

Adulthood and its Discontents

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The Necessary Adult

In order for a society to persist over the generations, it must continuously recruit from its ranks a special elite, individuals who are prepared to live by and pass on its defining values, fight its wars, take responsibility for its governance, and do its routine but necessary work — all this while turning out enough physically and mentally healthy children to keep the whole enterprise going across the generations. Each society has its own name for this vital cohort; in the English-speaking world we call them "adults". By contrast to mature men and women, children and seniors are either pre-productive or post-productive; as a consequence, their families and larger societies allow children and seniors a great deal of freedom: They are permitted to indulge themselves, and even to play at being anti-social.

Those who are big enough and smart enough to produce, reproduce, and govern, are not given such latitude: It is expected that they will accept the disciplines of work, the sacrifices required by parenthood, the obligations of citizenship, and that they will raise up kids who will later — and even with some pleasure — take their own adult place in the social brigades. The 20 restrictions that society puts on the adult guarantee the playfulness of the child, and the ease of the senior. As the Hindus put it, the householder, though not at the highest stage of growth in the moral sense, nevertheless supports all the other asramas, all the stages that precede it as well as those that follow.

But there has been for some time a pervasive unease in our land — a sense that Americans who are big enough, old enough, and smart enough to be adults are not responding the summons. Their class is being called, but many do not muster at the usual assembly points. Or, of those who do mobilize, too many quickly desert: too many are crippled by addictions and significant mental illness; in too many the

capacity for commitment to either love or work is stunted; and far too many attempt marriage, but defect to divorce when the early passions cool down. Beyond that, as Judith Martin (Ms. Manners) has documented, it is no longer the state of adulthood that is celebrated in our popular culture, but the larval and pupal stages — childhood and adolescence — that precede it. If the state of adulthood is the pivot and center of our social architecture, then it begins to appear that this center may not hold.

Clearly, the physical maturation of the body, its reproductive organs and even its brain is not sufficient to bring about, in young individuals, their psychological and social maturation, as true adults.

What has gone wrong? Why does the developmental process in regard to adulthood get stalled at the pupal or even the larval stages? Why is this crucial developmental process churning out so many aborted and immature forms? Based on their critical studies of degenerative changes in American family and cultural life, some keen observers and social critics have come up with important clues. Thus, David Blankenhorn has documented the deconstruction of American fatherhood and the damage wrought on children by life without father. Barbara Whitehead has shown that too often marriage is only a prelude to membership in the divorce culture; and Dr. Judith Wallerstein has revealed the grim clinical consequences, for children, of their parent's rush to the divorce court. These sightings were all made from within our society, and involve comparisons between clinical and non-clinical populations, between the fathered and the fatherless, between the children of divorce and the children of intact families. Other investigative strategies lead us outside of our own society, to look at the varieties of adulthood crafted by other humans, at other times and in other places. Beyond the local narrative of adulthood there is a more universal, species narrative; paradoxically, a careful reading of this species text can help us to better understand our own local narrative of adulthood, and our own troubles with this crucial stage.

Versions of Adulthood

The data that best reveals the usually overlooked species narrative comes from those societies that maintain formal age — grade systems, clear role and status hierarchies that are chronologically arranged.

The age-grade systems of major Sub-Saharan tribes are typical of many others. Thus, Spencer found that Samburu males are divided into age — sets, composed of peers that move together through the sequential age grades which define their powers, their rights, their duties, and even their attitudes. The most important distinction is cut between the Moran, the age set of young, unmarried warriors, flamboyant predators of other men's herds and wives, and the moderate bourgeois householder. The Moran may liven up the neighborhood and attract tourists; but unlike the settled adult householders, they also make trouble. The raunchy young Moran have to be kept in line by the most advanced age grades, those who can not match them in physical strength, but who can deploy potent curses against them.

Older men across the same range of research sites are not so concentrated on the physical welfare of their family or village; they are more "liberated," more concerned about their own or their community's relationship to God. The consuming interest in family well-being is restricted to the younger, house-holding adult.

