THE END OF CHILDHOOD

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I EXPECT that readers of this article have stood on the threshold of adulthood, looking into a world they were reluctant to enter, while knowing at the same time that the world of childhood had gone. Yet, however universal this feeling may be in western style societies, the particular moment when an individual child has this realization is a new experience in life, and because it is new, it requires more than a casual adjustment. The end of childhood is really not just one event, but rather a whole series of happenings which take the child away from the familiar world towards the larger, more complicated, unknown world of adulthood, of being 'grown up'.

The more obvious aspects of this watershed in life are the physical changes associated with the onset of puberty. In themselves, these changes are not usually unexpected, although there is much evidence that lack of previous information can make first menstruation difficult for some girls. What is often more difficult for the person leaving childhood to cope with is the inevitability of what is taking place, the sense of hesitation and inadequacy about this new direction which he or she is being compelled to follow. We, who have lived longer, have experienced the continuity between child and adult, but many children at this stage of their lives have an enormous sense of loss. Thus, for example, Simone de Beauvoir:

> There was only one thing that sometimes cast a shadow on this happy state (i.e., childhood)): I knew that one day this period of my life would come to an end. It seemed unbelievable. . . . But my distress had a more profound significance. In that sad corridor I realized vaguely that my childhood was coming to an end.[1]

Long before various psycho-analytical schools had accustomed us to think of the importance of early childhood experiences in relation to later growth, the continuity between child and adult was commonly accepted. Children in nuclear families may have had difficulty in *imagining* their parents and grandparents as 'young', but their simple questions, 'Were you a good girl, Gran, when you were little?' showed an almost instinctive sense of the continuity between child and adult. In a very important sense, even well after

childhood, the child in each of us should be alive. I have a fond memory of Pope Paul VI a few months before his death which illustrates this point. In a regular audience in the Sala Nervi, there had been the usual slow procession down the central aisle while enthusiastic pilgrims applauded. It was late spring, the time when some of the travelling circuses return to Rome. Suddenly, the now vacated central aisle was full of circus performers, with acrobats cartwheeling down the aisle and somersaulting on to the stage. And the Pope, immediately before the centre of all the attention, became a child again, clapping his hands together, his face illuminated with delight, his body shaking with laughter just as was that of the five-year-old child on his father's shoulders next to me. We were all children again at that moment.

If leaving childhood has a certain inevitability about it, and if the physical changes of puberty provoke emotional reactions of uncertainty in the growing child, it is important to remember that these changes also affect the way in which parents and other adults treat young people at this stage. The uncertainty is not only on the side of the adolescents. Let us consider some instances, the first with boys and the second with girls.

For over a thousand years in western Europe, there has been a special place accorded to boys' choirs in liturgical services. The artlessness, purity and strength of the unchanged boy's voice has attracted the attention of all the composers in the mainstream of music — Palestrina, Vittoria, Lassus, the Tudor composers, Purcell and so on to Peter Maxwell-Davies's 'The fires of London'. Peter Brook made a brilliant use of this aspect of the boys' choir in the film of Golding's *Lord of the flies*. In the first sequence of the 'tube' flying through the storm before the crash, there is the ethereal sound of the boys' choir singing the timeless *Kyrie*. Later, we are to hear the same voices — the once disciplined choir — singing to the same melody, 'Kill the pig!' as they descend into barbarism: the voices that typified 'innocence' and pointed to another 'world' herald the *corruptio optimi*. Anyone who has worked with boys' choirs at this stage knows that the boy's treble voice often has a particular strength and beauty before it 'breaks'. Often enough, this is a dramatic moment for a twelve or thirteen-year-old at the peak of his prominence and usefulness in the choir. The years of creating living music and being introduced actively into the choral repertoire come to an abrupt and final end. One can understand to a certain extent, how the aberration of castration of some boy choristers found a

certain justification in a misguided zeal for the preservation of something beautiful. But the loss of the voice is final, and the once prominent boy chorister has to accept to be another hoarse-voiced adolescent.

