Take a few days to review and reflect on the things in this toolkit, then meet again to see what resonates. If anyone is pushing for graduation to be postponed until the opportunity to gather in person arises, talk through all of the possible outcomes of that decision, including the possibility that circumstances may dictate that it’ll a year or more before that’s possible. Is it possible—however unlikely it may feel now—that an in-person graduation never happens?

2. If the decision is made NOT to move forward with an online graduation, explore the section, Support for Students and Teachers.

See if there's anything in the toolkit that might support graduating seniors and the teachers who are trying to support them.

Remember, we think the most important thing is that students find a way to acknowledge and mark this transition point in their lives. While the role of the school community is important in elevating the importance of this moment, we find ourselves in a moment when we need to reimagine and reinvent ways to support ourselves in the absence of wider community connection and institutional capacity.

3. If the decision is made to move forward with an online graduation this June, **start by creating a Class of 2020 Graduation group page on Facebook.** Assign page administrators. Communicate the outlines of whatever plan y'all came up with to the class of 2020. Tell them the first step is joining the Facebook group.

4. Decide who will host the Facebook Live event.

Principal, superintendent, someone else?

5. Outline the event. Just as you do for a traditional graduation, outline the event from start to finish. Just imagine it not starting with the students walking into the auditorium of field. It's probably going to start with something like a welcome from the school principal. Start writing down the basics—anyone who has a speaking role:

- The person giving the benediction
- Valedictorian
- Salutatorian
- Class president
- Can someone record themselves singing or playing the national anthem?
- Are there other performances to include? Has a student band figured out a way to record and edit something coherent on Zoom?

6. Organize the speeches and performances. Set up a Zoom call with everyone speaking or performing. Agree on how things are going to be recorded.

- Remind people to film themselves in landscape.
- Can everyone record using HD? or 4K?
- What is the time limit on each speech or performance? (Note: Everything should hover around 5 minutes!! We're watching T.V. now. No one wants to hear a long speech. Keep things moving!)
- Talk about lighting and sound considerations where people are filming themselves.

- Talk about the scenery. Maybe you all want to agree to film outside (or inside) so that there's some consistency to the event.
- Does the school's media department have lavalier microphones that can be plugged into smartphones? If so, maybe they can be sterilized and sent to the speakers? (Camera mics will work just fine but the sound won't be as crisp and clean as from an external mic.)
- What is the dress code? Remember, we're seeking to elevate the proceeding so dressing up is probably the way to go.
- Are there public speaking or theater faculty (or students) willing to help edit speeches and coach speakers on their presentations?

7. Record the speeches and performances.

- Each presenter/performer records their parts in whatever format was agreed upon.
- Each person uploads the film through Dropbox, Google Share, or other online platform.

8. Edit the speeches and performances. Maybe there are faculty or staff who can edit the material. But without a doubt, there is a small army of students with the iMovie and/or Final Cut chops to do it. Consider giving them, in consultation with the creative team, power over what the video looks and feels like. It's not just about the speeches. The transitions between speeches are opportunities for longer, creative interludes, which we'll discuss in the next section of the toolkit, called **Variations**.

9. Engage and honor students (finally!). Everything that is not a speech or performance is an opportunity to feature student voices, perspectives, and creativity.

Not least of these spaces is the centerpiece of the graduation: when students typically receive their diplomas.

We'll leave this blank for now because there are so many possibilities for what to do here, and it will depend on things like the capacity, interest, and willingness of the students and the school. We discuss a whole bunch of ideas for what can go into these spaces in the next sections.

10. Final Editing. Edit everything together and polish it up. Get ready for opening (and closing) night.

11. Practice. We advocate, if possible, for an event that blends live and pre-recorded material. On Facebook Live, the host (and there can be up to 4 hosts if there's a desire to give several people hosting power—an administrator, faculty member, and two students for example) will have the power to start and stop the live stream, and also to select "live" or "screen share" mode.

Consider having the principal as the primary host. They would start the event in “live” mode and give a warm welcome to the Class of 2020 and their families. Then they can STOP the live event (letting the audience know, of course, what’s happening) and switch over to “screen share” mode to show the pre-recorded material.

The host(s) can stop and start in different modes throughout the event. Just let the audience know it’s all part of the plan. The breaks could be like occasional commercial breaks, which would help to make the event feel like a TV show rather than a bad version of a live event. Give what the technology gives you! If TV is a medium built around bathroom breaks, use the bathroom breaks!

Anyway, make sure you have at least one full run through, with all members of the creative team watching/participating so that you can work out any kinks, make last minute edits, change the order of something. The beauty of having material pre-recorded is the ability to edit it until you really get what you’re looking for.

12. Make a digital program of the event that people can download or pull up on their computer/phone. Be clear about your transitions from live to screen share, and any other breaks, so people know what’s going on.

Part Two: Elevation & Celebration

OK! Now that the invention and preparation has been accomplished, pulling off the actual graduation is a piece of cake! You’ve already practiced. Just start the live event and away we go!

But no matter the quality or ingenuity of the pre-recorded event, what will be missing is the warmth and excitement of being together with the community for such a special occasion. So part of the work is finding as many ways to **elevate** what is happening in the homes where people are watching.

Nail the Live Sections

Anyone speaking or performing live needs to be...real. You don’t need to be a polished performer. You don’t need to exude some kind of charm or charisma. **You just have to be real.** You have to be sincere, genuine. You need to resist leaning on platitudes so that you can say something true.

Don’t generalize about what this moment means. Knowing that everyone is experiencing this crisis differently, and suffering different levels of loss, don’t generalize. If you are going to talk about the coronavirus, just talk about your own experience, and what you’ve realized by it. Talk about what you’ve discovered about the school, the students, your job as an educator, the community, the meaning of graduating...

- What do you think it might mean for these young people to graduate at this moment?
- What are they being called to do? Who are they being called to be?
- If you’re a student speaker, what does it mean for you to graduate at this moment?
- Can you find and explain your place on the spectrum between disappointment and joy? Between hope and resignation? Between crisis and opportunity?

- How are you moving into the next chapter of your life? Whatever you decide to speak about, your job is to foster a sense of connection.

Invite Families into the Celebration

Send out formal invitations, inviting students and their guests to join the live event on such-and-such date and such-and-such time. Make them as fancy as you can afford, which might just be fancy font on plain white paper! That’s OK! It’s the thought and effort that counts. Make it clear that this is An Event!

Add an extra sheet of **event guidelines**. Explain how important it is to support the students by making the evening as special and fun as possible.

- If the event starts at 6:00PM, ask everyone to start their graduation celebration on or about 5 o’clock.
- Invite everyone to dress up in whatever they would have worn to the graduation.
- Encourage families to take pictures together, and to post on the Facebook page.
- If possible, encourage families to buy or pick some flowers, buy or make a graduation gift, and/or have every person in the house make or buy some cards.
- Tell families to prepare a favorite meal so that after graduation everyone can sit down and enjoy a celebratory dinner together.

Social Media Participation

- Encourage students and families to post photos to Facebook and Instagram throughout the day. Maybe some are of day-of celebrations. But they could also be of friends throughout the years, school events, sports, theater, etc.
- Create a hashtag for the ceremony. Encourage students and families to post on social media, and to live tweet the event.

Caps & Gowns

Can the families or students still get caps and gowns? If so, have the students wear them, for photos and for the live event... Consider ending the event in live mode. Have the principal/host tell the students to move their tassels from right to left, to signify that they are now graduates, just as they would as a traditional graduation. Have them get someone to film them throwing their cap in the air. Have them upload them to an online platform to be edited for later, to show the whole class throwing their caps in the air!

What else?

- Well, there are a lot of dynamic and thoughtful scholars, artists, athletes...even celebrities...with a lot of time on their hands and a professed willingness to “do something.” Maybe the school

has a famous alum. **Hit ‘em up!** Have a teacher or student make an appeal to one of them to be the (volunteer) commencement speaker. On what grounds could they refuse? Travel? Too busy? No excuses in the quarantine! Shame them if they say no!

- (Just kidding. Don’t do that.)
- Make sure you record the whole event. Play it throughout the summer for people who didn’t get to see it, or get to see it all.
- Make sure every graduate gets a digital version of the recording, either through the cloud or on a flash drive.

With thoughtful preparation, intention, and participation a very special graduation is possible!

Support for Schools

The Variations



Stella Adler said, “The truth of your art is in your imagination,” and “Your talent is in your choice.”

What does that mean? In this context, it means that what’s going to carry this event into the realm of depth and meaning are the creative choices that you and your team make.

What we described in Section II is part of a frame intended to support the celebration of the graduating class of 2020. The most important part is the participation and highlighting of the students themselves!

On this front, we encourage you to go **above and beyond** what might happen at a traditional graduation.

What we are losing in the electricity and emotion of a face-to-face event can be reclaimed to some degree by stealing insights from more formal rites of passage, and from participatory art making! The easiest way to do this is to invite the students into the creative process of inventing and participating in this online event. What will make this year’s commencement more memorable and

meaningful is when students re-engage in its significance by becoming **creators** of it and **participants** in it.

Everyone—but especially the members of the creative team—should be encouraged to see graduation as an exercise in collective art making! Part live theatre, part Very Special Television Event, this is a piece of art that you’re all creating together. It should entertain people, move people, honor and celebrate people. And it should be challenging and fun. We have no doubt you will remember this process for the rest of your lives.

The collective imagination of the creators and the choices you all make will be your primary tools.

The three **Variations** that follow are ideas for helping you spark your creativity. They are presented from fairly simple and easy to pull off, to more involved, to, finally, challenging and complicated.

Remember, even if for whatever reason none of these ideas are going work on a schoolwide level, consider exploring the readings, exercises, and lesson plans in subsequent pages.

Variation One: Online Roll Call

We think this should be everyone’s low bar. If you’re planning an online graduation, we think that it’s possible to accomplish this. Someone in everyone’s house has a phone that records video. Everyone can upload that video from their phone. *This can totally happen, people!!!*

What is It?

Essentially the online equivalent of reading each person’s name on stage and having them accept their diploma.

Pros

- Every student can be represented regardless of class size.
- Pretty simple to pull off.
- Primary filming and editing could conceivably be completed in as little as 48 hours.

Cons

- The lowest level of representation.
- Wide breadth, shallow depth.

How it Could Work

- Invite students to record themselves on their phones.
- Give them a time limit (10–12 seconds) and tell them what they can and can’t say.
- Have them send or upload their videos to an online platform.
- The creative team arranges the videos in alphabetical order, and the edited piece is placed into the appropriate slot within the larger pre-recorded graduation section.
- For those who can’t or won’t participate, someone does a voiceover of the non-participant’s name over a shot of their yearbook photo.

