

## **Adolescence and the Myth of Independence**

Adolescents achieve independence with triumph and regret.

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Life is full of disillusionment. Beliefs one develops or are taught become sources of great disappointment, even betrayal, when they turn out not to be true.

Think of when one discovers how the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus are actually fictions created by trusted adults to inspire innocent imagination. Now the little child also understands that parents can tell a deliberate lie. Or there is a more powerful disillusionment with the power of parents and a promise that children want their parents to make: to always keep the child safe.

This is what the child wants parents to say. "We will always be there when you have need." "We will always protect you from harm." "We will always make good decisions." "We will always know what to do."

But time and again, experience with parents falls short of this expectancy. So the child makes some jarring discoveries. "They won't always be there when I have need. I am on my own." "They can't always protect me from harm. Bad things will happen to me." "They won't always make right decisions. I will sometimes pay for their mistakes." "They won't always know what to do. I must figure life out for myself." One painful part of growing up is giving up believing parents can provide security.

Now consider a great disillusionment that comes at the end of adolescence: "When I reach independence I can run my life." After all, isn't that the goal of the whole turbulent adolescent process, to be able to operate on one's own grown up terms? But now, in counseling with young adults in their mid-twenties, what I hear is not a cry of triumph, "Free at last!", but a moan of despair, "Now my life is all up to me!" What happened?

The sad reality is this: when parental authority lets go and steps aside, "the system" takes over. What the young person discovers is that parental protection provided a measure of shelter in which direct exposure to the more complex and arbitrary demands of social authority were kept at bay. This awareness makes for a rude awakening. By comparison to these impersonal forces of social conformity and social compliance, parental attitudes were more caring, parental demands were far fewer, and parental rules were more forgiving.

Now having to pay bills, having to hold a job, having to make one's way through the world all revise some ideas about basic freedoms that the adolescent was looking forward to, but which the young adult now discovers are really fraudulent

ideals. When it comes to freedom of action, "I am not free to totally do what I want." When it comes to freedom of individuality, "I am not free to be totally myself." When it comes to freedom of speech, "I am not free to totally speak my mind." When it comes to freedom of future, "I am not free to achieve anything I want." When it comes to freedom of finding a meaningful job, "I am not free to start out with one that pays a lot of money and is very personally fulfilling."

To get along, sometimes one has to go along; to fit in, sometimes one has to accommodate; to communicate, sometimes one has to shut up; to make one's way, sometimes one has to take what one can get. As one young man concluded, "about the only real freedom I have now is dealing with any troubles I get myself into."

In so many words, what the young man wistfully concluded was this. "I'll never be as free as an adult as I was as a teenager. Back then, I could rebel, I could question authority, I could ignore some home rules, I could stand out from the crowd, and I didn't have to worry about being on my own. What I wanted, I already had, but I didn't know it at the time—the freedom of having parents who supported my care and protected me from adult responsibility."

And you can understand his anger. He really felt betrayed by what he was led to believe over the course of his adolescence. Somebody had sold him a bill of good about independence, and that someone turned out to be himself.