

SOME THOUGHTS ON MATURITY

*When I became a man I put away childish things—  
St. Paul.*

CHILDREN look towards adult life as to a Golden Age. 'When I am grown-up I shall do just as I like.' 'I shall never be naughty again.' They believe that truly adult life is reached when their majority is attained. Working-class children grow up sooner and for them the age of independence begins at fourteen when they go out into the world as wage earners.

Before adult years have come the dream has faded to some extent. Adolescents see with a clear eye and realize that their elders are not perfect beings. They notice the hasty tempers, the jealousies, and the lack of truth to which so many grown-ups are prone. They see that 'naughtiness' can be found in the adult as well as in the young, though often the children are punished for the faults that their elders excuse or ignore in themselves.

Maturity is not a state to which all adults inevitably attain. It is the possession of the few, and there are many who go through life with the outlook and reactions of children. This childishness must not be confounded with a childlike attitude. It is rather the immaturity of childhood without the charm of that state that is displayed and this is especially true of neurotics.

It is worth considering the various characteristics of childhood in order to discover what we mean by the opposite state of maturity.

Childhood is a time of dependence. The infant is dependent on its parents for its life, and without their constant attention it would die. For many years the psychic life of the child depends on their affection and encouragement. It needs affection and turns for it to the mother and father who are the centre of its world. It gains its first knowledge of love through sensation: the sensation of the satisfaction that flows from the mother's breast and the protection and warmth found in her arms. The first

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idea of love that the child receives is a sensual one. The wise mother gives all that is needed in the first years of the child's life, so that a sense of security is conveyed to it and its affections are not thrown back on itself. At the same time, she knows how to wean the child gradually from its complete dependence on herself, bringing it into contact with other persons in its environment, widening the circle to include friends from other families, so that when infant school age is reached, the child is ready to meet the social life of the community which it enters without undue fear. This is the first step towards maturity, and the future well-being of the child is largely dependent on the way in which it is made.

Consideration of adult life will show us a number of people who have never passed beyond this state. There are others who made the first step, with a fair amount of success, but in face of difficulties returned to this psychological attitude of dependence.

There were some who were encouraged by their parents to be dependent on them, others lacked security in their early years. These were never sure of affection; sometimes they knew it to be withheld, and so they go through life as infants, demanding the affection denied them, rather than as adults ready to give and receive love in a mature fashion. Both these classes of dependent adults require constant attention from their friends. They are spineless and wanting in determination, though often exceedingly obstinate. Their demands on their friends are insatiable, for they do not know the meaning of friendship, or the values of affection. Often they cannot earn their livings for they feel unconsciously that others should provide for them. Failing to secure the attention they need, such people will often become the victims of neurotic illness, which is unconsciously desired, though the conscious mind is distressed by its occurrence.

The child's concentration of love upon its parents fades with the years and whilst the normal person continues to love them, many other affections find their place in his existence and in time he is ready for the affection of

married life. He is able to 'leave father and mother to cleave to his wife.'

In contrast to this we find many men who are interested only in women who will take the place of a mother to them, many women who go through life seeking a father. Father substitutes are sought in priests and doctors, indeed in any man of an age and authority for the rôle. Often the sexual feelings of the woman are stirred by the father substitute, though this feature of the affair may remain hidden in her unconscious mind. Men can find women in plenty who are ready to play the mother to them. When marriage is based on such desires, the results are often sad, especially when the girl finds an elderly man whom she looks upon as a father and discovers after marriage that, like herself, he is immature, and hopes to have in her a satisfactory mother!

The woman who wants a mate is distressed when confronted with a husband who has the psychic dependence of a son or who considers his own mother first, saying: 'I should always put my mother before my wife and children.' Such immature individuals are quite unfitted for the responsibilities of parenthood and their children are bound to suffer.

The immature woman resents the responsibilities of motherhood. She has had a good time, the period of wooing was filled with dances, games and expeditions. Suddenly she finds that her movements are cramped, her gaiety is largely curtailed and perhaps her girlish figure is endangered. The coming child is met with resentment and dislike and the instinct of motherhood is not aroused. The immature man is filled with jealousy at the claims of the children on their mother. In later years he is jealous of the talents and youth of his sons, just as the mother dislikes to have her daughters about her. How many petty tyrannies, unnecessary restrictions of liberty, and bitter words are the result of this jealousy on the part of the parents. They feel that they had none of the good things that life gives to their children, the superior education, the greater liberty of the boys or the chances of

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money-making of the girls, and being immature they are jealous. They are children competing with children, rather than adults looking on at the lives of youth.

