

WE HAVE TWO TEENAGERS

Michael Platt, PhD

"We have two teenagers," I sometimes hear parents say. They never say it happily, and so I sometimes reply, "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." Although I say it with a smile, the truth is sad, and it may be terrifying.

Teenagers are not inevitable, natural, or God-given. The Teenager was invented, fashioned, permitted — let loose you might say — sometime after World War II by the generation of our parents and grandparents. It was a sad day for those children; it has proved an expensive day for their parents; and it is a black day for the West.

The flat, listless, and enraged soul of the "teenager"¹ has no precedent in the history of the West or mankind. In all other ages, however immature the young acted, they nonetheless expected to grow up. They even wanted to. Their "ideals," their intentions, and their desires pointed that way. Not the Teenager's. The highest aspiration of the Teenager is to become a more perfect teenager, a movie or Rock star.

That this came to seem natural is astonishing. So far as I know, no previous generation of American parents ever regarded their children as superior to themselves. Or did so with less reason; the parents of the 50s had experienced a long war as young adults and before that as children a long economic depression; their children were born with the keys to their own automobiles in their hands. The parents knew security could evaporate in a flash, the children thought the world had always been luxurious. Their experience of growing up was very different from their parents, their troubles were different, and, strange to say, the most important of their troubles came from their own parents. The result was unique.

There were no "teenagers" before World War II. Ask anyone still living who raised their children before then. Or spend a rainy Saturday in the basement of your library, comparing old *Life* magazines from before the War and after.² Instead of teenagers, there were youths. A new word had to be coined to describe these young people. Previously human beings between childhood and adulthood were called kids, boys and girls, young people, adolescents, and youths. These young human beings were addressed as "Young man" and "Young woman." Looking at them their parents thought "my growing son" and "my growing daughter," and they addressed them as "Daughter" and "Son." Sometimes others addressed them in letters as "Master" and "Miss," and the words "gentleman" and "lady" were sometimes heard. To name a kind or aspect of youth, "lass" and "lad," "stripling," and "maiden," "whipper snapper" and "squirt," "sport" and "shaver," "minor" and "juvenile" were employed, and the latter, "juvenile," did not yet invariably go with "delinquent." Words such as "upstart," "brat," "tough," "rogue," "cad," and "slut," described deviations from the general good of "youth," not its characteristic features. The word "teenager" did not exist. Compare the entries in Webster's II (1934) and III (1961); only after the war does the adjective "teen-age" become the noun, "teenager."³ Parents used to say "We have two children," sometimes with a smile. Now they say, "We have two teenagers" usually with a sigh. Indeed, there is a world of difference between having youths in your home and teenagers.

The greatest moral change in America since the Second World War was the "creation" of the Teenager.⁴ Before the Second World War, youths grew up playing and studying, being foolish and mischievous, spirited and silly, but always intending to grow up one day.⁵ They associated with other youths, sometimes dressed alike, talked

alike, had their fads, and favorites, but never separated themselves entirely from their teachers and parents, let alone constituted themselves in opposition to the adult world. After all, they wanted one day to become men and women, mothers and fathers, good citizens, good believers. They wanted to become like their parents, or like their grandparents. Their heroes and heroines were such people. If they didn't have one nearby in their own family, they looked for one in their town, or in their church, meeting house, temple, or synagogue, in their country, or in their reading. Youths had presidents, inventors, scientists, explorers, warriors, saints, and teachers as their heroes. In American history they looked to the likes of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, and Clara Barton. In literature they looked to the likes of the Virginian, Robinson Crusoe, Hamlet, Odysseus, and Leather-stocking. Beyond these they looked to Abraham, Moses, Paul and Christ. What differentiates the Teenager from all previous generations of young people is the desire to remain just as you are.

A youth is someone who is young, incomplete, and immature, who knows it, and who does not want to remain so. A youth is a young human being who wants to become worthy of trust, of responsibility, and even of esteem. Youths make more mistakes than adults, usually with less grave consequences, but suffer more in the mind from them than adults; they like their mistakes less; they feel more shame. Because they want one day to respect themselves, youths imitate the qualities they respect in their parents or grandparents, or someone in their town, or someone they meet in their reading. Of course, being immature, youths will always be tempted by rewards, by flattery, and by illusions, but with an adult world around them and the evident comparisons they can so easily make between their potentialities and the actual achievements of adults, youths will also want rewards only as they merit them, hence the vehemence with which they protest the injustice of any reward given without merit, by parents, teachers, or others. Candy is candy, candy is sweet, candy can be given to you, but nothing in the world can substitute for knowing how to ride your bike. No one can *give* that to you. No one can do that for you. Youths tend, then, to know the difference between virtues and pleasures. They hope to enjoy adult pleasures and expect to gain adult privileges only by *first* performing adult duties. Thus it was that during World War II, many of them served their country, as young husbands on the front and as young wives at home, before they could enjoy the mature "blessings of liberty." Like many others, Audie Murphy was a hero before he could vote.

The Teenager wants none of this, does not want to grow up, and does not want to become an adult. Yet, although the Teenager desires to remain just what he is, his desire is often active and energetic. It is even "heroic," infused with longing, and practiced with mimetic ardor. It fills the Teenager's soul utterly. But with what? The Teenager aspires to perfect himself, but into a more perfect teenager. Teenagers have film stars, celebrities, and flashy sophists for their heroes. They judge everything human by personality, not character. The Teenager is a youth, who denies he is immature, who probably does not know he is immature, and certainly wants to remain so. For the Teenager the horizon of significant adult life has disappeared entirely. Where once youths looked to the Madonna and Davy Crockett, and their likes to emulate, now they look to "Madonna," Mick Jagger, and their likes.

