

Chapel Talk
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Becoming an Adult

This past summer Christopher and Andrew traveled to Germany to work on a large pig farm run by some of Andrew's cousins. After about a week, right when he turned 18 years old, I wrote Christopher a very parental email, cautioning him about the temptations of life abroad, specifically my worries about alcohol. I thought I was being a good parent to my teenage son.

Christopher responded almost immediately with these words: "Dad, I'm growing up. There will be challenges that I will have to face as I grow up. I have to face them alone in many ways, and make my own decisions about them. You've raised me well, but you have to trust me and let me go. I'll be fine."

Christopher seemed so sure of himself, especially in a foreign land. Pride and recognition swelled within me: was this the actual moment he'd become an adult? Perhaps – although two weeks later this self-asserting, independent and confident adult frantically called me collect from the Geneva train station because he and Andrew had lost the address of their next host family. It was 10:00 pm and they had no place to stay, and what should they do, and could I call someone in Geneva to help them out? No, I casually told him, I couldn't, because I was going for my afternoon swim. "You're the adult," I quipped, and left him and Andrew to solve the situation while I frolicked in the water playing "Jump or Dive" with Josh and Carter.

When does adulthood happen? In ancient societies and tribes, the transition for teenage boys involved leaving the community, going out into the wilderness, enduring physical challenges, including circumcision; for girls, it was usually marked by their ability to become pregnant. A theme here is that you are now capable of the future – you can have and protect children, ensuring the continuity of the species. Mrs. Mein reminded me that

in the Middle Ages, boys were apprenticed. Pages became knights; young boys served with a master tradesman for seven years, studying how to be a blacksmith, a carpenter, a butcher, a tailor, culminating with the apprentice proving his worth in an exhibition. Once you demonstrated that you could build a table or fashion a coat, you set up your own shop. Soon you were training the next generation in your trade. As boys explored outside the home, girls focused on the home, learning everything about running a household – how to cook, sew, bake, order, clean, purchase, entertain, delegate, hire servants, raise children, treat sicknesses.

More recently, people “came of age” at 21 with college graduation and procuring a job. Twenty-one also is the legal drinking age. Are we adults now at 18, or at 16 with a driver’s license? Are we adults when we start to become interested in and sexually attracted to another person? Is there a book, a manual, to tell us how? A pill to take? Can we buy it on eBay or download it? Do I have to break a rule to make it happen? Must I hate my parents? Didn’t Freud say I had to kill my father? Sometimes a major event forces maturity upon us – a death in the family; divorce; a horrific experience like September 11th; a loss of innocence when we are betrayed by what we thought was trustworthy, good or secure.

Most of you students wouldn’t fully consider yourself an adult by those definitions – none of you have probably voted; you are still in school, apprentices really; you don’t provide for yourselves financially. In short, you are still dependent on your parents for your livelihood. But emotionally, intellectually, many of you are conscious of a shift. You sense both worlds, yet you’re not sure which one you belong to, which one you should belong to.

For me, there was no single experience that anointed me an adult; there wasn’t a specific morning when I could suddenly shave – in fact, there still isn’t that morning. I remember when I was 14 or 15, jumping out of bed each day, lifting my arms expectantly to see if any armpit hairs had grown over night. Those hairs would surely announce my coronation. Every hopeful morning, I sadly stared at blank, barren skin.

However, in hindsight, three experiences spurred the transformation over a couple of summers starting at the end of my 9th grade year, the summer before I went away to boarding school. That summer of 1972 I spent eight weeks hiking in Colorado, in a small town no one had heard of then called Telluride. I knew no one at this hiking school. We lived in bunkrooms at 8,000 feet: 40 teenage boys, ten college-age counselors, two cooks, one very cold pond. Our base camp was already 2,000 feet higher than any mountain I'd climbed. What happened to me that summer was that I confronted the unfamiliar – I was tested physically: rock climbing, being tossed down steep snow slides, a two night solo, hiking 25 – 30 miles a day across the Continental Divide.

The most memorable experience occurred when I was chosen, with five other boys, to go down into the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River, a trip never done before at this program because of its difficulty and remoteness. Later a park ranger told us we were among the first hundred people, excluding Native Americans, to navigate The Narrows or see the Painted Wall from the river bottom. We felt privileged, like pioneers, explorers. For the first time I accomplished something on my own, without parents or family, without a name that admitted me to schools and opportunities – even if, as I look back now, all those boys came from families who could afford to send their children to camp for two months. Yet for those four days on the Gunnison River, I charted my own trail into an unknown territory, guided by affirming adults – but the steps were mine.

At the end of the summer we hiked to Rainbow Bridge in Utah. Seven of us and the director of this program, a vigorous, no-nonsense, middle-aged man named Dave Farney, trekked up to this spectacular natural stone arch, walked across it, and were heading back to our boat a few miles away on Lake Powell. I was in the lead, chatting with my friends, admiring the rocky landscape. All of a sudden Dave yelled at me: “Hey Will – where’s the trail?” Blushing, I realized I’d paid no attention to where I was going, and had led us to the edge of a small cliff. Dave stared at me – he was a serious hiker who cared about people and safety, and he trusted you as long as you were responsible – and told me something I can still hear 34 years later: “Will, if you’re going to lead, you must know

where you are going.” Embarrassed, chastened, yet knowing he was right, I fell in line behind the others as someone else guided us down the hill and back onto the trail. One step forward, one step back.

