

TRUTH FOR YOUTH

by Ray C. Stedman

George Bernard Shaw once said, "Youth is such a wonderful thing it is a shame to waste it on young people." Young people do not especially appreciate that remark. Although they may not say so, they feel that is simply the viewpoint of a tired old man, envious of the abundant energy and abandon of youth. Perhaps they are right. Certainly, young people do not feel their youth is being wasted. They may not fully appreciate it, but it is not being wasted. Youth is a very wonderful time of life. Mark Twain once said he would like to live his life over again, until he reached fifteen, and then drown! Having read the recital of his own youth in the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, we know what he meant.

But youth can also be a very tragic time; it is growing increasingly so in our day. The papers are filled with accounts of senseless vandalism on the part of young people. The rise of gangs of fear-ridden, defiant, pathetically love-starved youngsters in our big cities, who spend their time in crime and sex orgies, is distressing evidence that teenage years can be ghastly as well as wonderful.

There is no segment of life that is quite so easy for adults to be negative about as youth. One of the puzzles to young people is why parents seem unable to remember what it was like to be a teenager. Most young people fancy it is because their parents lived back in the days of high button shoes and mustache cups and are not really able to cope with this changing world. Perhaps the real reason for this phenomenon is that the teen years of life, especially the early ones, are an isolated section of life during which conditions are so different from what they will be afterwards, or what they were before, that it is difficult to relate to the world into which one must gradually move.

Teenagers live in a world of their own. It may be very tragic or very wonderful, but it is always different. There is nothing wrong with this; it is simply the way life is made. Teen years ought to be different, but it is that difference that makes it so difficult for teenagers to relate to adult life. Once this time of life is past, it fades rapidly in memory, like a dream which is very vivid at the moment but can hardly be remembered the next morning. It is this temporary unrelatedness of the teenage years that makes teenagers so baffling to their parents and so puzzling to themselves.

Let me show you what I mean: It is the unique mark of youth to have the ability to live wholly in the present moment. The immediate is all-important to the young. They have little thought for the past, and even less regard for the future; it is what is going on right now that is of consuming importance. Whether "our team" wins the football game is for the moment the most important thing in the world, far outshading the latest missile crisis, or yesterday's major earthquake in Alaska or Peru. Not having the right clothes to wear on a date can be a most shattering thing, mounting up to such a tremendous crisis that it often looks as though suicide may be the only way out. Whatever touches the love life of a young person is especially devastating.

I can remember as a teenager the first time a girl turned me down on an invitation to a date. The sun turned to darkness, the moon turned to blood, the stars fell from the heavens, the whole world collapsed around me. Young people today go through the same experiences.

It is this intense concentration on the present which accounts for the frequent shift in moods in young people. The highs of life are very high and the lows are very low, because life is lived close to the wind. Young people are constantly adjusting to that which is immediately before them. This is also the explanation for what often appears to adults as thoughtlessness or stupidity on the part of youth. Because they do not relate cause to effect, it is difficult for them to see what precedes or follows an action.

I read recently of a brother and sister who had a cat they owned jointly. To avoid arguments they allotted the forepart of the cat to the girl, and the tail and hind legs to the boy. One morning the girl found her brother standing on the cat's tail, and the cat was howling miserably. When the sister protested, the boy pointed out

that he was simply standing on his own property, it was the girl's end that was raising all the howl! This points up the difficulty youth has in relating one event to another.

But youth also has a glory about it; a glory that is lost all too soon. Youth is the time of life when it is natural to idealize and romanticize. The heroes of young people are always larger than life. Their anticipation outruns realization. Things are expected to be better than they really are. This is the reason young people are often deeply disappointed in their parents. Parents are usually heroes to their children until they come into those garish teen years and are disappointed to discover what feet of clay their idols have. But it is also this quality of idealism that makes the world of young people a place of adventure, color, and constantly changing delight. It causes far horizons to beckon, awakening strange restlessness in a young person's heart. It makes new experiences challenging and exciting, if they are not fearful and frightening.