In studying the life course of younger and older adult men of the Druze, Mayan, and Navajo societies, I was similarly impressed by the importance that the younger Paterfamilias give — across this wide range of societies — to domestic responsibilities and pleasures. In response to my standard question, "what is it that makes you feel good?", the younger men in the age range 35 through 55 would routinely give some version of this basic response: "When my family is fed, and there is peace in the village." Generally speaking, the various ethnographic accounts from around the globe vary in their details, but they add up to a generic and predictable human story: young un-married men are apt to be wild, predatory within their community as well as outside of it, exhibitionistic, and not much good for anything besides hunting and warfare. The restrained householder is clearly less dramatic, but his adult maintenance activities are clearly more important to the social welfare. The

adult Samburu has already been proved himself as a reckless Moran; he has sown his wild oats and won his chosen woman; now he can afford to be square — and even to enjoy it.

Adulthood and the Transformations of Narcissism

How should we think about the tectonic developmental shift that transforms the scrappy, self-indulging post-adolescent into the sober, reliable and caring adult house-holder? Sociologists and cultural anthropologists would answer that these males take their direction from society: their behavior is choreographed for them by the societal software — the role prescriptions that are appropriate to their age grade. The sociologists and anthropologists put all the dynamism of development outside of the individual, and into the socializing organs of the community.

But interpretations of this sort fly in the face of what we know about human development as a self-initiated internal process, moving according to its own time table, and in some independence of cultural scripts. In order to understand the great transformations into adulthood, we have to consider the ways that the species imperatives manifest themselves within persons, and within the intimate dyads formed by co-developing partners.

Many theories can be called on. For reasons that should become clear, as we consider the pathways to adulthood I mean to emphasize the human capacity for awe, worship and idealization. Admittedly, dogs can adore their masters; but in its more complex displays this appetite for the ideal is unique to our species: it is only we humans who endow heroes, idols, gods, political leaders, nations, systems of thought — and our own children — with unordinary qualities, pledging to them our loyalty, our service, and even our lives. Like most powerful human propensities — love for example, and aggression — the drive to idealize has both its introversive (self-directed) and its extroversive (outward-directed) expressions. When this drive is turned outward, it takes the form of worship and fidelity to some expression of the ideal, whether in the social, natural, or supernatural domains. In its introversive

mode, turned inwardly, it leads to a reflexive idealization of the self by the self: its own qualities, its own projects and products, its illusory perfections, its own appetites and their objects, and even its crochets. It takes the form that the psychoanalysts term "narcissism" — or, depending on the severity of consequences — "pathological narcissism".

Reviewing the species narrative, we soon realize that the transition to adulthood is based on a profound redirection of the idealizing tendency: from being introversive and reflexive — fixed, that is on the self — to being focused on some worthy version of otherness. For both men and women, we can say that adulthood has been achieved when narcissism is transmuted — and thereby detoxified — into strong, lasting idealizations and into healthy narcissism. In Pathological narcissism the claims of the individual trump all others; and the personality is mobilized to defend, justify and achieve these self priorities. The self-esteem of the NPD (Narcissistic personality Disorder) is likely to be founded in illusion, in a refusal to recognize his own imperfections. Self-entitled, he gives primacy to his own claims over any competition —even including the blunt claims of the Reality Principle. The pathologically narcissistic individual is noxious to others, and ultimately to himself: nature finally punishes those who are not humble before its rules. Instead of himself, the true adult venerates ideal versions of his community, his vocation and his family; and he serves the institutions that maintain the legendary virtues. He concedes his self-worship to something larger, he becomes enlisted in that larger whole, and thereby — now as part of some worthy enterprise — he acquires transmuted, detoxified "Healthy Narcissism": a new basis for self esteem that enhances the projects of the other as well as the self.

But adulthood, so defined, is not attained in one big jump. The full adult transition requires a series of renunciations, wherein narcissism is turned outward, in a fixed order of conversions, to invest and valorize entities that, while linked to the growing self, lie beyond its immediate reach. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson laid out one ground plan of the necessary transitions. In a natural sequence, These build

towards the essential components of the adult person: ego identity, intimacy and generativity — the capacities to work, to love, and to nurture that which is new and fragile but also promising.

