

Chapel Talk
Nathan Costa
September 16, 2010

Psalm 34:11-22
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

On Adulthood

I remember the week cable television came to the Costa household. It was April, 1985, in our rental house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a tiny, transitional home for my parents, four younger siblings, and me. We had just moved from Long Island, NY and cable was one of the exciting novelties of a new home. In those days, 36 channels seemed a lot, but I was interested in only a few: in particular, WOR, channel 9 out of Secaucus, NJ, my one remaining link to New York, my beloved Mets, and the 20-year-old, man-boy phenom, Dwight Gooden. I had just discovered ESPN in its infancy and Superstation TBS, as it was called, which broadcast “America’s Team,” the Atlanta Braves, Joe Torre, manager. I was set; I had my National League baseball.

I remember one night explaining this set-up to a family friend my parents’ age, another Mets fan, also recently moved from Long Island. I walked him through the highlights of the channels, cable TV being unfamiliar still to many: ESPN, TBS, the movie channels that were scrambled on our cable box but would come into focus by a careful maneuvering of the dial, as I had already learned. “And Nickelodeon,” I said to Jim proudly, “we’ve got Nickelodeon for the kids,” meaning, of course, my three sisters and brother. I remember Jim turning to my parents and saying quietly, “Isn’t that funny? He said, ‘... for the kids.’” I didn’t get it—there was nothing funny about that; I was completely serious. At a fully-grown 8 and $\frac{3}{4}$ years of age, I was definitely too old for Nickelodeon. Cartoons, stupidly funny game shows, Nick at Nite - that was for the kids, of whom I was decidedly not one.

I’ve been thinking a lot about growing up and adulthood recently: what are the opposites of Paul’s thinking, speaking, and reasoning “like a child”? What does it mean to think, speak, and reason - to live - as an adult? Concretely for me, moving into and outfitting a house this fall after 16 years of living in dormitories has seemed in some ways the next step in adult bachelorhood, or so I’ve told

my friends. (Some of them had already thought I was 40 before I turned 16, for while they were interested in movies, drivers' licenses, and each other, I was reading Vergil and Horace on the brevity of life, and trying to run my high school from the editor's desk of the school newspaper, a full-time profession even before college.) But, much like the dreaded mini-van is for some, for me, there was nothing quite so domesticating and apparently grown-up as buying my first washer and dryer and moving into a house on my own.

Unfortunately, when adults speak to kids about growing up, they can often come off as doctrinaire or, at the very least, condescending. Perhaps less at St. Andrew's than at other places I've known, discussions such as these often revolve around someone who has "been there and done that," either happy to have gotten to the other side of a turbulent adolescence, or wishing still to relive the glory days of youth, when downing an entire pizza, two-liter bottle of Coke, or a full pound of spaghetti didn't have unfortunate consequences the next day. I'll attempt to avoid those pitfalls here, and, in the spirit of authentic assessment, feel free to grade me at the end.

Human societies of all kinds and times have marked and celebrated the passage from childhood to adulthood. Ancient Roman boys, ages 14 to 16, laid aside their togas fringed with a broad purple stripe in favor of the toga virilis, a long, off-white garment signifying their status as a full Roman citizen.¹ At a ceremony on March 17, the festival of Liberalia, dedicated to Liber Pater, god of wine and sexuality, young men place the hollow, protective charm worn round their necks during childhood upon an altar, with a lock of hair or a little stubble from their first shave inside as a thank-offering for a safe childhood and hope for a family rich with offspring. I was reminded of such a ritual the other night when a young advisee of mine who will here go nameless proudly showed off the short whiskers of his sideburns to me and anyone else who cared to look—the beginnings of a first beard, and the benefits of a summer's growth.

Legally, in the United States we have marked ages at which people may take up rights, privileges, and responsibilities denied to the young: though one can be tried in court as an adult as young as

¹ "Roman Clothing," 13 Sept. 2010 <<http://www.wvroma.org/~bmcmanus/clothing.html>>

13 in New York,² you need to be 16 or 17 to operate a moving vehicle in most states; 18 to buy fireworks, and 17 (supposedly) to watch a restricted movie, unless you're accompanied by an adult; 18 or 19 to buy cigarettes, unless you're in a southern, tobacco-producing state; 21 to buy alcohol across the country; 18, of course, to vote and serve in the military. Although the legal age of majority is 18, you're normally still a dependent of your parents; colleges will still expect them to pay what they can for your education, and you can even remain on your parents' health insurance until age 26, no matter where you live or whether you're in school, employed, married, or legally dependent.³ When do we become adults, putting off our "childish ways"? The answer is, we can't make up our minds, and, really, we just don't know.