For many girls, the experience of menstruation proves to be the dramatic happening which marks the end of childhood. As has been already stated, this moment can be of particular difficulty for girls who have in no way been prepared for what happens to them. One woman writes as follows:

> I found this physical side of growing up (menstruation) very irksome and a real limit to my freedom. I wished very much that I was a boy as I felt that they got out of it all so lightly. It still irks me that the beginning of menstruation was, for me at least, an occasion of alienation from my mother.[2]

Simone de Beauvoir expresses two different feelings at this moment in her life:

> Worried, and feeling somehow guilty, I had to take my mother into my confidence: she explained to me that I had now become a 'big girl' and bundled me up in a very inconvenient manner. I felt a strong sense of relief when I learned that it had happened through no fault of my own; and as always when something happened to me, I even felt my heart swell with a sort of pride.[3]

The importance of this moment in life is expressed by the same author when she writes:

> My body was changing, and my life was changing too: my past was being left behind. . . . I had always been sorry for the 'grown-ups' monotonous existence: when I realized that, within a short space of time it would be my fate too, I was filled with panic.[4]

For both girls and boys, this momentous change is not simply physical, but it is also a growth in 'knowledge' which projects them towards the world of adulthood. The time of 'non-knowing', of 'innocence' [ignorance?] is ended by the onset of puberty with its new, powerful and disturbing changes. Young people find themselves stepping out of what has been their only familiar world, to stand nervously at what they feel as a new, and sometimes frightening, beginning.

It is this aspect of 'knowledge' and 'secret' which is one of the principle emphases of Neil Postman's challenging book *The disappearance of childhood.*[5] Postman follows the thesis of Philippe Aries in

Centuries of childhood[6] namely, that the idea of childhood emerged only gradually in european history, and brought in its train most of the aspects we now find familiar: dress, separateness, schooling, protecting 'innocence' and so on. Nowadays, argues Postman, the very sources of this separateness, especially the various kinds of 'secrets' which allowed adults to exercise power and control over children, are being eroded or have already disappeared. All of this has taken place because of the greater access to 'knowledge' which characterizes a modern, western civilization. One of the most powerful agents of this change is the growth of television with its endless presentation of 'unprocessed' knowledge, so different from the more natural 'screening' processes when knowledge came principally through books and demanded a mastery of reading.

> It is clear that if we pass on to our children a vast amount of sensitive material intended for adults, childhood will not be able to survive. By definition, adulthood includes mysteries explained and well-kept secrets. If, from the beginning, the children know the mysteries and secrets, how are we going to differentiate between them and others?[7]

For the moment, let us defer some other considerations on this thesis to a later section, and concentrate on some of the characteristics of childhood which are upset by the acquisition of new 'knowledge'.

Some characteristics of childhood

If we now look at four important characteristics of childhood, we may be able to appreciate better what happens in the inevitable movement into adolescence. Let us think about the importance of identity, liberty, delight and security in relation to childhood.

Most children who have had a reasonably stable childhood have gained a strong sense of personal identity prior to puberty and adolescence. Stage development psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, see a pattern in the whole of life which is the passage through different 'crises' (in the root sense of 'crossroads' or 'turning points') to certain predictable stages. Successful achievement of these stages is necessary for a fully human life. Failure to achieve the tasks of each stage can leave someone deficient in that aspect for the rest of life. Four of Erikson's 'stages' refer to the period of childhood.[8] The first is that of a basic trust, first in parents and parental substitutes, and then in others. The development of such trust seems to be linked with the natural virtue of hope, that is, a confidence towards the future manifested by the willingness of the young child to learn to

trust others. The four stages of childhood require, for Erikson, the acquisition of the 'virtues' of 'hope', 'will', 'purpose', and 'competence' to the extent that there is a satisfactory resolution of the crises: trust/mistrust, autonomy/doubt and shame, initiative/guilt, and, at school, industry/inferiority. Even this summary enumeration shows that the child takes on a certain 'character' or 'identity' in coping successfully with these developmental tasks, as the psychologist calls them.

The second and third characteristics of childhood, delight and liberty, I have taken from Wordsworth's phrase in the *Ode on intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood*:

> Delight and liberty, the simple creed
> Of childhood, whether busy or at rest
> With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast.[9]

The concept of 'freedom' or 'liberty' is so characteristic of childhood that it need only be cited. But the sense of 'delight' may not always be so apparent, or perhaps we need a poet or musician to remind us of it. We associate this 'delight' in a special way with Wordsworth, and with all those people who have made us richer by their attempts to express something of those apprehensions of beauty, or the awareness of something greater than the material certitudes of childhood.

