

Coming of Age in a

SOMETIME between the day I received my driver's license and the day I graduated from high school, when I could not remember the third line of my favorite rope-skipping rhyme but knew the value of sin x , I slipped into the nebulous existence of a young adult. I recall no tribal rites initiating me as an adult into society; nor can I bring to mind a critical moment that accompanied this "coming of age."

Turning to society for reassurance as to my position, I found that inconsistencies exist at a great many levels other than the personal. Legal aspects of maturity are contradictory, adult attitudes diverse, and society as a whole unsure as to its current approach to youth. It would appear upon closer inspection that this time of pseudo-adulthood is evidence of a current trend toward lowering age restrictions, increasing the responsibilities of young adults, and recognizing the youth's place as a productive citizen.

A change of attitude concerning age must manifest itself in a modification of our country's laws and, perhaps more important, a modification of some of the ideas concerning young adults. Familiar to all are the recently lowered voting age, and additional legislation concerning the right to marry, wills, and jury duty. It is interesting, however, that from statute to statute and state to state, there is not one, but several ages that

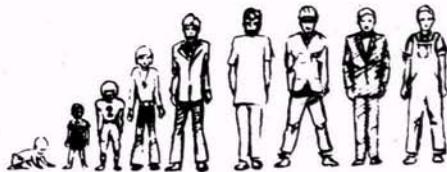
are linked to maturity and responsibility. Legal aspects alone are not sufficient to account for the apparent uncertainty as to when one becomes an adult.

To add to the confusion, the tremendous variety of available careers has young people entering the job market at different ages, assuming adult roles at different times. The contemporary legislation only reflects the changing feeling of society; it is a signpost for an entire shift in attitude.

The Working World Ethic

Some of the older attitudes seem to have their basis in pre-Industrial Revolution times. Prior to the advent of technocracy, a series of historical periods each brought to the maturing youth its own mode of child-to-adult transition. Characteristically, this change occurred at an age that would appear young by today's standards. Especially noticeable in the agrarian work force, youths assumed adult work loads and accompanying responsibilities at ages commensurate with today's childhood and adolescence.

Perhaps more familiar are the accounts of the aristocracies, wherein young persons assumed thrones, married, and conspired in even the most adult intrigues. For the most part a child joined society in the same position as his parents before him. The process



Work-Oriented World

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was necessary for survival of the society; for the youth to be confronted with even a semblance of choice would have been incongruous with the feudal system. Maturation, it would seem, was not an uncertain procedure when one was thrown into adult life with no recourse. This sink or swim growth process might have continued indefinitely if it were not for the radical changes that accompanied the Industrial Revolution.

With the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society, a tremendous, diversified job market was created. No longer was it mandatory that the child follow the parent's example for the community to function. At first it appeared that the old idea of instant adulthood could function in the industrial world. Children worked in the factories, the mines, the mills: the apparatus of a new age. There appeared to be little difference in being thrust from childhood into a field, a throne room, or a factory.

What had not been accounted for was education. Along with millions of unskilled jobs, the new society demanded intellect and training. The educational demands on the people increased as technology grew and living became more complex. More and more children attended school for a greater length of time. Eventually, the idea of child labor was replaced with public schooling and education for youths. A compulsory school

attendance age was established. Education enabled individuals to obtain more favorable positions in the working world, even if it meant entering the job market a little later than other persons.

The attitude of sink or swim employment could not apply in these modern situations. The working world ethic, for example, was no longer sufficient to explain maturity. It had been felt by many that the concept of an adult was tied to the idea of ownership. Property signified maturity. Employment heralded the beginning of adulthood and indicated the individual's readiness to contribute to society in a productive position. Unfortunately, the working world ethic proved to be difficult for those remaining in school and continuing their education. And today, those individuals form a large segment of the adult population.

"Coming of Age" and Education

The problem is that, unless one enters the working world and is accepted under the working world ethic, one hardly knows when one is "grown up." It is bothersome, to say the least, to be unsure as to whether society accepts you as an adult. Yet this is the plight

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of many students. While their peers function in the technocracy as laborers and are accepted, students seem to be penalized for their temporary resistance to the lure of the industrial job market. Today we see an encouraging number of young people staying in school, and yet no positive deviation from the traditional "I work, therefore I am" ethic.

In facing this fact, the young person must come to grips with his own concept of maturity. If the realities of the old world are not adequate for the modern student, he must substitute new ones. It would appear that education is yet increasing in importance, and that students of sorts will be with us far into the future. How is society to deal with youths who prefer to brush past the "make it or break it" economic world and find maturity in education?

The answer does not seem to be ignoring students and educators entirely. In varying degrees, this seems to be what has been occurring for many years. An individual involved in education cannot be expected, however, to live a rewarding life detached from the industrial society when he provides an integral part of the working system.

Lowering age restrictions in legal matters appears to be part of the answer. The recognition that young people who are 18, whether attending school, in the armed services, or working, have the right to vote is an important step toward recognizing maturity.

Attitude again takes the primary position in requiring change. Until a modification in feeling occurs toward young people, especially students, it will be tremendously difficult for the "coming of age" process to be without questions and uncertainties. There must be a consistent feeling about what constitutes a mature adult. Physiological explanations are insufficient, as are legal definitions that contradict one another, and society's traditional explanations.

Toward Maturity

To function in society as an adult . . . to live with responsibilities . . . to balance desire with necessity . . . to grow with living . . . to keep abreast of the times no matter what station you choose or what education you elect to obtain . . . these are some of the realities that seem so much more important than employment, property, age, or ownership.

With education constantly increasing in importance, a greater number of persons will bypass the traditional ritual of coming of age in their first employment experience, and will mature in a learning situation. Actually, the nebulous feeling I experience as a young adult is a hopeful sign that for some students the traditional attitudes are fading. And if in the future maturing becomes commensurate with learning, society may adopt a more consistent working definition of the mature adult. □

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