

# A Brief History of Youth and Age

Richard E. Barbieri

*"We have created conditions in which adolescent rebellion becomes a lifelong condition. It is not youth, but maturity whose history has entered a new and alarming phase."*

"When I was sixteen," said Mark Twain, "I thought my father was a damn fool. When I became twenty-one I was amazed to find how much he had learned in five years." The history of youth forever chronicles a movement from childish acceptance through adolescent rebellion to maturer evaluation of their elders' wisdom. The young endlessly test, question, reject, or finally come to terms with, their teachers' authority and belief.

The methods of questioning and the grounds for rejection differ from era to era. In 1968, students rejected their teachers' doctrines as irrelevant to an era of revolutionary struggle; 1978's students probably object to the same teaching as hopelessly idealistic and useless toward finding a job in a stagnant economy. But rebellion continues, and adults in all ages since the Egyptians

have felt that their young were the most impertinent in history.

Is our age really different from others? The question is almost impossible to answer quantitatively. Through the lenses of pride and nostalgia, we naturally see a sorry decline from the classrooms of our own youth. But reading of the town-gown battles at medieval universities, or of teachers beaten and imprisoned by schoolboys in eighteenth-century Eton, one may well wonder if anything has changed.

## Today's Young Are Different

Yet, if all younger generations undergo phases of rebellion and reconciliation, there seems something qualitatively different about the questioning of authority found among today's youth. Granted that every generation has its lost souls—Fitzgerald's twenties, Kerouac's fifties—the lost of the sixties and seventies seem more hopeless and less likely to be found than those of the past.

What accounts for this difference, which is discernible in every class where ethics, aesthetics,



*"Young people need to rebel, and they need to progress from childish gullibility, through disillusionment and doubt, to adult discernment." Photo: Michael D. Sullivan*

or social issues are discussed? Why did my students find the rhetoric of Jimmy Carter or George McGovern more offensive than that of Richard Nixon, despising the formers' claim to a morality they felt no politician could possess? Why do they spend several years reading the most moral literature we can give them, only to conclude that English is about stringing words together prettily, and that a novel advocating anti-Semitism and genocide for example, would be just as valuable literature as one by Chaim Potok, "if it was a good novel"?

There are as many answers to this question as answerers. Once we blamed the bomb. Children living under the constant threat of annihilation, we said, could not help but be cynics about their elders and the future. But bomb shelters are out of style, and today's teenagers don't believe they're on the eve of destruction. Then it was Vietnam; a cause for cynicism and distrust if ever there was one. But our students have almost forgotten the war that was flickering out as their adolescence began. Yet their cynicism persists. Perhaps it's Watergate; or television, with its constant huckstering for toys that break

the day they're bought and heroes who need six million operations and six million dollar salaries. And in the wings there must still lurk someone who thinks it's all Dr. Spock's fault.

None of these villains are unique to our time. All young people have grown up in a world too full of liars, cheats, hypocrites, pointless wars, and immediate dangers to life. Indeed our young certainly consider themselves, and probably are, more likely to live to a ripe, free, and fairly prosperous old age than most of their predecessors. If there is something different about growing up today, the fault, I fear, is not in our children, but in ourselves, in our failure to play age's part in the old debate, and our joining the opposition.

### **The Young Need To Rebel**

Young people need to rebel, and they need to progress from childish gullibility, through disillusionment and doubt, to adult discernment. To do this they need standards to rebel against and adult judgments to test, accept, or reject. But we, and here I mean especially the educated, no longer give them such standards and judgments,

and our failure to do so is a cause of their condition.

Is this another diatribe against the permissive society by a closet anti-Spockian? Not at all; or at least not first of all. For I am less concerned that we do not in practice set limits for the young than that we no longer believe in the realities upon which such limits depend. The intellectual doctrines we hold too often assert that convictions are simply prejudices, and that eternal questioning is not just the price, but the substance, of wisdom. The result is not only that our students have to go further than in the past to shock us by their iconoclasm, but that we give them nowhere to return after they have gone too far.