> I was only then
> Contented, when with bliss ineffable
> I felt the sentiment of Being spread
> O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still.[10]

Yehudi Menuhin, recalling influences in his childhood especially in relation to his mother, writes:

> At the time, hearing the Adagio [J. S. Bach's sonata in G minor for solo violin] for the first time. . . . I knew only that the music was very near to me and very moving. . . . We had shared an experience that marked us both.[11]

Readers of Herman Hesse's *The glass-bead game* will remember something akin to this in the account of the first meeting of the boy Knecht with the music teacher. Such delight often seems close to the surface during childhood, and seems related to the assurance of being loved, of being appreciated and of being understood.

'Any reproach made by my mother, and even her slightest frown, was a threat to my security: without her approval, I no longer felt I had any right to be'.[12] These words of Simone de Beauvoir already introduce the fourth and most important characteristic of a happy childhood, the sense of security. This is consistent with difficulties: it is certainly not something absolute or unchanging, but rather a consistent sense of being loved and supported as children. The universal appeal of Dickens and his many child characters — David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, the Dombeys and Cratchits — seems to be related to the fact that these children were being asked to bear more than a child should have to bear. We are moved by the absence of security in their lives. In an age when habitual thieves were having their hands cut off, and when young first offenders were being marked on the forearm with a brand, Jean Baptiste de La Salle and his first Brothers wrote in their practical treatise on education *La conduite des écoles* in 1705, the following words: 'Often it happens that children do not have enough strength of mind or body to endure the many difficulties they are called on to bear'.[13] Their observation, based on practical experience, shows the concern of most thoughtful adults that children should feel secure. Many childhood rituals, therefore, are important rites of initiation which strengthen this sense of belonging. Birthdays, Christmas, holidays, first communion and confirmation, can all be important points of consolidation of this security by providing successive entrances into a wider community. Such a feeling of security provides the framework which enables the child to imagine even greater things in the future. It would be altogether unfair to assume that *all* children share equally in the four characteristics enumerated. One of the respondents cited by Edward Robinson in *The original vision* is a sixty-six-year-old woman, who writes:

> Incidentally, one of my strongest feelings as a child was that of irritation at all the frustrations of being a child, together with the longing to grow up and realize my full potential in freedom.[14]

In his introduction to the work just cited, Robinson takes up the attitude first associated with Michael Paffard's 'Inglorious Wordsworths'; that is to say, it seems more likely that many people's memories of their childhood are akin to those recorded in *The prelude* or the Immortality Ode already cited. But it is important to see that Robinson considers this as something of great significance:

> I believe that what I have called the 'original vision' of childhood is no mere imaginative fantasy but a form of knowledge and one that is essential to the development of any mature understanding.[15]

The meaning given in the above quotation to the role of knowledge is an important insight, I believe. Children 'know' more than they express, and sometimes they are disdainfully impatient when adults presume they know what children are talking about. There are the 'secret' languages of childhood, often conserved in some kind of 'inner sanctum'. Even when childhood is being left behind, there is the sense of an 'essential self' which goes forward towards the responsibilities of adulthood.

What does 'knowledge' destroy?

The passage into adolescence from childhood is marked by the calling into question of the four characteristics of childhood, *viz.*, identity, liberty, delight and security. From the psychologist's point of view, adolescence challenges the young person with the need to retain a sense of identity just at the time when there is a tendency towards 'identity diffusion', that is, the taking of one's identity from relational groups and friends, even role-playing, so as not to feel isolated from the 'peer group'. Liberty, too, is threatened as 'shades of the prison house' enclose the growing child in so many ways. Our ordinary language gives us a good insight into this, especially if we try to hear the following expressions as they are heard by someone on the threshold of adolescence: 'Don't be a child!' or 'You're not a child now!' or 'Don't act childishly!' Delight, too, seems to be replaced often by a general surliness or moodiness. The former confidence and individuality of the secure child are often replaced by a suspicious kind of aggressivity, and a more conscious identification with others of the same age, including some people who had never been part of earlier childhood grouping. Initially, the sense is mainly one of loss.

