

OUR INFANTILE PARALYSIS

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“Unless ye be as great big children you shall nowise enter into the kingdom of our modern world. Unless ye remain at a mental stage of perpetual adolescence ye shall be cast into outer darkness where there is nothing but maladjustment and neuroses.” These are the basic texts we live by, and *Magna Carta* of the education we give our young.

The difference between a child and a man lies in two things: in what it wants and how it wants it; in its interests and its activities. The child is parasitical, acquisitive, wanting to take to itself (to the extent of stuffing it in its mouth) everything it sees. The man is independent, constructive, prepared to give as well as take. When we become men, the Apostle says, we put away childish things. Yet a glance around us shows that we cling to them, and by our example encourage our children to do so. We make a show of infantile eagerness to see a game, and express exaggerated disappointment when we fail to find tickets. Instead, we should be training the children—in whom such eagerness is comprehensible—to curb such manifestations of ecstasy and of regret. Our living habits are those of babyhood. We eat soft food and we drink soft drinks. Milk, the proper food of infants, has become the staple diet of an aging nation, and what was once called the staff of life has become high-grade blotting paper which could sustain no one for very long. Our teeth never encounter a crust and rarely do we bite a fruit, preferring the baby way of drinking it from a bottle. We seldom walk more than a few blocks and are careful to give the children carfare lest they tire their little legs. We ply these babes with pocket money so they may never have to resist the desire for a sweet, for “we know how hard it is not to have what you want,” and we do not appear to know how good it is not to have what you want. We think we are doing our duty by our descendants when we teach them the means to acquire what they want instead of teaching them not to want it. (What far-reaching results such a teaching would have on our industry! For we are indeed a nation of shoppers.) We think that teaching them to be successes, in games, in sex, in business, is all the education they require to be fully equipped grown-ups. We are actually only teaching them new games to play with, fresh toys when the teddy bears and trains get tiresome. Young people are encouraged to be creative with clay and cloth, with paint and plasticine, with every material except the one always available and always free of charge, their own natures. They are given the tools of any craft they have in mind to try their hand at it, but they are not given the instruments of thought their minds could usefully handle. They are thrown a few haphazard ideas to play with which make no more sense of the cosmos than worn out bits of a jigsaw puzzle. So in discouragement they turn their minds away from its God-given purpose of thought and busy their brains with problems of sport or moneymaking.

We encourage our young to live in a world of make-believe because we feel that it is safer than the world of reality. We systematically teach children to live for play and are surprised when in times of crisis they act like children. It is true that “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” but it is equally true that “all play and no work makes John a dumb jerk.” If sports were just a youthful passion, we could willingly condone it, but when we see them become the favorite topic of middle-aged professors and elderly statesmen, when we hear ministers of religion discussing the merits of a half-back or the subtleties of a pitcher, we recognize that theirs is no temporary intrusion into the world of childhood, but a frantic flight from facts.

This is comprehensible enough. The twentieth century has many facts it were pleasanter not to face. We have taken refuge from the things we cannot entirely forget, the wars and the depressions, the concentration camps and torture chambers, in the make-believe world of sports. At a time when honor stands dishonored and fair play is an antiquated notion, we gladly fly to the artificial world of sport where honor and fair play are enduring slogans. In a world where in great part law is lawless and justice just ignored, the rules of the game create a comforting sense of security. Is it any wonder we encourage our children to inhabit a world so much more to our own liking than the world we adults have made? But is there any hope of re-making the real world in a more tolerable pattern if we leave the young in their play-world? They will be called out of it roughly enough one day, so should we not lead them out of it now and help them to grow up?

They Need Light to Grow

The first requisite for the ripening of the seed is light—that is, in the case of man, a true conception of his function in the universe.

Both in the animal order and the human order the end of puberty is the beginning of maturity. What prevents us from ripening is the underlying idea of our own animality. Maturity means ripeness for a purpose. In the vegetable and animal order it means fitness for physical reproduction. In the human order it not only means fitness for reproduction and the entailed physical responsibilities—nurture and defense of a family. In man or woman it is a fitness for moral responsibilities, for spiritual care, which indicate maturity.

