

What Does It Mean to Be an Adult?

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Abstract

It turns out that the apparent randomness of adult life has an underlying pattern. This pattern, composed of stages, can guide us in relation to what we need to do and when we need to do it in order to feel OK about ourselves and to have a smooth and fulfilling life path.

One of the biggest sources of feelings of not OKness is, strangely enough, based not on true inadequacy, but rather on a false belief about how people are supposed to be, particularly when they reach adulthood. This belief is that we are supposed to outgrow the stages of childhood once we become adults. When we buy into that mistaken idea, we keep trying to make ourselves into something that we are not, which is a major source of suffering throughout adult life. This becomes particularly and poignantly true when we enter into relationships and even more especially when we become parents.

The simple truth is that we are not designed to outgrow the stages of childhood, but rather to keep repeating them in more sophisticated form in adulthood. In fact, we are even designed to repeat the same tasks as those of childhood, and we need the same kind of emotional sustenance to promote healthy growth as we did when we were children. This is the way we are made; it is nature's design.

Altering the mistaken belief that childhood is supposed to be gone once we become adults is the key to ending this major source of suffering. Changing this false assumption, we arrive at a place of peace with ourselves, of letting ourselves *be* the way we are truly designed. We come home to our true nature. We settle into ourselves with a big sigh and feel a cosmic wave of relief. We feel that, at last, "I'm home in myself," in other words, "I am OK."

This does not mean that the challenges of adulthood disappear. Nor does it give us license not to be responsible. But it does mean

that we are facing the right challenges. We are not wasting our energy trying to fit ourselves into some kind of preconceived, straightjacket model of what we think we are supposed to be. Instead of denying our basic nature as people who have nature in us, or parts of nature that are human, we accept our nature as it evolves over time. Instead of wasting energy trying to be something we are not, we can focus on how we are and how to take care of ourselves as we are in the day-to-day world.

The nature in humans, like nature in the outer world, is cyclical, seasonal. We come back to stages of development we began in childhood in the same way the seasons return with each passing year. Just as spring is a time for planting and growing, summer one of ripening, autumn a season of harvest, and winter a time of dormancy, so too do we have evolving needs and tasks as our cycle of personal seasons unfolds.

The slow evolution of our cyclical process as adults brings us temporarily back to the same feelings of helplessness and dependency and need to feel connected that infants have. Then, while still feeling deeply attached and connected, we want to explore with our senses like toddlers. Having gained a new sensory understanding of our lives, we move into the contrary, oppositional relating characteristic of two year olds as we learn to stand on our own feet and become more independent. Having established an independent position, we are then faced with finding out who we are in relation to other people in our world. So we rework and update our identity, testing our power with others to find out the consequences of our actions. After establishing a new identity, we need to create new skills, perhaps even new values and new methods of doing things, a process we share with school-age children. And last, we revisit the tasks of adolescence, updating how we are as sexual people and integrating the needs from previous stages. And then our cycle begins again, just as we were designed.

Our growth through each phase is best served when we receive certain forms of recognition, or strokes (Berne, 1964), from other people. For example, the following sections outline the six stages from the cycle of development that I developed (Levin, 1988, 2001).

Stage One: We thrive on recognition of our Being, such as “I’m glad you’re here”; “I’m glad I know you”; “I like you”; “I love you”; “I like being with you”; “What you feel is important to me, please tell me”; “It’s important to me that your needs in this relationship are met too.”

Stage Two: In addition to Being strokes, we also want recognition for our needs to explore, such as “I like your curiosity, your intuition”; “I’m glad to see you trying new things”; “I’m glad you’re exploring”; “I support you in being real about how you feel and what you want.”

Stage Three: We blossom with strokes about our thinking and independence, such as “I like the way you’re thinking”; “That is a really good, original idea”; “It’s great that you’re taking care of yourself by thinking about what you need”; “You have a unique position about that, and I like that about you.”

Stage Four: We flourish the most when we receive strokes that support our increasing personal power and unique identity, such as “I’m glad you’re finding ways of relating that are better for you”; “It was great to see you taking your power just then”; “I believe it’s really important to renegotiate relationships from time to time, and I’m glad you want us to do that; it will be good for both of us.”

