

Styles of Youth

By Robert J. Berger

No more goldfish swallowing

It should be clear that anything said about youth today should be said in terms of the society of which youth is a member. For it is the society, acting through parents initially, that determines the development and style of life of its youth. What type of a society does youth come from presently and what are some of the pressures that are facing the youth of today?

One of the first things that can be said about American society today is that it is a "school society." Basically the school, from pre-school to post-graduate, has been forced to take over or is expected to perform many of the old functions of family, church, and community. Parents often leave to the school many duties which were once under the jurisdiction of the family; and the church too finds itself out of touch with many members of the younger generation.

The school must also provide education, and the education has become the means to success. The more and better the education, the more and better the chance for success in an occupation. This is the most obvious and most severe pressure on American youth today.

John Keats, in *The Sheepskin Psychosis*, has written about the pressures for good education: "If you can get them in at four, you can breathe easy until they're eighteen. Parents have considerable reason to believe that a child will not get into a good college unless he has a good preparation . . . Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the parental anxiety is that it is not primarily concerned with education. It is concerned with jobs."

From pre-school to post-graduate or professional school the child is pushed toward success and good occupation. The value of education is pushed to the rear—success, affluence, competition become the way of life. No wonder college psychologists see many students who have little or no motivation for their school work or motivation for a career. By the time these kids are 18 or 19 they are burned out.

Bettelheim, in "The Problem of the Generations," refers to this problem: "Many a college youngster needs to ward off this undue attempt to run his life as his parents or teachers want, and longs to carve his own way. He decides that the only way to manage this is to drink, do poorly in college, or flunk out. This is not his original desire; he acts out of a necessity to prove himself master of his own fate."

This brings us to another major point. Bettelheim makes this observation: "Most serious writers on the problem of youth have recognized that youth's present difficulties in Western society are closely related to changed social and economic conditions and to the ensuing difficulty for youth in finding self-realization in work."

Modern technology has brought about such rapid changes in our society that it is difficult to hang on, to stabilize, or to have a sense of continuity in life. I don't

have to remind those of you who were young in the 20s, 30s, or 40s how greatly and rapidly this society has changed. We have machines and techniques for doing things at present that were completely unfathomable as little as five or ten years ago. How many of us understand the complexities of the modern computer or know what it is all about? We coexist with them, but most of us don't really understand them, nor do we realize how much they have really changed our life and our work.

All these complex instruments have brought about many time-saving innovations, but they have also left us with a sense of anxiety and a feeling of loss of control. This is evident in vocational and professional training. High schools and colleges cannot really make the claim now that they can train an individual for a profession. As a college counselor, I cannot really predict for students what the occupational world will be like in five or ten years.

Look at what has happened in the past ten or fifteen years. New titles and professions have risen so rapidly and the call for all sorts of specialists has been overwhelming. Who even heard of a systems analyst or a computer programmer in the 40s or 50s?

With the world of work changing so greatly and professions or specialties rising and declining in a matter of years, the young person can be overwhelmed in making a choice of career or occupation. How does one really gain any sense of identity in relation to the world of his work?

Kenneth Keniston states this very well: "Put in oversimplified form, if the main problem of traditional community is 'socialization' or 'fitting in,' then the chief problem of our technological society is the achievement of individual identity. In a technological society, every youth is confronted with a series of distinct roles, organizations, and institutions, each of which makes different and often conflicting demands. A medieval lad might choose between priesthood and peasantry, and this single choice almost entirely defined the rest of his life: his residence, his work, his marriage, his religion, his friends, and his values. But our society offers no such 'package deals,' no prefabricated and preassembled adulthood which can be donned like a suit of clothes."

To choose the right profession, the right vocation then, is a major task of youth. This commitment at the present time must be made with a great deal of uncertainty about what the future world of work will be like. In many cases

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the commitment is a tentative one, an unsure one, but it must be made. Along with this tentative decision goes a great deal of anxiety.

There is an additional point to make concerning this society from which our present younger generation evolves. That is its emphasis on affluence. The American youth of today grows up in a affluent and materialistic society. Most of his needs and wants are met with little effort, and he generally does not participate in the family economic undertakings. His main job is to go to school and be a good student. Chores are minimal and responsibilities light. If we look at the world these youths have known, it has been a relatively comfortable one. Most American youths do not know what hunger or deprivation are like. They just have not had to face these problems. (A note should be made here about black youths and black people generally. It is true that a great number of these youths have not really participated in American affluence and have been denied many of these experiences. But I think it would be accurate to say that the good majority of the black people want into this affluent society and do not reject it. Thus, affluence affects them as well—in that it creates a rightful demand on their part to participate.)

Most American youth grow up without a sense of contributing to the support of anybody. Their dependence on their parents or other adults is extended. A youth can be dependent on his parents until he is 24 or 25, and in some cases longer.