The next summer I was a teaching assistant in Connecticut in a summer program for disadvantaged children from the neighboring cities. Yet as with Telluride, this Horizons program made me journey – it forced me out of myself, out of my known and comfortable world, out of my family, and into a world that expanded my understanding of people and myself. Again, I had mentors – fellow teachers who taught me how to listen, how simultaneously to love, hope and expect the best at the same time. Mainly I learned from my students: being a teacher, I naively thought, meant I got to give the lessons, but I quickly discovered how little I knew. One day I read aloud *Make Way for Ducklings*, a tale about Mr. and Mrs. Mallard raising a family of ducks on the Charles River in Boston. I loved the story because their children are named “Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack and Quack,” and a nice Irish police officer named Michael stops all the cars to let Mrs. Mallard lead the ducks across the street into the Boston Garden. Lesson over, I thought. Later that summer my class talked about helping others. I was throwing out clichés about why it was important to care and be responsible. Then seven-year-old Whitney, sitting crossed legged on the floor, started to smile – a smile of recognition, a smile of connection and understanding. Waving her hand, Whitney announced: “You mean, we should be responsible like Mrs. Mallard is with her baby ducks?” I didn’t have to say “yes” – she knew the answer; she’d taught the class the connection. For the first time, I witnessed the transforming power of literature. My mentor was a seven-year-old girl who could barely read.

In between these two summers, I went to boarding school – again, I left the family, voyaging to an unfamiliar place where I knew no one. Yes, my white middle class background let me feel comfortable in the private education setting – but I was on my own, four hours from home, much more in a city than my out-in-the-country existence in Connecticut. Like you, I was surrounded by people different from me, and also surrounded by adults who expected much of me. At home, I rarely talked with my

parents – they tell me today that I grunted monosyllabic sounds around the house. But at boarding school, I began to see my teachers as adults excited about their lives, who believed in me more than I did, who treated me as a human peer. I met adults who let me make mistakes safely just when I feared making them the most. Ironically, by going away from my parents, I found myself returning to them as colleagues. I remember coming home at Thanksgiving my first year away, sitting on top of the dishwasher in our kitchen, enjoying talking to mom and dad after supper, not following my younger siblings to the playroom but wanting to linger there in the adult world. From my perch on the counter, my brothers and sister seemed small, literally and figuratively.

How do these experiences relate to your world at St. Andrew's? While I know you can't artificially seek that passage into adulthood, I do believe you can initiate that journey – a journey that manifests itself in many forms. It can be an intellectual adventure, through new classes, courses, ideas, assignments, questions – risking a different answer, risking a wrong answer. These conversations occur in classrooms, headmaster forums, meals, van rides, dorm rooms, advisor gatherings, common rooms. You discover how to think for yourself, how to rely on yourself, because your teachers here are universally interested in *your* insights, *your* questions. We don't want you to regurgitate back what little we know, nor do we want you to automatically accept what we claim as truth just because we say it, even if we are more athletic and quicker witted than you. Instead, we want you to argue your position, paint your picture, chart your path to a solution. The energy of your questions and connections drives the direction of these classes, and creates hope in answers and fresh possibilities. These conversations build a foundation of curiosity and healthy skepticism, transforming how you view the landscape around you.

The voyage can also be emotional – through community service, by meeting people outside St. Andrew's in public schools, homeless shelters, Adaptive Aquatics, Habitat for Humanity. The journey can occur at lectures on current events, at the symphony, at a play, at a protest rally. Sign up for a camping trip with Mr. McLean or Mr. Everhart to begin to test yourself in the natural world. A trip to a foreign country, as some of you did last summer to South Africa and Honduras, connects you with people who have names

and experiences that engages you immediately. Paradoxically, this journey outward directs you inward – by going outside ourselves, we find ourselves.

The final facet about this transformation involves the interplay between your family, especially the adults in your home, and St. Andrew's. Each of you left a home, like Telemachus in *The Odyssey*, to come to St. Andrew's; and like Telemachus, you have standing next to you in the boat, Mentor, ready to help, but letting you steer the ship through the waves. I urge you to apprentice yourself to the mentors surrounding you on this campus – to faculty, to staff, to spouses. Learn their trades; witness the complexity and majesty of the adult world as you move into it. For new students at St. Andrew's, you may be shocked at how receptive adults here are to you – how much we value and honor you as peers. Of course we'll battle and debate, and you'll argue and scrape with your parents – those tugs and stretches and challenges are inevitable; indeed, they are essential, because they engender enlightenment, connection, understanding, collaboration.

Some people portray the transition to adulthood as a loss of innocence, an end of childhood, the equivalent of being thrown out of the Garden of Eden and turned away from Paradise. I disagree: I believe humans are better off not in the Garden; I think we're more fascinating as "fallen creatures" than we were in Paradise – although when he was in third grade, Christopher sadly asked me: "Is it true that if Adam and Eve hadn't eaten the apple, then we wouldn't have homework?" Becoming an adult isn't about loss or endings: instead, it's about growth and discovery. It's not about facial hair, a driver's license, sexual bravado or physical power. Rather, this transformation embraces the unfamiliar; it leaves so as to return; it engages mentors who reconnect you with your parents; it nourishes safe mistakes and meaningful risks. By having the courage and faith to embark upon this journey, you will "possess/A paradise within thee, happier far" (*Paradise Lost*, Book XII l. 586 – 7).