Identity: Discovering the Ideal Self Beyond the Self

Tracking this sequence, let us first consider "Identity" — (incidentally, one of the most over-used and misunderstood terms in current psychology). On the one hand, the identity construction within the youthful head provides a new platform and new rationales for internal regulation; on the other hand, it provides a new basis for social participation. Joseph Adelson's cross-national research on Political Socialization reveals the developmental precursors of the adolescent transition towards ego identity, and a more expanded social engagement. He and his colleagues found that, at around age sixteen (and regardless of gender, intelligence level, ethnicity or national origin) adolescents attain a new, more complex sense of the social order. On the one hand, Society is seen to be supra-personal, persisting independently of its component individuals; nevertheless, this same social order, despite being abstract and remote, becomes as real to these young people as any solid, familiar individual. The identity quest begins in earnest when adolescents try to work out where they stand, as individuals, vis-a-vis this newly apprehended, supra-individual reality. The social has acquired for them a kind of person-hood; now their job is to make the personal become social. Recognizing this development, and its consequences for personal and social health, Erikson began to study the shared metaphors that made for an Identity — perceivable to individuals — between the social and the personal domains. Long before it entered the vocabulary of Psychobabble, "Identity" was a term in logic, signifying an equivalence between two terms or entities that may appear to be superficially dissimilar, but that are strongly linked in some more abstract, logical sense. But most of those who now use the term disregard its connective meanings; they fail to see or refuse to see that "identity" refers to more than one entity; that it implies — as suggested by Adelson's work — a merging of

the experienced self with some more abstract social imago. Thus, Erikson himself was understandably impatient with students and theorists who think of "identity" as another form of self-absorption, an answer to the self-absorbed question, "who am I?" By contrast, Erikson insisted that identity is a register of what you stand for; It is your potential self writ large, restated in an idiom that derives from cultural exemplars. Thus, identity is attained when the young individual discovers an equivalence between his own — usually inchoate — origin myth, and the founding legend of some worthy group, vocation, profession, religion or nation. Once this union is experienced, the unstated legend of the self is given definition, and made communicable to responsive others. At this developmental juncture, what had once been the rhetoric of "the grown-ups," now becomes the language through which the individual is known to himself and presented to the world. As a new adjunct to inner controls, this new identity "organ" takes over the regulatory functions of the superego, and moves them to a more advanced level. The Superego is a primitive control agent; it memorializes the child's naive view of the omnipotent parent and his powers. In effect, the superego preserves the archaic and essentially masochistic route to totemic powers that is coded into rites de passage around the world: the candidate for adult potencies "stoops to conquer" — he acquires title to power by first enduring, in a posture of abasement, the lash of those powers against his own skin (The Prince is trained in the stables, with the men that he will someday lead). The Superego moves this ancient sado-masochistic dance inside the head: By submitting to the now internal voice of the parental lawgiver the child gains security, but also access to the powers that he conceded to the parent. As long as he lives by the parental commandments — however idiosyncratic and arbitrary they may be — as long as "he does not go behind his father's saying," he can speak and act powerfully, in the name of the law. But with the attainment of identity, the young person chooses the collective discipline that he will submit to and represent. And that discipline, being couched in terms of revered principles rather than arbitrary, specific rules can be shaped to changing circumstances and opportunities. Under the

sign of Identity, principles, rather than representing the dead hand of the past, can become the sponsors of innovation and creativity. The Superego serves congealed tradition and orthodoxy; Identity, while preserving necessary personal and social controls, opens the person and the society to the future. The Superego imposes sanctified rules; but Identity introduces individuals to coherent, crafted Disciplines that have meaning, that make sense as routes to an ideal way of being. Erikson once remarked that deprivation is not, in itself, psychologically damaging; it is only deprivation without meaning that is psychologically destructive. Viewed thus, we see that identity gives rich significance to the risks and renunciations that are called for by the professional, marital and parental choices of a full adult life. The disciplines that they mandate become tolerable — and even desirable. What appears from the outside to be passive conformity is from the inside experienced as a kind of ritual and even worship. Thus, identity entails a new relation to society, to controls, and — perhaps most importantly — to the tide of narcissism. When the metaphors of self are discovered in a larger, collective scheme, and when the traces of that scheme are likewise encountered within the self, then narcissism moves away from the self, and crosses the bridge formed by that identity. What was personal narcissism comes to invest the larger, social entities that are congruent with the self. The grandiosity and self-regard that was once conserved for the private self is automatically transferred to some grander political, religious or aesthetic scheme in human affairs. Via the attainment of identity, potentially destructive narcissism is converted into shared ideology, shared discipline and shared purpose. Potentially pathological narcissism is transformed, detoxified, in healthy narcissism. All this is not to say that the endowment of identity brings selfless sainthood: healthy narcissism is still narcissism. Even within this matured posture, one may still continue to strive for personal glory and to humble the competition. But now the definition of success calls for the larger enterprise to be enhanced, along with the greedy self: in crushing his rivals the chess champion also discovers new gambits that enrich the game for all serious players; the

