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ADULTHOOD

Adulthood: Man Fully Alive

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

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A troubling new trend suggests that instead of *being* an adult, it is sufficient "to adult" when necessary—that is, to undertake what responsible adults do: pay the bills, control one's temper, etc. Once the often unpleasant tasks have been accomplished, the role of adult can be cast aside, to be reassumed at a later time. But there must come a time when we put aside "childish ways," as St. Paul admonishes. Only in laying aside our "I" and embracing the good of the other, wholly and selflessly, can we reach human maturity. This issue takes up the theme of adulthood and the current coming-of-age crisis.

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"Are You an Adult?"

AGATA ROTTKAMP

In the late 1990s, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, psychology professor at Clark University, asked a group of young adults a simple question: "Are you an adult?" The ambiguity in the answers given by the 18- to 25-year-olds in his research study made Jensen Arnett realize that something new was afoot. These were clearly no longer adolescents, yet they did not perceive themselves as adults either. These young adults, who ranged in age from the late teens to the late twenties, were in a transitional phase, Jensen Arnett decided. He dubbed it "emerging adulthood."

Jensen Arnett's idea is not without its critics, but few would disagree that cultural trends in industrialized countries do conspire to make for a longer, messier transition to adulthood. Young people spend more years in school, acquire more debt, marry and have children later in life (if at all). While these "in-between" years can be a time of breathless exploration, they are also filled, more often than not, with a painful sense of unfulfilled searching. (Elizabeth McCarthy writes beautifully about this experience of "being on the cusp" in this issue's witness piece.)

What is even more interesting than the concept of emerging adulthood, however, is that there is so little clarity about when it ends. When are you no longer "emerging," but a full-fledged grown-up?

The question defies a simple answer of chronological age, as state-dictated indicators of maturity prove to be inconsistent, even arbitrary. You can vote at 18, unless you live in Scotland or Brazil when you can do so at 16, or South Korea, where it is 19. In the US you may get married at 18, but this drops to 16 if your parents give permission. You can purchase a beer at 21, unless you're in the UK or Quebec, when you may do so at 18. If you are in Germany it is 16, if you are in Ontario it is 19.

Biological realities, too, elude firm definitions, writes Julie Beck in *The Atlantic*. Puberty ends anywhere in the early to mid-teens; the collarbone—the last bone of the skeleton to stop growing—reaches its full size anywhere between 25 and 35 years of age; the development of the prefrontal cortex of the brain isn't completed until the age of 25. There are no clear-cut measures to be found here either.

If numbers and measurements yield no definitive answers, we must ask a more fundamental

question—the very one we want to wrestle with in this and the three subsequent issues of *Humanum*: what does it mean to be an adult? What does it mean to be mature—to be fully alive?

A troubling new trend suggests that instead of being an adult, it is sufficient to "adult" when necessary—that is, to undertake the things that responsible adults do: pay the bills, clean one's apartment, control one's temper, etc. Once the often unpleasant tasks have been accomplished, the role of adult can be cast aside, to be reassumed at a later time. By this logic, however, one could go through life without ever reaching adulthood per se, without giving up "childish ways", as St. Paul suggests we must when we mature (cf. 1 Cor 13:11). Acting responsibly, though important, is not therefore definitive when we are speaking of adulthood.

As so often on the Christian journey, the beginnings of an answer to our question can only be discerned when the gaze shifts from the "I" (what *I* have to do to become independent) to the "thou" and, eventually, the "Thou." Adulthood means no longer having the self as one's sole focus. The ability to put the other first, selflessly, if not without effort, may be a more defining trait of human maturity. "Now [as one matures] the person is able to give himself to the other," Fr. Jose Granados tells us, "to abandon the sphere of the isolated individual around which the feelings tend to circle…in such a way that the individual is no longer the center of the relationship but lives…out of himself and, only in this way, becomes fully himself."

Navigating human relationships—as children, parents, spouses, friends—is part and parcel of being an adult. This can be painful in the case of family relationships, as Laura Bramon reminds us. Despite all risk, however, we long for relationship and, increasingly often, resort to technology to find and mitigate it. Friendship and social status, for example, are often the reasons why young men spend so much time and effort in playing video games, as Karl MacMillan explains in his review of a popular science fiction novel. We also turn to technology—the smartphone "robots" in our back pockets—because we want to feel more connected to friends through social media, often at the price of neglecting those who are right beside us and our relationship with God himself. Our "disenchanted and hyper-technologized age," relates Dawn Eden Goldstein, is marked by the vice of acedia—we become weary, slothful, joyless. We want to accomplish more, often by means of the virtual realm, but end up being diminished in our humanity.

Two books reviewed in this issue—one by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, and another by Ben Sasse—make the claim that the same pattern holds for our societal treatment of young people. We try to protect them more—allow them to be babysat by screens, provide "safe spaces," medicate them liberally—but end up diminishing their humanity and undermining their resilience. Sasse warns that the result is a dramatic coming-of-age crisis, leaving emerging adults unable to make the final leap to adulthood.

In a clear and definitive tone, the Baltimore Catechism tells us that God made us to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this world; and to be happy with Him forever in the next. If this is our intended *telos*, then surely human maturity—that is, adulthood—must take up the tasks of knowing, loving and serving God in a way that corresponds to a given individual's abilities and situation. And when carried out perfectly, these tasks—this full flowering of humanity—become holiness. This is why we have chosen Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati as the "model adult" for this issue. Only 24 years old at the time of his death, Pier Giorgio falls squarely into Jensen Arnett's "emerging adult" bracket. And yet here was a man who lived for others, having drawn his strength from Christ, having achieved, as a young adult, a maturity most of us can only dream of.

Agata Rottkamp is managing editor of Humanum.

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Economic Dislocations of Young Adults in the Secular Age

EDWARD HADAS

Economic decisions are part of every life at every age in every society. In modern industrial and urbanised societies, the most typical economic choices of young adults are sadly instructive about the non-economic flaws of these societies.

The economy that I am talking about is one of the basic axes of human experience. It co-exists in the human condition with, among other things, the life of the community, of worship, of the mind and of the heart. The distinctly economic life is two-sided: a continuing gift of labour which humanises the world, and a continuing receiving of goods and services to be consumed from that humanised world. Like all the other axes of humanity, this Great Exchange of labour and consumption is simultaneously private and social, virtuous and sinful, sacred and profane.

For people of all ages, economic life has changed significantly since the advent of modernity. On the labour side, the development of powerful machines has led to the toil of the mind supplanting the toil of the body. Labour increasingly takes place far from home, in factories and offices. Labour is increasingly organised in bureaucratic structures and divided into ever more specialised tasks. More recently, many of the traditionally feminine labours of care have become professionalised, while the labours of maternal love have been relegated to a secondary social status.

On the consumption side of the economy, humanity, at least the portion of humanity economically fortunate enough to live in relatively rich countries, has decisively conquered the traditional enemy: want. Even the relatively poor residents of rich countries enjoy a variety and quantity of consumption which would have been literally inconceivable to even the richest residents of any pre-modern society. There have also been many other more or less profound changes, from the mass consumption of consumer goods to the group consumption of education and, in infant day-care, of the fruits of the labours of love.

The economic transformations of modernity cannot be fully isolated from dramatic changes in all the axes of the human condition. While the directions of influence are the subject of lively debate, because the developments have been so rapid, the extent of the novelty is hard to deny. Of course, the human condition is in some sense unchanging in the fallen world—we are born, we suffer, we die; but contemporary people really are different. We expect to live longer,

we rely more on science, we have abandoned divinely connected rulers for democracies and secular autocrats, we endorse previously condemned sexual practices, we often do not accept the existence of God or the truth of religion. We worry greatly about individual happiness and not so much about social duties.

These generalisations are obviously broad ones, but I think they are accurate enough to help us to think about how to describe and understand the typical economic behaviour of young people in the most modernised societies: societies that are, far from coincidentally, also the most prosperous. There is no agreement on the predominant themes or even the predominant direction of the rising generation. Some cultural observers, both old and young, are pessimists, pointing above all to economic uncertainty.

On the labour side, they say, it is hard to get on the career path, youth unemployment rates are high in many countries, whilst in others young people are racking up remarkable amounts of debt. Highly educated young people often cannot find jobs that take advantage of their skills, or provide them with their expected social status. Poorly educated young people often cannot find jobs at all; at the very least, they cannot hope for the sort of steady and socially accepted labour which their grandfathers enjoyed. The results of this uncertainty in the labour market, conclude the pessimists, are delay, depression and dis-integration. Young adults are persistently unhappy about their jobs and they often feel no commitment to them. They are slow to "settle down" and start families of their own. I can sometimes summarise the negative labour story as a choice between cog and drift. You can become a cog in the bureaucratic production machine, doing work that is close to meaningless and suffused with boredom. Alternatively, you can drift around at the edges of the working world, working here and there and perhaps hoping to break through as an artist or just have some interesting experiences while you live in relative poverty outside of the normal, career-centred society.

There is a pessimistic consumption narrative to match the grim labour story. Young adults are overwhelmed by stuff: they often cannot afford what they want, crave things that they think will affirm their membership in some social set and get ridiculous pleasure from objectively trivial things, from fast cars to spa holidays. Many young adults seem unable to control their consumption, ending up obese or indebted. It is considered impossible to marry without owning one's home and having a decent car. As for having children, do you have any idea how expensive they are? And of course these objects of conspicuous consumption so often fail to live up to expectations.

Yet there is also an optimistic narrative of youth economics. Where labour is concerned, there is much to celebrate. There are more educational opportunities and more interesting and skilled jobs than ever before. There are more careers, more freedom to choose among them and more possibility to change career paths, even on a whim. The gains are universal, but they are especially large for women, who are no longer confined to the domestic sphere or a narrow list of jobs outside of the home. Now women are just as educated as men, can take on any job that men can, and are increasingly paid and promoted just like men. The optimists do not see any economic problem in people starting families later. It is a mostly a sign of just how good the paid labour-lives of today's young women really are.

This optimism extends to the life of consumption. Why mock young people's shopping and entertainment choices? Why exaggerate their angst about having and not having enough of the right things? Step back and see how good it all is. Young people today live in unprecedented comfort, can and do travel with unprecedented ease and can and do use their electronic consumption to overcome distance. Thanks to the internet, they live in big and usually supportive communities.