In healthy periods of civilization minority ends with the end of puberty. No matter how unpleasant the world may seem or how little the youth may care to face it, he does so because he is indoctrinated with his obligations to his fellow men and their common Maker. In the past kings took over the reins of government at an age when our boys are as yet ineligible to drive a motor vehicle. In the heyday of the Sorbonne, of Oxford, of Bologne, men were graduated from these universities at an age when our boys are getting ready for their last year in high school. It may be argued that they did not know as much then; and it is true that in the exact sciences there were fewer facts to know. But in philosophy and letters few will deny their superiority nor the clarity of their reasoning and the maturity of their judgment. There were foolish youths then as always, but thought was taken seriously in its own right and not simply as a means to a high-salaried job. The mind was trained in the university and the character was trained in the home or the school and the young people were prepared for the struggles and the stress of life. The schools now have no time for character formation, nor standards of measuring maturity. Only a mature person can judge of maturity and only after a certain amount of all-round personal contact. In crowded schools the busy teachers cannot have enough personal contact to judge them. So intelligence tests are substituted as a basis of assessment. A boy I know, who comes from a literate home, after having dawdled over Latin and having lazed over Greek for a few years, entered a high school and was given the usual intelligence test. His parents, who had suffered from his refusal to work, his rejection of responsibility, and general immaturity of character, were very astonished when they found they were being congratulated on having “the most mature boy in the school, years ahead of his age.” These conclusions had been arrived at on the basis of a wide vocabulary which he had acquired by no effort of his own. If educators do not know what maturity is, how can the student work toward it?

The educators do feel, however, that there is something lacking in their products, so they drag out the hothouse process of education and with it the cherished adolescent atmosphere—as long as possible. This long postponement of living brings, not ripeness, but decay. Responsibilities are so long deferred that the college boy has lost the zest to ponder them. Nor is there any chance he will ever want to unless he is given a good reason for doing so. It is not enough to be able to reproduce ourselves. We must know why we are doing it. If the reason is not good, youth cannot be blamed for running away from reality. Unless we believe that there is “no proportion between the pains of this life and the joy to come” then logically death becomes the one great unpleasantness never to be mentioned, old age a nasty condition of decay to be disguised as well as possible, and only the years of health and beauty are worth living at all. If we look upon ourselves simply as intellectual beasts, then there is no maturity beyond the physiological ripeness of puberty, nor is there a need of any.

They Need Pure Air

The second requisite for the growth of a seed is pure air. Youth needs the atmosphere of a sound society.

The various manifestations of our unsoundness, economic, domestic, educational, have been often enough examined. Self-evident proof of our unsoundness is the extraordinary rise of insanity in the last thirty or forty years. Either life is worse than it used to be or we are less fit to cope with it. Perhaps we are not teaching the facts of life to the children, or not the right facts. We do teach them something, I admit. They know quite a bit about fetal development and coital incompatibility. But these are only part of facts about parts of life. They are not learning the fundamental facts which have to do with good and evil, courage and cowardice, intellectual honesty and love and fidelity, the need for pain, the dignity

of death. They are only learning to avoid learning them—and at this we are excellent teachers. If they don't succeed in avoiding facts, if life insists on violently embracing them, they develop painful trauma and are incurably maimed. Experiences which used to build character now build mental institutions. Our young people cannot ripen in a society that is unsound. They are immature because our old people are, and our old people dare not grow up because the alternative to childishness is despair.

They Need Love

The third requisite for the ripening of the seed is moisture. Love is needed to keep the spirit from drying up, and to nourish its growth.

We hear a great deal about the love we owe our children. Even the intellectual-beast school concedes love to have teleological value. But there are many kinds of love. The love we shower on our children should be of the highest quality, which, like “the quality of mercy is not strained.” It is natural and simple and flows from the heart and not from the mother-craft book. It does not tie children to apron strings nor does it try to appear indifferent to their ventures. It lets them take reasonable risks for it entrusts them to their Mother in Heaven. Thus as they grow in stature they will also grow in courage, in prudence and in grace, with no shadow of mumism or “father complex” to darken their paths. The example of truly mature love between parents is the best anti-toxin to the hysterical love of the magazines and the movies. Living and growing under the wings of such an affection can make straight the paths of the next generation, can keep its feet off the tortuous and thorny way of worldly loves.

But how shall children learn to grow up in homes where their elders envy them their youth? Where mothers try to grow down to their daughters, where paunchy “pops” call themselves “one of the boys,” and white-haired grandmothers bedeck themselves in bridesmaids' finery and chatter of “we girls.” If the young see around them idolatry of youth, they cannot be expected to renounce any characteristic of that perfect state.