great surgeon outdoes his competitors, but only by adding to the healing art that they all revere.

Intimacy: From "I" to "WE"

The sense of identity is based on the allegiance to some fixed certainty, one ratified by revelation and the unordinary deeds of extraordinary agents; folding ourselves into their enduring truth, we gain a sense of permanence and continuity that cannot be lost. With this guarantee in place, we can accept the existential challenge that is built into the condition of Intimacy. By definition, our intimates are chosen and loved because they are unique, remarkable, one of a kind. They represent worthy qualities that we can only know through sharing their life. There is, however, an inescapable down side to Intimacy: this unique other is by definition irreplaceable; once lost, our intimates can never — save in dreams — be held again. Identity, which cannot be lost so long as the central nervous system remains intact, allows us to accept the existential dangers of intimacy, which is always at risk. Mingling self and other, the condition of intimacy creates a new bridge for further conversions of narcissism: The personal story of conjugal partners is about "us" and "we", rather than "me". Identity guarantees a special yet stable self; Intimacy underwrites the Eros of a lasting conjugality.

Generativity: Entering the Life-Cycle

As the girls used to sing when I was a kid, "First there's love, and then there's marriage, then here comes Barbie with a baby carriage." Once the intimate and trustworthy "we" has formed, the conjugal couple can risk the next adventure. Men and women are now as smart, strong and passionate as they will ever be; and if adult development is to continue, it must proceed via third parties — through the child that mingles the blood and the genetic legacy of the conjugal couple. That couple enters the stage of Generativity, usually (though not necessarily) enacted in the parental role. Emboldening each other, they can face the daunting challenge of

becoming in the fullest sense like their own fathers and mothers. Our species narrative holds that, when the couple takes on the powers and responsibilities of their own parents, then they have — by definition — reached the very summit of adulthood. Indeed, contemporary American society is one of the few in which a major attempt has been made (outside of monastic orders) to define adulthood as separate from parenthood. Parenthood deserves its top billing on the scale of adulthood: It routinely brings about what is probably the greatest renunciation of narcissism in the entire life cycle. Before the onset of what I have called the "chronic emergency of parenthood" young men and women are still allowed a good deal of freedom to strive towards the narcissistic goals of omnipotentiality and omniconsumption. They can hold on to all possible potentials and options, no matter how mutually exclusive these might be. Before the entry into parenthood the care and tending of the self — its development and expansion, its priorities, and its pleasures — still retains (despite the competing claims of identity and intimacy) a fairly high priority. But the main message that I got from adult men in various peasant societies was that marriage, and particularly parenthood, ended the fun and games of young manhood, and that these pleasures were largely unregretted. Predictably, in unstable as well as stable societies, men told me that they had been wild "Moran" in their youth but that marriage had shifted their character dramatically, toward greater responsibility, selflessness, and moderation: "When I was a young man I used to hell around; I didn't care for myself or anybody else." ("I see that you are different now. What happened?") "Well, you know how it is: I got married I had kids." Psychoanalytic theory is mainly concerned with the earliest transformations of narcissism — those which contribute to the formation of the primitive self. But our naturalistic review shows that narcissism represents more than emergency psychic rations for the starved, immature ego. Like any central theme in the human species narrative, narcissism as an evolved adaptation serves species and social goals, as well as individual needs. On the individual level, narcissism does sustain the vulnerable self; on the social level it manifests in the idealism that sustains

our vulnerable societies; and on the species level, it protects our vulnerable children. Thus, once extended to the child, Parental narcissism reveals what may be its most central purpose: to provide essential protection to the fragile, demanding human infant. Thus, under species-normal conditions, the narcissism of new parents naturally gravitates outward, away from themselves, and reveals itself in a new form: as the virtual deification of their baby. Unlike earlier conversions of narcissism, the parental transformation is not aimed at securing and elevating the parental couple; instead, it is dedicated to bringing about the individuality, the sturdy self-hood of this wondrous child.