As educators we have surrendered not only the conviction that *we* have the truth and students must come to us for it (a belief better abandoned, or at least modified), but the hope that there *is* any truth to be discovered by thought, communicated in words, or shared between people. The reasons for this retreat lie in the intellectual history of the past hundred years,

and are well documented in such books as E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* and Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, both of which should be required reading for every teacher seeking to understand how we've arrived at our present intellectual situation.

It may seem odd to suggest that we go back a hundred years to explain today's youth, or to claim that the opinions of philosophers and natural and social scientists have had a major influence on the "literacy crisis" generation. Yet consider how many concepts, abstruse and revolutionary in their day, are now common knowledge. Most children know that there are nine planets revolving around the sun, that man is a relative of the ape, and that government depends upon popular consent, without ever having studied astronomy, biology, or political science, or even hearing of Copernicus, Darwin, or Rousseau. As C. S. Lewis pointed out in *The Abolition of Man*, even school texts on essay writing can spread philosophical theories of value judgment deriving from Locke, Hume, and Russell.

*"We had best begin . . . propounding our moral and intellectual beliefs with confidence . . . so that our students . . . will at least have had the experience of straining their minds to prove or disprove an idea."* Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.



## The Role of Rebellion and Doubt

My point is that we teachers have absorbed several notions from thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that we communicate through precept and practice to our students as the accepted world-view of their society. These notions, which may be subsumed under the headings relativism and reductionism, define questioning, refusal to accept authority, and disbelief in permanent standards of judgment, as the proper views of educated people. They see all values as culturally derived and evolving, and all abstract notions like justice and beauty as elaborations of more basic economic, social, and physical circumstances which alone constitute "reality." They therefore tell students that the classic adolescent postures of rebellion and doubt are not temporary stages of development, but the bases of maturity and wisdom.

Therefore, when a student asserts that what is true for him or her in politics, ethics, or aesthetics is the only truth there is, then no one has the right to tell him or her what to do with his or her life, or that no amount of argument can ever persuade him or her to change his or her opinions, we cannot argue, because at heart we agree, or at least—which is rather a different thing—we think it intellectually irresponsible *not* to agree. Although we may feel quite certain that Shakespeare was a great writer, that Hitler was a bad man, or that teenage drinking, promiscuity, and anti-intellectualism are wrong, we feel bound to acknowledge that these views are the results of our conditioning, are not susceptible of proof, and are not even statements about the things themselves, but only about our current emotions. Nothing could more cripple our efforts to share our convictions with our students, or their need to be guided or informed by us.

Insofar as these doctrines have led to a growth of tolerance and decline of authoritarianism, they have been of great benefit. No one who remembers teachers of the "This is true because I say so: write it down" school would wish a return to education that viewed students as empty vessels whose sole purpose was to receive the vintage wisdom of their teachers.

But one of the most obvious lessons of modern life is that too much of a good thing can be

bad. Just as indiscriminately administered antibiotics end by weakening the patient and strengthening the bacteria they at first destroyed, so an overdose of skepticism and doubt ends by leaving our students so devoid of convictions that they fall prey to the first epidemic of belief, however implausible, that catches them with their resistance down, or else incapacitates them permanently for belief of any sort. Scientology, "Moonyism," fads in extreme politics, and the like seem to me the result of raising young people so filled with doubt about all beliefs that they cannot judge between a sound doctrine and a foolish one and adopt any faith, however bizarre, that promises finally to explain everything to them and relieve the burden of doubt.

A balance between adults and young people has been lost. Instead of letting our students test their beliefs against ours, giving them an obstacle against which to push to develop their mental muscles, we provide them with a spongy medium that they cannot grasp, and through which they pass without ever developing the strength needed for responsible rational judgment. We have created conditions in which adolescent rebellion becomes a lifelong condition. It is not youth, but maturity whose history has entered a new and alarming phase. Though I expect it will take us at least as long to emerge as it did to enter this phase, we had best begin by returning to our old role, propounding our moral and intellectual beliefs with confidence, so that our students, whether they accept, reject, or modify our views, will at least have had the experience of straining their minds to prove or disprove an idea, and of seeing that adult reasoning consists of affirming as much as it does of denying. [7]



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