The *New York Times Magazine* this August published an article entitled, "What is it about twentysomethings?" that examined reasons why more people in their 20s and 30s, even before the economic downturn, are moving back in with their parents, travelling or going back to school for lack of better options, avoiding commitments of jobs, homes, relationships—in short, taking longer to grow up than our parents and grandparents apparently did. To make it personal, when my father was my age, he had a wife, four kids, and a doctorate from Harvard, plus a house and a mortgage; where did we, where did I fall off the bandwagon? Was he more "adult" than I am?

Recent advances in neuroscience have suggested that our brains don't stop growing shortly after puberty as we once thought, but continue to develop far into our 20s with changes in our control of emotions and higher-order thinking.⁴ In fact, our brains are always developing, creating new neural pathways, though certainly at some times in our lives faster than others. And just as the passing of truancy and child labor laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created the time, space, and expectation for kids to grow up and go to school, thus creating the lifestage we now call adolescence, perhaps today's social and cultural forces—like the need for more education, greater career opportunities for women, cultural acceptance of unmarried relationships, advances in fertility—these changes have allowed people in their 20s and 30s to postpone the traditional

² "Juvenile Tried as an Adult Lawyers," 14 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.legalmatch.com/law-library/article/juvenile-tried-as-anadult.html>>.

³ Robert Pear, "Rules Let Youths Stay on Parents' Insurance," *New York Times*, 10 May 2010, 14 Sep. 2010, <www.nytimes.com/2010/05/11/health/policy/11health.html>.

⁴ Robin Marantz Henig, "What is it about twentysomethings?" *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2010, 14 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthoodt.html?scp=1&sq=twentysomething&st=cse>>.

commitments of adulthood. Some psychologists think we're seeing the evolution of another life stage after adolescence, called "emerging adulthood," one that parallels the continued development of our brains and other neurological systems well into our 20s.⁵

This is good news, an affirmation of something we in schools have always known, that we never stop growing, and learning doesn't end when you graduate, but it still doesn't help us figure out what the markers of adulthood are. How do we know when we're there?

A few possible answers:

In his final piece in the *New York Review of Books* this summer, the late British cultural critic and historian Tony Judt argued for the importance of language in defining adulthood, not unlike Mrs. Johnson did on at Saturday's convocation: "I was raised on words," he wrote. "Talking, it seemed to me, was the very point of adult existence."⁶ Adults should know how to use language, he argues. He laments the attitude that forgets style in favor of substance and worries that his children are right when they notice that these days "people talk like texts." Judt taps into the young person's fascination and frustration with the adult world. As children, we know that talking is one of those "adult ways": we yearn to understand and become part of their conversations, we wonder what we miss after we've gone to bed, but sometimes we're bored and impatient when we want to leave and they're still chatting. At first we like them to talk about us, and then we don't like to be talked about at all. As we grow up, though, we learn to use words, for good and for ill, to deceive and to illuminate, to record and remember. Battling Lou Gehrig's disease, a neurological disorder that ultimately renders him speechless in his final weeks - "as for tongues, they will cease," the apostle Paul wrote - Judt exhorts us to preserve the words and public forums of the adult world: "They're all we have," he writes, tragically, three weeks before his death.

In senior leadership training before the start of school, Mr. Roach offered two other definitions of adulthood. The first belonged to Bob Stegeman, longtime teacher and dean at St. Andrew's:

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tony Judt, "Words," *New York Review of Books*, 15 Jul. 2010, Vol. LVII, No. 12: 4.

“Adults know what they’re doing.”⁷ They’re competent and reliable; they follow through and accept responsibility. They’re prudent, they know their role, and they do it well.

Well, sort of The dirty little secret is that adults don’t always know what to do. I daresay, in teaching, being a student, and probably a lot of other things, sometimes you actually have to fake it, to give your best shot at figuring out what you’re doing before you actually know what that is.