The Bible, in its vast wisdom and understanding of human life, recognizes this quality of romanticism as a valid adjunct of youth. The Scriptures say, "Your young men shall see visions" {Joel 2:28}, for this is eminently proper. I should like to say to the young people present: Keep this ability as long as possible. Resist all efforts to make you stodgy and practical about everything. You will be young as long as you retain the capacity to imagine. The unique ability of your youth is to invest otherwise dull circumstances with a romantic or idealistic aura that gives zest and vitality to life. Whenever you lose that you lose your youth as well!

There is a third characteristic of youth that marks it off as a altogether different stage of life. That is youth's well-known cry for independence. We are hearing so much of this today. *Don't Fence Me In* is the theme song of the young. But this is also the torment of youth, for it is inevitably coupled with a desperate need for acceptance. This terrible tension between an urge for independence and a desperate need for dependence creates unbearable torment. This is why the professional rabble-rouser can usually find a ready response in a young crowd. Someone has well said,

"If a young man is not a rebel by the time he is twenty, there is something wrong with his heart; if he is still one by the time he is thirty, there is something wrong with his head."

This urge for independence is an awakening search for meaning. Oftentimes it is an inarticulate protest against depersonalization; a kind of mute cry, saying, "Here I am! Look at me! Pay attention!" It is a poignant search to find the answer to the stirring, restless question within, "Who am I, anyway?"

Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice In Wonderland*, has a little story about a padlock with long spidery legs that ran around with a very upset and distracted look about itself; it was always nervous. Someone said to it one day, "Whatever is the matter with you?" And the little padlock said, "I'm looking for someone to unlock me." That is the cry of youth in every age.

Into this strange and mixed-up world of pragmatic self-centeredness, romantic glory, and surging independence, the cold, hard, and sometimes bitter facts of life keep intruding themselves. No one can stay in this realm forever. A transition must be made to the practical world of adult life, where jobs must be found, houses built, payments made on time, diapers washed, dishes cleaned, and beds made. It is right at this point that disillusionment often comes. This world of practical demand often intrudes so strongly and powerfully, right at the very time young people are trying to find answers to life, that the questions they are asking are never really answered but are simply buried under the advancing tide of adult responsibility. The imagination is shackled and hand-cuffed and put to work earning a living. The padlock is never unlocked. It is hushed, stifled, and suppressed, made to conform to the world around.

We older people will never understand youth until we realize that this is the very fate young people fear. Though they may not be able to say so, they are desperately afraid of being made to conform to the established order of things; for what they see is not at all what they want. The tragedy of young people is that in their frantic efforts to escape this conformity they find it to be inexorable, irresistible. They can find no way out. Their efforts to escape are futile. Even if they break out in open rebellion (resulting in such phenomena as the beat generation), they find that it is only another form of conformity: the beatnik is conformed to an unconformity where bare feet and shaggy hair are *de rigueur*. Thus youth is dragged irresistibly into meaninglessness, unless -- unless at this very point youth finds its key in Jesus Christ!

It is right here that the Bible has something very definite and important to say to young people. What it has to say is set forth in a number of books addressed specifically to young people. Did you realize that certain books of the Bible were written especially for young people? Proverbs, for instance, with all its wonderful wisdom, is a book especially designed for and addressed to those in the early years of life. The book of Daniel, with its intriguing story of four teenagers captured by a pagan nation and enmeshed in a way of life utterly different from what they are expected to live, is a wonderful story for young people. The two letters of Paul to Timothy were written to a teenager who was attempting to live a Christian life in an unchristian world. Throughout the whole of Scripture, there are scattered many teenage heroes and heroines: Joseph, Samuel, David, Daniel, Mary, Mark, Rhoda, Timothy, and others. Here are teenagers facing the same kind of problems and the same kind of world that you are asked to face.