Many parents are infinitely careful to let no breath of authority taint the beautiful big-sister and big-brother relationship with their children. They try so hard just to be boys and girls together lest the young think they are telling them what to do; they keep their own experience out of their way until the youngsters, finding the job of making decisions too big for them, start to shirk it as we are shirking ours. They must know that there is an authority, but a loving one which prefers cooperation to duress. In united families there is co-operation in all things; the children told of difficulties and their help secured. They share in the responsibilities and in the joys of the whole group. A child should feel that everything he does affects the welfare of the group as a whole. Parents who make sacrifices in order that their little boys may have as many ice cream cones as the Jones' boy are silly. If they think he must have everything, he will think so too and will expect the world to give it to him when they are gone. Parents have plenty of sacrifices to make in serious things. “But the poor child cannot be expected to know that there are more serious things than ice creams...” No, of course not—if he is never told. Most parents know, but do not always remember, that it is more important to sacrifice leisure than money, better to have a good game together once in a while than to let your son go much to the movies, that it is more useful to teach him to make things than to give him money to buy them, and to teach him to rely for entertainment as much as possible on his own resources—in general to be independent and self-reliant. “But we do teach our boy to be independent,” cry some parents, “We let him sell papers and help out at the store.” This, however, is usually done to give him a sense of business, and not for any serious motive such as helping with the home expenses. Or it is done in order that the youngster should have more petty cash with which to indulge his whims. That is teaching him what he already knows, to live for himself, not for others. It is not only we who must love our children to the point of unselfishness, but they who must love us, not for our sakes but for theirs, or they will never grow up. And we alone can teach them this.

Another means of keeping close to them, provided we begin early enough, before they can read, is to read interesting books to them, instead of letting them look at the comics while we enjoy our deserved and longed-for book. This habit will form an invaluable link between parent and child. It is a means of touching on serious topics which never come up in the ordinary course of talk. It will open doors which nothing else can unlock and a subtle means of help and guidance. It is

all the more necessary because of the horizontal division of the country's humanity into age groups which does so much to prevent a true exchange of ideas between generations. This arbitrary division is, perhaps, more than any other single factor, responsible for the inanity of so much youthful talk—and consequently of youthful thinking as well. Instead of listening to their grandfathers' friends discussing matters of the moment and talking of serious topics with men of their fathers' generation, these youths are condemned by convention to spend their leisure listening to the drivel or the eventually wearisome wit of fellow teenagers. It is partly the smallness of modern apartments which breaks up the family group, prevents mixed gatherings of friends and leads to the club-life at the drug store. It is chiefly because parents have lost touch with their children and think they don't want them around and fly the premises in a panic. Actually, intelligent young people are frequently flattered to find the older people talking to them seriously so parents might find it rewarding to stay and be human. The restriction of social life to contact with persons as ignorant as oneself is certainly fatal to conversation, that is, true conversation, which is an exchange of ideas and experiences and not just small talk. It is equally fatal to mutual development. Nor is the drug store, where so many of these meetings take place, a stimulation for the mind. These youngsters sitting high on their stools, looking over into slops, surrounded by shelves bulging with bubblegum and beauty creams instead of books, fill one with compassion for a generation which has been helped by its elders to grow but not to grow "up."

They Need Good Soil

The fourth requisite for the ripening of a seed is soil. It doesn't always have to be a fine loam. Grit and sand and gravel are just as necessary as leaf-mould for most plants. They provide the minerals which give firmness to the stalk and let the roots get a good grip.

It is a truism that boys who have had to struggle since their early youth frequently grow into bigger men than some sheltered youths. Even though they may not be as developed intellectually, their characters have been matured by difficulties and responsibilities for which there is no effective substitute. The generation that grew up in the Depression are for the most part far less childish than their parents or their children. But even those who do not come up the hard way can find plenty of salutary hardness in life if they are trained to face it. Even so apparently small a thing as resistance against group pressure in school, college or office will make a youth into a man. It is very difficult to teach a child the need for this. If we harp on it too much we may make him a hopeless conformist. The pressure of the school group is so strong that the family has to wage constant war to save the child from the casting mould. It is very uncomfortable for child and for parents. The resistance is easier to induce in large families where there is an opposite-group pressure. It is easier still if several like-minded families live in the same neighbourhood, send their children to the same school. Every family that resists the conventional foolishness makes it that much easier for others. But this being "different" is never easy, and with some children it is not possible at all. But let us not be scared by the trauma we hear so much about. Wounds are natural to man and he must learn to heal. Without some cuts and bruises no lad ever developed strong muscles or sound bones or lived to reach maturity.