Considerations

- **How much time are you willing to give this section?** If you have a 200-person class and everyone gets 10 seconds, that’s about a half hour of the overall ceremony. Fifteen seconds is closer to an hour. It really depends on what you’re hoping to get. Are you

fine—or does class size dictate—that everyone only has time to say their name? Is there enough time for people to say what’s next for them, after high school (and quarantine)? Do you have enough time for someone to say their name, what’s next, and give a thank you to a teacher or a shout out to a friend?

Practice all options. Time it out and make a decision.

- **How can they say it?** We encourage you to let the students show their personality whenever possible? Who can say what this might mean? Could a surfer hold their board next to them? Could a basketball player spin a basketball on their finger? Can students use an app to edit their own clip in a unique way?

We suggest encouraging creativity while making clear what’s expected and what won’t be accepted—like (in)appropriate language, (in)appropriate attire, etc. Or maybe you’d like everyone in their cap and gown. If so, make it known. (Remember, these are all creative team decisions.)

- **Do you care where they film themselves?** Same as above. If you have guidelines, provide them.

Organizing the Online Roll Call

- If you didn’t see it in the previous section, make sure you’re putting together a creative team that includes a wide array of students. If that core group already has enough on its collective plate, reach out to more students who want to

lead this particular sub-group. This should be comprised of students who, between them, are connected to all of most of the student body. This group will be responsible for putting together a communication plan to engage the student body and developing a set of protocols for filming (i.e., landscape, 2 seconds lead time before speaking and 2 seconds when finished, time limit, dress code, etc.)

- If people are saying more than their names in the clips, the leadership team should watch all videos to ensure that no one’s shout out is a coded message that could be offensive or hurtful to anyone. (i.e., giving a subtly sarcastic shout out to a student who has been a victim of bullying, or saying some phrase that students would know to be an insult to someone, etc.)
- For students who don’t contribute, their name is read by one of the students (or a faculty member) as a voice over while a yearbook photo is displayed.
- An editing team puts everything together. This is viewed in its entirety by student, faculty and admin leadership to ensure all students are included.
- Include this as the centerpiece of graduation.
- Total time will be the allotted filming time times the total number of students.

Variation Two: Using the Interludes

Whether you’re planning an event that’s going to switch back and forth between live and pre-recorded, or if you’re doing all pre-recorded material, every transition between the big set pieces is an opportunity to sneak in special footage.

What is It?

Fun, funny, or poignant—maybe all of the above—the interludes are creative breaks between pre-recorded set pieces. There are a few variations on this variation...

Pros

- Deepens the experience by expanding who and what is represented during the event, elevating the special factor.
- Good editing can get in a lot of student voices and perspectives into short stretches of time.

Cons

- If it’s about bringing more voices into the mix, it will take more editing time;

- If a goal is to bring non-student (i.e., school and community) voices into the mix, it will require more hand holding since older folks are going to be less adept at using technology;
- Will add to the overall amount of time of the ceremony.

How it Could Work (Some Variations on this Variation)

- **Use student voices.** When you ask students to record their part of the Online Roll Call, have them also respond to one or more prompts.
 - What will you always remember about school, or senior year?
 - Share the funniest memory from high school.
 - Who was an important school mentor/advisor, and why?
 - What’s one thing you learned in school that you’ll take with you.
 - What **won’t** you miss? What are you ready to leave in the rearview mirror?

!!!! Or, ask students to do any of the three **lesson plans** below, and use interludes to showcase some or all of their “performance.” Some will be funny. Some interesting. Some really creative. etc. (It’s possible the audience will likely be completely confused by all of it, which may or may not matter to you!)

- **Encourage everyone, always, to get creative!** Is there a funny story that happened on a team trip or class trip? Could the team/class take it on themselves to tell the story together? If some people can share the editing skills, have each member of the team (or whoever wants to participate) record the story or memory separately, however they remember it. Then edit the whole story together, from the many (sometimes conflicting recollections). You’ll get a funny oral history of a fond memory that can be included as an interlude. (Maybe there’s even a coach, a teacher, or an administrator with a very different take on the event. Oh, let the hilarity commence...)

Is there a school song that the class is expected to know? Was there a major song, or a TikTok challenge that overtook the school at some point in the year, or in freshman year? Would students be willing to sing the song or do the challenge, which would then get edited like the story above...

- **Use voices of beloved members of the school community.** Ask teachers, administrators (who won’t already have a role in the event), office assistants, nurses, crossing guards, bus drivers, custodians, lunch servers, and other people with a special connection to the students. (Make sure to include some that would be unlikely candidates to say something at a typical graduation.)
 - Give some coaching and prompt them to create short messages of love and support—or memories—to the Class of 2020.
 - Are there any candidates here that might participate in the school song or TikTok challenge above?
- **Use photo/video montages.**
 - Engage the media department, the yearbook team, and anyone else who documents the school year. Put together a few high-quality highlight reels that can be shown over the course of graduation.

- **Extra Credit:** Solicit and include student/community phone videos (i.e. someone who has a great video of a marching band competition, or something from a field trip; a student band playing out; funny (and relatively tame) footage from a student party, etc. Anything that fleshes out the life of senior year, or the of the overall school journey.
- **Extra Extra Credit:** This is probably too much but do people have school pics from kindergarten, or at least from around that age? These could be edited either as an introduction to the whole event, or could be used during Online Roll Call: the childhood picture cross fading to the present-day person saying their name...

Organizing the Interludes

Maybe every interlude features a different kind of piece. For example, the first interlude is a “greatest hits” of images and video from special school events. The second interlude includes clips of people from the school and from the wider community sending messages of love and support. The third interlude includes students’ memories and shout outs...etc.

On the other hand, maybe you decide that each break will have the same rhythm. For example, each break contains three (or more) parts. There’s one student memory, there’s greatest hits segment, and there’s one community member message. Every time. It may be a way to include more faces and voices.

Remember: Stella Adler said, “Your talent is in your choice!” Make choices that interest your team and that you all feel will serve the students, the families, and the import of the occasion. You’ll get it right!

Support for Students and Teachers



Variation Three: Creative Rites of Passage

Note: What follows is a challenging prompt! For people intrigued by the process described below but who know or suspect they'll need support pulling it off, email kevin@stellaadler.com to set up a virtual consultation.

When we started thinking about this project at Stella Adler, we initially imagined this as something we would direct primarily to high school performing arts students, in collaboration with digital artists and editors. We imagined that classroom-sized or club-sized collaborations would allow for more students to engage in creative expressions of the rite of passage concept.

At heart, a rite of passage is a kind of theater. In fact, the roots of Western Theater are believed to have begun in ritual, specifically in the harvest rites of the Greek god, Dionysus. This variation is one in which students who are drawn to creative expression create something *on behalf* of the student body. There are complications and limitations involved in this variation, which we'll discuss below.

What is It?

A smaller subset of students—a class or a club, or maybe just an independent group of creative and ambitious students working independently—who engage in a creative and collaborative process of creating an artistic performance focusing specifically on graduation as a rite of passage.

What is created could either be a standalone project shared only within the group, and to people they choose. Or it could be inserted as a pre-recorded part of online graduation — thus, a Variation. Depending on the project length and its level of excellence, it could be included as a major set piece (See Basic Template) or as an interlude (See Variation Two.)

This concept was piloted with about 25 NYU acting majors who train at the Stella Adler studio. With exactly 4 weeks to conceptualize, prepare, shoot, and edit, the students met twice a week, two hours a night, for the first three weeks. In the final week, the student editors took over and the last two meetings lasted less than an hour each. The 20-minute final product was screen shared as part of the students' online graduation on May 16...There's more description of this project below, and a supplementary video of the work in the online toolkit.

Pros

- Challenges and engages students in cultivating their creativity;
- Will likely be the final collaborative project of high school. It's an amazing way to connect virtually with classmates in a fun and meaningful way. It's an opportunity to reengage with the longer journey of school and to overcome, or at least balance, the feelings of being hijacked by the present moment.
- Elevates the event through artistic expression. Literal expressions of what the moment means are great. But the artistic expression touches people at more subtle frequencies...

Cons

- Much more complex and time-consuming.
- Requires a serious commitment by many people.
- Requires someone who understands, or is willing to learn, how to facilitate a collaborative, creative process (which is why this is suited for arts clubs and classes).

How it Works

- A teacher or a student pulls a group together and proposes that they create an approximately 5 to 15-minute piece that expresses the meaning and feeling of the moment... or creatively expresses the responses to the prompts(s).
- If at all possible, gather on Zoom. We find it to be the "best" platform for this kind of exercise. Beware of the security/privacy issues related to Zoom but try to use it if you can.
- Using one or more of the lessons plans included in the online toolkit, or the supplementary section on rites of passage, the students respond to prompts related to one or more of the following (or one you make up yourselves):
 - When I entered high school I was/felt _____.
As I leave, I am/feel _____.
 - At this transition point in my life, I am leaving behind _____.
I am carrying forward _____.
 - Besides the end of mandatory classwork, what does "graduation" represent? What are you graduating from/to?
- Depending on the skills and interests of the students (theater, music, dance, etc.) begin thinking about and experimenting with ways to express what emerges from the responses to the prompts.

Easier said than done, of course. Here are ways to get started:

- Start by going to the Lesson Plans section of this guidebook to review what it means to turn a feeling or a piece of text into a gesture or movement.
- Think of the ways metaphor (“I’m **shedding** an old skin”; “I’m **embracing** a new way of being” or “I feel I’ve been **running in circles**, not getting anywhere”) lend themselves to images, moods, and movement. Think of the way your own form of artistic expression can express those metaphors. While instrumentalists and visual artists can use their instruments or mediums to create abstract expressions, the “instrument” for actors and dancers is **them!** How can you use your bodies and voices to get at the **meaning** and **emotion** of what’s expressed?
- See if there’s a natural (or interesting) progression of images and movements (or notes/chords/moods) and, from them, create a kind of “narrative.” It’s likely what you’re creating will wind up being a collage—a series of sounds, words, movements, and images—that gets at what you’re trying to express.
- Experiment with putting word or movement phrases next to each other that “fit” in terms of mood or look. And then experiment with jamming things together that seem to clash. (This jamming itself might be a good metaphor, perhaps, for the range of mixed feelings seniors are experiencing now. Thus, it might make sense to make a collage that swings from mood to mood and feeling to feeling. Just make sure it looks intentional, rather than haphazard.)
- Use the different “views” in Zoom (speaker and gallery) to experiment with how to perform, record, and manipulate the material into a whole piece.
 - Experiment with solo recordings, small group, and full group. What does it communicate when a movement is done or a piece of text spoken by one, then some, then all?
- See if you have talent within the group to accomplish the editing, or whether you need to find a student editor, or small team of editors. Start the editing process.
- Have a couple of in-process viewings with the whole team to identify weak spots, or the need for more/different editing. Continue and finalize editing.

