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Infantilized by Academe

By Susan Neiman

We think we do young people a favor, telling them these are the best years of their lives. Our intentions couldn't be better: However we understand waste, these years should not be wasted. They should be used to prepare for an uncertain future, or perhaps just the opposite, savored for the freedom that later futures will constrain. But the generosity of our intentions is no excuse for the poverty of our memories. The time between 18 and 26, give or take a year, is often the very hardest time of our lives, and it's made all the harder by the repeated assurance that it's the best. Remember thinking that you alone were wasting that precious time with uncertainty, anxiety, and heartbreak while everyone else was properly enjoying it? Remember worrying, if this is how frightened and doubtful life feels now, what could you possibly expect from a future that everyone said will only be worse?

Given how few of us would choose to repeat those years once past them, and given how many cross-cultural empirical studies show that people get happier as they get older, our well-intentioned injunction contains an ominous note: If you view life as a downhill process, you will expect little of it and demand even less. Laziness, immaturity, depression. It's your own fault. At the same time, we promote the distractions and, increasingly, the kind of education that discourage young people from finding their own way to adulthood.

Whatever else we may give young people, we rarely give them what they need most: a model of adulthood as something to strive for. We live in a culture in which growing up is widely seen to be a matter of giving up on hopes and dreams, and accepting the supposed limits of reality.

The idea of adulthood has been under fire since, at least, the appearance of Peter Pan, at the beginning of the 20th century, and the variations on his story reflect the decline in the image of adulthood itself. In the novel, grown-ups are simply dull: Mr. Darling's knowledge is confined to stocks and shares, his only passion is being exactly like his neighbors. By the mid-20th century, Mr. Darling is slightly menacing, an authoritarian who could so easily turn into a tyrant that the same actor could play both father and pirate. By the end of the 20th century, the grown-up had become ridiculous: In Stephen Spielberg's brilliantly disturbing twist on the story, *Hook* (1991), Peter Pan is an object of contempt. Grown-ups remain rigid and boring, but they've become so pitiful that teenagers are right to mock them. At the beginning of the 20th century, growing up looked merely dreary; by the end, it looked positively pathetic.

Ideally, parents and teachers prepare young people to take up places in a world they will help to make more sense of than the one we know. In his *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Kant called education "the greatest and most difficult problem that can be given to the human being." It is the greatest because the human being becomes human only through education; it's the most difficult because educators are flawed.

Look at Kant's own field, philosophy. Despite his insistence on their importance, you won't find education and its role in coming of age on a syllabus for a course on Kant or an introduction to philosophy. Philosophy departments themselves are constricted by the fact that those who teach in them were trained to discuss a list of problems derived from a particular narrative of the history of philosophy — the problem of the existence of the external world (can we ever know if the world exists?), the problem of other minds (can we ever know another human being?), and in ethics, trolley problems — and are rarely inclined to recognize a problem that isn't on the list. That is a real loss. For philosophy is not only, as Stanley Cavell put it, education for grown-ups; read rightly, philosophy can educate us in growing up and finding a model of maturity that is not a matter of resignation.

One place to begin is Kant's [definition of enlightenment](#): reason's emancipation from immaturity. We choose immaturity because we are lazy and scared. How much more comfortable it is to let someone else make your decisions! "If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on — then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take care of that disagreeable business for me." Kant is right, of course: It often is our fault. We're unwilling to summon the energy or run the risks — even the risk of embarrassment — that thinking for ourselves would demand.

When Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?" is taught, that is the only message emphasized. Nothing is wrong with society that a little effort can't fix. Thus the essay has become a neoliberal mantra that only strengthens existing orders. Get rid of your own laziness and cowardice; become enlightened, grown up, and free.

Though Kant's essay is far more readable than his scholarly texts, few people remember more than its first few sentences. But Kant also insists that immaturity is not your fault alone. You may tend, as we all do, toward laziness and cowardice, and those tendencies are abused. There are guardians who have taken over the task of supervising us, Kant says, by convincing us that independent thinking is not only difficult but also dangerous. That is a radical and powerful political message: Social structures are constructed to keep us childish.