But most of what the Scripture says to young people is summed up in one verse:

Rejoice, O young man, [of course, this includes young women as well] in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. {Ecc 11:9 RSV}

Listen to that carefully. Take it apart and analyze it:

First, "Rejoice, young people, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth." That is, live life to the full while you are young. Do not be afraid of the natural exuberance of youth. Do not let anyone discourage you from enjoying the abundance of physical vitality that you have. Use it! Take full advantage of your capacity for imagination and adventure. Did you know that that is what the Bible says to youth? Too many young people seem to feel the Bible tells them to fold their hands, curtail their impulses and act like old people, but it does not. It recognizes the love of romanticism in youth and it urges you to take full advantage of it while you can, consistent with other principles.

The second thing is, "Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes." Take life as it comes. Do not feel fretful and envious over the opportunities others have, but lay hold and use the opportunities that come to you and be glad for them. Exercise, within consistent limitations, the independence of youth. Do not let someone else run your life: walk in the sight of your eyes and in the ways of your heart. You are to make the choices.

But now there is a third principle, "Know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement." Please do not misread that. That is uttered in the same spirit of encouragement to discover all that life has for you as the other two sections. It is not meant as a threat. God is not saying, "All right, go ahead and enjoy yourself, but just wait, I'll get you in the end!" No, he is saying, "Remember, there is one more aspect of life that is very important, yet one more thing is necessary. Remember that as you do these other things, it is possible for you to go wrong. You need more than yourself. Life is too big for you to handle on your own. At the end, each of us in the human family must give an account of ourselves, and the certainty of that points up the need for a adequate guide right now." So the conclusion is given in Chapter 12, Verse 1, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." Surrender yourself to the only adequate guide to life while you are young. Invite him squarely into the center of your life right now, in the days of your youth.

Right here is the glory of the good news about Jesus Christ. The gospel tells us that Christ is the one behind the secrets of the universe. Here is the one who controls human history. Here stands the only one capable of rightly motivating and directing youth along the perilous path of life. In Jesus Christ youth finds an answer, a key to its padlock, a solution to its riddles. The New Testament proclaims everywhere the total adequacy of Christ to satisfy the hungers and thirsts of youth.

To know Jesus Christ and to open your heart to his control is to discover that he gives the fullest sense of independence it is possible for man to have. He sets us free from any lesser level of control. We give ourselves to the one who is the master of the universe and thereby discover the secrets of our own natures. He alone can unlock these since he is the Creator. If we give ourselves to any lesser level of control, we find ourselves

ultimately slaves of that to which we have yielded. That is Paul's argument in Romans 6. Give yourself to pleasing the crowd, or the party, or whatever group or individual may seek to assert itself over your life, and you discover you have become a slave to an insatiable master. You are imprisoned and cannot find the fulfillment for which you long. But when you give yourself to Christ and make yourself his slave, you find liberty. Jesus said it,

"Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, ... and you shall find rest unto your soul." {cf, Matt 11:29 KJV}

In coming to Christ, youth discovers that he stimulates the imagination. He reveals the truth that romanticism is not an illusion about life, but more often a racial memory of what God intended human life to be like. In Christ that glory can continue forever. This is the wonder of contact with him. A vital, day-by-day relationship with Christ reveals that he has the ability to relate an individual properly to the past, to all the lessons of history; and to the future, because he masters and controls the future. Yet, above everything else, the word of Jesus Christ to a young man or young woman is: live in the glory of the eternal now!

Each new day with Jesus Christ is an adventure in the breathtaking possibility of what he can do through you -- right now. This is exactly what youth longs to do -- to live in the present. To be a Christian, a real Christian (not the bloodless, halfhearted, lukewarm variety such as we see too much of, but a committed person whose whole aim in life is to accomplish what Jesus Christ wants to do through him or her), to become that kind of Christian is nothing more or less than a way of staying young forever. All the qualities we admire and love in youth are perpetuated in the heart through an obedient submission to fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Let me give a word of personal testimony on this. I remember so well those uncertain teen years in my own life. Someone has described himself when a teenager as, "nothing but a mouse studying to be a rat," but that was not my experience. I was simply a boy wanting to be a man. I had a longing for life; I felt all the urges young people feel within for accomplishment, for doing something worthwhile, something that counts. But I also remember, clearly, how afraid, how uncertain I was. I realized that my lack of experience gave others intense advantage over me. I was already aware of the seeds of failure in my life. I was afraid of myself and the many things that I was already doing which were turning out to be wrong. I did not know what to depend upon. I felt all the aching, lonely uncertainty of youth.

