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On Being a Mature Person

THE richness or poverty of our lives depends upon our maturity. Every year, every event, offers us the opportunity for mature or immature responses.

One sign of growth in maturity is our readiness to learn what is expected of us under conditions of life that are changing every day. What was suitable in the world as it was last year may not do at all in the circumstances of tomorrow.

In the smaller circle of our own personality, too, there are continuing changes. None of us is altogether and always either brilliant or stupid. The brightest of us have periods when we seem feeble-minded, and the dullest of us are sometimes blessed with sharp wit. Most of us wish to be mature, because that seems to be the only state in which we can cope with our problems.

Various authors have laid stress upon separate virtues included in the maturity of a human being: responsibility, independence, generosity, co-operativeness, goodwill, integrity, adaptability, and skill in separating fact and fancy.

Whatever trait is emphasized, the mature person will show skill in handling the events and tests of life in such a way as to produce the greatest possible amount of happiness with the smallest possible amount of stress.

The mature person lives significantly for himself and for mankind. He rejects the temptation to be always neutral or safe, to be a mere invalid or a minor in a protected corner. He is too busy with gratifying work to engage in trifling things, and too well balanced to pay attention to miracle workers and jugglers.

That is not a lazy life. The mature person is not passively receiving but is creatively acting. He has a sense of relative values and a feeling for consequences. He confronts life with some boldness.

One principle that marks maturity in any walk of life — in business, in private life or in national affairs — is this: the determining element is not so much what

happens to a person but the way he takes it. The responses to life of a mature person are of good quality and can be counted on.

The contrary state, immaturity, is marked by adult-infantilism, in which a person has reached maturity of physical development, but remains an infant in his response to the problems and obligations of life.

What are mature actions?

The mature person tends not to be clumsy in his association with other people. He thinks about how the thing he proposes to do will affect his neighbours' lives. He seeks to give other people room so that they, too, may mature. He has learned the important lesson that he who walks in crowds must step aside, keep his elbows in, step back or sidewise, or even detour from the straight way, according to what he encounters.

It is all very well to try, once in a while, to think strictly personal thoughts, but we quickly come to see that we live in relationships. Family life helps our children to grow from stage to stage of confidence, skill, responsibility and understanding. Our homes prepare people for the larger and more exacting relationships of a world where social and political sense have not progressed as far as have scientific and technical skills.

The mature person has graduated from home and school with some awareness of the requirements of society. He wants to share in the human enterprise of getting out of the jungle frame of mind, of building a community wherein he may grow. He develops from the stage of thinking: "Please help me", through "I can take care of myself" to "Please let me help you."

Sharing is a vital part of maturing. Most of the significance we attain grows out of our contribution to the lives of others. The person in an executive position, from the president of a great company down to the foreman of a small gang, puts his imprint on history through the people under his direction. He builds their

strengths and reduces their limitations. He gives them opportunities to become their own most mature selves. This can be, as Stephen Vincent Benét remarked in one of his essays, the most conspicuous enterprise of the human being.

Down through the ages, human life has relied upon an instinctive sense of obligation on the part of those most generously endowed. This is born of the sternest racial law we know: the perpetuation of any group demands that all the varied resources within that group be released to most effective use. It is as the human race grows into fullest application of this demand of life that it matures. And a person remains immature, whatever his age, so long as he thinks of himself as an exception to the law.

It is not enough, however, to give lip service to such a belief. The title of a book by Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, just published (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., New York) is significant of the meaning of maturity. It is: *The Mind Goes Forth*. The mature person is not living in a room lined with mirrors, but in a sun room with windows. The person who is completely wrapped up in himself makes only a small package.

In spite of doubts

Even a mature person may be torn on occasion by indecision about what he ought to preserve and develop in his life, but this exercise of wrestling with doubt contributes toward our expanding maturity. We learn to submit to what we cannot avoid, to banish desire for the impossible from our minds, and to seek attainable objects worthy of our thought and effort.

In a mature person the progressive tendency is not easily diverted from its course by doubt or fear. He lives amid ideas which never before existed on earth. Not all are good ideas, but they are all bustling ideas that make rigidity difficult and unhealthy. We need, sometimes, to yield like the bending reed beside a river in flood, rather than defy the flood like an obstinately-clinging tree, and be swept away.

The mature person will allow his fancy to suggest aims and purposes, but he will bring his reason to bear upon them before committing himself. He knows that he cannot do what he likes with anything: he can do only what can be done with it. He will choose from what is possible what he judges for his interest, and work toward it with patience and determination, making allowance for the unexpected and the irrational influences that may seek to interfere with his plans.

Qualities of thought

Every person is the centre of his own universe, and so he should seek to know himself as adequately as he can. We may be influenced by our environment and our upbringing, but it is in the free margin of our

thoughts that our maturity appears. Out of this margin for initiative we develop our special handling of situations and desires.