I am not going to adjudicate between the two sides: according to my judgement as a Catholic economist, both are right. What Pope John Paul II liked to say about modernity as a whole is true of the economic situation of the young. It is filled with light and shadows. Indeed, I think the modern saint's judgement of the age provides the best way to understand what is happening in this part of young people's lives. The economic life of the young is best understood as part of the whole modern turn.

Consider the erosion of horizons in so many aspects of the lives of today's young adults. Many of them have little or no religious framework, little or no coherent sense of anything transcendental. Their place in society is uncertain, because the constraints of heredity have been broken by the demand for self-defining freedom. The cumulative effect of several generations of exploring such freedom is often to leave these young adults with parents who are unreliable guides to the good life. And so, young adults have to make it on their own. That quest is made more difficult by the modern tendency to substitute a purely emotional happiness for the true, the good and the noble. This happiness often proves an inadequate lodestar, particularly in the realm of sexual love, which is typically very important to young adults.

I do not want to condemn everything modern—that would be not just unfair, but unrealistic. All I want to do is point out the relative appeal of economic accomplishments to young people. For them, other parts of life are likely to seem hard or meaningless: but the economic life is relatively straightforward. In labour, success is easy to understand and not that hard to achieve. Most modern jobs—both cog and drift—offer success by some standard that can make sense to a young person who is perhaps spiritually underdeveloped.

The fairly typical young person's desire to excel, often in competition with others, is given great and fairly safe sway. In many types of work, the goods of intelligence and friendship are genuinely promoted. The rules of employers are solid, reasonable and satisfying in comparison to the near-anarchy on the dating scene and the nearly uncontrolled emotional demands of many close relationships. When social signals are blurred by the erosion of class and the praise of individualism, the monetary rewards from employment are clear: they are, for the most part, something like just.

Under the circumstances, it is really not surprising that so many young people look to their lives of labour for meaning. It makes sense that the old aristocratic identification of leisure as the highest sort of labour has been replaced by a praise of long hours and extravagant commitment to the job, the team or the company. With families so often seen as unreliable, and so many heritages and traditions eroded, it is reasonable to move cities to keep a good job or get a better one. So far, it sounds as though the optimists are right about the contemporary relationship between young people and the economy. Their lives of labour really are pretty good, or at least good enough to help make up for losses and weaknesses in other parts of life.

However, there is a serious problem with this life-style, one which lurks behind many of the pessimists' harsh readings of the current situation. The problem is not that there is nothing actually good about labour in general, or modern labour in particular. One welcome development is the overthrow of the almost universal philosophical tradition of the West, and much of the East, about the value of labour. Contrary to that tradition, modern people have recognised that a life centred on labour is not animalistic, undignified or totally profane.

In this modern spirit, Christians have increasingly emphasised the labour of Jesus as a craftsman during his hidden years, as a sign of the transcendence inherent in the human stewardship of God's creation. Similarly, Christians can look to Mary to validate the inherently

divine core in the physical labours of domestic love. For men and women, old and young, the holiness of the everyday is seen a wonderful sign of God's overflowing love for humanity.

However, the old traditions were not entirely wrong. Even the most spiritually fulfilling life of labour cannot provide the fullness of life to which God calls each person. Not even the best career can provide a real substitute for the richness of divine and human love, for the true, the good and the beautiful. Labour can be more ennobling than wise men may have once thought, and modern labour overall may provide more opportunities for human excellence than pre-modern labour, but no labour can, on its own, bring order to restless hearts or make sense of suffering.

In short, the results of the modern striving in labour can never be completely satisfactory. It is this inevitable ontological failure—labour's limited potential for transcendence—rather than, say, wage injustice or poor vocational training, which explains why modern labour excites so much discontent. The young are especially vulnerable to this disappointment, because in their inexperience they are particularly likely to ask more of labour than it can possibly deliver.

The excesses of both the young cog and the young drifter are testimonies to this inadequacy. The hyper-dedicated cog hopes to be able to work hard enough to drown out the roar of spiritual emptiness. The hyper-detached drifter is refusing to ask for what is available because he or she knows or intuits that it will never fully satisfy. Both end up losing out on the genuine but moderate good which modern labour really does promote.

Similarly, young women who put their careers before motherhood often expect too much from the former. However, young women who want to labour at nothing but motherhood, seeing housework and all paid work as unfortunate if sometimes necessary distractions, are often disappointed. For some, of course, motherhood is an all-encompassing vocation, but many still yearn for something "more". Perhaps a latent frustration with the inevitable limits to what this labour can offer leads some mothers to transcend it through "helicopter parenting", promoting the perfect success of their children.

For millennia, philosophers and religious teachers have cautioned young and old alike about the strict limits to the goodness of a life of consumption. The increased modern appreciation for the goodness of everyday life has perhaps revealed some new depths to this side of economic life. Modern technologies provide new opportunities—often not taken—to humanise the world more thoroughly by creating more beautiful objects and spreading more widely the lifestyles of elegance and refinement which were once limited to a tiny group of aristocrats. The ready accessibility of travel allow more people to witness the wonders of the world, both as God made it in raw nature, and in the artworks and monuments which humanity has wrought out of it.

However, the traditional warnings against excessive desires still hold—whether the consumer good in question is food, clothing, housing, creature comforts or leisure. A few people have argued that there is redeeming spiritual merit hidden in the immoderate consumption of mind-altering drugs, and others make the same sort of claim for extreme fitness, mind-numbing entertainments and thrill-seeking leisure experiences. But their case is not persuasive.

I think many young people do try to squeeze out as much of the genuine goodness of consumption as they can. The careful attention to food, décor, holiday planning and various ways of "having fun" often demonstrates a commendable striving for the good and the beautiful. However, excesses are hard to avoid when attention is being paid to worldly things and experiences rather than to the transcendental excellences— friendship, family and love

—which these consumption activities can support but not supplant.

To understand why many young people search so eagerly for treasures which cannot satisfy, we need to once again ponder the relevant competition. Just as the excessive dedication of young careerists to the excellence of labour often betrays a desperate search for more meaning than labour can possibly provide, the craving for consumer pleasures may betray—just as philosophers and religious teachers have always said—an inner emptiness. Young people who earn and yearn to spend as much as possible are courting spiritual disaster. Those of us who are old enough to have seen what money can and cannot buy may find ourselves frustrated by the naïve enthusiasm that many young adults express for economic accomplishments and satisfactions. I often find myself telling people not to fuss so much about their careers, not to wait until they are sure of economic security to get married and have children, and not to worry about not being able to afford this or that consumer good or service.

I try, though, to think the best. I recognise that the dedication to excellence at work does provide valuable goods and services, as well as supporting many fine communities of labour. The striving for professional success is often accompanied by a concern for justice or an appreciation for truth and beauty. The concern for excellence in consumption counters the tendency of mass production to settle for mediocrity. Most important of all, whilst the desire to find a higher meaning in the economic life may be misguided in many ways, it nonetheless reveals one of the finest attributes of youth: the restless, energetic, imaginative and idealistic striving for higher things.

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How to Grow in Love: Through Adolescence to Adulthood

JOSÉ GRANADOS DCJM

I. Introduction: Precocious Adulthood, Prolonged Adolescence

We live in an age of precocious adulthood and prolonged adolescence. The two are paradoxically related, for the person who is allowed to become an adult too soon will never reach adulthood. The desire to seize life prematurely hinders the capacity to enter fully into it. If this paradox is no contradiction, this is because both extremes are a symptom of the same problem: the incapacity to inhabit time and to discover life's intrinsic law of growth and maturation.[1] Human life consists of different stages; only by patiently going through them can the whole become meaningful. To suppress one of them, not to integrate it into the rest of life, yields a formless identity. As Shakespeare puts it in *King Lear*: "M*en must endure their going* hence, even as *their* coming hither. Ripeness is all."

What is then the law that makes time unfold in a meaningful way? What is the proper rhythm of human life? Is there any way of learning it and of being initiated into it? German theologian Romano Guardini wrote a short book, *The Ages of Life*, in which he describes the phases of development in a man's life. Guardini goes through childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age to show how each of them has a particular role in the building up of man's identity. According to him, to recover the texture of time is essential to help the modern subject emerge from the crisis of fragmentation in which he lives.

In this process, adolescence has a privileged place as a crucial moment of change. Following Guardini, we can describe this period as the moment in which the person faces two distinct challenges: that of articulating his own identity and that of finding the meaning of sexuality. Guardini writes about the challenges found in this stage: "This new time is threatened by dangers. Regarding personality: that one does not take the step that allows him to stand by himself, and that he remains in a state of dependency; or that he remains in rebellion and does not learn that there is an order to which it is possible freely to consent. Regarding sexuality: that he does not find the courage to go beyond himself, that he becomes unable to become father or mother in the fullest sense of the word; or that he gets imprisoned in sex, without being able to enter into true love, in respect and responsibility." [2]

It is this conflict that allows us to grasp the specificity of the transition. Following Guardini's reflections we can say that both issues faced by the adolescent are intertwined: the problem of identity appears at the same time as a problem of relationship, of openness to others. It is in the question awakened by sexuality that he will be able to find an answer to the maturation of his own self.

II. The stages of life, the stages of love

Adolescence, the stage of life in which the discovery of self is linked to the awareness of sexuality, offers us a clue to find a solution to our question: How to resolve the crisis of time's configuration, so crucial for the structuring of man's identity? If the human person is defined by his relationships and by the way these relationships mature, then it is only an analysis of love, of its different phases and dimensions, that allows us to find the law of development of time and the conditions for maturation. This connection between love and identity allowed St. Augustine to describe his own adolescence in these terms: "I came to Carthage . . . . As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; . . . I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love . . ."

An analysis of personal love reveals to us several integral dimensions of true love. Love appears as something that happens to me, as something I encounter always-already-there in existence and that I have neither produced nor created. At the same time, love is also revealed as an act in which freedom is born: the act of receiving this gift and of being able to respond to it. These dimensions of love place it in the horizon of transcendence, as a bearer of the divine: the human being learns the meaning of his life as a relationship with God, the original Giver and the ultimate destiny of his existence.

