

ADOLESCENCE

THE WORD adolescence derives from the Latin "adolescere" meaning 'to grow into manhood'. The term pertains roughly to the period between the 14th and 21st years, which is the third seven-year period of life. The first period ending at the seventh year marks the end of infancy and young childhood, the second ending at 14 sees a child into puberty, and the third which ends at the 21st year marks the beginning of adulthood.

Although these seven-year periods tend to telescope and precipitate as a result of the acceleration of growth in children of today, the fundamental characteristics of these three phases remain unchanged.

If the third seven-year period of life is one of 'growing into manhood', it follows that this growing into manhood does not take place from birth on, which in turn implies that childhood is a thing in itself and not merely an initial or preparatory stage to becoming adult.

Childhood would then be a well-defined, self-contained and universal state with its own laws of growth and organic development, not impinged upon by future expectations and demands.

The first two seven-year periods would constitute the two sides, as it were, of the coin of childhood: the first period beginning with birth which is the separation of the body of an infant from the body of his mother, and the second period beginning with a certain culmination of biological growth which allows for mental development to begin in that a child has by now become a school child. In a sense, one might call this second step in development a "second birth", a mental birth.

In the same sense, one can say that a growing child has two further "births" ahead of him. The one is the separation of his emotive life from that of his parents and family, which means that his emotional relationships and reactions to things become his own and are

no longer without question those of his family background. He becomes emotionally independent. This culminates round about his 14th year.

A fourth and final "birth" in the development of a young person is that of his Ego, which means that he acquires a workable relationship to his own self as separate from all other selves.

Thus each of the first three seven-year periods of life can be seen as a period of "pregnancy" ending in three successive "births", only after which a person is fully "born" as an individual.

But to return to childhood: childhood is then a distinct "world" of physical-biological growth, with the emotive and ego potential of a future individual playing around it as the wind and the weather and the sunlight play around the fertile earth, until this world of childhood is invaded by the dynamic power of the child's own emotional weather. A person begins to have his own personal climate, as distinct from his environmental climate.

With the inrush of peripheral climate into the personal experience of a growing young human being classically at the age of 14, adolescence or growing-into-manhood begins, and this growing-into-manhood is simultaneous but not synonymous with puberty. It is essential to distinguish between adolescence and puberty.

Adolescence is a new beginning, marked by the third "birth" we have described. It is the setting out under new conditions into unexplored territory. It is essentially forward looking.

Puberty is the *end* of something, the culmination of processes which have gone before and which began at conception. In botanical terms, a development begins with germination, the plant then sprouts, leafs, flowers, ripens and is finally ready to seed. The readiness to seed can be likened to puberty.

Puberty is the end of childhood. It is the natural end of natural development. In this sense, it is backward looking.

Adolescence is the beginning of the spiritual development of an individual.

The fact that puberty and adolescence coincide and

intermingle at one specific juncture in life constitutes a second dramatic discrepancy in human existence. The first discrepancy was an early inrush of an experience of the child's own Ego between its second and third years, causing him all at once to refer to himself as 'I', at a time when he is insufficiently developed and entirely unequipped to deal with himself as a self. We know from the histories of many handicapped children how vulnerable and endangered a child is at this particular moment in life.

Likewise, puberty and adolescence constitute another dangerous moment to which a growing young person is exposed.

How harmonious and safe human life would be if puberty set in *only* after adolescence and the first experience of one's own Ego would come as the crown of the first 21 years of development!

But Prometheus wrested what would have amounted to a divine automation or puppet out of its pre-ordained state of serene perfection and gave to humankind his own Promethean lot: what should be crown comes too soon and what is to begin comes after, troubled by what has already taken place. Natural and spiritual development are pitted against one another. Nothing fits. Everything is at odds, and like the great Titan, a growing human mind or soul is fettered to the precipitous rock of existence, a prey to the anger of the gods, endangered yet resilient, helpless yet in possession of a secret the gods themselves fear—the secret of man's advance to a perfection of his own through moral suffering and moral striving.

Only when adulthood has been reached do the premature and the tardy principles in the development of the growing young person fall into step and harmonise, or at least enter into some kind of co-existence

In short, adolescence is a human state, puberty a biological one. Puberty is normally the gateway into adolescence but not identical with it. Puberty is confined to a definite period, whereas adolescence as a state of growing-into-manhood can linger on into adulthood.

If the word adolescence is taken literally to mean growing-into-manhood, it follows that it is a state peculiar to man. This means that in the animal there would be no transitional adolescent phase between physical maturity and adulthood. Therefore, we speak of a young animal and a mature animal. Or is there a phase in animals equivalent to human adolescence?