Young children have strong wills and an urge to power. They have little opportunity, however, of forcing their wills upon others. This is true of the spoilt child. Though he may get his way on many occasions, the time comes when his mother rebels and the immature woman who gives way to her child is usually a very undependable person.

There is also the over-strict parent, against whom the child is powerless. He longs to do, to feel his power, even if it only be the power to hurt. The powerlessness of the child and his inability to change unpleasant situations, will often result in temper-tantrums or tears. Both reactions are due to pent-up emotions, to instincts which are baulked and cannot be fulfilled. The child who is making his way steadily towards maturity will learn to meet situations in a more useful way. He learns to give up when it is necessary, to work for his aims where they are possible of attainment. The infant may cry or scream when he cannot button his shoes or build up his bricks in the way that he wants. The older child struggles patiently with his difficulties and overcomes them.

The immature adult reacts to unpleasing situations in the way of a child. He thinks that others are not giving him the affection or admiration that he requires. He feels that they do not submit entirely to his authority or pay sufficient attention to his dogmatic statements. He reacts to these slights by temper-tantrums. It is true that he does not shriek or lie on the floor and kick as a child would do. He has a larger command of words and his experience has taught him how best to wound. He fancies that he is an adult displaying his superior power whilst all the time he is merely a being with the mature brain of an adult, displaying the *immature emotional reactions* of a child. Sensitive individuals dread above all things the bitter tongue of a bad-tempered man or woman. It may be that something immature in their own composition bends be-

fore this display of pseudo authority. Bad temper often achieves its ends but at what a cost to personality!

Tears are the refuge of immature women, not the tears that are the legitimate outcome of true emotion, but the childish storms of weeping that are so distressful to the unsuspecting observers. Such tears will make the person at whom they are directed feel unkind though he may know himself to be in the right. He does not realize that the woman who weeps in such an easy manner is merely an adult behaving with the immaturity of a child.

The child is often cruel. This trait is not deliberate: he wants to feel his power, and if he be given some suitable outlets the cruelty will disappear. Adult cruelty, both physical and mental, sometimes has the appearance of being motivated by the same childish urges. To see an individual flinch under the lash of cruel words, to see a body torn by pain, can afford delight to the immature individual who realizes by this means the extent of his power. 'I can do this.' 'I can make this woman or child cry.' 'I can cause unhappiness,' are satisfying thoughts to the infantile adult, who longs to be powerful. Such satisfaction is often entirely unconscious and the individual finds all sorts of good reasons for his conduct. 'Children must be trained.' 'Discipline must be maintained.' 'Such ungrateful behaviour must be punished,' are some of the reasons given and the person remains blind to his unconscious urges.

After early childhood comes the period of adolescence, when the individual is disturbed by physical and psychical changes. He is restless and unstable, flying from one interest to another, impatient of authority and often given to violent affections. It is a period of growth when the boy or girl learns by the method of trial and error and breaks finally the psychic ties that have bound him to his family. His values have been established in early childhood. They should uphold him in this time of stress, and he should have learnt to reject the false and accept the true. If the adolescent be given opportunities for development and experience, being guided by the wisdom of his

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parents in supplying the suitable environment and companions, rather than by endless prohibitions, he will settle down to the stability of adult life. There are many, however, who keep through their adult life the attitude of the adolescent. They are always ready to adore some friend and the idol always falls; they rush into this activity and that, and find them all disappointing. Such people are the bane of all societies, religious and otherwise. They are wildly enthusiastic, but their enthusiasms do not last. They are unstable individuals, who bring disappointment to many.

Childhood is the age of phantasy. The child forms pictures, seeing himself as the hero of many adventures. The girl dreams of marriage or a career of wonderful riches and beautiful frocks. The day dreams of youth resemble the fairy tales and legends of olden times. Evil is always defeated, good is unmixed with bad, life flows on in perpetual happiness.

The mature adult has done with dreams and phantasies. It is true that he may use his imagination in literature or art, he may amuse himself with pictures of what he will do when he wins the Irish Sweep. But these phantasies are no longer confused with reality. He knows life as it is and works to attain his ambitions. Above all he knows that pleasure is never unalloyed, that joy is always mixed with pain. The woman finds that a career has many trials and that the success of married life is achieved largely by her own efforts.

The immature adult resorts to phantasy life for his satisfactions. He seeks always the perfect environment, the ideal career, the faultless friend. Hence he is perpetually disillusioned and thinks that life has treated him very badly. He wants to have his cake and eat it. Experience does not teach him the impossibility of such an achievement, and so he bears a perpetual grudge against reality.

