



'Doing Your Own Thing'

In a curious way, the permissive society has placed more responsibility on young people than ever. And a new kind of conformity threatens to take the place of the old. Can the young really 'do their own thing' in these conditions? We look at the problems of being yourself today...

"To be nobody-but-myself — in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means the hardest battle any human being can fight, and never stop fighting."

— Poet E. E. Cummings, in letter to high school editor, 1955

□ In the mid-1960s a wave of disquiet swept through the middle classes of North America and Western Europe. Something was happening among the young people of the day which their elders could not quite understand. They had, after all, worked long and hard to build a society in which their offspring would want for very little materially. They had secured for the next generation a degree of political and economic freedom never known in the world before. And yet there were clear signs that a considerable and influential segment of the younger population was turning its back on the fruits of their labour. Bewildered and a little hurt, the adults asked why.

The answer was that youth was being led by its more radical elements into a revolt against the seeming conformity and heartlessness of modern technocratic society. The majority never joined in fully, but enough had sufficient sympathy with the cause to bring about a widening of the "generation gap" in almost every facet of everyday life. While campus demonstrations, changing moral standards and drug use dominated the attention of the mass media, the youth movement came to most homes in a much less spectacular fashion. But come it did.

Its most lasting effect was to create a visible division between the generations in tastes, attitudes and habits. If adults wore their hair short, young people wore theirs long. If adults liked their music sweet and soft, the "rock" of the young was harsh and strident. Many youths took a different attitude towards the desirability of ambition from that of their parents. They asked devastating questions about the ways of society which rarely entered their parents' minds.

For once, the younger showed the way to the older in their approach to living. Under the influence of youth, adults whose creative impulses had formerly been held down by convention began to search for new ways of expressing themselves. People of all ages felt less constraint in their choice of clothing and hair styles. Though it is true that they sometimes followed older leaders, the young deserve much of the credit for knocking the stuffiness out of modern life.

Their persistent assaults on the *status quo* prompted a reappraisal of the necessity for the canons of society which hitherto had been taken for granted. Many of these could not stand up to the test of that most potent weapon in our vocabulary: the word "why". The result was a sweeping relaxation of the old rules — too sweeping and too great a relaxation, in the opinion of many. Be that as it may, society's institutions were rudely nudged into allowing more freedom for people to lead their own lives in their own style.

Paradoxically, this freedom has confronted the youth of today with an unprecedented challenge.

There is nothing easy about living in the permissive society; while it permits individuals to exercise their wills within broad limits, it also burdens them with more responsibility for their own emotional well-being than humans ever bore before. The fewer the rules, the greater the need to make one's own rules for the sake of self-preservation. Not only to make them, but to live by them — and it is always tougher to abide by self-imposed rules than by those imposed from above.

Even finding out what rules to set in the first place is a disturbing problem. In a society which constantly pushes a variety of competing choices on a person and then says, "go ahead and do your own thing", it is a real dilemma to determine what things to do and not to do for your own good.

Throwing out the babies with the bathwater of mistrust

To lead a fulfilling life amid such complexity obviously demands able judgment. But judgment is usually based on experience, and here many young people feel themselves to be on their own. They find it hard to tell what to assimilate from the experience of their elders and what to reject as hypocrisy in the defence of vested interests. The Watergate scandal was only the most striking of the many events that have led to a deep suspicion of the moral poses of the adult world.

The young lately have seen a succession of virtuous façades ripped away to reveal hidden injustice and corruption. Small wonder they are inclined to look upon the traditional values of the society with a cynical eye. Unfortunately, a lot of babies have been thrown out with the bathwater of their rejection of the old social doctrine. An automatic mistrust of everything to do with the "system" — including the moral and legal system which it embodies — has given rise to an odd form of narrow-mindedness which is supposedly open to new ideas but shut against old ones.

Carried to its logical extreme, this becomes the blank conditioned reflex of Pavlov's dogs, slavering at certain sounds and growling at others; or the mentality of Pavlov's compatriot, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who (according to Malcolm Muggeridge) once saw some men setting fire to a house and sprang from his carriage to assist them, never stopping to ask who they were or why they were burning down the house.

Certainly the pressure is on from various quarters to narrow down the minds of young people, notably the commercial "hype" to the effect that if it isn't happening now, it isn't worth considering. This battle cry of the exploiters of the youth culture would cut young people off from all the experience of the past. The fast pace of the mass media also helps to spread the impression that anyone who is not "where it's at" is a social pariah. It is the age of the latest: the latest pseudo-scientific theory, the latest revelations of the perfidy of the Establishment, the latest campus cult book, the latest punk rock group.

Why not let the self-professed thinkers do the thinking for you?

It all has a look of boldness and liberation about it that can be deceiving. The poet Stephen Spender recorded of a nearly identical period of modernism in Germany in the late 1920s that "intense expressions of will and feeling were obscured by the predominate fashionableness of advanced attitudes. It was easy to be advanced. You had only to take off your clothes."

Under the pressure to "get with it", it is difficult for anyone to form and hold independent opinions. But why bother, anyway? How much more convenient it is to let the self-professed thinkers do the thinking for you. It disposes of the danger of being outmoded. Follow the leader, and know that you are following the latest trend.

