
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 loveable, 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.
Alyssa Grasinski is a wife, mother of one, and recent law grad from Indiana University Maurer School of Law who lives in the Washington, D.C. metro area.

Keep reading! Click here to read our next article, What Gamers Are Really After