- Share only within the group or present the final product to the school for consideration in being shown during the online graduation. (If and when there’s an in-person ceremony, maybe this team can re-create the performance live...?)
- **Extra Credit:** Reach out to as many (all?) graduating seniors as possible. Ask them to either email or record their responses to the chosen prompt(s). Incorporate as many “voices” and perspectives into your piece as possible

Note: Again, this one is a real challenge! For people intrigued by the process described above but who know or suspect they’ll need support pulling it off, email kevin@stellaadler.com to set up a virtual consultation.

Supplemental Material

Video of online graduation of NYU/Stella Adler students .

Four weeks before their online graduation ceremony, a core group of about 15 acting students began meeting twice a week to figure out and then create something to contribute to the event. The students who couldn’t participate more regularly (another 15 or so) were invited to contribute ideas or video, and the core group decided if and how to incorporate that additional material.

Their work was guided by a few simple prompts. Then worked and communicated on Zoom. There was a lot of talking, laughing, sharing. Ultimately, they decided to record and include parts of different assignments they were part of, as well as several different responses to the prompts. They recorded themselves reciting bits of monologues and scenes they performed in. They thanked teachers and reflected on what their experience at the studio meant to them. And on the last day before editing, the core group recorded themselves in Zoom gallery view performing synchronized versions of group work from class.

The result (part of which is included as one of the toolkit videos) is a 25-minute, collaboratively crafted video that served as the centerpiece of the online graduation ceremony.

Lesson Plan Overview

Technically, Variation #3, above, could also be considered a classroom lesson, but one that would require a teacher to carve out some serious time above and beyond what's required within the regular online curriculum. In some ways it might be more appropriate (and fun?) for artistically inclined students to try to organize themselves in that project...We included it above because schools could conceivably choose one or more of these projects to highlight during graduation.

In the pages that follow are three related lesson plans, comprised of a series of exercises, that can be undertaken in three sessions of 20-30 minutes each. (Note that these short, accessible plans aim to give teachers graduation-related plans that their students can undertake in easy-to-digest bites—with or without much teacher guidance.

The lessons are meant to engage students in thinking about, and creating short creative pieces around, their school experience and this important moment of transition.

One note about time: One way students might think about moving into a new stage of life after graduation has to do with time. Graduating from high school means you're entering the first part of

your life when how you use the hours in your day **are entirely up to you**. Remember Stella's saying, "your talent is in your choice"? Well, now your life is your canvas and the choices you make create the art that we call "your life"!

So when we write that the lesson plans take about 20-30 minutes a piece, it is being said to a student who is always wondering what they have to do, and how much time something is going to take.

Artists don't think this way!

As artists, we never enter a creative process and say, "OK, creating this thing is going to take me X minutes a day for X days..." We just work to create the thing. As long as it takes to express what we need to express.

The point is, if you're a student taking these exercises on yourself, you are certainly welcomed to look at the clock and put your pencil down after 20 minutes. But this is about **you**. This isn't required. This is your art, so take as much time as you need express what you need to express!

Lesson Plan #1: Devising Your High School Journey By The New Victory Theatre

Taught on Video By: Ugo Anyanwu

Lesson Objective: To explore aspects of one's high school journey using text, physical gesture, costume and music

Day One: High School Review (15–20 minutes)

Materials: Something to write with and something to write on

Activity

1. Think about yourself as a **freshman**. Can you think of one thing that you would really like to be able to go back and tell your freshman self? It can be a word, a phrase, a sentence. Just one thing you want to tell yourself. Write it down.
2. Once you have it written down, create a physical gesture that expresses what you've written down.
3. Repeat for **sophomore** year. Write down something you'd like to say to your sophomore self and then create a gesture expressing what you wrote down.

4. Repeat for **junior** year. Write down something you'd like to say to your sophomore self and then create a gesture expressing what you wrote down.

5. For your **senior** year, you can do one of two things (or both!)
 - a. Either think of something you want to tell yourself last September, just as you were beginning senior year.
 - b. Imagine yourself one or more years in the future. What would that person say to the person you are right now?

6. Depending how you handled #5, create one or two gestures for senior year.

7. Review each of the phrases and gestures. Practice each of them.

Challenge: When you create your gestures, try to make two variations. Make one version that's **literal**. For example, if your phrase is "Get yourself together," the literal version would actually involve pretending to gather parts of yourself somehow...The other

version should be more **abstract**. In this version, you're trying to tap into what the physical imagery (getting yourself together) is trying to express about an internal state of being. What is the emotional or mental state of a person who needs to get themselves together? How can your body create a gesture to express that inner state?

Day Two: Rehearsal and Expanding the Story (20–30 minutes)

Materials: Something to write with and something to write on

Activity

1. The basic exercise is simply to put all four of the gestures together. Put them together, one after the other. You might want to use the words at first, to help you remember.

Optional Challenge: Before you move on to part two of the activity, try going deeper into your story! You probably have a whole bunch of things you could say to yourself in each year of high school. To create longer movement piece, create two more phrases and gestures for each year of high school. Add them to what you've already created and put it all together.

2. After you've done it for a while and you've got it down, eliminate the words and just perform the gestures, one after the other. You can say the words silently in your head if you want to. But as you memorize the sequence, and it becomes part of your muscle memory, stop saying the words and just allow your body to express the feelings of those words through the body!

3. Keep practicing your piece until you've really got it!

Something to Think About: For the next activity you're going to put everything together, with costumes and music if you choose. Is there a song that you were really into in any of those years? Is there a certain style you were rocking? Or are there songs that match up with how you were feeling? Start pulling them together.

Day Three: Putting it Together, Live and Virtual (20 minutes—until you're satisfied with your work!)

Materials: Music, outfits. Optional: a phone for recording your performance

Activity

Put your movement piece together with costume(s) and music.

1. Try practicing one way as if you're performing live. In this version, you can only use one costume and one piece of music because you're just going to perform the whole thing straight through. If you have the ability to edit your music together, you can try to time your movements to parts of different songs. (Ex: in freshman year you play "Sorry" by Justin Bieber. Sophomore year it's HUMBLE by Kendrick Lamar. etc. Edit all songs together and play only as much of each song as you need for your movements for that year.

2. Try it another way for recording from your phone. If you're filming from your phone, you have a lot more options because you can edit. You can stop filming at the end of freshman year, change your costume, and then start again when you're ready for sophomore year.

3. Finally, when you're satisfied, **share it with someone you love and trust!** If you created a live version and virtual version, do you like one better than the other? How did people react differently to each one? How does it feel different to you to create and share the different versions?

That's it! You just created a theatrical representation of your journey through high school!

Lesson Plan #2: Who We Are: Expressing Personal Story through Documentary Theater By Ping Chong + Company

Taught on Video By: Stephanie Anderson, Eric Aviles,
Christina Bixland & Moana Niumeitola

Objective: To explore our identities, growth, and aspirations for the future through documentary theater & other forms of artistic expression

Note: Educators may use the video lesson to share directly with students, OR you could lead the lessons yourself as outlined below.

Day One: Identity & Text (20–30 minutes)

Materials: Something to write with and something to write on.

Essential Questions: What is identity, and what aspects of oneself make up our intersectional identities? How do we use voice, breath, and body to successfully share personal content in a video performance?

Activities

1. Artistic Encounter

- Share with students: Ping Chong + Company is a theater company based in New York City, devoted to making brand new works of theater that advance social justice, and bring real people's stories to the stage. Most of PCC's work is considered documentary theater or interview-based theater.
- Watch: a video of a section of PCC's *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*.

2. Discussion

- What do we think documentary theater is? How does it compare to other documentary forms students know? (Documentary films, biographies, memoirs, etc.) What makes what we just saw documentary theater? What is the power of putting the spotlight on real people's stories?

3. Exploration

- Setting the Stage: Explain to students that you're going to try using some documentary theater practices to mark this momentous occasion—their high school graduation—with some meaningful reflection on:
 - Who you are. (Identity)
 - How you've changed in the past few years. (Growth)
 - What you want the world to know about you, as you turn the page on this chapter of your life and step forward into your future! (Blast-off!)

- Identity Brainstorm: Ask students to reflect on the identities they own that make them the unique and interesting people that they are. Have students jot down as many identities they can think of, that are true for THEM. There are so many intersectional ways that we identify, ways that we feel true to ourselves in the world, so tell students to fill their pages with as many identities as they can think of. Include some discussion on intersectionality, and on categories of identity, like:
 - Relationship-based: son, niece, big brother, friend.
 - Interest-based: swimmer, dancer, gamer, basketball player, artist, activist.
 - Personality-based: brave, optimistic, loud, quiet, goofy, hard-working, etc.
 - Cultural or geographically based: identities connected to where you live, or where members of your family are from—like New Yorker, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Chinese-American.
 - Include other categories as you see fit: gender identities (male, female, non-binary, trans, etc.), sexual identities (hetero, LGBTQIA+, etc), religious identities, and more.
- Select core identities: Now that students have brainstormed a full sheet of identities, have them circle 2 or 3 identities that they feel proud of, that they feel are pretty core to who they are, and that they would feel comfortable sharing aloud with peers, friends, and family.

4. Scripting

- Explain to students that now they're going to share their chosen identities as part of a scripted documentary video project.
- Have students flesh out a small script for a video share. You can use the prompts below, or vary in your own way:
 - My name is* _____. (Use full name.)
 - And I am a proud* _____, _____, & _____. (Use identities.)

5. Sharing

- Consider with students the elements of performance (particularly breath, voice, and body) that help make on-screen sharings successful. How do we really own our moment on-screen?
- Some ideas of on-camera performance skills to consider:
 - Take a deep breath before you speak to center yourself and let everyone watching focus on you.
 - Let your body settle into a still, confident posture: shoulders down, hands calm, eyes looking directly into the camera.
 - Speak slowly and clearly, using your whole mouth to articulate your words so that everyone can easily understand you.

- b. Practice performing: Each student speaks their script one at a time:
- Deep Breath
 - My name is _____, and I am a proud _____, _____, & _____.