Our society delays youth from entering the labor market for a fairly long period of time. Education—and for men, military obligations—has got to be met before the gates are opened. This prolonged dependence in the affluent society leads of course to a great deal of resistance and hostility against the adult world. The most likely targets for this are parents and school administrators. Parents, in turn, exacerbate the situation by feeling justified in making somewhat unreasonable demands on young adults on the premise that the financial control gives them the right to do so. It has been said that the affluence and lack of participation in meaningful work lead to a feeling of restlessness and boredom.

It has been shown that often the most politically active students come from the more affluent and liberal homes as compared to those of their classmates. Thus it seems that the affluence from which many students emerge breeds those who oppose its values and methods the most.

These then are the three main areas of our society that must form the context of any understanding of present-day youth. The fact that we are an industrial and affluent nation, which places a demand upon young people for prolonged dependence and increased educational development while training for vocations unfathomable or undiscovered, certainly gives rise to a great deal of anxiety and unrest in our young people today.

The symbols of this unrest and extreme anxiety on the college campuses have been the alienated and activist students. By their actions, dress, and patterns of behavior these students, especially the alienated, have captured the headlines of the popular press and have been the subject of many scholarly articles in the professional journals. By no means do these students constitute a sizable majority or minority of college youth today. The amount of

publicity they have received, though, has seemed to the public to indicate that they are the majority of college students. This is untrue. What is true, however, is that these students in their behavioral manifestations indicate overtly what most young Americans adolescents and young adults feel covertly. There is a difference in degree of acting out and style, but not in the underlying causes.

In a recent article in *The Saturday Review*, Paul Woodring commented on "The Invisible Majority." Referring to the abundance of news stories on the activist and alienated students, he wrote: "Judgments based upon such news items do a grave injustice to the almost infinite variety of human beings with a college generation of six million students. Those of us who meet undergraduates everyday in our classes and know them as individuals get a very different impression. Most of the students we know are thoughtful, intelligent, and responsible human beings, and some are wise beyond their years. Because they are sensitive, informed, and aware, they are concerned about the state of the nation and of the world, but only a few want either to drop out of society or to start a revolution.

"Even among the demonstrators there are many who are opposed to violence but who demonstrate because they have become aware of injustice and are not yet in a position to do much about it except to demonstrate. 'What else can we do?' they ask plaintively, and we have no good answer."

Among the most significant national events that have affected the activist and alienated are: the series of horrible assassinations that cut down, one by one, those men with whom many youths could identify, politically and socially; the escalation of an unpopular and what many feel to be a "wrong" war; the realization that mere passage of civil rights legislation is not the panacea for those outside the mainstream of American society, and finally the growth of the multiversity and the obvious gaps between students, university administrators, and faculty and the recognition of much irrelevance in higher education. Some of these events affect us all, young and old, in many ways. But most affected is the generation just coming into its own, the generation in search of an identity, what Keniston calls the "Post-Modern" generation.

Both the activist and the alienated are reacting to the difference between what is preached and what is practiced. They have learned that governments and Presidents, in their own best interests, lie or distort the truth and that their parents may pay lip service to the higher values espoused by society but may not actually follow those dictates. Social change has been rapid in the past thirty years and parents who were brought up under one set of values have difficulty relating to the values now espoused by their children. Even though they may seem to endorse much of the post-modern way of life, their roots and their values tend to keep them from complete endorsement.

Keniston states: "This points to one of the central characteristics of post-modern youth. They insist on taking seriously a great variety of political, personal, and social principles that 'no one in his right mind' ever before thought of attempting, to extend to such situations as

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would possibly be in line. To fill their vacancies a few faces appear, for the most part deserving souls who for one reason or another missed out on earlier glory.

From the junior year on, it becomes largely a matter of endurance and holding the status quo. The prolific number of awards passed out at this time are indeed an encouragement.

Availabilities include Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities, Sooner Yearbook Personality, the Letzeiser Medals, and various special awards sponsored by individuals and business firms. There are scores of possibilities.

By this time those who have been in the race all along have such an enormous list of qualifications, compounded year by year, that they rule out any outside competition. The end comes and we once again have a group of "leaders." It is obvious to the large majority why some were chosen. They came to college with great potential and the motivation to be a campus leader. Some found opportun-

ity at their doorstep, others had to come in through the back entrance. But each, due to his outstanding personal qualifications, was able to profit from experience and proceed to honor and position he undeniably deserved.

What about the process he has just survived, though? Has he achieved status because of it or in spite of it? Has he progressed due to the pressure placed on him by his associates or might he have learned more at his own pace? Have his desires and whims been challenged and yet been free to react or has his motivation been placed in the student leader mold and baked to a prescribed degree? Has he developed the courage to open new frontiers or is he a "leader" who follows the crowd in return for their support? Has he acquired the understanding to continue a leadership role or does he merely know the system of rewards on one university campus?

As for the few who really are leaders, what have they gained from their college experience? Certainly the recognition they receive cannot be worth the struggle. Their status declines as they realize the number of less deserving persons who are accorded equal public honor.

Of course, reward should not be of primary importance to the campus leader. His positions of responsibility in the college training ground should ideally prepare him for future positions as a community, state, or national figure.