The womb is a biological organ specially crafted to sponsor the physical growth, from fertilized ovum to neonate, of the human infant; likewise, the conjugal, parenting family is in effect an extra-uterine extension of the womb, shaped by evolution to sponsor the psychological and social — as well as the physical — growth of the still partially decorticate, still incompletely human neonate. In order to bring this new familial "womb" into being, both parents must re-deploy the remaining figments of their narcissism and together devote themselves to the completion of this generative family "organ." Surrendering many of their personal goals in favor of larger family system goals, the new parents become complementary and coacting components — protective rind or nurturing core — of the family structure. Thus, both parents give up the illusion that they can be at the same time both masculine and feminine and instead split their sexual natures between the conjugal pair, giving over to their partner the gendered qualities that would interfere with their particular parental assignment. Men concede their "feminine" side — the softness that might conflict with their protective role — to the wife; while forming the protective rind on the family's periphery, they live out their gentler nature vicariously, through identification with the maternal, nurturing core of the family. In their turn, wives concede the aggressive potentials that could terrify their vulnerable kids (or drive away their mate) to the husband. In order to form the mothering core,

wives in effect export their own aggression out of the house with their man, leaving the home as a relatively benign and demilitarized zone.

Finally, both parents concede to the baby prince or princess the most stubborn narcissistic illusion of all — that of personal immortality. Now it is the child rather than the parent who is omnipotent; it is the child who can be all things and will never die. Parents still fear death, but now they fear not their own demise, but the obscene possibility that their child will predecease them. These various concessions of personal narcissism towards celebration of the child, lead to the routine, daily heroism of fathers and mothers (a virtue, by the way, that is only rarely acknowledged or studied by contemporary social scientists). Nevertheless, when parental self-centeredness does not convert into child-centeredness, then infants are put at risk, victimized by their parent's unconcern and too often by their rage. A central meaning of adulthood is that — as a condition built on restraints, deep attachments, and successive renunciations of narcissism — this state protects children from the potential selfishness, rivalry and ferocity of their own parents.

Adulthood: The Down Side

Thus far, I have sketched a rosy, even ideal picture of human development. We now turn to the state of affairs in our own nation. If a major function of adulthood is to protect children during their season of protracted vulnerability, then current events force us to recognize that we North Americans are in a drawn out and worsening adulthood drought. I do not have to spell out the crises of childhood, adolescence and youth in contemporary America — they have been thickly documented and tragically demonstrated in unbelievably bloody ways. But our question concerns people who are bigger than children and older than adolescents: what, we ask, has happened to adulthood? The constructs introduced earlier — Identity, Intimacy, and Generativity — should give better focus and precision to our thinking on this question.

Let us look first at the pathways to identity in post-modern America. Bear in mind that national cultures, as well as sub-cultures within them have as their moral foundations the values, traditions, institutions and disciplines bequeathed by unordinary founders. Founded on great legends, vital cultures provide the seed-beds of individual identity. But In every enlightened society, including our own, the national cultures and sub-cultures — the major seed-beds of identity — are opposed by the high culture: of creative literature, experimental theater, academic criticism, and the social sciences. The high culture makes its agenda and its living out of provoking culture wars: questioning established certainties, exploding hallowed myths, ridiculing conformity or piety, and exposing the flawed nature of revered figures. Thus, we are reliably informed that Thomas Jefferson cohabited with his slaves; Abe Lincoln was a manic-depressive, a closet racist, and perhaps a closeted homosexual; George Washington may have cheated on Martha. But the high culture goes way beyond such gossip-y nihilism; it is revolutionary against the national culture. While degrading the founding legends of its own society, it idealizes and elevates the legends of the enemy. Thus, the wardens of high culture have trashed not only our founding figures, but our founding myths of Democratic statehood. As depicted by them, America does not stand for a singular goodness, a redeeming idea of freedom in the world, but for a singular evil: it is a monster among the nations, born in the genocide of the Indians, the enslavement of the Blacks, the expropriation of the Hispanics. In more recent times it is not celebrated as the nation that gave the coup de grace to Hitler and Tojo; instead, it is condemned as the butcher of Hiroshima, the instigator of the Cold War, the Amerika of Vietnam, and the homeland of McCarthyism. Thus In our American case, the high culture typically reverses the moral polarities: it grants privileged, even mythic status to the various racial or sexual minorities that can plausibly claim to be victims of oppression by the majority culture. In Charles Krauthammer's terms, deviancy is defined upwards: the dope-head may be exonerated as a victim, or even praised as a heroic rebel against middle-class stodginess, while the responsible but undramatic bourgeoisie are accused of driving him to self-destruction. When the high culture is ascendant, it