With a familiarity that's surprising in a man who had no children, Kant describes the way they learn to walk. To do so, they must stumble and fall; preventing their bruises by keeping them in a baby carriage keeps them infantile. Kant's target is not overprotective mothers but authoritarian states, for whom grown-up citizens are more trouble than they're worth. The state's desire for control and our own desire for comfort combine to create societies with fewer conflicts, but they are not societies of grown-ups.

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Kant lived in feudal times when even enlightened rulers were paternalistic, and "paternalistic" was not yet a term of abuse. It's easy enough to see how feudal structures kept their subjects infantilized, But how might a modern, democratic society do it?

Taking care of infants can be exhausting, but it's rarely *conceptually* challenging. A baby who has just learned how to act on the world by coordinating hand and eye to grasp an object may grasp the wrong thing: her father's glasses, her mother's earrings, a fork left under the table. But how easy it is to distract her! All you need to do is put something else in her way — a bunch of keys will usually do it — and the baby is diverted, forgetting entirely the objects you don't want her to reach. As she grows, distraction gets more difficult, but the principle remains the same. Authoritarian parents have no qualms about hitting a child who seeks something they don't want to give her, just as authoritarian regimes have no qualms about jailing their critics. The rest of us have no choice but to manipulate with various forms of distraction.

Distracting older people is slightly more complex, but whatever difficulty there may be is easily compensated for by the fact that the things that can be used to distract us are limitless. Who can doubt that millions more people took time last November to stare at Kim Kardashian's backside than to vote in the U.S. midterm elections? That is not only an American problem: A lot of Europeans were watching Kim Kardashian, too, when they could have been, for example, reading Thomas Piketty.

Let me be clear: I happened to be reading Piketty that week, and I was also watching Kardashian — with fascinated horror, but fascination just the same. I'm just as vulnerable to distraction as anyone else, even if I call distraction part of the project of understanding the world I live in. But I would prefer to do without it. I wish I didn't know who Kim Kardashian is. Other things demand my attention, given my dependence on products that are designed to break down shortly after their guarantees expire. If all the hours spent by all of us on what are cheerfully called upgrades — figuring out how to navigate the new computer, set the new alarm clock, grill with the new oven, store messages on the new smartphone, save pictures on the new camera, unlock the new

auto ignition — were added up, who knows how many genuine problems might be solved?

Our students are often more distracted than we are, and so inured to distraction that they are unlikely to notice it. As other commentators have argued, the process of gaining admission to selective American colleges now requires presenting an array of accomplishments so vast and varied that any reflection that might accompany them is purely incidental.

Our educational institutions don't do enough to help students overcome the obstacles to growing up, and recent trends are particularly disturbing. As [Todd Gitlin has argued](#) in the discussion over whether trigger warnings should be given before expecting students to read or watch potentially traumatic material, colleges *ought* to produce discomfort: "Universities are very much in the business of trying to get you to rethink why you believe what you believe and whether you have grounds for believing it. At a time when almost [twice as many freshmen](#) think it is either 'very important' or 'essential' to be 'very well off financially' as to 'develop a meaningful philosophy of life,' it is more than ever incumbent upon the university to lift its eyes from capital campaigns and get on about getting students to consider the world."

Though some see the replacement of the idea of liberal-arts education with an emphasis on marketable skills as a function of declining economic opportunities, the trend began long before the financial crisis, as indicated by decades of increasing emphasis on testing and rote learning.

Nor is it only an American problem. Arriving in Berlin in the 1980s, I was deeply impressed with the freedom and intensity European universities made possible. The American concept of broad training across the liberal arts was missing — students generally took courses in two or three fields — but how they took them! Instead of four or five courses per semester, the Berlin students usually took no more than two, leaving time to read not only all of the suggested texts but also related ones, organizing their own discussion groups to work out their views on justice and history, on Marx and Heidegger. Degrees were granted after a series of

exams toward the end of their studies. Without the pressure of recurring tests and papers, they read and listened and argued because they wanted to find out things that mattered. It was not only Kant's ideal of thinking for oneself, but thinking for itself — thought for its own sweet sake.

All that was changed by the 1999 Bologna reform, which has given European students the worst of both worlds: the battery of requirements and exams that often hinder real thinking in American colleges, without the American ideal of the nurturing professor that so often encourages it. Although the Bologna reforms have been widely criticized for discouraging critical, independent thinking, a shortened and streamlined education is probably here to stay.