6. Reflection

Ask students:

- What was it like to share something true about yourself in this way?
- What was it like to witness others' sharings?
- What did you notice about your own or others' success applying elements of performance on camera?
- How might documentary theater techniques help turn real experience into meaningful reflection?

Day Two: Growth & Gesture (20-30 minutes)

Materials: Something to write with and something to write on

Essential Question: How has our understanding of ourselves evolved over the course of high school? How can we use physical gesture to add meaning to our expression of personal story?

Activities

1. Discussion

- Start a conversation about how far students have come since they were freshmen. There's a lot of **growth and change** that happens in high school. How does what we've learned the classroom compare to what we've learned about who we are, what matters most to us, what kind of people we want to be, what we strongly believe in, etc? We grow into new versions of ourselves all the time. How have student experienced this evolution in themselves?

2. Brainstorm/Free-write

- Give students 4 minutes to write stream-of-consciousness about how they have grown or changed over the course of their high school careers. What do they know now that they didn't know then?

3. Scripting

- Ask students to look over their free-writes, and identify one key point they'd like to focus on for the rest of the activity.
- Have students flesh out a small script for a video share, based on their key point of focus. Ask them to get as much meaning as possible into one sentence, i.e. distill their description of their growth down to the very heart of it. Students can use the prompt below, or vary in your own way:
 - *One way I've grown (or changed) in the past few years is _____.*

4. Theatricalizing/Physicalizing the Script

- Once students have a clear one-sentence growth statement, explain that now they're going to give this meaningful statement even **more power** by transforming it with simple movement: a **GESTURE!**
- Assess student pre-existing knowledge about gesture vs pose, dance, and other uses of body to express meaning. To aid in that discussion, you can clarify that:
 - A gesture is not frozen (that's a pose)
 - A gesture is not really complicated or long (because that would be a movement phrase or a dance.)
 - A gesture is a simple movement that has a beginning, middle, and end. It is short and sweet and easy to repeat!
- Identify key words
 - Ask students to start by choosing the most meaningful words in their growth statements. For example, in the sentence "*One way I've changed in the past few years is that I've learned that I have to be willing to take risks if I want to grow,*" the key word might be RISK.
- Ask students to create a simple, repeatable gesture to illustrate their key word.
 - Simultaneously, have all students silently share their gesture, and then repeat three times, getting more specific and precise each time.
 - Suggest that students **DILATE** their gestures, i.e. make them as large and dramatic as possible while still being visible to their virtual audience, and maintaining their specificity.
 - If time, ask students to share their gestures on camera without sharing their key words, and invite the rest of the class to share what they see in the gesture—i.e. to guess at the key word's meaning.

5. Sharing

- Remind students that to **OWN** their moment on camera, they need to keep in mind the elements of performance that they explored in the first lesson. As a review, those were:
 - Take a deep breath before you speak to center yourself and let everyone watching focus on you
 - Let your body settle into a still, confident posture: shoulders down, hands calm, eyes looking directly into the camera
 - Speak slowly and clearly, using your whole mouth to articulate your words so that everyone can easily understand you.
- Add to the list above that now students also have gestures to go with their key words, and that performing a gesture on camera involves:
 - Keeping the gesture within the frame visible to the audience
 - Making the gesture specific and precise
 - Dilating the gesture, to make it as expressive as possible.

c. Practice performing: Each student speaks their script one at a time, performing their gesture at the same time as their key word, to add some powerful physical expression to their growth statements!

- Deep Breath
- My name is _____, and one way I've grown (or changed) in the past few years is _____.

6. Reflection

Ask students:

- How did the use of gesture change your experience of sharing?
- How did the use of gesture change your experience of witnessing others' sharings?
- What did you notice about your own or others' success using gesture to add meaning to their on-camera performance?

Day Three: Expressing Ourselves Freely (20-30 minutes)

Materials: Something to write with and something to write on.

Essential Question: Now that we stand on the precipice of a new journey, what do we feel ready for? How do we want to be seen in the world? How can we use our own expressive forms to add meaning to our personal stories? How does creative expression enhance storytelling?

Note: Depending upon your class and how much time you have, you may wish to skip step 4, and jump directly from scripting into the final sharing. If you have more time, you could do step 4 together as a class, or assign it in between class sessions as homework.

Activities

1. Discussion

- Start a conversation about how students feel seen by the world around them, and how they would like to feel seen. Now that they have come to the end of their high school careers, what do they feel ready for that they were not ready for before? The future may feel a little uncertain right now, but we don't have to know exactly where we're headed to know that we're ready for something new, something different, something we've waited a long time for, something that feels like the next step.

2. Brainstorm/Free-write

- Give students 3 minutes to write stream-of-consciousness about what they would like the world to know about them, and what they feel ready for. As they step out of high school and into their futures, what are they most excited about?
- Encourage students to think holistically about their pasts, their presents, and their futures, i.e. right now we're all ready for social isolation and sheltering-in-place to be over, but this

brainstorm is not just about this current moment. It is about the longer view of their journey toward and through the end of high school and moving forward into their futures!

3. Scripting

- Ask students to flesh out a small script for a video share, distilling the core thoughts from their free writes into one sentence.

Students can use the prompt below, or vary in your own way:

- *I want the world to know that I'm ready to _____!*

4. Transforming the Script through Creative Expression

- Once students have a clear one-sentence aspiration statement, explain that now they have some freedom of expression to consider how to give their meaningful statement even more power. We're going to make our statements artful, but in our own unique ways.

- Brainstorm a list of possible modes of creative expression.

In the second lesson, we explored gesture as a mode of enhanced expression, but what other forms of expression do students enjoy? Some ideas:

- Visual art: drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, etc.
- Physical Expression: dance, gesture, posing, etc.
- Music: singing, playing an instrument, beatboxing, body percussion (creating rhythms by striking different parts of the body in different ways), etc.
- Theater: acting, scenic design, costume design, props, puppetry, etc.
- And there are so many more!

- Identify key words

- Ask students to start by choosing the most meaningful words in their aspiration statements. For example, in the sentence *"I want the world to know that I am ready to break free of my past and invent my future from scratch!"* the key word might be BREAK FREE or they might be FROM SCRATCH. There is no right or wrong choice, it's about what words feel the most potent to each student.

- Ask students to explore a creative way to express or POP their key words. They can use any of the forms of creative expression you brainstormed together, or another form of their choice.

- If time, ask students to share their expressive choice on camera without sharing their key words, and invite the rest of the class to reflect what meaning they take from the expression. Can they guess what the creator's intended meaning was?

5. Preparing a Final Sharing

- Explain to students that now you are going to personally and collectively thread together all of the high school

reflections they've done in this 3-lesson unit, to model what could become a segment of a really powerful virtual commencement ceremony!

b. Review the script segments. Each student has 4 statements:

- My name is _____ (full name.)
- I am a proud _____, _____, & _____ (identities)
- One way I've grown (or changed) in the past few years is _____ (with gesture.)
- And I want the world to know that I'm ready to _____! (with personal form of creative expression)

c. Review the on-camera performance skills students explored in these lessons, to help them truly OWN their moment! Those were:

- Deep breath before you speak
- Still, confident posture & eye contact with the camera
- Clear articulation of text
- Specific, precise, dilated gestures that stay within the camera's frame

d. Add Transitions. Consider with the class how you might transition between each student's personal piece. Some ideas:

- The speaker could name the next speaker, inviting them to begin. i.e. "Jackson?"
- The speaker could clap or snap a rhythm and the next speaker could repeat the rhythm before they begin, like a virtual call and response.
- The speaker could "throw" an imaginary ball or microphone to the left of their screen, and the next speaker could "catch" the same imaginary item from the right of their screen
- The speaker could move an imaginary (or real!) graduation tassel from the right to the left.
- The speaker could move their hand forward to block the camera lens, and the next speaker could start by blocking the camera lens with their hand, and moving their hand back away from the lens.
- What other transitions can your class think of?

e. Rehearse

- Rehearse transitions.
- Rehearse the entire piece. Each student speaks their script one at a time, transitioning between each speaker as decided by your class.

f. You're ready to share with family, friends, schoolmates, and the world!

6. Reflection

Discuss with students:

- What was it like to be seen and heard through this project? Was any of it uncomfortable? Empowering? Did your feelings about it change at different points in the process?
- Do you think that documentary theater is a useful way to make meaning of real-life experiences? Is personal storytelling powerful? Why or why not?
- If you did step 4: How did the use of your own chosen form of expression change your experience of sharing? What did you like about seeing others' unique forms of expression embedded in their sharings? What is the value of adding physical, visual, auditory, or other forms of expression to scripted personal stories?

Congratulations!

You've just created an artful expression of meaning, to mark this significant transition from high school to BEYOND!

Thanks for creating with us!

And from all of us at Ping Chong + Company,

Congratulations to the Class of 2020!

Lesson Plan #3

Journey, Sacrifice, Commitment

By Kevin at Stella Adler Studio of Acting

Taught on Video By: Kevin Bott

Objective: To devise a personal threshold crossing to mark one's transition from one major chapter of life to the next.

Note: This lesson will make little sense if you haven't read the (fake) Q & A starting on page 4; and especially if you haven't taken the "Deeper Dive into Rites of Passage" in the Appendix starting right after this lesson. Read those first and come back when you're done.

Underlying Questions

- What has your life journey so far been like?
- What have you learned? What have you experienced?
- Who was kind to you? Who were you kind to?
- How have you been hurt? Who have you been hurtful to?
- Who shaped you? What shaped you?
- How do you mark this transition out of childhood?
 - What do you put down from the old chapter? What no longer serves the person you are becoming? What needs to be put to rest before you can fully step into the new phase?
 - What are picking up? What are you committing to? Who are you becoming?
 - Who needs to know? Who is it important to have see/hear/experience your rite of passage? Who needs to know what you are sacrificing at the threshold and what you are committing to?

Day One: Annotated Map of Your Journey

Time: This lesson doesn't fit neatly into 3 twenty-minute sections. Its purpose is to take people through the process of creating a threshold crossing. It will take as much or as little time as someone decides to put into it. I usually teach this in a 3-to-4-hour workshop.

Materials: Large piece of paper for drawing, (could be 4 pieces of printing paper taped together), crayons, markers, regular and colored pencils

Activity

- **Reflect on your life.** What's your first memory? Picture yourself in that memory. Imagine the memory is happening on the side of the river. You are in the river. Maybe you're swimming. Maybe you're in a canoe or on a raft. See that first memory on the bank of the river... Now let yourself be carried by the river. The river is the flow of time. Along the banks, you see all the important moments on your journey so far. You see the important events—positive and negative. You see the people that shaped you, for better and for worse. You see who you

are at different times... as you float down the river to the present moment... Make sure there is a "present moment" on the map. Is it at the edge of the page? Is it in the center? In the corner? The river should lead to "now."

