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What If There Are No Adults?

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The transition to adulthood used to be one of the main goals of the young. Adulthood was seen to be a status worth achieving and was understood to be a set of responsibilities worth fulfilling. At least, that's the way it used to be. Now, an entire generation seems to be finding itself locked in the grip of eternal youth, unwilling or unable to grow up.

Concern about this phenomenon has been building for some time. Baby-boomer parents are perplexed when their adult-age children move back home, fail to find a job, and appear to be in no hurry to marry. Though the current generation of young adults includes some spectacular exceptions who have quickly moved into the fullness of adult responsibility, the generation as a whole seems to be waiting for something—but who knows what?—to happen.

Frederica Mathewes-Green sees the same phenomenon. In her brilliant essay published in the August/September 2005 edition of *First Things*, Mathewes-Green describes this new reality with striking clarity.

She begins with the movies. Describing herself as a fan of the old black-and-white classics from the 1930s and 1940s, Mathewes-Green remembers how young actors customarily played the part of mature adults. Actresses like Claudette Colbert and Jean Harlowe were “poised and elegant” onscreen. She notes, “Today even people much older don't have that kind of presence.” She then compares Cary Grant with Hugh Grant. The first Grant was “poised and debonair” while the more recent Grant “portrayed a boyish, floppy-haired ditherer till he was forty.” She cites reviewer Michael Atkinson, who dubbed today's immature male actors as “toddler-men.” As Atkinson describes the distinction, “The conscious contrast between baby-faced, teen-voiced toddler-men movie actors and the Golden Age's grownups is unavoidable.”

As Mathewes-Green explains, “Characters in these older movies appear to be an age nobody ever gets to be today. This isn't an observation about the actors themselves (who may have behaved in very juvenile ways privately); rather, it is about the way audiences expected grownups to act.” Fast-forwarding to today's Hollywood culture, she observes: “Nobody has that old-style confident authority anymore. We've forgotten how to act like grownups.”

Frederica Mathewes-Green is surely correct in seeing this contrast. Gladly, she not only depicts the reality as we now face it—she goes on to explain how we have arrived at such a state of institutionalized immaturity.

As she sees it, “The Baby Boomers fought adulthood every step of the way.” In other words, Mathewes-Green points to the parents of this current generation of young adults as the locus of the problem. Speaking of her own generation, she remembers: “We turned blue jeans and T-shirts into the generational uniform. We stopped remembering the names of world political leaders and started remembering the names of movie stars' ex-boyfriends. We stopped participating in fraternal service organizations and started playing video games. We Boomers identified so strongly with being ‘the younger generation’ that now, paunchy and gray, we're bewildered. We have no idea how to be the older generation. We'll just have to go on being a cranky, creaky appendix to the younger one.”

Mathewes-Green's analysis pushes back even further than the baby boomers. She blames the parents of the baby boomers for trying to protect that generation from the realities of a cruel world and a hard life. Having fought and survived the great trial of World War II, they wanted to protect their own young children. “They wanted their little ones never to experience the things they had,” Mathewes-Green explains, “never to see such awful sights. Above all, they wanted to protect their children's innocence.”

Mathewes-Green is a writer of great ability. Her picturesque imagery makes her point with poetic force. She describes the days “when large families lived together in very small houses” and when “paralyzed or senile family members were cared for at home.” When the realities of life were not hidden away, institutionalized, and sanitized, children grew up understanding that life itself is a trial and that adulthood requires a willingness to grow up, take responsibility, fend for oneself, and fight for one’s own.

In summary, Mathewes-Green believes that the parents of the 1950s “confused vulnerability with moral innocence. They failed to understand that children who were always encouraged to be childish would jump at the chance and turn childishness into a lifelong project. These parents were unprepared to respond when their children acquired the bodies of young adults and behaved with selfishness, defiance, and hedonism.”

In her historical analysis, the parents of the baby boomers attempted to separate childhood and adulthood into two completely separate compartments of life. Childhood would be marked by innocence and adulthood by responsibility. As Mathewes-Green warns: “Be careful what you wish for.” Missing from this picture is a period of urgent transition that would turn the child into an adult. What we face now is a generation of children in the bodies of adults.

Understanding the reality of the problem is a first step towards recovery. Nevertheless, mere description is insufficient as an answer to this crisis.

In days gone by, children learned how to be adults by living, working, and playing at the parents’ side. The onset of age twelve or thirteen meant that time was running out on childhood. Traditional ceremonies like the Jewish Bar Mitzvah announced that adulthood was dawning. This point would be clearly understood by the young boy undergoing the Bar Mitzvah. “By the time his body was fully formed, he would be expected to do a full day’s work. He could expect to enter the ranks of full-fledged grownups soon after and marry in his late teens. Childhood was a swift passageway to adulthood, and adulthood was a much-desired state of authority and respect.”

Today’s patterns of schooling do not, in the main, appear to produce a similar result. Instead, the educational process continues to coddle, reassure, and affirm young people without regard to their assumption of adult responsibilities. This approach, Mathewes-Green explains, prepares children “for a life that doesn’t exist.”

When a generation is continuously told that its options are limitless, its abilities are boundless, and its happiness is central, why should we be surprised that reality comes as such a difficult concept?

Mathewes-Green points to the delay of marriage as the most interesting indicator of what is happening. As she notes, the average first marriage now unites a bride age 25 with a groom age 27. “I’m intrigued by how patently unnatural that is,” Mathewes-Green observes. “God designed our bodies to desire to mate much earlier, and through most of history cultures have accommodated that desire by enabling people to wed by their late teens or early twenties. People would postpone marriage until their late twenties only in cases of economic disaster or famine—times when people had to save up in order to marry.”

Is the current generation of young adults too immature to marry? Mathewes-Green insists that if this is the case, it is only because the older generation has been telling them they are too immature to marry. Does early marriage lead to disaster? Mathewes-Green is ready to prescribe a dose of reality. “Fifty years ago, when the average bride was twenty, the divorce rate was half what it is now, because the culture encouraged and sustained marriage.”

Look carefully at how she describes the personal impact produced by this pattern of delayed marriage: “During those lingering years of unmarried adulthood, young people may not be getting married, but they’re still falling in love. They fall in love, and break up, and undergo terrible pain, but find that with time they get over it. This is true even if they remain chaste. By the time these young people marry, they may have had many opportunities to learn how to walk away from a promise. They’ve been training for divorce.”

Rarely does one article contain so much common sense, moral wisdom, and promise. The way to recovery surely must start with a rediscovery of what adulthood means and a reaffirmation of why it is so important—both for the society and for individuals. Adulthood must be tied to actual, meaningful, and mature responsibilities—most importantly, marriage.

There is reason for hope. Many in this new generation demonstrate a willingness to buck the trend. They are the new pioneers of adulthood, and they will be uniquely qualified to influence their own peers and to reshape our own culture. Taking marriage seriously as a life-long commitment, they will be more inclined to raise children who will understand what it will take to live as adults in our time of confusion. They will understand that eternal youth is not a blessing, but a curse.

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