

What does it Mean to be an Adult?

Curtis Murphy

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Oh, grow up! Raise your hand if anyone has ever said that to you? Or maybe You've said it to someone else. What did they mean? Or what did you mean? Was it something like “stop horsing around, stop laughing, sit up straight. Focus. The idea that it's possible to tell someone else to grow up, implies a shared understanding of what that looks like. Our definition of “being grown up” is often unspoken, but usually it has something to do with some notion of responsibility. And the question I want to ask is: when we talk about taking responsibility, what are we taking responsibility for?

My favourite definition of being an adult comes from depth psychologist and wilderness guide Bill Plotkin. He says: An adult is someone who has encountered her soul, retrieved some knowledge of her ultimate place in the world, acquired some practical means for occupying this place among her people, made a commitment to doing so, and is doing it.” Put a different way: “When we commit to the tangible expression of our life's purpose, we begin to become adults.” It doesn't impose what form that should take, or how it should be measured. It's about encountering your own soul (and maybe the soul of the world), so it's not something that can be assessed by any authority, though it would likely be seen and affirmed by those who really know you. So being an adult can't be an objective thing, but doesn't mean it's irrelevant or impossible to notice.

Plotkin's definition has something to do with what is called vocation – which is often used as a synonym for job or career, but in reality has a different meaning. It comes from the latin for voice, as in vocal music, and it refers to what life calls you to do, what life calls out of you. So vocation is a synonym for calling, which is also used as a synonym for work or for a job, but again, these are by no means necessarily the same thing, though perhaps in an ideal world they would be. Two divergent images come to me when I think about vocation, and the ways in which we do and don't create space for it. One is when I was working at a call centre in Montreal a number of years ago. We were calling people and doing telephone surveys on behalf of companies and political parties. The auto-dialer would ring until we got someone and then we would launch into the script, and try to cajole the person into spending 10 minutes on a survey which took at least 20 minutes. Officially, we were not allowed to know who we were doing the surveys on behalf of, but it was usually pretty obvious, when we had to ask questions like: would you say that you are satisfied with your service at scotiabank? Hmm, I wonder who paid to have this survey done? One evening I was sitting at my station, and noticed to the right of me, was a young woman who was studying classical music scores in between calls and while she waited for the auto-dialer to connect, and on my left side was a young man writing rap lyrics in a notebook while studying the art of spoken word poetry. I looked around the room at the 100 or so people there – mostly young adults – and thought: what a waste! I wonder what these people's gifts and dreams are? I'm sure everyone here

has gifts that could be helping enrich, heal, and beautify the world, and I'm pretty sure they don't involve calling people and asking "How satisfied are you with your high-speed internet service?! I only lasted about 2 months at that job, but that image has been my main takeaway.

And then I think of my friend Fabian, who lives on his family's farm in Belgium, land that his family has lived and worked on since the 1700's. He put his farming background and his passion for building a sustainable future together, and has become one of the leader supplier of strawbale and other earth-friendly building materials in all of Europe. He put many years of preparation into it, and took many risks, and while he's not exactly getting rich, he's getting by and creating a more beautiful world.

It seems that a combination of luck, skill, privilege, persistence, vision, and community support, is needed to help people flower more or less fully into their life purpose – and certain stars need to align for this to happen. There's no formula for finding a way to make a living following your passion- many self-help books and blogs have promised it, and some of them have probably helped many people, but the fact that they're still selling more proves that none of them have yet offered the definitive one.

If we are lucky, we have enough time and energy left over to put into our soul-work once we've attended to the day-to-day, but the reality for many people is that the soul work largely gets put off amid the hustle and bustle of daily living, or that the struggle to survive is so much that the soul work is all but forgotten.

Certainly there's no way to put a strict timeline on a person growing into the expression of their soul's gifts, but putting it off indefinitely – or putting it off until retirement, if one is fortunate enough to live that long and have a retirement relatively free from the demands of making a living - is less than ideal. And as I said speaking about elderhood last week, I would deeply honour the ways that so many people strive to express the stirrings of their soul's purpose, even when it is not well-supported by their surroundings.

And I should say that this is something I continue to wrestle with myself, since this is the stage of life I am in right now. Talking about elderhood I have the luxury of some distance, and talking about childhood the advantage of hindsight, figuring out how to be a soul-centered adult giving my gifts to the world while still managing day-to-day life is an ongoing challenge. And, while some people might tell me that I'm still young and have plenty of time (many would call me a "young adult,"), but I feel increasingly faced with the reality that, in my mid 30's I'm essentially middle-aged. And maybe it seems like I have it all figured out by embracing a calling in ministry, it's not that simple.

This year I went back to a previous field of work, and have been working in a small grocery store, as part of settling in and having a steady income after graduating from seminary and adapting to life in a new city, as well as having a job that will allow me to take parental leave when our child is born. It's not perfect, but it's good enough, and there are moments of grace, beauty and connection. And increasingly, as Carly and I get deeper in imagining the type of ministry that we want to build together, we become more and more comfortable with the idea

that it may never be our primary source of income. What we feel most passionate about is creating more space in our lives and in the lives of others, so that people CAN connect with and give their gifts which may not be considered very financially viable under our current economic regime.

