



# The Youth of Our Day

by

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All over the world during the past decades the problems facing youth have reached center stage. Youth violence is often in the news. The older generation is helpless in relation to both “criminal” youth and the more legal ones.

What do youth really want? Is it a revolution against all of the “old ways” or do they want something new? Many observe the way youth react to society from purely pathological perspectives. They say, “Youth do not want anything new at all. The youth today are sick. We need to find the cause and prepare a cure.”

Others believe there is no special problem with youth. Youth have always acted this way from time to time. The only thing that has changed is the outer form, which is now considered modern.

Often Socrates is quoted (from roughly 400 BC): “Our youth love luxury. They have bad manners; they have contempt for authority and no respect for their elders. The children of our times are tyrants. They do not stand up when older people come in the room. They talk back to their parents, chatter when others are present, gulp down food and tyrannize their teachers.” Already 2400 years ago!

Now it is very superficial to simply say: That is the way it was when Socrates lived. It has always been that way. No, it has not always been that way.

First of all, it is not difficult to prove that in the course of history, there have been many movements that swing back and forth many times

between a strict education and a slower arbitrariness. Secondly, youth opposition and youth disturbances on a large scale appear every time a culture has passed its zenith. As long as a culture is new and “young,” it progresses forward and the youth work together with their elders’ initiatives. Only when there is something old, something that has been that the elders want to retain, do the youth oppose them instinctively. They want to create something new.

Once we have considered all of these general observations, are the problems of youth sufficiently illuminated? Or does something remain that is perhaps the most important topic of all?

Over the past sixty years a displacement in maturing has taken place so physical/sexual maturity occurs two or more years earlier than in the past. If the age for soul maturity or personality development were correspondently displaced, the health of our youth would be less endangered or changed. It would be simply a displacement in time. But that is not the case. To the contrary, the soul maturity of youth has also been displaced, but in the opposite direction. It is delayed.

The result is that a youth’s total situation is more vulnerable than ever before. They become physically mature without the corresponding grownup soul maturity. Further, in this extremely sensitive and vulnerable situation, our youth are exposed to a storm of impressions from the outside—advertisements, film, newspapers, TV and computer games—and more overwhelmingly, from a technological world of motorcycles, airplanes and cars.

Therefore our youth have a different starting point than previous youth. While the inner condition is more influenced, more exposed and more immature than previously, the outer situation is more aggressive, more disharmonious and confusing than earlier.

In social life youth meet an exaggerated specialization and automatization. The ideal is that society shall function as a well-greased machine, wherein the separate parts function with full precision.

In a recent newspaper article, a doctor reported the following incident: One evening he arrived at an accident. A trailer had hit a man. The police made sure the people who arrived at the scene were kept at a distance. In the middle of the crowd lay the injured man but no one was attending him. The doctor raced forward but it was too late. The loss of blood was too

great. A simple bandage would have saved his life, but no one thought of it, not the police nor anyone in the crowd. He was to be taken to the clinic. The doctor arrived surprisingly quickly but he was a few minutes too late.

This is obviously an exaggerated example, but it shows a basic attitude among the general public: Hold back and let the paid specialists do the work. The spontaneous, voluntary, unpaid humane effort has become more the exception. More often it is considered strange and even laughable, not to mention liable. “What do you have to do with this? Is it your job? Are you paid overtime?”

That is not the youth but the adults who are speaking. It is the elder generation that has formed society so this tendency dominates. It is the necessary consequence of a society that does everything possible to be totally automated.

Is this the whole story? Do the youth have anything to offer in contrast to the perfect, automatic machine that runs society? Yes, they do. And this is where their so-called rebellion enters the picture. The uncontrolled explosions of joy in destroying things are not directed at a certain goal because there is nothing specific they want to destroy. It is not rebellion against a particular tyrant. In that case it would have to be against the well-greased machine we call society. It is not due to social repression or social suffering. Often the most well-off youth are the leaders.

It is the unbelievable love for speed. You cannot buy it. If so it would be very expensive. But it is wild, dangerous, meaningless and therefore very tempting for youth who actually long to act with zeal and conviction, a fully defined activity with no compromise involved, by which they can challenge their limits, their entire existence.

The uncontrollable, anarchistic, excessive actions—in destructive rage, outrageous speed or sexual experimentation—must be seen against a background of the nihilistic worldview that the elder generation presents to the younger generation in thoughts, words and actions—two world wars with increasing destruction and a threatened third world war with unimaginable consequences for all mankind. The elder generation created this. Instead youth are offered a more or less well-paid job with full retirement benefits. This is the starting point for our youth?

The logical consequence should be that youth say: We want to do it completely differently than the elder generation. We have no reason to

seek revenge from them. They are not worth it. And we have nothing to learn from them.

Where is the new, positive direction in which youth may head fully committed, with no fear and where they can engage all of their disposable forces? Did the Nazis have it? Some of Europe's youth believed so and engaged fully. They were disappointed and Nazism was exposed in all of its gruesome inhumanity. Did the communists have it? Another group of youth thought so and entered it with no reservations. It too was also exposed in all of its relativism and merciless tactic.

