

Passage

[pa-sij]

Noun. A way of exit or entrance: a road, path, channel, or course by which something passes. Alternately, the action or process of passing from one place, condition, or stage to another.¹

by Christopher Blythe (Folklore and Latter-day Saint Literature)

Passage refers to the act of passing or moving across space—as in a passage across waterways or, similarly, a mountain pass. We also speak of the passage of time, and, of course, we read passages of text.

As a folklorist, a professor, a father, and a man now embarking further into his middle age, I am taken with rites of passage. *Passage* in *rites of passage* is a bit of a metaphor. It refers to the journey of life. The rites—prescribed ordeals and rituals—assist us in the transition from one stage of our lives to another. They help us to reconceive of an individual (even ourselves) as they

take on new roles. Arnold Van Gennep in his *Les rites de passage* described three phases to these rites: separation, transition, and integration. Simply put, we leave our previous situation in a society, undergo a liminal period, and reemerge anew different in some way.

Rites of passage are performed in crisis points along our journey: birth, adolescence, adulthood, old age, death. These moments along the passage are dangerous but also full of possibility, and the rituals that mark them often reflect that. The traveler is vulnerable and uncertain as now at a new age they become aware that their bodies and relationships are changing. In these crisis points, they depend on mentors who have gone before to lead them along the way. In some rites of passage dating from antiquity to the modern college fraternity, the initiate is

blindfolded or otherwise cut off from light to represent this truly helpless position. A guide leads them through trials before they reveal brighter paths.

As a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am in awe of the abundance of rites of passage guiding the Latter-day Saint life cycle. My students tell me about learning new songs or undergoing playful initiations at “girls camp” as well as their adventures

leaving home on missions and later wondering how they will reintegrate into society. They are sometimes aware that they are presently undergoing rites of passage involving dating, marriage, coursework, becoming parents, and becoming adults. Many have entered the temple where they made sacred vows and returned to us wearing the mysterious garments of the holy priesthood. There we received the all-important reminder that mortality itself is the great rite of passage of the gods.

BYU is enriched by numerous formal rites of passage. Students don academic regalia and walk across the stage marking the completion of their degrees. Professors wind their way through the ranks punctuated by CFS (Continuing Faculty Status, BYU’s version of tenure) and then full professorship, each time being embraced by a new subset of colleagues and enabled to serve in new capacities. On May 1, 2023, we witnessed the installation of C. Shane Reese as the 14th president of Brigham Young University. As part of that ceremony, Elder D. Todd Christofferson formally pronounced President Reese’s new position and issued a charge from the board of directors, including the First Presidency. Sister Wendy W. Reese then placed a presidential medallion around her husband’s neck. This symbol of the office is specially designed for each incoming president. Representing his mission in Taiwan, President Reese’s medallion features Chinese characters meaning, “Enter to learn; go forth to serve,” as well as other personal aspects.² These preliminaries were for President Reese, who was moved to tears by the ceremony, but they were also for our community to reconceive our colleague as our leader. He would then stand behind the lectern and provide his vision for his tenure as president.

In recent months, J. Scott Miller finished his term as dean of the College of Humanities and returned to his teaching assignment in Asian & Near Eastern Languages. Another of our colleagues, Chip Oscarson, was announced and then recognized as the new dean of the College. While the formalities were surely less extravagant than President Reese’s installation, they were there—including in mundane acts, like moving offices, writing his first message, and leading portions of university conference. It will be worthwhile to pay attention to these moments. They have a psychological impact on all involved, as do all rites of passage. ■

1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “passage (n.),” www.merriam-webster.com.

2. Shane Reese, Email to the Author, May 8, 2025.

