

The Role of Youth in the Modern World

There have always been two widespread and conflicting myths about the young; these two myths are equally delusional and both are passionately embraced -- often by the same people -- even though the myths themselves are intrinsically inconsistent and contradictory.

The first myth, of course, is that the new generation is hopeless: hopelessly lazy, hopelessly self-indulgent, and hopelessly destined for the trash heap of history. In the Fifth Century BC Socrates lamented about the youth of his time: "Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers." Matters didn't improve much half a millennium later when Augustus made almost the identical complaint about Roman youth. In truth this same assessment echoes through the ages, century after century up to the present time.

And then that other myth: that the young are not hopeless at all, but rather our only true hope! Countless poets and philosophers and certainly politicians -- always trying to win a few cheap votes -- have echoed the tiresome refrain that the newest generation will come to the rescue, that they will, like a collectivized Superman, leap tall buildings with a single stride and vanquish all evil and suffering from the earth.

Well, within all myths, of course, there is some truth. But I will not insult you by patronizing you and telling you that this latter myth of how exceptional and extraordinary young people are, is a truer, more valid myth. Because having grown up in the Sixties, in a generation that swore it would change the world and that we were on the cusp of eternal peace and prosperity as the Age of Aquarius began, I am a little jaded. I have had too many friends who went from disdaining wealth to being enslaved by it; too many friends who fought against injustices at home and abroad only to grow old and turn their eyes away from all the horrors in the world, mindlessly soothing themselves before the TV or the internet; too

many friends who gave up hope not only about the future but even about themselves.

And yet, since the old are genuinely hopeless, I embrace the hope of this next generation. Just because other generations have failed or fallen short does not mean you will. And if you go into the world both as innocent as lambs and as wise as serpents, you could really make a difference. I think part of the reason that young people grow so old so damn quickly is that their elders dupe them, generation after generation, into believing that they are super special and that it will be easy to change things for the better if only the young try hard enough. Or even worse, that they are worthless and have life too easy so they will not be able to change anything. Discard both these myths. The young are relatively untainted, full of energy and ideas, and ignorant enough to be brave. That ignorance is a virtue in a world full of caution and people always trying to advance themselves. This generation can be far more effective by believing in themselves, but not deceiving themselves into self-worship. You must not think yourselves all-knowing and all-powerful. A healthy respect for authority, an appreciation for the efforts made by past generations, and a genuine admiration for your elders is required. At the same time, you must also cultivate a healthy disrespect for authority, a compassionate acceptance of the failures of the past, and develop a reverent and dispassionate criticism of your elders. There is a powerful potential in our youth, and they must have the courage to change old ideas and ways of doing things and redirect all of us toward a better world.

And there is no time like now to begin. So I would like to leave you with three bits of advice. It will seem that my three suggestions are also contradictory and inconsistent, but since I'm offering them, I like to think of them as paradoxical rather than contradictory. The first is this: Do not wait to grow-up. Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi civil society leader who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize once said: "We always refer to young people as future leaders. And at one time, probably this was true. But this is not true any longer, because they are not future leaders. They

are leaders already. They are the leaders. They are creating a completely new breed of leaders to create a completely new world for themselves and all of us.”

There are 1.2 billion people ages 15 to 24 in the world today. There are more youth in the world now than ever before, and the number in absolute terms will increase. Most young people live in developing countries, of course. When we look at the entire planet, 50% of us are under the age of 30.

So what does this mean? A young person in a developed country today has many more opportunities -- greater contact with the rest of the world, more education, and a longer life. At the same time, in most societies youth is now prolonged. In other words, young people are taking longer on average to find employment, get married, have children, or figure out what they want to do with their lives.

In order to face our global challenges, we must understand youth demographics and who youth are and what they represent. And it is critical that youth participate -- more than before -- in the social, political, and economic life of nations. You are not future leaders -- you must already see yourselves as leaders and work harder to contribute more to the world around you. Being a part of an active citizenry can mean many things, from running a local campaign to cleaning up your community to participating in your country's democratic structures -- although I would never urge any of you to pursue a career in the sordid realms of politics or diplomacy....

The second thing I would suggest is this: Grow-up immediately. Do not dawdle. As St. Paul once declared, when I was a child I enjoyed toys and games, but “now that I am older I have given up childish things.” If you don't grow up right now you will find yourselves faced with a reality with which you cannot cope. You will be startled and confused and eventually frustrated and broken by the horrific realities of the modern world. Here is but one bad example: One in five girls is still not in school around the world. Even today, girls are more likely to die in childbirth than from any

other cause. And another: Young people are shut out of decision-making, whether by institutions or by social norms. When we look at worldwide economic uncertainty, particularly in Europe, we see that unemployment numbers among youth are simply frightening, and depressing.

And this carries great risks in terms of foreign policy and global human rights and security. Foreign policy practitioners are now seeing the role of youth in the world as fundamental to the health of societies -- for political stability, for economic opportunity, and for living together in peace. Youth must step up -- and the power centers and structures must let them.

And my third piece of advice, again seemingly contradictory: Do not ever grow up! You must remain like little children in order to really change anything. To me, this really gets at the heart of what makes youth in today's world special. You are the generation of innovation, technology, and social media. You revolutionize the world with 140 characters on Twitter and through your ability to network and connect with peers from around the world in a single instant. Your ideas matter and will be the engine for change. But your ideas and ideals will be for nothing if they are just the same, drab ideas and ideals of older generations. Always, always look at the world and its problems with fresh eyes and a sense of wonder. And remember what the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said: "The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently." Be flexible, be open-minded, be willing to dare to see the world in ways never before imagined.

You are part of an interconnected world and can make connections that can, on an individual level, produce great changes. This program with its international participants and focus is an example of that. There are lots of programs and opportunities and ways to become active, to participate, and to make a difference -- locally, nationally, and especially internationally.

So, in closing, I want to reiterate that what we are talking about here today is not preparing the next generation to face global challenges in the future, but it is really about your generation taking the reins of leadership in the present. You must simultaneously commit yourselves to three things that to a practical mind are inconsistent: Do not wait to grow up! Grow up now! And, never grow up! Thank you.