There are distinct phases of infancy and childhood in all the more highly organised animals which are reminiscent of human childhood. Take the polar bear cub with its enchanting and inventive mischief, or the play of the otter cub, the kitten, the puppy, the lion cub, each displaying infancy and childhood in its own delightful way.

But back to the polar bear cub—the moment it reaches physical maturity, all the deadly earnestness of polar bearhood comes down heavily upon it, and the polar bear enters an irrevocable adult state in which he is one of the fiercest and, to man, most inaccessible of beasts.

The seriousness of animal life, of survival, procreation and protection of young, begins relentlessly with physical maturity.

It is as though the animal child and the human child would inhabit the same universal paradise of play, of infancy and childhood, but with physical maturity, they part company—the animal to *be* what he is, the human being to *become* what he is meant to be.

Adolescence as a state of *becoming* is reserved for the human being alone. Therefore, it is both precarious and exquisite, dangerous and indispensable.

What may on the surface be suggestive of adolescence in the animal is a phase of adaption to given conditions, within which he exists but cannot advance, for he cannot taste of the wine of the human Ego.

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Dr. König said that a newborn infant is wounded and shocked by its birth, for it is not only a mother who labours. An infant labours, too, through the narrow passage that leads from the deepest security into the blinding light of day. Therefore, Dr. König said, an

infant needs weeks and months of nursing and convalescence.

He took this idea up again in one of his lectures to the Village Communities and spoke of an infant as being sick—not sick unto death, but unto life. He steadily recovers from this sickness as he grows and develops, and by the time he is seven years old, he has attained complete health.

The phase of childhood into which he now enters is one of the greatest health in human life, which does not mean that a child is free from physical disease, but there is equilibrium and harmony between himself and the world around him.

But then at puberty, Dr. König went on, there is a new onslaught of sickness. It is the shock and sickness of physical maturity, the recovery period of which is adolescence.

Birth and puberty are two moments of sickness. A child who was conceived and born in labour is now ready to conceive and bring forth in labour. Puberty puts him into an entirely new position: he becomes participant in the mysteries of creation; they now lie within his power. Yet as a person he is not ready; neither his identity nor his capacity of responsibility are at all established. He has not yet grown into manhood.

It would seem that adolescence has two aspects: that of the recovery from the sickness of puberty, and that of growing into one's own manhood. How handicapped the latter is by the former! Therefore, adolescence is a phase of extremes, often intolerable for those who have long since absolved their own adolescence.

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The transitional period between physical maturity and adulthood grows proportionately less the more ancient or the more unsophisticated a particular culture happens to be.

In tribal life, for instance, puberty rites were the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood. Even today in countries where there is still a peasantry, boys and girls tend to go from puberty to adulthood with relatively little transition. The demands of the earth

do not wait for the peasant to mature gently. Also in the working classes, boys and girls who are children today tend to be adults tomorrow. They cannot afford—not only in the financial sense—to prolong adolescence, but enter fairly quickly into responsible working life.

In older cultures, a youth of 14 was raised to the status of defender of the polis, the stronghold, the city or state. In the Middle Ages, knighthood was conferred on the youth of 14. His female counterpart mothered her first child at that age.

Wolfram von Eschenbach relates the story of Parsifal's childhood and adulthood at length. His adolescence, on the other hand, took place, so to speak, during his ride from Arthur at Nantes to Gurnemanz's stronghold where he became a man.

Achilles, Siegfried, Theseus and other legendary heroes end their childhood abruptly to fulfil their adult destiny. Only Telemachus is allowed a span of adolescence, for his father, Odysseus, absent though he is, is still king of Ithaca, and he himself is not yet responsible.

The Gospel of St. Luke refers to Jesus up to His twelfth year and then again, from His thirtieth year. Likewise, John the Baptist appears as a child, and re-emerges only when he is a man.

This can mean that

much more value was attached in earlier times to physical maturity in the need to resist the pressures of external existence, so that a further state of "becoming" as far as internal existence was concerned seemed incongruous or superfluous—or that

in earlier times, the individual was not yet emancipated from the necessities of polis, state, country, fief, clan and the like, which claimed their human material to fight their wars and suffer their vicissitudes regardless of age and maturity, as though the group had to be established before the individual could be established in the group. The Crusades are an example. They swallowed up all males, young and old, and the females had to

replenish the stock. Even children were drawn into the vortex of the issues at stake in that particular moment of history. There was no time for adolescence.