This feeling may account for why there now seems to be such uniformity in the attitudes of youth, at least in western countries. The danger is that uniformity can easily turn into the kind of intellectual conformity which limits the scope for people really to "do their own thing".

It would be ironic if the conformity attacked so successfully by youth in the 1960s were only to be replaced by a new and even stricter conformity in the 1980s — ironic, but not funny. And it could well happen. George Orwell, a socialist thinker who could hardly be called a reactionary, once wrote:

“In a society in which there is no law, and in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by ‘thou shalt not’ the individual can practise a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are governed by ‘love’ and ‘reason’, he is under constant pressure to make him behave exactly the same as everybody else.”

The outward trappings of individualism should not be confused with the real thing

This may seem like nonsense at a time when people dress in countless different colourful ways, and when the opportunity for self-expression is broader than ever. But a certain sameness has also crept into the dress and language of the young; though they may look and talk differently from the preceding generation, they are not so diverse among themselves.

In any case, nobody should mistake the outward trappings of individualism for the genuine article. True individualism is not something that shows externally. What really matters is not how people look, but how they think and act.

And what matters to the future of a generation — matters very seriously indeed — is whether individual members of it are able to think and act in any significantly different way from all the others. Why? Because people who move about in herds are susceptible to domination by power-obsessed leaders who see in a soft mass mentality a good place to impose their hard wills.

When the power-grabbers secure their grip, the only hope of shaking loose is through a determination not to surrender control of one’s own thinking. Albert Einstein, who knew first-hand the enormities which a controlled mass mentality can bring, wrote: “While it is true that an inherently free and scrupulous person may be destroyed, such an individual can never be enslaved or used as a blind tool.”

The condition of the world will never be improved by conformists. By definition, conformists are intolerant and even afraid of new and different ideas. Progress is the product of the working of strong minds — minds kept fit by mental exercise. Minds that are closed to the opinions of others lack the stimulation and nourishment needed to make them grow strong.

On a more personal scale, a herd offers no place for a sensitive and intelligent person. Twenty-five hundred years of human experience, from the ancient Greek philosophers on, tell us that in order to find happiness, people must first find themselves. Finding yourself naturally leads on to *being* yourself — which means coming to terms with your own circumstances according to your own standards of behaviour. It is a delusion to think that happiness can be mass-produced. One can never find it by following a crowd.

A person’s identity is only complete when it is rounded out by loved ones and friends

Since most of us live in crowds, however, we are faced with the further problem of having to establish our distinctive identities within an existing social framework. People who insist on doing precisely what they want with no self-discipline and no regard to the impact of their actions on those around them are likely to end up in jail, where individualism is not encouraged at all. In his immortal work *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill struck the balance between the individual and society quite neatly. “The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; that he must not make a nuisance of himself to other people,” he wrote.

Individualism, then, is not anti-social; rather the opposite. A person's identity is not his alone; it is only complete when it is rounded out by loved ones and friends. Individualism is strength, so a true individualist is strong enough to tolerate the habits and opinions of people who differ from him. A true individualist respects the individuality of everyone else.

"This is my way; what is your way? *The way doesn't exist*," wrote the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In this perplexing world, finding one's own way and then sticking to it is something that comes naturally only to a lucky few. Most of us lose our way from time to time, straying down the wrong streets and going up blind alleys. It is all very exhausting. It would be much less trouble to take directions from those who assure us they know *the way*. But wait! "Most of the greatest evils that man has inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false," Bertrand Russell tells us. Quite certainly, what he says is true.

*In between the true and false,
watch out for the half-truth*

Sorting out the true from the false is an extremely demanding endeavour. It is even more demanding to identify the half-truths that are the meat of modern politicians and pressure groups. It takes an equipage of knowledge to search for the truth; moreover, it takes a recognition of what knowledge is lacking and a willingness to acquire it. And that, in turn, takes humility, for perhaps the greatest victory a person can win over his own ego is to know what he does not know.

One advantage of being young today, however, is that the chance to learn has never been better. Never has there been such ready access to the accumulated wisdom of the world through instruction, the mass media and books. Never have there been so many people willing to help others

find their way, either. Apart from the usual parental guidance — which sadly is not available to all young people — numerous organizations exist to provide counsel and comfort to those seeking advice or those who have stumbled into distress.

*Claptrap is claptrap, whether
it comes from the right or left*

Yet in the end, all the learning and advice that one can get amounts only to the raw material to form one's own opinions and patterns of behaviour. In the permissive society, "you pays your money and you takes your choice", as the English used to say. The choices to be made by young people nowadays are peculiarly hazardous. There are simply many more ways to blunder into trouble than at any time before.

All the more reason, therefore, for the young to insist on asserting their own individuality and not to be herded into going for whatever is "trendy". This applies not only to behaviour, but just as importantly to ideas. As a political force of tomorrow, youth is being subjected today to a good deal of ideological mind-bending. Young people should treat all they are told with scepticism. Claptrap is claptrap, whether it comes from the right or the left.

"While to the claims of charity a man may yield and yet be free, to the claims of conformity no man may yield and be free at all," Oscar Wilde wrote. A new strain of conformity is now attempting to make claims on the minds of the young. It is an insidious strain, because it goes under the guise of an illusory individualism. But it is every bit as narrow-minded as any conformity before it, and if young people give in to it, they may forfeit their richest legacy — the right to be themselves.