



Immaturity on Campus

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I have no wish to brag—well, perhaps a small wish—but the timing of my retirement in 2002 after thirty years of university teaching was exquisite. Smartphones had not yet become universal. Political correctness was still in its incipient, not yet in its tyrannous, stage. I did not have to undergo sex sensitivity training, which I could not have done with a straight face. In the classroom professors, not yet students, were still in control.

Signs that change was in the offing were evident when I began teaching in 1973. Not all male teachers wore ties and jackets, nor female teachers skirts to class. Teachers had begun to address students by their first names. (I cannot recall having been so addressed once through my undergraduate years at the University of Chicago.) Students moreover were now sometimes invited to address teachers by their first names.

I recall a young female student, on the edge of tears, during an office hour, asking why I had marked up her papers, as she thought, so severely. “Jerry [an associate professor in the same department]” she said, “is never so hard on my writing.” Hmm, “Jerry?” I concluded there was a good chance that “Jerry” had been, to use the Victorian phrase, “intimate with her.” Lots of that, I soon discovered, was going on, at least between younger male faculty and undergraduates. Not a good sign.

The first formal opening to the change in professor-student relations may have come with the advent of teacher evaluations by students. Such evaluations might be useful in reporting genuine pedagogical delinquencies—“He is always late to class, alcohol on his breath”; “She returns our papers weeks after we’ve handed them in, unmarked and uncommented upon”—but most, or so I found,

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of those I received, were trivial: “He knows his stuff.” “I like his bowties.” “What does he have against contemporary poets?” But, then, who ever said that students were in a position properly to judge the true quality of teaching? The only memorable evaluation I received in all my years read: “I did well in this course, but then I would have been ashamed not to have done.” Reading it I wondered what exactly I had done to induce that shame, so that I might do it again and again and again.

Student evaluations of their teachers may well have stimulated grade inflation, which seems to have emerged roughly around the same time. A teacher who was a “tough grader” figured not to get pleasing student evaluations; he might even find himself with low student enrollments for his courses. In any case, where once Cs were common and As rare, somehow the grade of C jumped up to B and As were more common than not. At the school where I taught a proudly left-wing teacher was said to give black students automatic As as an act of reparation. One quarter I would arrive for the 10:30 a.m. class I taught to find large, empty Dunkin’ Donuts boxes on the table. The teacher who preceded me in the classroom, I learned, passed out donuts to his 9:00 a.m. class, a sad instance, I thought at the time, of a teacher sucking up to his students. I hope the donuts received a strong evaluation.

I once had a call from the mother of a student asking how it was her daughter Kimberley received only a B in my course. “Kimmy always gets As. What’s the story, Professor?” she wanted to know. The story, I told her, was that in my courses B was not a dishonorable grade. I didn’t bother to add that in my own undergraduate days I had myself received a pathetic paucity of As.

Perhaps the real significance of student evaluations of their teachers was to allow an entering wedge for students to criticize and thereby seem in some rough sense the equal of their teachers. (For those who taught without tenure, poor evaluations could also be a deadly weapon used against them to block permanent appointments.) From complaining on paper, it wasn’t all that long before students, now supported by political correctness, began to complain about their teachers in person and in public: accusing them of sexism, racism, Eurocentrism, and whatever else they happen to have around the joint. Students demanding the right, in effect, to edit assigned readings—the comically called “trigger warnings”—passages in works or whole works that might offend their sensibilities (betcha didn’t know they had any) followed naturally enough. Let us not speak about the generalized demand that everything should be done to ensure that the university is a “safe place,” when once upon a time the complaint about

the university was that it was altogether too safe, too much an “ivory tower,” which was to say too distanced from the so-called real world.