leads to hectic excitement, a-historic secularism, a multitude of foundation grants, an appetite for novelty, life-ways experimentation, and patronizing irony — "one-upsmanship" as a personal style. But the high culture does not provide even its stars with lasting psychological comfort, it does not engender identity, and it turns out offspring who typically write books detailing the neuroses of their celebrity parents. Nevertheless, in contemporary American society the high culture is increasingly triumphant: it dictates the style and interests of much of the media, of increasingly illiberal education, even the content of religious ritual and the sermons of church men. The shrill grievances of its victims are enshrined in myths that drive out the founding myths of America. While we cannot lay all the blame for the deconstruction of identities on our high culture, it does lead the attack. Along with materialism, urbanism and the degradation of family life, it is a prime mover in the deculturation of America.

But whatever the culprits, instead of clear identities the new generations increasingly show the stigmata of identity failure and breakdown, plus attempts at remedy which lead to further social and personal pathology. Identity failure increasingly takes the negative form that Erikson characterized as "Ego Diffusion" — the syndrome that appears when youthful candidates for identity refuse the essential jump. Convinced that critical decisions will limit their options, they will not make the decisive choices — to include and to exclude — that are essential to identity formation. By refusing to choose, they can hold on to the illusion that they are all-including, capable of being anything and everything. Many become existential dilettantes — consumers of all possible life — styles, no matter how mutually exclusive these may be. Much like our current president, they try to be, all at once, lechers and feminists, masculine and feminine, hetero- and homo, sybarites and socialists, Dope-heads and revolutionaries, yogis and commissars. Alternatively, they become addicted to those psychedelic substances that confirm the user's hectic fantasies of being everything and having everything. Ego diffusion can sponsor happy times for affluent youth — until they discover, too late, that not choosing has

all the consequences of a disastrous and by now irrevocable choice. In no way is it a way-station to adulthood.

Identity Diffusion has a more ominous fall-out: now we get the appropriately named "Identity Politics", centered on the prefabricated pseudo-identities sponsored by the swollen rhetoric of victimhood. Erikson wrote of the "synthetic" identities — usually taking the form of extreme nationalism — adopted as an emergency measure by youths in danger of psychic fragmentation. What we are seeing now is the emergence of equally pseudo — identities based on deculturation, on social rather than psychic fragmentation. In societies which provide armatures for true identity development, young adults declare themselves through their special skills and powers — through the callings that they have chosen, and that have chosen them. But In identity — absent cultures like our own, young individuals discover themselves in the special foods, the strange sex, or the lurid oppressions that have been imposed on them by fate or their appetites. What was once seen as addiction or pathology is redeemed; converted, via victimhood, into the stuff of off-the-shelf identities. There are psychological bonuses to be found under the sign of the victim, experiences which temporarily satisfy the hunger for identity. Thus, the self-baptized victim does inherit a shared legend of historic injustice; clear allies as well as clear enemies; a comprehensive, all-explaining dogma, and a sense of shared purpose with one's fellow sufferers. But here the resemblance to true identity ends: victimhood leads also to a Manichean world view, to easily justified rage, to reliance on violence as a political tactic, and to the dedicated collection of injustices. True identity binds its holder to serve the laws of a discipline; the victim identity gives one the facile justification — "now Gods stand up for bastards" — to evade discipline, to indulge yourself outside the law, and at the expense of the law.