- **Draw your journey.** Start by using the Underlying Questions above as prompts to draw your river. Represent the scenes/people/feelings/lessons that are on the riverbank. Include dates, names, abstract drawings, symbols, words or phrases.... Use anything that expresses—in a way that makes sense to you—the importance of those moments. This is your **annotated map**.
- **Going Deeper (optional):** As you look at your journey map, is there **one story** you could tell that would help someone understand who and what shaped your life so far? Not your whole life story... Just one incident. One short scene in the film of your life... Another way of saying it might be, "If someone doesn't know [this story], they can't really know me." What's that story?

You're not going to share it with anyone. It's just for you. The story can be "positive" or "negative," as long as you feel it's something that had a significant impact on your journey and who you are. If it's positive, think about this as something that you're carrying with down the river. If you think of it as "negative," there will be an opportunity to leave it behind at the threshold.

Day Two: Sacrifice & Commitment

Materials: something to write on and something to write with

Activities

- Look again at your map and see if you missed anything, or if there's anything that needs more detail. Work some more if you want to... With your mind or with your eyes, travel down the river once more. Intentionally bring appreciation for the journey. Appreciate that even painful parts of the journey can serve a purpose. Consciously take a moment at each stop on the riverbank to reflect on exactly how that chapter/experience/person shaped you.
- Imagine yourself at "now" in the river. Draw a threshold, a boundary, a checkpoint. Something preventing you from moving down the river. Imagine that you have an understanding that before you can cross into the next part of the river, you need to **declare** what you have brought with you so far on the journey.

- From everything you have accumulated on your journey, you must now divide them into categories. You must lighten your load before you enter this next stretch of river, so you have to make lists of what you will carry with you and what you will leave behind. (Sort of like an emotional and psychological customs station at an airport or border crossing.)
- Write down your **declaration**. What are the things that continue to serve who you are becoming? And what may have served you at one point but no longer serves who you are becoming.
 - Note: You can't truly leave memories or hurts or experiences behind. But with art and ritual you can **symbolically** release power they have over you. At the ritual threshold, you have an opportunity to acknowledge how these things shaped you, and then to emotionally and psychically release them. Leave them back on the riverbank. You can always take a backward glance, but you don't need to carry it anymore. It's dead weight!! It won't serve your journey.
 - On the other hand, you can consciously embrace or absorb the parts of your journey that do continue to serve you and your ongoing evolution. These things are weightless. They lift you. So you can take them with you.
- Using your list or map, write the following statements:
 - *From this stage of my journey I leave behind* _____.
 - *From this stage of my journey I choose to carry* _____ *with me into the next.*
 - *I commit to [searching for/finding/embracing/ becoming/etc.]* _____.

Complete each sentence as many times as you need or want to. Look back at the Ping Chong + Company lesson. Maybe some of the identity statements work here.

For statements #1 and #2, account for all of the things on your riverbank. Either they come with you into the new, or they stay back with the old. And for #3, write as many statements as feel true/meaningful to you. Even if you feel a lot of uncertainty about the future, then make commitments to be patient with yourself, or to be alert for your inner voice. Or maybe you need to commit to bringing health into yourself, or peace to a relationship or situation. I'm sure there are things about your life and your identity that you are ready to move on from... Some examples:

- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I commit to* _____.
- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will honor* _____.
- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will be the kind of person who* _____.

- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will no longer worry about* _____ *and will instead focus on* _____.
- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will trust myself.*
- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will do things that bring me joy and peace regardless of what others think!*

Don't forget things that might be very relevant now, like:

- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will work to establish myself as an adult—in my relationships, my communication, and behavior—even though the coronavirus forces me to continue being supported by my parents.*
- *As I enter the next stage of my journey, I will not allow virus-related unemployment dictate how I feel about myself or limit the person I wish to be.*

These are just examples! You make statements that are meaningful to you.

Taken together, these statements comprise your **VOWS**—promises or commitments you make to yourself and to the “your community” (whatever that means to you). These vows are what you need to declare before you can move fully into the next part of your river journey.

Day Three: Rite of Passage

Note: This does not correspond to the video lesson demonstration. Please see Appendix B.

Activities:

- Take each of your vows and arrange them in the following order:
 - All the leaving behind statements, in any order. Could be: chronological order; in order of importance to you; all the people, then all the experiences, then all the lessons; etc.
 - Do the same with the “carrying with” statements.
 - Do the same with the commitment statements. Make sure these are all written as full sentences, and in your preferred order. Once you have it the way you want, put the commitment statements aside.
- Review lessons 1 and 2, from The New Victory Theater and Ping Chong + Company, respectively.
 - Review the way they create physical gesture and movement from text and ideas.
- Take each “leaving behind” and “carrying with” declaration and create a gesture or short movement phrase for each one. Choose if or how to say the statements along with your movement/gesture. You could say all statements. You could say

some. You could pick certain powerful words, or associated sounds, and only say them. Or maybe for you, the words carry more power than the physical representation. In that case, emphasize the words more than the physical phrases.

Either way, be sure to **use your body in some way**, if you're able. The body holds a lot of memory. It can help us access meaning in ways our conscious brain cannot.

- Link each text/movement phrase to the next. One to the next from beginning to end. What you will have in the end is a two-part performance. You could say something before (or after) each section, like, simply:
 - “*From this stage of my journey I leave behind...*” and then don't finish the sentence. Just begin your piece.
 - Then, in a slight pause before the next section, you say, “*from this stage of my journey I choose to bring...*” and then don't finish the sentence. Just begin the next section.
- Rehearse the sequence until you know it in your mind and body. Find your “as I enter the next stage” statements. At the end of your dance, you will make your vows, like this:

- “My name is [NAME]. I have reflected on my journey. I have reflected on what and who has shaped me. I know what I need to carry with me, and I know what I leave behind.”
- And then read, simply and confidently, your “As I enter the next stage” statements.

- Invite someone or a group of people to participate in the rite of passage. After you have completed your performance, turn to your audience and say, “If you are willing to honor this rite of passage, and support me in moving into the next stage of my life, please affirm by saying: “I bear witness.”
 - If someone from your group of witnesses can read this to the others, even better.

Remember, Stella Adler believed **your talent is in your choice**. You can modify, rearrange, add to or subtract any or all of this. Create the performance that will seem meaningful to you as you move forward.

Congratulations and Great Good Luck to You, Class of 2020!

Support for Families and Loved Ones



Well, this page is something of a bait and switch. There is no support for you!

Just kidding! In addition to this page, please see Appendix B beginning on p. 28.

But the kind of support here is meant to support you in supporting the graduating seniors in your life! Maybe the most challenging aspect of this rite of passage this year is that many if not most of the people going through this rite of passage may find themselves stuck in neutral for the foreseeable future. The coronavirus may dictate that these newly minted graduates are going to be living in their childhood bedrooms, being supported by parents and other elders, unable to find work, unable to get their own place, and maybe even unable to go off to college or a job in the fall.

We want to encourage you to be more conscious about what this transition means, and do more to support and encourage the sense—described throughout this guidebook—of one stage of life closing and another opening up. You have a lot of power to help them to see themselves in a new light. If you are willing to put the work in to have a new, more mature kind of relationship with your child or loved one, you are inviting them to step up into that maturity.

But of course, this means a rite of passage for you, too! What do you need to leave behind in your belief about who your child is, or who/how you have to be with them, so that you, too, can move into a new more mature phase of your life and of your child/parent relationship? Don't be shy about trying some of the exercises above!

The exercises at the end of this guidebook attempt to bring attention to and elevate this transition. And this could be powerful, especially if you're willing to bear witness and affirm what the graduate is trying to express.

But a good follow-up would simply be to have the family members sit down together and carve out some expectations on all sides. If the graduate wants to see themselves, and be seen, in a new light, what would that look like? How would they want to be treated? What new patterns would need to be established? What would you, the parent or guardian (or sibling) expect of the graduate? (i.e., the graduate wants to be treated as if they are an independent adult but also wants all laundry washed and meals cooked for them? Might not work out!)

In short, this could be a hard summer for a lot of us. The graduates want to move into a new familial role, and a new role in the world. But they're also being restricted by circumstances and unable to see the future with clarity. What likely would have been a summer of working hard and playing hard with old friends before a new job or school in the fall, may wind up being a summer spent being bored and restless around the house. Trying to figure out how to move down the river while feeling like they have to tread water...

We hope that you will do your part in this rite of passage. Make a big deal out of graduation day, whether there's a celebration or not. Encourage your student to do the activities above, or at least reflect on the prompts contained in this document. And as parents and guardians, work hard to model the kind of maturity, accountability, and transparency that you want to see in them.

Congratulations! Your kid did it! You did it!
Now help them make this important transition gracefully!
Good luck!!

Appendix A

Deeper Dive into Rites of Passage



This section is for anyone wishing to know more about rites of passage and their relevance to high school graduation. There are prompts and questions involved, which could be used in conjunction with the lesson plan section above.

A **rite of passage** is a special kind of ritual, one that virtually every human civilization has created for the purpose of elevating, marking, and celebrating the major transitions in the lives of their people.

What are the some of the major life transitions?

- Giving birth
- Coming into maturity (either in a secular or sacred context)
- Marriage/divorce
- Entering or leaving the military or a religious order
- Entering or leaving prison
- Death

Each of these transitions imply a social role—a role in some community (secular or sacred)—and a set of responsibilities and privileges associated with it.

Parts of the Ritual

Not always, but often, rites of passage are divided into three parts. All of them revolve around the middle part, which is called the liminal. Liminal come from the Latin word *limen*, which we've come to call a **threshold**. Here's what threshold means:

- Gate or door;
- End or boundary;
- The place or point of entering or beginning;
- The point at which a **physiological** or **psychological** effect begins to be produced;
- A point above/beyond which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not.

Everything about a rite of passage has to do with the threshold.

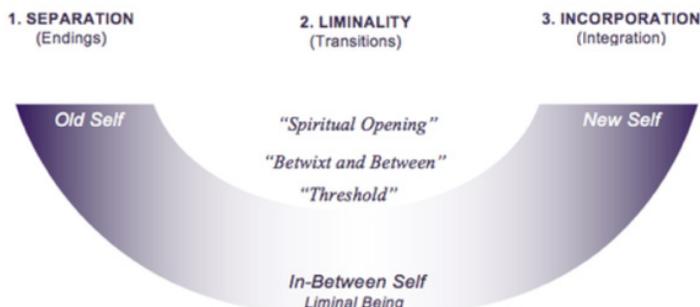
If you're at the threshold of something, you are at a point of tremendous **change**. You are at the doorway but not yet through it. At this point you can still choose not to enter. You can turn back. It's both the end of something and the beginning of something.