Student evaluations of their teachers came about as a result of the student protests in universities during the latter half of the 1960s. The general student protest movement, which now slides in under the rubric of “The Sixties,” above all enshrined youth. “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” was one of its chief shibboleths. The effect of that decade on those who lived through it when young has, I suspect, been even stronger than the Depression of the 1930s was on those who came into maturity during it. The general aura of protest, of the righteousness students of the day felt about their attacks on what they called the establishment, of their unshakeable belief in the inherent wisdom of the young, never really left most of those who felt themselves part of The Sixties. Many of those same people went on to become university professors, administrators, presidents. Their sixties background, and the strong ideological and psychological residue it left, has made it all but impossible for them to come out against even the most egregious demands of current-day students. Not for them to insist that these demands are foolish, coarse, stupid, some (such as barring speakers with whom they disagree) opposed to the very idea of education itself—not for them to say knock it off.

All the new nuttiness on the part of current-day students did not come about exclusively within the precincts of the university alone. Something radical in the realm of child-rearing in the culture at large had prepared the way for an entire generation of university students to behave well below what once would have been thought appropriate conduct at their age. “Act your age” in fact was a standard invocation of an earlier day, one that was called into use perhaps at the beginning of grammar school and remained in use long thereafter. Another, alternate version of act your age was “Grow up!” always with an exclamation mark at its close.

But all this changed with the advent in American life of the “Kindergarchy,” or rule by children, ushered in by new, more intensive methods of child rearing. At the heart of these methods is the reigning notion of the utter preciousness and precariousness of the child, who must never be harmed—not physically, of course, but more seriously never psychologically. The Kindergarchy came in with what Philip Rieff has called “the triumph of the therapeutic,” in his book of that title. That triumph has, among its other conquests, replaced the emphasis on the development of character with an emphasis, in Rieff’s words, on “the richness of living.” Under the therapeutic culture, self-esteem has become the first order of business and, as Rieff wrote, “a sense of well-being has become an end, rather than a by-product of striving after a communal end.” The therapeutic

culture is, in other words, self-centered, one in which all are devoted foremost to pleasing themselves.

Nowhere has this been felt more keenly than in the raising of children. No other generation has been so mentally curried and worried about. Under the therapeutic culture one's children were understood to be delicate creatures, so easily injured psychologically, even permanently maimed. Kid gloves in one's dealings with them needed to be worn round the clock. The hovering parent, applying a full-court press on his children, became a standard figure of the day. Children were also now thought an investment of sorts, one that, one hoped, might pay off in social prestige. How grand to be able to say that one had a daughter at Yale, a son working for Goldman Sachs! How splendidly such things reflected on oneself, as a good parent, a grand person, an altogether successful man or woman!

The children under the therapeutic regime had to have sensed their own importance—an importance quite possibly new in history. Kids were coddled well beyond the ages they once were. This was evident in various ways, large and small. Fran Leibowitz noted the rising ages of children being conveyed in strollers, and remarked that the person who comes up with the first shaving mirror for a stroller was likely to make a fortune. One of the results of the extended coddling of their upbringing has been to make recent generations greatly impressed with their own significance. I can recall grading student compositions that radiated with a false and unearned self-confidence, the result doubtless of their relentless succor by therapeutic-minded parents, on which I had to restrain myself from awarding a D and adding, "Too much love in the home."

My own generation—those people born between 1930 and 1945—was brought up along distinctly non-therapeutic lines. So many of my contemporaries, I have noticed, have brothers or sisters, roughly five years older or younger than themselves. The reason for this, I have concluded, is that mothers then decided to have a second child only after the first had begun school. This was done at the convenience of the parent, not for the psychological benefit of the children.

Mine were excellent parents, honorable, good-humored, without the least meanness, nor in any way neurotic (or, as we should have said in the non-therapeutic age, nutty), but I always sensed that they had a life well apart from their interest in their two sons. (I have a brother who is, you will have guessed it, five-years-younger than I.) When my brother and I were quite young, our parents would sometime go off on vacations without us, leaving us in the care of a paid sitter who lived in the neighborhood (the redoubtable Miss Charlotte Smucker) or with a childless aunt.

