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The Generation That Won't Grow Up

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Now, TIME magazine has come out with a cover story that announces this new social phenomenon. It's about time.

According to TIME's January 24, 2005 cover story, the "twixters" are young adults who simply won't grow up. TIME's investigative report and analysis offer considerable insight and first-person accounts of this new social phenomenon. Beyond this, the article offers substantial confirmation of the basic issues at stake and what it would take to reverse this trend.

Lev Grossman, the main writer of TIME's article, explains that the "twixters" are "not kids anymore, but they're not adults either." He begins his article by introducing six young adults—all young Chicagoans in their twenties—who "go out three nights a week, sometimes more." They have each held several jobs since college (one is now on her 17th). These unsettled young adults don't own homes, change apartments almost as frequently as their wardrobe, and are, for all appearances, permanent adolescents.

Needless to say, none of them are married, and none have children. Grossman correctly observes, "Thirty years ago, people like Michele, Ellen, Nathan, Corinne, Marcus and Jennie didn't exist, statistically speaking." Just thirty years ago, the median age of marriage for American women was 21. Motherhood came only a year later, statistically speaking. Women now marry at a median age of 25—the same median age for first childbirth.

The phenomenon of delayed adulthood is already producing profound social consequences. Economists are concerned about the financial implications of young adults who return to live with their parents and put off major investments like the purchase of a home until well into their thirties. Social scientists are tracking the effects of delayed marriage and the social dislocation common to this age group. Like most demographic trends, this new pattern of life is not likely to be reversed anytime soon, at least in society at large.

Grossman provides interesting insights into this generational phenomenon as he focuses on several twenty-somethings who fit the pattern. Matt Swann, 27, took 6.5 years to graduate from the University of Georgia with a degree in "Cognitive Science." Like many in his generation, he chose his major based upon interest, with little attention to job prospects.

Swann's extended college experience is now the norm. According to data provided by colleges and universities, the average college student is now taking at least five years to finish a baccalaureate degree. Once the degree is in hand, these

graduates do not necessarily move on to a stable job related to their academic pursuits. Many of these young people enter the job market in order to “find themselves” and follow their own personal interests.

Kate Galantha, 28, took a full seven years to complete her college degree, attending three different institutions. She finally graduated with an “undeclared” major in 2001 and began work as a nanny. She has moved six times since 1999 and is apparently unsure of her next move.

Zach Braff, 29, a film director and actor, explains his perception of the generational trend. “In the past, people got married and got a job and had kids, but now there’s a new 10 years that people are using to try and find out what kind of life they want to lead. For a lot of people, the weight of all the possibility is overwhelming.”

Grossman argues that this pattern of delayed adulthood is a permanent cultural shift. “In the past, people moved from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood, but today there is a new, intermediate phase along the way. The years from 18 until 25 and even beyond have become a distinct and separate life stage, a strange transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that constantly threatens to crash down on them. They’re betwixt and between.”

Social scientists debate the significance of this new phenomenon. Some see this trend towards delayed adulthood as a good thing. Advocates for the trend suggest that these young Americans are simply enjoying the benefits won by advocates of social liberation. Furthermore, they have grown up in a culture of affluence that has afforded them unprecedented options, creature comforts, and security. They simply do not want to enter the more insecure world of adult responsibility.

Jeffrey Arnett, who sees what he calls “emerging adulthood” as a positive trend, teaches developmental psychology at the University of Maryland. These unsettled young Americans are simply taking their time to focus on adult responsibility. “This is the one time of their lives when they’re not responsible for anyone else or to anyone else,” he argues. “So they have this wonderful freedom to really focus on their own lives and work on becoming the kind of person they want to be.”

In other words, Arnett sees delayed adulthood as a new social phenomenon that allows self-centered Americans even more time to focus on themselves while “not responsible for anyone else or to anyone else.” Of course, what Arnett celebrates, others see as the very heart of the problem.

After all, what are these young people doing during this stage of “emerging adulthood?” Well, they’re having a lot of sex, for one thing. Obviously, social trends point to demographic generalities, not to every individual in this age cohort. Still, even TIME registered surprise at the sexual attitudes of these unmarried twenty and thirty-somethings.

The delay of marriage is the most significant statistical marker. The average age of first marriage for a white American male is now almost 28—a full six years later than just a few decades ago. This trend is not uniquely American. The average age for a man’s first marriage in Canada is 28, in England 29.7. Germany and Italy come in with even higher ages, 30.3 and 30.5 respectively.

This delay in assuming marital commitment and responsibility does not mean a delay in sexual activity. As Grossman explains, “Marrying late also means that twixters tend to have more sexual partners than previous generations. The situation is analogous to the promiscuous job-hopping behavior.”

The six twenty-somethings Grossman introduced in his opening paragraph all indicate an interest in marriage—but not anytime soon. “It’s a long way down the road,” said Marcus Jones. “I’m too self involved. I don’t want to bring that into a relationship now.” As he joked to Grossman, “My wife is currently a sophomore in high school.”

In a similar vein, Jennie Jing, 26, commented, “I want to get married but not soon. I’m enjoying myself. There’s a lot I want to do by myself still.” Kate Galantha isn’t sure about marriage at all: “I fantasize more about sharing a place with someone than about my wedding day. I haven’t seen a lot of good marriages.”

Economic factors are undoubtedly at play in this new social phenomenon. Economists argue that wages for young adults are simply not keeping pace with the larger economic context, and most young adults lack confidence that job

prospects will sustain them through their adult years. So, they go back to live with their parents, returning to a state of extended adolescence that western cultures simply have never seen before.

Looking at this from a biblical perspective, the most tragic aspect of this development is the fact that these young people are refusing to enter into the adult experience and adult responsibilities that is their Christian calling. The delay of marriage will exact an undeniable social toll in terms of delayed parenthood, even smaller families, and more self-centered parents. The experiences of marriage and raising children are important parts of learning the adult experience and finding one's way into the deep responsibilities and incalculable rewards of genuine adulthood.

As TIME explains, many of these young people are so busy buying iPods, designer clothes, and new automobiles that they will find the necessary sacrifices of marital life and parenthood to be a rude shock. So long as they are living with parents, or grouping together in "emerging adult" enclaves, they continue to live like teenagers—only with even greater freedoms and privileges.

According to TIME, America should not linger in denial about this new social phenomenon, but should simply accept it as a new reality. That is simply not good enough for those who believe that God has something better in mind. At the same time, TIME's cover story is an important milestone that should not be missed.

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