Where are the unconditional, wholesome ideals? If youth in a nihilistic society discover an ideal they can totally connect with, there are two other alternatives they can be led into unconsciously. One alternative is the well-known excessive experiences that affect them almost ecstatically in short-lived explosions of joy. The other is to find the best insured, bourgeois job where one aims at holding all of the world's problems at a distance from one's own private life, and pretend that problems do not exist because one chooses not to see them, like an ostrich that hides its head in the sand because it is afraid.

James Dean was killed in a car accident at the age of twenty-four. The person driving towards him caused the collision. Dean did nothing wrong other than drive at an outrageous speed. For many years before and after the accident, he was the number one idol in Europe and America. People admired him like a god. In many cases you could consider it a James Dean "psychosis." Such ideal idols are typical among youth. Youth want ideals. Without genuine ideals youth lose themselves and turn old at an early age.

Who is considered an ideal is no coincidence. If you know who a youth's ideal is or what their ideal is, you have already learned very much about that person. In the ideal you recognize yourself on a larger, more refined scale. In the ideal you view hidden possibilities that are not yet achieved. In the ideal you feel your deepest life force strengthened.

What was James Dean's life like? He lost his mother at the age of nine. It was as if his entire life broke into pieces. From that point on he was derailed. Who of today's youth are not derailed in one way or another? Who are not in reality or in a deeper sense "parentless" in our day? He wanders restlessly from one activity to the next. His talents show great promise. But where will he find what he really wants to do? All the time he longs for something new, for the "real" goal.

Which of our youth does not have this restless striving, this longing? For a young, vibrant youth, would not a specialized profession be merely a narrow room that in truth would only increase his eternal longing?

Every youth that is not yet broken or faded has this eternal longing deep within his soul. If it is not acknowledged and grasped consciously, it must break down all barriers and run amok in wildness.

James Dean fought desperately with this. His friend, Will Bast wrote down the following text about him:

I want to grow out of this totally meaningless, little world that we live in. I want to leave it all behind, all these narrow thoughts on meaningless, small things—things that will be forgotten a hundred years from now. SOMEWHERE THERE IS A PLACE WHERE EVERYTHING IS HUGE AND MEANINGFUL. I will try to achieve that level and find a place where I can approach completion, a place where this whole dirty world should be, could be, if we took the time to learn.

To a friend who wrote television programs, Dean said:

You move too fast, you always talk about sales and who has an idea that can be sold. You should rather try to write without ulterior motives. That work is more important. It is the only way you will find what you are longing for. Satisfaction lies in creative activity, in work, not in final results.

The last words to his friend Will Bast before the car accident were: “Never forget that what is meaningful is not visible to the eye.” This was not an accidental, spirit-filled comment. It was a basic truth that he reached through many battles in life and which he expressed differently in the following radical, apparently nihilistic, but in truth consequent and brave comment: “Death is the only thing that remains that deserves respect. It is the only unavoidable, undeniable truth. Everything else we can doubt. But death is the truth. Within it lies mankind’s only nobility. And after that mankind’s only hope.”

Throughout James Dean’s short life we find a feverish, restless striving, an inextinguishable ideal flame that burned inside him.

Everything that appears “to the eye” was for him a mask. In distain he threw off mask after mask. But what is the ideal? For him all moral and religious ideals that are passed down were empty phrases. Haven’t the elder generation’s results already irrevocably proven that? But he cannot throw away the ideal force. To do so, he would have to throw himself away. When the ideal force does not find new content but merely burns, it is consuming. All it longs for is, in reality, death that destroys all masks.

In James Dean we find at a climax, on a larger scale, the problems that arise within the desperate starting point for the youth of our day. We cannot expect that a large majority of youth will pass through this catastrophic situation without a partially crippled condition, where the human core is lost or is repressed for a long time. We can expect nothing more than the desire to disappear in a crowd, a tribe that appears attractive when youth are faced with a life situation where the essential takes place in their own inner lives, “invisible to their eyes,” continually standing face to face with death that destroys all masks and empty words.

With that much more tension and expectations, we must look to the few youth in our day who have the power to go through this crisis with their entire humanity intact, safe and sound. They will have passed through a “trial of youth,” a purification that no previous generation has had to pass through.

In ancient times (and today in native tribes) youth were forced to go through challenging, bodily torment before they were accepted into adult society. These practices belong in the past. But the trials our youth experience today are in truth harder and more revolutionary than ever before. They lie within the entire life situation. Those who pass the trial are those who will create the core of mankind’s further development. They will be known in the coming centuries. They are the few who take their inner development, their inner self-education in their own hands. They are the few who, in the midst of daily turmoil, victories and defeats, find the *place where everything is huge and meaningful*.

There you can be a whole human being. There you find the productive area where the entire future is before you and within you, because it relates to the future like the seeds of a plant relate to the plant’s entire life. There you find the place where people meet other people who are also on the way to creating the future and where everyone is “young,” whether they live many years after birth or not.

In this place the generations work together. It is the place where the culture of our day is not a decadent culture or a culture that has passed its zenith. In this place the culture of our age is part of a “young,” developing epoch that is just beginning to unfold.