I have no recollection of my parents ever telling me they loved me. I have no memories, either, of being hugged by either of my parents. But, then, I needed neither the declarations nor the hugs, for I was supremely confident of my parents' love. In exchange for full-time attention, my parents allowed my brother and me immense freedom: to form our own friendships, go our own way, make most of our own decisions, including where we would go to college. So long as we did not get in trouble, our lives were pretty much our own. Freedom in place of intense attention still strikes me as a damn fine deal, and a hand I continue to feel I was lucky to have been dealt.

My parents and most of their contemporaries were pre-psychological. If I had ever told my father I was feeling insecure about a task, a job, a relationship, he would have replied, "Face up to the problem. Don't be a coward." Insecure didn't exist as a category for him. As a small boy shaking my father's hand, I recall his saying, "You call that a handshake? That's a limp fish. A man shakes hands firmly." To be a man was from an early age the name of my desire, and also that of most of my boy friends.

Drivers licenses then being awarded in Chicago at fifteen, we early had the run of the city. By sixteen most of us were smoking. By seventeen, thanks to the sex-service stations (also known as cat-houses) in Kankakee and Braidwood, Illinois, few of us were virgins. We bet football parley cards; played poker and gin rummy (Hollywood-Oklahoma, spades double) for what then seemed serious stakes; drove out to the harness races at night; a few among us had bookies. This was very much in the then approved Chicago style, but the intention behind it all was to be a man, a grown-up, and as early as possible. Girls, apart from the gambling and whoring accessible to us boys, comported themselves as young women, adults.

We had no wish to be children any longer than necessary. We wanted all the freedom that adulthood implied. The poet Philip Larkin, whose parents had a less than happy marriage, reports the he couldn't wait to grow up. "I never left the house," he wrote, "without the sense of walking into a cooler, cleaner, saner, and pleasanter atmosphere, and if I hadn't made friends outside, life would have been scarcely tolerable." Larkin claimed he gave up on Christianity when he learned that the Christian heaven promised a return to childhood. He wanted no part of that return. He yearned for adulthood, and its accoutrements: liquor, long-play records, beautiful women, keys.

One senses that recent generations of Americans can wait to grow up—wish, in fact, to delay growing up as long as possible. One sees all sorts of dismaying statistics about the young living at home into their thirties and beyond, marrying late if at all, producing fewer if any children of their own. Some day-glo color

their outlandish hairdos, pierce their faces, tattoo their bodies, as if to announce they aren't ready for adulthood yet, and may well never be.

Alongside the self-obsession they display and the victimhood they claim, current-day students often shout down speakers whose views they don't approve, everywhere issue demands for different food, free birth control, elimination of student debt, greater diversity in professorial appointments; they claim sexual harassment, confront teachers they think insufficiently sympathetic to their causes; and generally carry on like nothing so much as children, badly spoiled children at that.

What is the response of the putative adults in the room—of the college presidents, administrators, professors—to such behavior? Best one can determine it is by and large to collapse, to cave into the demands of the brattish students. They nod and call for more “dialogue”; express the wish to continue the “conversation”; organize endless panels; claim, in the recent words of the president of Sarah Lawrence confronted by a group calling itself the Sarah Lawrence Diaspora Coalition, to be “grateful for the willingness of our students to share their concerns with me and the campus community.” One can imagine the students' reaction to such piffle: “Yeah, right, sure, Grandma!”

Panels meet, dialogue ensues, the conversation rambles on, while one awaits the next set of student demands. New deans and associate provosts are hired and put in charge of diversity, of inclusivity, of safety, soon no doubt of sexual satisfaction, transgender bathroom maintenance, and who knows what else. The beat, as the old disc jockeys had it, goes on, and is likely to continue until an impressively authoritative figure arises to cry out to these kids: “Enough! Cut the crap! Act your age! Grow up!”