It is no easy thing to go from being one thing to another. What does it mean to stop being a child and start being an adult? Or to go from being single to being married? Or from prisoner to citizen again? If you feel the change in yourself, how do you make other people see and acknowledge it in you? On the other hand, what if everyone is telling you, for example, "you're an adult now," but you don't know what that is even supposed to mean.

That's where rites of passage come in. They are events in which the community (meaning your people, whoever you love and trust) comes together to mark, acknowledge, certify, and celebrate the transition that a person is undertaking. As discussed in the Q&A section of this document, all of the theatricality within a rite of passage is meant to elevate the event. In some ways, like all art, its power comes in touching people on many levels—not only the rational, logical, and linear (the modalities that are most comfortable for most people in our culture) but also at the level of the emotional, symbolic, non-linear, and somatic.

The actual **performance** of a rite of passage takes place in "the liminal space." It is thought to be a space between states or identities. Traditionally, the person involved in the ritual is *between* selves. They are not quite who they have always been (pre-liminal identity, also associated with separation from the old role within the social group), and they are not quite who they are becoming (post-liminal identity, also associated with integration back into the social group but now in a new social role).

PHASES OF RITES OF PASSAGES



When a person moves toward a threshold moment (rite of passage), they are typically at a point in life when they have matured emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically to the point that they can no longer stay in the comfortable realm of the life they have been living. Well, it is comfortable in one way because it's what you know. But it's also increasingly *uncomfortable* because it's kind of feeling like the old way is stale or played out.

When this discomfort becomes so great and so intense, you might hear an inner voice telling you that it's time to enter into another stage of life. That inner voice is pointing you to the threshold. (If we're lucky, there are also voices of elders and wise people in the family or community who are pointing us there, too!)

Sacrifices at the Threshold

OK. You might now be saying, "Cool, OK, I can feel that. I can see how I'm ending one long chapter of my life and beginning a new one." And maybe you think you're ready to cross the threshold and enter the new, exciting/scary phase of your life! Great!!

Just one problem: **you need to leave something behind.** In a rite of passage, the person who wishes to cross the threshold must leave something from the old life behind. Sometimes, things serve us in one part of our lives but stop serving us as we get older. Just like a snake, as we grow and evolve, we outgrow our "skin." It's not that the skin is bad. In fact, it was perfect for a long time. It just doesn't fit anymore! Time for a new skin! (Attention: If you're conscious to it, you'll find your skin gets tight at different stages of your life! If you understand what's going on, you can consciously undergo a rite of passage in order to grow and evolve!)

It's common in a rite of passage to say that a person has to **emotionally** or **psychologically** allow an old part of their story to "die" so that they can fully bring a new part of themselves to life. (But if that seems too heavy for you, you can also say that to cross the threshold a person has to emotionally and psychologically "put something down" so that they can pick up something new.

The rite of passage is the event in which a person symbolically moves on from the old self, steps across a (symbolic) threshold with actions (including words), and makes a commitment (to themselves and to the community) to fulfill the responsibilities and obligations associated with the new social role.

Questions

- How is graduating high school a threshold for you? What two things is the threshold separating? Other than having to go to school, what's ending and what's beginning? (ex: childhood/adulthood; immaturity/maturity; dependence/independence, etc.) How would you define the separation?



An inner impulse calls the caterpillar away from normal life (separation); lives in a state of non-fixed identity as they undergo change (liminal space); then cross a threshold to reveal their new identity (reintegration).

Questions

- Is there a part of your story, or a part of your life, maybe a certain way you've done things, that you feel no longer serve you?
- Is there a "skin" you've been wearing that's become too uncomfortable to live in?
- What part of your life or story do you feel you no longer need? What do you want to put down?

Commitments at the Threshold

Once you have shed the old skin, guess what? Uhhhhh... you ain't got no skin!! And you know what else? You might feel a bit... exposed... for a little while. It takes a little while to grow that new skin. You might want to run back into your comfort zone. It's easier to do what you've always known than to step out into the unknown.

During a rite of passage, one way that we help ourselves make the threshold crossing stick is by **making some promises**. We make them to ourselves and to people we care about or to people who already live in the role we're aspiring toward.

In the realm of rites of passage, once we shed the old skin, we then **name** and **commit** to the new skin we're looking to wear. If you're getting married, you are making **vows—solemn promises**—to yourself, your partner, and to the people you care for, about what kind of person you are trying to become.



A snake shedding an old skin.

In a rite of passage, the people you make your vows to/for/in front of it are called **witnesses**. When they observe your threshold crossing, they are **bearing witness** to the transformation you're **performing**. By making these vows, **in some public fashion**, you are holding yourself accountable to the person you want to be, and asking your people to hold you accountable to that, too!

Beyond the threshold is something new, but you need to have an idea of what you're looking for. **Find the answer by tuning in to your inner voice**. Or if you're not used to listening for that voice, look to your family and the wider community for role models whose lives resonate with your aspirations.

Questions

- Can you “see” what’s on the other side of your threshold?
Do you know who or what you’re trying to become?
What is the new skin you’re seeking to wear?
- What is your inner voice saying? What are you being called to do? Who are you being called to be?
- Who are you asking to bear witness to your transformation?
Who do you trust to hold you accountable, so that if you fall off your commitment, you’ll let them call you out?

Appendix B

Building a Graduation Rite of Passage at Home

Overview

Because this project was conceived in response to schools canceling the academic year in April 2020, and because we wanted to support people have a meaningful high school graduation experience in June, there obviously wasn't a lot of time to build it. It was exactly three weeks from when we received Covid-related emergency funding to when we went live with the online toolkit.

We were truly “designing the plane while flying it.” And we didn't see a few things. Or I should say more accurately, “I” didn't see a few things. As the project director and resident rite of passage guy at Stella Adler, I was the one doing most of the designing and flying!

When we applied for funding, my initial idea was that because everything was moving to platforms like Zoom and Hangout, what we could offer were project planning resources (theater people are amazing event planners!) and creative thought partnership for building a meaningful online graduation. We also wanted to think about supporting individual classrooms do smaller scale versions of the idea — like what we had just begun piloting with a group of about 25 college acting students who trained at the Adler studio.

As I talked to prospective partners at arts organizations and within the NYC Department of Education we realized together that while creating innovative schoolwide graduations might prove difficult (at least in our city), what would be useful were formal lesson plans that teachers could use to engage students in the ideas around rites of passage and graduation. And further, because of the lack of technology in many students' New York City apartments, we needed lesson plans that students could undertake themselves.

So away we went! **Courtney Boddie** from The New Victory Theater came on board first, and introduced me to **Christina Bixland** at Ping Chong + Company. Soon we were all at work figuring out how to create these resources. They began filming remotely, and virtually, with their teaching artists, and I was pulling multiple all-nighters in my basement, filming my own videos and drafting the guidebook.

It was only when I got to part three of my lesson that I realized that if I continued with what I had planned—see p. 22 of this guidebook—I was going to seriously screw up the landing.

What I knew the whole time was that a high school graduation is never “really” a rite of passage. It's a ceremony and has always been a ceremony. A graduation **ceremony** is an event celebrating an accomplishment that's already been achieved. You don't graduate as a *result* of the graduation ceremony. You don't even need to show up to the ceremony to graduate. A **rite of passage**, on the other hand, is a container where social transformation can take place. The closest graduations come to being rites of passage is when we substitute—in our minds or in the graduation-day speeches—the “end of high school” with “the end of childhood.” But in reality, getting a high school diploma does not confer adulthood.

Individualistic societies like ours are fairly bad at conferring adulthood to our youth because we don't have a shared understanding of social roles or social obligations. And so we use high school graduation as a kind of institutional version of a maturation rite.

I say all of this to say that as artists, and as advocates and organizers for justice, we often think about how to see the opportunity in the crisis, the possibility in the problem. Our initial thinking was that we had an opportunity to bring an essential component of a rite of passage—the active participation of the people going through the social transition—into the void caused by the erasure of the traditional ceremonies. Either online or in the places they lived, students could imagine together and create artistic pieces that would either help them reflect personally on the transition in their lives, or bring them together in a collaborative effort to do the same. And we now have some evidence that it works! The college acting students loved the process and appreciated the opportunity to have a voice in their own graduation, rather than being talked at for a couple of hours. They said it brought them from feeling robbed of something they worked hard for, to feeling, like, “cool, we just invented something totally new and unique.”

And still...I knew as I began filming the last part of my lesson that I had missed a huge opportunity.

In figuring out how to use technology creatively, and in thinking within the framework of a graduation ceremony, I was becoming more and more focused on the fact that our culture **should** have true rites of passage for young people transitioning into adulthood. I believe a lot of our social problems—from domestic violence to incarceration to climate change—can be traced to the fact that we don't!

I feel confident that what Stella Adler Studio of Acting, Ping Chong + Company, and The New Victory Theater have created is a really wonderful resource. I think that creative student engagement for institutional events can make them feel more like a rite of passage. And I think the student/teacher lesson plans can help create pieces that can be part of a rite of passage. **But what we needed, and what we didn't have, was an actual rite of passage!**

I realized that one opportunity within this crisis was to build a new maturation rite, one that any family or community could perform, even in the Age of Coronavirus. And so, using the activities I already

taught in parts one and two, that's what part three became—a step-by-step walkthrough of a rite of passage to mark the transition between the end of childhood and into the beginning of adulthood.

This written Appendix goes hand in hand with Video Lessons 3.1–3.4, which can be accessed through the project website.

I hope you find this interesting and useful.

Kevin Bott

Building a Graduation Rite of Passage in Twelve Steps

This rite of passage is designed as a maturation rite. It works for a high school graduation (and could probably be streamlined to work as an actual graduation event in a small school) but it definitely doesn't have to be connected to a high school graduation. Maybe it's performed the weekend before a person moves out of their childhood home. Maybe it's before someone is leaving for college or for the military. Maybe it's the weekend after college graduation... Obviously, this would work even better if we weren't in the midst of a pandemic and could include extended family and loved ones. But like pretty much any rite of passage, it can work with just a few people, with a family, or with a whole community. I will use the words "family" and "community" interchangeably in the pages below.

