

Coming of Age—When Your Turn Comes

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Coming of age recognitions and rituals are as old as human culture itself. Many were elaborate and involved strenuous challenges and sacrifices—of animals, sometimes of humans. But you can relax, there'll be none of that here this morning. However simpler or complex the occasion, all were designed to recognize that those coming of age now fit into the community in a different way.

We've all heard the adage "The children are the future." Well, duh, of course they are in a literal sense. But we're not here to talk about survival of the species. We are here to talk about a life passage of young women and young men—represented today by Kira Santiago and Elizabeth Mallinson.

Good morning. Good morning, Kira. Good morning, Elizabeth. How are you? It's you I'm speaking to this morning. But, if it's alright with you, I'm going to let the rest listen in. Is that okay?

You're coming of age. What does that mean? In the context of coming of age—becoming a young adult—is the emphasis on *young* or is the emphasis on *adult*? I think it's the one in anticipation of the other.

I mean, obviously, you're not considered adults in our society, even though throughout the course of human culture you most always were. You can't get a license to drive. You can't even own a car. You can't vote. You can't marry or buy a beer. And your signature doesn't mean much—you can't waltz into bank and sign for a loan. That's been true your whole life, so what's different today

What's different is how we view you and, hopefully, how you view yourself. In a natural context, you have been our future since, well, since you have been—since birth. Today comes the realization and recognition—for you and for us—that you are now our future in a different, a much more profound way.

In those previous human cultures I mentioned, life spanned only a couple of brief generations. Lives were short and parenthood came early. Your turn to be an adult, to lead, came much sooner than it does today. Indigenous peoples still have a reverence, an intergenerational awareness formed in those times. They felt deeply their connection with the two generations that came before them, that were alive when they were born, and the two to follow, the two that would be alive when they died. A life saw only five generations, including its own.

We live much longer now, something on the order of five or six of those earlier generations. So we see several before us and several after us, two or three times as many as our ancient ancestors. We have a much greater perspective and can see the affects of living one generation to the next.

So the sense that each life adds to the next is enhanced. Your turn, your chance to lead, your opportunity to better the next generation and all to come after that, comes later in life, but your turn will come. There will come a time, perhaps sooner than you think,

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

when you will have the chance to affect the future. That realization is part of coming of age.

Everyone gets their chance in life. Some pass and choose to be spectators. That's their choice. Not everyone can lead. Not everyone wants to.

But others opt to engage and embrace the responsibility of leadership. That takes maturity, a sense of compassion, indeed a love of others, even or especially those unlike yourself. And it takes courage. It takes a lot of work—with yourself and with others—to become the change you want to see in the world.

Part of coming of age is a realization that actions have consequences. When you were younger you learned that after the fact, by experience. That can be painful. Most touch a hot burner only once. Some of us learn a bit slower or are not quite observant enough to put what we have learned into action. But eventually we learn to figure things out before hand, with reasoning rather than experience. That, too, is part of coming of age.

Accepting cause and effect, seeing that actions have consequences, is another part of the equation. Most see this coming in, but fewer see it going out. When something happens to us we respond, we react. Cause and effect. X causes Y. But what happens when we're the X?

The thing that some miss is that as soon as we're the Y, the consequence of an action, we're someone else's X. Knowing that what you do has a consequence in another person, that you effect other human beings, allows you to shape your relationships rather than depending solely on kinship or circumstances as you did in your formative years. Relationships are an unbroken chain and realizing that is part of coming of age.

Your turn to lead, to change the world will come, and you are entering the years when you prepare for that. And I hope you prepare well as a lot will be expected of you when your turn comes. We can look around the world and see a lot that is wrong. And you don't have to be a prophet to predict the consequences of irresponsible cultural behavior.

Our environment and our rights—civil and human—are at risk. The situation may improve before your turn comes, but I wouldn't count on it. There's a mighty burden looming in your future.

One of the most important questions you will face in the time between now and when it's your turn to take up that responsibility is, "Who am I and what do I believe?" I know that's a compound question but you can't get an image of one without the other. It's like a spider doing push-ups on a mirror—when one moves so does the other.

If you can get a grip on that or those questions—even a tenuous one which is all most of us ever manage—then you face the challenge of figuring out how to make a difference in this crowded and contentious world of ours. And once you get a grip on that—even a tenuous one which is all most of us ever manage—you have to decide where to begin.

You've been given a head start on who you are and what you believe. You've been well mentored in the most important part of that, which is how to go about it. Who you are and what you believe is up to you. You've been taught that and it's something you'll work on the rest of your life. In fact I think you'll find that that effort is one of life's greatest pleasures—one of it's most satisfying and rewarding undertakings. You can't work with others, let alone the world, if you don't understand how to work with yourself.

How to make a difference? I'm afraid I can't help you much with that, at least not yet. But I do think it will become apparent to you as you more fully realize your potential—as

you become more of yourself. But I can offer you some foolproof advice on how to begin. Always—always, Always, ALWAYS—begin where you are and work with what you've got.

If you're to accomplish anything—if any of us or if all of us together are to accomplish anything—it's essential that we begin from where we are and work with what we have. Not waiting until we're somewhere else or we have something or someone else, but starting right here, right now, with whatever resources are at hand.

That's what Felix Adler did when founding this Society and movement in 1876. And when he initiated the Society's educational efforts in earnest, just a year or so later, he said "The ideal [of ethical education] is to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals." Change the world and make it more moral.

That's a petty heavy responsibility he laid on you, to bring our culture closer to moral ideals. But if Felix Adler taught us to have faith in anything it is to have faith in each other—in our ability to create the kind of world we want through our own efforts. Adler had faith in you and so do we. I think you are up the charge he gave you, and I imagine your parents and teachers and mentors would agree with me.

Exactly one hundred years ago, another local religious reformer, Walter Rauschenbusch, who was for eleven years pastor of the Second Baptist Church in New York City's "Hell's Kitchen," thought that the conditions of life in America had combined to form an intense social struggle. In 1907 he had this to say about the state of affairs in what Felix Adler called this *blessed land of freedom*:

"The vastness and the free sweep of our concentrated wealth on the one side, the independence, intelligence, moral vigor, and political power of the common people on the other side, promise a long-drawn grapple of contesting forces which may well make the heart of every American patriot sink."

Well, that pretty much describes the situation today, a century later. So no one can dispute the *long-drawn grapple* of Rauschenbusch's prophecy. We see in our cultural today how the many pay for the ignorance and arrogance of a few. And that makes the heart sad.

But the real power of a democracy does not belong to the few but to the many. And the obligation to ignite the will of the many belongs to those who take up the long-drawn grapple of social and cultural reform. And that's where you'll come in when it's your turn.

You have the independence of mind and will, you have the intelligence and the education, you have been schooled in ethical ideals, and you have within you the capacity for a moral vigor so lacking and so desperately needed today. You are our tomorrow and that gladdens my heart.

When we look at you we remember these things, and we look forward to all the great things you are capable of and that we have faith you will bring about. When you look at yourself, remember all that you have been taught, all that you have become, and all that you believe. We're counting on that, too.

The opening song this morning, *Let There Be Peace On Earth*, is uplifting, as is the second, *This Little Light of Mine*. If there is to be peace on earth it will be through you.

So, when your turn comes, let your light shine and let it shine brightly because we're counting on you.

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