It is important for our maturity that we learn to accept ourselves as we are, without trying to be what we are not. We are at a disadvantage if we lack a skill we should like to have; if we need money we haven't got; if we are less handsome than our neighbours: but frank recognition of our plight will save us from feeling humiliated.

The Greek play-writer, Aristophanes, caricatured the philosopher Socrates in his drama *The Clouds*, and all Athens roared with laughter. Socrates went to see the play, and when the caricature came on the stage he stood up so that the audience might better enjoy the comic mask that was designed to burlesque him. In that action he gave an evidence of his maturity.

There are people who keep up their feeling of superiority by strutting in what they think of as dignity, by being unapproachable, by being incessantly busy. They take appreciation for granted, and look upon criticism as an impertinence.

Self-love, we are reminded by Alfred Korzybski in his book *Science and Sanity*, is frequently referred to under the figure of the Greek mythical character Narcissus. He, seeing his reflection in a pool, became so engrossed in self-adoration that he rejected the attentions of Venus and was killed.

Such self-centredness is natural in early childhood, but "serious dangers, and even tragedies, begin when some of the infantile or narcissistic semantic characteristics are carried over into the life of the grown-ups."

Thomas Bulfinch goes a sombre step further in *The Age of Fable*. He reports that when the shade of Narcissus was being ferried over the Stygian river it leaned over the side of the boat to catch a glimpse of itself in the waters.

Far-fetched though such myths may seem, they have practical value in many areas of life today. Look at the common case of a young man or a young woman, unable to settle down in a job or at home, disorganized in mind and act, yet expert in describing personal mental and emotional symptoms. Such people have focussed on themselves without relating themselves to their environment.

While it would be a mistake to be forever examining oneself, the mature person will take a look, once in a while, to see how he is measuring up in the context of his life. He will not shut himself up with his thoughts, but will let the air currents of the world ventilate his mind.

Out of meditation will come wisdom, a quality associated with maturity. And what is wisdom? Isn't it largely the ability to bring together a fact that one has

freshly discovered and a general principle that was deposited long ago in the archives of our memory? These, facts and principles, are used by the mature person for thinking, for reaching judgments about the relative values of things.

You never can be sure of the whole truth of any fact or situation but you can reach a state of practical certainty that enables you to make informed choices between courses of action. That is an indelible mark of maturity: to be able to make choices that are as wise as our best thought can make on the basis of facts known to us. Then we are matching ourselves with life.

Qualities of character

Guiding the decisions and choices of a mature person is a philosophy of life, a sense of what he wants to be.

There are certain basic values and virtues that need to be preserved at all costs: for example the feeling that life has a purpose and the belief that there is something in one's judgments of justice and truth which is in harmony with the nature of the universe.

The mature person need not be a confirmed conformist. He may be a rugged individualist, but he will be as rugged in his adherence to basic principles as he is in self-reliance. He will recognize, but he will not be afraid of, the fact that there are three great questions in life which he must answer over and over again: is it right or wrong? is it true or false? is it beautiful or ugly?

In answering these questions a man will find principles of far more value to him than a library of books, or a den decorated with diplomas. The principles contribute to his maturity by enlarging his thinking, by helping him to avoid confusion, by rescuing him from prolonged debate. They give him a base for decision and action. They are like the north star, the compass and the lighthouse to a sailor: they keep him on his course despite winds and current and weather.

Some people confuse principles with rules. A principle is something inside one; a rule is an outward restriction. To obey a principle you have to use your mental and moral powers; to obey a rule you have only to do what the rule says. Dr. Frank Crane pointed the difference neatly: "A rule supports us by the arm-pits over life's mountain passes; a principle makes us sure-footed."

Sense of responsibility

This introduces the thought of responsibility. The man of mature character is a man who can be relied upon. His qualities are predictable. He is a good security risk for himself, his family, his employer and his neighbours.

The mature man does not transfer the blame for personal misfortune to anyone else — his parents, his

employers, his circumstances. To refuse to risk taking responsibility where failure is possible is a childish course. To pass on responsibility for what we do to someone else is to bring shame upon our human dignity. If we are to learn to be mature we must accept the willingness to fail as well as the ability to succeed; to accept the consequences of what we do both in the chores of life and in our search for better things.

Self-deception cannot be tolerated in maturity. We smile pityingly at the conceits of Don Quixote, who was able to deceive himself that the windmills were giants, but in our own age, we see men who will not look at things as they are, but as they wish them to be, and are ruined.

Some of us wear masks, to delude ourselves or others. To use any mask, say H. S. and G. L. Elliott in their counselling manual *Solving Personal Problems* (Henry Holt & Co. Inc.) is to be afraid to attempt success through one's own abilities. Many an employee tries to act a role which his employer endures rather than admires. An executive having a difficult-to-answer letter on his desk may don the self-deceptive mask of busyness, making it impossible for him to get around to his correspondence. Anyone may put off decision-making by the simple device of donning a mask under cover of which he analyses and re-analyses a problem, postponing the moment he fears.