Now, how can a person learn to integrate all these dimensions in a balanced way? The task would be impossible if the person had to invent it by himself. Fortunately, man finds himself always-already in the place in which these laws are present. For the understanding of the truth of love is given in the family, the place where the person is born and is called to define his identity and his capacity to love. It is the family that allows us to measure the stages of development of love towards maturity.

First, one needs to learn to receive, as a child, the gift of life. This is the time of trust in one's parents, and, in the security of their love, the child can experience the world as a place of wonderment and discovery. It is also the time of brotherhood, when we learn that we come from a common love, that the love we have is a shared love.[3] But it is not enough to receive love; one has to mature in order to give himself to another, thus opening up a different dimension of freedom. The love received in sonship and shared in brotherhood is to become a love given to one's spouse, a love that recreates us and that allows us to create, a love that will become fruitful in parenthood.

It is this process of development, in stages that are never overcome, but always integrated into the following stage, that measures the person's growth. To educate in love means to teach someone to be a child, to become a spouse, to give life in parenthood.

These three dimensions do not measure only the affective life of the person, but also the meaning of work and of man's activity in society. Work is bearable only for the one who has the consciousness of a debt contracted with existence, to which he has to respond: that is, it is bearable only for the one who is a child. On the other hand, the assumption of responsibility grows in accordance with man's capacity for spousal and parental love. It is the capacity to give oneself to others in a creative act of freedom and to assume as one's own task the

flourishing of other persons.

In the light of love, of the relationships that constitute the identity of the person, the stage of adolescence can be described as a transition between the time of a primordial receptivity, in which everything was given by one's parents; and the time of responsibility, in which the subject discovers himself in the light of a call to love to which he is summoned to respond. Precisely because adolescence traverses this region between two times—between two seasons of life—the adolescent is in danger of becoming trapped in the moment, making of the present an absolute, without roots in a past that he looks upon as alien and a future that seems too open to offer orientation and meaning.

We have, then, a general answer to our question: the education of a person is given in these different forms of living in relationship which are also dimensions of love and its truth. The stages of life are measured by man's capacity to accept that he is a child, to commit himself to his spouse, to become fruitful as a parent, and to live in fraternal love. Let us focus now on the question of maturation insofar as it has to do with courtship, since the question of enduring love and preparation for marriage is such an urgent one. How can courtship help the person mature, in the light of love?

III. Maturation in mutual love

Karol Wojtyła, in his work *Love and Responsibility*, distinguished three levels or dimensions of the person in need of gradual integration: sensuality, or sexual attraction; the emotion or feeling of love; and the act of personal love. All of them are given in some respect from the beginning of the relationship. It is the latter (which Wojtyła called "betrothed love") that is tied to the discovery of the person's value and the birth of true, mature love. To these three levels we can add a fourth one, implied in the others: the connection between love and transcendence, the fact that God appears as the ultimate horizon of man's journey of love. (This fourth level is represented dramatically by the character of the Jeweler in Wojtyła's *The Jeweler's Shop* who stands for the importance of the presence of God in the relationship.)

It is only in the integration of these levels that love can grow and mature. First, sexual desire is fulfilled when it is assumed, without disappearing, in the world of the emotions, which enables the two lovers to share in a common world. A crucial step is then the maturation of feelings, which enables the lover to reach a higher level of union: now the person is able to give himself to the other, to abandon the sphere of the isolated individual around which the feelings tend to circle. At this point he is able to say "we" in such a way that the individual is no longer the center of the relationship but lives, so to speak, out of himself and, only in this way, becomes fully himself. The ultimate backdrop of this integration of love is the horizon of transcendence. Of course, these dimensions cannot be seen as different chronological stages: they appear all at once, with different intensity, along the process. The key is the integration of all these levels, and especially the connection between the affective and the personal dimensions. The time of courtship allows for the formation of this affective unity whose secret lies always beyond itself.

In an earlier time, the traditions of courtship fostered this integration. Social forms brought the sexes together, prudently guiding the development of sexual and emotional energies. Such practices as community dances, church socials, and chaperoned outings enabled young men and women to spend time together without the risk of premature intimacy. Eros was thus cultivated and disciplined. Young people who were coming of age were understood to need help navigating the transition between adolescence and adulthood, especially when it came to the momentous decision of marriage. These were not fully mature individuals, independent

agents set free in an impersonal world; rather, they were the sons and daughters, brothers and sisters and members of a community. Social protocol reflected this fact, as parents and members of the extended family were assumed to play an important role in the supervision of young people in search of a suitable mate.

Though we no longer enjoy the formal structures of courtship, we can nevertheless encourage young adults to view dating and even engagement as a period requiring the same kind of discipline provided by the courtship system. They should make prudent decisions about time spent together, seek wise counsel from elders, carefully discern the character of their beloved, and evaluate their own capacity for unselfish love.

All of these considerations culminate in the question of how we can assess whether the process of maturation is moving forward.

IV. Factors to measure love's maturation during the time of preparation for marriage

What are the steps in this maturation or at least the signs that show that the process is taking place? I would like to point out three elements that could be lights along the way of maturation in love. First, it should be discerned whether the couple has the capacity to look into the future, to open up a horizon that goes beyond the present and the capacity to promise and to stay faithful to the promise. Feelings, by themselves, cannot offer the path towards the future; they cannot help us go beyond the moment. When feelings are made an absolute, time becomes a circle of eternal repetition.

Second, the couple needs to show the capacity for building something together, demonstrating that their love is not closed in on itself. This is also the capacity of preparing for parenthood and common fruit. It is the connection between being together, being in a place (community), and having a common task. Here we can add the openness of the couple to transcendence, to God, to what Wojtyła calls, in *The Jeweler's Shop*, "the gaze of the Jeweler."

Finally, there should be signs that the couple has the capacity of suffering together, of understanding that there is a dimension of the cross in marriage. It is this experience, indeed, that will help them understand the horizon of eternity disclosed by love, inasmuch as this experience teaches us how love can be greater than suffering and, therefore, greater than death.

Though the culture at large offers little help in guiding young people in matters of love and marriage, the tradition offers rich resources to assist them. It has a profound anthropology that appreciates the meaningfulness of dwelling in time and recognizes the complex and delicate stages of human development. A pastoral care informed by this anthropology can authentically guide the young in the great task of their lives: growing in love.

[1] According to Robert Wuthnow, in *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton UP, 2007), these are the chracteristics of the "new young adults": Delayed Marriage; Children Fewer and Later; Uncertainties of Work and Money; Higher Education (for some); Loosening Relationships; Globalization; Culture: An Information Explosion.

[2] Guardini:"Das wird durch Gefahren bedroht. Hinsichtlich der Personalität: dass er den

Schritt in die Eigenständigkeit nicht tue, und abhängig bleibe; oder aber in der Rebellion verharre und nicht lerne, was freibejahte Ordnung ist. Hinsichtlich des geschlechtlichen Lebens: dass er den Mut zum Hinüberschritt nicht finde, unfähig werde, im vollen Sinn des Wortes Vater oder Mutter zu werden; oder aber dem Sexus verfalle, darin verwildere und nicht zur echten Liebe in Ehre und Verantwortung gelange" (*The Ages of Life*, 21).

[3] There is a lot of talk, recently, about the birth of childhood. What is meant by this expression is that childhood, which was unimportant in other times, became a center of focus in the modern era. This discovery of childhood means, in fact, the forgetfulness of the true essence of what it is to be a child. It describes childhood as the background of our constitution as adults, mostly in the time of conflicts that we suffered. But it is proper to childhood precisely to go unnoticed. And maybe the obsession with it is a symptom of the lack of a presence of childhood in the rest of the person's existence.

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Man Fully Alive

ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus was Bishop of Lyon, France during the latter quarter of the second century. As a youth he was acquainted with Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who was a disciple of St. John the Apostle. Irenaeus' principal work was Against Heresies *in which he refuted the many forms of Christian Gnosticism which in various ways disparaged the material world. The following excerpt is found in the middle of Book IV in which Irenaeus expounds on the unity of God and of his activity vis-à-vis the world from Creation to Redemption. It is in Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning, says Irenaeus, that creation is brought to its full maturity. For in revealing the Father to man and presenting man in turn to the Father, creation receives the Life of its life. This is what he means when he says: "The Glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God."*

Men therefore shall see God, that they may live, being made immortal by that sight, and attaining even unto God; which, as I have already said, was declared figuratively by the prophets, that God should be seen by men who bear His Spirit [in them], and do always wait patiently for His coming. As also Moses says in Deuteronomy, "We shall see in that day that God will talk to man, and he shall live" (Deut 5:24). For certain of these men used to see the prophetic Spirit and His active influences poured forth for all kinds of gifts; others, again, [beheld] the advent of the Lord, and that dispensation which obtained from the beginning, by which He accomplished the will of the Father with regard to things both celestial and terrestrial; and others [beheld] paternal glories adapted to the times, and to those who saw and who heard them then, and to all who were subsequently to hear them. Thus, therefore, was God revealed; for God the Father is shown forth through all these [operations], the Spirit indeed working, and the Son ministering, while the Father was approving, and man's salvation being accomplished. As He also declares through Hosea the prophet: "I," He says, "have multiplied visions, and have used similitudes by the ministry (*in manibus*) of the prophets" (Hos 12:10). But the apostle expounded this very passage, when he said, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are differences of ministrations, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Cor 12:4–7). But as He who worketh all things in all is God, [as to the points] of what nature and how great He is, [God] is invisible and indescribable to all things which have been made by Him, but He is by

no means unknown: for all things learn through His Word that there is one God the Father, who contains all things, and who grants existence to all, as is written in the Gospel: "No man hath seen God at any time, except the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father; He has declared [Him]" (Jn 1:18).

Therefore the Son of the Father declares [Him] from the beginning, inasmuch as He was with the Father from the beginning, who did also show to the human race prophetic visions, and diversities of gifts, and His own ministrations, and the glory of the Father, in regular order and connection, at the fitting time for the benefit [of mankind]. For where there is a regular succession, there is also fixedness; and where fixedness, there suitability to the period; and where suitability, there also utility. And for this reason did the Word become the dispenser of the paternal grace for the benefit of men, for whom He made such great dispensations, revealing God indeed to men, but presenting man to God, and preserving at the same time the invisibility of the Father, lest man should at any time become a despiser of God, and that he should always possess something towards which he might advance; but, on the other hand, revealing God to men through many dispensations, lest man, falling away from God altogether, should cease to exist. For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God.

(Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. IV, Ch. XX, no. 6–7.)

St. Irenaeus was Bishop of Lyon, France in the 2nd century.

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The Long Way Home

LAURA BRAMON

One of my earliest memories is of sitting on my mother's lap in my great-aunt's farmhouse, a whitewashed colonial overlooking the snowy Missouri River bottom my great-uncle farmed. Our family's generations pivoted quickly—young marriages, swift pregnancies—so I remember this little home as a lively place where three or four generations gathered: a teeming flank of men and women whose faces echoed one another, whose laughter rang with the same cadences.

In this memory, it is Christmas. I can't be more than two years old. There is a bright tree and a great rush of voices. Everyone gets one gift, something simple. I can see mine: a cardboard puzzle with alluring yellow and blue pieces in the shapes of a rubber duck, a bubbling bar of soap. I lean against my mother's soft body and take the puzzle pieces to my mouth, rub their stiff weft against my lips. I feel her voice reverberate in my body as other voices rise around me.

As a woman, I look in on my people in this farmhouse and I love them. My heart flares with a child's wonder at belonging, of encountering love in the generations knit together. That flare is so strong that even now, more than thirty years later, I feel it: a kind of vibrant pagan happiness, predicated on blood ties that stake a body to its begetters and the near earth.

But my heart grows sober, too, knowing how the human predicament yokes every happiness to the dim mystery of death. I consider my family in the kaleidoscope of all that has transpired in the years since that Christmas Day: the natural trials of illness and loss, and the unnatural traumas of abuse and abandonment—especially the succession of divorces that estranged spouses and siblings, cousins and grandparents, and transmuted our shared sins of anger and avarice into weapons for civil wagering. Every generation dies, but somehow, in the circumstances of our time and place, we were enticed to wound and discard each other, to renounce our blood ties in favor of a costly kind of freedom.

I see now that the blood-tie happiness I once tasted was an encounter with the primal givenness of family relationships, the givenness that cannot be recreated in any other circumstance. The bond of the body guards the unique spiritual work of the generations: tending a set of sins refracted among the members in varying degrees of vanity or violence, abhorrent to the victim and sometimes invisible to the transgressor.

We pass those roles back and forth. If we hate the transgressor, we may in some very real way hate ourselves. But we often love the transgressor, too, for all the humor and quirks of his heart, for the memory of his childhood or the care he gave us in our own, for the way his face and voice catch familiar contours and sounds. In this affinity, we find a bare light to coax us to love.

I have not seen my great aunt's farmhouse in nearly twenty years. As a young woman, I moved away from home—on a whim, at first, expecting a short-lived sojourn. But then time shifted and our family splintered. The dramatic losses and conflicts of that event cancelled our common understandings of right and wrong. In this painful confusion, I found God asking of me an exile that I asked him to take away. He refused.

Exile is at once a protection and a loss. Living at a physical distance from one another, encounter is no longer assumed, but orchestrated—awkwardly, sometimes, but often with a mannered care and love, in the hope that each encounter, whether fruitful or painful, will win back a bit of what has been lost. In this way, distance spurs temperance, and temperance urges me on in repentance and forgiveness regarding my part in the common generational sins we share. But at the same time, distance stokes a grief for the old ease of our affinities, our common joys.

In exile, friendship has become very important to me. Deep consonance—in humor, shared ventures, the quest for God—is sometimes so strong and so radically contingent that a friendship feels like falling in love, a recompense for blood-tie affection denied or deferred. But affinity alone is little comfort. In the depth of our hearts, we want not only affinity but rigor, the sober work of formation promised but not always realized in the permanence of blood.

I think about a dear friend God gave me a few years ago, mid-exile: a woman with a sober heart, very steady, regardless of the fact that her family's splintering was perhaps more dramatic than my own. God matchmade us in a Mary garden, a tiny plot of green and trees abutting our white stone city church, a thousand miles from the river of my childhood and the ocean of her own. Lingering in or walking by that garden over the years, we have marveled over the fact that no sorrow, betrayal, or shame can tamp the desire to love and be loved by the people who created us.

We have marveled too at the joy we have felt in pressing past friendships' affinities to confess to one another our own complicity in our families' generational sins. Sometimes these confessions come almost by accident; sometimes they are readied and rehearsed. And sometimes, in moments of fatigue and fear, they well up in the kind of quick, pained reactions we might offer only to a sibling or a parent. The friend marks right and wrong, but she is gentle: quick to listen, ready to forgive, eager to accompany. Together with St. Paul, we bear all things, believe all things. We do not want to fail.

In an age of family turmoil, our closest friendships may offer us not only consolation but little arks in which to make the grave passage from a child's desire for love to an adult's desire for truth in the inward parts, as the Psalmist says. Truth begs purgation, and purgation offers us a progressive, often painful coming-of-age that gives us eyes to see and ears to hear ourselves as we truly are—and God as He broods over us.

In His generosity, we receive friends with whom we can taste a different kind of happiness: less the fraught allegiance of blood-borne givenness and more the radically dispossessed self-gift of the Spirit. This is a happiness that can hold both life and death, because it can receive and relinquish all. And if we are lucky, it is a happiness that will seed deeply in us, form us,

and strengthen us: so that when we return to the primal work of our blood-ties, we go with great freedom and gaze at our family members with the same eyes of hope that we give to a friend.

Laura Bramon lives in Washington, DC, where she works on child protection and education issues for an international relief and development agency. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in IMAGE, First Things online, Cardus, Books & Culture, Featherproof Press, and other outlets.

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WITNESS

A Life on the Threshold

ELIZABETH MCCARTHY

I come from a long line of nail biters. My mother and all her sisters bear the marks (as do I) of cuticle scars and jagged stubby nail beds. We tell each other to "stop it," whacking each other's hands mid-bite with very little intention of stopping ourselves. It's a habit that I wish to break, but in the grand scheme of bad habits, it factors very low on the totem pole. Where some stronger folk might try getting to the root of a minor vice such as this, I believe three coats of shellac followed by a back massage will cover things up just fine. It's a temporary fix. Once the varnish wears off I'll be at it again. Of course, going to a nail salon as a habitual biter is embarrassing. I lay my hands on the table and have to endure the scrutiny of my Vietnamese beautician. She tells me not to bite. I could lie and tell her I'll try harder, but instead I tell her the truth: I'm anxious. I can, in fact, read my anxiety levels by just looking at the state of my cuticles. These days, I'm getting a lot of manicures.

Why the anxiety? There is nothing particularly extreme about my circumstances. I'm a few years out of college and unsure what to do with my life. Apparently there are quite a few of us out there. (I wonder if they are nail-biters too.) Yet somehow the fact that I am in some sort of anxious majority doesn't seem to give me much comfort. What if we anxious twenty-somethings *never* figure it out? We're all coming of age, often with not much hope that we'll ever arrive anywhere. The words "coming of age" imply both a beginning and a point of arrival. They imply that I'm on the cusp of some sort of vocational quest, a journey I didn't even know I was on in the first place. I wonder: when did this whole journey start for me? Would clarifying my start in some way ease the anxiety about where I am going? Perhaps to understand my approaching adulthood I should revisit my receding childhood.

I've been told that I have an uncanny memory. Show me a picture and there is a good chance that I'll remember something of that day. I remember looking out the window as a four-year-old, my grandmother holding my brother behind me. It was a rainy morning. All the lights in the house were out and in walked my mom and dad with a new baby. I remember them doling out presents to us two kids. I can't remember what it was but I do remember looking at my new little brother. We were all gathered around him in front of the fireplace. I remember being four and the car breaking down on the highway. (This was before cell phones). A veterinarian pulled over and offered us a lift. I remember being in the back of the vet's van with a lot of puppies. I remember being three, eating a banana in the mudroom and thinking

that I didn't really like bananas. I remember telling myself I wasn't going to eat bananas anymore. To this day, I haven't eaten a banana.

I could go on. There was a vacation in Italy with my grandparents. My grandmother promised to pay me if I said "Ciao" to a little boy. I did. That was also the day I first counted to one hundred and the day I got to pick out my very own Italian bathing suit. I remember being four at a skate park. I saw an ilk of cool-looking rebels with mohawks and funky-colored hair. I remember thinking I wanted to be like them. Because they were cool, and even as a four-year-old, I had a very refined coolness gauge.

Perhaps I have such an uncanny memory because there is so much in my life worth remembering. I have always had the sense of being part of a community that loved me and was committed to me. I have always trusted that I belonged to someone, that I belonged somewhere. Such a certainty allowed me to develop a strong sense of self at a very young age. Indeed, I've known who I was for as long as I can remember. It seems I have not changed a whole lot since that realization.

When I went to college, my professors told us we were on the cusp of adulthood and we should treat college as a way to experiment: to figure out who we wanted to be, unshackled from who we used to be. From sexual encounters, to food, drugs and entertainment, we were offered endless opportunities for "self-realization." But I already knew myself. Since I was uninterested in sampling these amenities, my peers and professors viewed me as stubborn, unwilling to grow up. In this regard, college had very little to offer me. As my four years of university wore on, I noticed an ever-widening divide between my peers and myself. Upon graduating, I learned that I was entering a world with many other new graduates from other universities, all of whom had been offered the same amenities; many of them had caved to the temptations. I moved to a city where state-of-the-art studio apartments sprouted like weeds, offering new and improved appliances to their young inhabitants. Coupled with the expanding app universe, it seemed as though my peers had struck a seam of endless bounty. And yet, even with this cornucopia of luxury, they were lonelier than ever: full to bursting with shiny objects, yet starving.

Though this seems to be the trajectory of my generation, I am still unwilling to accept these criteria for "adulthood." I am now twenty-four and two years out of college. I have interest in my own self-promotion, but would like to find a way to integrate my gifts within the community where I have such strong roots. I would like to get married and start a family and give my children the same sense of belonging and love that I was given. I would like those children to belong to a particular place where they too might "come of age." It seems as though my childhood has been preparing me to want these things.

I am anxious because I sense the threshold of what my childhood was preparing me for in a culture that no longer values childhood. Yet how can we ever reach the destination of adulthood, if we do not first acknowledge that our journey began *in* childhood? Remembering from whence I came keeps me faithful to where I am headed. Thank God for my uncanny memory, which reminds me who I have always been, and where I have always been going.