But it was right then, as I was coming out of my teens, that I met Jesus Christ in a vital and real way. There was some emotion connected with it at times, and there was considerable rebellion on occasion, a resistance to his ultimate purpose, but deep within my heart there was a desire to give myself to him and to obey him in the directions he gave me in life. I had the usual struggles of a young person in trying to hang on to what I thought were my own ideas. I put up occasional resistance to the unceasing pressure of the Holy Spirit in these areas, but, when I did yield, I discovered that every yielding (which seemed to me a sort of a dying, a giving up of my own right), led into a tremendous and wonderful world of experienced liberty.

The other day, reading through David's experience in First Samuel, I ran across King David's own testimony which exactly says what I feel today, as I look back upon my life since that time. David said, "He has led me into a wide place." As I have walked along, desiring to obey Jesus Christ, I have found every step has led me into a wider place. And it has just begun! This whole lifetime of experience down here is but a grade-school course preparing me for a vastly more exciting and adventurous life than any I have ever remotely imagined, lying beyond the door of death. The lessons that are being learned here are preparing me to operate on principles which will make possible the most glorious experience of liberty conceivable.

Look out into the universe, and, I think, what worlds exist that are waiting to be conquered; how many seas lie tranquil under some sun in some unknown planet that are yet to be sailed; what battles are to be fought, what enemies defeated, what victories won, in the far-flung borders of this inexhaustible universe of God's? God has not put it all there merely to go to waste. Nothing God makes ever goes to waste. The glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it says to young men and women in this space age: Now that the boundaries of our universe have been flung back, and the battles seem all to be lost on this present planet, it is but an indication that God is calling to a task of exploration, conquering, and adventure far beyond the boundaries of earth. Through Jesus Christ the door is now being opened for us to enter when the proper time comes.

Here is a very insightful verse I ran across the other day.

What will you do with your life
Youth of the age of space?
Sit down to whimper or whine
While satellites and deadly missiles whirl around?
Or seek to run away in one mad whirl
Of glaring lights and blaring sound?
Or say "It's too much for me Man, I'm beat!
For me, I seek a place way out!
Let the world be hanged! I decline!"
Or will you rise up and really live?
Will you get under the world's load of hate and fear
And lift with courage creative and faith resurgent
Until all the immensity of space shall hear you say,
"I am but one,
But I am one,
And with all I am redeemed by Christ,
A human fashioned of heaven's spirit
And earth's sod,
I will live the life of a man
As befits a child of God!"

Old Samuel Rutherford, back in 17th century Scotland, said these words, "What a wonderful yoke is youth and grace, Christ and a young man!"

Prayer

Our Father, we are so conscious of the possibilities that lie in young hearts: undreamed-of possibilities, unheard-of demonstrations of power and blessing and victory, if only those young hearts are in thy control. Lord, we acknowledge thee as the Master of life. Life is too vast for us, too difficult, too complex, for any puny wisdom of ours to solve its problems or enter into its mysteries. But we thank thee that there stands before us One who invites us to come to him, to commit our way unto him and he will direct our paths; to turn not to our own understanding but to trust in his direction, love and grace, and he will see us safely through the shoals and terrors of the voyage. We ask that young people may commit their lives fully to Christ. It is not enough to say they are Christians, or merely attend church, or belong to a young peoples' group. In the inner citadel of the heart there must be a basic, urgent commitment of the will to thee. It is for this we ask, that these dear young people may discover all that you have hidden away in their hearts and lives, and that all the glorious possibilities of their youth may be realized as they give themselves to thee, who loved them and gave thyself for them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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