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How to Grow in Love: Through Adolescence to Adulthood

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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*: “Men 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 characteristics 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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