If we had to select the main characteristic of the young person at this stage, it would be the loss of certainty. Moodiness, rebelliousness, unpredictable behaviour are only some of the various ways in which this loss of certainty finds expression. It is hard for many adolescents to feel they are really lovable; it is sometimes difficult for them to know just what is expected of them. This can be especially true when childhood has enabled them to construct ways of behaving strongly oriented towards conformity,

manifested often by various forms of attention-seeking or wanting approval. It is a time, too, when some school teachers and youth leaders can be more important than parents for the young leaving childhood, if only because such adults are more used to encountering adolescents in a group, and therefore see them in relation to their peers. Many parents are naturally ill at ease in face of the changes in their adolescent sons and daughters. Often, for instance, they assume too easily that the young really understand the physical changes they are undergoing, especially if they seem to have had access to the factual, informational side of such new knowledge. Many autobiographies suggest, however, that the knowledge is incomplete and often associated with locker room conversations and expressions young people feel incapable of sharing with parents. All of this contributes strongly to the general breakdown of easy communication with parents, so frequently noted by the young themselves when they feel themselves free to express how they feel.

There is an important spiritual side to all this, as well, and it is to this we now turn to try to suggest some ways in which adults can help young people at this time of their lives.

Some spiritual attitudes

The traditional catholic childhood lived in a practising catholic family and enriched by initiation to first sacraments, can offer a complete system for explaining the world and mankind's place in it. This is not to say that what the sociologist might call 'socialization into religion' is always a complete success, or even less that it is a sign of the presence of an active, personal faith. At this moment of 'crisis', it is not unusual that young people question themselves very deeply about the basic mysteries of God's existence, the relevance of God's law and so on. Part of the movement away from childhood can be the rejection, or putting to one side, of many beliefs once accepted uncritically. This is an essential part of growing away from what is now seen to be inadequate, and can offer the basis for a quiet dialogue with sympathetic adults.

A related, but sufficiently different challenge, emerges where the image of God developed during childhood becomes inadequate. There is no question of apportioning blame for the failure to produce a more lasting image. My reading of the many 'memories of a catholic childhood' kind of articles and books, has often led me to marvel at the secure, complete world which religion can offer the

child. But, if the image of God never gets past some simplistic presentations ('Baby Jesus' and the crib, for example), there is the risk of relegation, just as happens to certain fairy stories or a fundamentalist version of Santa Claus. As adults, we need to be willing to see certain kinds of 'rejection' as positive growth and a prerequisite for a more mature faith.

To express this in more positive terms, we should consider of prime importance how young people could have some possibility of an encounter with the person of Jesus. The liturgy could be a strong help in this regard but I believe this is more likely so in a pastoral centre or retreat with young people than it is in many parish churches. One thing is certain. It is the encounter with living witnesses to their faith which is most striking, especially where such witness invites to imitation without being a subtle exploitation of young people's idealism. The touchstone will always have to be the importance given to a genuine personal freedom which proposes rather than imposes.

Young people entering adolescence are often highly idealistic and respond enthusiastically to challenges, especially where this can find some practical focus and expression. That is why it is important that there be pastoral structures, such as youth groups, which offer an experience of togetherness to these young people who so often feel themselves very much alone. Activities and structures need to be flexible so that the young find things they can do and say without feeling themselves too restricted by unnecessary adult 'controls'. The apparently humdrum aspect of something like 'meals on wheels' can offer a stepping stone, for example. I use the expression 'stepping stone' because I believe one of the most important things we adults can do for the young crossing this threshold into adulthood is to help them to seek their own autonomy. But this is something which has to proceed by half-steps, by individual actions which help the young gain more confidence, and by the willingness to let them find their own personal direction in life.