As we are continually reminded, "the victims of racism are powerless; they cannot themselves be racists" — no matter how hard they may try, victims can do no wrong. But under that generous dispensation, it turns out that they can do plenty of wrong. True identity serves the law that it chooses to serve; but the wearers of

victimhood too often indulge themselves in lawlessness. They represent the sadistic route to power. But identified victims can harm themselves, and their cause, more than they damage others. Addicted to his own sense of grievance, the victim must act so as to maintain the condition of oppression that his self-esteem requires; the victim's narrative often becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy of chronic, self-inflicted grief. The victim identity is not good for kids, and it is not good for representative government. True identity at the individual level underwrites Democracy at the social level. The bearer of genuine identity requires teachers and mentors, but he has no use for princes. But Adolph Hitler, that Messiah of German victimhood, who released a Furor Teutonicus that tore the whole world apart, showed us how much the dedicated victim requires demagogues to collect injustices for him, and how easily he can be manipulated by these "advocates", to become the storm trooper of Fascism — Left or Right.

Those who have not made the stern choices required by identity will find it hard to make the risky commitments required by intimacy. The marriage ceremony used to contain the phrase, "til death do you part," thereby reminding the couple at the outset of their life together that one of them would probably witness the death of the other. Perhaps in order to avoid that grim prospect, there is a flight by the young to sexual consumerism, where one avoids whole, unique — and mortal — persons in favor of a standard, interchangeable set of limbs, organs and orifices. Finally, in our time, Intimacy is too often called on to substitute for Identity, such that individuals of fragile identity put very heavy demands on their burdened partners. They insist that the partner provide an unshakeable security — an assurance that finally comes only from the well-founded self. Our intimates are only human; they cannot be perfect, nor can they be guaranteed against loss. When illusion wears off, and these limitations are revealed, the affair or marriage usually ends, and the weary search for the "Good relationship" starts up again.

Any latent difficulties around identity and intimacy are exacerbated by the prospect of, or the entry into, the parental condition. It is at this point that

defections from adulthood have their most grievous effects. The parent who conserves narcissism for himself instead of conceding it to his child will show the stigmata of Generativity's dark side, which is self-absorption. Such a "parent" in effect conserves the prerogatives of childhood for himself, and incidentally withholds them from his kids. Precious to himself, he fusses over the details of his own care and feeding his career, his work-outs, his special veggie diets, the development of his own pecs, abs, and "inner consciousness". He takes care of himself in the same way that true parents take care of and indulge their kids. In brief, parents who cannot be adult raise kids who cannot be children. They rear the kind of kids who are becoming the scourge, not only of the target-rich schoolyard, but of the "grown-up's" world as well. Ultimately, as regards the fate of American Democracy, today's Lumpen-parents may be rearing up militias for the *Lord of the Flies*.

The Return of Adulthood?

If sexual repression was the particular burden of Freud's time, then unbuffered, unmitigated narcissism is becoming the scourge of ours. We have even reached the point where individuals demand the right to terminate themselves — usually via "assisted suicide" — because their bodies are no longer perfect. But despite their special vulnerabilities to the temptations of decadence, democracies do have great recuperative powers. Given our strong traditions of free discourse and the orderly transfer of powers, democratic societies can — without provoking holy wars — produce counter-cultures against decadence, and seemingly unstoppable social pathologies can generate their own anti-bodies. And we do see hopeful signs that our national slide down the slippery slope of deculturation is being braked and slowed. Violent crime is down, as are out-of-wedlock births. Some cities are being rescued. Perhaps most important, while many children of divorce avoid marriage, many others strive to create, for their own kids, the kinds of homes that their own parents should have provided for them. Via identification with their own well-nurtured kids, they re-parent themselves — and earn a second chance to be good adults.

Robinson Jeffers once wrote, "When the cities lie at the monster's feet, there are yet the mountains." And indeed, significant constituencies are to be found out there, generated, paradoxically, by the very conditions that we deplore. Perhaps a worthy task for the politically incorrect is to help these mavericks coin their refusals, their opposition to decadence and deculturation, into new and trustworthy identities.