Elizabeth Harper McCarthy graduated from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in 2017. She is a classically trained actress living in the Washington, DC area.

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BOOK REVIEW

Outsourcing Empathy? Why Alexa Is Not Up To the Task

COLET C. BOSTICK

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011. With new preface, 2017.).

In her preface to the 2017 edition of *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle identifies the exact moment she felt misgivings about the many promises of technology. It was two decades earlier, during an encounter with "Cog," a humanoid robot consisting of an adult-sized torso, complete with moving head, neck, and arms. Mechanically, the robot's main action tracked movement; however, when this function was housed in a human-like body, Cog took on (as intended) human-seeming characteristics. As a psychologist and anthropologist who had spent years observing the effects of robotic technology on people young and old, Turkle was mentally prepared and even enthusiastic about this new and promising creation. When she entered the room with Cog, the robot "noticed" her—that is, moved its head and followed her movements—and Turkle was astonished to find herself "unreasonably happy" that she had been recognized and acknowledged by the robot. She realized she was experiencing the "robotic moment"; in an instant her mental identification of the robot changed from a tool for her use to an "other"—a possibly equal entity with which she could enter into relationship. As an anthropologist, she had watched children and the elderly emotionally attach to machines and had identified such behavior as a problem. But with Cog, Turkle was surprised by her own visceral desire to spend time with the robot—to be in its company—and to have a human-like relationship with a non-living thing.

Why do we want machines to care? This is the overarching question of Turkle's decades of research, study, observation, writing, and personal reflection. These technological objects are only that—objects, machines—and yet we expect them to do something for which they are not built. Intuitive programming housed in an approximation of a body doesn't really fool us into thinking that machines are real like us, or even the "real" imagined in childhood stories (*The Velveteen Rabbit, Pinocchio*)—but our desire to treat them as more than machines denotes a change in how we understand life and relationship.

Turkle describes this phenomenon as being "alive enough." She began studying children's

interactive toys in the late 1970's and was there when the manufacturers of these toys realized that if a child cares *for* the object, it becomes a creature, and the child cannot bring himself to turn away, cannot make himself not care. "We love what we nurture," Turkle points out, and if a cute, talking creature toy "makes you love it, and you feel it loves you in return, it is alive enough to be a creature." Further, and perhaps more disturbing, is that in her innumerable studies of children interacting with technological care-objects, she found that the children asked of the robots what they needed the most—substitutes for the attention of adults and a sense of their own importance.

Cog, the humanoid robot of Turkle's awakening moment, takes this a step further by seeming to offer to care in return. Elder care comes to mind almost immediately in this line of thinking, and in 2009 MIT's AgeLab presented the robot Paro with the aging parent in mind. But Paro is a "sociable robot" and is not a physical aide, meant as a companion to help isolated nursing home patients stave off loneliness. The robot mimics caring behavior by "listening" and "responding"; but of course a machine, by definition, cannot care and cannot hold a conversation. Performance (here, the performance of caring) has been deemed sufficient. New relationships are being developed and lived because we are settling for "alive enough," "caring enough," "human enough."

Turkle refers to theologian Martin Buber's "I-Thou" understanding of relationship in describing the interactions she observed between people and Cog. Since the robot has a face, makes eye contact, and follows movement, there is physical similarity to the human—but not, she insists, a symmetry. Instead of the person giving commands and the robot executing them, we enter into a type of half-way conversation with our devices. Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa are examples of this hybrid back-and-forth that is not merely mechanical, but also not human. We have started to mistake interaction with kinship, letting ourselves believe that "people are not so different from robots [and] robots are not so different from people." Once this idea is accepted (usually unconsciously), human beings will go to great lengths to keep this belief intact. When the inventor of Cog wanted to show a group of children that the robot is only a machine, he switched it off, effectively turning the animated humanoid into a limp puppet. The children were dismayed and solicitous, speaking of Cog as being wounded. (Turkle likens this to turning the boy Pinocchio back into a wooden doll.) Lifelike behavior is no longer seen as a deception, as something a machine acts out or has as a program; life-*like* behavior in robots is now preferred to *actual* mechanical behavior in robots or the real-life behavior of human beings.

When she wrote *Alone Together* in 2011, Turkle divided the book into two sections: the hardware of robots and the software of networking. But in the 2017 preface, she realized that making distinctions between them is a moot point: whether hardware or software, in both cases human beings are interacting with *machinery*. Whether it's due to the speed of advancing technology or 21st century man's wholehearted embrace of digital culture, the distinction between hardware and software has really become superfluous. We carry our robots in our back pockets. In social computing, "conversations turn into mere connections," and the hardware has "exploded far beyond the robotic into the world of apps." Our smartphones allow us to be physically present, but we are constantly absent mentally and emotionally. We sit with our families at our dining room tables, each immersed in a separate world, living "alone together."

Without being shrill, Turkle urges the reader to consider the implications of accepting mere information in place of real knowledge, of trading in human empathy for mechanical distraction. She is concerned that we believe the lie that we need technology to free us from a situation technology itself has created. But "we," she insists, "are the empathy app." *Alone*

Together is an essential read, not only because it is thoughtful, articulate, and thoroughly researched, but because the author insists on thinking through a new understanding of what it means to be human in a new world together.

Colet C. Bostick is a writer and editor living in Damascus, Maryland.

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On Exiting Neverland: Ben Sasse's *The Vanishing American Adult*

MELANIE DANNER

Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-reliance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).

Ben Sasse's book *The Vanishing American Adult* compellingly documents a dramatic coming-of-age crisis in which the transition between adolescence and adulthood is drawn out for or never entirely navigated by many Americans. A historian educated at Harvard, Oxford, and Yale, and currently a Senator from Nebraska, Sasse issues a wake-up call to this "national existential crisis" in that a healthy republic relies on today's emerging adults becoming its future leaders (30). Sasse warns that their failure to become engaged and educated citizens constitutes the greatest threat to our society. His work is replete with analyses from multiple fields: sociology, psychology, pediatrics, history, and education. While citing many experts, he liberally utilizes his personal experience, as well as that of family and friends, to elucidate trends in American culture and how to counteract them to raise virtuous adults. Consequently, his book is far from theoretical; most American parents will recognize many of the patterns he describes in their own children or among their children's peers.

Sasse observes that to confront the widespread work and societal changes greater resiliency will be required of the generation that is coming of age. American workers, like others in the global economy, face increasingly tough challenges. For example, career stability has been on a steep decline, and digitization and automation are expected to replace vast quantities of workers (an estimated 110–140 million jobs worldwide by 2025). Sasse briefly examines some devastating trends in the emerging adult population which undermine resiliency: more medication than any previous generation, more screen time, more porn, more years at home, more intellectual fragility (think "safe spaces" and "microaggression"), less marriage, and less religious participation. Each of these trends robs young adults of agency, rendering them more enfeebled protagonists in their own lives.

Sasse points to John Dewey, the father of the modern American public school, as one of the chief culprits in this crisis. From the early to mid-1900s, Dewey espoused and successfully

propagated an ideological view in which the school, not the home, became the locus of children's formation, replacing parents instead of supporting them. This perception of school as the center of children's lives became more pervasive over the decades, until it comprised a real subversion of the proper order in which schools should be an instrument at the service of "families and the deeper and wider institutions of life that are based on love" (27).

One of the most pernicious unintended consequences of the modern American public school system is removing students from multi-generational influences and largely limiting their gaze to their peer group, generally confined to those born the same year. Sasse addresses this problem and the resulting shrinking of experience in a chapter called "Flee Age Segregation." He urges parents to mindfully raise their children so that they are regularly exposed to people of other generations, thus breaking through the myopia engendered by interactions limited to age group peers. This introduces them to the whole cycle of life—birth, aging, and death—as well as the wisdom gained from elders.

Often both schools and parents unintentionally exacerbate another deficiency in today's emerging adults by failing to instill a work ethic. By reducing "education" to that which occurs in the classroom (rather than a broader definition which embraces real life experiences, particularly work), many adults convey to emerging adults that their only "job" is schoolwork. Thus, the young are deprived of the character building and self-confidence that hard work imparts. Sasse encourages parents to start giving children chores at a very early age and expanding both the repertoire and complexity of tasks as they grow to increase their sense of agency. One move Sasse and his wife undertook in this regard was to send their 14-year-old daughter off to work at a ranch four hours away. They wanted her to "learn how to suffer...because very simply neither our children nor yours will grow up to be free, independent, self-respecting adults if we hand them everything without the expectation of something in return" (140). The ranch work was a huge growth experience for their daughter, and, as Sasse re-tweeted her experiences, parents and grandparents all over Nebraska wanted to learn what they could do to make their kids/grandkids "suffer" to this end.

Sasse extols another discipline which is on the wane in the U.S.—the habit of distinguishing between wants and needs. Noting that conspicuous consumption is weakening us at both personal and cultural levels, he urges parents to cultivate this discipline in their children and emerging adults (and adults themselves) to embrace it. The person who is free of the compulsion to constantly consume is liberated, having more time and energy to invest in other pursuits and relationships. When members of the younger generation are educated to prize work over money and view work not just as a means to a certain standard of living but as "an offering up of [their] talents for the service of others," they will realize the dignity of work that gives true satisfaction to their lives (155).

Becoming less dominated by a consumeristic mentality is facilitated by the next step Sasse recommends: travel and travel light. He eschews tourism in favor of meaningful encounters in cultures different from our own, particularly less affluent ones. Such encounters enable us to gain perspective on our lifestyle and ponder which of our commitments are beneficial and which are detrimental to the development of our humanity. Sasse emphasizes that the useful kind of travel for maturation entails work and requires exiting one's comfort zone, whether it be communicating in another language, eating new foods, or adjusting to different customs. The real traveler (in contrast to the tourist) is challenged to think more deeply about life and consider which ways of living are more correspondent to the truth, beauty and goodness that the human heart desires.