When one thinks of a Teenager, one thinks not only of someone without a family, without a past or a future, without plans and goals, but someone with a peculiar set of pleasures. The Teenager cannot stand to be alone. However lonely, unsure, and self-pitying he is, he tries to suffocate these shoots of self knowledge by joining the gang.

And how does one picture a gang of Teenagers, if not in a car speeding down the road, listening to Rock music, and on drugs? Or at a Rock concert in a gang of gangs? Or at an orgy? These pleasures as understood by the Teenager have one thing in common. All are powerful, absorbing, and “quickie.” The Teenager craves a melody that will rock him around the clock forever, seeks an experience so intense that he will forget what time it is, so absorbing that it will blot out all eternity.

Happy the day that includes some experience, some unusual discovery, some satisfying conversation, a handshake, a glance, a thought that we did not begin the day expecting. During such events we do not think of past or of future, but we also do not flee them. The pleasure of speeding down the highway, the pleasure of taking drugs (from a glass or a syringe), the pleasure of coupling with someone you do not expect to spend much time with (let alone a lifetime), and the pleasure of Rock melodies are all in flight, frantic, desperate. Never does one see, on the faces of those enjoying these pleasures, a smile (such as Bergman gives us during the overture of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*). The Teenager is the most free and the least happy of beings. Thoreau said most people lead lives of “quiet desperation.” The desperation of the Teenager is not quiet. With the Rolling Stones, they shout, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” A being less acquainted with joy there has never been.

The “creation” of the Teenager was the saddest day in the history of American youth, poses the greatest danger to the West, and is a most astonishing event.

So far as I know, there has never been such a human being on earth before. The Teenager is a novelty not only in the history of twentieth century America but in the history of the human race. All other previous generations of youths looked to the future, planned for it, and aspired to make it different from their youth. The generation of the Teenager was the first ever to strive to make their future the same as their present. In truth, they were the first youths who strove to live wholly in a present without a future and a past. After such a novelty, one may wonder how long there will be a future for human beings.

For the 20,000 word version of this essay, entitled *The Teenager and the West, A Different Drummer* (about and against Rock Music), and *The Young, the Good, and the West*, send \$20 or 15 euros, to Dr. Michael Platt 1275 Knopp School Road, Fredericksburg Texas 78624, and include your email for this copyrighted book exists in computer Samizdat.

Endnotes:

¹ The flat, listless, anxious, petty soul of the Teenager has been very well described by Allan Bloom in his *Closing of the American Mind*, but its uniqueness has not, I think, been noted and its genesis has not been explained. For further thoughts à propos of Allan Bloom’s fine, important book, see my “Souls Without Longing,” *Interpretation: Journal of Political Philosophy*, XVIII, 3, (1991) pp. 415-465

² Cf. the issues for 6/6/38, 6/14/43, 6/11/45, 12/20/48, and 4/2/56.

³ In the nineteenth century, the words “boy” and “girl” extended up to adulthood; for example, colleges students were called college boys. And they were called this despite the fact that more was expected of them, in the way of diligent study, moral conduct, and good manners than is now. Even in the late 1930s, F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing to his daughter at Vassar and expecting a lot, speaks of once being a Princeton boy. In the

sixteenth century Ascham speaks the same way, and also calls those from seven to seventeen "young gentlemen." "This day I go out of my teens" wrote Queen Victoria in her diary upon her twentieth birthday, not "This day I am no longer a teenager." (*Oxford Book of Ages*, ed. A. & S. Sampson, s. v.) The word "teenager," as we now use it, was first noted in the third edition of *Webster's* (1961); it was not in the second (1934); there it is noted only as an adjective "teenage." The first use of it as a noun that I have come across, in a *Life* magazine of gives it with a hyphen "Teen-ager" indicating I suppose that it is an innovation. Mencken notes it as such in his *American Language: Supplement I* (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 409.

We might compare this evolution with a similar one. Older persons used to be called: old persons, granny, gammer, grand father, and elders. There is something odious about "senior citizen" where citizen is seldom used for anyone else and where the respect expressed is so insincere as to be disrespectful. "Oldster" mixes some affection with its condescension. "Elder" is much better. About "retired person," there is something sad, but appropriate, for a human being is diminished by retiring. No other society has ever taught that its members should expect to retire.

⁴ For an almost rosy apology for the era, from a self-described "Conservative," see Jeffrey Hart, *When the Going Was Good* (New York: Crown, 1982); for a critical assessment, from the Leftist point of view, see Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States: 1945-1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982). For a "balanced" indeed truly moderate account of the era, read William L. O'Neill's *American High* (New York: Free Press, 1986), who has the sagacity to trace mistakes the nation made to the desire of the citizenry to have something for nothing or little; Dwight Diggins' *The Proud Decades* (New York: Norton, 1988), as its subtitle suggests (1941-1960), takes a somewhat longer view. Longer still is the view offered by Paul Johnson in *Modern Times* (New York: Harper, 1983).

⁵ The reader who doubts their novelty might read the third part of Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*; author Tolstoy is honest to a fault; youth Tolstoy was a bag of vices, poses, and miseries, but he was never a Teenager, for in the midst of his confusion there was always a striving to become a man and the world of grown up men and women was there around him, and not shut out.