

Getting It Right

Advice to those in difficulties: “When all else fails, read the instructions.” All over the western world at least, educators of adolescents should long ago have been reading the instructions. That means, of course, reading rather more than just those passages in the instructions that one already thinks one knows about.

There is also the question of whose instructions to read. Where is the authority whose instructions may be trusted? We have at the moment two in mind: the acquired wisdom of the human race; and the trained objectivity of disciplined minds.

Industrialized communities have given rise to social situations in which adolescence might be defined as that period in human life during which a person is kept out of the labour market, ostensibly in order to be trained for it. Alternatively, a more idealistic though not necessarily incompatible assumption has grown that adolescence is a phase during which a person undergoes exacting preparation for adulthood — a future state conceived as the full achievement of individual human potential, in all its many dimensions. It is disconcerting to these preconceptions then, on turning to the dictionary (one way of reading the instructions), to find that we have by now stood reality on its head.

Adolescence is not derived from *adult*, as one’s half-educated guess might assume; on the contrary. The word comes from the Latin prefix *ad* with *olescere*, meaning “to grow,” and it is *adult* (or *ad* with *ult*) which is derived as the past participle from *adolescere*, consequently referring to one in whom growth has been completed. As understood by our forebears then, adulthood is the consequence of adolescence, and adolescence is *not* the consequence of adulthood in the sense that any course of training derives from its goal.

This may seem like pointing out that one’s glass of wine, standing half empty, is on the contrary half full. But the corrective may prove urgent for what is unquestionably a desperate situation. Our secondary and even tertiary schools and colleges, designed for adolescents, have been for decades now a ghastly,

overcrowded educational slum, in which millions of young people have been and are still being kept waiting in ignominy with nothing serious to do. The best we seem to hope for is that they may find ways of amusing themselves without disturbing the rest of us, as in other places of detention; but if they have any spirit at all, that never seems to happen for long. We would be more able at least to recognize the problem, if not solve it, if we were to recognize that their youth alone does not disqualify these adults. We should stop thinking of them as some other kind of creature and therefore second-class, but should see them as already "having grown," in fact, whether society recognizes it or not.

The dictionaries also foreshadow other problems in defining adulthood and adolescence, that any investigator runs into who seeks to read the instructions contained in the experience of human societies in all their diversity. Two dictionaries consulted by us, while giving the same origin for the words, also give comically conflicting interpretations of them. The Concise Oxford of 1940 thinks of an adolescent as "a person growing up between childhood and manhood (14 to 25) or womanhood (12 to 21);" the confident precision about the age limits seems slightly barmy, a quaintly English prescription. Whereupon Merriam-Webster's New Collegiate of 1956, in the United States, declares that in civil law the word *adult* ("a person . . . that has reached maturity") "is applied to males after the age of fourteen and to females after twelve."

In similar vein ethnographers who report on the practices of alien societies differ widely in their interpretations of these terms, just as the societies themselves differ widely on the point. Relatively few long-standing societies recognize a distinctive period, with its own customs, between childhood and adulthood; for those that do, the period recognized varies in duration from two years to twenty or more. For the early ethnographers, the most striking features of what we might call adolescence in the societies they study are the rites of transition, those dramatic and often extraordinary customs of initiation and of marriage. But again, the variations in age at which these rites are performed show that they have been determined on mainly social grounds that have little regard for the actualities of personal human growth.

Despite great variations in the social conditions that have been overlaid, there are for each individual human being underlying constants of psychological experience to be undergone. Sheer changes in size and potency inexorably bring on alterations in one's relationship with others, and with environments both natural and social; and one's development in mental powers demands major adjustments of belief and value. This is in consequence a potentially most exciting time of life, for individuals; for the social order, however, mass excitement is a threat. Thus it is that though growth suggests guidance; and though societies may officially recognize in the growth phenomena of adolescence great opportunities to educate, by harnessing its dynamics as it were in parallel; in fact the form of action or rather reaction resorted to by a society is often the traumatic

fury and repressive confrontation of the initiation rite. We hear calls for this kind of treatment every day in the western world.

There is no doubt that the survivors learn quickly and precisely to do as they are required, under any regime combining unmistakable directives with unremitting fear. Moreover, under such conditions any later measure of reward however small will turn terror into loyalty — a loyalty to the oppressive institution, and to its very oppressions, that will be enthusiastic, unswerving, and abject in almost direct proportion to the degree of fear experienced. Above a certain threshold of trauma, this “loyalty” becomes irreversible, automatic, and unconditional.

For anyone who wishes to engage on society’s behalf in the treatment of this phase of life, some instructions handed down to us by the human race are therefore plain. Any society that demands unthinking loyalty from its young can arrange the thing easily enough, and the “educational” procedures involved will revolt only those who have not already “learned” that kind of loyalty. But the society that hopes for loyalty of another quality, and is not afraid to change, may have to read its instructions also in that other book, of contemporary studies (which this issue has tried in part to represent).

We recognize nowadays that growth continues throughout adulthood. The earliest growth experiences — in the adult whom we used to call a child — offer to education unique features of a startling potential, features to be met with a firm regime of constant demand for serious activity in every human domain, in an atmosphere of genuine respect and humanity (such as free adults expect in dealing with each other). Much of this is already understood and practised, if only in the best of schools. But insofar as the obligation of schooling itself entails an enforced detention of entire populations apart, while they wait throughout a decade to be admitted to society, the undertaking appears to remain doomed. How can a prison ever be a training ground for free men and women?

Perhaps it can. Perhaps a modern society requires of its citizens an ability to live by an intelligent self-restraint to a degree without precedent in human populations, and for such an unnatural end these present extreme prolongations of frustration and self-doubt may be inescapable and even necessary. Such are the miseries of the peace. The young men and women carrying guns in the Lebanon, and in Nicaragua and Cambodia, do not seem to feel such pains. Keeping alive, making war, and making love leave them few problems about the purpose of life; amid the debris of the institutions of their societies, they are finding themselves. For education it would seem, therefore, to be a hard option: either society itself or human nature must change, before we get it right. For we must decide, in turn: is it the job of education to change human nature, or to leave it alone?

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