The final life-long discipline Sasse encourages on the road to maturity is reading deeply from

great books. This habit not only expands our knowledge of various subjects, but introduces us to other viewpoints, thus broadening our mental horizons. In a sense, this type of reading can be another vehicle of "travel" to other places, times, and cultures. To this end, Sasse urges that each person "build a bookshelf" of five feet of meaningful books which should be regularly reevaluated for their merit. The building of this bookshelf should be a lifelong work in progress. Parents can start creating a bookshelf for a child at birth, constantly refurbishing its contents as the child grows. But by his early teens, he should be making some of the book selections and increasingly taking ownership of the project as he reaches his late teens. A major cultural change is necessary; the average American's daily reading time of nineteen minutes is not close to adequate to a truly human life which will not succumb to the tyranny of the dominant mentality.

The Vanishing American Adult provides a fascinating, insightful overview of how our culture arrived at many of the current obstacles to successfully achieving adulthood. The book's biggest weakness is its under-emphasis of the pervasive effects of technology in the current coming of age crisis. Just three pages document the negative effects of more screen time. While Sasse comments on the staggering loss of time, citing a number of statistics (among them that men with less than a four-year degree spend 75% of their leisure time playing video games!), he does not explicitly connect the compulsive screen behavior of vast segments of American youth and emerging adults to the lack of agency he so decries in the book. This behavior is much more than dreadfully unproductive; it rewires the brains of youth and emerging adults, rendering them passive, more susceptible to anxiety and depression, and less engaged in fruitful relationships with others and with reality. Sasse does point the reader to Neil Postman's two seminal works on the effects of media on American culture: *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Postman attributes the disappearance of childhood to the predominance of electronic media (first television as a "total disclosure medium"[1] and, later, many other technological devices) which rob children of their innocence, "adultifying" children. Simultaneously, adults no longer possess a clear understanding of the attributes and the dignity of adulthood and do not help the young transition into it biologically, socially or morally. Postman observes,

> Everywhere one looks, the behavior, language, attitudes, and desires—even the physical appearance—of adults and children are becoming increasingly indistinguishable…Without a clear concept of what it means to be an adult, [there can] be no clear concept of what it means to be a child. (51)

Other than this deficiency, Sasse's book is so accurate in its assessments that a large percentage of American emerging adults would acknowledge that his portrayal realistically captures their lives and the handicaps they must overcome to reach adulthood. Sasse does not just lament or engage in hand-wringing over the alarming state of affairs; instead, he proposes a series of intelligent and necessary steps to extricate our culture from its present morass.

Melanie Danner lives on a hobby farm in the Maryland countryside with her husband, children, flock of sheep and paddling of ducks.

[1] A "total disclosure medium" is one that reveals things that were formerly taboo to whomever happens to be watching. Things kept from children in previous generations, especially sex, are no longer guarded. These things previously required literacy and the ability to navigate written materials.

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

Why You Won't Grow Up At College

CAITLIN DWYER

Greg and Jonathan Haidt Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

The university is a key institution in our society, helping the young navigate their transition to adulthood. From its inception, the university has striven to devote itself to the "cause of truth" to "enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity" (*Ex Corde Ecclesia*, 4, 5). Because of this unique mission, college campuses have often found themselves at the heart of fiery debates regarding speech and academic freedom as individuals and groups have argued over how universities must live out their commitments to the pursuit of truth and education of the person.

Thus, while the existence of turmoil at universities is nothing new, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that the *nature* of these controversies has changed over the last few years in a way that reflects unique and serious challenges facing today's university students. Lukianoff, a constitutional lawyer serving as president and CEO of the Foundation of Individual Rights in Education and Haidt, a psychologist on faculty at New York University's Stern School of Business, identified some of these trends in a popular 2015 article in *The Atlantic*. In light of new developments on university campuses that followed the publishing of the article, Lukianoff and Haidt expanded their arguments in *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. Their book intends to be a warning to parents, universities and society in general to stop promoting the three "Great Untruths" if we wish to help form our children into competent adults capable of thinking, dialoguing, and sustaining a democracy.

The book opens with an allegory narrating the authors' supposed voyage to Greece to visit "Misoponos," the modern-day oracle of an ancient god of stupidity referenced by Aristophanes. Misoponos personifies the common assumptions prevalent in parenting and education today which contradict ancient wisdom. He delivers the aforementioned "Great Untruths" of our time: (1) The Untruth of Fragility, (2) The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning, and (3) The Untruth of Us Versus Them. The authors go on to explain the genesis of each of

these "untruths" and the negative effects they have had on the development of young adults, particularly "iGen" (short for "internet Generation"—those born after 1995 who grew up with the internet) whose arrival on college campuses has coincided with the emergence of new and alarming trends.

The Untruth of Fragility encapsulates the idea that stress damages a person and, as such, parents and educators should seek to protect children under their care as much as possible. The problem with this idea, the authors contend, is that people are actually "antifragile." In essence, like our immune systems, children "*require* stressors and challenges in order to learn, adapt, and grow. Systems that are antifragile become rigid, weak, and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to respond vigorously" (23). Overprotection sets up a vicious cycle: parents and educators see stress as damaging and thus protect their charges from adversity. If we never face adversity, we never get the chance to *overcome* adversity. And without the experience of overcoming adversity, we begin to question our *ability* to overcome adversity. Thus we seek *more protection* from authority figures. And the cycle repeats.

The authors argue that this idea is the heart of the growth of a culture of "safetyism" on college campuses which manifests itself in the trends of speaker disinvitation, requests for "safe spaces," "trigger warnings," and the expansion of the definition of "violence" to include speech. Rather than seeking to confront and dispute ideas through rational debate, students seek to avoid "dangerous" ideas through the help of university bureaucracy. Lukianoff and Haidt argue that, as a result, students are developing a "moral dependency" on third-parties to mediate their problems and are consequently less equipped to deal with the inevitable challenges that life will bring. I have seen first-hand this lack of self-efficacy and grit as a parent and a professor.

The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning captures the prevalent idea that we should always trust our feelings. While this approach is seemingly innocuous, further reflection reveals that our emotions are often inconsistent with reality. I might fear that I am in danger when I am not. I can feel like someone does not like me, when she does. The most prevalent form of modern psychological therapy—cognitive behavioral therapy—is based on the premise that many of us engage in distorted patterns of thinking, like catastrophizing or overgeneralizing, and that correcting these will lead to decreased anxiety.

Lukianoff and Haidt argue that certain practices on campuses *encourage* cognitive distortions (which lead to greater anxiety) rather than correcting them. One such practice is training students to recognize "microaggressions," these being "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative...slights or insults" toward marginalized groups (40, quoting Derald Wing Sue at Columbia University). The issue with this training, the authors suggest, is not in encouraging people to recognize and avoid insensitive comments that they might be making—this would be a good thing. The problem is the inclusion of the word "unintentional": what constitutes aggression is now defined "*entirely in terms of the listener's interpretation*" (40, authors' emphasis). This encourages students to interpret what may be a misunderstanding or an insensitive comment (that could be corrected charitably) as acts of violence worthy of retaliation.

This has stifled dialogue on campuses where students (as well as faculty and staff) fear being "called out" and deemed offensive bigots by their peers on social media. As later chapters describe, this does actually happen and, in some cases, has lead to investigation, suspension, and termination. Rational argument for a position can now be construed as a personal attack on a listener. I have witnessed this conversation-cooling effect in my own classrooms, for

example, during discussions about "hot button issues' in my theology courses.

The authors also link this trend to the uptick in "disinvitation events" during which students protest to prevent a speaking event from happening because the content of the speech is considered "violent" (provoking subjective feelings of harm, therefore objectively harmful). In the extreme, protestors have resorted to significant physical violence, as was the case in the "Milo Riot" at UC Berkeley on February 1, 2017.

This trend has been compounded by the Untruth of Us vs.Them which describes the idea that people engage in increasingly dichotomous thinking about others. Rather than focusing on our common humanity, the authors contend, we tend to form identities around common enemies that need to be defeated. The authors trace the roots of this thinking to increased political polarization and a loss of viewpoint diversity in universities (left-leaning professors outnumber right-leaning scholars by as many as seventeen to one in certain disciplines) which leaves institutions prone to "groupthink" and "witch hunts" targeting heterodox voices.

While they point out that this trend is present on both ends of the political spectrum, dichotomous thinking and action on the left is in part fueled by the continued embrace of Marxist ideology. Thinkers like Herbert Marcuse apply the Marxist power paradigm to "privileged" and "oppressed" groups along the lines of race, class, and gender with the end goal being a "reversal of power" rather than "equality." In the words of Marcuse: "liberation of the Damned of the Earth presupposes suppression not only of their old but also their new masters'" (66, quoting Marcuse). Such thinking skews the view of "justice" which many young people so badly long for.

Lukianoff and Haidt assert that the Great Untruths have created an environment antithetical to realizing the aims of a university. The freedom to experience the "joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth in every field of knowledge" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1) is increasingly diminished for students and faculty alike, as they walk on eggshells seeking to avoid career-ending controversy. And the disastrous result is a generation of young people ill-equipped to face adulthood. The authors end on a positive note, however, offering advice on how to remedy the presented issues through a variety of ways: for example, encouraging free play in young children—giving them opportunities to assess risk and mediate disputes without the aid of adults, limiting screen time (particularly social media) in the early years, and improving free speech protections on campuses at the university level.

The limitation of *Coddling* is that it paints an incomplete picture of the problems facing university students today. While paranoid, helicopter parenting, social media excesses, and university bureaucracy may cause or contribute to anxiety and the need for greater protection, so can broken families, a rampant hookup culture, binge drinking, prescription drug abuse, debt concerns, real struggles to develop a strong sense of identity and purpose, and the loss of faith. The advice section does not address any of these issues. Parts of the book seem to imply that a deeper commitment to academic freedom at an institutional level and cognitive behavioral therapy on a personal level would eradicate many of the problems facing universities; this strikes me as a bit naïve. Further, the book offers limited concepts of truth, freedom, justice, and happiness. Truth is conceived of primarily in terms of data and facts, freedom is indifferent to the Good, justice is merely fairness, and happiness is primarily good mental health.

That critique aside, when taken not as a macroanalysis of all things that ail universities, but as the insight of two men within their respective fields of constitutional law and psychology, *Coddling* offers some fascinating insights into the troubling events transpiring on university

campuses and some thoughtful suggestions regarding where to go from here. It provides powerful food for thought for university faculty, staff, students, and any parent who desires to prepare their child for the road ahead.

