

Transcript Segment, Part 1
“The Tasks of Adolescence”

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So adolescence, what is it? I get that question quite a lot when I address this. And I want to simply start by saying I'm considering the long transitional space, the movement from childhood to adulthood.

Now sociologists and psychologists will subdivide that into sections, and that's their purview and their bread and butter. That's fine. And I find their work helpful, not to question that, but what I'm looking at is what's happening across this very long transition.

It's a very old word, adolescence. Some people will say it only started in the 20th century, but that's not in fact the case. It's been around since the time of Aristotle. I think there's first reference of him using it in bemoaning the fact that "they're so useless."

In it, it's always been understood as a time of movement and change, and I would suggest to you this is the kind of movement it is. We're talking about moving from childhood to moving to adulthood.

Now sometimes we know what that means. And that's one of the interesting things in the literature is to discover that when people are measuring the movement toward adulthood, nobody ever says what adulthood is. They usually pick exterior markers like you have a job, you live on your own, you pay your bills, whatever else, external markers. And I'd suggest that most of those external markers are largely determined by socioeconomic situations, not by the individual's ability or circumstance.

So I had to really think about this when I was working on my work, say well where is it we're going? If I know where the goal is, maybe I have a chance at helping people get there. So I paid attention more to what was expected of adults. And you notice it more when it's lacking.

Somebody gets older and you're like, what is with them? Okay, so pay attention to that. So when you're looking at children, you see in children a self-interest but it's an unselfconscious self-interest. They think they're the center of the world, but they don't think of themselves as thinking that they're the center of the world. They just act that way.

And in some ways, it's charming, and after a while, it gets irritating, but you're just like, "No, you're not the center of the world. " But that's what children do and it's natural for them. Their perspective is limited to what it is they can see concretely and most immediately affects them, even in later childhood.

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They have a limited ability to see cause and effect. You know? They have a limited ability to understand time. Are we there yet? And believing their parents were around the same time as the dinosaurs. So that's a natural thing of children. They have a limited capacity to see things.

But older children are able to follow explicit instructions within a limited frame of reference. They can follow your instructions if you tell them to go do something, but they may not know what the intention is behind it, unless you tell them explicitly. So pay attention to that.

Now adults-- think of the adults that you know and particularly think of the adults that you think aren't doing well. And notice that these are the things that you expect of adults. You expect them to consider the concerns of others, right? You expect them to anticipate and plan for long-term consequences, especially as it impacts the lives of other people. You expect them to follow through on obligations, even if you didn't check and say, you're going to follow through on that, right? You expect them to do that.

And you expect them to interact well with others, even without explicit instructions. You know, you expect a certain level of behavior when they walk into a room like this as to how they will behave and how they will interact with other people. So what I'm arguing is that, in fact, there's a lot of expectations for adults that have nothing to do with those markers. They have to do with that expectation.

And I suggest that expectation comes unbidden. It's not like you wake up one morning and say, "Okay, I think I'll be an adult." Usually, people have already been expecting it of you, if you're suddenly waking up one day and thinking that. And the reality is, is that, when you're failing in that way, people at a point will kind of sign you off and say, I'm not dealing with them anymore. I'm not going to hire them. Or if you have hired them, you're going to fire them because they're not able to follow through on the sorts of expectations that you have on them.

In very broad strokes, I talk about it as a move from an "instrumental" kind of engagement and seeing of the world to what I'd suggest is a more "relational" seeing of the world and ability to engage in it. And it's not simply an order of quantity in terms of what people have to know, it's an order of complexity. We need people to be able to engage in the world in a much more complex way.

And in that, what I'm saying here is that mature adults need to recognize and anticipate connections among people, ideas, and actions. So what we do as adults-- and you all seem kind of adult in this room-- what we do as adults is actually very complicated and it takes a long time to get here, or wherever it is you are. I won't speak for all of you. I hardly speak for myself.

So what I'd like to suggest is that adulthood-- and you can find this in the newest book-- shameless plug number one. So I came to define adulthood as "the capacity to be responsible within the context of relationships." And you and I know when we are behaving like an adult and you and I know when we are not. So it's not like it's a finish line that you cross and say, "Yahoo, I got here," as many younger people might assume. In fact, it's a way of being in the world.

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And so to be an adult is to have that capacity to do this: a capacity to be responsible for yourself in the context of relationships. And those relationships are varied. They can be with an intimate other, they can be with a family, they can be with colleagues, they can be with the person who's running the cash register at Star Market. All of these, in some ways, are relationships, and knowing how to behave appropriately and responsibly within the context of each one of those is, in fact, very complex work. Congratulate yourself if you find that you do it well most of the time.

In that effort-- so if that's adulthood, then adolescence is figuring that out. And I'd suggest that there are four tasks that are part of it. The first is to be able to recognize oneself as a person, right? That you're an agent. That you're a subject in the world. That you get to act and do things and you get to make decisions for yourself.

But it's also gaining the capacity to see other persons as persons. Not as stuff in your life. Not as the buyer of groceries. Not as the friend who will do things fun with you. That you're in fact a person with a life and a hope and dreams and interests and concerns of your own and a point of view.

And the other thing is to recognize the relationship that's between you and the other person. Now this is a tricky thing, because I might recognize myself and I might recognize Tom over here, my dean, and I say, "Oh, there's Tom. There's me." Or whatever. Okay, I recognize him as a person.

But I also have to appreciate that there is a relationship between the two of us. That sometimes I have to do things in benefit to the relationship, even if they're not immediately beneficial to me, like serve on some committee, for example. [CHUCKLE] But it's part of developing the relationship.

And it's not simply a matter of, as people first think of it when they first understand this thing about relationships, either I get my way or you get your way, it's realizing that what the relationship requires is this something negotiated in-between. That neither of us may get our way but what we're doing is in fact beneficial to the relationship. That's a very complicated idea and process.

So getting to know myself, getting to know another, recognizing there's this something between us we've got to negotiate, is very challenging. And the fourth task that's embedded in all of those is interpretation. I got to figure me out, I got to figure you out, I got to figure out the world, I got to figure out particularly what are people expecting of me and how do I respond to that expectation.

So to be an adult isn't simply to give people what they've just asked. It's to actually think about it and respond appropriately. So if you come to appreciate how much work you've done to get here, all of these-- the recognition of oneself, the recognition of others, the recognition of the relational space between-- and interpreting all of those accurately is extraordinarily complex work that we expect to take place during adolescence if you are to function as an adult. And there's very little explicit attention given to that work in most formal educational settings.