The phantasy life of the immature is seen most clearly in the ideal of himself that is held by the religious adult who is psychically immature. He has read of saints and pictured himself as one, and he will seek to attain an ideal

that is far beyond him whilst he fails to work for the perfection that is in accordance with his vocation. One will seek to live an austere life in the world, forgetting the acts of charity which would be suitable to his state of life. Some will fancy themselves as contemplatives and forget that obedience and joy play a large part in the lives of such souls.

The married woman desires to live as a nun, making her husband's life a burden by her practices of asceticism; the 'perfect mother' will not give her children any opportunity for free development and both will refuse to accept either themselves or their true vocations. They seek to conform themselves to the false ego ideals that they have chosen, rather than to develop the personalities they have been given. Nothing is harder to part with than a false ego ideal, nourished as it is by pride, and yet there is nothing that is so hindering to the attainment of maturity. Often the individual breaks under the strain caused by pursuing his false ideal; neurosis or immorality will be the result.

We have considered some of the characteristics of childhood and a number of ways in which childishness or immaturity is displayed in adult life. We have yet to contrast the state of maturity and discover in what it exists.

The mature adult is one who has passed successfully through the various stages of childhood, developing normally in perception, feeling and will, until he reaches adult life and his whole being is directed towards the attainment of a goal. He is not fixated at any stage. From life that is centred in the home he passes on to the life of the school which prepares him in its turn for mature existence.

It will have been seen that immaturity is largely a matter of the emotions. A man may be brilliantly clever and yet be immature. The scholar is not necessarily a fully developed adult. On the other hand, the peasant who can scarcely read or write may be a mature individual reacting to all situations in an adult manner, and able to bear the responsibilities of life.

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The mature adult is fully developed in his sex life. He does not seek childish satisfactions and he is ready for the responsibilities of parenthood. Some writers appear to suggest that only the married can reach maturity. This does not seem to be true. There are thousands of Religious, let alone unmarried men and women in the world, who are completely mature, who face reality and use their personalities in the service of God and man. Religious do not seek their convents because they fly from reality and its difficulties and responsibilities. They have a special vocation which it is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. They have weighed the cost, and because they are mature they are able to live a celibate life without falling into insanity or neurosis. Such people have developed the life of the spirit at the cost of bodily satisfactions, but they are able to bring their whole being into harmony with their spiritual desires. A perfect body is not necessary to maturity. The cripple may be mature and the athlete in a state of infantilism.

The mature being is harmonized. He has passed through the emotions of childhood. He does not react with jealousy or bad temper to a situation that he may find displeasing. He has cast aside the phantasy life of the child and is able to face reality in himself, in other persons and in his environment. He is able to work towards a given end by the use of reason rather than by the display of emotions. He is not without emotion. He knows joy and suffering in a way never felt by the immature, but he does not become swamped by them and he does not use them to enforce his will. We have an example of this in St. Teresa, who seems to have been of a peculiarly sensitive temperament. Through good and ill she worked for her Foundations and met opposition with firmness and tact, but never with childish ill temper or tears.

The modern exponent of maturity often stops short at the maturity of the spirit in which he may not believe. Catholics know that there is no perfect harmony of the personality that does not include the interior life. It is the soul that directs and rules the life of the mind and



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emotions, bringing them all into harmony and directing them to their end. Alfred Adler has shown us that the mature adult is one who has passed through the individualism of childhood and become a social being, at one with his fellows whom he seeks to serve. True social life is found in Catholicism where all men are brothers in Christ Jesus and fellow members in the Body of His Church.

It may be objected that we are told to become as little children, and that therefore maturity is not an end at which we should aim. We are told to be perfect, and the perfect adult is not the childish one. There are certain characteristics of childhood that the mature will always retain. The wonder and the spontaneous joy of childhood should never be left behind. Those who deliberately aim at maturity are apt to be stilted. They have very little sense of fun and seem to be on their guard, fearing that they may lapse from the state of perfection. This attitude turns maturity into another false ego ideal, self-conscious and therefore unattractive. The mature person is not afraid of fun. He can enjoy a joke against himself, for he has no need to stand on his dignity. He keeps the wonder and simplicity of childhood and does not feel that he must be without delight or enthusiasm.

Finally, maturity is not a static condition. The adult cannot attain it and know that he will remain in that condition. In his progress from the cradle to the grave man is for ever changing, and maturity differs in each period of life. It is always possible to regress. Most people do so in some measure in the dependent state of illness. Many regress when life presses them beyond their powers of resistance. The mature may sink back with the rest, but they should be able to regain their previous condition.

There are few who are wholly mature, and if we realize the infantile state of many of those around us we shall be more ready to be patient with them and more able to give them the help that they need in attaining to the happy and useful condition of psychical maturity.

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