Perhaps Lukianoff and Haidt's work can help cease the current uncivil discourse and redirect universities toward their true task, so aptly described by St. John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University*:

> It is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of [his] own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are…

Equipped with the capacity to know, love and argue for the truth, young people will be ready for adulthood.

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Acedia: Darkness at Noon

DAWN EDEN GOLDSTEIN

Jean-Charles Nault, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015).

R.J. Snell, *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

For a brief moment in the spring of 2015, even the most eagle-eyed literary consumers were liable to think they had double vision. Two books, published within weeks of each other, both argued that acedia—defined by St. Thomas Aquinas as encompassing sorrow about spiritual good and weariness with activity[1]—was a defining vice of our disenchanted and hyper-technologized age. However, a closer examination of the similarly-themed volumes—*The Noonday Devil* by French theologian Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., and *Acedia and Its Discontents* by American philosophy professor R.J. Snell (then of Eastern University, now of the Witherspoon Institute)—reveals significant differences between them.

Of the two studies, *The Noonday Devil* is by far the most comprehensive—which is unsurprising given that acedia was the topic of Nault's doctoral dissertation at the Pontifical Lateran University (published in 2004 as *La saveur de Dieu*). The book also has the distinction of being one of the more accessible high-level theological works of recent memory. Nault based its style not on his dissertation itself but rather upon the distillation of his research that he gave via conferences to his brother monks at the Abbey of Saint-Wandrille, where he is abbot.

The text of *The Noonday Devil* is neatly divided between two initial chapters outlining the development of theological thought on acedia and two subsequent chapters providing practical advice for combating it. Nault's historical analysis follows a *ressourcement* approach that will be familiar to readers of Servais Pinckaers. He begins with an extensive treatment of acedia in Evagrius and other Desert Fathers, passing briefly through other Church Fathers and Hugh of St. Victor before commencing a chapter-length account of Thomas Aquinas's teachings on the vice.

Acedia, Nault explains, is a concern in the Desert Fathers' writings because it "drives the monk

to leave his cell and to flee intimacy with God, so as to seek here and there some compensation for the austere way of life to which he felt called by God" (11). Nault's analysis of Evagrius provides a core insight, one which he will revisit as the book's focus turns from theory to praxis: acedia for Evagrius comprises two complementary dimensions, the temporal and the spatial. Temporally, the acedia sufferer feels as though "the passage of time is never ending." This sense of ennui can affect the body, bringing about "a certain physical weakness ..., accompanied by the potential for a psychological disturbance." Spatially, the acedia sufferer has "the impression of being hemmed in, of being stifled" (30).

Before developing the implications of Evagrius's account, Nault switches gears for his Thomistic analysis. Thomas follows Gregory the Great in identifying acedia as "sorrow for spiritual good." "And yet," Nault adds, "in an altogether new insight, he describes it as the first sin against the joy that springs from charity. He makes it the sin against the *gaudium de caritate*" (62).

The remedy for acedia is, therefore, that which will restore charity in the sufferer's soul. Nault, by means of a remarkably concise (and unmistakably Pinckaersian) account of the outlines of Aquinas's moral theology—the *exitus-reditus* structure of the *Summa,* the nature of virtue as a *habitus,* true vs. false freedom, and the ultimate goal of beatitude—identifies that remedy as nothing less than the Incarnation: "Christ restores to us the hope of being able to participate fully in the divine life" (86).

Given that acedia held such interest for theologians of the Church's first millennium and beyond, how is it that the very word faded into obscurity? Nault writes that acedia disappeared from manuals of theology at a time when, under the commentarial tradition set forth by Cajetan, Aquinas's incarnational synthesis gave way to fragmentation:

> If you take the two definitions of acedia that we mentioned in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the "sadness about spiritual good" and "disgust with action," and you abandon the unified concept of Christian action in which the Holy Spirit and Christ are at the very heart of this action, you will see that sadness becomes [characterized as] "melancholy" and the paralysis of action becomes "sloth." (105)

At the start of the second half of *The Noonday Devil,* Nault notes that he is not so interested in "[analyzing] the causes of the rather disillusioned outlook of our modern world" as in proposing "the current relevance of acedia *in the life of a Christian*" (107–08, emphasis in original). By understanding the nature of acedia, the Christian may guard against temptations toward nihilism and despair.

As Nault returns to discussing the spatial and temporal dimensions of acedia, he explores various means of combating the vice through an incarnational perspective. Of these, the most effective — and deserving of a lengthier treatment than that which Nault provides—is that of the liturgical anamnesis. "The Eucharist," Nault observes, "is what gives temporality its ultimate meaning, since it takes up the past, the present, and the future: love never passes away (1 Cor 13:8)" (142).

Although R.J. Snell includes the word "acedia" in his book's title, within his text he uses the terms "acedia" and "sloth" interchangeably; generally, he prefers "sloth." The definition he gives of sloth in *Acedia and Its Discontents* will be familiar to Nault's readers, being drawn from Evagrius, Aquinas, and even an article penned by Nault.[2] Of particular interest for his argument is Nault's insight that acedia, in fueling "the desire to save one's 'freedom' at any

price," leads ironically to "a deeper enslavement to the 'self.'"

Acedia and Its Discontents lacks the cohesiveness of *The Noonday Devil*; it reads more like a compilation of articles than an integrated study. For example, nearly midway through the study, Snell—critiquing contemporary culture's "disenchanted, unencumbered world of freedom"—pauses to introduce his book's theme, as though he were mentioning it for the first time: "Christian tradition provides a fascinating account of a particular vice, *acedia*, usually translated as sloth, which seems to capture with particular aptness the spiritual conditions of our own age" (61).

Snell also frequently drops in quotations from other authors without introducing the speaker, to such a degree that, at times, his prose reads like mosaic writing. This practice, which has become increasingly common in academic literature, creates inconveniences for the reader, who must continually turn to the footnotes to learn whose words are being employed. It also makes it difficult for the reader to discern whether the author is drawing upon an outside source or is simply using scare quotes.

Technical quibbles aside, as a work that falls under the category of Christian philosophy rather than theology, *Acedia and Its Discontents* is in many ways a useful complement to Nault's magisterial volume. Snell draws out in more detail than Nault the effects of acedia evident in the radical individualism that characterizes much of contemporary Western culture. The ultimate answer, he writes, is living "a genuinely spiritual or supernatural life [that] is materialized in our work of culture making"; this "makes both us and the world more human, more perfected in our subjectivity" (119).

[1] *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 35, a. 1

[2] "Acedia: Enemy of Spiritual Joy," *Communio* 31 [Summer 2004]: 236–59.

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Adulthood vs. Modern "Adulting"

ALYSSA GRASINSKI

Kelly Williams Brown, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-up in 535 Easy(ish) Steps* (Grand Central Life & Style, 2018).

What does it mean to be an adult? For Kelly Williams Brown it "means treating others and yourself with decency and compassion, figuring out what needs to be done and then doing it with minimal fuss or self-pity." The author of *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-Up in 535 Easy (ish) Steps* offers wannabe adults tips–most of which are common sense, things prior generations had taken for granted in those of a certain age: such as making your bed in the morning or not putting tacos in your purse!

The author tries to relate to her audience, which, as it happens, means including a fair share of profanity and inappropriate examples. She builds a foundation of solidarity, much like you would in a friendship; instead of saying something like "I know everything already so now let me teach you," she says: "Hey, I struggle with this too, so I know how you feel."

Just as Brown is "there for us," she thinks the project of "adulting" in general is the perfect bonding agent for us millennials. When you see a mom struggling to get her children to behave in the grocery store, give her a sympathetic smile, the author suggests. When a coworker drops the files he was carrying and simultaneously spills his coffee, help him pick up the mess. It's easy to bond over the difficulty of adulthood because "we've been there."

Adding to the self-help, the author—not wishing to be taken for the tiger mother of adulting—doesn't want us to be so hard on ourselves. Speaking somewhat omnisciently, she declares that despite our imperfections and struggles, we are really doing better than we give ourselves credit for. "We all sense our own dysfunction so clearly." We forget to pay the water bill on time or go to bed yet another night with dishes in the sink—yet we often overlook all the areas where we do thrive. Readers who are feeling down are encouraged to remember this and stop making all those self-deprecating jokes. As for any real defects, just resolve to improve where improvement is needed. This appears to be an essential takeaway of the book.

But what *is* this thing we are supposed to get better at, the thing we're already doing pretty

well? The many skills of adulting are explored in categories such as: getting your mind right, domesticity, cooking, "faking it until you make it," getting a job, finances, maintenance, friendships and neighbors, love, difficult times, and families. Some tips are completely practical in nature, such as not skipping oil changes. Others are more personal. As for that advice, many things could be said about it, pro and con. There's the advice to "appreciate those who value you," for example. So far so good. But the reason for this—"because the world doesn't care about you"—doesn't take into account the Christian call to radical love, to go the extra mile with those who are less lovable, even those who don't love us in return. Then there is the advice that one's "significant other" not be one's best friend. Taken in the best sense, the suggestion is that spouses not close themselves off from other friends. Spousal love and friendship, of course, are not identical. Still, this perspective ignores the fact that marriage represents the deepest possible fulfillment of what began in friendship; even as it needs and is enriched by many friends.

Essentially, though, the problem with the book—and the whole "adulting" phenomenon—is the category itself. Perhaps we should distinguish "adulting" from "adulthood." The once universally recognized standard for adulthood was having reached the age of majority (18), having a job or profession, and/or getting married and having kids: with the accountability, responsibility, and sacrifice needed for those tasks. But the term "adulting" is a new word created by millennials. The Urban dictionary defines it thus: "to carry out one or more of the duties and responsibilities expected of fully developed individuals." This new verb suggests the idea that you can move in and out of adulthood, that is, you can "adult" without *being* one. Indeed, the very idea of adulting at one's pleasure, when one wants, is the exact opposite of what it means to *be* an adult. We should not miss the irony of the new adulting non-adults, namely that they seek independence, not wanting to be tied down by marriage—even a "relationship"—all the while being quite dependent on loans and parents, living in their basements eating pizza rolls from a microwave well into their 30s.