Qualities of action

The mind needs to be stored with significant facts we observe and ascertain. Maturity has its say about the care and zeal with which we collect this knowledge. The scientist, said Dr. David H. Fink, himself a neuropsychiatrist, can spend a lifetime studying the way of a snake on a rock, but a child runs around the zoo from cage to cage, looking only at the surfaces of things. In the same way, many a person, after returning from a foreign trip, reads books describing the same localities, and wonders why he saw so little where others saw so much.

When we come to use what has been stored, we use another element in maturity: self-control. We assay the facts and delay our actions until we decide just how and how well they will meet the necessities of the situation. Tolstoy wrote: "There never has been, and cannot be, a good life without self-control." More recently, Lord Beaverbrook said that a man "can only keep his judgment intact, his nerves sound and his mind secure by the process of self-discipline."

Self-control in the mature person means abandonment of the childlike immaturities shown in anger, hate, cruelty and belligerency. Blustering and weight-throwing are not signs of maturity. It is not mature to

push a situation to the point where it can no longer hold, but has to give way under the pressure we inflict upon it.

Self-control is a factor in self-confidence, one of the points by which we judge maturity. The backbone of confidence is one's faith in the validity of one's own judgment.

But a mature person is not unwisely self-sure. He doesn't underestimate the chances of missing an open goal. He is not led astray by conceit into an unproved belief in his ability.

Working toward maturity

Education plays its big part in preparing us for maturity, but education is not a thing to have and to be finished with. At whatever stage of life we may be, it is wholesome to say: "I am a student."

Everyone in modern society is confronted with a complex series of new situations which education in his youth, no matter how good, could never equip him to meet.

Adult education is not a way of making up for lack of junior schooling or technical training. It is, rather, trying to do a notable thing: to recognize adulthood as a significant period, and to provide stimulus and training for minds that have grown beyond the easy judgments of youth.

Adults do not need to accumulate more heaps of knowledge, but to look for the ideas that control thoughts about conditions. In the nineteenth century we saw the growth and acceptance of elementary education; in the first half of this century we have seen the development of secondary and higher education. It may be that the latter half of our century will see adult education come to full stature as a phase of an advancing and dynamic culture, necessary to our maturity if not to our survival.

"One of the fatalities of our culture," says H. A. Overstreet in *The Mature Mind* (W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., New York) "has been that it has idealized immaturity. Childhood has seemed to be the happy time." The truth is that now, for the first time in their lives, adults possess grown-up eyes. They can put into effect a wisdom about life that childhood and youth are unable to possess. This is the time when all the preparings of earlier years can come to their fruition.

The young may build themselves imaginative castles, but as part of their maturity they learn to take off their coats, go into the quarries of life, chisel out the blocks of stone, and build them with much toil into the castle walls.

Another look at maturity

It is evident from what has gone before that the mature man is not one who has grown up and settled

down in his job or his home or his community. He is a growing man, becoming emancipated from the limitation of his present place as new vistas open up before him.

Only those who have weighed the issues and have decided to stay where they are can plead out of such a forward-looking endeavour. Their decision may be quite intelligent if we grant them their goal of escaping trouble. Because of their lack of knowledge and wisdom, less will be demanded of them, and if they commit errors they will not be harshly blamed for them. If they fail economically, someone — a relative or the State — will prevent their starving. People with that outlook would be fools not to be stupid, remarked Dr. Alfred Adler caustically.

That reminds us that open-mindedness is one mark of a mature person. No one has the right to call himself mature who cannot listen to both sides of an argument, and none of us has the right to be called mature who insists that what is good for him must be good for, and should be imposed upon, everyone else.

And now, do we wish to face the thought of being mature? There can be a certain loneliness in maturity. We have to give up much to which we have become accustomed — some idiosyncrasies, some peccadilloes, some illogicalities. We may have to give up trivialities that kept us amused hitherto. We will become aware early in our effort of a central maxim of maturity: that every mortal being is under bond to do his best.

A mature life does not mean a placid life. Florence Nightingale had a desperate time finding herself, and wrote in her diary: "In my 31st year I see nothing desirable but death." Abraham Lincoln had a tragic struggle with himself. In 1841, when he was 32, he said: "I am now the most miserable man living."

Mature living carries in it the capacity to accept illness, disappointment, and all that is largely beyond our control; to accept ourselves and others; to keep our balance through success and failure. It gives us a certain ability to roll with the punches, to pick up the pieces and start over.

We don't have to become mature all at once. We advance toward it little by little, always learning toward our development as persons and as citizens. We seek obtainable goals and avoid groundless hopes and baseless fears.

Through maturity, what was once a pin-point world limited to our own narrow thoughts assumes size and form, with a past and a future. Our jobs become means of expressing the acquired skill of our minds and hands. We find ourselves with a new expertness in handling life, a new interest in people, and a new competence to meet exasperating incidents.