Even—or rather just—among kings, the preservation of the line or royal species, was of greater moment than the maturation of the individual monarch. James I of England was crowned at the age of eight. Marriages among kings were made in infancy. The weight and earnestness of the state sat upon the shoulders of children.

There was an exception to all this where crafts and guilds were concerned. No youth could become a master in a craft without going through an apprenticeship. Apprenticeship in the crafts was the only form of adolescence in earlier times.

Goethe calls one part of his novel "Wilhelm Meister" (which means "master", ultimately in the craft of life), "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", which is the description of his hero's growing-into-manhood. It may well be that this novel was one of the factors that served to inaugurate adolescence as a legitimate and necessary phase of human development.

The Austrian writer, Stifter, also depicts a kind of adolescence or apprenticeship to life in his novel *After-summer*. Henry, his hero, has to go through a higher school of nature in an encounter with geology, botany and in a sublimated form, zoology, before reaching the House of the Roses where his destiny as a man is to begin.

The 18th and 19th centuries, by no means only through the works of Goethe and Stifter, saw the recognition of adolescence as an inherent human state. Man had at long last earned his adolescence.

The 20th century is witnessing the mass proliferation of adolescence—so much so that psychologists are speaking of adolescents as of a *new social class*. Adolescence begins earlier and lasts longer. The student, formerly an apprentice for a given period to his chosen profession, can maintain his status as student or apprentice indefinitely. One wonders sometimes if this clinging to adolescence is not a result of the

curtailment of childhood, partly through early intellectual schooling and partly through the acceleration of growth in children. If a child is allowed to be a child as long as he needs to be one with everything that this implies, his growing-into-manhood will not exceed its inherent span of time. If, however, he arrives at adolescence with an experience of having been deprived of a full childhood, he will do everything he can to prolong his juvenile status.

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But here I should like to turn away from the general aspects of adolescence and see the question in relationship to our handicapped youngsters.

Modern psychology speaks of three phases of adolescence which, to my mind, provides a workable basis for further deliberation:

- (1) Puberty;
- (2) The Search for Identity;
- (3) Coping.

Puberty would be the biological phase, identity-search the psychological phase, and coping the social phase of adolescence.

It is obvious that the search for identity is the central phase, the core of adolescence and hence, the most crucial and vulnerable phase. It is also the period which sees the peak of the growth in testable intelligence. We are at our most intelligent in this middle phase of adolescence and at the same time we are in search of identity, which is again a Promethean discrepancy in the order of things.

What the search for Identity means can hardly be more brilliantly described than by Tolstoy in the third part of his *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*.

To quote a few excerpts: "At that period, which I regard as the end of boyhood and beginning of youth, my dreams were based on four feelings: love of *her*, the imaginary woman of whom I always dreamt in one and the same way and whom I expected at any moment to meet somewhere. The second feeling was the love of being loved. I wanted everybody to know me and love me, I wanted to tell my name—and for everybody to be struck by this information, to surround me, and

thank me for something. The third feeling was hope of some unusual, vain-glorious good fortune. The fourth and chief feeling was self-disgust and repentance, but repentance so mingled with hope of happiness that it had nothing sad about it . . ."

In our handicapped youngsters there is a tendency, as in other unsophisticated groups, to go from puberty into some manner of coping (with life in society in conjunction with their own limitations and capacities), but not because they are potentially less sophisticated, but because their handicap manifests on the one hand in testable intelligence and on the other, in the search for identity.

In his "Village" lectures Dr. König spoke of the "masks" we wear in the many different life situations we encounter, each situation calling for another "mask", or in other words, a different aspect of our identity. In our handicapped young people, a certain motility and pliability in situations is lacking. They chose one "mask" which becomes fixed, regardless of changing demands.

This is apparent particularly in the psychotic group, who after puberty seem to be able to cope relatively well, often showing astonishing skill and proficiency in certain types of work or craft. But coping does not necessarily only mean working. Coping is to cope with oneself as a member of society, and this cannot be done if identity has not been established.

Psychotic youngsters tend to by-pass the search for identity. They even take flight or avoid it assiduously and emerge from this phase with a shadow identity and shadow-coping. We have all too often seen instances where coping, substituted for by perfection in work, cracks and leads to catastrophe and breakdown.

I should like to conclude with a question: In what way can we learn to guide our handicapped youngsters more completely through the three phases of adolescence and particularly through the central phase of identity-seeking, so that something which is a birthright of every human individual—his prerogative "to become a man", to grow-into-manhood—does not remain a semblance, is not foregone?

Here lies a considerable challenge to us all.

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