The culture of any given generation is a key determining factor in how its young turn out and grow up (or not). Millennials (and, presumably, Gen Z as well) are facing different challenges and realities than those faced by prior generations: the economy is different, the way this generation was raised is different, a college degree is more of an assumption, as is the corresponding debt. But the key difference for the young today is the lack of clarity about what an adult is. How much of the current crisis owes itself to the culture of divorce which destabilized for so many millennials one of the determining factors of real adulthood: openness to marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood? The fact that this book exists at all only hints at this, given that it offers millennials step-by-step direction for something that they would have otherwise received naturally within the context of an intact family.

It appears that there is now a more pronounced stage of life that occurs between adolescence and adulthood, a stage that combines the desirable elements of each (i.e., the benefits of adulthood with little or no responsibility). It involves the years as a student, entering and exiting jobs, dating, drinking, volunteering, and the famous backpacking tour across Europe. Those in this in-between stage are dealing with much more than a simple lack of real independence and accountability. Rather, they lack a goal, namely an irrevocable bond (marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood) that independence and accountability are meant to serve. It is the lack of a goal, that is the specific ingredient without which no amount of "adulting" could ever truly make one an adult.

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What Gamers Are Really After

KARL MACMILLAN

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (Crown, 2011).

It is so tempting simply to dismiss video games altogether. After all, even the most casual games take up time that could be better spent on something more valuable. More serious gamers can devote hours each day to playing, an investment of time that is hard for many to even begin to understand. I know of a software developer who voluntarily reduced his work week from 40 to 30 hours—with a corresponding pay cut—simply to devote more time to playing video games.

While many of us spend too much time on low value activities, there is not much else than substance abuse or compulsive gambling that compares to video games. Numerous articles and books have documented that potentially millions of young people are withdrawing from society —avoiding close relationships and dropping out of or underperforming in the workforce—because they devote most of their time to gaming. Even the most gluttonous binge-watching on Netflix or unhealthy obsession with golf has not generated a huge cohort of young people withdrawing from life.

This leads to the question of why. Why do people lose themselves to these games so completely? And similarly to other addictions, why are some people able to enjoy video games in moderation while some become completely trapped?

Ready Player One, a popular science fiction book by Ernest Cline, offers interesting insights into these questions. While it doesn't claim to be a serious, idea-driven book—it's more of a beach read—it touches on important topics from the perspective of someone immersed in video game culture. And that inside view is, I believe, immensely powerful. Cline doesn't seem to feel any urge to dismiss video games. Quite the contrary: much of *Ready Player One* is a celebration of video games. Surprisingly, though, the emotional heart of the book is a strong warning against losing oneself to gaming. This dichotomy within the book, the reveling in video games on one hand and fear of their potential harm to individuals and society on the other, allows Cline to offer insights into why people would be drawn to video games that would be hard to find in more purely critical works from outside of video game culture.

The book is set in a dystopian future where most of humanity spends its time in a shared virtual reality world called the OASIS which is part video game and part alternate reality. The main character of the book, Wade Watts, is a young, orphaned high-school senior trying to find his way in a world that has collapsed economically and socially. He is practically homeless and only has the slimmest support from extended family. He also checks all of the stereotypical boxes of a nerdy teenager ripe for transformation as part of a coming of age story: overweight, socially awkward, without fashionable clothes, and bullied by his peers in school.

Interestingly, the deeply traumatic life that Wade lives in the real world is described matter-of-factly and is accepted with a certain hopelessness. He deals with the problems in the real world, but without striving to change them. In many ways, the tragic real world is simply a distraction that must be dealt with before Wade can enter the OASIS.

The OASIS is where Wade actually lives. It's where, as a child, educational programs taught him to read, write, play, and socialize. It's where he attends high school and spends time watching movies and playing video games with his one true friend, another gamer. It's the internet, popular culture, and video games wrapped up in a shared virtual space that allows Wade and millions of others to escape the dreary real world. And for Wade, it's where he is actually able to find some amount of happiness.

The happiness that Wade finds isn't typically presented as coming solely from the video games themselves. While the OASIS, and video games in general, are presented as engrossing to the point of addictiveness, that's not their only appeal. They aren't a hard drug where one hit is enough to hook you for life. Instead, this virtual world meets a wide range of Wade's social and emotional needs.

For example, throughout the book Wade is presented as deeply committed to striving to be the best gamer that he can be. He methodically practices to gain new skills and hone existing skills. His approach to gaming is very much like that of a serious athlete or musician rather than someone simply playing games for fun. While gaining these skills gives Wade a sense of purpose and a feeling of accomplishment, they are also a way for him to gain social standing among his peers and—eventually—within society at large.

In the book, much of this focus on game-playing skills is in the context of the main driver of the plot: a game within the OASIS programmed by the creator of the world, James Halliday, and revealed upon his death. The winner of this game is set to receive all of Halliday's wealth as well as control of the OASIS. Given the singular importance of the OASIS in this future world, victory would reward the winner of the game with immense wealth and power.

While this particular motivator is, clearly, unique to the imagined world of the book, there are similarities to serious "real-life" gaming. Esports events, where teams and individuals play video games competitively, fill entire stadiums with viewers while millions at home watch live video streams. Twitch TV, an Amazon-owned internet service that allows gamers to broadcast themselves playing video games to be watched by others, has an average of 1.2 million viewers at all times of the day and night. Over 4 million unique gamers stream themselves playing each month and the top streamers can make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. Serious gamers can aspire to real-world success and recognition and, while few actually find that success, the mere possibility can, like with sports or music, drive people to take their efforts much more seriously.

For many who struggle to find a place and standing in the real world, the possibility of gaining importance in video games is enormously attractive. They can channel their disappointments and frustrations in the real world into becoming heroes in their virtual worlds. Wade

contemplates this explicitly at the height of his obsessive gaming:

> Then I paused and spent a moment staring at my [video gaming] rig. I'd been so proud of all this high-tech hardware when I'd first purchased it. But over the past few months, I'd come to see my rig for what it was: an elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist. Each component of my rig was a bar in the cell where I had willingly imprisoned myself.
>
> Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop culture-obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified videogame.
>
> But not in the OASIS. In there, I was the great Parzival. World-famous [video game player] and international celebrity. People asked for my autograph. I had a fan club.

While Wade contemplates achieving real fame, just being the best gamer in your peer group or within your online gaming community can be enormously motivating. It can let you be great in one part of your life, even when you are falling behind in others.

For Wade, the biggest source of happiness related to video games is that they help him find an end to his isolation, and this is where Cline presents his strongest admonitions. Within the book, the lives of Wade and Halliday, the creator of the OASIS, are often explicitly paralleled, particularly in their relationships. Wade is an orphan while Halliday is neglected and misunderstood by his parents. Neither is very successful in forming successful relationships in the real world, and they are both deeply lonely. Most importantly, both of them have two primary relationships: a close friend and a love interest, both of which they find through a shared interest in video games. It's in the characters' different handling of these relationships that Cline presents his warning.

The first description of these relationships comes from a passage discussing Halliday in his teenage years. In junior high, Halliday was fascinated by Dungeons & Dragons, though he did not have friends to play the game. In time, a classmate invited Halliday to attend one of the weekly D&D gaming sessions at his house where Halliday "was introduced to an entire group of 'mega geeks' just like himself. They immediately accepted him as one of their own, and for the first time in his life, James Halliday had a circle of friends."

While D&D is not a video but a "physical" game, this anecdote from Halliday's life does highlight the social potential of games. Video games can provide a shared activity with associated built-in social norms that can make socializing easier, especially for those that struggle to find a place. This can be as simple as two people enjoying the same game and playing competitively, mimicking chess players of the past. As often as not, though, today's video games are explicitly social with features that share much in common with social networks. Sometimes the social aspect is secondary to the gameplay, such as online services that match players that want to play games competitively, but often it is a key element, with players required to form teams, for a single game or, sometimes, for months or years.

For those outside who do not play video games, it's tempting to dismiss these interactions. But

this is, I believe, a mistake. It's possible to form real and lasting relationships online and through video games. These relationships can have depth and power. Most importantly, for some, these relationships can be the only opportunity that they have, or feel like they have, to find friendship.

The question becomes, however, whether these online interactions are enough. While they may be real relationships, are they able to provide enough true intimacy to feed our desires for closeness and community? Cline explores this extensively through Wade's two closest relationships: his friend Aech and his love interest Art3mis. Take this online chat between Art3mis and Wade (using his online name Parzival):

> Art3mis: But you still don't really know anything about me. Or my real personality.
>
> Parzival: This is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here.
>
> Art3mis: I beg to differ. Everything about our online personas is filtered through our avatars, which allows us to control how we look and sound to others. The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it.
>
> Parzival: So, IRL [in real life], you're nothing like the person I met that night in the tomb?
>
> Art3mis: That was just one side of me. The side I chose to show you.

This notion that online interactions allow us to control how we present ourselves is a key theme to the book. Both Aech and Art3mis turn out to be very different from how they present themselves within the OASIS. Eventually, Wade is forced to meet both characters in reality and, subsequently, they must all accept a loss of control over their self-presentation.

What's especially interesting is that Cline makes no attempt to argue that online interactions are superior to in-person interactions at a fundamental level. Quite the opposite. As characters meet in person, they are forced to be more vulnerable, genuine, and open. Their physical meeting deepens their relationships. The loss of control and forced exposure of more of their real selves is presented as completely positive.

The vulnerability that comes from leaving the confines of the in-game interactions is ultimately what differentiates Wade and Halliday. Halliday is never able to pursue his love interest, because he never gains the courage to build a friendship beyond their shared gaming. He never even addresses her by her real name, preferring to use the name of her in-game character. Eventually, she marries his friend and the pain of this loss causes him to withdraw from both of them and, eventually, all relationships into the online world that he created.

He does come to regret this withdrawal, however. At the climax of the book, a simulated version of Halliday offers Wade some advice as he hands over full control of the OASIS to him:

> "Listen," he [Halliday] said, adopting a confidential tone. "I need to tell you one last thing before I go. Something I didn't figure out for myself until it was already too late.…"I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real

world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real. Do you understand?"

In the book, Wade takes this advice to heart and pursues his relationships with Aech and Art3mis outside of the OASIS. He confronts his fears, makes himself vulnerable, and begins to find happiness in reality. Hopefully some of the millions that are trapped in video games today can do the same.

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