Stage Five: We succeed best in a stroking environment that recognizes our abilities to organize, to do things, and to have our own values. “Great presentation today!”; “Nice job fixing that faucet”; “I respect that you value downtime more than I do”; “Fair enough. You disagree, and I’m glad you said so, and said it in a respectful way”; “You got support so you could organize this well, and it really shows.”

Stage Six: We prosper best with strokes that recognize us as whole, complete, separate, independent people. “That’s not a choice I’d make, but I’ll still like you if you make it”; “I like it that you have your own path in life.”

Again and again, when our marriages flounder, when we have trouble parenting our children, when our lives get off track or we sabotage ourselves, the underlying issues come back to these basic growth stages and how we are traversing their terrain. Here are a few examples.

Bill T. was sabotaging his marriage by denying aspects of his Being phases. He was not admitting his own needs and feelings existed and blaming his wife for the fact that he was constantly adapting to her. He began to break out of this destructive pattern, first by allowing himself to know what he felt and needed and then telling her. In the process he discovered a world rich with what makes marriages work—emotional intimacy and connection—something he had believed was impossible to attain.

Katie G. discovered how she was sabotaging her life by not allowing herself any exploratory phases. She discovered that she was narrowing her perceptions to the world she knew and not allowing herself to explore, to find out “what’s out there.” She decided to let it be OK that she did not know about something and then allow herself the process of exploring to find out. She discovered she could have support while she tried new things, which opened up the world for her. One outcome was that she began to consider shifting her entire economic base to a field more suited to her personality.

Brenda H. was having constant problems with her children, feeling that they were always on her, whining, complaining, and acting as if nothing she did was right. Then she realized she was pushing them all away, mistakenly assuming she could not be close and still have her own values. Discovering she did not have to value what they valued (a stage five growth task) left room for her to be her own individual self with her own priorities, different from theirs. That revelation was a turning point for their whole family system. She became emotionally available again, they stopped whining and complaining, and she rediscovered the joy of finding out who these little people were as individuals.

Until this life pattern—a cycle of repeating phases—was completely elaborated, only parts

of how people grow in life had been presented. For example:

- *Piaget* (1942/2001) described how children learn but limited his theory to cognitive development, omitting our social and emotional selves and stopping at the threshold of maturity.
- *Erickson* (1950) created a lifelong picture of growth but painted it in terms of conflict rather than needs, leaving the cyclical commonalities between childhood stages and their more sophisticated grown-up versions undiscovered.
- *Levinson* (1978) and *Sheehy* (1976) each detailed crises and patterns in adult life but missed why people face them, why they occur at specific ages, and what approach would lead to successful resolution. Levinson's analysis is based on outer observations, not inner experiences, and it excludes both the patterns of women's lives and the fundamental organizing principles common to every human life.

In contrast, the cyclical feminine view outlined in the six stages described in this article includes social and emotional aspects, presents the lifelong pattern, defines needs rather than conflicts, links the commonalities between childhood and adult development, defines why developmental crises occur and what approach leads to successful resolution, is based on inner developmental experiences, includes men and women, and presents the architectural pattern common to every human life.

To omit any part of ourselves is to render that part not OK. We will never outgrow the

stages of childhood; we are destined to repeat them throughout life. No matter how old we become chronologically, it is our fundamental nature to remain in the same growth pattern as children in this vast universe we call home.

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Advice from Around the World

From Italy

by Micaela Vannuchi Giardi

Crisis and Opportunity: "Where a door is closing in front of you, look for the main gate that is opening" (Sicilian saying). Working in Italy as a counselor with people facing life-changing crises—such as a severe medical diagnosis, grief, separation, and so on—I try to convey the message that a crisis is not the end of all roads but often a greater opportunity lies ahead that will help the person to evolve. Focusing only on the door that is closing leads to a sense of failure and desperation, whereas taking time to step back may allow us to gain clarity about the bigger picture and maybe to discover the main gate that is opening.