The quest for greater autonomy is necessarily a very personal one, especially in cities in western style societies today. We have lost most of our traditional and even symbolic forms of 'initiation' and 'apprenticeship' and what we have gained have often been forms of identification with various pop cults cleverly promoted by the media. Even here we need to exercise a certain reserve before imposing arbitrary limits. The paradox of autonomy is that it can never be achieved by the young unless the general movement towards its

achievement is 'permitted' by adults! By 'permitted', I mean that the increase of a real personal autonomy is possible only to the extent that there is a corresponding 'letting go' on the part of parents and responsible adults. This is never a total abdication of responsibility, but rather a leaving of space so that the young can learn (as we had to learn!) that freedom is never total, and that mature use of freedom should be accompanied by a corresponding growth in responsibility. Sometimes this means that parents have to be ready to rescue certain situations, but always with a quiet, supportive understanding which is neither judgmental nor condemnatory. Besides leaving 'space', we adults need to offer our young people 'time'. Our first instinctive reaction to the suggestions of our young can be refusal. One such common crisis can be the protest of the young person against family attendance at Sunday Mass. What is important about this, is not the peremptory 'We have always done this as a family!', but rather the more adult approach of saying why we have always done this as a family. We hope to achieve the mature acceptance in faith of what is an important duty of a convinced Christian. Short-circuiting of the process which is necessary to arrive at this decision is no help towards personal autonomy.

Some tentative conclusions

Neil Postman's book, referred to earlier, concludes by asking if there is any alternative to this 'disappearance of childhood' in modern society. Two of his detailed questions have particular importance for the theme treated in this article. He asks: 'Are there social institutions strong enough and sufficiently committed to oppose the disappearance of childhood?'[16] 'Is the individual powerless against this decline?'[17] To the first question, Postman replies that the family and the school offer the greatest resistance to the trends he discerns. I think he is right, but only to the extent that both family and school prove to be resilient and sufficiently adaptable to uphold the values of a true freedom and the growth of autonomy. If family and school define their roles in terms of opposition to prevailing trends, they run the risk of promoting a specious maturity, which, like adolescence itself, becomes more identified with opposition than with a positive identity. To the second question, my reply is similar. The individual can always survive the mass-culture, but the price of nonconformity may have to include the testimony of 'martyrs', as Anthony Burgess suggests with such perception in *1985*.

There are some important ways of helping young people to make this personal step from childhood towards adulthood. The most practical thing is for parents and teachers to keep contact with the young. This is not helped by the kind of fussiness caricatured by the expression 'smothering', but there does have to be a real physical proximity in such down-to-earth things as shopping, household chores, sporting activities, and family outings. It was a very experienced mother whom I heard say: 'When I see my daughter pick up a tea towel while I'm at the sink, I know she has something to talk about'. Shared tasks and activities have the advantage of providing the kind of 'neutral ground' where people begin to talk to one another. At home, and at school, there is much wisdom and experience in the adage, 'few rules but clear ones'.

The end of childhood has a deep significance intuitively grasped by many going through it, namely that another stage of their lives is beginning. Our task is not to try to preserve them in a kind of Peter Pan attitude, but rather help them to carry over the spontaneity, joy and delight of childhood into their first glimpses of being more personally responsible young adults. The price asked of parents and teachers is the willingness to let them grow in personal freedom.

NOTES

[1] Beauvoir, Simone de: *Memoirs of a dutiful daughter* (Penguin Books, 1963), pp 72 and 124.
[2] Personal communication. [3] Beauvoir, Simone de, *op. cit.*, p 101. [4] *Ibid.*, p 103.
[5] Postman, Neil: *The disappearance of childhood* (Delacarte Press, New York, 1982. Citations translated from the French *Il n'y a plus d'enfance*, Insep Editions, Paris, 1983).
[6] Aries, P.: *Centuries of childhood* (New York, 1962). [7] Postman, *op. cit.*, pp 152-3.
[8] Erikson, Erik: *Childhood and society* (Penguin Books, 1963).
[9] Wordsworth, William: *Selected poems* (Oxford, 1932). [10] *The Prelude*, Bk 2, 1, 399-402.
[11] Menuhin, Yehudi: *Unfinished journey* (Futura Publications, London, 1978), p 48.
[12] Beauvoir, Simone de: *op. cit.*, p 39.
[13] La Salle, Jean Baptiste de: *La conduite des écoles*, Cahier Lasallien, No. 24, p 142.
[14] Robinson, Edward; *The original vision* (Religious experience research unit, Oxford, 1977).
[15] *Ibid.*, p 57.
[16] Postman, *op. cit.*, p 255 (my translation).
[17] *Ibid.*, p 259.