The process of leadership production can be told through the story of one campus leader. This enterprising young man went through much the same process described above. In his freshman year he pledged a fraternity. The next year he was elected to the Student Senate.

Everyone knows there's more to a

campaign than posters, handbills, and two-minute speeches. A wise candidate knows how to pull the proper strings and how to attract the block votes.

A personal friend helped him obtain an important chairmanship. In his junior year he thought the time was right. He ran for Student Body President, and with a few extra ballots, achieved his goal. He found opportunities and took advantage of them. He was recognized and honored as an outstanding campus leader. He soon became a reflection of the environment which pressured him instead of an individual in his own right. His leadership training taught him that it was much more rewarding to follow an established pattern than to fight the system. Today he has aspirations toward a top position in our society. How well is he prepared to meet the challenges of today?

Naturally, not all campus leaders are as stereotyped as the one above. Our university has produced many fine leaders in the true sense of the word. And, often, the system has encouraged leadership potential to develop. It appears, however, that these leaders, generally speaking, develop in spite of the system and not as a result of it. If the university community is to be the ideal model for future society and not the mirror of outmoded ones, perhaps we should rethink the process which produces tomorrow's leaders. □

Styles

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dealing with strangers, relations between the races, or international politics. For example, peaceable openness has long been a credal virtue in our

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society, but it has never been extended to foreigners, particularly with dark skins. Similarly, equality has long been preached, but the 'American dilemma' has been resolved by a series of institutionalized hypocrisies that exempted Negroes from the application of this principle. Love has always been a central value in Christian society, but really to love one's enemies—to be generous to policemen, customers, criminals, servants, and foreigners—has been considered folly . . . These youths have the outrageous temerity to insist that individuals and societies live by the values they preach. These speculations may also explain the frequent feeling of those who have worked intensively with student radicals or hippies that, apart from the 'impracticality' of some of their views, these sometimes seem to be the only clear-eyed and sane people in a society and world blind to the traditional gap between personal principles and practice, national creed and policy, a gap that we may no longer be able to afford."

The final issue is that of violence. This is a generation that has grown up with the specter of total destruction hanging over their heads. They have known no times in their lives when this was not so. Violence is all around—the military might and industrial complex of our society, the westerns, spy thrillers and murder

mystery favorites of television and radio, the potential for mass violence and rebellions on our streets, the daily dose of war and killing on the news shows that almost numbs us with the dull replication of its message, the shock of seeing a youthful President in the prime of his life murdered on a supposedly safe main street of an American city, the tragic slaying of our nation's leading apostle of non-violence in Memphis, and the recent murder of Senator Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles. This is a violent society! The hippies with their flowers and love-ins are reacting to this; they are trying to tell us something. The activists with their anti-war, anti-draft movements are also giving us a message. There is an increased sensitivity and awareness of the horror of violence in these segments of post-modern youth. Perhaps we would all do well to heed this message.

These are some characteristics of these two groups who symbolize so much to American society, the style of American youth. While it is unfair to generalize from these groups to the whole of college youth, I re-emphasize that what the activist and alienated are pointing out so clearly are traits common to most American young people, but in a much more subdued form.

Adults who find themselves dismayed by what they view as horrible

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behavior of students might do well to think about this: One of the few opportunities a youth has to enter a period of psychological moratorium in this complex world of today is in the years of college. This is his last chance to try out different roles, to develop himself as a contributing and worthwhile member of society. Colleges may sometimes seem lax in their administration of rules and regulations, but although I agree that standards must be kept and the line drawn, there must still be enough flexibility within the system to allow the individual to grow and to become. If you have patience, wait and see. I think you may agree that this is a remarkable generation of youth. We all have much to learn from them. I learn every day.

Let me close with a favorite quote of mine from Erik Erikson: "To enter history, each generation of youth must find an identity consonant with an ideological promise in the perceptible historical process—but in youth the tables of childhood dependence begin slowly to turn—no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life, whether individual or collective. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented by the old and as presented to the young has meaning; and

it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm them and joining the issues, to renew and regenerate, or to reform and rebel." □

Campus Notes

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football tailback for the past three seasons. *Robert L. Bailey* is the new director of registration under Dr. William C. Price, dean of admissions and registrar, and *Joseph H. Lawter*, principal of Oklahoma City's Central High School for the past eight years, has been named to head the human relations studies center, part of the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education.

Obituary

Death has taken three retired faculty members this summer. Dr. Nathan Altshiller Court, professor emeritus of mathematics, died July 20; Dr. Helen Brown Burton, for twenty-three years director of the School of Home Economics and for whom the home ec building is named, died Aug. 23, and Dr. Arthur N. Bragg, professor emeritus of zoology, died Aug. 27.

Court, who was 87 at the time of his death, was a world renowned mathematician who pioneered the college course work in geometry. When he began university teaching in 1913, Euclidian geometry was taught at the high school level only. At OU from 1916 onward, he urged the establishment of an upper level course, taught it, and developed the outline and basic

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