A word about the ritual space. As I explain in the video, the ritual space is referred to as a *liminal* space. Liminal comes from the Latin word, *limen*, which means threshold, or related to the threshold. In a ritual context, when the initiate enters the liminal space, they are at both an ending and a beginning. To enter the liminal space, they must step out of their previous social identity. But they will not yet have stepped into the new social identity. They are *in-between*. Their personality is not fixed. In fact, it is almost as if they have no identity until they cross the threshold and re-enter the social realm of their community.

In other rites of passage I've facilitated, the participants have worn plaster half masks until they've crossed the threshold. In this one (unless a graduate really wants to wear a mask), I suggest that the Graduate not speak until it's their turn to make their declarations. Until then, they should simply be an active observer and listener.

Finally, I didn't really emphasize this in the videos or in the first Appendix, for various reasons, but there is no escaping that the primary metaphors for a rite of passage are **death and rebirth**. I was able to skirt around this before setting about to create an actual rite of passage. Now there's no avoiding it. Rites of passage acknowledge and mark the passing of time and thus, implicitly, the end of all things. In this case, the end of youth.

But the other side of this coin is that the ritual itself is proof that the cycle of life continues beyond any one of us, and is bigger than any one individual. A rite of passage allows us to feel grief for the ephemeral and fleeting nature of our own individual time on earth. At the same time, the rite of passage gives us feelings of comfort and peace in knowing that the values and traditions of our community that came before us will continue beyond us. Communicating this central theme will be the primary responsibility of the Ritual Elder, who I'll introduce below.

1. The Roles

Rites of passage are about the **transformation of social roles** (and in many cases spiritual and psychological roles). Thus, it's a social and communal event; "society" has to be involved. Here is the primary cast of characters:

- **Initiand** (or initiate): For our ritual, this is the **Graduate**. The person going through the transformation.
- **Ritual Elder**: This is the rite of passage's master of ceremonies. It should be played by someone who is respected by the community, including by the Graduate. Ideally, it's someone

with a little charisma. It's someone who has some depth but who is loose enough to improvise a little and respond to the unexpected. The Elder is also a Witness.

- **Witness:** Everyone else who participates in the rite of passage. Witnessing is active, not passive. Witnesses are not there to observe, they are there to be engaged and involved. Their active participation is crucial to the success of the ritual.

2. Preparation

Content

- **River Maps:** For Graduates, see the video and written lesson plan of parts one and two of this exercise. Witnesses should also do a version of the map, except instead of chronicling their life stories, they are chronicling the story of their memories of and relationship with the Graduate.

Be creative. Take your time. This exercise is meant to prompt reflection, memory, and emotion. It's an opportunity for the Graduate to take stock of their own journey thus far, and for Witnesses to reflect on the role of this person in their own lives.

Since this is about moving between life chapters, the first step is to gain clarity about the chapter that the initiand is leaving.

- **Declarations:** The threshold is sort of like a customs checkpoint. You must declare what you're carrying across the border with you. But in this case, you also have to declare what you're leaving behind. Instructions for the Graduate are on p. 22 of the guidebook and in Video Lesson 3.1.

The Witnesses will use their own river maps to write declarations, too. There are two of them and people should write as many as are true, each on a separate slip of paper.

- *"From this stage of my journey with you, I will miss _____."* Simply, what will you miss about this person, or about your relationship with this person, as they move into a new chapter? It can be anything from seeing them every day, to Sunday morning pancakes, or whatever...
- *"From this stage of your journey, I hope that you carry _____ with you."* What qualities or characteristics do you hope the graduate holds onto across the threshold? For example, the person always sees the good in people. Or they always know how to make people laugh. Or they're very kind and empathetic....
- **Vows:** The graduate should refer to the commitment statements on p. 22 of the guidebook. There should be copies made for all the adult Witnesses.

(The Graduate should only bring their declarations, each written on a separate slip of paper. They won't need the river map or their vows. Witnesses should bring their river maps and their declarations.)

Attire and Space

Treat the day as what it is: a special occasion. Everyone should do their best to elevate the ritual by wearing clothes that feel special. I don't mean that people should wear dresses and suits and stuff. I think it's more important that people feel comfortable than to wear particular kinds of costumes. But it should be dress that demonstrates an appreciation and respect for the seriousness of the event.

Dress up the room, too, for a special occasion (or at least clean it well).

If possible, and depending on how many people are involved, create a circle with chairs, one for each Witness and one for the Elder. If it's a larger group, have people sit on furniture and on the floor around the perimeter of the room.

There is a space, too, for the Graduate, but they will sit about a foot or 18" outside the main perimeter circle. The Elder should sit next to the Graduate and should have a little "prop table" for their materials.

3. Materials

- **A piece of ribbon, rope, or twine:** This will be placed on the floor as a **separator** between the Graduate and the rest of the community. It will double as the **threshold** that the Graduate will step across at the end of the ritual to mark their reincorporation into the community.
- **A ritual bowl:** It needs to be big enough that all the Declarations can be put inside and immersed in water. As with everything, if it's a little special—like a china bowl, or stone, or hand thrown ceramic—that would be nice. But if not, really any bowl will do. If it's a little plain, consider decorating it.
- **A container of water:** Could be a vase or a pitcher or just a couple of glasses if that's what you've got. But you'll need to pour about 2 to 4 cups of water from it into the ritual bowl.
- **A non-disposable, closable box or sack:** Something that can hold all the Declarations, a small trinket, the threshold material, and the vows. Something that the Graduate can take and keep.
- **Witnesses' river maps and Declarations** (see above)
- **The Graduate's Declarations** (see p. 22 in the guidebook)

- **Copies of the vows for all the adults** (The Graduate shouldn't get a copy. They should give them to the Elder at least a day before the event, and then forget about them.)

4. Gathering/Welcome

The Elder should think of themselves as someone akin to a clergyperson officiating a wedding. At the appointed time, they should begin the event by welcoming everyone and saying what it is everyone is there to do. Here's a simple sample script:

Friends and family, I welcome you here on this special occasion of PERSON'S graduation from high school. Of course, we are so proud of their accomplishment. But more than just celebrating a school graduation, we gather today to reflect together on the 18 years of their childhood, on the wonderful person they have become, and on the ways they've impacted and helped shape our own lives. And finally—ultimately—we gather as a community to assist PERSON in making the symbolic transition into adulthood, and to let them know that they will have our support and our trust as they enter this new phase of life, with new privileges and new obligations. I should let you know that in this ritual space, the person who is making the transition between social roles is considered to be without an identity. By stepping into this ritual space today, PERSON has stepped out of their childhood role. But they cannot fully exist as an adult in the eyes of this community until they step across a threshold at the end of this celebration. So until they are asked to do so, PERSON will not speak. They will listen and observe as if they were a spirit among us. Now let us begin this rite of passage.

At this point, if the Graduate isn't in the room, they should enter. Or, if they are in the room, someone could sing or play a favorite song of theirs. Or you could show a slideshow of their life. Put it to a mix of the music they've listened to over the years. In fact, this would be a great project for the Graduate to be involved in. Remember that rites of passage require preparation and active involvement. The more the Graduate is involved in creating what they want, the more connected they will feel and the more opportunities they will have to reflect on this transition.

Whenever they enter, the Elder should make the divider, in a circle around the Graduate's chair, with the rope or ribbon. Sample script:

PERSON has now taken a step out of their own identity, outside of the identity that has been comfortable to them for many years. And yet they have not yet entered the

new identity that awaits them. We place this powerful divider between them and the rest of the community. This is the cocoon. This is the chrysalis of transformation.

5. River Stories

Remembering that the Graduate is only involved as an active listener, the Elder should say something like:

*As you know, we've all spent some time over the past couple of weeks creating river maps of our lives in relationship to PERSON. Would everyone please get those out now? The Graduate has come to one of the first checkpoints along their river journey. To enter the deeper waters of the next stretch of river, we must help them to let go of certain things so that they have both the strength and lightness of spirit to cross. They will also **gain** this strength and lightness by carrying the declarations our love and support. Before we invite this young person into the realm of adulthood, let's take some time now to share the stories that make up our lives with them. Let's use this time to remember and celebrate the fullness of these past 18 years spent with them. I'll begin.*

And then the Elder will tell a story about one part of their map. After that, the Elder will ask who would like to go next. And from there, anyone can tell one story. You don't need to go around the circle, or in any particular order. If people remember a story differently, or can add a funny or poignant detail to someone else's story, they should jump in after the story is told to add to it. Or just allow for a natural back and forth of storytelling.

Warning: It sometimes happen that there's an overly dominant person in the group who—either because they're not a great listener or because they're so enthusiastic—cuts off others' stories to impose their own version. This can really sap people's enthusiasm and goodwill. If you have someone like this in your group, the Elder should gently remind them that they can add their own memories of events when it's their turn to speak. And then *consistently interrupt them* when they try to interject onto someone else's story.

The Elder may also need to remind people that it's ok if everyone remembers stories differently. That's natural, and there are no "right" versions of a story.

Let the stories go on as long as people want to tell them.

6. Witness Declaration #1

Elder Sample Script:

That was beautiful. Thank you, everyone, for sharing those stories. What an impact PERSON has made on each one of us. At this time I'd like to say a few words...

In the mind of the Graduate, it's likely that this rite of passage is about growth, about moving forward, about new doors opening. But there is another side to this, and to every, rite of passage. It's the side you can only see when you cross the threshold and are actually on the other side. It's one that you can only see when you turn around from farther down the river.

This side is about loss, and decline, the passage of time and, ultimately, death. The young are hopeful that for every door that closes, another opens. But the old know the reverse—that for every door that opens, the one behind closes forever.

And so let us take a few moments to take out our first set of Declarations, which say, "From this stage of my journey with you, I will miss..." This is the time to think not of the bright future ahead but of what the rest of us will lose. What will you miss about PERSON and of this chapter of life with them, as they mature and as they move away both physically and emotionally? Take some time, feel free to write something you hadn't thought of before now. But make sure to write it down. We'll now sit for a few minutes in silent contemplation.

[After a few minutes of silence.]

When someone feels ready, please come up to PERSON, and to the ritual bowl. Say or read each of your declarations. And when you are finished, hand the declarations to PERSON.

And then one-by-one, as they feel ready, the Witnesses will come up to read their first declarations. Once they have read them all, they hand them to PERSON. Then the next person comes until everyone has read their declarations and PERSON has them all.

Note: This is a deviation from the video. Either one will work but I think having Witnesses hand their Declarations over, rather than putting them directly in the bowl, will have a bigger emotional payoff.