One of the ideas we're excited about is something we're calling a "sabbatical bank." Most of you probably know that sabbatical is a long-standing tradition - for ministers and university professors usually - where they get a year off every seven years (this has an interesting history, and comes from the biblical notion of sabbath on the 7th day). In contemporary practice, it maybe be broken up into smaller chunks and spread out, but the idea is that it's stepping back from ordinary responsibilities, to explore, renew, and come back refreshed and more able to give and nurture others. In this congregation, I think it's fabulous that you've extended some of those benefits to other long-serving staff, recognizing that they too need to find that spaciousness and be renewed and come back with a new perspective. An that's the key difference between sabbatical and vacation: The notion of vacation in our economic and cultural logic is essentially: your work is draining, go catch your breath and come back to doing the same thing. It's like a boxer taking a timeout and then stepping back into the ring to keep punching it out. A sabbatical is taking the time to ask - do I really want to step back into the ring at all? It's a way of renewing oneself so that life and work become more fruitful and less of a struggle. We imagine a shared fund that everyone in the community - especially those without a lot of economic resources otherwise - could access and have a chance to hone their soulcraft in ways that their day to day work doesn't support. We've tried to do this in small ways with loved ones, and hope to make it a more well-established practice going forward. If everyone in a community has this opportunity, the community itself becomes richer, and more aligned with their individual and collective souls. Sabbatical is meant to be a cyclical form of death and rebirth that keeps creativity alive.

Tama J. Kieves says: "...this is what I continue to learn from dying to "safe" choices...You can live a life of either trusting your inner voice or distrusting your inner voice. You can cling to familiar expectations, conventions, and "reasonable" responses, or you can listen to the sweet madness in your bones:

"Yet, nothing but the madness knows your unique way home."

So while I love Bill Plotkin's definition, my definition of adulthood might be: "an adult is someone who listens to the sweet madness in their bones, and turns it into a song the rest of the world can hear."

This idea of adulthood has some resonance with conventional ideas about being a "contributing member of society," but what is necessary is expanding the notion of what contribution can look like. You may have heard this before, but I never tire of repeating these words from environmental educator David Orr: "The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs

people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.”

An adult is someone who is doing this healing, loving, restoring work, as best as they are able in the circumstances they are in. And I might expand to saying that a grown up community and society is one that is able to see this in people, to draw out this capacity, and support it materially and spiritually.

We may be the “one terrible part of creation that is privileged to refuse our flowering,” but I don't really think this is only a matter of individual choice or refusal. Really, for a wide variety of reasons with deep historical and ideological roots, we have ended up with social structures and in particular an economic system that fosters that suppression of dreams, rather than the expression of them. If your dream is to sail around the world or climb mount everest, that might find praise and support – something in particular that has an element of achievement or conquest – but the subtler dreams that are stirring in most of our own souls have a hard time taking root. If we refuse our flowering, it may be because the soil we are planted in are not as fertile as it needs to be. Which is why I love the gardening slogan “don't grow plants, grow soil.” And I have a feeling that if we can make the soil of our society and our communities rich enough, people will naturally flower and give life to the world around them.

Even though it's often said that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is about becoming less dreamy and more practical, it might be better expressed as learning how to weave something tangible out of the fabric of your dreams.

Or as Henry David Thoreau has said: If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

While I believe that each of us has a dream deep in our souls, to bring forward and bless each other with, we all need help building that foundation. So my hope and prayer is that we find ways to enrich the soil that each of us is planted in, whether that's through a sabbatical bank, being generous with the time and energy that we may have, or simply honouring and appreciating those moments when we hear the song of each others soul. So I leave you with an invitation to take with you into this time of music and beyond – listen to the sweet madness in your bones, and ask: what is it telling you today?

The Sun
by David Whyte

This morning on the desk,
facing up,
a poem of Kavenagh's
celebrating a lost love.
"She was the sun," he said,
lives in the fibre
of his arms,
her warmth
through all the years
folding the old man's hand
in hers
of a Sunday
Dublin morning.
Sometimes reading
Kavenagh I look out
at everything
growing so wild
and faithfully beneath
the sky
and wonder
why we are the one
terrible
part of creation
privileged
to refuse our flowering.
I know
in the text of the heart
the flower is our death
and the first opening
of the new life
we have yet to imagine,
but Kavenagh's line
reminds me
how I want to know
that sun,
and how I want to flower
and how I want to claim
my happiness
and how I want to walk

through life
amazed and inarticulate
with thanks.
And how I want to
know that warmth
through
love itself,
and
through the sun itself.
I want to know
that sun
of happiness
when I wake
and see through
my window
the morning color
on the far mountain.
I want to know
when I lean down to the
lilies
by the water
and feel their small and
perfect reflection
on my face.
I want to know
that gift
when I walk
innocent through the trees
burning with life
and the green
passion
of the pasture's
first growth,
and I want to know
as lazily
as the cows
that tear at the grass
with their
soft mouths.

I want to know
what I am
and what I am
involved with by loving
this world
as I do.
And I want time
to think of all
the un-lived lives:
those that fail to notice
until it is too late,
those with eyes staring
with bitterness,
and those
met on the deathbed
whose mouths are wide
with
unspoken love.
Every year
they keep me faithful
and help me
realize there is more
to lose
than I thought
and more at stake
than I could dream.