Why Don't Catholics Mature?

We have seen that human development follows the same lines as that of plants, requiring the light of a clear belief, the atmosphere of a healthy society, an affectionate home life which is like life-giving water, and the soil of hardship and difficulty in order to attain fruition.

Now why is it that so many Catholic boys are permanent adolescents? Their religion gives them a true conception of their function in the cosmos, they were raised for the most part in unbroken homes, lived in a Catholic atmosphere and did not entirely escape difficulties. What then is lacking?

We Catholics are trying to "pass." We are not prepared to live our religion in all its implications of prayer and penance and poverty. Perhaps it is because these things seem un-Australian, even a little psychopathic, and because we think we must be successes—like everyone else—in order to advertise God. We want to "pass," want to be all things to all men, so

we pass away without having been very much to any man or anything much to God.

We teach our young Catholics the ways and means of being as indistinguishable as possible from the herd. On Sundays and days of obligation they sidle out from the bunch and go sheepishly to church. On Fridays they avoid meat, and they even avoid bad movies if they can. But wherever there is no specific interdiction, wherever it is a question of character rather than commandment, they happily follow the herd. When our children are small they must wear the same type of shirt as the rest, when adolescent they must kiss the same type of girl. Some Catholic boys take their religious instruction seriously enough to have qualms about kissing, but dare not brave opinion by taking a girl out without kissing her or going out in a group of avowed non-kissers, so prefer to sink their “difference” in spirits or in beer. The fear of lechery explains a great deal of the drinking amongst Catholic boys. If fornication can only be fought with drunkenness there is something wrong with the way our religion is being taught. Too many Catholic institutions teach a watered-down Catholicism which stimulates no one to the heroism necessary for everyday life. Christ’s disciples were so filled with the Holy Ghost that observers thought them drunk though it was early in the morning. The Holy Spirit is indeed such a stimulant that no other spirits are required. Obviously those boys have not been kept close enough to the Holy Ghost to feel the tongues of fire or they wouldn’t be falling back on the passing warmth of alcohol.

And since there is a certain light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world, the fraud of watered-down religion is in the long run detected by the young. Those who do not drown their disappointment at life in drink, deaden it with business or wear it down with exercise, and some as we know, give up either their religion or their sanity.

I once asked a priest who had taught for many years in a high-grade Catholic college why so many of the young people they graduated were lamentably childish, why the vast majority seemed incapable of self-government or even of serious discussion. He said sadly that a large proportion of the teachers were of the same mental age as their pupils. The faculty members had so long simulated an exclusive interest in sports, had so long eschewed serious subjects, had tried so hard to speak the language of youth, that this had become their only tongue—spoken even amongst themselves. It is not with the gift of such a tongue that the Holy Ghost endows His faithful, nor will it suffice to communicate the glory of God. Once when I said to a young priest who had spoken very familiar, loving words about God: “Father, it’s good to hear you talk like that. Most of the priests I know do not,” he answered, “We can’t often do so, even among priests; at the seminary the conversation was almost always about something else...” and his voice was full of sorrow.

Youth, therefore, eternal youth is everyone’s ideal. It is the cult not only of the ignorant, but of the instructed, since most of these believe only in the here-and-now and those who believe in more dare not behave as if they did. The educators of various schools are satisfied to get more and more expensive kindergarten equipment for the establishments where they condition the young for this playful world. Clerics of diverse faiths are satisfied to improve playroom facilities for their flocks and let them substitute generosity of purse for generosity of heart and mind; letting them relax thereafter in the pharisaical conviction that they have done their share.

Until this attitude changes our young will not. It is not without significance that the one genuine myth creation of the twentieth century is the figure of the child who refused to grow up, the boy who escaped into a private dreamland in order to avoid being a man. Peter Pan, coupling the name of the Apostle with the name of the faun, the animal all-god of antiquity, is a valid symbol of our time. A vestigial Christianity grafted upon an antique survival with the Faith drained out of both, is a true summary of our civilization. The imaginary pipes lead us in our scamper back to the happy dreamland of nursery thoughts from which we shall soon be awakened with an iron sound.