6a. Water/Fire Script

(Again, this deviates from the video. I think it works better to move on from the energy of Declaration #1 before moving onto Declaration #2. Therefore, I'm encouraging using the water to "cleanse" the first energy before moving on.)

Using the four elements in ritual serves to connect us to the natural world and to our planet. The river maps are meant to do this. The river metaphor is wonderful because it brings at least the suggestion of all four elements. The river, of course, and the riverbank. But also the fresh air that's passing over us as we travel

across the water. **And the fire is us.** Our lives make up the little campfires that populate the shores... I think someone could figure out a way to substitute any of the elements for water. But in the way I've constructed this, water is the metaphor for *time*. So here's the Elder's sample script:

I will now ask PERSON to look through all of the Declarations from their loved ones. Look at each one, take a moment to take it in, and when you're ready to let it go, place it in the ritual bowl.

[The Graduate takes a few minutes to do it.]

The Elder picks up the vase of water.

The river is time, the riverbank the earth, and what we call our life is made up in the campfires that dot the shores. Water, like time, gives life. It can take life. And it has the power to transform. Just like a river flowing for centuries can destroy the hardest stone, so Time will destroy the strongest life. Even the most powerful experience is ultimately ephemeral. Even the hottest sun will cool, will transform, will return to dust and ashes. I pour this water on the old fires of our experiences with PERSON so that new fires can be lit.

7. Witness Declaration #2

But what does not have to diminish, even with time, is our spirit. While even the most positive experiences from the past can weigh us down—either as the burden of trying to escape or with the burden of trying to recapture—what can buoy us is being connected to love and to those things that truly bring us joy and peace, and which allow us to carry joy and peace with us to others. Let's take a moment to think about the qualities in PERSON that we believe will support them and bring joy and comfort to themselves and to others in the next stage of their journey. Take some time, feel free to write something you hadn't thought of before now. But make sure to write it down. We'll now sit for a few minutes in silent contemplation.

Repeat steps from Declarations #1. Everyone hands their Declarations to the Graduate.

To the Graduate, the Elder says:

These Declarations are Declarations of love for who you are, for your true essence. Your community, observing you from the outside, advise you to lean on these things about yourself when you feel lost in the river. Lean on what lifts your spirit. These Declarations are not burdens. In fact, they take the burden away. Please place these in the ritual container next to you.

[The Graduate does so.]

8. Graduate Declarations

And now the time has come to allow PERSON to follow the lead of their community. They, with the community, have watched the fires of their past doused by the water of time. And now they must go deeper into what weights they need to unburden themselves of, and what they choose to carry forward.

Now the Elder invites the Graduate to read each of their Declarations —first all of #1 and then all of #2. The Graduate should say it, reflect on it for a moment, and then put the #1s in the bowl and the #2s in the container. If the Declaration #1 is too personal, the Graduate has control of what they say or don't say. If they choose not to say something, they should still take the moment to say it silently, reflect, and place it in the bowl.

9. Water/Fire Script.

Between Declarations #1 and #2, the Elder repeats a variation on the script from 6a above:

Picking up the vase of water, the Elder says:

The river is time, the riverbank the earth, and what we call our life is made up in the campfires that dot the shores. Water, like time, gives life. It can take life. And it has the power to transform. Just like a river flowing for centuries can destroy the hardest stone, so Time will destroy the strongest life. Even the most powerful experience is ultimately ephemeral. Even the hottest sun will cool, will transform, will return to dust and ashes. I pour this water on the old fires of our experiences with PERSON so that new fires can be lit.

The river is time, the riverbank the earth, and what we call our life is made up in the campfires that dot the shores. Water, like time, gives life. It can take life. And it has the power to transform. Just like a river flowing for centuries can destroy the hardest stone, so Time will destroy the strongest life. Even the most powerful experience is ultimately ephemeral. Even the hottest sun will cool, will transform, will return to dust and ashes. We pour this water on the old fires of the experiences that this young person can no longer carry. We ask water to dilute their power, to cool these pains and passions so that PERSON may see the lessons within them and use them to grow and to become wise. We need them to cultivate the maturity and wisdom inside of them—for their own benefit and for the benefit of our community.

Note: after Declarations #2, nothing is done with the container at this time. The Elder shouldn't acknowledge it at this point.

10. Vows/Commitments

These are the vows that the Graduate has written. See pp. 21 - 23 of the handbook.

As I say in the video, this will be like the recitation of vows at a wedding. One or more adults will take the vows and, with direction from the Elder, approach the Graduate and begin reciting the vow. The Graduate will repeat, like so:

Adult: "As I enter the next stage of my journey..."

Graduate: "As I enter the next stage of my journey..."

Adult: "I commit to _____."

Graduate: "I commit to _____."

The adult witnesses should figure out ahead of time the order of people reciting the vows, or deciding if only one person, or a couple of people, will participate in this section. Whatever's decided, adult witnesses come up one-by-one with the vow they're reading written on a slip of paper. After the vow is complete, the adult witness should place the vow they read into the container.

11. Bearing Witness

Today we have taken stock of this young person's life. We see the ways they have been shaped by us just as we see how we have been shaped by them. Our lives are forever intertwined. We will always remember and cherish the childhood PERSON has lived, and the life and joy they have given to us through that childhood. We have asked that the river of time transform the passions into lessons for wisdom and healing. And now this young person has declared their vows, making commitments to embrace the responsibilities that come with maturity — first, the responsibilities to nourish their spirit and invite joy and peace within themselves. Only then will they have the clarity and lightness to nourish the spirit of our wider community, and to carry joy and peace wherever they go.

If as a community we agree that this person has lived in the river of childhood long enough, and that they are prepared to move beyond this threshold and into the deeper waters of life; if we agree to support this person in those waters, aiding them and guiding them when asked, trusting them to swim on their own when desired, and holding them accountable to the declarations and commitments they've made today when necessary, then let us say together: I Bear Witness.

All Witnesses: *I Bear Witness.*

12. Crossing the Threshold

The Elder asks the Graduate:

Are you prepared to cross this threshold separating your identity as a child from the new identity as an adult?

Graduate:

[hopefully they say yes.]

The Elder asks if there's anything else they'd like to say before crossing the threshold. This is just an opportunity for the Graduate to speak from the heart. They can either prepare something, speak extemporaneously, or say nothing at all. For those who want to take it a step further, Graduates could incorporate "performance" as demonstrated on pp. 15-23.

After the Graduate speaks or performs (or doesn't), the Elder takes the container filled with Declarations and Vows.

Elder:

This container is filled with your spirit. It is filled with the hopes and dreams that your community has for you. It is filled with the promises you have made to yourself and to us. These promises have been made before a community of people who love you and wish only the best for you. Take this container on your journey. Let it find new ways to speak to you throughout the years, as a teacher and guide. And when it speaks, remember us and remember this day.

[The Elder hands the container to the Graduate.]

When you are ready to step out of this ritual space, when you feel ready to be reincorporated back into the community, but now in an elevated role, you are free to step across the threshold and introduce yourself again, for the first time.

When they're ready, the Graduate will step over the physical threshold on the floor. When they're on the other side they simply say:

My name is [Full Name].

The rite of passage is complete. The Graduate has graduated and is formally reincorporated into the social fabric of the family/community. **Time to celebrate!**

Bonus Activity: Someone take the soggy paper that's been soaking in the water. Wring out the water and shape it while it's still wet. It could just be a heart, or a circle, or maybe something representing water or the river. Add a touch of white Elmer's glue to help keep the shape together. Once it's completely dry, have the community decorate it. Then give it to the Graduate to keep in their container. (And don't forget to put the threshold material in the container as well! What a special graduation gift to receive!)

Finally, remember that crossing the threshold is just the beginning. No one knows how to do it. People need support and encouragement... and patience. It's important to remember our own struggles, and mistakes, as we entered adulthood and how grateful we might have been to have more guidance.

It's too much to get into here but see page 24 for some initial ideas to help make this transition as smooth as possible. Good luck!

Bibliography and Additional Rite of Passage Resources



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Also

Ritual4Return

ritual4return.org

Gisela Wendling

giselawendling.com/rites-of-passages-pivoting-at-the-edge-with-spirit/

Project Partners



The Stella Adler Studio of Acting

The spirit that has animated the Adler family for more than 100 years stems from the insight that growth as an actor and growth as a human being are synonymous. The studio's mission is to create an environment with the purpose of nurturing theater artists and audiences who value humanity, their own and others, as their first and most precious priority while providing art and education to the greater community. In addition to the world-class professional training, the studio has evolved into one of the most culturally rich environments in New York City through its cultural center programming.

The studio upholds a unique focus in American actor training, and affirms that the primary function of theater is to uplift humanity. To Stella Adler, a successful student was not necessarily one who becomes famous or rich, but one who connects to their deeper self and to our shared humanity. The school is a cultural center determined to train actors and support artists not despite, but in the face of a world in crisis. Programs like those within the Arts Justice Division help to create an environment for all students to become actors who are socially and consciously aware and whose awareness contributes to their ability to act passionately, and compassionately, in the world.

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The New Victory Theater

... is New York City's first and only nonprofit performing arts venue for kids and families, and the largest provider of live performing arts and arts education to NYC schools. Through the [New Victory School Partnership program](#), 40,000 school kids attend live performances each year, for little to no cost. And in schools across the city, New Victory supplements these performances with free, arts-based classroom workshops and trains 2,250 teachers in artistic professional development to help educators incorporate the arts into their daily curriculum. Ugo Anyanwu, who created the video and lesson plan on devising the journey through high school, is a New Victory teaching artist.

newvictory.org

Ping Chong + Company

...is a theater company based in New York City devoted to producing innovative works of theater with a commitment to social justice, and to using theater to engage communities and schools in dialogue around identity, place, and belonging.

The company was founded in 1975 by celebrated theatrical innovator Ping Chong, an internationally acclaimed theater and visual artist, and recipient of the National Medal of Arts, the highest honor for an American artist, recognizing his contributions to the nation's arts and culture.

Today, Ping Chong + Company offers organizational support and artistic incubation to a multi-generational ensemble of affiliated artists, under Chong's artistic leadership. The company has produced over 100 works for the stage across New York City, throughout the United States, and around the globe. Productions range from grand scale cinematic multidisciplinary productions featuring puppets, performers, and full music and projection scores, to intimate oral history projects that bring real people's stories onstage, elevating and celebrating the voices of traditionally underrepresented communities. In addition, PCC offers professional development for educators and artists, and virtual and in-person theater residencies in schools, engaging youth in the power of personal storytelling.

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