The forces that surround and shape our world are no more interested in cultivating real grown-ups than such forces were in Kant's day, for grown-ups make for less compliant subjects and less credulous consumers. While the structure of the problem was already clear to Kant, the means by which we are kept in a state of immaturity are more subtle and insidious than they once were. We're besieged by mixed messages. Half of them urge us to get serious, stop dreaming, and accept the world as it is, promoting a picture of adulthood as capitulation to the status quo. The other half blasts us with products and suggestions that are meant to keep us young. What we rarely receive is a picture of adulthood that represents it as the ideal it should be: the ability to see, confront, and navigate the gap between the way the world is and the way it should be, without ever giving up on either one. A dismal vision of maturity was never deliberately planned by those whose interests lie in the world's remaining no better than it is today, but it serves those interests well. What better way to keep people in self-incurred immaturity than presenting a vision of maturity to which no right-minded soul could aspire?

We're both caught and complicit in a world that turns human needs upside down. The problem is not the grown-up recognition that reality never quite matches our ideals. It's far worse, and more systemic, than that. We tell children that all the questions they ask, and many they've yet to think of, will be answered in school, and we send them to institutions that will dull their desire to pose

questions at all. For those who manage to survive 12 years of elementary and secondary education with their curiosity intact, a good college can be a place to bloom. But with increasing pressure to focus on preparing themselves for the job market, this is little compensation.

It's been more than half a century since Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* argued that we have failed to create a world it makes sense to grow up to, largely because it cannot offer the meaningful work an adult life demands. That problem has hardly gotten easier in an era of vanishing unions, declining wages, and permanent electronic availability. To make up for it, we idealize the college years.

Given the scope and complexity of social forces arrayed against adulthood, what can universities do to encourage it?

The odds are long, and it's best to start by acknowledging that the sort of institutional disruption that puts helping students become adults as the central goal is not on the horizon. That is not defeatism but honesty: We mislead our students by refusing to admit that the problems we face are as hard as they really are. (Of course, it's also a way of misleading ourselves, though the twenty-somethings I know are smart enough to see through it.)

Rousseau's problem, which he laid out in *Emile*, his treatise on education, remains with us: It's impossible to create fully active and responsible citizens in a society that undermines adulthood, yet it's impossible to create another society without responsible adults. This was also the starting point for Kant, who knew that growing up is never complete.

But while we acknowledge the need for deep and systematic institutional changes, we should not discount the force of individual example. Addressing the teaching fellows for his introductory humanities course at Harvard University, Stanley Cavell used to say that their most important task was to stand up and show undergraduates that there are grown-ups in the world who love books. To love a book means to wrestle with it, to take it seriously enough to be unsettled by it. Books that are in the much-maligned canon are those that have survived generations of such struggle. The very word "canon" deserves to be retired, for it

suggests ecclesiastical decree, as if a corpus of old texts were handed down by fiat and can be ignored as soon as you've decided that authorities no longer dictate what you read.

Though the canon may need to be widened, most of its contents hold up, and few things are more misguided than the attempts of some educators to appeal to their students by doing away with classic texts, often in the name of avoiding Eurocentrism. They would do better to look to the Enlightenment, often wrongly thought to be the source of Eurocentrism itself. Quite to the contrary, its authors knew how to value both universal principles and particular differences, and they knew how to tell one from the other. They were steeped in classical Western literature, but they were well aware of how much they had to learn from other cultures, often using them to criticize Europe itself.

A grown-up relationship to your culture is no different from a grown-up relationship to your parents. You must decide which parts of the inheritance you want to make your own — but you have to examine it first. Examining and re-examining classic texts — like Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" — with an eye to the questions they raise about our own world keeps alive the kind of thinking that could, if we allowed it, turn growing up into the subversive ideal it should be.

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I disagree strongly with this. Surely for most people who go to college, the 6 years comprising junior and senior high school are by far the worst in their entire lives, except for the very few who are the successful "jocks" and their ilk - prom queens and the like. Everyone else I know wouldn't relive those years for a million bucks.

