

How Society Matures

By Sean McClennan

Without going into definitions, I think that we would all agree that there is something called *maturity* and that generally as they grow up, human beings go through different levels of it. I also think that it's fairly uncontroversial to suggest that how mature an individual is, is largely defined by their behaviour—how they react in different situations. And I think that we've all run across people whose chronological age just doesn't seem to be in line with how we think they should behave. "Grow up!" "Act your age!" "Wise beyond your years." You only have to look at the language to understand how true it is that the perception at least is there.

Applying definitions and measures to try to quantify maturity—well that's another question and likely to be much more controversial. But for the sake of argument, let's take the work of one psychologist, José Stevens; he outlines some fundamental principles of maturation and defines five levels of maturity between *Infant* and *Adult* in his book, *Transforming your Dragons*.

According to Dr. Stevens, as we mature, there is a general tendency towards wider experience and a greater capacity to digest the situations encountered in life. As people mature, they show a greater capacity to find peaceful solutions to conflicts; they demonstrate a greater independence of thought; they develop greater compassion and self-confidence; they become more respectful of the rights of others and they grow less fearful of the unknown.

Of course, youth does not always equate to lower stages of maturity, any more than age guarantees *Adult* behaviour. Life experience and education can accelerate maturation, and anyone can get *fixated* in their development. The following belief statements might characterize adults fixated at lower stages of maturity:

1 Infant

- My tribe, clan, or gang is everything to me. I couldn't exist without them.
- I feel lost without direction and people telling me what to do.
- As far as I am concerned, no behaviour is out of bounds for me.
- People that play fair are suckers.
- I seem to be scared all the time.

2 Toddler

- Strangers and foreigners make me uncomfortable.
- What this country needs is more law and order.
- You have to watch out for germs and viruses. They are everywhere.
- People should know their place.
- I usually do what I'm told.
- Spare the rod and spoil the child, I always say.

3 Child

- Life is about competition. You have to be better than the next guy.
- A fool and his money are soon parted. They deserve what they get.
- Free enterprise is good. Nothing should interfere with it.
- I believe my ideas are best for the world. People should be more like me.
- Clothes make the man/woman.
- Life is survival of the fittest. The strong win. The weak lose.

4 Adolescent

- I want to understand myself more. I like to understand people and why they do things.
- I have not completely made up my mind about the meaning of life.
- My emotional relationships are intensely involving.
- I believe that the environment has to be protected from ruthless plundering.
- I will gladly march in protest for what I feel is right.
- I believe there is much unfairness in the world and that I should work to correct it.

5 Adult

- You do your thing and I'll do mine.
- I cannot harm others without harming myself.
- I believe in the spirit of the law rather than the letter of it.
- I feel a deep spirituality that is not necessarily related to religion.
- Appearance is not so important. Internal qualities are what count in life.
- I seem to be able to move among social classes with relative ease.
- I do not believe in arms for peace.
- I like to work hard and then relax with my family and friends.
- There is much more to life than getting ahead.
- I would give up a fortune to preserve the forests, lakes and animals.

Probably reading these you'll recognize people that you know and even aspects of yourself now or at other points in your life. Possibly, these classifications might make you uncomfortable or even angry—there is certainly an unapologetic attachment of political beliefs attached the stages of maturity and naturally there is an association of *more mature* with *better*. So be it—it's a discussion after all and as Aristotle says: "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." For the time being, let's entertain that idea.

The fact that we can so easily connect the stages of maturity to politics just begs us to apply these stages to societal phenomena. After all, societies and their beliefs and actions are the result of the beliefs and actions of individuals. It's a valid exercise—we just need to remember that you can't work backwards and generalize that all the members of society X are at that maturity level.

Religion is where I'm taking all this; the impact of religion on all levels of our individual and global lives (positive or negative) cannot be understated. From the level on which we draw comfort and strength in times of strife, to the social reaction to the struggle for GLBT rights, to the impact of terrorism on the world community, framing religious belief in terms of "maturity" might provide really interesting insights into how to think and cope when beliefs come into conflict.

Some (like Karl Marx) would be inclined to immediately classify all religion as *immature*. That would be naive—sociologically and psychologically it is clear that religion plays a role in all human life. Even individuals and societies who claim to have transcended *religion* have nearly comparable belief systems. Science, communism and any number of other systems have supplanted religion in various

Continued next page