Mr. Roach offered another defining quality of adults: “To be an adult is to have time for other people,” he said, “to be enough in control of one’s own life and struggles so as to make room for others.”⁸ Now this I understand: I never felt like an adult until I had to look after other kids -I like to think that’s what my 8-year-old self was thinking back then; maybe I wasn’t an adult, but you sure grow up fast when you have four younger siblings to look after.

By this understanding, adults are generous in time, food, money, and spirit; they’re able to suppress the temptation to think that their own small world and experience is or should be everyone else’s. They can keep their own egos in check, live lives larger than their own, and are willing to help others. They sacrifice and serve.

Ernest Gaines offers another perspective on adulthood in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Jefferson’s godmother wants Grant Wiggins to teach Jefferson to go to his death as a man and not the animal he is thought by some to be. Wiggins’ task is to convince Jefferson of his humanity and his adulthood in the short seven months before his death. After weeks of hostility and ignoring the visits of his godmother and her friends, Jefferson finally speaks to them and eats with them, and in three entries in his diary he grows in his emotional response:

i kno i care for nanan but i don’t know if love is care cause cutting wood and haulin water and things like that i don’t know if that’s love or jus work to do an you say that’s love⁹

its munday an i aint got but just a few days lef an i hope i see my nanan just one mo time ... mr wigin i hope i can see her one mo time on this earth fore i go is that love mr wigin when you want see somebody bad bad¹⁰

⁷ Tad Roach, talk to Class of 2011 in Engelhard Hall, September 3, 2010.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Vintage Contemporaries: New York), 1994: 229.

And, at their final meeting:

when they brot me in the room an I seen nanan at the table I seen how ole she look an how tied she look an I tol her I love her an I tol her I was strong an she jus look ole an tied an pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good an I let her hol me long is she want cause you say it good for her¹¹

Jefferson is a man before he dies, in part, because he figures out, haltingly but surely, what it is to love another and because he allows himself to be loved. Like many of us, he has to do it before he feels it and to talk himself into being the person he needs to be for himself, and most important, for others:

i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong ... good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man good by mr wigin¹²

So, maybe we have some answers: adults use language and are articulate; they know what they're doing, or at least can fake their way into doing it; they live large and open lives, get over themselves, and make time and space for others; and, most important, they learn to love and allow themselves to be loved. One more thing: in his book, *Heaven's Coast*, the poet Mark Doty poignantly captures the adult awareness and attention to time and the present that seem only to come with age:

I can feel how large, how essential this moment is as it's happening: that is what I've come to love about being an adult, to the extent that I can claim that title: that one knows more about how good things are, how much they matter, as they're happening, that knowledge isn't necessarily retrospective anymore. When I was younger, I missed so much, failing to be fully present, only recognizing the quality of particular moments and gifts after the fact. Perhaps that's one thing that being "grown-up" is: to realize in the present the magnitude or grace of what we're being offered.¹³

And that, my friends, is why we're here, in this place, in this School for one to four years or more, in this chapel week after week: not to mark the inevitable passage of time, or to grow up too fast,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 231

¹² Ibid, 234

¹³ Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997): 90

not to foreswear Nickelodeon, or to become 40 before you turn 16 - I don't actually recommend it - but to be attentive and fully present both to ourselves and to others, to put aside some childish ways, to gather as a body less individual than whole, and to recognize the goodness of things in the present, to figure out what really matters - indeed, Paul's "faith, hope, and love," the greatest of which is love.

As Paul Auster has written, "Growing old; it[']s] a funny thing to happen to a young boy."¹⁴ That statement, for me and others, in the words of Alain de Botton, "beautifully captures the idea that actually all of us inside always still feel like children, even though we grow old."¹⁵ I don't think there's ever a time in our lives when we can say we're adults once and for all, when we have fully mastered language, when we know exactly what we're doing, when we can't lapse into the self-interest and narcissism of the worst of petty childhood, or when we can't participate in the wonderful, life-giving joy and optimism of the young—that is, after all, one reason why we teach. But my prayer, as we do inevitably grow up and older for our entire lives, is to recognize and embrace the graced opportunities of the present and to forever live and grow for and with others in faith, hope, and love until our dying day.

¹⁴ Qtd. in *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 31 Dec. 2005, 15 Sep. 2010, <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5077638>.

¹⁵ Alain de Botton, *ibid.*